

BOOK REVIEWS

CHRISTIANITY AFTER RELIGION: THE END OF CHURCH AND THE BIRTH OF A NEW SPIRITUAL AWAKENING By Diana Butler Bass, New York, HarperOne, 2012, 294 pp. \$25.99

During one of her many presentations to church groups, Diana Butler Bass muses about the difference between weather and climate. People talk and often complain about the whims of weather they experience every day. Yet while we see weather from our windows and feel it on our streets, we do not as readily see and feel climate. Climate is an attribute of any given geographic locale that is mostly taken for granted by its inhabitants, because the big picture is greater than their immediate sense experience. And when climate changes, it does so subtly, almost imperceptibly, evident only to trained observers.

Trained as a church historian, Butler Bass posits that Western society is undergoing a spiritual climate change more rapid than the physical climate change of the earth. In one of her earlier books, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, she gave a weather report of ten neighborhood mainline churches, and was accused of being too positive. Though weather forecasts are useful for preparing to cope better with impending conditions, understanding climate change is essential for adapting to long-term shifts in our environment. *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* is Butler Bass' trenchant analysis of current spiritual climate change, and unlike trained observers of physical climate change, her optimism remains undiminished.

The book focuses on the holy shift, as her workshops have sometimes been titled, from religiosity to spirituality in Western societies. Scholars of the twentieth century simply assumed that secularization was inherent in modernization. But instead of disappearing, religion in the twenty-first century has experienced resurgence in the global south and replacement in the global north. Christianity in particular is flourishing as religion in the global south, but has morphed into something else in the global north. Neither reversion to ancient animism, nor reduction to modern humanism, economism, environmentalism, or any other spiritless ism, Christianity has been renewed as spirituality.

The distinction Butler Bass draws between religiosity and spirituality, distilled from numerous, mostly mainline church focus groups, renders religion to be a negative term associated with the public realm of membership in organizations and adherence to doctrines. In contrast, spirituality is a positive term associated with the private realm of thought and experience. Spirituality "is both a critique of institutional religion and a longing for meaningful connection" (p. 68). Western religion has recently modelled itself quite self-consciously after big business, commodifying faith in the process, and soon suffering the discontents, alienations, and reversals of the marketplace. But this has only fuelled authentic spiritual longing, and the prophetic tradition within Christianity itself. It is not so much that the majority now want an end to

religion; they want better religion. They want religion *and* spirituality. They want the transformation and regeneration of religion by spirituality. They want community, not empire.

Part I: *The End of Religion* documents the now familiar personal stories and social statistics of the decline of religion, identifying the first decade of the twenty-first century as “the Great Religious Recession.” Nevertheless, in conversation and concert with William McLoughlin, Phyllis Tickle, Harvey Cox, Parker Palmer, and others, Butler Bass sees a Fourth Great Awakening in a spiritual space beyond religious organizations, institutions, and traditions. In examining the crisis of legitimacy confronting religion, she employs three sociological points of analysis: belief, behavior, and belonging. “What do I think” is the question of religious ideas, “how should I act” is the question of religious commitment, and “Who am I” is the question of religious affiliation.

Part II: *A New Vision* elaborates the evolving nature and relationship of believing, behaving, and belonging, and is Butler Bass’ boldest, most unique contribution. Her scrutiny of believing is most incisive. She asserts that the assumption that belief is the intellectual content of faith, our rehearsal of ideas about God, is misguided – Jesus himself had little interest in orthodoxy. Replacing faith *in* God with tenets *about* God has produced fundamentalist, institutionalized religion. The question “what do I believe” should be benign, because it leads only to religious dogma that “deserves to die.” The more spiritual question “how do I believe” is more fruitful, pushing people into a deeper engagement with the world beyond dictated information *about* the divine, to personal experience *of* the divine. The question “who do I believe” is also experiential, pushing the question of authority beyond mere expertise to issues of relationship and authenticity. Belief as experience, not merely intellectual assent, shifts the focus from the correctness of cognitive content to the act of faith as a verb – practicing trust, loyalty, and love. To believe in God is not merely to weigh the rational or empirical evidence for the existence of God, but to trust and take refuge in the wholly, holy Other.

