





5. The Spread of Christianity

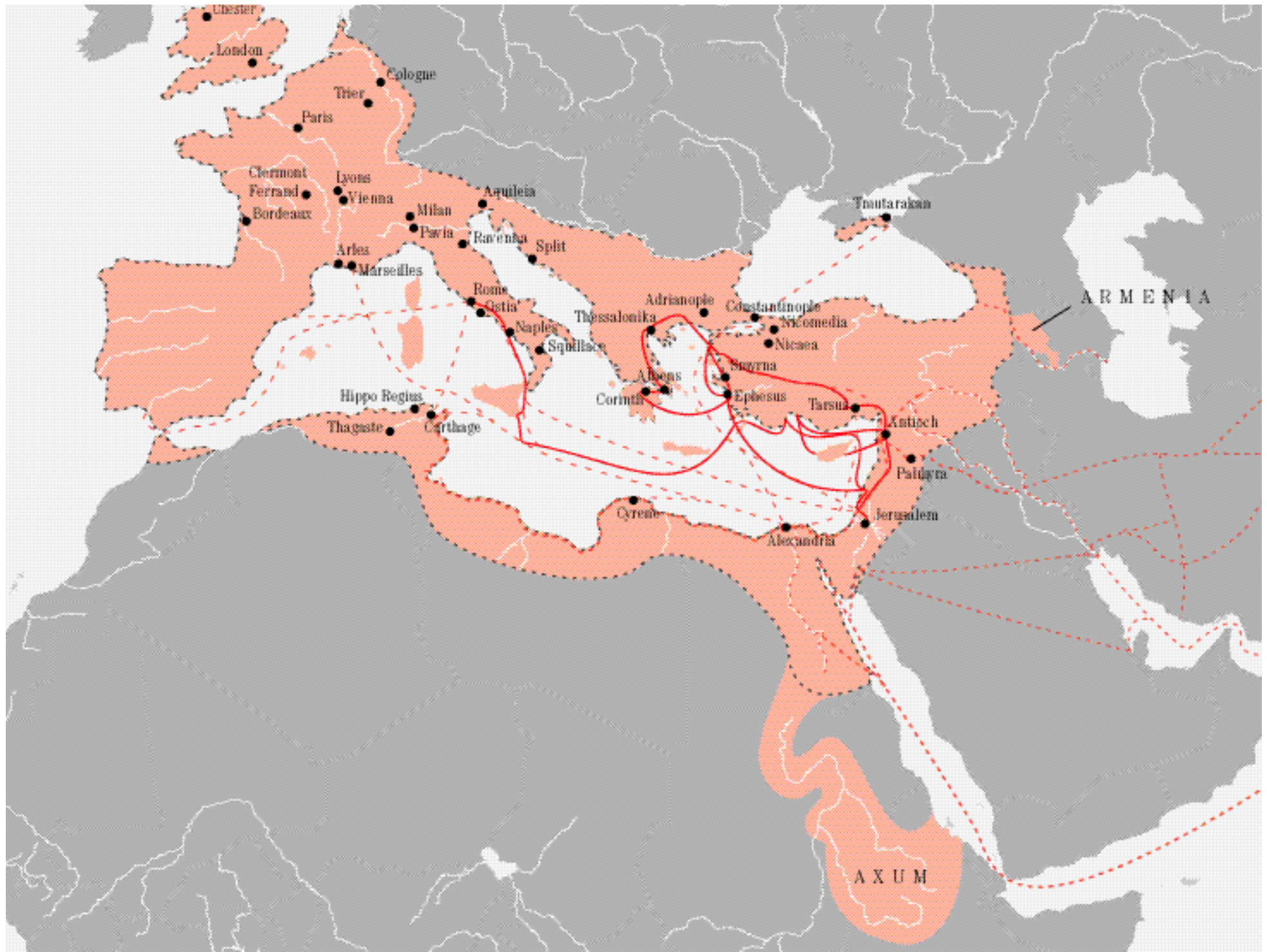
Like the Jewish diaspora, the spread of Christianity began in the classical period and has continued into recent times. This chapter deals with Christianity's spread in Afro-Eurasia, particularly in the classical and postclassical periods but with renewed development in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Like Buddhism, and later Islam, Christianity developed into one of the great world religions, capable of transcending a host of geographical and cultural boundaries because of the power of its appeal. Like the other world religions, however, Christianity's spread led to a number of compromises with local belief systems, in various patterns of syncretism that involved complex mixtures of religious change and continuities. These patterns, along with explicit doctrinal disputes, helped divide Christians into separate and sometimes hostile communities.

