



# **REFORM OF CHRISTIANITY**

**THE EMERGING CHURCH**

**NORMAN BEECHER**

## **Editorial Reviews**

From outside the going ecclesiastical and theological establishments Norman Beecher brings a mind shaped by scientific discipline to bear on the issues posed by the contemporary cultural situation for Christian faith and practice. The result is a lively, challenging, fresh plea for Christian witness that speaks the language of our culture from within rather than preaches in an outmoded idiom at our culture from without. The book itself is a step toward the reform it advocates.

**--The Rev. Dr. Harvey H. Guthrie,  
retired President and Dean of the  
Episcopal Divinity School,  
Cambridge, MA**

It is a courageous book that challenges the church to move beyond the mythology so many take for granted and address our foundational belief system. As such, it is in the now growing tradition of critical thinking exemplified by theologians such as Marcus Borg, John Shelby Spong and John Dominic Crossan. Anything that moves us away from the narrow mindedness of contemporary American Christianity is a deep blessing. I agree that a new church is emerging, and like any birthing, there is pain.

**--The Right Reverend J. Clark Grew,  
retired Episcopal Bishop of Ohio**

Norman Beecher continues the eminent tradition of his forebears as he writes about the need for reform of the Christian Church. He paints a picture of a scientist's view of the struggle to reconcile much that is archaic in Christian thinking and practice with the need for a strong religious underpinning to our society. Reform of Christianity is a thoughtful analysis of what is problematic for so many about the thinking of the Church. He concludes with interesting prescriptions for a revitalized Christianity.

**--The Rev. Douglass T. Lind, D. Min., ThD., PhD.,  
Episcopal priest now serving an  
Episcopal Church in Florida**

Many people have found the Christian religion wanting, but it is not necessary to give up its great value because of this. It is far better to build a new religious understanding on the basis of the greatest religion of our world than to abandon Christianity, as has been done in Europe,

**John Adams, second president of the United States:** "As I understand the Christian religion, it was, and is, a revelation. But how has it happened that millions of fables, tales, legends, have been blended with both Jewish and Christian revelation that have made them the most bloody religion that ever existed?"

**Mahatma Gandhi:** "I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. They are so unlike your Christ."

All religions change over time. Christianity changed greatly from the time of the early Christians to the time of the Spanish Inquisition, when it was probably at its worst in terms of cruelty and tyranny.

Reformation has been under way for centuries and has made enormous progress. Notable contributors have been Galileo and Martin Luther. But reform at the present time is lagging and has even shown some regression in the re-birth of fundamentalism.

We do not need a new religion that simply forgives our failures and comforts us with myths and legends. We need the teachings of Jesus, unfettered by bigotry and superstition.

# Reform for the World's Principal Religion

In the twenty-first century the religion with the most adherents throughout the world bases its doctrine principally upon a creed written in the fourth century. In the approximately 1800 years since the Nicene Creed was written, scientific knowledge has increased a thousand-fold. Scholars and theologians have studied the ancient records, especially the Bible, and have reached conclusions never imagined in the fourth century. Yet there has been little change in doctrine over these centuries.

In the twenty-first century we know many things about the Christian religion that were not known in the fourth century. First, the Bible was written by many ordinary men whose understanding was limited by the small knowledge base of their time. Second, we are learning that many of the stories told about Jesus Christ, for example, the virgin birth, are tales told popularly about many great figures of earlier times and are undoubtedly not literally true. Third, we know that humans have redefined God many times throughout history. In our generation we need to understand what kind of a God could be loving but would not prevent the Holocaust.

There is a wonderful Christian religion waiting for our recognition. Biblical scholars and theologians have been writing about it for decades. Unfortunately, the position of many churches is that their doctrine is and will always be infallibly correct. It is instructive to consider the great range of doctrine that we have in the different churches in this nation. They cannot all be infallibly correct.

Reflect that Jesus had nothing to do with the doctrine of the Christian churches. When he died, he left only his wonderful teachings. Warring humans established the churches and have murdered thousands of their fellow Christians to try to assure that their particular doctrine is the one that is chosen as infallibly correct.

It is time for the Christian Church to focus on the teachings of Jesus and gain a better understanding of God.

