

Chapter 1

Good News in a Bad News World

In This Chapter

- ▶ Getting the gist of Christianity
- ▶ Exploring the many paradoxes of the Christian faith
- ▶ Breaking it down: Seeing how Christianity fans out
- ▶ Understanding Christianity's role in today's world
- ▶ Recognizing the difference between Christianity and major world religions

When you click the remote and watch the nightly news broadcast, good news is sure hard to come by. Instead, other people's bad news always seems to take center stage: A burglar steals an elderly couple's life savings, a fire rips through an apartment building, or a hijacked plane crashes in Siberia. You visit the checkout aisle at your local grocery and see that other people's bad news sells tabloids: a celebrity's failed two-week-old marriage, a politician's scandal, or a mystery illness that causes an Olympic gold medalist to grow a second nose.

You and I are inundated with bad news, but it's the yearning for good news that keeps us getting out of bed each day: a marriage proposal, a job promotion, the expectancy of a child or grandchild, the winning ticket of the Super Lotto. Good news not only makes your day, but it also gives you hope and optimism for the future.

Christianity is a faith that's all about good news. The heart of the Christian message is called the *gospel*, which means — you guessed it — the “good news.” The Christian faith, therefore, claims to offer meaning and hope to people, not just for a day, but also for all eternity.

So what exactly is this so-called good news that Christianity claims? How is it different from other religions? And if Christianity is supposed to be about good news, why does it seem that so much bad news — scandalous priests, corrupt televangelists, and so on — flows from the Christian Church these days?

In this chapter, you discover the essence of Christianity and how it compares to other world religions. You also explore some popular misconceptions of the Christian faith so that you can discern what Christianity is and is *not*.

12 Part I: Uncovering What Christianity's All About

Packing Christianity into a Nutshell

Trying to define Christianity in a single sentence is kind of like trying to cram my family's luggage into the back of our minivan when we go on vacation — an impossible task until you start throwing many bags, even seemingly important ones, out the window. I spend this entire book diving into what the Christian faith is, but if I had to pack it into a nutshell, I'd say that Christianity is the belief that God chose to create and love humans, and — at an incredible cost to himself — frees them from a tight spot if only they, in response, choose to reach out for his helping hand.

I dive into the cut-and-dry basics of Christianity later in this chapter, but first I give you the scoop on the whole shebang — from beginning to end (as briefly as possible!) so you know what you're dealing with. So kick back, get a mug of java or tea, and read on for the story of Christianity. (If you want to get to the nitty-gritty, flip ahead to the section, "Understanding how Christians define their faith.")

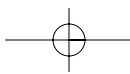
Going back to the beginning: People choosing, God responding

Christians believe in what they call the one True God, who is perfect, has existed forever, and created the world and all its itty-bitty little creatures (see Chapter 7). But when God created humans, he came up with something extra special; he not only gave people pinky toes and eyebrows, but also the one-of-a-kind gift of *free will* (choice).

God gave people the ability to choose whether to follow him and have a relationship with him or to go our own separate ways. The reason he did this seems pretty obvious to me: Suppose you desired a relationship with a special someone. Would you prefer a person who decidedly picked you out of a crowd, or would you rather have a robot that was programmed to do nothing else? Personally, I prefer the chooser. I often wonder why my wife decided on me, but I won't argue; I'll just enjoy the voluntary, albeit semi-crazy, decision she made. So too, God opted for a humanity with free choice. But when he did so, he took a risk, because people can decide to go their own ways and forget about him.



God made it clear from the get-go that following him meant letting the good times roll, while going against him would be a major bummer for all parties involved — yucky stuff like eternal death and judgment, as I discuss in Chapters 4 and 9.



The first folks to live out this experiment in freedom were Adam and Eve. The couple had some good times with God for a while. But as the Bible talks about in the Book of Genesis, curiosity got the better of them, and they soon wanted to know what it was like doing what they wanted to do instead of what God wanted them to do. They disobeyed God, setting off a chain reaction of disobedience (or *sin*) that has spiraled through every generation since them. See Chapter 4 for more on Adam and Eve's escapade.

