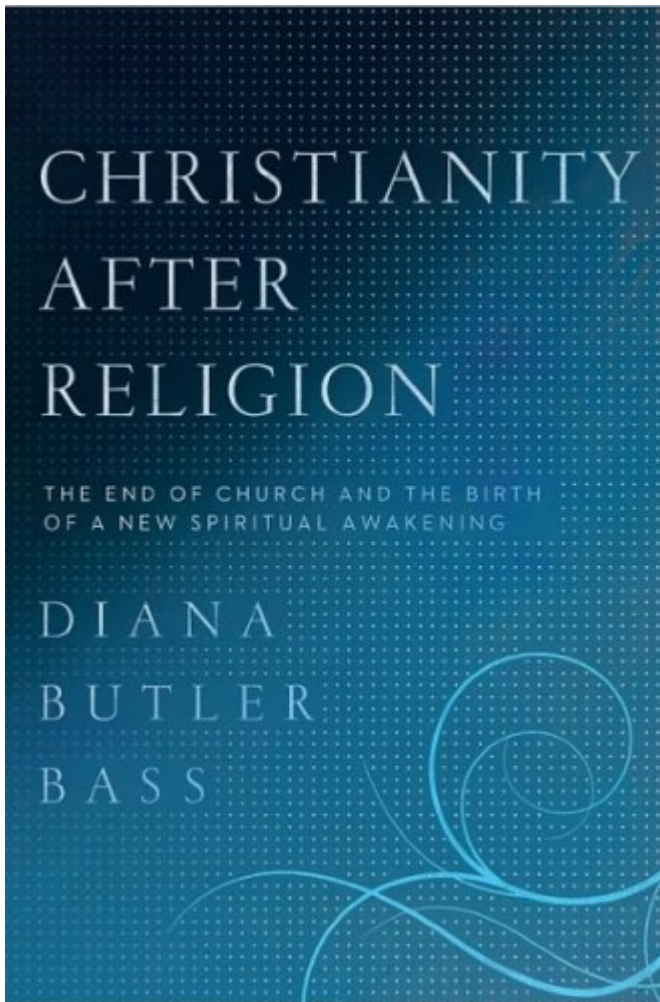


Church as problem and solution

by [Kyle Childress](#) in the [July 11, 2012](#) issue

In Review



Christianity after Religion

By Diana Butler Bass
HarperOne

In less than a decade Diana Butler Bass has become one of American Christianity's liveliest and most popular writers on religion and social change. *Christianity after Religion*, like her previous books, is full of warmth and is written with a winsome

accessibility. Bass usually writes in large ways about big subjects while staying grounded in specific stories about particular communities and people; however, in this book she loses that particularizing power.

Books about the Christian faith tend to fall along a spectrum. On one end of the spectrum, the church is the problem; on the other, the church is the solution. Many contemporary books cluster somewhere around the middle, but in the past few years they have been bunching up on the church-is-the-problem side. *Christianity after Religion* joins these.

Bass's two previous books, *A People's History of Christianity* (2009) and the highly successful *Christianity for the Rest of Us* (2006), were on the solution side of the spectrum. In both she was clear that Christianity must change and is changing, just as she asserts in her new book, yet in those she told historical and contemporary stories of congregations and small communities of faith that have quietly and sometimes creatively practiced the love of Christ in the midst of such change. In *Christianity after Religion* she asks, "Despite such examples of vibrant faith, why is Christianity in the United States struggling to maintain its influence, institutions, and numerical strength?" She says up front that she does not believe that it is "wise to adapt religions to contemporary tastes willy-nilly," but the bulk of the book is an effort to "reform, renew, and reimagine ancient traditions in ways that make sense to contemporary people."

The book is divided into three sections. The first, called "The End of Religion," leans heavily on polls and surveys showing that traditional Christianity and the conventional church are ending while a new yearning for spirituality is emerging. Sprinkled in with the number crunching and sociology are stories of people who have given up on standard Christianity for something more spiritual. As a pastor who is inundated with this kind of information every day, I began calling this the "tell me something I don't know" section. After more than a few anecdotes about people saying, "I used to go to church but now I'm spiritual," I kept thinking, "I can match every one of your stories with five more I've heard in the grocery store, in parking lots, at funeral homes and in civic clubs." If I had a nickel for each time someone told me they "used to be in church, but," I'd be rich.

Bass gets to the meat of her argument in the second part, "A New Vision," which I call the "worth the price of the book" section. Her argument is clustered around three basic questions that she says every religion seeks to answer: What do I

believe? What am I to do? And who am I, and to whom do I belong? From her perspective, conventional Christianity has tended to frame these questions in terms of a desire to learn the right beliefs so people can act properly and get into the right group. Bass reframes them by reversing their order and saying that a renewed Christianity, rooted in the ancient faith, is about belonging to community, which leads to changes in behavior (practices), which leads to belief (which Bass redefines as trust).

This middle third of the book is helpful and stimulating. I wrote notes in the margins and made connections to other ideas, books and authors. For example, in the chapter about belonging, Bass writes about moving “from proposition to preposition” as a way of talking about the Christian life as a journey. The locating word *through* helps us learn to ask “Who am I through God?” As the apostle Paul writes: “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” Bass says, “‘Through’ opens a new door to understanding who we are. We are not only in God, but we exist *through* God—rather like the difference between standing in a doorway and walking through one.” It’s a movement preposition and reminds us that we’re not static. She goes on to say that, along with other prepositions, *through* invites us to “consider identity by exploring how we move, to whom we are related, and where we are located.”

None of this is all that original, nor does Bass work it in deeply theological ways. But from a preacher’s perspective the writing is lively and imaginative, and it is conducive to communication from the pulpit.

The third and final section of the book, “Awakening,” is most reminiscent of Bass’s *A People’s History of Christianity*, in which she cuts a wide swath, citing history as a way to talk about the present and the future of the church. For example, she uses the “New Lights” and “Old Lights” of the First Great Awakening to talk about the tension between the new awakening going on in Christianity and in other religions around the world and about the forces of reaction and fear also being felt. Bass sees the meanness in the world as a rearguard action, the death throes of dying religion in its various guises as a new global awakening of spirituality is coming.

Like any of us, Bass has her blind spots, and after several books they are beginning to show. She says little about the African-American church. Before I’d start talking very much about “Christianity after religion and the end of the church” I’d go to some black churches. The communities of faith descended from or inspired by the Radical Reformation—such as Mennonites and intentional Christian

communities—also get short shrift. Because they have a long history of being light on their feet in the midst of social and cultural changes, I'd want to see if I could learn something from them as well. Both of these groups have a lot to tell the rest of us about the importance of faith that is deeply rooted in community and in institutions of faith that are sometimes small, flexible and adaptable.

Bass writes with the mainline Protestant church in mind—an institution heavy on programs, head-oriented religion and standardized ways of doing things. Her assertion is that this old church is dying, and her passion is for a new, vital, warm faith that practices what Jesus preached. But most mainline Protestant churches seem to be well aware of the need to change. They've heard of the same studies Bass has read and have had the same "I used to go to church but now I'm spiritual" conversations. The issue is not whether to change, but how to do so.

Most also know that the change we need will come not from more studies or plans but from being blown by the Spirit of God and learning from other God-blown churches. Bass, who on her travels is constantly watching and learning from such communities of faith, needs to tell us more, not fewer, of those stories so we can be part of the solution.