Christianity originated in the eastern Mediterranean during the reign of the Roman emperor Augustus, initially as a reform movement within the Jewish religion. Just as Buddhists protested excessive Hindu cer-

emonialism, so Jesus of Nazareth argued against the rigidities that had arisen in the Jewish priesthood. The new religion also appealed to some of the poorer classes, with promises of opportunities of salvation and the imminence of the kingdom of God on earth. Jesus seems to have seen himself as a Jewish prophet and teacher who probably came to believe that he was the son of God. (Certainly his followers came to believe this of him—we lack direct evidence of his own beliefs.) Jesus urged a moral code based on love, charity, and humility. Many of his disciples believed that a Final Judgment was near at hand, and through it God would reward the righteous with immortality and condemn sinners to everlasting hell. Opposition from Jewish leaders and the Roman governor led to Jesus's crucifixion in about 30 CE. Belief that Jesus Christ was resurrected seemed to confirm his divinity, and his followers began to spread his word around the eastern Mediterranean. When one early convert, Stephen, was stoned to death, many disciples left Israel and traveled throughout western Asia. The gradual realization that the Messiah was not imme-

Spread of Christianity through the 6th Century CE

-  *Christian lands*
-  *Paul's journeys*
-  *Trade routes*
-  *Roman Empire during rule of Constantine (4th century CE)*



diately returning to earth to set up God's kingdom also contributed to growing efforts to spread and institutionalize the religion.

A crucial step toward Christian missionary activity came under the apostle Paul, a Jewish convert (about 35 CE) who argued that this religion was not for Jews alone. Rather, in the spirit of the more cosmopolitan Roman Empire and Middle Eastern Hellenism, Paul's leadership established that Christianity was universal and available to all, whether or not they followed Jewish law. Paul himself preached widely, in Greece and Italy as well as the Middle East, and he increasingly phrased the religion in terms of Greco-Roman culture (and using the Greek language), creating a more formal theology that appealed to those outside the poorest groups.

Christianity spread gradually throughout the Roman Empire, taking advantage of the ease of travel that political unity provided. Roman governments occasionally attacked the new religion, which refused to place loyalty to the emperor above God, but they were often tolerant; sporadic persecution did produce martyrdom, which had its own powerful impact on the spread of Christianity. Gradually church officials emerged, as did a more formal body of intellectual work. By the fourth century, Christian intellectuals had become one of the most creative forces

in the empire; about 10 percent of the population had converted, finding in this religion a spiritual focus and rituals that mainstream Roman religion, with its secular-seeming gods and goddesses, did not provide. It was in the fourth century that the emperor Constantine made Christianity the official religion, which greatly accelerated conversions in southern Europe (Spain and Italy), parts of the Balkans, and particularly in the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa.

Even before this, Christianity had been adopted by the ruler of Armenia, a Roman province in Western Asia and the first region to make Christianity an official religion. Traders and missionaries also spread Christianity beyond Rome's borders in the Middle East (to Persia, for example), though the religion was regarded with suspicion by the priests of Persia's Zoroastrian religion and the rulers of the Sassanid empire there, hostile to all things Roman.

Christianity also spread in this early period to Axum, in northeastern Africa below Egypt. Here, active trade with the Middle East and Greece encouraged cultural contact, and Christianity seemed part of a vibrant, successful society. King Ezana made this the official religion. Christianity in this part of Africa, particularly Ethiopia, was cut off by Muslim conquest of North Africa in the seventh century. A separate Ethiopian

church persisted, resuming some contact with European Christians in the thirteenth century; today about 40 percent of Ethiopians are Christian.

