

Jesus Beyond Christianity

I don't see Jesus Christ as being in
any part of a religion. Religion is the
Temple after God has left it.

—Bono, of U2

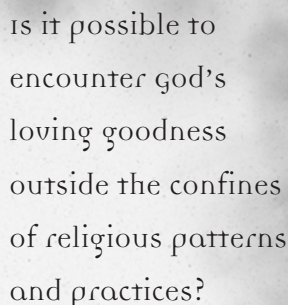
Sitting in a prison cell awaiting execution for his part in an attempt to assassinate Adolf Hitler, the theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer did what anyone in that situation might do. He wrote letters to his friends and family. On April 30, 1944, the topic on Bonhoeffer's heart was simply this: Does Christianity have a future?

Titled "Religionless Christianity," his short letter pondered whether the nineteen-hundred-year history of the church and its theology might in fact be a preliminary stage for doing without religion altogether. It was a revolutionary idea all right, one that has challenged Christians ever since its publication. Despite being written more than sixty years ago, the letter's tone is remarkably contemporary.

The letter is not the ranting of someone who has been hurt or frustrated by religion. It is the heartfelt searching of a man who loves God and wants his faith to matter. Toward that end, Bonhoeffer does not advocate the abandonment of Christian faith as much as ask where it is to go next. He questions, for instance, whether religion is

really necessary as a condition of salvation. Is it possible to encounter God's loving goodness outside the confines of religious patterns and practices? He also wonders why he so often feels drawn to be with people outside the church—the seemingly religionless—more than

with those who share his faith. Further, why does it seem harder to talk about God with those who claim to know him than those who don't?



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In the end, Bonhoeffer suggests that we have come to the end of religion as it has been traditionally understood. "The time when men could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over," he writes, "and so is the time of inwardness

and conscience, which is to say the time of religion as such."

Unfortunately, Bonhoeffer died before being able to elaborate on these thoughts, so one can only guess at what exactly he meant—or even the specific circumstances that caused him to reach these conclusions. Still, his letter does not seem to advocate abandoning the Christian faith as much as reimagining it.

I don't know about you, but I identify with Bonhoeffer's search—and many of his questions. I, too, think the time of traditional religion has passed. I've felt it in my own heart, and I see evidence of it in the broader culture as well.

To be honest, religion doesn't really work for me anymore. Being aligned with an institutional church or a particular system of worship seems increasingly irrelevant to my ongoing journey with God. In my experience, the customs, traditions, and even language of religion often seem to get in the way of honest dialogue about God. What's more, religion's airtight explanations and all-or-nothing

theological arguments seem out of touch with the complexities of twenty-first-century life.

Though it's true that some people still seem to find comfort in religion's embrace, many more are exploring new interpretations of what it means to follow God. Obvious cracks are appearing in the foundation of traditional religion.

A fundamental fear

Religion, it seems, is no longer a source of cohesion in the world. In recent years, religious conflicts have escalated in frequency and scale. The stakes seem higher somehow, and the consequences more dire.

Since September 11, 2001, many commentators have talked about the “clash of civilizations,” but I would suggest that what we're actually experiencing is a “clash of monotheisms.” The zealots of the dominant monotheistic religions—Islam, Christianity, and Judaism—are at odds with each other and desiring dominance. Meanwhile, masses of the faithful stand on the sidelines in confused silence.

Driven by promises of paradise, some followers of Islam are willing to become suicide bombers. Driven by what they perceive to be moral conviction, some Christians are ready to bomb abortion clinics. While Islamists call for global jihads, Christians of a certain ilk call for an almost forced return of Christianity as the shaping force of American cultural life. They claim that the founders were intent on establishing this kind of society—conveniently forgetting that men like Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson opposed organized belief systems. In fact, Jefferson went so far as to inwardly swear “eternal hostility” toward organized religions.

Admittedly, all religions probably have a fringe element, but just the same, what is it about traditional religion that breeds dogmatic, sometimes fanatical, and even violent responses to the rest of

the world? Over the years, terrible things have been done and justified in the name of God. Just look at any history book. Is it any wonder the world's population is beginning to look for alternatives? Frankly, fundamentalists of all kinds are scaring people off. The more zealous and powerful these people become, the more potential followers they drive away.