# **Reform of Christianity**

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**Norman Beecher**



Norman Beecher was born in Florida and grew up in Florida and North Carolina. He went north for college and obtained an ScD degree from MIT. This led to a career in research management.

His education was interrupted by 3½ years service in the Second World War. Here he learned something of the theological problem of evil when his division, the 14<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, led the battle group that opened the Dachau concentration camp.

Since his retirement, he has read widely in Christian religious literature and has gained the conviction that the Christian Church must reform or die. He believes strongly in the value of the churches. This is not surprising in view of his many religious ancestors such as the Rev. Lyman Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher.

Some of these ancestors also rebelled against archaic doctrine. In the early 1800s his great great-grandfather, the Rev. Lyman Beecher, was tried for heresy by the Presbyterian Church because he did not believe in preordination nor in the damnation of infants who died before they were baptized. Happily, he was unjustly acquitted. Henry Ward Beecher also held reformist ideas.

Norman Beecher has written two earlier books, *Fortunate Journey*, a chronicle of the interesting members of his and his wife's family and *The Pre-Meditated Life*, a guide for young people in making decisions.

# REFORM OF CHRISTIANITY

## THE EMERGING CHURCH

Norman Beecher

To the corruptions of Christianity I am indeed opposed, but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian, in the only sense in which he wished anyone to be: sincerely attached to his doctrines in preference to all others, ascribing to himself every *human* excellence, and believing he never claimed any other.

**Thomas Jefferson** (1743 – 1826)



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## **Dedication**

To Nancy, my companion  
in learning about life  
for 60 years.

## **Acknowledgments**

I am especially indebted to Leonard Ross, April Prewitt, Anne Kimball and my wife, Nancy, who read the manuscript and gave me their comments. I changed some things as a result of their suggestions, but the final results are all mine and they bear no responsibility for errors of fact or judgment.

Norman Beecher

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## PREFACE

There have been recently published a number of books advocating atheism and decrying the record of error and prejudice by the Christian Church over many centuries. This is not new in the scholarly world. Theologians have for decades declared the “theistic“ God dead. Historians have decried the dismal record of Christianity in creating religious wars and persecuting non-conformists. What is unfortunate is that this new crop of atheists ignores the benefits for the world inspired by Christianity.

This book is written for all people who are interested in the Christian religion, but especially those who believe the churches have value in our society. It is intended as a wake-up call that the Christian Church must take account of the knowledge gained in both the scientific and theological fields in the last 1700 years, In the United States more people than ever are concerned with religion, but they are not satisfied to accept fourth century teachings without question.

The declarative statements here about Christianity are true in the fullest sense of the word. They generally support the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. They do not always support the religious concepts developed by the very fallible church fathers in their times, which were times of general ignorance compared to today. Especially suspect are doctrines conceived during the many political struggles of the Church when power was the principal objective, rather than truth.

To explain adequately why the statements herein are true is too much of a task for a single small book, although abbreviated explanations are given. What this book does is alert the readers to the problems with Christian doctrine and suggest new understanding. They can then begin extensive thinking about Christianity and its doctrines and undertake the task of defining their own faith. The references and bibliography should point out helpful sources of information.

It has been the position of the orthodox (Roman Catholic) Church that individuals do not define doctrine; they accept the doctrine specified by the Church. In case anyone does not agree with this, the Church notes that the Pope inherited the mantel of Jesus Christ through the agency of St. Peter and passed it down through the ages.

This is a totally untenable position. There is nothing to insure that the fallible human beings who successively filled this office would have the wisdom and love displayed by Jesus. In fact, the Bishops of Rome, who preceeded the Popes, were, by the time of the Council of Nicaea, much more interested in political power than in bringing in a kingdom of love. Later Popes ordered some of the worst crimes in history, such as the Crusades and the burning of thousands of non-conformists at the stake. Why should the doctrinal views conceived and passed down by these men be accepted without question when they so completely failed the test of common humanity?

Christianity does not have to be so heavily burdened with myth and superstition as is the faith now preached in most churches. Scholars are able to go back with some competence to the original teachings of Jesus and to the events in his life. They can draw forth the wisdom in the holy books of our religion, the Bible, and understand it in the perspective of the writers and the times when it was written. And theologians and philosophers of our day are able to add ethical wisdom developed in the millenia since the life of Jesus and the writing of the holy books.