When people recognize sin in their lives, their natural response is to try to do something to make up for it. Humans have continually tried to earn God's favor by doing good deeds as a payback (see Chapter 15). Christianity says that payback with God is impossible, though. Think of it like this: Suppose a genie grants you a wish to be transformed into a fish if you want to. Because he asks you in the middle of a heat wave, the idea of being a fish surrounded 24/7 by chilly water sounds really cool, so you take the plunge into the deep blue sea. However, after a long swim and an initial fling with a puffer fish, you decide that the fish's life isn't for you. Your natural response may be to swim upstream to where you initially jumped into the water and hope that somehow that action will reverse the metamorphic process. But no amount of swimming against the current will change you back into a human again. Instead, the genie, by his own initiative, has to change you back.



In the same way, as you see when you read Chapter 3, God had to act on his own initiative to allow some way out of the trap that humans found themselves in. Christianity says that he did this by sending his Son, Jesus Christ (flip to Chapter 5), to take the punishment that is due you and I. In his teaching, Jesus made it clear that the Good News of Christianity is simple: Rather than deal with the bad news of sin, confess your sins and believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. He wipes your sins clean and gives you eternal life. A single Bible verse sums up his message: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Understanding how Christians define their faith

If you played a word association game with a sampling of Christians who've been touched by God's gospel and asked them to name a single word or

14 Part I: Uncovering What Christianity's All About

phrase that sums up Christianity, I suspect you'd get a handful of answers. A few likely candidates are

- ✓ Jesus Christ
- ✓ Grace
- ✓ Truth
- ✓ Life
- ✓ The Bible
- ✓ A transformed life

Each of these words reveals a key aspect of what Christianity's all about. After you begin to paint the terms one on top of another, you begin to see a clearer portrait of the Christian faith.



If you want to understand what true Christianity is, look first and foremost to what the Bible's New Testament says about Jesus. Explore *all* of what Jesus did, said, and taught — not just a couple selected verses. What's more, never look at the actions or words of Christians and conclude that their behavior or attitudes reflect what Christianity is. The Church is often in alignment with Jesus, but as Chapter 15 covers, Christians aren't perfect and make mistakes as well.

Definition #1: Jesus Christ

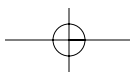
Christianity is a faith based on the life, teachings, and resurrection of Jesus, a man who lived in Palestine some 2,000 years ago. Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, sent by his Father in heaven to die on the cross for the sins of all humans.



People of other faiths often consider Jesus a good moral teacher, one who preached such memorable principles as “Love your enemies” and “Turn the other cheek.” To Christians, however, Jesus isn't just a good teacher. He either was who he said he was — God in human form — or else he was someone who's not trustworthy. Chapter 5 discusses Jesus and the reasons why Christians believe that being merely a good teacher is the one thing that Jesus could never have been.

Definition #2: Grace

You see the word *grace* sprinkled all around the Christian Church — in the song, “Amazing Grace,” in church names, such as Grace Baptist Church, and when Christians say “grace” before a meal, to name a few. *Grace* is everywhere. In fact, the New Testament mentions it 123 times.



Christians define *grace* as God's undeserved love shown toward humans. They believe that God's grace is what saves humans through Jesus Christ (see Chapter 3) and enables believers to live a Christian life (see Chapter 14).

Definition #3: Truth

Christians say that their faith isn't just a fairy tale that gives them comfort in times of trouble or blind hope in the midst of tragedy. Rather, they say that Christianity is factual, explaining the way events actually happened in the past, why today is like it is, and what's going to happen in the future. See Chapters 2 and 16 and the "Christianity isn't just a touchy-feely thing" section later in this chapter for more on this subject.

Definition #4: Life

A central teaching of Christianity has always been that life is more than school, marriage, kids, work, 401k's, Florida retirements, and hearing aids. Instead, Christianity claims that every person has an eternal soul that will exist even after his or her earthly body dies. Therefore, those who believe in God's grace through Jesus Christ will have eternal life in heaven and eventually on a new earth, while those who don't will be separated from God forever in hell. As Jesus said, he came so that humans may have life that has meaning, purpose, and joy. See Chapter 9 for more on these life and death matters.

