



# The Great Reversal

By Diana Butler Bass

**F**or the last few centuries, Western Christianity offered faith in a particular way. Catholics and Protestants taught that belief came first, behavior came next, and finally belong resulted, depending on how you answered the first two questions. Churches turned this pattern into rituals of catechism, character formation, and Confirmation. At birth, Christian children were either baptized or dedicated, with sponsors and parents answering belief questions on their behalf, promising to teach them the faith. As children grew, Sunday schools and catechism classes taught Christian doctrine and the Bible, ensuring that each generation knew the intellectual content of the tradition. Eventually, children moved from Sunday school to “big church,” where they participated in grown-up church practices and learned how to pray, worship, sing, give alms, and act kindly. When a Christian child reached an age of intellectual and moral accountability—somewhere between seven and fifteen—the church would offer a rite of full membership in the form of Communion, Confirmation, or (in the case of Baptists) adult-believers baptism. Believe, behave, belong. It is almost second nature for Western people to read the religious script this way.

It was not always that way. About five hundred years ago, Western Christianity divided from a single church into five different major church families: Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Reformed Christianity, Anglicanism, and Anabaptism faith. Each group felt the need to defend itself against all the others, making clear its interpretation of the Bible and theology. Although religious diversity is common enough today, even the limited pluralism of the sixteenth century caused intense religious turmoil—including outright warfare. Competing religious claims turned into competing claims for political and economic power. Each religious group embarked on a process of ordering and systematizing its view of faith. New theologies shifted away from emphasizing Christian practice toward articulating Christian teachings, as everyone attempted to prove that their group’s interpretation was true or most biblical. Religion moved increasingly in the direction of

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defending philosophical truth claims. Wilfred Cantwell Smith notes that Christianity become intellectualized and impersonalized as “decade after decade the notion was driven home that a religion is something that one believes or does not believe, something whose propositions are true or not true.” He further states, “A legacy of it is the tendency still today to ask, in explanation of ‘the religion’ of a people, What do they believe?—as though this were a basic, even *the* basic, question” (Smith, 39-40).

Thus, for several centuries, Western people have generally assumed that religious commitment begins when one assents to a body of organized doctrines. This holds true if you are considering changing churches or having a faith crisis. If you are no longer comfortable being a Catholic, you look about to find a church that teaches divorce is acceptable. If you no longer want to be a fundamentalist, you find a church that teaches that the Bible is not literally true. You find out what a group teaches, and you wrestle with its ideas. Joining depends on whether or not you agree with its creed or statement of faith or doctrine. If you find its ideas about God sensible or truthful, then you reshape your life accordingly by learning new prayers, serving the poor, giving up smoking or drinking, and trying to be a better person. Finally, you become a member and join the church.

There is, however, something odd about this pattern. Other than joining a political party, it is hard to think of any other sort of community that people join by agreeing to a set of principles. Imagine joining a knitting group. Does anyone go to a knitting group and ask if the knitters believe in knitting or what they hold to be true about knitting? Do people ask for a knitting doctrinal statement? Indeed, if you start knitting by reading a book about knitting or a history of knitting, you will very likely never knit.

If you want to knit, you find someone who knits to teach you. Go to the local yarn shop and find out when there is a knitting class. Sit in a circle where others will talk to you, show you how to hold the needles, guide your hands, and share their patterns with you. The first step in becoming a knitter is forming a relationship with knitters. The next step is to learn by doing and practice. After you knit for a while, after you have made scarves and hats and mittens, then you start forming ideas about knitting. You might come to think that the experience of knitting makes you a better person, more spiritual, or able to concentrate, gives you a sense of service to

others, allows you to demonstrate love and care. You think about what you are doing, how you might do it better. You develop your own way of knitting, your own theory of the craft. You might invent a knitting book or become a knitting teacher. In knitting, the process is actually the reverse of that in the church: belong to a knitting group leads to behaving as a knitter, which leads to believing things about knitting.

Relationships lead to craft, which leads to experiential belief. That is the path to becoming and being someone different. The path of transformation.

It is also the path found in the New Testament; the Way of Jesus the leads to God. Long ago, before the last half millennium, Christians understood that faith was a matter of community first, practices second, and belief as a result of the first two. Our immediate ancestors reversed the order. Now, it is up to us to restore the original order.

## Step 1: Belonging

Jesus did not begin with questions of belief. Instead, Jesus’ public ministry started when he formed a community:

As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea—for they were fisherman. And Jesus said to them, “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. Immediately he called them; and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with hired men, and followed him. (Mark 1:16-20)

Over the centuries, theologians have argued that the Christian church began with Peter’s confession to Jesus: “You are the Messiah” (Matt. 16:16). After Peter says that Jesus is the long-awaited redeemer, Jesus calls Peter “the rock” and says that upon this “rock” he will build his church. In a very real way, however, the church began long before that confession. It began when Jesus called out, “Follow me,” and his friends and neighbors left their old lives and started a new community. A dozen men and a band of women joined Jesus and one another in a journey of faith and sharing and compassion.