Christianity's spread, in the final period of the Roman empire, was complicated by various doctrinal disputes. Egyptian Christians (known as Coptics) emphasized, for example, the unity of Christ's human and divine nature. But the dominant religious leadership of the empire, in the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE), ruled that Christ had two separate natures. Most Egyptian faithful refused to accede, and a separate Coptic church persists to this day, with about 3 million adherents, mainly in Egypt. Muslim invasion led to many Christian conversions throughout North Africa, reducing the Coptic presence in the region.

After the collapse of the full Roman Empire in the fifth century, the most successful missionary efforts looked northward, to Europe. The Western church, under the pope in Rome, sponsored a host of missionary campaigns, gradually converting most of the Germanic peoples from their traditional polytheistic religions. A Frankish king, Clovis, adopted the religion in 496 CE. Missionaries soon thereafter spread Christianity to the British isles (the pope sent a group of forty missionaries at the end of the sixth century, and their efforts gradually superseded those

of earlier Celtic leaders, whose Christianity had initially developed more separately). Later still the religion reached northern Germany and, by the tenth century, Scandinavia. Conversion of these regions brought not only religion but also the Latin writing system and larger artistic and intellectual apparatus associated with Roman Christianity. Other Catholic missionary efforts reached into central Europe, converting the Czech areas, Hungary, and Poland.

A largely separate dissemination effort came from the Byzantine Empire, based in Constantinople. Eastern Orthodox Christianity differed with Catholicism on a number of doctrinal and organizational points; among other things, Eastern Orthodox Christians refused to accept the primacy of the pope in Rome. A full schism occurred in 1054 CE. Orthodox missionaries gradually converted peoples in the Balkans. In 854 CE the Byzantine government sent the missionaries Cyril and Methodius farther north, to places like present-day Slovakia, where they devised what would be called Cyrillic, a written script for Slavic languages derived from Greek letters. Here too, the spread of religion was associated with writing and other

important linkages with a sophisticated artistic and literary culture. Trade advantages also played a part. A king in Kievan Russia, Vladimir I (ruled 980–1015 CE), adopted orthodox Christianity and forced his subjects to convert by applying military pressure and by importing priests from Byzantium.

The spread of Christianity in virtually all parts of Europe was associated with important syncretic compromises with local beliefs. Christianity was monotheistic, but growing worship of local holy figures, or saints, restored some of the more traditional qualities of religion, in which a larger number of spiritual forces are available for support, some with strong local connections. Saints also served as mediators between ordinary people and a powerful God. Christians adopted polytheistic holidays; Christ's birth came to be celebrated not when it had occurred (almost certainly in the spring) but in association with the old rituals of the winter solstice. Other beliefs and practices, some of which appear magical or superstitious, adapted local folk traditions to Christian ideas. In Western Europe, a full campaign against what came to be known as

popular superstition was mounted only in the sixteenth to seventeenth centuries.

Christianity in Asia

Christianity retained a strong hold in western Asia, though Muslim conquests cut into its ranks. Important Christian minorities persisted in places like present-day Lebanon, usually tolerated by Muslim authorities on condition that Christians paid a higher tax. Byzantine Christians in Asia suffered as the territory of the empire shrank, and then encountered still greater pressure after Turkish conquests in the fifteenth century. Armenian Christians also suffered at various points in the Ottoman period, though the church (part of Eastern Orthodoxy) retained a substantial following.

Outside the old boundaries of the Roman Empire in Asia, much early Christian activity was conducted by neither of the main European churches, but by a group called Nestorians. (Another movement, the Manicheans, who originated in Persia, also used Christian elements along with elements of Zoroastrianism and even Buddhism, and







won considerable missionary success in Central Asia and beyond, setting up a community even in China that lasted until government persecution wiped it out in the sixteenth century.)