Like it or not, religion is no longer regarded as a place to find peace for the soul. Increasingly, sanctuaries have been turned into war rooms. Perceiving the postmodern world as a threat to any concrete views of life and especially religion, fundamentalists and their conservative cousins have become obsessed with holding their theological and cultural ground. In many ways, these efforts are like putting a finger in the dyke, trying to hold back the sea of change that ultimately cannot be stopped.

Writing in *Parabola* magazine, William Ventimiglia declares, "Fundamentalism, in my view, is correct in wanting to preserve the possibility of religious experience. However, it stands against the relentless tide of conscious development in its efforts to confine individual religious experience to conservative organized expression." He goes on to quote Jesus' analogy of the Holy Spirit as a wind that blows where it chooses and writes that this element of God's action in the world has "always been a problem for organized religion with its well-established categories of understanding."

Fundamentalism, by definition, is an effort to protect the fundamentals—or essentials—of the faith. The problem is determining just what those fundamentals are. In today's context, it seems that fundamentalists are intent on hanging on to a particular view of the divine that sacrifices the beauty of God's spirit and grace in exchange for control and authority.

But what if Bonhoeffer was right? What if the last nineteen hundred years of Christian theology and practice were just a temporary form of human self-expression? What if we have now reached the point where we can live beyond religion? Could it be that we will soon see the spirit released in the world in brand-new ways,

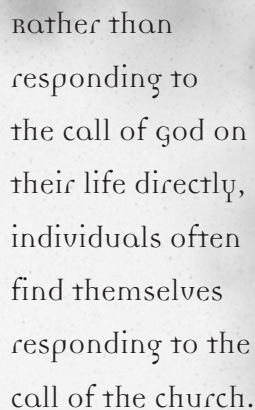
without the baggage of religion? Could it be that the eventual collapse of current religious systems will in fact prove to be a literal high-water mark in faith—that in fact many of the “fundamentals” aren’t fundamental after all?

AN ELUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

For years, preachers have appealed to people to join the church and experience Christian salvation using this phrase, “It’s about relationship, not religion.” The only problem is that it’s seldom true. In actuality, the relationship promised by religion is usually predicated on commitment to the institution as much as it is to God. You don’t have to be in a church for long to figure out what the expectations are—whether it’s tithing, teaching Sunday school, praying, or going to confession—and what they expect you to believe becomes even more apparent.

Rather than facilitating a dialogue between followers and God, the church has a tendency to interpret individuals’ relationships with God for them. Rather than responding to the call of God on their life directly, individuals often find themselves responding to the call of the church. What seems like obedience to the teachings of Christ is often adherence to external and dogmatic belief systems. This “false advertising” of sorts has no doubt also contributed to the interest in new spiritual paths.

We must also consider the claims to superiority that appear in virtually every religion. In Christianity, it is Peter who, in the



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book of Acts, declares emphatically to his peers and religious leaders, "Salvation is found in no one else [but Jesus], for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." In addition, most Christians also cite Jesus' own words in the gospel of John as proof of Christian superiority: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

These claims to superiority might not be problematic if they were a unique occurrence. But what happens when there are competing cultures in a world? Today, few societies have the option of living in "splendid isolation" anymore; the world is at once too big and too small. In this new pluralistic reality, we find ourselves dealing with competing claims of superiority.

Go to England, and you'll find a staggering number of religious television shows, not just Christian, but Islamic and Buddhist as well. All of them are quite similar in format, and each advances its faith as the true religion with varying degrees of intensity. What is a viewer to do?

In today's world, we no longer have just one religion seeking dominance but instead a cacophony of voices all vying for our allegiance. The evangelical preacher can be found next to the imam, who lives beside the Buddhist, who sits on an ecumenical council with the local rabbi. Each religion has different claims, and all are fighting for the hearts and minds of a searching global populace.

In addition, an unlimited number of spiritual and cultural perspectives are available to us through the Internet and satellite radio. These technologies make each religion's claims to ultimate truth even more difficult to resolve.

In the case of the Christian faith, one may be able to argue that the heaven and earth spoken of by Peter were not a literal heaven and earth. After all, back in biblical times, the world was thought to be flat, the earth below and heaven above. Likewise, when Paul speaks of the gospel being preached in all the world, it's

conceivable that he may not have meant the Americas, Australasia, and any number of other places, since his “world” did not yet include these locations.

