Chapter 5: Christian Traditions

Chapter Overview

In chapter five, Wendy L. Fletcher examines the history of Christianity in terms of its various reactions to historical, political, intellectual, and social challenges. In the beginning of this chapter, Fletcher connects this history and these challenges to the founding of Christianity itself. Thus, she explores how the early Christian community responded to challenges and conflicts in a collection of diverse writings of what eventually became the New Testament canon, that is the Christian scripture, especially the Gospels, the Pauline Epistles, and later writings that discussed the establishment of organizational structures and leaders in ministry, including bishops, presbyters, priests, and deacons.

Fletcher emphasizes the adaptability and varied development within the Christian traditions with her descriptive analyses, which is ordered in a thematic and chronological manner throughout the chapter. She traces the development of orthodoxy through the ecumenical (universal) councils, the promulgation of the Nicene Creed, and then outlines the differences behind the schism between the Eastern and Western Churches.

Fletcher’s discussion of the High Middle Ages includes concise summaries of key movements, including scholasticism, monasticism, the conciliar movement and the launching of the crusades. The theme of fragmentation continues in Fletcher’s accounts of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. Especially interesting are Fletcher’s discussions of the development of mystical traditions during this period where she focuses on the contributions of Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, and John of the Cross.

Fletcher underscores the complexity within and across the Christian traditions by recounting the varied responses to modernity and historical biblical criticism, ranging from Fundamentalism, Evangelicalism, Liberal theologies, Neo-orthodoxy, Liberation theologies, the Second Vatican Council, ecumenism, and the shifting place of women within pastoral leadership. Fletcher’s explanations of the twentieth-century movements for social change, including the Social Gospel, participation in the American Civil Rights movement, South Africa’s anti-apartheid movement and Latin America’s *Communidades de Base*, underscore the vitality and political significance of several Christian denominations.

Learning Objectives are met when the student:

1. The development of Christianity from the beginnings of the Jesus movement through the Greco-Roman period to the modern era.
2. Christian literature, including the Gospels, Paul, and theological writings from different periods of Christian history.
3. Issues relating to outwardly theological expressions, such as liturgy, art and architecture, and structures, including governance, authority, and the relationship between church and state.
4. The debate over “right belief,” which occupied the first several councils of the church, concluding with the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE.
5. Analyze the connection between social change and twentieth century movements, including the changing role of women in the church.

Study Questions

1. What are parables? Where can we find them?
2. The Roman Emperor Constantine changed the external fortunes of Christianity in the Roman Empire. What were two of these key changes and what were their effects?
3. The schism between the Eastern and the Western Christian churches was a gradual process that involved many divisive factors. What was the notable change to the Nicene Creed that contributed to the schism, and what was at stake in this change?
4. The conventional start date of the Continental Reformation is the “95 Theses” authored by Martin Luther. Identify one of his core ideas that led to reformation in the Christian Church?
5. Identify distinctives of Pentecostalism and explain how these features have contributed to the growth and changes within global Christianity.

Study Questions: Answers

1. Parables are simple (albeit sometimes cryptic) stories wherein Jesus illustrated moral or spiritual lessons often in reference to familiar concepts. We can find parables in the Gospels, and we can find several parables that appear in more than one Gospel. (p. 185)
2. In a radical reversal following the Great Persecution under Emperor Diocletian, Constantine first called for the toleration of Christianity and then placed it at the forefront of public life. This change meant that Christians were no longer persecuted or stigmatized. Rather, Christians were increasingly promised greater opportunities and status. Moreover, in doing so, Constantine undermined the structure of the pagan religious system. The second change was that Constantine gave bishops magisterial and juridical power, which meant that the bishops could exercise power and could settle disputes in Christian communities. Another notable change is that Constantine convoked the first ecumenical (universal) church council thereby giving the precedence for later emperors who also sought to enforce universal church unity through the convoking of council. (p. 189)
3. The change within the Nicene Creed that contributed to the schism between the Eastern and Western churches was the addition of the word *filioque* (Latin for “and the son”) by the Latin Church. At stake was whether or not the Holy Spirit only preceded from God the Father, or from both God the Father “and the Son” (Latin *filioque*). The Greek Church maintained that the Holy Spirit proceeded only from the Father, and rejected the claim of authority that the Roman Church made in changing the Creed without discussing the changes with the other churches, thus leading to the schism. (p. 198)
4. One of Luther’s core ideas was the priesthood of all believers. This idea meant that Christians could have access to God without a priest, and so they could be much less dependent on ministers and bishops. Another core idea was the doctrine of justification by faith, which challenged the complex system that placed the cleric as a mediator between God and the sinner. (p. 215)
5. Pentecostalism emphasizes “speaking in tongues” (glossolalia) and the experience of divine healing. These charismatic gifts have contributed to a more inclusive form of Christianity, in part, due to the emphasis on divine experience over institutional knowledge and ecclesiastical structures that often exclude women and the unlearned. In countries where access to medical care can be difficult to obtain, there is a draw to the hope of divine healing. Finally, Pentecostal pastors address and provide guidance for everyday problems (p. 229)