Christianity did not begin with a confession. It began with an invitation into friendship in creating a new community, into forming relationships based on love and service.

What prompts any of us to drop what we are doing and heed the call into friendship and community? Curiosity? Fascination? C.S. Lewis once said, “Friendship is born at that moment when one person says to another, ‘What! You too? I thought I was the only one.’” Belonging to a community starts with a flash of recognition, an intuition of connection: “I can’t believe that I have found you! This is where my home has always been.” We make friends, join a group, or enter into a romance because it is this person or these people who make our hearts lighter, bring joy and comfort, and make the world more interesting and bearable. Although once upon a time, people may have joined a church to make a business reputation or look respectable, it is hard to imagine either of those being a good enough reason for belonging to faith community these days. People no longer join, instead, they join in. And when we join in, our heart leads the way.

Jesus began with the inner life, the heart. Indeed, when he said, “You will know the truth, and truth will make you free,” he was not speaking of a philosophical idea or set of doctrines. The truth is that the disposition of the heart was the ground of truth. Spiritual freedom results from a rightly directed heart, the self as it moves away from fear, hatred, isolation, and greed toward love. And, as Jesus also said, love is shaped through a relationship with God and neighbor, steeped in self-love and self-awareness. Faith, truth, freedom—all of it—is relational, not speculative.

Early Christian writers knew this to be the case—even the most intellectual sorts, like the apostle Paul, who writes that even if we know everything, “but do not have love,” we are nothing (1 Cor. 13:2). Indeed, both Jesus and Paul said that love was the *greatest* and *first* of virtues, the womb of the good life. Right passion, the disposition of the soul, how we relate to God and neighbor is the starting point. The most ancient prayers of Christian faith have nothing to do with getting ideas about God right. Instead, they are prayers that reorder the heart, directing it anew. Ancient Christian practices both recognize the disordered soul (sin) and point the soul toward mercy and restored relationships. “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” or “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Or, as desert

monk Abba Pambo said, “If you have a heart, you can be saved.” Vital faith begins with desire and disposition, not a doctrine test.

Spiritual awakenings always start from within. Augustine’s aching longing, “Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee,” to Mother Teresa’s contemporary insight, “There is a terrible hunger for love. We all experience that in our lives—the pain, the loneliness. We must have the courage to recognize it.” Those to whom the risen Jesus first appeared testified, “Were not our hearts burning within us? (Luke 24:32). The scriptures are full of broken hearts, willing hearts, listening hearts, overflowing hearts, hardened hearts, and longing hearts. And, as Western religion increasingly became a matter of doctrine, spiritual movements emphasizing the heart tried to correct the course.

Love may start deep within, but it does not stay there. When asked what the greatest of all the commandments was, Jesus replied it was to “love God” and “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:37-39). Love is the connective tissue of relationship, the internal disposition that reaches up toward God and out toward others. It is impossible for love to exist in isolation. Love needs expression in relationships and communities. To love, one must risk belonging.

## Step 2: Behaving

The early community that followed Jesus was a community of practice. Jesus’ followers did not sit around a fire and listen to lectures on Christian theology. They listened to stories that taught them how to act toward one another, what to do in the world. They healed people, offered hospitality, prayed together, challenged traditional practices and rituals, ministered to the sick, comforted the grieving, fasted, and forgave. These actions induced wonder, gave them courage, empowered hope, and opened up a new vision of God. By doing things together, they began to see differently.

It is profoundly important to grasp this: Jesus and his followers were poor; they vast majority of them were politically and religiously oppressed. There was little reason for them to hope for a better world, that the Romans would just let them be, or that the next ruler would change things. They were the victims of one of history’s most vicious empires; they lived in utterly hopeless circumstances. For someone to come along and say, “Have faith; your

lot will improve” would be a bit like someone spitting upon the victims. Have faith? In what? Some long-promised messiah who seemed to be very late in arriving?

Jesus did not walk by the Sea of Galilee and shout to fishermen, “Have faith!” Instead, he asked them to do something: “Follow me.” When they followed, he gave them more things to do. At first, he demonstrated what he wanted them to do. Then he did it with them. Finally, he sent them out to do it themselves, telling them to proclaim God’s reign and cure the sick. When they returned from this first mission, they could not believe what had happened. They discovered that proclaiming the kingdom was not a matter of teaching doctrine; rather, the kingdom was a matter of imitating Jesus’ actions. Jesus did not tell them to have faith. He pushed them into the world to practice faith. The disciples did not hope the world would change. They changed it. And, in doing so, they themselves changed.

Later in the New Testament book of James, the writer says, “Faith without works is dead” (2:17, 26). This verse has caused much consternation in Christian history. Does that mean we work our way to heaven? That good works save us?