Even if one can somehow sort through these competing claims, the overall perception remains that organized religions propagate divisiveness. Of particular concern are groups who combine claims of superiority with power-based interpretations of foundational texts such as the Bible or the Koran. To say there is a deep mistrust of these groups in broader society would be an understatement.

But despite these problems, people don’t seem to be rejecting God or turning away from the divine as they did in the twentieth century. Nor are they reducing the idea of the sacred to New Age generalities. Instead, they seem to be searching for new “religionless” ways to celebrate the sacred.

MY OWN EXPERIENCE

So what about me? Where do I fall on the spiritual spectrum? Frankly, I’m not quite sure how to answer that. Do I remain personally committed to Jesus and his teachings as found in the Bible? I do. I even think there’s a place for great religious teaching and teachers. At the same time, however, I remain hopeful that faith can be practiced without the baggage of religion. I’ll explore this idea throughout this book, but rest assured that the following pages will not simply try to convince you that all roads lead to God. Instead, this book is about a new way of looking at God and, in particular, the Christian message. I want to go beyond the religious categories that have governed the conversation so far.

The increasing interest in universalism among all but the most extreme elements of the world’s religions suggests that an evolutionary shift is indeed taking place. For further evidence of this, one need only look to organizations like the Parliament of the

World's Religions or the proliferation of books by religious teachers highlighting the similarities between faiths. While I'm encouraged by this trend, I don't believe universalism is the complete answer. For me, it's the beginning of the story, not the end.



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A universal Longing

Universalism is basically the theory that all religions are inherently the same—that each of them is valid and can bring us to God.

As far back as the third century, Origen, one of the great theologians of the early church, affirmed the idea of universalism, saying, “The Word is more powerful than all the diseases of the soul, and he applies his remedies to each one according to the pleasure of God—for the name of God is to be invoked by all, so that all shall serve him with one consent.” Even though his views were called into question by the church three centuries later and ultimately determined to be heretical, Origen attracted some high-profile supporters. Saint Vincent of Lérins said that he would rather be wrong with Origen than right with the world.

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, Muhammad is said to have declared, “If Allah is Allah, then there can only be what Allah is; there cannot be a God of Christians, a God of Jews.”

Hans Kung, the great Catholic theologian, once wrote, “No survival without a world ethic. No world peace without peace be-

tween the religions. No peace between the religions without dialogue between the religions.”

While these assertions sound promising, in practice, harmony between faiths remains more dream than reality. So far it seems that the world’s religions aren’t willing to engage in meaningful dialogue with each other; and those who do represent a small and largely unheard minority. Generally speaking, individuals who accept the idea of universalism continue to live outside of the major religious traditions.

While universalism bravely tries to resolve many of the conflicts and crises created by religion in our pluralistic world, it seems a bit like that Coca-Cola ad from the 1970s. You know the one—happy, smiling people from all over the world singing, “I’d like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony.” If only it were so simple.

Unfortunately, the complex issues and difficulties of human life cannot be solved with a Coke and a smile—either figuratively or literally. In much of the Middle East, Coca-Cola has been rejected and replaced with a new brand: Mecca-Cola. This product acknowledges the population’s desire for a carbonated drink while at the same time affirming the separateness of Middle Eastern culture.

The reality is that cultures and societies differ, and life is incredibly complicated. Sanitizing the religious landscape and removing all those differences does not resolve the tough issues. “Had Allah willed He could have made you one community, but He hath made you as you are,” reads the Koran in chapter 5, verse 48. “So vie with one another in good works. Unto Allah you will all return, and He will inform you of that wherein you differ.”

In this passage there seems to be something of the particular as well as the universal. The idea is that all revelations are pathways to salvation but different perspectives are necessary because of our different cultural settings.

Nevertheless, there is still an obvious longing in the world for some kind of resolution to the centuries-old conflict between

religions. At a recent concert in Los Angeles, Bono, lead singer of the band U2, theatrically put on a white blindfold inscribed with the word *coexist* during a performance of the song “Love, Peace, or Else.” The word on his headband was made up of the symbols of the monotheistic faiths—the Christian cross, the Jewish star, and the Islamic crescent. The word was simultaneously flashed onto the digital light screens surrounding the stage. Through this powerful symbolism, it was obvious the band was issuing a passionate call to the audience to reflect on the need for peaceful coexistence in a troubled world.