Definition #5: The Bible

Christianity says that God revealed who he is and what his plans are through the written words of the Bible. Christians have historically believed that the Old and New Testaments are the inspired Word of God, are without error in the original writings, and serve as the final authority for the Christian faith. In fact, Christians have traditionally believed that their religion is intricately interwoven with the Bible, so much so that you can't separate them from each other without destroying the fabric of both. See Chapters 2 and 6 for more on the Bible.

Definition #6: A transformed life

When you know a lot about a subject, it's easy to get lost in the details. I can ask a chef about his prize soufflé, and he may bury me with the details of its preparation rather than what I care about — that its taste is to die for! I can ask a Web site developer about her Web site, and she may talk at length about technical aspects of HTML when all I care about is how I can use the site to order books. Or I can ask a theologian about what Christianity is, and he may go off on the particulars of the Nicene Creed, when all I want to know is whether the faith brings peace and joy to life. When the chef, Web site developer, and theologian responded, they were telling me the truth, but I was hoping for something more relevant and tangible.

16 Part I: Uncovering What Christianity's All About



So, although you explore many aspects of Christian belief throughout this book, don't forget that, for the average Christian, the Good News of Christianity on a practical, everyday level means a *transformed life*, from a life that was empty to a life that has meaning and hope, even when tragedies happen.

Check out Chapters 3, 5, and 13 to discover how Christ changed the lives of people in Bible times as well as those living today in the 21st century.

Being forewarned of stereotypes: What Christianity is not

You get a glimpse of what Christianity is in the preceding sections, but this section helps you take note of several misconceptions about Christianity that permeate popular thought. Some come from people who aren't Christians, while some are from Christians themselves who take Christianity a la carte, emphasizing one part of Christian teaching rather than the entire Christian message.

Consider the following misconceptions that are popular today:

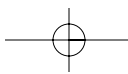
- ✓ Christianity is harsh and legalistic.
- ✓ Christianity is just about love.
- ✓ Christians can't have any fun.
- ✓ Christianity is just a European religion.
- ✓ Christianity is one of many paths to the same end.
- ✓ Christianity is a one-hour-a-week obligation.
- ✓ Christianity is a feel-good kick.

I discuss these in the sections that follow.

Christianity isn't just about judgment and condemnation

Because Christianity seeks to change, even kill, the sinful nature, many people have come to think of it as a faith that's based on meeting a certain behavioral standard. And if you don't measure up, then you're going to be judged and condemned.

Movies and TV shows often portray the Church as legalistic and judgmental. Take, for example, the film *Chocolat*. It tells the story of a wandering single mother, Vianne, and her daughter who come to a French village that's



dominated by the Comte de Reynaud, the mayor who has a firm hand on all that goes on in the village and its church. When the mayor learns that Vianne had her child out of wedlock, has no interest in coming to church, and plans to open a chocolate shop during *Lent* (the religious season when Christians traditionally abstain from eating something, such as chocolate), he resolves to run her out of town. The film portrays a stark contrast between the Comte's strict legalism and Vianne's loving grace throughout the movie.

Many undoubtedly identify with *Chocolat's* depiction of the Church. Perhaps you even grew up in a church like that. Yet, the irony is that, in watching the film, Jesus would be one to identify with the character of Vianne, *not* the mayor. After all, in many ways, the religious leaders of his day looked upon Jesus in the exact same way as the Comte looked upon Vianne.



Throughout history, strands of the Church have had this tendency to slip into legalism. However, this attitude isn't unique to Christianity. When you look at any religion, you find a similar portion of its followers stressing regulation and conformity to an expected standard, looking down on or being suspicious of those who don't live up to the rules. Ironically, even those who profess no religion at all sometimes fall into this legalism trap, criticizing those who believe differently than they do.

Jesus often battled with the *Pharisees*, the Jewish leaders of his day, over these very issues. Time and time again, Jesus made the point that the Pharisees cared more about rules than people and were preoccupied with obeying legal principles rather than loving others.

As you discover in Chapters 3 and 9, Christianity doesn't ignore judgment of sins, but biblical Christianity is a faith for the Viannes of the world, not the Comtes and the Pharisees (although they can be forgiven, too).

