

ALSO BY DIANA BUTLER BASS

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Broken We Kneel

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CHRISTIANITY AFTER RELIGION

THE END OF CHURCH AND THE BIRTH
OF A NEW SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

DIANA BUTLER BASS



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*To Marcus, Marianne, Henry, and Abbey.
You have gladdened my heart along the way.*

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The Beginning

Saguaro High School, Scottsdale, Arizona
1976

I OPENED MY LOCKER—IT WAS as overstuffed and unorganized as usual—and out fell a copy of the New American Standard Version of the Bible. The Word of God hit the sandaled feet of a girl with a locker near mine.

“You’re so religious,” my high-school companion growled. “A Bible at school? Are you becoming a Mormon or something?”

“No,” I replied. “I’m not a Mormon.” I had recently joined a nondenominational church, however, a church that took the Bible both seriously and literally. I was only vaguely acquainted with scripture through childhood Sunday school. But my new church friends knew the Bible practically by heart. I was trying to make up for lost time by reading it at lunch.

“What sort of religion makes you bring a Bible to school? Are you a religious fanatic?”

“I’m not religious,” I responded. “I’ve got a relationship with

erable ones, their fortunes would ebb with the American public in the years to come.

In earlier awakenings, nativist movements started strong and threatened to derail the cultural change of the New Light. During all three previous awakenings, nativists took over political parties, elected candidates, started crusades, split churches, and thrust dangerous demagogues into the public theater. The dogmatics typically portrayed themselves as innovative purveyors of a true spiritual awakening, offering their followers the secret to a meaningful way of life. Eventually, however, nativist movements overreached, often breeding violence. Their insistence on the old ways seemed increasingly out of step with the daily lives of regular people, who begin to accept and adapt to economic, social, and technological change. As fear ebbs, and new forms of community, work, and family become more normal, nativist movements wither and retreat to the margins of society. Even those once comforted by dogmatic promises of authority and order begin to look for new forms of faith. Awakenings can be slowed by fear, but if enough people experience, understand, and practice a new way of the spirit, they cannot be stopped.

Awakening and Romantic Religion: Self, Practices, and Community

A spiritual awakening is, of course, more than politics, warmed-over liberalism, or just the values of the counterculture. Awakenings typically embody the romantic elements of religion—adventure, quest, mysticism, intuition, wonder, experience, nature, unity, historical imagination, art, and music—as a protest against systematized orthodoxies and religious convention. During the First Great Awakening, heartfelt passion for Jesus displaced formalized covenants of faith and European liturgies. During the Second, individual heroism and attention to devotional practices replaced Calvinistic deter-

minism and clerical authority. During the Third, a fascination with process, history, and archaeology led Christians to erect neo-Gothic cathedrals over sites once occupied by unadorned meetinghouses and opened the spiritual imagination to new understandings of soul in nature, poetry, and the past. The Reverend Henry Ward Beecher (1813–87), brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe and one of the greatest preachers of the day, fancied himself as “romantic evangelical” who, like many of his peers, found God in the unity of all things. The current awakening is marked by its insistence on connection, networks, relationship, imagination, and story instead of dualism, individualism, autonomy, techniques, and rules.

Some romantic movements of the past emphasized escape from the world in favor of utopian schemes. Indeed, the underside of the current spiritual awakening is the temptation toward “navel-gazing,” isolated faith, sectarianism, and moral relativism. At its best, however, the contemporary awakening is a movement of *romantic realism*. The Fourth Great Awakening imbibes the romantic spirit, but it has been chastened by the overly optimistic movements that preceded it—like schemes to perfect human society through social engineering or Christian attempts to bring about the kingdom of God on earth. The new romanticists remember, however dimly, Reinhold Niebuhr’s dictum: “Social justice cannot be resolved by moral and rational suasion alone. . . . Conflict is inevitable, and in this conflict, power must be challenged by power.”²¹ Thus, prayer must be twinned with a vigorous passion for doing good, and spirituality itself is increasingly defined as a life of contemplation and justice. Niebuhr’s dark reminders of human sin and evil have proved increasingly truthful since 9/11, deepening the characteristics of pragmatism and realism that shape the new awakening.

