

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

A People's History of Christianity

by

Diana Butler Bass

INTRODUCTION: AFTER JESUS

1. Have you ever, as Bass addresses in the Introduction, felt that you needed to qualify your Christianity to others based on widespread assumptions of what being a “Christian” means in today’s world?
2. Have you ever described yourself as “spiritual, but not religious?” If yes, what was the context of the situation? Do you actually feel this way or was it used as a way to avoid discussing your religious affiliation?

3. Do you agree with the statement that “Many Western people, even a good number of Christians, secretly agree with atheist Christopher Hitchens when he claims, ‘Religion poisons everything’” (page 7)? What is your most basic, visceral reaction to this statement?
4. Do you think that history is relevant to your day-to-day Christian life in the twenty-first century? Can you explain how the history of Christianity affects your daily or weekly religious routine? Or has history, as Bass contends, “ceased to exist”?
5. The two main focal points of this book are *Jesus’s Great Command to love God* (devotion) and to love our neighbor (ethics)—a focus on tending devoutly to our inner lives while also doing good in the world. The author feels that this balance has been prominent in our past and is the key to our future. Do you agree? How do these two threads play out in your life now? Are you balanced or do you tend to put more importance on one over the other?

Bible passages for further reflection: Luke 10:25–28; Mark 12:28–34

PART ONE: THE WAY

EARLY CHRISTIANITY, 100–500

CHAPTER 1: CHRISTIANITY AS A WAY OF LIFE

1. According to *A People's History*, the first five centuries of Christianity have been studied and written about profusely over the last thirty years. The book offers many pieces of lesser known history, but what, specifically in Part I, surprised you most about the first five centuries of Christianity?
2. Do you believe that our current times mirror those of ancient Rome? In what ways are we alike and, perhaps more importantly, how do we differ?
3. Bass writes, "Throughout the first five centuries people understood Christianity primarily as a way of life in the present, not as a doctrinal system" (page 27). Is Christianity still seen this way by outsiders to the religion? Do you personally feel that your faith is an active and adventure-seeking way of life rather than a doctrinal-based practice?

Bible passages for further reflection: John 14:1–6a; Acts 9:2

CHAPTER 2: DEVOTION: THE LOVE OF GOD

1. It can be hard as modern people to relate to martyrdom as it existed in the first five centuries of Christianity. Bass writes, “As Christ had died for the love of humanity, so they too were called to die for a greater love than their earthly loves” (page 35). What would you consider a modern example of martyrdom in our society? Think not only on a national/international political or religious level, but also at the microcosmic level of your own daily existence—your neighborhood, your church, or your school or office.
2. A major part of the history of devotion in early Christianity focuses on the human relationship with our bodies. *A People's History of Christianity* discusses the practice of honoring the body, which should be considered a sacred gift. In your mind does this relate in some way to many modern cultures' body obsession? Does our society's lack of reverence for the body stem from a lack of faith or is it from a lack of knowledge of our history? Or do you think it is unfair to draw a connection between this ancient practice and our era's obesity and eating disorder epidemic?
3. On page 40, Bass references a criticism of President Barack Obama by evangelical leader James Dobson. How do you feel about Obama's take on the role of religion in politics? Do you agree or disagree with Dobson's critique? Why or why not?

4. The story of Origen is an interesting contrast between allegorical and literal interpretations of the Bible in the early third century. Are you surprised that an argument that is still so central to Christianity today was relevant in the third century? Do you read the Bible literally or allegorically? Will the illumination of history here have any effect on how you will interpret scripture in the future?