Today Biblical and theological scholars are not all ordained clergy of a specific church. Many are truly independent scholars and many who are associated closely with a church have still been able to maintain professional independence. We can learn much from them and weigh their insights against the teachings of our own church.

We and our clergy should think deeply about religious doctrine. It is time for the development of improved doctrine. The Christian Church needs reform. With new and wiser doctrine it can be set on a course of hope and inspiration that will carry it forward for decades, even centuries.

## FOREWORD

In the first century the teachings of Jesus had a generally positive effect. His followers formed small communities which were characteristically more charitable and loving than the larger Roman community. Although they had failings, as we read in the letters of St. Paul, the members of the “Jesus movements“ stood out as exemplary good people. Outsiders were drawn to join these nascent Christians.

Of course, these early Christians believed the religious teachings of the Jews. The base of their members was Jewish. The books they chose for their holy books were the Hebrew scripture plus the many gospels written about the life of Jesus and also the letters of St. Paul and other Christian leaders. These writings were simply added to the Hebrew scripture and some of them became later the New Testament. In the early centuries of Christianity there were probably as many as 100 gospels, letters and other writings that circulated. No decision had been made as to which were the most valuable and would become part of Scripture.

The early Christians believed in the anthropomorphic Hebrew God. They did not at first attribute any divine character to Jesus, but this idea grew over time, as his followers sought to convince others of his greatness.

The Jews of Jesus’ time were ambiguous about belief in life after death. A faithful Jew had such belief only as an option. Then, as now, Judaism did not emphasize this aspect of doctrine. In contrast Christians have made eternal life a key part of their doctrine. The Jews of the time of Jesus accepted his teaching in this matter, although it was not clear from what had been orally handed down whether life after death began immediately or at the end of time.

There was no fixed doctrine for the Jesus followers in the early years. St. Paul began to establish doctrine, since he wanted to recruit new members to the Christian community. He invented many of the doctrines that we hold today, such as the concept that Jesus’ death was a sacrifice for the sins of the gentiles, later expanded to be the sins of the world.

Doctrine became more rigid following the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. Before the end of the century, the Catholic Church had begun

to assume wide power. Christianity by the fourth century had become a very different institution from the simple groups of Jesus followers in the first century.

Religion in general is usually accepted as entirely beneficent. A look at the headlines about actions taken on “religious grounds“ should disabuse anyone of that notion. In the Moslem world we read of riots based on alleged blasphemy and suicide bombings by individuals who expect to gain martyrdom and access to an especially delightful heaven. In the Christian world there are murders of homosexuals and murderous conflict between different Christian sects.

Humans seek religion as support in the loneliness and evil of the world. We hope also to believe that life is not over after our brief time on earth. We are willing to accept supernatural hypotheses to comfort us in these regards.

The absurdity of our supernatural beliefs becomes ever more apparent as science and religious scholarship advance. Europeans have mostly discarded religion. This could happen in the United States if no changes are made.

Christianity has been about supernatural beings floating around us and magic. This is doctrine created in the fourth century. Intelligent people do not believe in magic any longer. They have had to make a deliberate “leap of faith“ to accept this doctrine.

This traditional Christianity has a number of symbols: God, Jesus, the Bible. We can build a new Christianity with simply a new understanding of the familiar symbols. The teachings of Jesus of Nazareth will remain fundamental. Our understanding of God must be new. We recognize that the anthropomorphic Hebrew God really could not exist.

Creation of the doctrinal structure of a reformed Christianity will be an intellectual labor for our senior clergy, scholars and theologians. Many are already working on it. When the new doctrine is complete, it should provide the same inspiration and guidance. The difference will be that it will be tied to reality. No “leap of faith“ will be needed. We can believe and retain our reason.

Religion should be an instrument of enlightenment and sound moral guidance. A religion that leads us to follow the moral teachings of Jesus is of great value. A religion that teaches us to believe in the Biblical story of creation or that no one is good who does not believe in the existence of dozens of supernatural beings is dangerous error.