



The Secrets to Christianity's Historical Success

Given the content of the Bible, Christian dogma and Christianity's violent history (which most 21st century Christians seem totally oblivious of), it is quite surprising that Christianity still has more than 2 billion followers in 2022. The latest statistics on the major world religions according to the 2022 World Population Review, look as follows [1]:

- Christianity: 2.38 billion followers
- Islam: 1.91 billion
- Hinduism: 1.16 billion
- Buddhism: 507 million.

Christians typically see the fact that their religion is currently the biggest religion globally, as well as its longevity, as a sign that their god is the one true god and of his providence. However:

- They don't use the longevity argument for older religions, like Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism or Judaism. As an aside, the fact that there are several religions which have survived for millennia in itself shows that religion as a human endeavour can have staying power, it is actually a typical cultural phenomenon. Christianity is by no means unique in this regard.
- They won't use the size argument when Islam surpasses Christianity as the biggest religion, which current projections place at around 2050 (with Christianity in decline and Islam as the fastest growing religion). It is also relevant to point out that there are currently two other world religions with more than a billion followers, a clear indication that large numbers of followers do not prove anything about divine origin or providence. Christianity is not unique in this regard either.

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The Secrets to Christianity's Historical Success

Be that as it may, Christianity was surprisingly successful globally, which I'd like to analyze in this article. Numerous contributing factors can be identified, but it seems to me if one looks critically at history there are 3 fundamental reasons for its success thus far. None of them has anything to do with its value or any supernatural influences.

1. Becoming the Official Religion of the Roman Empire and the impact of this political power

- In 380 CE, Theodosius I and the two other Roman Emperors, decreed Christianity to be the official and compulsory state religion of the Roman Empire. See our Historic Moments article about it for more details: [Christianity becomes the Official Religion of the Roman Empire - The CSF](#)
- Christianity was transformed from a small and peripheral religion of the underdog to a major world religion on the back of the political power of the Roman Empire. In this process the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) emerged with unfettered political power and no hesitation to use this political power for violent coercion and persecution over the next 1,500 years. One had to be a Christian to be successful and safe. See another of our Historic Moments articles for more details: [Christianity starts its 1,500 years of Persecution - The CSF](#)
- With the fall of the Roman Empire the RCC retained most of its political power as it continued as the de facto state religion of the western world. To this day Christianity has a disproportionate political influence in the West, despite its noticeable decline.



- In this regard it is quite relevant to pay some attention to **Mithraism** in the **2nd to the 4th century** [2] [3] [4]:
 - Mithra/Mitra was the Sun god and also the primary Persian god, going back at least 2 millennia before the 2nd century
 - Mithraism resurfaced in the Roman Empire in the 2nd century with the worship of Mithras (the Sun god, as well as god of justice and war), with some variations based on Plato's philosophy
 - It was popular among soldiers, merchants, lower level officials, and also gained the support of some emperors (like Commodus, Septimius Severus and Caracalla)
 - In the 3rd century it was more popular and well-known in the Roman Empire than Christianity and was its major competitor as Christianity started to grow
 - Emperor Diocletian, who reigned from 284 to 305, was the last Emperor to follow Mithraism and declared Mithras the Protector of the Emperor and the Empire

- The next 75 years, after Diocletan's abdication for health reasons in 305, turned out to be critical for the fate of both Mithraism and Christianity, with at least 3 major historical developments:
 - Constantine I converted to Christianity on the eve of his battle with Maxentius for control of the Western Provinces. On 28 Oct 312 he defeated Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge under the banner of Christianity
 - In 313 Constantine issued the Edict of Milan (with co-Emperor Licinius) to legalize Christianity
 - In 380 Theodosius declared Christianity the official and compulsory religion of the Roman Empire (with is two co-emperors)
- There is an interesting degree of overlap in the symbolism of Mithraism and Christianity, like
 - Miraculous birth. Mithras was often portrayed as born from a rock as a youth with his sword in his hand. Several sources state that 25 Dec was the celebration of his birthday, which also coincided with the Festival of the Sun on the Winter Solstice. Several sources also refer to his Virgin Mother, although it has to be added that numerous gods claimed their origins from a divine father and a human virgin mother
 - As the Sun god Mithras was known as the “Light of the World” and the “Mediator between Light and Darkness”
 - Baptism, purification and celibacy
 - The Divine right of Kings, was an original doctrine of Mithraism.
- There is an ongoing historical debate about what Christianity took over from Mithraism (and other religions), but some level of influence is indisputable. Both of them developed and competed in the 1st few centuries in the same geographic area, there are many similarities, and Paul was from Tarsus (a Mithraism stronghold). He introduced warrior metaphors in his letters, quite aligned with Mithras as a warrior god
- By the end of the 4th century Christianity had unfettered political power and everybody became Christian, while the influence of Mithraism completely dwindled. Christianity has 2.38 billion followers today, while Mithraism was practiced in Iran until the 1979 Islamic Revolution and now only has a small following in India
- It is quite conceivable that the situation could have been reversed if Constantine I followed Diocletan and continued with Mithraism instead of Christianity. And even if not completely reversed, their following and influence would have been significantly different if Christianity never became the official and compulsory religion of the Roman Empire and if they did not extensively use violent state-sanctioned coercion over such a long period of time.