The spirit of romantic realism is perhaps best developed by contemporary poets. In “The Vision,” Wendell Berry captures the mood of romantic realism. Its words could be a hymn for this awakening:

*If we will have the wisdom to survive,
 to stand like slow-growing trees
 on a ruined place, renewing, enriching it,
 if we will make our seasons welcome here,
 asking not too much of earth or heaven,
 then a long time after we are dead
 the lives our lives prepare will live
 here, their houses strongly placed
 upon the valley sides, fields and gardens
 rich in the windows. The river will run
 clear, as we will never know it,
 and over it, birdsong like a canopy.
 On the levels of the hills will be
 green meadows, stock bells in noon shade.
 On the steeps where greed and ignorance cut
 down
 the old forest, an old forest will stand,
 its rich leaf-fall drifting on its roots.
 The veins of forgotten springs will have opened.
 Families will be singing in the fields.
 In their voices they will hear a music
 risen out of the ground. They will take
 nothing from the ground they will not return,
 whatever the grief at parting. Memory,
 native to this valley, will spread over it
 like a grove, and memory will grow
 into legend, legend into song, song
 into sacrament. The abundance of this place,
 the songs of its people and its birds,
 will be health and wisdom and indwelling
 light. This is no paradisaal dream.
 Its hardship is its possibility.²²*

The Fourth Great Awakening is not a quest to escape the world. Instead, it moves into the heart of the world, facing the challenges head-on to take what is old—failed institutions, scarred landscapes, wearied religions, a wounded planet—and make them workable and humane in the service of global community. No miracles here. God does not heal without human hands. The hard work is the possibility.

Romantic realism begins with the self-in-relationship, not the isolated hero, but the individual whose life is linked with other heroic lives in a quest for beauty and justice and love. Romantic realism is strengthened through spiritual practices that shape devotion, character, and ethics. These practices require attention, time, and teaching; they need to be formed and nurtured in a guildlike community of beginners, novices, craftspeople, masters, and innovators. Through the self, community, and practice, the awakened romantics experience God, discovering new possibilities of trust, devotion, and love directed toward their neighbors and dedicated to anticipating the future of God's peace, goodness, and justice at work in the world now. The goal is not to bring about a utopian kingdom; rather, the goal is to perform the reign of God in and for the life of the world.

Awakening Now

As the end of Lent neared in 2011, I went to my local bank to deposit some checks. Three tellers were working that morning, all women. One woman wore a pale ivory *hijab* as a head covering; the second woman's forehead bore the dark red mark known as a *bindi*; the third woman had a small crucifix hanging around her neck.

I walked up and laughed. "You all look like the United Nations of banking!"

They exchanged glances and smiled.

"You are so right," said the Hindu woman. "You should meet our customers! But we cover a lot of languages between the three of us."

It was a quiet morning. They wanted to talk. I said something about being a vegetarian for Lent. The Hindu woman wanted to give me some family recipes; the Muslim woman wanted to know more about Christian fasting practices (the Catholic woman was, by now, on the phone in another office).

I shared how we had dedicated Lent that year to eating simply and exploring vegetarian foods from different parts of the world. "When we eat Indian food," I explained, "we try to talk about the church in India or pray for people in India. The same for African and Asian and Latin American countries."

"What a wonderful idea!" the Muslim woman said. "We need to love our traditions and be faithful to our God; but we teach the beauty and goodness of the other religions too."

Her Hindu colleague chimed in, "That is the only way to peace—to be ourselves and to create understanding between all people."

For the next few minutes, they shared how much they appreciated living in Virginia, where they had found religious freedom. "Here, it is like Thomas Jefferson promised," the Muslim woman said. "Very good. People here are very tolerant, curious about different religions. Much better than other places. Here there is real respect. I can be a good Muslim here."

