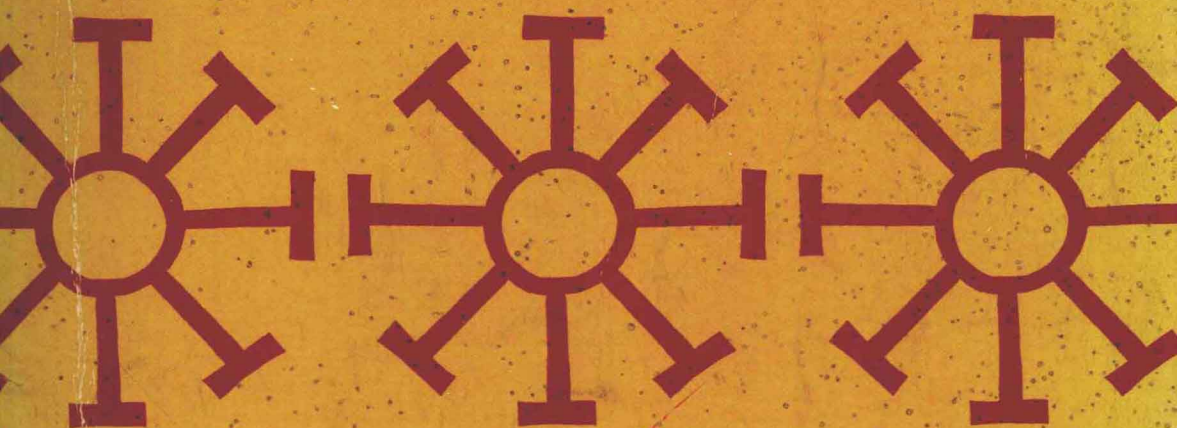


Introduction to Christianity

Mary Jo Weaver



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Indiana University

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*Dedicated to
my colleagues in the Religious Studies Department
Indiana University
with thanks*

INTRODUCTION FOR TEACHERS

Those who teach introductory courses know that it is often harder to maintain teacher interest than student interest over the long haul. This textbook, an intentionally general introduction to Christianity, is meant to relieve teachers from the frustration of having to lay a large foundation and having too little time to build on it. My experience with students suggests that many of them come to religion classes knowing very little about Christianity. Years ago we could assume students had a general knowledge of the subject and we could launch out into our own bailiwicks of interest or speculation; the task of constantly rehashing the basics was left to colleagues teaching exotic, non-Christian religions. Perhaps I misremember or romanticize the past; I do not know. I do know that the high-minded ideas I had when I first began teaching have been increasingly displaced by the necessity of giving students a very basic introduction; those who come knowing something about Christianity often come from a narrow confessional background that needs to be expanded, and those who come knowing nothing need to begin simply.

Repeating the same “nuts and bolts” introduction every semester can be wearying. For years I searched for a book to do this for me so that I could do something else, something more interesting or perhaps just more my own. I wanted a small, inexpensive book that gave general information in a straightforward style, something the students could read easily with little or no help from me. For a while I thought I could rely on histories of Christianity, but I found two drawbacks to this approach: students got bored with too much historical material (unable to see its relevance to their lives), and they were unwilling or unable to read so many books each semester. I envy those who can solve their problems by assigning several books each semester in a beginning-level course; in a large state university setting, where all religion courses are electives, one tries to keep the reading list small.

The introductory textbook of my dreams began to take on specific charac-

teristics gleaned from my own teaching experience. It had to be historical, but not just historical; I wanted to use the material to raise contemporary questions and to challenge the assumptions many of my students brought with them to the course. It had to situate Christianity clearly within its Israelite-Judaic context so that students could see what it had in common with Judaism and where it differed from the Jewish tradition. I was particularly eager for my students to see the integrity of Judaism, and I wanted to make it impossible for them to think of Jews as “too stubborn” or “too blind” to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. At the contemporary level, I was more interested in having my students know the practical difference than the doctrinal difference between a Mennonite and a Methodist. And I wanted them to have some sense of the complexity of Christianity in terms of the many different groups or denominations it inspired: they might never get into an argument about Christology, but they were likely (in the Midwest, at least) to encounter someone whose perspective is rarely mentioned in textbooks—a Dispensationalist, for example. I wanted the book to be clear on the major divisions within Christianity: Christians read Scripture differently, and may have antagonistic church politics and points of emphasis; but I also wanted to show the points of unity and agreement, especially within a context of worship. Finally, I wanted to give them some indication of how different groups of Christians could come to exactly opposite conclusions on contemporary issues.