2. Theological Adaptability to stay relevant and acceptable in a Changing World

Another success factor is the fact that over 2000 years Christianity continued to reinvent themselves to stay relevant and acceptable in a changing and civilizing world. In an in-depth Morality article, I demonstrated how Christian morality is quite arbitrary and whatever you want it to be:

[Does Christianity have an Objective Morality? - The CSF.](#)

There is little commonality between the early Christians and Christianity today.

- On the one hand, it took centuries for core Christian dogmas to emerge, and then only with heavy political influence by Roman Emperors
 - The Gospels were written in Greek more than a generation after Jesus, not by his Aramaic speaking disciples or any eye witnesses
 - The divinity of Christ was only accepted at the Council of Nicaea in 325, about 300 years after the death of Jesus
 - The Trinity doctrine was only accepted in 381 at the First Council of Constantinople, almost 400 years after the death of Jesus. This Council also outlawed paganism (which included Mithraism) and heresy (all Christian beliefs not compliant with the Nicæan Creed), which included Arianism

- There was strong political influence in both these doctrinal developments:
 - The Council of Nicaea in 325: convened by Constantine I. It accepted the 1st standard Christian Creed, and was strongly influenced by him
 - The First Council of Constantinople (the first one after Nicaea), convened and influenced by Theodosius I, who already publicly and officially proclaimed the Doctrine of the Trinity before it was accepted at this Council.



- On the other hand, as the Western World started to slowly and gradually civilize since the Enlightenment, the Church was forced to continue ignoring and reinterpreting more and more of the barbaric parts of the Bible, especially over the last few centuries. In most cases they put up fierce resistance against progress, before changing their teachings to stay socially acceptable. There are lots of examples, but let's focus on 3 major ones:
 - **Slavery.** Despite the theological gymnastics of Christian apologetics, the Bible does not condemn slavery at all. As a matter of fact it not only condones slavery, but provides explicit instructions for slavery
 - The Old Testament:
 - Provides instructions to take slaves as the spoils of war, after genocide (Num 31: 1 - 54)
 - Allows the slave trade and Israelites to buy slaves (Lev 25: 44-46)
 - Gives instructions how to sell your daughters into slavery, which also included sex slavery (Ex 21: 7-11)
 - Allows slave owners to assault and even kill their slaves, as long as they don't die on the spot or on the same day, because the slaves are their property (Ex 21: 20-21)
 - The New Testament explicitly condones slavery, by commanding Christian slaves to obey their masters (Eph 6: 5; Col 3: 22), and Jesus did not speak out against it
 - The Christian Church consequently supported slavery for many centuries. As the Western World started to civilize slowly and political developments led to the abolition of slavery (for example, in the US only in 1865), there was initially strong Christian opposition to these developments on explicit Biblical grounds.

But as Christianity lost these battles, they gradually stopped supporting slavery regardless of the content of the Bible.