I glanced at my watch. I needed to get to an appointment. I thanked them for their insights.

"I would wish you a Happy Easter," I said hoping they would hear the sincerity in my voice, "but, instead, I wish you both peace."

I started to walk away when the Muslim teller said to me, "Peace of Jesus the Prophet. And a very happy Easter to you."

And the Hindu woman called out, "Happy Easter!"

When I reached my car, I realized that I was crying. I had only

rarely felt the power of the resurrected Jesus so completely in my soul.

Sometimes it is hard to see the awakening that is happening all around us, because this awakening is quite different from those in the past. Unlike the awakenings in American history books, this one was not concluded in thirty or forty years. No one spiritual renewal has reshaped us; there is no political consensus and no genuine institutional renewal. We have experienced almost two generations of religious conflict, most often with people in our own religious traditions. We still feel lost, we are divided, and our institutions are failing us. Things are different, especially those things of the spirit, but the road ahead is not clearly marked.

Part of this can be explained by the strange historical process of this particular awakening—in an age of swift change, this awakening is taking a very *l-o-n-g* time. Certainly unanticipated by William McLoughlin or anyone leading religious change in the last five decades, the Fourth Great Awakening has unfolded in two distinctive periods, with an interlude in between: the Fourth Great Awakening 1.0, from 1960 to 1980; a powerful nativist backlash from 1975 to 1995, which is most obviously embodied in the religious Right and which set up rival and contradictory versions of revival; and the Fourth Great Awakening 2.0, beginning around 1995 and continuing to today.

Although the first phase set a social and ideological vision of equality, care for the earth, and authenticity, two things have changed significantly since the earlier phase. Each of those two things contributed to muting the nativism of the 1980s, and each altered the course of the emerging spiritual awakening. First, technology has exponentially increased our ability to connect and communicate, to share information, and to be aware of events and concerns around the world. Indeed, technological advances have played a role in major American awakenings since the days when George Whitefield mounted his horse and rode from one colonial village to

another, acting as a human networker and sharing the good news of revival. Technology was always a means of awakening, a form of communication that carried information *about* new possibilities and ideas.

In the eighteenth century, technology changed the way people did things, but there was not quite an immediate and intimate relationship between technology and personhood. Today, however, technology is shaping us; we are in the process of internalizing and integrating technology in ways that make us different than we were—even to the point of enhancing human wisdom, opening us all to new dimensions of spiritual experience. Technology is not only enabling an awakening; it is an important dimension of it. That shift was not possible in the 1960s and 1970s before microtechnologies, digital information, and the Internet.²³ Many twenty-first century technologies are, by definition, about connection and community, both of which are central to the nature of spirituality and to this awakening. Indeed, much of the promise of the Internet is profoundly spiritual.

Second, religious pluralism is much more widespread and deeply ingrained in American culture than it was in the 1960s and 1970s, during the first phase of the awakening. In the mid-1960s, the U.S. government lifted immigration quotas on Asian, African, and South American countries, allowing for people of non-Christian, non-Western faiths—as well as Christians from countries where Pentecostal forms of both Protestantism and Catholicism were pronounced—to move here more easily and become citizens. During the first stage of awakening, pilgrims had to go to Tibet, Japan, or India to learn to meditate or experience Buddhism or Hinduism. Only a small number of American communities of these religions existed, and practitioners of Eastern spiritualities were considered exotic.

Now, however, if one is curious about another religion, most of us can walk across the street and ask neighbors about their prayer

practices. You can ask your aunt or your sister-in-law. Indeed, religious diversity is so strong in the United States that we have developed a practice of “bridging,” whereby we befriend, marry, and work with people of a wide variety of faiths. This pragmatic diversity is actually changing the way most Americans view what it means to be “a good American,” as individuals and religious groups creatively engage the tension between devotion and diversity.²⁴

The Reverend Dr. James Forbes, the noted Protestant leader and former pastor of the venerable Riverside Church in New York City, believes we are in an awakening of spiritual renewal and social transformation that embodies a holistic understanding of self and God, is expressed through a life of “balance” and in community, and draws from all faiths, not just one. He claims:

The great awakenings in American history were all Christian revitalization movements that brought personal piety and also brought transformation in the society. But the next great awakening will have to be an interfaith awakening.