Obviously, the more specific this textbook became in my head, the more impossible it became for me to find it. Had I been a little wiser, perhaps I would not have chosen to write it, but the approach I have taken in this book has worked for me and I thought it might be helpful for others. My intention, above all, is for the book to be *useful*. I have not aimed at innovative scholarship, nor do I have a single, dominating focus. I have tried to pose correctly, without pretending to solve, the major issues in Christianity. I hope my approach lends *flexibility* to the text, and that it places minimum restrictions on faculty subjectivity. Issues are not stated, resolved, boxed, and tied neatly with a ribbon; rather, they are presented from a number of different perspectives so that students can wrestle with them and come to some kind of personal understanding of them. I have aimed at *readability*—I want students to be able to read this text easily—at jargon-free, lucid prose. I have put notes, bibliography, and appendixes at the ends of chapters or the end of the book so that they do not interfere with the fluidity of the text itself.

In my mind, the strength of the book lies in its flexibility. It has no single dominating approach; it is *purposely* neither theology, nor history, nor sociology, nor philosophy, but dips into all of these perspectives in order to focus on a question or a practice from a variety of angles. It is intentionally brief and asks rhetorical questions in order to encourage instructor supplementation. I wrote it to be a basic framework on which one could build a variety of different structures: professors who want to be predominantly theological, or historical, or

contemporary, can be, all using the same structural framework. It is, therefore, rather like the frame for a prefabricated house: it may not contain all the features one wants, may have some things in it one does not want, and may not be quite the house one would have designed, but it is useful, it can be modified, it serves its purpose. I hope instructors will develop material to go along with the book, and so I have not included graphics, cartoons, readings from primary sources, or summaries of current scholarly arguments. Each teacher will have his or her own such materials and I hope the book encourages personal accents and modifications.

The book is meant to be used in a semester, with room for supplementary material. The appendixes have packed together material that teachers may or may not want to pursue; they are meant to be helpful summaries of some of the points mentioned in the text. The glossary is made up of terms used in the book but not explained there, and is meant to be a handy reference aid for students. One could take the regular chapters, followed in some cases by the appropriate appendix, and come up with a fifteen-week, semester course; but I want to reemphasize my framework analogy rather than suggest that this book can be or should be the only text used in a course.

THE BOOK'S ORGANIZATION AND CONTENT

I have divided the book into three parts: two contain background material and the third is an introduction to contemporary issues with a summary of Christian commonality by way of worship. The first part contains three chapters, on God, Jesus, and the emergence of the early Christian church.

The first chapter's purpose is to introduce the concept of a revealed religion and to discuss simply (insofar as that is possible) what revelation means; it is *not* meant to be an introduction to Israelite history or to the Old Testament. I chose two aspects of God as background for Christianity: creation and providence. Other authors might have featured covenant or prophecy, the monarchy, or Israel's cultic life. Indeed, given the many aspects of the Jewish tradition, one could have chosen many other issues. I wanted to be brief and to highlight the divine word and deed in the history of a people. Those who want to know more about Jewish experience of divine self-disclosure should consult introductory textbooks on the Old Testament. It was not my purpose in the first chapter to come to grips with major scholarly issues of biblical criticism. I have tried to indicate where a question is complex and needs more explanation than I am giving it, and I hope some teachers will expand this chapter with their own material. Keeping the students in mind and my "nuts and bolts" approach as a guide, I tried to be simple and to provide a large context for the understanding of Jesus within his Jewish context.

The second chapter situates Jesus within his historical and religious context. Like the first, it is meant to be general and not to raise major issues; I was more concerned here to tell the Jesus story and to highlight Jewish expectation about the Messiah and understandable differences of opinion about Jesus. The third chapter concerns itself with the emergence of the Christian church. I was tempted to call it the emergence of the Christian churches. Again, I chose what I thought were the major controversies within early Christianity and then tried to move the early community out into the larger world without becoming too complex or confusing. My main purpose was to show the early community as divided over important questions. Students too often think about Christian antiquity as a time of unity, total charity, and blissful contentment when no one needed to argue because they all knew what they were supposed to do. Some students want to get back to such a “golden age,” and I was constrained in this chapter to show it as an exciting time, but not at all an age of unanimity. In all three chapters one could be much more complex; any of the issues I have raised—revelation, exegesis, the Jewish context for Jesus, the development of the early church—admit of more than one interpretation, and my choices and explanation will please some and not others.