Bible passages for further reflection: Matthew 19:16–21

CHAPTER 3: ETHICS: THE LOVE OF NEIGHBOR

1. The commandment to love our neighbors has remained a central part of Christianity through the ages, but has also proven to be one of the hardest tenets to observe. Consider the selfless acts of early Christians who stayed behind in plague-ridden cities to tend to the sick and dying. If the same circumstances presented themselves today, would you, as a Christian, stay behind to nurse the sick? How have you responded—and how can you continue to respond—to modern-day crises like AIDS, cancer, or recent flu epidemics? Is it necessary to put yourself in danger in order to love your neighbor as Jesus intended?
2. Contemporary values, at times, seem to be dynamically opposed to the Christian ideals of hospitality, living simply, and taking care of the poor. In the fourth century, John Chrysostom preached these ideals and was eventu-

ally banished for his vocalness. What parallels can you draw between the fourth century and today in regard to greed, money, and political power silencing the Christian ideals of hospitality? How does this relate to the popularity of today's "prosperity gospel"? Can both the prosperity gospel and true Christian hospitality co-exist?

3. As Bass discusses in this chapter, the second century's Origen "pointed out the positive vision of a life of Christian peacemaking. He criticized the army as a society of 'professional violence,' pointing out that Jesus forbids any kind of violence or vengeance against another" (page 72). According to a 2001 survey of the U.S. military conducted by Population Reference Bureau, nearly 80 percent of U.S. military members identified themselves with some denomination of Christianity. If you look through Origen's historical lens, it would be impossible to marry Christianity with the military, but in your opinion is it possible to be a soldier while still being a Christian? Would you argue that part of being a Christian in today's world is serving your country, and therefore fighting for the freedom of its people? How do you make sense of these two opposing views?

Bible passages for further reflection: Matthew 25:34–36; Luke 14:12–14

PART TWO: THE CATHEDRAL MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY, 500–1450

CHAPTER 4: CHRISTIANITY AS SPIRITUAL ARCHITECTURE

1. In Chapter 4, Bass draws parallels between contemporary and medieval society, culminating in a quote from French historian Regine Pernoud, who wrote, “We are actually closer to medieval times than to those times of the more recent past.” Do you agree or disagree with Pernoud’s assessment?
2. According to *A People's History*, the actual physical structure of the medieval church was considered holy. Consider your own church. Do you think that that building is treated as “holy geography”? How does your church do well serving as the center point of a community, and how could it do better?
3. Choirs were introduced to the Church in the sixth century, during the rule of Pope Gregory I. What role does music play in your worship services? How would your spiritual life change if music was taken out of our modern worship?

Bible passages for further reflection: Genesis 3; Luke 10:29–37

CHAPTER 5: DEVOTION: PARADISE RESTORED

1. The idea of a sacred pilgrimage has fallen somewhat to the wayside in most mainline denominations of modern Christianity, but it is still a very important part of other Abrahamic religions today. If you were to plan a holy Christian pilgrimage, where would you go and what would you hope to learn? Would you be influenced more by the Celtic idea of “sacred journeys,” where the wandering itself was the destination, or by the ancients, who made pilgrimages to specific physical locations tied to Christ or the saints?
2. Beginning on page 105, Bass addresses the medieval practice of “Praying the Hours.” This type of devotion takes discipline and hard work. If you have one, do you find your own prayer practice to be work? Do you find it difficult to fit into your hectic daily schedule? Do you use a prayer book or daily devotional to help make your prayer practice more of a habit? Is it something you enjoy?
3. Beginning on page 109, Bass tells the story of Julian of Norwich. She writes, “To her [Julian], fatherhood represented God’s kingship, a kind of distant rule, whereas God’s motherhood demonstrated the worldly, sensual, and active property of God.” What do you think of this very early Christian interpretation of the divine feminine? Was it as surprising to you as it was to Bass’s students on the day of their extra-credit pop quiz?

4. Do you believe that we have something to learn from the medieval people regarding death and the art of dying well? Why do you think that death, the one inevitable and guaranteed life experience, has become an awkward and uncomfortable issue in our postmodern culture?

Bible passages for further reflection: Isaiah 11:1–11; Revelation 21:1–7

CHAPTER 6: ETHICS: WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR?