- **Chauvinism and Misogyny.** The Bible contains many explicit verses, which can only be classified as misogynistic
 - Old Testament
 - A man raping a virgin who is not engaged, should only pay a 50 shekels fine to her father, while she should then marry her rapist (Deut 22: 28-29). Rape was not even a capital offense, it was an offense against the property of another man
 - A woman has to be stoned to death if her father cannot prove she was a virgin when he gave her away into marriage (Deut 22: 20-21)
 - New Testament
 - Women cannot hold positions of authority or teach in the church (I Tim 2: 12; I Cor 14: 34-35)
 - A man is the head of the household and his wife has to be submissive and obey him (Titus 2:3, 4; I Cor 11: 3; Eph 5: 22)
 - The influential activist for women's suffrage, women's property rights and the abolition of slavery, Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815-1902), wrote: "The Bible and the Church have been the greatest stumbling blocks in the way of women's emancipation." [5]
 - Christianity as the major cultural influence in the West played a role in women not having suffrage until fairly recently. In the West women only received full and universal suffrage in the 20th century [6]: New Zealand (1893), Norway (1913), Germany (1918), Britain (1928), France (1944), Australia (1962) and the USA (1965). Christianity then adjusted its teachings to support women's suffrage.
 - Ordaining Women. Based on the explicit New Testament passages, no Christian Church used to ordain women, but that also changed over time as female emancipation and equality gained political momentum and popular support. There are still some churches which do not ordain women, like the Roman Catholic Church, Southern Baptists, the Orthodox Church in America, the Mormons, etc. Christianity followed its tried and tested recipe once again, by gradually starting to ordain women despite the explicit New Testament commands to the contrary [7]: the American Lutheran Church (1970), Anglican Church (1977), the Episcopal Church (1977), Methodist Church (1980), etc.
- **Same-sex marriage.** The latest cultural battleground for Christianity is same-sex marriage, and although this has not fully played out yet, they are again following the same playbook (which makes for an excellent example to look at this tactic in action)
 - Old Testament:
 - Gen 2:24 defines marriage as between one man and one woman, as fundamentalist Christians like to point out
 - But more importantly, their god issued explicit commands that homosexual activity should be punished by death (like Lev 18:22 and Lev 20:13)
 - New Testament:
 - Jesus condones and reiterates the Gen 2 definition in Matt 19:5
 - We find no revelation by Jesus that god's homophobic stance has changed dramatically
 - I Cor 6:9 is quite explicit that homosexuals are immoral and sinful, and will not inherit the "Kingdom of Heaven"
 - As same-sex marriages are becoming socially acceptable and legal in more countries, Christianity is continuing their well-proven theological gymnastics, by ignoring the barbaric commands of the Old Testament and rather opportunistically reinterpreting those explicit commands in view of other generic and more palatable Bible verses. Today, there are no shortage of articles by progressive Christians and Churches, explaining why opposition to same-sex marriages are "misreading biblical values". Christianity simply continues to accept the values of modern society, and Christian apologetics became quite adept at finding rationalizations and Biblical justification for this.

- Would you still follow a religion which supports killing your own kids for disobedience, burning witches, slavery or excluding women from authority (all straight from the Bible, the last 2 from the New Testament too)? Would such a religion even be legal in the Western World today?
- In a way this theological flexibility and opportunism came full circle, with the Prosperity Theology we find among Evangelicals in the US (and other Western Countries) today, pretty much the exact opposite of the teaching of Jesus. The same goes for “Republican Jesus” in the US who is a symbol of gun rights, nationalism, blaming the poor and demonizing assisting the poor as “Socialism”.

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3. Childhood Indoctrination

Christianity has a 3rd big and very effective arrow in their quiver, which is early childhood indoctrination. It is a strong focus of all Christian churches and denominations I am aware of, to ensure all kids born into Christian families acquire the “right” beliefs before they’re old enough to think for themselves.



- Biblical mythology and the dogmas of the specific denomination are taught as cosmological facts. This is quite an effective strategy, as the vast majority of people seem utterly unable to bring rational scrutiny to the tradition they were raised in.
- It also demonstrates the role of fear in Christianity. As much as they try to emphasize love in their religion, it is clear that fear plays an outsize role in practice and in the Bible. I experienced this first hand in my own upbringing, my deconversion and the social responses to that, I often see it in the dynamics of Christian groups, as well as in debates with Christians:

- One of the reasons Christian parents are so keen to teach their young kids the core dogmas of Christianity, is because they have a real concern for the welfare of their kids. They certainly do not want their kids to burn in hell
- It is also one of the main reasons why people cannot escape this indoctrination later in life. More intelligent people sometimes experience some doubts, but one of the main reasons they mostly cannot bring full rational scrutiny to these doubts and the claims/dogmas of their religion, is the fear that they'll end up in hell.
- In most cases when they don't have rational counter-arguments Christians revert to telling people that they'll just have to wait and see when they die, how their god will burn them in hell forever (often rather gleefully).
- Several authors made the following point, so I cannot claim credit for any original thinking here, but it is nevertheless spot-on:
 - If the teaching of religion was prohibited until people reach the age when they can think for themselves, no religion will survive beyond a few generations
 - A suggested thought experiment:
 - No religious teaching until the age of 21
 - In the mean-time give kids a good schooling in logic, logical fallacies (some of which are the lifeblood of religion), as well as critical thinking in general
 - Then at the age of 21 introduce them objectively to the teachings and claims of all the major world religions and see what happens
 - There is a very good reason why Christianity does not follow this approach: they simply cannot survive it.