The second part of the book, containing four chapters, is meant to give a wide-ranging and relatively brief historical overview. I have tried to recapitulate the central core of Christianity, but no book can cover it all. I decided to include some groups not usually included in such texts and to give what looks like short shrift to others. Why? My intention here was to explain the historical roots of Christian *diversity*. I did *not* intend to write a history of Christianity and have thus omitted what some people think of as major figures. I do not, for example, discuss Aquinas and Augustine, nor do I talk about the development of some major religious orders, nor of specific popes in the Middle Ages; I do not feature personalities in the development of American Protestantism or American Catholicism. Anyone coming to this textbook with a list of major historical figures, therefore, will be disappointed or surprised not to find them. Let me repeat, this part is *not* intended to be a history of Christianity, but is meant to be a history of Christian diversity. I wanted the students to see the major and minor divisions within Christianity in order to better understand both Christian complexity and their own times when new groups and sects spring up like grass.

Chapter 4 is meant to show the differences and similarities between the two oldest forms of Christianity, Orthodox Christianity and Roman Catholicism. It focuses on power and politics because that is where the practical issues were and are. At the same time, it introduces students to ancient concepts like monasticism and the value of tradition as a religious authority with which Protestants later took great issue. The chapter is not meant to be a conclusive or comprehensive history of Christianity in the first several hundred years. Chapter 5 is also about similarity and difference and is meant to further the explanation of Christian *diversity*. It, therefore, tries to pull in the major aspects of the Reformation

and to show the roots of the many different Christian groups that emerged from that controversy; it is *not* a history of medieval and Renaissance Christianity and so simply does not discuss the many other aspects of Christianity or Christian history in that time. For that, we need to refer students to good histories of Christianity that are meant to be inclusive.

Chapter 6 continues the story of diversity in its European and American contexts. Here, too, one will find major omissions if one is looking for a history of Christianity. The purpose of this chapter is to bring the European divisions up to date and then to a new geographical and religious context, America. In so doing, I also try to explore the general context in order to explain the emergence of new Christian groups. By the end of Chapter 6 students should have some idea of how and why many different Christian groups were formed during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries; but the proliferation in those times is mild compared to the explosive nineteenth century, so Chapter 7 is meant to continue the story of diversity through an incredibly prolific era. By the time I got to the twentieth century I was more interested in gathering groups together around a major controversy than I was in delineating further divisions, and I wanted to lay the foundations for the next section of the book. I made the section on the twentieth century general and centered it around fundamentalism versus liberalism because that battle continues to resonate in the contemporary religious atmosphere. As in the previous part, any of the material in Part Two can and should be supplemented, expanded, and deepened according to the interests and proclivities of the teacher.

Part Three contains four chapters and is meant to do a number of things: to gather together the many different groups and redivide them according to practical or ethical positions; to explain why Christian churches are structured differently; and to emphasize the points of commonality and unity Christians have in their worship. The diagram I use to introduce these chapters is something I have worked out teaching and have refined in conversation with colleagues over the years. It is not derived from H. R. Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, at least not in a firsthand way. It ought not to be judged, therefore, according to how well it reflects Niebuhr's intentions (which is not its purpose) but according to how well it works to interpret some of the varieties of Christian behavior and, in the process, to raise the kinds of questions students face today.

The first two chapters of this last part, Chapters 8 and 9, take the different Christian groups that we have just understood historically and look at them from a different perspective. Historically, Catholic monks and Pentecostal Christians have little in common and share no great love for one another, but in terms of their relationship to the lure of the world they *do* have some common beliefs or reactions. Doctrinally, a group like evangelicals might look monolithic, but in response to issues of social justice we find many different kinds of belief and behavior. These chapters, then, are meant to flesh out the picture and to make the story of Christian diversity both more complex and more contempo-

rary, to make the historical sections relevant, and finally, to raise some large issues within Christianity in a way that will engage students and provoke thought and discussion.

Chapter 10 delineates some of the varieties in Christian polity, a topic I have not seen treated in other textbooks. It responds to questions from my students about why some churches operate in one way and other churches in quite a different way. The last chapter, Chapter 11, is an attempt to draw all the groups (or most of them) back together again in terms of worship. No matter what historical differences, doctrinal feuds, or ethical arguments Christians have had, they *do* agree about the importance of worship and they basically agree on a remarkable number of things about worship. The chapter is meant to bring the story to a unified conclusion so that at the end of the book students know about the great variety of Christian belief and practice—or at least know it exists—and also that there are important points of correspondence across the whole Christian spectrum.