In August 2005, the musician Moby posted an interesting journal entry on his Web site. Titled “Religion,” the essay had a similar ring to Bonhoeffer’s letter from sixty years ago. “So, do you think it’s time to invent a new religion?” it began.

Because Moby has been up-front about his commitment to the teachings of Jesus throughout his career and frequently writes about Christ, on some level his actions aren’t surprising. But at the same time, the fact that a rock musician would publicly explore the religious challenges of our time on his Web site does illustrate how often spiritual impulses are cropping up in culture—and not just in churches, mosques, and synagogues.

In his essay, Moby expresses concern with the ways society has changed over the years and how out of touch religion is with these new realities. In particular, Moby highlights the need for a new religion in light of the teachings of Jesus. For Moby, as for many people, the problem isn’t Jesus; it’s contemporary Christianity. Perhaps that’s why he claims no religious affiliation. In his words, present-day Christianity is “depressingly Newtonian” in a world of quantum realities.

“Our human significance is both far greater and far smaller than anything that we’ve hitherto recognized . . .,” he writes. “We need a new way in which to look at ourselves and in which to understand our lives and our significance.”

beyond universalism

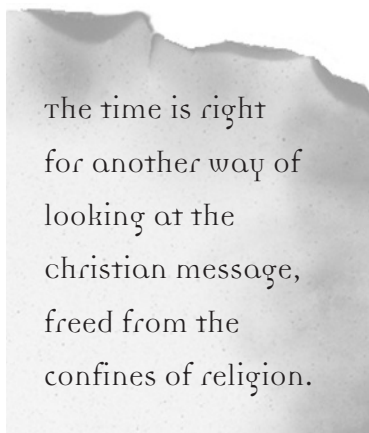
Bono and Moby are not the only ones calling for a new way. I recently spent some time at a local magazine stand and found all kinds of periodicals covering spirituality. From *Vanity Fair*, a mainstream periodical catering to the fashion and high-society types, to *Utne*, a compendium of articles from independent magazines from around the country, the media are regularly featuring articles exploring religion and spirituality as it unfolds in the twenty-first century. The articles tend to fall into two main categories: the continuing struggle to understand the rise of fundamentalism in the post-9/11 world and the new spiritual practices and ideas that are beginning to fill the marketplace.

Even among those who remain committed to traditional faiths, there are calls for new approaches to the practice of religion. Ziauddin Sardar, an Islamic scholar, notes that for almost a century now, scholars and thinkers have been calling for *ijtihad*—reasoned struggle and a rethinking of Islam. In *Utne*, Parvez Ahmed, a board member for the Council on American-Islamic Relations, addresses common misconceptions about Islam and Muslims both inside and outside the faith.

Within the Christian tradition, there are a number of groups who also wish to reframe and reconfigure Christianity for the twenty-first century. Recognizing that the gap between church and culture is growing exponentially, they believe that continuing with the status quo will only assure the eventual demise of the Christian faith. While I agree with their assessment, I'm not sure attempting to make old beliefs fit in new packages is really the answer either.

For the most part, Christianity seems to be frozen in history—and recent history at that. When it comes to Scripture and its interpretation, modernity rules. Try as they might, most Christians today can't seem to get out of the quagmire of modern views regarding the

role and function of religion. They may put a new label on the box, but the contents remain unchanged. For a society looking for alter-



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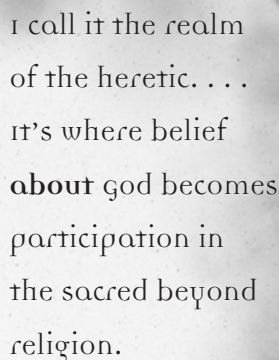
native ways to practice faith, that's just not good enough. The product simply isn't compelling.

We need to move past religion. I believe the time is right for another way of looking at the Christian message, freed from the confines of religion and open to the possibility of a radical new incarnation and manifestation. The message of Jesus needs to evolve for our times.

In his extraordinary book *Stages of Faith*, James Fowler speaks of the development of the spiritual life as a movement through a series of stages. Using the analogy of moving through childhood to adulthood, he characterizes the various stages of faith and identifies what precipitates the movement to the next phase of the spiritual journey.