Forbes continues, sounding remarkably like the tellers at my neighborhood bank:

Will an interfaith Great Awakening look like a watered-down version of spiritual or religious life? Or does it look like challenging every religious tradition in this nation simply by the question, “What does your tradition have to say about how we achieve and maintain balance necessary for full human existence?” I want to ask my Christian church, don’t water down your religion. Interfaith awakening will probably not be about comparative soteriology, doctrines about salvation. It will not be about what names we use. It will not probably be about our comparative eschatology, study of the end times. It has to be about what gives us balance. And I am convinced that just as it is in my body, also in the body politic. There is a gyroscopic mechanism that would

incline us to seek balance, and that is why it is likely that a great awakening is going to happen. In each of the great awakenings there has been a perceived sense of out of balance, out of kilter, insecurity, change beyond our capacity to cope. I think we are a prime suspect for a great awakening because we surely meet that requirement. Out of kilter, broken down, scared, not able to even believe that our ideals are feasible.²⁵

An interfaith awakening does not mean that everyone will surrender their distinctiveness or that churches, mosques, temples, and synagogues will cease to exist. Nor does it mean that the world's people will suddenly convert to a single and imperialistic religion—whether that religion is Protestant fundamentalism, Roman Catholicism, Islam, or something else. We are slowly, painfully, and patiently learning what it means to live in particular faiths while honoring the wisdom of others in a mutual, spiritual quest toward “full human existence.”

Because of religious mixing, the Fourth Great Awakening might better be understood as the Fourth Great Awakenings, plural. Throughout these pages, I have described a Christian awakening mostly of a Protestant sort. In the past, Great Awakenings have served to renew American Protestantism and revitalize a largely homogeneous culture. But this awakening is not only an evangelical Christian or even a larger Protestant Christian event. Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists have been undergoing similar revitalizations as they pay renewed attention to the spiritual dimensions of their traditions, emphasizing communal identity, faith practices, and experiential belief—often over against authoritarian leaders and inflexible religious structures. Belonging, behaving, and believing are undergoing profound transformations in every religious context. These multiple spiritual awakenings are parallel events across faith boundaries. Just now, people are realizing that there are walkers on another nearby path heading in the same direc-

tion. Not the same path, but a close enough path that travelers can make friends with others on a similar (but not identical) journey that will eventually bring new life, new hope, and new possibilities to the larger culture.

We live in a time of Christian spiritual awakening, of Jewish spiritual awakening, of Muslim spiritual awakening, of Hindu spiritual awakening, of Buddhist spiritual awakening, of spiritual awakening that bears no religious label, of spiritual awakening of the “nones.” Harvey Cox describes this multireligious awakening as the Age of Spirit, an effusive, experiential, practice-centered impulse of faith sweeping across the globe. This is an age of great awakenings. With such spiritual scope, it may not be the “Fourth” of anything, for nothing quite like it has happened before in history.²⁶ This may be the Great Global Awakening, the first of its kind. The American or Canadian or English or Australian or West African or Korean or Latin American forms of this sort of spiritual revitalization are local expressions of vast, multinational religious shifts, in which each cultural family is exploring new connections between the divine story and their own story. What is happening in the United States is a spiritual node in a global network of faith. Indeed, Christianity is also a spiritual node in this network of awakening. In my country and in my faith tradition, we are merely a part of a much, much larger web of God's wondrous work.

Nativism Now

All of this, however, poses risks. Awakenings can be slowed—or potentially stopped—if people fail to understand the times in which they live and respond with fear instead of hope. Awakenings are both the work of God, and they are hard work. Every spiritual awakening gives birth to counterawakenings, those nativist movements seeking to restore older forms of authority and power. In the 1980s,