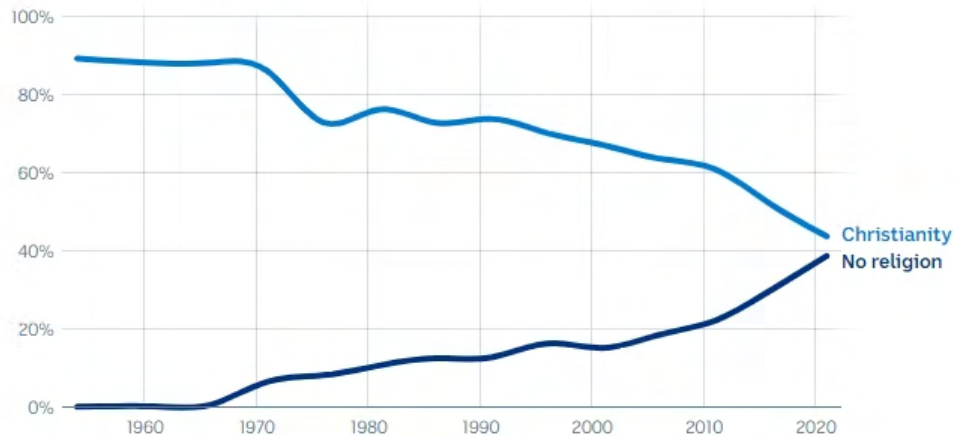
My contention is that if Christianity did not benefit from these 3 factors (becoming the official state religion of the Roman Empire and brutally using its political power over 1,500 years, continuing to reinvent themselves to stay relevant and acceptable, as well as zealously using early childhood indoctrination), it would have been a small peripheral religion today, much more in line with what one would expect from a religion based on the Bible.

Additional Perspective: The Decline of Christianity

To conclude this article some additional perspective is required. When looking at the current global statistics it is important not to look at them as a snapshot in time, but to view the trends which provide quite a different perspective. There is widespread research quantifying the decline of Christianity globally. I'll just list a few examples:

- In the US a study by the Pew Research Centre concluded at the end of 2019 that "In US, Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace" [9]. Just in the previous decade (2009-2019):
 - The % of US adults who identify as Christian, dropped from 78% to 65%
 - Likewise, the % who do not identify with any religion increased from 17% to 26%
- The Australian 2021 Census results were published recently. A summary of the most relevant religious statistics [10][11]:
 - Over the last 10 years, from the 2011 census to the 2021 census:
 - Christians declined from 61.1% of the population to 43.9%
 - At the same time people without any religion increased from 22.3% to 38.9%
 - If this trend is sustained people without religion will exceed any specific religion by the 2026 census. And since this trend is accelerating, it seems likely
 - The Australia Bureau of Statistics also published a very interesting long-term graph:

Australians' religion



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics

- In January 2021 global research from the University of Michigan was published by the University of Oxford Press [12]. This study investigated religion in 49 countries, covering 60% of the world's population.
 - They found that religion was in decline in all the higher-income more developed countries since 1981 (where the religion is predominantly Christian)
 - However, since 2007 the speed of this decline increased and it became more widespread too. Since 2007 religion declined in 46 of the 49 countries they studied
 - The fastest decline was still in the high-income countries
 - In the US the decline was faster than in most other countries
- Some findings in the latest National Congregations Study published by Duke University in 2021, covering congregations of all denominations in the US [13]:
 - Congregation size is steadily decreasing and was down to only 70 regular participants in 2019
 - The age of worshippers are steadily increasing. The average age in the Roman Catholic Church reached 80 in 2019.

For a variety of reasons Christianity and its influence are on the decline “at rapid pace”. The three fundamental factors outlined above all played a significant role in Christianity's success over the centuries, but my contention is that these factors have been losing their impact to various degrees over the last 50 years, and that this is likely to increase in pace.

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Next CSF Article

The Supposed Judeo-Christian Foundation of Western Civilization (by JJ Brits), scheduled for 19 Aug 2022

Sources

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[4] <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mithraism>

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