Research Questions

1. What are some of the key differences in how the various denominations of Christianity interpret Christian scripture and Christian tradition?
2. What is the nature of papal authority for the Latin Church? How has papal authority developed throughout the history of Western Christianity from Gregory the Great, to Innocent III, Boniface VIII and up to the Second Vatican Council?
3. Sin is often considered to be the fundamental problem of human nature. Discuss the Christian ideas behind the nature of sin in regards to the function of Jesus as the messiah and saviour and the Church. Topics may include: atonement theology; the effects of sin as debated between Augustine and Pelagius; the various ways sin is addressed and rectified (e.g., baptism; indulgences; justification by faith).
4. Women have traditionally been excluded from positions of pastoral leadership in the Church. What roles have traditionally been made accessible to Christian women? To what extent have women become a part of the Christian leadership and power structures in the modern ear? What are some of the key points of contention within the ongoing debates over the role of women in the Church?
5. Mary, the mother of Jesus, has been the source of much controversy in the history of Christianity. Why is this so? What ideas concerning Mary led to these controversies?
6. There are several central rituals within Christian practice including liturgy and Easter. Describe any of the rituals in Christianity by explaining its purpose and significance.
7. Summarize the key aims, debates and developments across the first four ecumenical councils, including the role of the emperors, theologians, the function of creeds and the development of orthodoxy alongside its foil heresy, and the irony of increased fragmentation that occurred after these councils.
8. The Reformation began a significant process of change in the Western Christian churches. The changes that the Reformation brought about are linked to justification by faith, the authority of the scripture alone and the priesthood of believers. In what ways were these ideas employed across various Protestant denominations spanning from the 17th century to the present day?
9. The development of orthodoxy occurred alongside heresies which it had defined itself against. Four of the heresies summarized within Fletcher’s chapter include the teachings of Arius (Arianism), Gnosticism, Pelagianism and Nestorianism. Each of these heresies is diverse and complicated. Research one of these heresies in order to explain its origins, concerns, rationale and legacy.
10. Church architecture and Christian sacraments are often connected to the idea that the spiritual can be made visible in the world. Choose either a sacrament or an element of Church architecture, and explain how Christians believe that this is possible.

Reflection Questions

1. The Pauline Epistles are letters that Paul wrote to early Christian communities to encourage them live a Christian life as they navigated conflicts and misunderstandings of Christian teachings. If Paul were to write to a Christian community now, what conflicts do you think he would address?
2. The role of women in the history of Christianity is complex and varied. How does the treatment of women differ among the various Christian denominations?
3. Ecumenism often seeks to create a climate of mutual acceptance and common purpose. How does ecumenism help Christian communities deal with their theological differences? What are some of the benefits and/or drawbacks of ecumenism?
4. Why was the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI in February 2013 a significant event for Roman Catholic thought and practice, as well as for Christianity in general?
5. From Emperor Constantine onwards, the relationship between the Church and State has been complicated. What are some of the advantages, challenges and issues related to this ever-evolving relationship between the political and ecclesiastical powers?