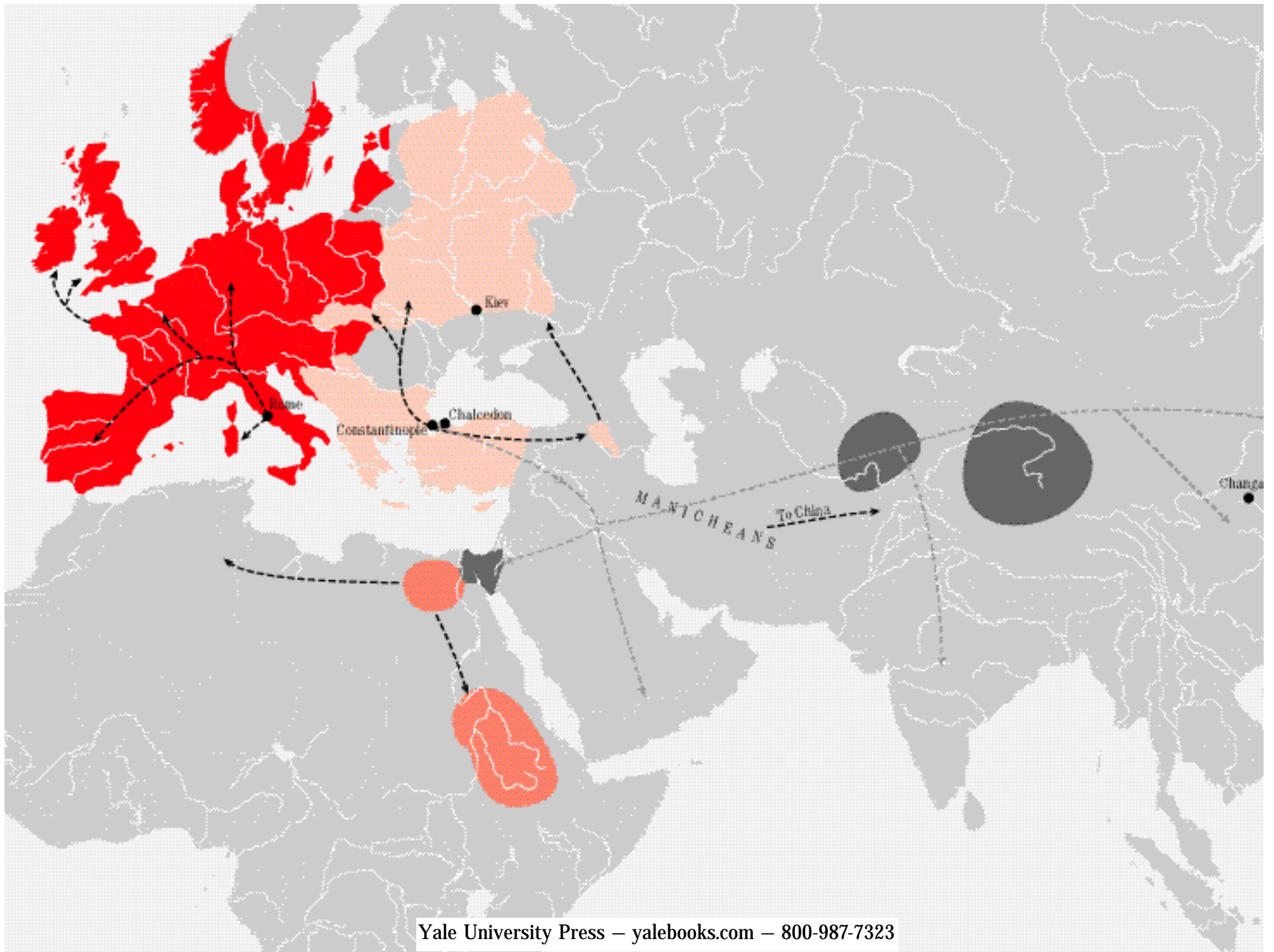
Nestorius was a patriarch in Constantinople who argued that divine and human natures coexisted in Christ. The patriarch's beliefs, and his personal arrogance, roused opponents, who argued that this approach overdid the human elements in Christ's nature. The Roman pope excommunicated Nestorius in 430 CE. But his ideas survived in Mesopotamia and Persia, where opposition to Rome actually helped them catch on. Islamic conquerors of the region allowed Nestorians to keep their faith, though most converted to Islam in part because of special taxation. Already, however, Nestorian merchants had spread the ideas into India, central Asia, and China. They won no support from established rulers—a crucial difference from Europe. But they displayed a bit of the flexibility, the willingness for syncretism, characteristic of most successful missionary efforts, so they did win some followers. A Tang emperor was interested in Nestorian ideas (brought by a Persian bishop), which he found somewhat similar to Buddhism, and a monastery was allowed in the city of Changan in the seventh century despite Buddhist and Daoist opposition. Chinese Nestorians used Buddhist and Daoist