Christianity isn't just about love

Another extreme is the tendency to think of Christianity as being all about love — period. End of Story. Using 1 John 4:8 (“God is love”) as the mantra, some people proclaim that because God is love, any talk of judgment, punishment, or hell is bogus.

Certainly one of Jesus' key teachings was to love others. And he backed up what he preached by loving the outcasts and the down-and-out of his day. At the same time, love isn't all he spoke about. He also talked a lot about sin and holiness, as I discuss in Chapter 5.

18

Part I: Uncovering What Christianity's All About



The God of Christianity is a God of love *and* holiness (see Chapter 7). People have always had a hard time trying to grasp the balance between the two, which is why some people tend to focus on holiness and justice and forget about love. Others dwell on love and forget about God's holy nature. But, as Chapter 5 discusses, Jesus walked the tightrope between these two extremes.

Christianity doesn't mean "no fun"

Christians are often portrayed as being “sticks in the mud,” or people who want to suck all the fun and happiness out of life. However, biblical Christianity says the opposite — that God is the one who created fun, a sense of humor, wonderful food and drink, sex, and adventure.

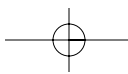
Popular culture today says that excess — food, alcohol, sex, or whatever — means fun. In contrast, Christianity says that “more” initially seems liberating, but it ultimately ensnares and dehumanizes you, making you a slave to physical desire rather than allowing you to maintain control over yourself through your mind and will. Or to quote from the popular film *Sabrina*, “More isn't always better; sometimes it's just more.”



Christianity insists that in order for these activities to be fun for you now *and* in the long run, you must do them in the right context and with the right amount. Consider, for example, the yeast that goes into a loaf of bread. Because yeast is the active ingredient, thinking that the more yeast you put into the batter, the better the bread will be is only natural. But, as any cook can tell you, you only spoil the loaf by doubling the yeast. Tasty bread features just the right amount of yeast put into the batter at the appropriate time.

Christianity isn't just a white man's religion

Some people think of Christianity as a European or “white man's” religion. Although Europe has played a key role in the history of the Christian Church over the past two thousand years, don't confuse Europe's role as catalyst with being the original source. Jesus was a Jewish carpenter, a Middle Easterner who never set foot in Europe or the United States. The early Church consisted of people from across the Mediterranean region — Palestine, North Africa, Asia, and Italy. As you discover in Chapter 10, it was only a couple hundred years later that Europe started to play a dominant role in leading the Church. Obviously, Europe was a torchbearer of the Christian faith for more than 1,500 years, but the winds of change continue as the 21st century unfolds. As I discuss in the “Putting It into Perspective: Christianity in the World Today” section of this chapter, the majority of Christians are now from the developing nations of Africa, Latin America, and Asia.



Christianity's not a religion?

An expression that has become popular over the past 30 years is “Christianity is a relationship, not a religion.” The notion that Christianity is *not* a religion may seem perplexing or even ridiculous to many. If you think of *religion* as referring to a belief system about God and the world around you, then Christianity most certainly does match that definition. But Christians who speak this phrase are referring to a popular understanding of *religion* that means a set of rules that one has to follow to gain approval from God. In this sense,

people may consider Christianity an anti-religion, because by its nature, Christianity affirms that humans can't do anything to be approved by God. Instead, it's only by his grace that people are saved.

Jesus spoke against this notion of an earn-your-way religion to the people of his day. Instead, he talked of faith as an intimate relationship with him and his Father in heaven.

Christianity isn't just one of many paths to the same end

Many people treat religions as essentially being the same — as different paths to the same destination. However, each of the major world religions holds fundamentally different, mutually exclusive claims about who God is and what's true. However, they can't all be true without “dumbing down” God into some kind of being who constantly bends to meet the fancies of any human belief.



What's more, from a Christian perspective, the Jesus of the Bible didn't allow for that “all roads lead to heaven” belief. On many occasions, he made it clear that the only way to God is through him and him alone. Most notably, in John 14:6, he said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me.” See Chapter 15 for more on this hot potato topic.