1. According to the author, one of the most troubling ethical questions for Christians in the Middle Ages was “who is my neighbor?” Is this still a difficult question for contemporary Christians to answer? Through the lens of your faith, how do you define who your “neighbors” are?
2. Bass writes that in the late thirteenth century “in the pursuit of philosophy, Christians, Jews, and Muslims found common questions of faith and reason—and offered a common critique of corrupt religious authorities” (page 126). Later, she poses a very poignant question: “If we share their problems today, might we too find friendship through *convivencia*?” (page 127). How would you answer this question?
3. Do you agree with Bass’s critique of conservative Protestant leaders’ actions during October 2002, when the U.S. was headed to war in Iraq? What would you have said to President Bush if he had called you to ask whether or not

we should go to war? What advice would you have given him?

4. On page 143, Bass concludes the story of a group of persecuted Christians named the Beguines. She writes that the movement's central spiritual insight was "Love is the Christian way of life, and Jesus's followers are called to enact his way of love." Why, when trying to follow such a simple Christian creed, were these people persecuted? Does this happen still in modern society? Where and how?

Bible passages for further reflection: Isaiah 56:6–8; Acts 2:1–13; Revelation 5

PART THREE: THE WORD REFORMATION CHRISTIANITY, 1450–1650

CHAPTER 7: CHRISTIANITY AS LIVING WORDS

1. During the Reformation, it is clear that words alone had the power to change things. Do words alone still have the power to change things or have they lost their potency in the cacophony of our modern world? What's a specific example that backs up your opinion?

2. Bass writes, “In recent years, many Christian leaders have called for a new reformation” (page 153). Do you think that the church is in need of another reformation? Is Protestant Christianity, by nature, always in need of reformation, as theologian Frederick Herzog believes? Do you agree with Bass’s assessment that “the reform of Christianity appears overdue” or do you think Christianity is doing just fine as it is?
3. The year 1440 saw the invention of the printing press, which ushered in the empowerment of laypeople and the emergence of a new merchant or business class in Europe. What modern invention would you compare to the printing press? How has this modern invention changed the world as a whole and how has it affected Christianity specifically?

Bible passages for further reflection: John 1:1; James 3:1–10

CHAPTER 8: DEVOTION: SPEAKING OF FAITH

1. Martin Luther’s break from Catholicism had “everything do to with words,” according to Bass. She writes, “Western Christianity split between the Catholics and the protesters because of a disagreement between an active and passive verb. Words had real consequences. And reading scripture for its transformative power emerged as the primary practice of Protestant piety” (page 165). Is this central tenet of Protestantism still true today? If not, what is the primary practice of Protestant piety today?

2. Johannes Schwöbel, a German reformer, wrote, “The game has been turned completely upside down. Formerly one learned the laws of God from the priests. Now it is necessary to go to school of the laity and learn to read the Bible from them” (page 177). Do you think that this transfer of power to the people made the church less corrupt? Or did this flood of new information simply open the door to misinterpretations and bad translations of the original scripture? Does this reversal continue to play out in your own congregation or denomination?
3. Prayer is one of the practices that have survived throughout Christianity’s entire history. Have you ever had a surprise encounter with prayer like Tony Jones, whose story appears on page 177? How important is prayer in your daily Christian life? Do you believe that prayer is truly transformative or is it merely a practice that is required by your faith?

Bible passages for further reflection: Acts 2:17–18; 1 Peter 3:15; Acts 4:31–35

CHAPTER 9: ETHICS: WALKING THE TALK

1. The reformers of the sixteenth century raised the same questions that we face now: “If faith alone saves, then what is the role of works in the Christian life? What is the basis for ethics?” How would you answer these questions today?