The appendixes provide near-at-hand information about some of the themes mentioned in the book but not elaborated on. Appendix 1 simply shows the different ordering of books in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible. Appendix 2 provides a simple, story-line synopsis of books in the Old and New Testaments and is meant to be used like a reference table. Appendix 3 is an outline of early Christian literature, an area not really covered in the book, but alluded to in the discussion of tradition (Chapter 4). Appendix 4, also meant to be used as a reference table, pulls together the various ecumenical councils in the history of the Christian church and shows which groups follow which councils; here the Romanness of the Roman Catholic church is perhaps more visible than it is in the text itself. Appendix 5, another reference table, simply delineates some of the creeds (or confessions) within Christianity in an attempt to show some of the doctrinal developments that were not treated within the text. Appendix 6, a historical time line, is a study aid for students, as is the glossary, made up of terms from the text itself that are not fully explained there. All of these are meant to provide useful information without intruding into the text itself. The bibliography is selective and provides some additional sources of information.

I have found it helpful in the course to build on the parts of this book by assigning four short papers on a specific Christian group chosen by the student. The first paper deals with the background of the group and its relation to Jesus, the second with the historical experience of the group, especially in America, the third with its place on the diagram for Part Three, and the fourth with its polity and worship. By investigating one Christian group from all these angles, students get a deeper understanding of one group and of the broader phenomenon. The bonus for them is the ease with which they are able to tackle two- to three-page papers and their amazement at the end of the semester that they have a ten- to twelve-page term paper and a good grasp of either their own religious background or one completely new to them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In his classic text, *American Renaissance*, F. O. Matthiessen said this:

During the course of this long volume I have undoubtedly plagiarized from many sources—to use the ugly term that did not bother Shakespeare’s age. I doubt whether any criticism or cultural history has ever been written without such plagiarism, which inevitably results from assimilating the contributions of your countless fellow-workers, past and present. The true function of scholarship as of society is not to stake out claims on which others must not trespass, but to provide a community of knowledge in which others may share.¹

Without elevating myself and my task to the stature of Matthiessen, I must acknowledge that I share his general feeling. This book was produced from my research and teaching experience, anecdotes told to me by friends, and informative arguments with colleagues. Students have helped me by confronting my assumptions and descriptions with their own experience. I am not always able to say where I have found a particular definition or distinction, nor do I always know whether my ways of organizing the material are original or suggested to me from elsewhere. Two standard reference books have been invaluable to me over the years and in the production of this volume: *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, edited by F. L. Cross, and the *Corpus Dictionary of Western Churches*, edited by T. C. O’Brien. I have not, to the best of my knowledge, quoted from them directly, but I have surely relied on them heavily. Both of these books give pithy and accurate definitions as well as manageable explanations of complex historical and theological debates. Because I have tried to insinuate some theological questions as well as historical material, I have sometimes relied on important or memorable works that were especially helpful. My discussion of the nature of tradition in Chapter 4 is indebted to Gershom Scholem’s essay, “Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism”;² my summary of the conservative/liberal debate in twentieth century Protestantism (at the end of Chapter 7) owes much of its organizational style and information to William E. Hordern’s fine little book, *A Layman’s Guide to Protestant Theology*. Some of this material appeared in an earlier version in an Indiana University Independent Study Division text, and I thank the trustees of the University for allowing me to use it again here. Most of the refinements, however, have been suggested to me by colleagues in conversations over the years. Where they got the information originally I do not know, but I am grateful to them for sharing it with me so generously.

I have noticed that all books that thank friends end with the author taking responsibility for all mistakes. I take that responsibility but I am also aware that my friends and advisors share in the liabilities of the book as well as in its strengths. I would not have made certain decisions to include or excise material without an argument from one or more of my readers, nor would I have been as sensitive to certain issues or phrasings without their different kinds of insight. When I began this book I thought I should get friends representing as many different perspectives as possible to read it: ministers, atheists, fundamentalist Christians, sectarians, humanists, historians, and skeptics. I thought this would protect me and help me to stretch the book as widely as possible to

¹ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), paperback, p. xx.

² In *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 282–303.

include many different viewpoints. I did not anticipate that I would have to argue for so many points or work so hard to make myself clear. I hope the result is felicitous. Whether it is a success or failure, however, I am deeply grateful to those people who helped me. James Ackerman, Howard Berkowitz, Anne Carr, John Gillman, Anne Hauerwas, Luke Johnson, Jack Kinnard, A. E. Lacy, Lauree Meyer, Sam Preus, David Smith, and Bill Storey all read parts of it carefully, and offered me valuable suggestions and new perspectives. Bob Epps, Stan Hauerwas, David Felter, Jim McDonald, Jan Shipps, and Stephen Stein helped me when I could not figure out a fine point of history or polity. My secretary, Star Kelley, relieved many burdens with her superlative skills; she suggested ways in which I could improve consistency and kept me from unfortunate turns of phrase more than once. Paula Jentgens typed the final version with speed and accuracy. I owe a special debt of thanks to Barbara Nelson. She argued and supported me through a first rewriting with steadiness, persuasion, and editorial savvy.