Christianity isn't just an hour-long obligation

To some, Christianity means going to church for an hour once a week. Although the Bible does call Christians to come together and worship God once a week, Christianity is more than just an obligation or an idea that affects life only on weekends. Instead, biblical Christianity is meant to be lived out 24/7 and should impact the way Christians think about every part of their lives and the world around them. Jesus didn't water down his message at all to his would-be followers. He didn't say, “Give me your spare change and a couple hours during the week.” Instead, he said, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me” (Mark 8:34). See Chapter 13 for what his call means on a practical level.

20 Part I: Uncovering What Christianity's All About

Christianity isn't just a touchy-feely thing

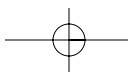
Many people think of Christianity, or any religious faith for that matter, as an emotional tool, which Christians turn to in times of trouble. The thought is: “Hey, if it helps you, great.” However, Christianity claims that it's not that kind of religion. Instead, Christianity claims to be a historical faith, directly tied to real space-and-time history. Given that, it's either literally true and far more than a feel-good kick, or false and therefore not worth investing your emotions in. (See Chapters 2 and 16 for more on this subject.)

Making Sense of Christian Paradoxes

The film *Catch Me If You Can* tells the real-life story of Frank Abagnale, Jr., a teenager who impersonates an airline pilot, a doctor, and a lawyer and extorts more than \$4 million — all before his 20th birthday. If I were to write a movie with such a plot line, I'd be laughed out of Hollywood for coming up with such an unrealistic story. Indeed, truth is often stranger than fiction.

The Christian faith is strange like this, because so many of its teachings are so contrary to human expectations. It's true: Christianity is filled with paradoxes that go against the grain of your natural line of thinking — you expect one thing, but get blindsided by another. Consider the following examples:

- ✔ **God is love, but he requires justice.** The Christian God is all-loving, but he still will punish those who don't come to him.
- ✔ **God is one God, but three “persons.”** Talk about confusing — the idea of the Trinity is surely the most difficult concept to grasp in all of Christianity. God is one God, but reveals himself in three “persons” — the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Chapter 7 explores this mind-bending topic.
- ✔ **God is fully in control, but humans have free choice.** The Bible makes it clear that God is all-powerful and is actively engaged in this world, but at the same time, allows people to have the freedom to make their own decisions and be responsible for the decisions they make.
- ✔ **Jesus was fully God and fully man.** Core to the Christian belief is that Jesus was a man who walked on the earth and who was both fully God and fully man. Confused? Flip to Chapter 5.
- ✔ **God is all-powerful, but he died for humans.** Because Jesus was fully God, it follows then that God — in the person of Jesus Christ — literally died for humanity. How can an infinite, eternal God die? And why did he do it? See Chapter 3 for more on this paradox.



- ✔ **Humans can't earn their way to heaven by being good.** A key Christian belief goes against the rugged individualistic fabric of culture today. It says that you can't pull yourself up by your own bootstraps (go on over to Chapter 15 for more). In other words, being a good person or keeping the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 34) won't help you earn God's favor and get you into heaven. Instead, it's God's grace alone that saves you, not yourself (go to Chapter 3 for the lowdown on grace).
- ✔ **The Church is full of sinners.** To some, the fact that Christians can't seem to live out their faith consistently is grounds for dismissing the truth of the Christian faith. Yet, ironically, the sin in a Christian's life only serves to underscore a core part of Christian teaching — that all people have and will continue to sin as long as they live on this earth. See Chapter 15 for a full discussion on this subject.

Ironically, these paradoxes of the Christian faith serve to underscore its truth. As C.S. Lewis once said, "Reality, in fact, is usually something you could not have guessed. That is one of the reasons why I believe Christianity. It is a religion you could not have guessed" (*Mere Christianity*, Harper San Francisco, 2001).

Understanding How the Branches of the Church Came About

Most every human organization has groupings within it. Corporations have divisions and branches. Pro football divides its teams into two conferences, while professional baseball has two separate leagues. Professional wrestling probably has some kind of division to it as well, but I was too scared to ask.

