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As more take the spiritual route, religions decline

by Jeannine Gramick

CHRISTIANITY AFTER RELIGION: THE END OF CHURCH AND THE BIRTH OF A NEW SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

By Diana Butler Bass

Published by HarperOne, \$25.99

It is no secret that Christianity is in decline in the West. A *Newsweek* cover story in March 2009 reported that 86 percent of the U.S. population self-identified as Christians in 1990. By 2009, the percentage dropped to 76 percent, while the number who claimed "no religion" doubled to 16 percent in that same period. Among those under the age of 30, the figure declaring "no religion" was close to 30 percent. If the trend continues, the "no religion" plus the "non-Christian" categories will outnumber Christians by the year 2042.

With statistics like these, I was eager to see what Diana Butler Bass, a veteran researcher and author on Christianity, had to say in *Christianity After Religion*.



Bass basically agrees with commentators on religion, such as

Harvey Cox and Phyllis Tickle, that we are witnessing the end of Christian dominance and the beginning

of what has been called the "emergent church." In this new kind of church, *spiritual* is the dominant word. How often have we heard people say, "I'm spiritual, but not religious?" In polling data, half of the U.S. population describe themselves as "spiritual and religious," while one-third describe themselves as "spiritual" only.

The word *religious* has come to be identified with organized religion. We associate "religion" with institutions, organizations, buildings, dogmas, rules and hierarchy. Bass claims that all religions have lost credibility because of the clerical sexual abuse scandals in the Roman Catholic church, controversies over homosexuality in the Episcopal church, and the tendency since Sept. 11 to view all religions, not merely Islam, as narrow and fundamentalist.

In addition to the lost credibility factor, Bass attributes the declining membership in organized religions to other causes. For example, many parents now allow their children to choose what religion they prefer, if any. The fear of hell is no longer a compelling reason to claim a specific religion.

Furthermore, polls show that the public generally sees religion as a system promoting beliefs *about* God, instead of advocating faith in God or love *of* God. People today want to belong to a community that is more interested in spiritual values and practices than in believing doctrines that seem meaningless and unconnected to their lives. They want contact with the sacred without the intermediary of an institutional or doctrinal structure. Dogma, the "spiritual" generation says, is on life support and the plug needs to be pulled.

Bass likens this thirst for the spiritual to a Fourth Great Awakening in the United States that began in 1960. (The First Great Awakening took place 1730-60; the second, 1800-30; and the third, 1890-1920.) This Great Awakening is marked by a vision for equality, care for the Earth, authenticity, inclusion and community.

Awakenings can be slowed or stopped if individuals respond with fear, as was the case about 30 years ago with the Moral Majority and the religious right. Pentecostal and charismatic preachers crusaded against the evils of the Democratic Party, feminism, homosexuality and abortion. Today we are in the midst of a second backlash to this awakening from Catholic bishops, who are preaching against the same iniquities (add contraception) and complaining about the loss of religious freedom.

Fear-filled religions stand out starkly against any spiritual awakening. The bad news is that many religious leaders today show increasing fear about expanding their vision. Witness the present religious battles over marriage equality and women's health. The good news is that there would be no hostile reaction if there were no spiritual awakening.

This is not just a Christian awakening, Bass says, but an interfaith one. Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists have undergone similar revitalizations because people seem to be paying more attention to community, faith practices and experiential belief than to authoritarian leaders and inflexible religious structures.

This book is well-documented with copious notes; it's quite compelling. At the same time, I felt some anxiety as I thought about its implications. As one who grew up with a Catholic ghetto mentality, who laments the loss of some Catholic culture, and who wants to be proud of my Catholic heritage, I felt somewhat apprehensive. As I read about the amorphous contours of the emerging church, I envisioned that Catholicism might eventually be swallowed up into one big spiritual mass. With no arguments to back up her claim, the author's contention that distinctive churches, mosques, temples and synagogues will not disappear did not sound convincing.

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I suggest you read *Christianity After Religion*, form your own impressions and shape your own conclusions. Despite my concerns about organized Catholicism, the book left me hopeful about the mounting spiritual route that humanity is traveling and about the commonalities that unite us. I am confident that God's Spirit is guiding us forward.

[Loretto Sr. Jeannine Gramick cofounded New Ways Ministry, an organization advocating for lesbian and gay Catholics, 35 years ago. This year she is celebrating 50 years of religious profession.]

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