vocabulary, writing verses called the “Jesus-Messiah Sutra,” for example, and calling angels and saints “buddhas.” But Christianity seemed alien to most East Asians, and government persecution also inhibited conversions.

The final Nestorian chapter came in the Mongol period. Mongol leaders in Persia, converted to Islam, turned furiously against the Nestorians in the early fourteenth century. Muslim crowds destroyed churches, looted homes, and killed or enslaved many individuals. Nestorianism was wiped out in western Asia. Mongol leaders in China, however, were broadly tolerant, actively interested in many religions, and they used Nestorian officials and secretaries, among others, though they rarely found Christianity attractive personally. European Catholics, visiting China, attacked Nestorians for holding “false beliefs,” but they made little missionary headway of their own (mainly serving Western merchants, until trade fell off after the collapse of the Mongol empire). With the decline of the Mongols, indeed, the Nestorian minority in central and eastern Asia was diminished further, attacked by Confucian and Muslim governments, even as Nestorians themselves proved unwilling to compromise basic doctrines and rituals that continued to seem foreign.

Spread of Christianity 500–1000 CE

-  *Catholic area*
-  *Coptic area*
-  *Orthodox area*
-  *Nestorian area*
-  *Catholic, Coptic, and Orthodox missionary routes*
-  *Nestorian missionary routes*



As Western European trade expanded by the sixteenth century, Catholics sent new missions, by sea, to India and China. The missionaries won some converts, particularly in India, but their success roused the active resistance of local religious leaders. Many missionaries adopted local dress and manners. The famous Jesuit Matteo Ricci, in China, won tolerance because of his scientific knowledge and his ability to construct superior clocks. He wore Confucian dress and adopted Confucian manners, mastering the language and the literary classics. But he and his colleagues won little religious interest. A Jesuit leader in India adopted Brahmin habits, including vegetarianism, but he too made little headway and was denounced by other missionaries as having converted to Hinduism. Christians won more converts in Japan, but the government turned against them in the late sixteenth century. Only in the Philippines was substantial headway made; except for Islam in the south, no world religion or major philosophy had a prior hold. Asians in the main saw no reason to switch their beliefs. Among Europeans, Protestants at this point had little missionary interest in any event, and the great merchant companies from Protestant regions concentrated on gaining trade advantages through the eighteenth century.

Christianity's most recent Asian (and African) chapter involved the huge burst of mission-

ary activity, both Catholic and Protestant, that spread from the mid-nineteenth century, fueled by imperialist success, industrial prosperity, and a desire to "civilize" the whole world in the Western image. Missionaries still made little headway in Asia, save in Korea, where a large minority became Christian. But missionaries there converted a number of individuals and set up schools, and this played a role in important movements of reform, including efforts to improve conditions for women (many leaders of initial attempts to ban footbinding in China, for example, were converted Christians backed by European and American missionaries).

The story was different in Africa. European coastal settlements had generated limited conversions before the modern missionary era. Backed by colonial governments and growing trade penetration, however, large numbers of African polytheists converted from the late nineteenth century onward. By the late twentieth century, about 40 percent of all sub-Saharan Africans were Christians (evenly divided, Protestant and Catholic). Christianity seemed to many Africans a key to success in Western terms (including jobs in colonial administrations). It appealed to groups held as inferior under traditional cultures, including many women. And it offered undeniable spiritual appeal in a period of rapid and varied cultural change in the huge subcontinent.

Suggested Readings

Jerry H. Bentley, *Old World Encounters* (New York, 1993); Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York, 1953); R. A. Markus, *Christianity in the Roman World* (New York, 1974).