The Christian Church is no different. Although it started out as a unified entity and remained so for a thousand years, geography and doctrinal differences eventually caused a split in A.D. 1054 between the Western Church (Catholic) centered in Rome and the Eastern Church (Orthodox) centered in Constantinople. Then, nearly five hundred years later, the Protestant Reformation caused a new group, called the Protestants, to emerge from the Catholic Church. These three major divisions of the Church — Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox — remain to this day.

Protestants further divide into many different denominations; some of the most notable are Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Anglican. Although these denominations agree on the major issues of the Protestant Reformation, they've tended to divide based on differences in doctrine and perspectives on how churches should be structured and governed.

22 Part I: Uncovering What Christianity's All About

The Catholic Church is the largest of the three major branches in the world, while the Protestant Church is the largest segment in North America (though it too is dispersed throughout the world). The Orthodox (Eastern) Church is more geographically oriented, being dominant in Greece, Russia, and parts of Eastern Europe and less elsewhere. You find out all about the Catholic and Orthodox Churches in Chapter 10 and about the Protestants in Chapter 11.

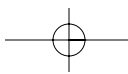
Putting It into Perspective: Christianity in the World Today

Binoculars are handy when you want to gaze upon a distant object, but you don't hold them up to your face as you drive a car or walk down the street. If you did, you'd end up hitting a tree or stepping into a mud puddle. Instead, before using a pair of binoculars, it often helps to first stop, scan the landscape, and then use the binoculars to center on what you want to see more clearly. Similarly, before you look closely at the Christian faith in the rest of this book, take a step back and put Christianity into a larger perspective.

Focusing on facts about the faith

Christianity originated with Jesus Christ some 2,000 years ago and remains a growing faith in the world today. To help you understand Christianity's role in the world, consider some of these facts about the faith:

- ✔ **Christianity is the largest religion in the world.** In terms of raw numbers, Christianity is the world's largest religion, with more than 1.9 billion people professing faith, or 33 percent of the world's population. Islam is next, with 22 percent, followed by Hinduism (15 percent), non-religious (14 percent), Buddhism (6 percent), and Judaism (0.5 percent) (www.adherents.com, 2002). Check out the section, "Relating Christianity to other world faiths," later in this chapter, to see the major differences among these religions.
- ✔ **The developing world, including Africa, Latin America, and Asia, has more Christians than North America and Europe do.** As I discuss in the section, "Being forewarned of stereotypes: What Christianity is not," earlier in the chapter, people sometimes consider Christianity a European religion. But, more and more, Christianity has truly become a world religion, spread out fairly evenly over all the continents: Europe holds 29 percent of all Christians, followed by Latin America (23 percent), Africa (18 percent), Asia (16 percent), North America (13 percent), and



Oceania (1 percent) (www.zpub.com, 1995). Although many people think of North America as the major hotbed for Christian activity over the past 150 years, it's interesting to note that Africa now has more Christians than the United States and Canada combined.

- ✔ **More than 8 out of 10 Americans classify themselves as Christians.** According to Barna Research, in 2002, 85 percent of Americans identified themselves as Christians. Further, 40 percent of Americans label themselves “evangelical” or “born-again” Christians.
- ✔ **Not all Christians live biblical Christian lives.** Being from Massachusetts, if I were asked what baseball team I support, I'd respond that I'm a Boston Red Sox fan. However, because baseball is one of my least favorite sports, I've never been to a Red Sox game nor do I even follow the team in the newspapers. At best, I try to act like I know what I'm talking about when my buddies discuss the Red Sox's chances of winning the World Series.

Truth be told, many of the 85 percent of the Americans who identify themselves as Christians do so in the same way I call myself a Red Sox fan. Therefore, in order to prevent being misled by statistics, recognize the distinction between the season ticket holders (firmly committed Christians) and the fair-weather fans (those who make their faith as much a part of their life as the Sox are of mine).

Relating Christianity to other world faiths

An outsider may look at the world's religions and conclude that they're all pretty much the same. But those who profess faith in one of these religions would beg to differ. Keep reading to find out how Christianity relates to the other dominant world faiths:

- ✔ **Judaism:** Christianity is most closely tied to Judaism. In fact, Christians share a common legacy and heritage with Jews (check out Chapter 10 for the lowdown). Moreover, Jesus — the very reason the Christian faith exists — was a Jew.