Separate chapters then address behaving and belonging. “Throughout its first five centuries, people understood [Christianity] primarily as spiritual practices that offered a meaningful way of life in this world – not as a neat set of doctrines, an esoteric belief, or the promise of heaven” (p. 149). The primary *why* for any Christian practice is that the action in some way imitates Jesus and fosters relationship, actions that tend to become hollow when programmed by churches. As for belonging, it is intimately, simultaneously related to being and relationship. Contrary to Descartes’ sense of the self as a proposition – “I think, therefore I am” – and consistent with Mead’s sense of the socially reflexive self, Christian spirituality insists that the self is a preposition. The first and last spiritual question is “whose am I,” and Butler Bass is emphatic here. “With complete and certain assurance, I confess that I no longer hold propositional truths about Christianity; rather, I experience prepositional truths of being found *in* God *through* Christ *with* others *toward* the kingdom” (p. 192).

Her most compelling argument is what Butler Bass terms *The Great Reversal*. Ever since the Reformation, Christians have shifted away from emphasizing practice toward emphasizing

belief first, behavior second, and belonging as an eventuality. The consequent intra-Christian contest of truth claims produced an intellectualized and impersonal religion that defined people by what propositions they believed. But Christian spirituality unfolds in the exact opposite order; belonging first, behaving second, and belief as an eventuality. Christianity did not begin with Peter's confession, but with the disciples choosing to follow, to join in and belong. Faith did not begin by precisely refining ideas about God via seminal lectures in systematic theology. Christian faith was originally about how to act toward each other, what to do in this world. "Jesus did not tell them to have faith. He pushed them into the world to practise faith" (p. 207). Peter's confession of belief eventually grew out of the belonging of relationship. Butler Bass deftly uses contemporary Amish and African Christianity as examples of Christianity in its proper and ancient order, of spirituality and faith as experiential practise, unencumbered with complex creeds and confessions, a spirituality of the heart and hands, not the head.

Part III: Awakening is Butler Bass' vision of what the current Fourth Great Awakening can be, the most significant change in Christian faith since the Protestant Reformation. We are not at *the* end of Christianity, but at *an* end to the Christian religion of the modern era. It is also a spiritual awakening to a new awareness of God's energy in the world. As in the Counter Reformation, it has been temporarily slowed by resurgent conservatism that has sought to maintain high levels of fear and return to old-time religion. But that has been retrenchment as backlash, not revitalization, the last stand of religious dogmatics about to be overwhelmed by the wave of spiritual, romantic realists best exemplified by Wendell Berry. Butler Bass concludes with a hopeful call to prepare, practice, play, and participate, because "awakening is not a miracle we receive; it is actually something we can do" (p. 251).

To unpack the cultural turn from religiosity to spirituality is hardly new; many other scholars have done so in their own terms. For example, Swenson (2009) describes religion as the sacred among or between, while spirituality is the sacred within. In *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Heelas and Woodhead (2005) give a more explicitly sociological and theoretical account. Religion is "life-as," life lived in conformity to 'objective' roles, duties, and obligations, whereas spirituality is "subjective-life" lived in authentic connection with the inner depths and experiences of one's unique self-in-relation. The religious source of significance is found in adhering to a transcendent, communal tradition that bestows order and meaning from the outside, whereas the spiritual source of significance is in turning away from self-sacrificial deference to external authority toward being true to self. Perhaps the most inclusive, over-arching description is what Charles Taylor (1991) calls "the massive subjective turn" of Western culture. Or perhaps it is all bound up in the end of modernity, and therefore the end of modern forms of religion, exemplified by *The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context* (Penner, 2013).

Bruce (2002) has suggested that spirituality itself is doomed to disappear in turn, viewing it as the last gasp and whimper of concern with the sacred in the West. But as Durkheim taught us, the sacred need not contain a concept of the supernatural or even the spiritual. Societies will

always sacralise something and generate some kind of “collective effervescence” that becomes a transcendent experience, even if it is only professional football. And it is unlikely that the sense of there being something more than the rational and the empirical in the universe will ever vanish. There is no more academically informed, yet broadly accessible, personable, and hopeful analysis of the revitalization and resilience of Christian spirituality in particular than what Diana Butler Bass has provided.

Works Cited

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