It is a mistake to think that this verse is about some future salvation—about whether or not a person will go to heaven. The context is not eternal life; rather, the context is this life. When placed in the here and now, and in the context of following a spiritual path, the meaning is crystal clear: actions shape faith. Spiritual practices engender hope. Behavior opens the door for believing. Doing what once seemed difficult or impossible empowers courage to envision a different world and believe we can make a difference. Without practices, faith is but an empty promise.

## Step 3: Believing

Peter’s confession of faith grew out of his friendship with Jesus and the things that they had done together—praying, eating, preaching, healing, giving, and feeding. In the Gospel of Matthew, before Peter’s confession of Jesus as Messiah (16:13-20), Jesus and his disciples had fed the great crowd that had been following their band (15:32-39). Together, they had practiced hospitality. Before he asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Jesus reminds them of this act of miraculous hospitality, saying

that the action pointed to greater spiritual realities of God’s power and presence in the world (16:8-10). In response to what he has experienced, Peter blurts out, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” This is not an analytical or philosophical statement, not a hypothesis provable through the scientific method. Jesus says that Peter’s insight comes from God’s spirit, not any “flesh and blood” knowledge. Peter’s participation in community and their shared practice set the stage for Peter’s statement of faith. The confession is not an intellectually considered utterance of theological speculation. Rather, it is what the Bible refers to as “wisdom from above,” the sort of knowing that comes from engagement with God, others, and the world. It is *credo*, “You are the One whom I trust for healing and love!” or “You are the One for whom my heart has waited.”

In the biblical pattern of faith, believing comes last. Indeed, this pattern repeats in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament. From the calling of Abraham and Sarah through the great prophets and heroes of Israel to Jesus and the early church, those who walked with faith started by following, by becoming part of God’s community, by enacting the practices of God’s way, and finally by recognizing and proclaiming the glory of God.

## Experiential Christianity: The New Vision

Experiential Christianity is what Harvey Cox explains as the “Age of the Spirit,” when “faith as a way of life or a guiding compass has once again begun” (Cox, 19). The wind is blowing in Africa and Latin America and Asia, but in North America and Europe and Australia too! In the Global South, they struggle to keep up with the Spirit; in the West, we struggle to embrace it. The Age of the Spirit, this new-old experiential faith, is everywhere. In places where Christianity is very new and very old, where churches are being built and churches are being closed, “the experience of the divine is displacing theories about it (Cox, 20).

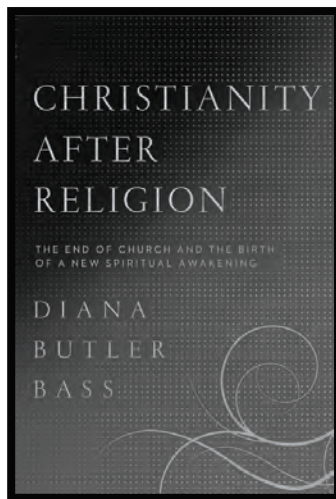
Relational community, intentional practice, and experiential belief are forming a new vision for what it means to be Christian in the twenty-first century, a pattern of spiritual awakening that is growing around the world. We belong to God and to one another, connected to all in a web of relationships,

and there we find our truest selves. We behave in imitation of Jesus, practicing our faith with deliberation as we anticipate God's reign of justice and love. We believe with our entire being, trusting, loving, and devoted to the God whom we have encountered through one another and in the world. We are; we act; we know. Belonging, behaving, and believing—shifted back to their proper and ancient order. This is the shape of awakened Christianity, a faith that is a deeply spiritual religion. No longer merely religion, but *religio*. The Great Reversal is the Great Returning of Christianity back toward what

Jesus preached: a beloved and believing community, a way of life practiced in the world, a profound trust in God that eagerly anticipates God's reign of mercy and justice.

## Works Cited

- Cox, Harvey. *The Future of Faith*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2009.
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## Christianity without Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening

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The data is clear: religious affiliation is plummeting across the breadth of Christian denominations. And yet interest in “spirituality” is on the rise. So what is behind the sea change in American religion? Diana Butler Bass offers a fresh interpretation of the “spiritual but not religious” trend. Bass—who has spent her career teaching the history, culture, and politics of religion, and engaging church communities across the nation—brings forth her deep knowledge of the latest national studies and polls, along with her own analysis, as she seeks to fully comprehend the decline in Christian attendance and affiliation that started decades ago—and has increased exponentially in recent years. Some contend that we’re undergoing yet another evangelical revival; others suggest that Christian belief and practice is eroding entirely as traditional forms of faith are replaced by new ethical, and areligious, choices. But Bass argues compellingly that we are, instead, at a critical stage in a completely new spiritual awakening, a vast interreligious progression toward individual and cultural transformation, and a wholly new kind of postreligious faith. Offering direction and hope to individuals and churches, *Christianity After Religion* is Bass’s call to approach faith with a newfound freedom that is both life-giving and service driven. And it is a hope-filled plea to see and participate in creating a fresh, vital, contemporary way of faith that stays true to the real message of Jesus.