2. For many Christians both now and in the past, being a Christian is a constant internal battle between selfishness and selflessness. Bass, in boiling down Martin Luther's words, writes, "True Christians demonstrate love through doing good, when 'faith is truly active through love.' People should not care for the neighbor to save their own souls; rather, they do good because faith 'finds expression in works of freest service'" (page 183). Is this one of your struggles as a Christian? If so, how do you deal with the tension? If this is not something you struggle with, has it always been this easy for you or was there a particular experience during your faith journey that illuminated the way?
3. In 1525, the shopkeepers of Memmingen created a political entity called "A Christian Union"; their constitution was based on the practice of social justice and stated that all people had innate rights to things like land, freedom, and wild game. According to Bass, "the impulse for social justice remained a theological cornerstone of Protestant practice" (page 188). How do you define the term social justice? Do you agree that it has remained a cornerstone of Protestantism?
4. A recurring theme in *A People's History of Christianity* is that love is the true root of Christianity. In 1675, Philipp Jakob Spener, a Lutheran minister, reminded his parishioners that, "It is not enough that we hear the Word with our outward ear, but we must let it penetrate to our heart" (page 205). Do you believe that this central belief is still alive and well in our church communities?

5. If justice is the cornerstone of contemporary faith and love is the true root of Christianity, what is the relationship between love and justice? How do the two interrelate in your congregation, denomination, and the larger church? Do you emphasize one over the other?

Bible passages for further reflection: Luke 1:46–56; Luke 4:14–21; Matthew 6:9–13

PART FOUR: THE QUEST MODERN CHRISTIANITY, 1650–1945

CHAPTER 10: CHRISTIANITY AS A QUEST FOR TRUTH

1. Bass contends that Enlightenment theologians “revolutionized Christianity by making it more rational, irenic, scientific, and liberal” (page 216). How do you think the Enlightenment changed Christianity? Did it change it for better or worse? Did it open the door to more questions and doubt or did it strengthen faith? Has your faith today encountered any trickle-down effects from this period in history?
2. Bass describes modernity as a time when people “assumed there existed one truth about the universe and its various components” (page 218). They saw life as a “quest” to find that one truth. Do you see life as a jour-

ney (not focusing on the end result) or as a quest (focusing on the destination)? Do you believe, as the early moderns did, that there is one truth to the universe? What effect does this have on your faith?

Bible passage for further reflection: Luke 11:5–13

CHAPTER 11: DEVOTION: THE QUEST FOR LIGHT

1. The Quaker focus on the “inner light” is something many people today can relate to. This search for the inner light is part of many different religions and spiritual practices even outside of Christianity. Do you find that your faith is influenced by sources outside of Christianity? Is the search for the “light within” part of your faith journey? Or are you more traditional and doctrinal?
2. On page 236, Thomas Jefferson is introduced as a spiritual figure. Is this surprising to you? Have you ever thought of Jefferson as a religious leader? Would you have been surprised, as Bass was, to see him depicted in a stained-glass window in a church?
3. Chapter 11 explores answers to the question “Where is God?” from a handful of early modern Christian sources. How would you answer this question? With which group do you most identify?
4. What role has doubt played in your spiritual journey? When has doubt been an obstacle to your religious prac-

tice, and when has it, as Emily Dickinson described, kept believing nimble?

Bible passages for further reflection: Genesis 1:1–5; John 1:1–10; Matthew 5:14–16; Ephesians 1:15–23

CHAPTER 12: ETHICS: KINGDOM QUEST

1. One of the most striking aspects of this chapter is the distance Americans have traveled as a society over the last 150 years. Do you attribute the equalities and freedoms that have come about in those years to Christianity? Or do you see human rights as a political issue, not a spiritual one? What, in your wildest dreams, do you predict will shock Americans 150 years from now?
2. At its core, does Christianity lend itself more to capitalism or socialism? Can either extreme work in a sustainable way with regard to Christian values?
3. On page 266, Bass quotes an elderly gentleman in Pennsylvania as saying, “Without evolution, there is no progressive Christianity.” Do you agree or disagree with this statement? What does “progressive Christianity” mean to you? Do you identify yourself as a progressive Christian?
4. Do you believe, in the words of the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, that “many religions can lead to eternal life” (page 275)? Bass describes the World’s Parliament of Religions, the watershed event that introduced plural-

ism, on a popular level, to Western Christians over 100 years ago. What do you imagine, or what would you like to see, as the role of pluralism in your church 100 years from now?

