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Bass, D. B. (2012) *Christianity after Religion: the End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening.*

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In her most recent book, *Christianity after Religion: the End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, progressive Christian author and historian Diane Butler Bass asks the question: “Despite such examples of vibrant faith, why is Christianity in the United States struggling to maintain its influence, institutions, and numerical strength” (2012: 15). In the first section of this work, she aims to prove why this is the case with various statistics and analyses to make her point about why traditional Christianity is losing ground. She uses this starting point to segway into the central point of her book which is “that the United States (and not only the United States) is caught up in the throes of a spiritual awakening, a period of sustained religious and political transformation during which our ways of seeing the world, understanding ourselves, and expressing faith are being, to borrow a phrase, “born again” (2012: 5). Even with this decline of traditional Christianity apparent according to the evidence she presents, Bass views this spiritual shift and transformation optimistically as something that is not only necessary, but also as something that has been slowly taking place for a long time now. For Bass, the typical relationship between religion and spirituality is that religion has to do with religious institutions of people with a shared history and practices, whereas spirituality “is both a critique of institutional religion and a longing for meaningful connection” that is associated with the personal religious experience that may or may not be within a pragmatic religious group setting. (2012: 68).

According to Bass, during a 12 year research period in which she “analyzed successful local religious communities”, there were also “new surveys and polls that pointed to an erosion of organized Christianity in all its forms, with only “nondenominational” churches showing a slight numerical increase” (2012: 15). In the first part of her book titled “The End of Religion”, she does cite a number of surveys and polls from magazines such as *Newsweek* and *Time* as well as books on the subject by scholars Mark Chaves from Duke University and Harvey Cox from Harvard to make the point that the influence of institutional Christianity is indeed in decline. She also interprets what these findings can tell us about “the end of religion” as we know it and why it is taking place using historical and theological analysis as well as anecdotes. She does this by discussing subjects such as the Protestant conflict over homosexuality, the Catholic church sex scandal, terrorism, and the politicized religious right to highlight why so many have turned

from institutional religion. The reasons she gives for her claims are compelling and serve well to back up her claims. Once the church became an institution, Bass notes, “it became guarded, protective of the power and wealth it garnered, the influence it wielded, and the salvation it alone provided” (2012: 89). She concludes that because of this, many have left institutional religion in favor of a non-dogmatic, non-hierarchical spirituality more in line with the teachings of Jesus and “based around serious engagement with faith practices such as prayer, hospitality, and enacting justice” (2012: 15). For Bass, the end of a malfunctioning, institutional religion as we know it presents the opportunity to start a new kind of spirituality where faith in God and ethical practice are primary whereas belief in God is secondary and actually follows the first two. She effectively uses example of various church groups from her research to make this distinction between religion and spirituality and why this new spirituality could be a better alternative to the old institutional style of religious practice.

In Part 2 of her book titled “A New Vision”, Bass states that “Although Western Christianity would eventually be defined as a belief system about God, throughout its first five centuries, people understood it primarily as spiritual practices that offered a meaningful way of life in this world, not as a neat set of doctrines, esoteric belief, or the promise of heaven” (2012: 149). Here is where Bass makes her strongest points on what direction we should take in regards to this spiritual shift when she compares institutional religion with what she refers to as *religio*, or spirituality. Religion as an institution, Bass says, stresses that one should first dogmatically believe abstract doctrine, then behave accordingly and this will in turn help the person gain belonging into the group. *Religio*, on the other hand, is focused faith and ethical practice that begins for us as members that belong to a community or group. This community group, through real world example as well as education in and out of church shows the individual how to behave ethically and spiritually which would thus fall in line with the ethical teachings of Jesus taught conjointly. By this rationale, *Religio*, for Bass, teaches one how and why to believe in God by following real life examples, which contrasts with religion as institution where the individual dogmatically follows a disembodied doctrine given to them. As Bass points out, “unlike religion as a system of belief, *religio* meant faith- living, subjective experience, including love, devotion, awe, worship, transcendence, trust, a way of life, an attitude toward the divine or nature” (2012: 97). As she goes on to say further in the chapter: “The primary why for any Christian practice is that the action, in some way, imitates Jesus” (2012: 154). Institutional doctrine, on the other hand, was “seen as not only divisive, but as contrary to the message Jesus himself taught” (2012: 111) according to Bass. This is based on Jesus’ disagreement with the Pharisee’s insistence on Mosaic Law that put following doctrine above Jesus’ emphasis on love and compassion.

For Bass, we are already in the midst of this new spiritual awakening, the latest of four since the 18th century. As she states at the end of her book in the last part, ‘The Great Awakening’, “people ask me to describe this awakening. In response, I tell stories, parables of spiritual renewal, of a world transformed by God’s love. I tell stories of surprise congregations and I relate conversations I have on airplanes, at coffeehouses and with banktellers”(2012: 268). She is extremely optimistic that we are heading in the right direction even going so far as to say that this new spiritual

awakening is a “part of a complex web of spiritual renewal throughout the world, which is in the process of reshaping most religions by emphasizing relationships, practices, and experience that connects people to a deeper awareness of self, to their neighbors in a global community, and to God” (2012: 259). One could argue here that this new age approach to Christianity doesn’t seem to be compatible with some of Christianity’s most dogmatic tenets although its inspiring nonetheless to consider such an idealistic approach to Christianity. Still, it is understandable why someone would be skeptical of this awakening considering the state of world affairs and religion at the present time. Also, some of her claims and arguments, while full of hope, are quite daring to say the least and very open to criticism considering their very personal and subjective nature. Nonetheless, it is refreshing to hear about the changes that have happened and that are happening with this spiritual shift everyday according to Basses own experiences and evidence- both personal and second-hand. She writes, “The Great global awakening is not contained by the stage of the local Congregational Church, in small groups, at camp meetings or tents, or at Pentecostal tabernacles or progressive political meetings. The awakening is being performed in the networked world, where the border between the sacred and secular has eroded and where the love of God and neighbor- and the new vision of belonging, behaving and believing- is being staged far beyond conventional religious communities” (2012: 258).