

BOOK REVIEWS

CHRISTIANITY AFTER RELIGION: THE END OF CHURCH AND THE BIRTH OF A NEW SPIRITUAL AWAKENING, by Diana Butler Bass, N.Y: HarperCollins, 2013, 304 pp., \$18.34.

In *Another Perfect Stranger*, Sarah takes a flight to an art college she hopes to attend. Part of her desire to leave home is to escape from her parents who, she believes, are pushing their faith on her. Seated between two male passengers, she is quickly engaged in a conversation with a man to her left who is a zealous Christian. His aggressive conversational approach disturbs Sarah, and she quickly disengages from the conversation. As she begins chatting with the man seated to her right, named Yesh, the conversation becomes highly engaging and thought provoking. As the film progresses, we discover that Yesh is, in fact, Jesus in modern clothing. Author and film creator David Gregory's depiction of Jesus is thought-provoking as Jesus confirmed Sarah's disdain for religion in favor of a heart-felt, personal faith. *Another Perfect Stranger* has a good, albeit predictable, storyline as well as a simple message about faith, life, doubt, and God's love.

The terms *religion* and *spirituality*, in modern parlance, have changed over the past few decades. As culture changes, language is modified to accommodate the developments. Butler Bass takes the changes and delves deeper into the significance. Church attendance is declining in the U.S. American religion has become a commodity resembling the superstore chains, and Americans are picky consumers. With the decline, there is a noticeable change in how Americans are viewing religion. The trend has been noticed for several decades. Butler Bass, supported by Rob Bell, Brian McLaren, and Emergent and Emerging church scholars take these trends one step further in anticipation of a great social and cultural movement. From Butler Bass's perspective, the United States is increasingly *spiritual*, but less *religious*, indicating the eve of a Fourth Great Awakening, a "...Great Turning toward a global community based on shared human connection, dedicated to the care of our planet, committed to justice and equality, that seeks to raise hundreds of millions from poverty, violence, and oppression" (pp. 5-6). If this sounds apocalyptic, then Butler Bass is ready to serve it with a postmodern flair.

Butler Bass, an American Christianity historian and speaker, uses a blend of statistics and personal anecdotes to support the claim. For historians, this is problematic. First, one does not usually identify historical movements prior to or during the movement itself. The term *Great Awakening*, coined by Joseph Tracy in 1842, was in reference to the First Great Awakening of the 1730s and early 1840s. Historian William McLaoughlin (1978) identified *The Fourth Great Awakening* and predicted a time of "...global conscience, environmental sensitivity, a passion for racial equality, an understanding of connection and community, an emphasis on beauty, art, music, and poetry, and an ethic of self-realization" (p. 222).

Historians are neither prognosticators nor prophets. Identifying a period or event as a 'turning point' prior to, or during, the event raises questions. Is one attempting to create a self-fulfilling prophecy? The term, turning points, is a highly subjective construct resulting from historical reflection. The term *Fourth Great Awakening* is premature and certainly presumptuous. Nonetheless, the facts Butler Bass presents are interesting and worthy of serious consideration. With declining church attendance and the shift in self-identification of being religious to spiritual, something might be happening on the American Christian scene. Butler Bass is convinced that history is repeating itself, and the same features of the First Great Awakening are occurring once again- a battle between the Old lights and the New Lights. Again, one wonders about Butler Bass's understanding of history. Are the spirits of Spengler and Toynbee channeling Butler Bass with the discarded view of cyclical history? One wonders if this is a view held by Bell and McLaren because of their praise of the book. If so, then it would be odd that Postmodernists would maintain such a deterministic cosmic truth