Bible passages for further reflection: Luke 6:20–23; Matthew 5:1–11; Acts 2:41–47

PART FIVE: THE RIVER CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANITY, 1945–NOW

CHAPTER 13: THE RIVER

1. Bass writes on page 288, “In the United States it has become commonplace to speak of how divided our society is, a fifty-fifty nation permanently roiled in a culture war of conservatives and liberals.” Do you agree with this statement? Is America more divided now than ever or does it just feel that way to those of us living in our current state of turmoil?
2. Do you see Christianity, as the author does, as “a fluid faith?” What does this mean to you? Is change frightening or exciting to you? Do you prefer a comforting faith or new adventure?

3. On page 295, Bass quotes a thirty-something progressive Christian pastor in Washington, DC, who says her congregation communicates to her that “when others know that they are going to church, they always have to qualify it by saying, ‘But it’s not like that.’” Is this your experience? Has anyone ever made a similar qualification to you?
4. Sociologist Robert Wuthrow found in the 1990s that “Christian spirituality was developing a new orientation toward practice” (page 298). What are your spiritual practices? If you don’t have any, which of the practices discussed in Chapter 13 sound appealing to you?
5. Bass writes that she has encountered many Christians who weave other spiritual traditions and practices into their Christian practices. Do you believe that you can still be fully Christian while being open to other religious practices? If not, why? If so, which traditions do you find appealing?

Bible passages for further reflection: Psalms 65:9–10; Isaiah 41:17–20; Isaiah 43:14–21; Revelation 22:1–5

EPILOGUE AND FINAL THOUGHTS

1. Were you surprised by the distinction Dr. Livingston made between nostalgia and history? How would you explain the difference between nostalgia and history? Do you think that, as he claimed, nostalgia undermines hope? Are you nostalgic for the past? Or, do you believe that you have a realistic sense of the Christian past? How

has your sense of history changed as a result of reading this book?

2. Bass describes *A People's History of Christianity* as “a history of hope.” Do you feel hopeful at the conclusion of this book? What do you see as the greatest cause for hope for present-day Christianity? How can you participate in that promising future, and how can your church community participate?
3. Of all the reformers, thinkers, and ordinary people of faith profiled and cited in this book, who spoke to you most? Make a short list of the three people who most inspired you. Write a single sentence describing what you most admired about this person (or group of people). How can you apply their example, words, and insights to your own life and your community?
4. If Bass were to add a Part VI to her book thirty years from now, what do you think the Devotion chapter would say about the way twenty-first-century Christians interpret the command to love God? What do you think the Ethics chapter would identify as our approach to fostering community and loving our neighbor? That is, in what direction do you see the church, both your own parish and the larger community, developing in the next decades?
5. Is there anyone or any movement in Christian history that you would have liked seen included in *A People's History of Christianity*? In a very real way, no history is ever complete, as it is always open to new stories. Following publication, Diana Butler Bass said she would have liked to also

include a story on Pentecostalism focusing on either William Seymour, an African-American preacher who founded the Azusa Street Mission, or Aimee Semple McPherson, the founder of the Four Square Gospel Church. She also would have added a section on indigenous tribes' conversion stories and how native peoples adapted Christianity to their traditional practices. What would you add and why?

6. What does it mean to you to “make history”? Do you think that regular people create history? How do you think your life is contributing to the larger story of the history of Christianity? How would you like to be remembered in relation to your faith, the good you do in the world, and in your congregation or spiritual community?