

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Christianity After Religion

by

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INTRODUCTION: THE BEGINNING

1. Diana Butler Bass writes that this is a book about how religion has changed, beginning in the 1970s. Why did you pick up this book? How do you feel about changes in the church?
2. Christians are surrounded by fears about exponential change in the church (p. 6). Do you share those fears? To whom have you expressed your thoughts and feelings? What does it mean to you to approach this topic with others in your faith community?

PART I

THE END OF RELIGION

CHAPTER 1: THE END OF THE BEGINNING

1. In chapter one, Butler Bass names several reasons people question the church: anger, boredom, hypocrisy, and outdated attitudes. Which of these factors resonates in your community? Why do you think that is?
2. What do you think Butler Bass means by this chapter's title? How does she distinguish between *the* end of institutions and *an* end to religion (p. 36)?

CHAPTER 2: QUESTIONING THE OLD GODS

1. Where people used to feel a religious obligation to attend church, Butler Bass believes there are cultural shifts occurring because we now have so many options to choose between (p. 40). What are some of the large and small choices you have faced so far today? When does choice feel liberating or oppressing?
2. Take some time to explore each of the three big questions mentioned on pages 47–57:
 - a. *What do I believe?* Butler Bass discusses evolving ideas about how Americans view God in the twenty-first century. Based on the survey categories, how do

- you perceive God—as primarily authoritarian, benevolent, critical, or distant?
- b. *How should I act?* Church attendance and prayer are also evolving in our culture today. If you attend church, what does that experience mean to you? What do you wish to tell someone who is making a different choice from yours?
 - c. *Who am I?* Religious evolution can leave a person with a shaky sense of belonging. Do you worship the God/s of your ancestors?
3. What do you think of Butler Bass’s suggestion that we can turn away from the old gods in search of new ones (p. 63)? Why?

CHAPTER 3: WHEN RELIGION FAILS

1. Regarding the analogy between the institutional church and the dismantled automobile industry (pp. 71–73), did you ever think of the church as a big business model? What happens when you assume that the church was always this way? How does historical context alter your perspective?
2. “By centralizing and regularizing religious work, more poor people could be fed, more churches could be built, and more schools and colleges could be supported,” notes Butler Bass of the business model of the church that began after the American Civil War (p. 75).

How do you think we will continue to care for the poor amidst new models of the church?

3. If someone asked you to name your spiritual gifts, would you name “discontent” as a gift? Why or why not? Read the prayer on page 83. What new territory opens up inside you when you say this prayer?
4. “Religious faiths struggle between the pastoral and the prophetic, comfort and agitation” (p. 88). Which churches and leaders throughout history do you think best model a blend of pastoral and prophetic traditions?

PART II

A NEW VISION

CHAPTER 4: BELIEVING

1. Butler Bass quotes theologian Harvey Cox, who divided church history into three ages: the Age of Faith (faith in Jesus), the Age of Belief (belief about Christ), and the Age of the Spirit (experience of Jesus). “Faith is resurgent, while dogma is dying,” claimed Cox (p. 109). What do you notice in the world and the church that leads you to agree or disagree with this?
2. “Even among Christians, there is a sense of mild relief, maybe even quiet jubilation, that the Age of Belief is

giving way to something else” (p. 111). Have you ever engaged in “what I believe” conversations with family, friends, or coworkers? How did those conversations go, or why did you choose to avoid them? Are experiences of faith easier to share than beliefs?

3. “Creeds are essentially prayers of devotion that express a community’s experience of encountering God” (p. 131). How do you think Butler Bass’s suggestion to substitute the word *trust* for *believe* in the Apostle’s Creed can shift a religious community’s perceptions?

CHAPTER 5: BEHAVING

1. “Practice is the doing of faith.” Butler Bass poses a question about faith practices on page 145: “What do you do that has changed your life in the last five to ten years and has moved you toward God and your neighbor?” How would you answer this?
2. We sometimes assume we know what Jesus did and said, but rereading a Gospel in one sitting refreshes our memory. What surprises about Jesus come to light when you read about him in the Bible?
3. Butler Bass makes it clear that Christian practices are not synonymous with church programs. How do you sustain Christian practices in your faith community? What practices call to you?

CHAPTER 6: BELONGING

1. In the section titled “Identity Gap,” Butler Bass addresses a question “So what happens when old forms of belonging disappear?” (p. 171). Do you think traditional church folk are finding ways to express their mourning and anxiety about the church? How can we support church leaders who are simultaneously embracing new ideas and tending to the grief of change?
2. The spiritual question “Where am I?” explores the notion of spiritual journey. Butler Bass refers to several spiritual journeys in the Bible (pp. 178–80). To which of these journeys do you relate?
3. People feel a basic anxiety about the church: There’s a disconnect between the message of “salvation” and the struggles people face. In Butler Bass’s view, “salvation” is not being saved from ourselves and escaping God’s wrath; rather, it is being saved to ourselves with a loving Creator (p. 182). How would you communicate this teaching about salvation to an elder? A teenager? A preschooler?

CHAPTER 7: THE GREAT REVERSAL

1. On page 201, Butler Bass suggests a great reversal from believe-behave-belong to belong-behave-believe. How

would you explain the change to someone who has not read this book? What analogies, such as the knitting group example, help you see the difference between the two approaches?

2. Butler Bass notes that in our culture people no longer join institutions as much as they join in on activities (p. 205). Does her observation ring true for you and the people you know? What draws you to join in? What do you think are the implications of this shift for all organized groups, including faith communities? How can people work across generations to balance the energy of joining in with the endurance of commitment?
3. How do you think “belonging, behaving, and believing—shifted back to their proper and ancient order” (p. 214) will play out in the congregations you know?

PART III AWAKENING

CHAPTER 8: GREAT AWAKENING

1. What themes have arisen often enough in the book to be familiar now? What ideas and prayers have awakened in you? If you were to have a conversation with the author, what would you want to talk about?
2. Butler Bass delves into intense responses to change, including lost bearings and virulent push-backs.

“Awakenings can be slowed by fear, but if enough people experience, understand, and practice a new way of the spirit, they cannot be stopped” (p. 236). How do you think God’s people have dealt with change throughout history? What do you think allows us to go deeper with these provocative, life-altering issues?

3. Awakening opens the imagination toward what might be, instead of only what was. With whom can you be the most imaginative, or the most measured? With whom have you created change?

CHAPTER 9: PERFORMING AWAKENING

1. In the mid 1700s, Pastor Jonathan Edwards identified four steps of spiritual awakening: (1) a general stirring toward moral living, (2) an awareness of personal shortcomings, (3) an experience of “converting grace,” and (4) a palpable sense of joy from the “new light” of God. Edwards saw all four steps as being instigated by God, but there was only one way to prepare for a spiritual awakening: prayer (pp. 253–54). Do you believe Edwards’s steps are fitting for our age? How can we pray to spread the current Great Awakening?
2. This chapter includes many *p* words: *prepare*, *practice*, *play*, *participate*. If you removed any of these words from the process of awakening, what would be lost?

3. How much did this book make you think about people both inside and outside the church? Is that typical for a book about religion? What statistics, stories, and points from this book do you think you'll remember six months or a year from now? Do you know anyone who needs to read *Christianity After Religion*?