Working with the people at Wadsworth Publishing has been a revivifying experience for me. The religion editor, Sheryl Fullerton, is a dream come true: she supported me, helped me to interpret criticism, and guided me through a major manuscript revision with skill, insight, and (always) good humor. Sally Schuman and Leland Moss, my production editors, have been clear, trustworthy, and supportive. I have felt wafted through this process with ease, due, in good measure, to their talent. My copy editor, Lorraine Anderson, is smart and skillful and has in many ways made the rough way smooth. I am deeply grateful to them all.

None of this would have been possible for me outside the atmosphere of Indiana University. My colleagues in the Department of Religious Studies have led me to see other viewpoints and to think fairly about them. I owe them many thanks and make a small gesture of gratitude by dedicating this book to them.

Mary Jo Weaver

NOTE TO STUDENTS

All religions can be looked at from either the inside or the outside. When Christianity is viewed from the inside, one gets a believer's perspective and sees Christianity as *the* religion, the only possible truth. If Christianity is viewed from the outside, one gets a nonbeliever's perspective and sees Christianity as *a* religion, one perception of the truth among many. A clear and determined choice between these two approaches leads to considerable distortion from the very outset. To avoid this distortion, this book attempts to incorporate both perspectives, though within limits. This book takes an outsider's perspective insofar as it does not attempt to proclaim Christianity or prove it to be true. At the same time, it is faithful to an insider's viewpoint as it tries to read and understand the doctrines and practices of Christians as they are understood within the believing community.

Christianity has a doctrine about God that includes a belief in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; and it offers a method for getting in touch with God that involves a relationship with Jesus. Christians agree that it is important to know, or to believe in, or to experience Jesus, but they disagree about how that is done. There are, accordingly, many varieties of Christian belief and practice, most of which reflect differences in biblical interpretation, historical experience, and Christian self-understanding.

An introduction to Christianity can do many things, some of them more ambitious than others. This book is modest in intention and general in scope: it intends to *introduce* Christianity from a number of perspectives so that students can have some appreciation of its richness and diversity without being overwhelmed by its differences of opinion and practice. Christians are extraordinarily diverse in their beliefs and behavior, but they also share common understandings. This book delineates the historical differences and commonalities in order to introduce the dynamism and diversity of one of the world's largest religions.

A book like this is bound to be controversial however hard the author tries

to be fair-minded and judicious in choosing material, examples, and topics. I can only hope that those who see significant gaps in interpretation and historical awareness will fill those gaps with supplementary reading. Though I wrote this book with a definite audience in mind—the college freshman who has little knowledge about Christianity and perhaps a minimal understanding of religion—I have been conscious throughout that it will be read by teachers and reviewers. It has been tempting, therefore, to insert complex digressions in order to preserve a professional image. I have nonetheless tried to keep the needs of the student uppermost in mind while writing.

Accordingly, though I usually allude to the fact that most issues are more complex than they may appear to be in this general introduction, I do not raise difficult questions of scriptural exegesis (critical explanation) or sophisticated historical argumentation in the body of the text itself. The notes and suggestions at the ends of the chapters and the appendixes at the back of the book give more nuances and further explain controversial issues. My approach to the Bible is informed by historical and critical scholarship and grounded in a deep appreciation of the ways Scripture is used by believing communities of Christians. Different groups of Christians read certain texts differently and I have tried to recognize that fact without attempting to solve the issues. I have tried to raise some questions about scriptural interpretation without urging one interpretation over another. I have not taken time to explain some historical material or to identify certain personalities, but I have added a glossary of terms and names to elaborate upon areas not covered in depth in the text. Use the glossary like a dictionary: when you find a word or the name of a person in the text that you want to know more about, turn to the glossary for a further explanation.

Finally, I have accepted the statements from each group about itself and have made no speculations about the possible truth or falsehood of certain claims. My intention is to give each group an impartial reading and to present its history and its positions straightforwardly. I have been more interested in practical issues than in theological ones, and more interested in presenting an explanation for Christian diversity and unity than I have been in writing a comprehensive history of Christianity. My hope is that you will find the text clear, accurate, and challenging.

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