Part of the problem the Christian churches face, according to Butler Bass, is the use of creeds. According to Butler Bass, creeds are divisive and place the intellectual over the experiential aspects of faith. As Butler Bass noted, "The early Christians prayed and worshipped for several generations before they had a written creed, and they prayed for several hundred years before they had a canon of scripture." (pp. 130-131). "Belief was not a doctrinal test. Instead, belief was more like a marriage vow-'I do' as a pledge of faithfulness and loving service to and with the other" (p. 117). For Butler Bass, creeds are a heartfelt statement, experiential not intellectual. Granted, Kelly (1972) noted early Christians had an early form of catechetical instruction referenced in St. Paul's letters, but the formal creeds of today were not developed until the 4th century. The question is not *when* but *why* the creeds were formulated. Butler Bass appears mired in raising questions of how, what, and who. Rarely does why appear. *Why* is the interrogative that implies cause, and is a question worth asking. The earliest creedal statement, 'Jesus is Lord' was a statement both intellectual and experiential. As much as Butler Bass disdains the comparison of the term *Lord* to that used in reference to *Caesar*, St. Paul in Philippians 2:10 does just that. The term *Kyrios Iesus* and the term *Kyrios Kaisar* were the terms used by the magistrate during his attempt to persuade Polycarp. Christians were certainly aware of the implications of such a comparison and sometimes paid for it with their lives. Butler Bass's claim that creeds are prayers is an indication of her attempts to stretch etymologically to make a point. *Orare*, *Prex*, and *votum* are common Latin words for prayer and are etymologically related to *credo*. Creed (*credo*) is a statement of faith and was part of the public act of liturgy (Greek : *liturgia*). Interestingly, Butler Bass does make a valid point in reference to the use of *credo* as being 'believe, trust, and commit'. A perusal of Luther's Small Catechism will also enlighten one on this point. As to her claim that the word doctrine (*doctrina*) is translated as "'healing teaching' from the French word for 'doctor'"; therefore, doctrines are intended as healing instruments, life-giving words that would draw God's people into a deeper engagement with divine things", the

reader is left wondering how far the author will stretch the truth to make a point (p. 134). While the French may have used the word in that fashion, the Latin root *doctrina* is translated as "teaching". With such loose play with facts and creative etymology, the book's credibility is brought into question.

Butler Bass's frustration with the loss of experiential faith in traditional denominations is understandable. If the statistics shared are valid and reliable, Butler Bass is not alone. It may be true that many are no longer attending traditional churches because they are not feeling their faith (spirituality is the term Butler Bass prefers to use). Why are people leaving the pews? Why are people not feeling their faith? Is the cause found within the institutions, the individuals, or both? Could the cause be external? Is it possible the increased emphasis on individualism has fractured the unity once felt not only in churches, but in the nation as a whole? Where are the mainstream churches that once used a consistent, meaningful, and artistic liturgy that united the congregation as a solid worshipping group confessing the common belief in a creed and standing firm on doctrines based upon the authority of scripture? Where are the churches that took the Great Commission with greater emphasis than a building fund or church growth program? Is it possible the statistics have changed due to demographics? Could it be churches once representative of an immigrant group have changed as generations pass? Could it be that people are feeling over stimulated and exhausted from a sensory overload resulting from technology? There are plenty of questions to ask before answering with such a canned response as 'we are on the verge of a Fourth Great Awakening'.

Christianity after Religion concludes with a chapter of what Butler Bass envisions. Retracing the Great Awakenings of the American past, she dreams of a time when all faiths come together and celebrate religious pluralism-each seeking God in their own way. Her chapter is truly touching and is best described as a fantasy world- a multi- religion Heaven on Earth. There's the rub. The authority of scripture and the lordship of Jesus as Christ are diminished in favor of an ecumenical peace. She desires the Church Triumphant now, and forgets that we live in the Church Militant. Butler Bass, like represent the frustrated postmodernists who attempt to integrate New Age spiritualism with Christianity, do not want to think a loving God would send people to Hell. Few Christians want to think there will be people going to Hell. Wishing it away will not make it disappear. Likewise, God is not created by human thought. There is a way, however, to build the Church. There is a way to increase the relevancy of Church. It is called the Great Commission. It means teaching the truth, not as one sees it, but for what it is and where found- in the infallible Word of God, translated into doctrines for teaching, and expressed in public statements called creeds.

Butler Bass has a writing style that, unfortunately, becomes somewhat monotonous after the first few chapters. The book becomes repetitious on several occasions, punctuated by anecdotes of her personal encounters with strangers who somehow open their innermost thoughts to her. This leads the reader to question the veracity of the stories. The book has issues

worthy of serious consideration, but those are too often dimmed by the emotional outbursts of frustration by the author. There is little doubt Butler Bass had something to say; it is sad that it was lost in the noise.

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