Both Jews and Christians believe in the Old Testament teachings of the Bible (Jews call this part the Hebrew Bible or the *Tanakh*) and proclaim people like Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David as pillars of their faith. Their paths split, however, with Jesus Christ. Throughout the Old Testament, the authors refer to and prophesy of a coming *Messiah* (meaning Savior) that will save the Jews (and non-Jews as well). Christians believe that Jesus was this Savior, while Jews believe that their Messiah hasn't yet come.

24 Part I: Uncovering What Christianity's All About

✓ **Islam:** Islam is the other major *monotheistic* (believing in one God) religion in the world. *Muslims* (believers of Islam) say that Allah is the same God as that of Jews and Christians. However, unlike Christians, Muslims don't believe in a Trinity (see Chapter 7). Instead of Jesus being the Son of God like the Christians believe, Muslims say that he was just a prophet and wasn't crucified (Qur'an 4:157). They also believe that the prophet Muhammad, who lived in the seventh century, was the greatest prophet sent by Allah.

Islam says that people gain salvation by observing the Five Pillars of Islam: professing the statement of belief, praying daily while facing *Mecca* (the most holy city of Islam), giving to the poor, fasting during *Ramadan* (the holy month), and making a pilgrimage to Mecca.

✓ **Hinduism and Buddhism:** Chances are that if you encounter someone who claims to be a Hindu or a Buddhist in the West, he or she practices a pantheistic religion. Instead of having the belief in God as Creator and distinct from the world, *pantheistic* religions, while different from each other in their own right, claim that the world is actually identical with God. In Hinduism, for example, God is really *Brahman*, or the ultimate power underlying the universe. Everything comes from Brahman and everything eventually returns to it.

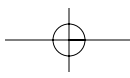
The differences in belief between Christianity and pantheistic religions are great. For example, if God is in everything, then it follows that God is in both good and evil, rather than separate from it. Therefore, "good" and "evil" become relative, even illusionary terms. Additionally, while Judaism, Christianity, and Islam focus on a written Word of God given to man, pantheistic religions tend to focus on private mystical experiences instead.

✓ **Christian-related religions:** A final group of religions is made up of Christian-related faiths that differ from historical and biblical Christianity. These groups include Mormons (the Church of Latter Day Saints), Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christian Scientists. Although non-Christians sometimes consider them part of the Christian Church, most Christians stress the major differences in belief between these groups and traditional historical Christianity.

Table 1-1 shows a summary of beliefs of these various religions.

Table 1-1 Summary of Religious Beliefs

| <i>Faith Group</i> | <i>Who Is Jesus?</i> | <i>What Is God's Nature?</i> | <i>What Is God's Written Word?</i> | <i>Problem of Man</i> | <i>How Is One Saved?</i> |
|---------------------|-------------------------|---|--|-----------------------|--|
| Christianity | Fully human, fully God | Trinity (one God in three persons) | Bible (Old and New Testaments) | Sin | Accepting God's grace |
| Judaism | Just a man | One God | Hebrew Bible or Tanakh (same as Christianity's Old Testament) | Sin | Observance of the law |
| Islam | Just a man, a prophet | One God (Allah) | Qur'an | Sin | Following Five Pillars of Islam |
| Hinduism | Just a man | Brahman (part of the world) | N/A | Ignorance | Goal isn't heaven, but to be absorbed into Brahman |
| Buddhism | Just a man | No personal God exists | N/A | Suffering | Enlightenment is needed, not salvation |
| Mormonism | Fully human, fully God | Three Gods and three distinct personalities | Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, Pearl of Great Price, Bible | Sin | Good works and merit |
| Jehovah's Witnesses | A man | One God (not a Trinity) | Bible and additional teachings | Sin | 144,000 Jehovah's Witnesses are specially anointed in heaven, the rest of Jehovah's Witnesses earn eternal life on earth (no belief in hell for non-members) |
| Christian Science | God, but not a real man | One God (not a Trinity) | <i>Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures</i> by Mary Baker Eddy, miscellaneous writings, Manual of the Mother Church | Sin | Everyone will be saved; no final judgment |



26 Part I: Uncovering What Christianity's All About _____