Additional Resources

1. For numerous free translations of the Bible in English and many other languages, see: Bible Gateway. <https://www.biblegateway.com/>
2. For a free database of writings from the early church, see: Early Christian Writings. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/>
3. For an expansive free database of classic writings in the Christian traditions from the early church to the modern era, see: Christian Classics Ethereal Library. <https://www.ccel.org/>
4. For the standard reference book on the Christian tradition, which also includes excellent bibliographies on many topics ranging from A – Z, see: Cross, F.L. and E.A. Livingstone. eds. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed. Oxford University Press, 2005.
5. For an introduction to Christianity with emphasis on theology and doctrine, see: McGrath, Alister E. *Christianity: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Blackwell, 2006.
6. For a reference source on the Bible and gender studies, see: O’Brien, Julia M. ed. *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Gender Studies*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
7. For a database of many resources related to progressive Christianity, including articles, events, and other ways to connect and be informed, see: *Progressive Christianity*. <https://progressivechristianity.org/>
8. Vatican <http://www.vatican.va/>
9. Weaver, Mary Jo and David Brakke. *Introduction to Christianity*. Wadsworth, 2009.
10. World Council of Churches: <http://www.oikoumene.org/en>

Field Work Guidelines

If you are interested in doing fieldwork, you need to plan and organize your fieldwork experience as thoroughly as you can. Generally, you can divide your fieldwork experience into three stages: Planning, during, and after your fieldwork.

Planning Your Fieldwork

*Research:* Begin by researching the individual, group, or place you would like to do work on or with. Visit websites if available, and read any available scholarship.

*Make Contact:* Contact the person, group, or administrators of the place you would like to research. Give as much information as possible about your project so that your contact can guide. Often your contact will be able to help you understand the rules for conduct that will be needed during your fieldwork. Remember to be polite and courteous.

*Questions:* Based on your research and interests, create a set of questions you would like to answer during the course of your fieldwork.

*Ethics Approval:* Some projects need to have ethics approval, especially if your research involves people. The guidelines for applications for ethics approval may differ depending on the organization or university you work with; thus, please contact your organization or university to find out more about this process.

During Your Fieldwork

Often, there are specific rules for conduct when you visit sacred spaces and/or interview people, and usually, these rules can be seen before you enter a site, or spoken about before you interview people. It is best to find out about these rules before you begin your fieldwork. There are some general rules that should be followed at all times: Always be polite and courteous, dress modestly, and participate where appropriate.

*Be polite and courteous:*

1. Introduce yourself. If you are visiting a sacred site or a worship centre, you will be able to find people who are either there to meet you specifically, or would like to help you during your visit.
2. Leave your camera, phone, notebook, or laptop in a bag or even at home unless you have received prior permission to use these items.
3. Be aware of signs. Signs have important information about the place you are in, thus, look for the signs and the information they give.
4. Be respectful of the people and your surroundings. Do not disturb the rites or the privacy of the people. While there are times when you may be invited to participate, please remember that if you are not invited, you should keep a respectful silence and distance from the rite. Also, people may be curious about why you are visiting or conducting your research. Try to answer their questions as best you can. They may be able to provide you with additional information and further help.

*Dress modestly:*

1. Rules for appropriate dress are often important when visiting a place or a group. Please follow these rules if you have been given them.
2. For churches or Christian sacred sites, these rules usually mean that knees and shoulders should be covered for both men and women. Heads, however, usually need to be uncovered, especially for men. Often, if you are not dressed appropriately, you may be given appropriate attire, or you may not be allowed into a site.

*Participate Where Appropriate:*

1. If you have been invited to participate, please do so!
2. Generally, follow the guidelines that have been given to you, or the people around you. The best tip: Stand when people stand, and sit when people sit.
3. Ask questions. If you are not sure what to do, ask the people around you. Most people will be happy to help you out.
4. If you are interviewing a particular person or people, make notes on the questions that you ask, and answer any questions that you are asked as well.

After Your Fieldwork

1. Make a comprehensive set of notes on your experience as soon as you are able. The better your notes are, the more you will be able to draw on later.
2. Thank anyone who has helped you with your experience, and acknowledge their help in the written version of your work.
3. Follow up with the people or the place that you have visited. If you have used information from any interviews, offer to send a copy your work to the place or the people you have met.