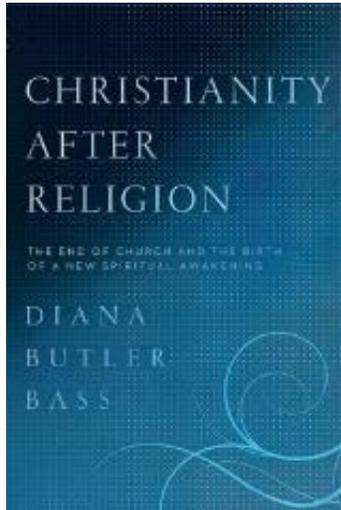


***Christianity after Religion:
The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening***

By Diana Butler Bass
(Harper Collins Publishers, 2012)
294 pages



When I was in Portland, I visited Powell's City of Books. I found this book on the shelf and I was intrigued – just by the title. I picked it up and started to read it and I was immediately engaged.

WARNING: At the outset, I must warn anyone reading this (and anyone who may be interested in picking up the book) that this book is necessary for anyone who is willing to listen to challenging ideas. If you are religiously reactionary and get upset when people challenge traditional Christian expression, this book is not for you.

Bass approaches her conversation from a sociological viewpoint rather than a strictly theological view. She seeks to explain the cultural transitions that we see in our current culture – a move away from religious observances to spiritual practices. Clearly, in our contemporary culture, there has been a dramatic shift in people's thinking – many are willing to embrace the spiritual label while rejecting the religious one. Bass seeks to explore this change.

In her first section, describing the current failure of religious expression, she says, “To stay that one is ‘spiritual but not religious’ or ‘spiritual and religious’ is often a way of saying, “I am dissatisfied with the way things are, and I want to find a new way of connecting with God, my neighbor and my own life.” (Bass, 2012, p. 68) I have found this to be true as I have interacted with lots of people from traditional religious expressions and those who classify themselves as spiritual.

Bass identifies three essentials in the religious/spiritual life: Believing, Behaving, and Belonging. In the second portion of her book, she explores all three from both a religious perspective and a "spiritual" perspective. I think she has done an excellent job in clarifying these essential aspects of faith. She contrasts the religious approach to these issues and then the spiritual path and then makes a persuasive argument that the "spiritual approach" is the better, more meaningful way of processing life.

In her final section of the book, she contrasts what is currently going on in our religious, spiritual culture with the great awakenings that have occurred in our American past. While I don't know that I would agree with all of her comparisons and her conclusions, she certainly documents well what has occurred in our past and is very insightful as to what is going on in our present. She makes a good argument that we are currently undergoing a significant spiritual awakening regarding spirituality in our culture and our world.

I think that Bass raises some great questions about how we should approach religio-spiritual issues in our lives and our churches. I have come to ask many of these questions myself, even before I picked up her book. Her book has expressed some of my deepest reservations about the traditionalism and hypocrisy I have seen demonstrated in "church" today.

One of the most valuable aspects of Bass' book was her examination of the cultural transition to Spirituality and the Religious Right's reaction to the move toward spiritual matters. Her discussion of how the "religious" culture has reacted with hostility to the cultural transition to spiritual awakening is very prescient and, in my humble opinion, hard to deny.

I found the book challenging, inspiring and helpful in processing some of my thinking and my evaluations of our current culture. I encourage any person to read this (if you are willing to engage the subject of our culture with an open mind).

If you are already convinced that those who are spiritual but not religious are pagan, going to hell and we need to recover our country back from people such as these, this book is not for you. However, for the rest of us, it is a refreshing call to nurture our spiritual relationship with the divine!

I share her conclusion to the second section of her book to describe the call to personal renewal. She says:

Relational community, intentional practice, and experiential belief are forming a new vision for what it means to be Christian in the twenty-first century, a pattern of spiritual awakening that is growing around the world...The Great Reversal is the Great Returning of Christianity back toward what Jesus preached: a beloved and loving community, a way of life practiced in the world, a profound trust in God that eagerly anticipates God's reign of mercy and justice. (Bass, 2012, p. 214)

All I can say is amen and amen!