The second phase he terms "mythic-literal." This expression of faith, he contends, is characterized by its commitment to literal interpretations of beliefs and a linear approach to spirituality in general. The imagination is also curbed in favor of a more rigid structuring of one's world. That's certainly where I began my journey, and I know many of you likely did as well. The reality is that many people find themselves in this stage for a long time. Fowler says that what triggers the movement to the next phase is a clash or contradiction of stories. This clash inevitably leads to a questioning of one's values and perspectives. Previously held literalisms break down, and there is a disillusionment with teachers and teachings that once held us. The task then becomes the reframing of one's world by adopting a new relationship to it and breaking out of the mold that nurtured us.

Fowler's final category is called "universalizing faith." He notes that few people get here. It is the giddy realm where conceit breaks down and people transcend the categories that normally apply to the religious. It's where people transcend their own belief systems, if you will. Fowler called it the realm of the "subversives, the relevant irrelevant." I call it the *realm of the heretic*. It's where those looking for more than religious systems end up. It's where belief *about* God becomes participation in the sacred beyond religion.



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who wants to be a heretic?

Copernicus and Galileo are among the world's most famous heretics. Both incurred the wrath of the church because they dared to challenge the prevailing wisdom of their times.

In a small work written in 1514, Copernicus introduced seven axioms about the order of the physical universe. Perhaps the most revolutionary and incendiary of the ideas was his declaration that the "earth's center is not the center of the universe." In fact, Copernicus was so afraid of being brought to trial on charges of heresy that he refrained from publishing the work until many years later. He died shortly after its publication in 1543.

It was Galileo's defense of Copernicus's theories that ultimately led to his own trial for heresy. In addition, Copernicus's book was placed on the list of banned materials—a ban, incidentally, that was not lifted by the Catholic Church until 1835. To the end, Galileo argued that Copernicus was right in spite of the accepted view of the day.

For years, people believed that the earth was the center of the universe. It had been the predominant view for so long that it became dogma. Eventually, an entire worldview formed around it. If the earth was the center of the universe, then the earth was the center of all worlds. And if the earth was the center of all worlds, then the church was at the center of all human affairs.

Before Copernicus, no one had considered that forces beyond the boundaries of the earth might sustain it. Copernicus proclaimed that the sun gave life and energy to the earth, not vice versa. But he didn't stop there. He went on to suggest that the earth was in a state of perpetual motion. Again, this was a radical idea. Medieval cosmology often depicted the earth as a static center with heaven above and earth below.

Not surprisingly, Copernicus had many detractors. Although he was personally committed to God and saw his work as a way of glorifying God, the powers that be were quick to tell him he was threatening the faith. Tolosani, a Dominican monk, wrote that Copernicus "seems to be unfamiliar with the Holy Scriptures since he contradicts some of its principles, not without risk to himself and to the readers of his book of straying from the faith."

What does Copernicus have to do with religion in today's context? A lot. For the bulk of world history, religion has been viewed as the center of all things—the "earth," if you will. Until recently, it didn't occur to anyone to look beyond it. Religion was the light that seemed to give energy to the divine impulses. Even now, it is hard for many people to think beyond the dominant idea that religion is the answer to society's need to experience the divine.

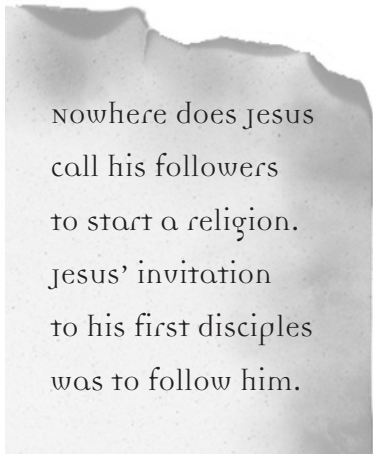
Throughout history, the church has put up creeds and doctrines to ensure that all things related to Jesus rotate around the axis of religion. The institutional church has become the center of the Christian universe. The challenge, I believe, is to reorder that universe. Jesus put it another way. Challenging the Pharisees on a point of law, he asked them whether the Sabbath was made for man or man for the Sabbath.

I believe that the next phase of faith is to move beyond religion. Nowhere does Jesus call his followers to start a religion. Jesus' invitation to his first disciples was to follow him. It was a call to journey, a process that leads us away from some things and toward others. It wasn't a call to adhere to a set of rules for all time. In fact, one of the most commonly heard critiques of the Christian message is that it is out of touch with what is really going on in the world around us.

"The purpose of theology," writes the theologian Sallie McFague, "is to make it possible for the gospel to be heard in our time." For the gospel to be heard in our time requires a commit-

ment to spiritual growth and maturity. It involves being willing to break out of the boxes that have served us well in the past but no longer suffice today. While it's possible to preserve and pass on a centuries-old understanding of the nature of society, ethics, and even morality, we have to realize that these constructs are often powerless to speak into today's world.

Faithfulness to the message of Jesus does not mean that we must simply imitate our forbears in the Christian tradition. To do so might help preserve *their* formulas, but it will freeze *us* in history. I believe that we must attempt to recontextualize the story—to find equivalents for our world today. Jesus' message was a wake-up call to his people. In the Bible, in the second chapter of Mark, Jesus says, "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins."



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Here Jesus cautions the movement he is calling into being against appearing new or even progressive when it is in fact “old,” meaning fundamentally connected to the dominant symbolic order. To do such a thing would jeopardize Jesus’ vision of the kingdom of God. The old order was not sufficient to contain Jesus’ radical message, and that is just as true today.

This tendency to hold on to the familiar remains a problem for many followers of God today. Religion becomes a place we retreat to, where we hear the old stories, lovingly preserved but frightfully disconnected from the realities of life. The rise of interest in fundamentalism is evidence of the desire for reassurance—for ways of fitting a complex world into manageable categories. But religions don’t function at their highest and best when they attempt to provide simple answers to life’s biggest questions.

The answer is not a retreat into the past. We must look instead at the “beliefs and ideas that stunt holiness today,” as one writer put it. I believe we must resist our Israelite-like impulse to look back longingly at Egypt.

Undoubtedly, some people will see this call to reposition questions of faith beyond religion as dangerous and unscriptural. Many who come from a religious point of view may be threatened by the challenge to consider Jesus beyond religion. But as I see it, religion finds its gravity in the light of the sun. It finds sustainability and life through its relationship to the sun.

embracing the journey

As we enter this brave new world of the spirit, we can come with fear or arrogance or armed to the teeth with dogmatism. But that is not my desire. I venture into this world to conquer no one, to plant no flags and claim no territory, but to share what I hold dear from my tradition and offer my story about the grace of God as a gift to all who journey beyond religion.

Throughout this book, I want to explore what it means to move beyond religion—particularly Christianity. After all, that's the tradition I know best. But I believe that you will find value in these pages regardless of your spiritual background. I believe that the message of Jesus, once loosed from its religious confines, has the potential to contribute to the global yearning for the sacred and the divine. I believe that there is hope for the heretic, for God's grace is a much bigger gift than we've ever imagined.

INTERLUDE I

what is a heretic?

There are five main types of heretics:

1. Church reformers—people who think the church needs to adjust its beliefs or practices beyond what the church is willing to do. For Martin Luther, this meant challenging the selling of indulgences and criticizing the role of the pope. Luther also translated the Bible into the vernacular so that everyone could understand it.
2. Eccentrics—individuals who usually work alone and hold fringe and sometimes bizarre beliefs.
3. Dualists—people who take the dualism of body and spirit to extremes. For example, the Cathars taught that this world is evil—even created by the devil, not God—and that pious Christians must separate and purify themselves from it.
4. Reactionaries—people who refuse to accept a new dogma of the church. For instance, when Vatican II proclaimed that Mass should be said in the vernacular rather than Latin in the 1960s, some people refused to change.

5. Intellectuals—includes scientific thinkers whose theories and ideas go against church belief, like Copernicus, who challenged the church's view that the earth was the center of the universe.

The church classified heretics in the following way:

1. The heretic impenitent and not relapsed (for the first time)
2. The heretic impenitent and relapsed (for the first time was penitent, now is impenitent)
3. The heretic penitent and relapsed (for the first time was penitent, now is penitent again, but relapsing was the capital offense)
4. The heretic negative (who denied his crime)
5. The heretic contumacious (who absconded)

Because the church doesn't thirst for blood (*ecclesia non sitit sanguinem*), the first four types were all delivered over to the secular state, which usually immediately punished heresy with a death sentence—the longest delay could be five days. Though not always observed, the custom was for the impenitent heretics (the first two types) to be cast into the flames alive; and the penitents (the third type) were first strangled or hanged and then burned.