



A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story

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For too long, the history of Christianity has been told as the triumph of orthodox doctrine imposed through power and hierarchy. In *A People's History of Christianity*, historian and religion expert Diana Butler Bass reveals an alternate history that includes a deep social ethic and far-reaching inclusivity: "the other side of the story" is not a modern phenomenon, but has always been practiced within the church. Butler Bass persuasively argues that corrective—even subversive—beliefs and practices have always been hallmarks of Christianity and are necessary to nourish communities of faith.

In the same spirit as Howard Zinn's groundbreaking work *The People's History of the United States*, Butler Bass's *A People's History of Christianity* brings to life the movements, personalities, and spiritual disciplines that have always informed and ignited Christian worship and social activism.

A People's History of Christianity authenticates the vital, emerging Christian movements of our time, providing the historical evidence that celebrates these movements as thoroughly Christian and faithful to the mission and message of Jesus.

A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story Details

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Bcoghill Coghill says

Best church history I have read but it is more than that. It is a one volume story that relates, in every part, to what is going on in our church today.

It kind of gives me hope.

I will recommend to all of my churchy friends.

Marilyn McEntyre says

With explicit reference to Howard Zinn, Diana Butler Bass provides an alternative view of Christian history by looking at what ordinary people were doing in the midst of wars, schisms, church councils, and theological arguments. It's a refreshing and encouraging look at how the Spirit moves even in dark times. Unsentimental and surprising.

Gabe says

Diana Butler Bass has very openly used Howard Zinn's successful history of the other sides to her specialty, Church History. In *A People's History of Christianity* she attempts to draw attention to the threads of hospitality, openness, welcoming and love that purport to be at the center of Christianity, but so often seem missing from Christian history. Much like the history of textbooks, Christian history is generally reduced to conflicts and their victors. What's often ignored (or seen only in instances, not as its own narrative) is the constant push for reform that Christianity has maintained from its earliest days to now. Yes, the church messes things up. Yes, the church is also full of people always trying to do things better.

She divides Christian history into five parts, The Way (Early), The Cathedral (Medieval), The Word (Reformation), The Quest (Modern) and The River (Contemporary). Each time period, she asserts, has its share of failing and its share of successes. The ways in which the hospitable current of Christianity manifests itself is depended on the time period, the needs of the people, belief systems, etc.

Her section on the early Church was probably most personally challenging for me. The focus of much of the early church on community and care for all served to remind me exactly how removed I am from a community of faith and that the care that is to be put forward for all people is not something that can be done alone. Honestly, when thinking along those lines I feel like a failure at following Christ, and one who has virtually no way of becoming less of a failure. When I can't get a grasp on the grace that I should show to others then it becomes harder to keep hold of the grace God shows to me. I could stand to offer myself the same hospitality and lack of demands for perfection that I want to offer to others.

Her section on Modern Christianity was also challenging for me, but in a very different way. Despite being a product of modernity I find myself at odds with it often. Its focus on a knowable Truth and on progress toward that does not fit well with my experience of reality as changing, but not progressing. Modernity's effect on Christianity was to treat the sacred scriptures as scientific or historical texts. It was the

Enlightenment that gave rise to today's Fundamentalist Christianity. If there is a Truth and we can know it, then everything is set in concrete already. Of course it is the flipside of this that Butler Bass explores in her chapter on Modernity. It was this belief in progress that led liberal Christians to use the church as a vehicle for progress. The abolitionists, the civil rights movement, women in ministry, ecumenism and learning to live in a pluralist society. All of these were part of modern liberal Christianity. I can't deny the good of all these things, but I do question the drive behind them. If Truth is knowable, and if history is moving in a forward direction, then the world (and its inhabitants) is perfectible. It's not just the Browncoat in me that says, "I do not hold to that." I found most of her coverage of liberal Christianity to be self-congratulatory and typical boomer "Look what all *we* did!" Her inclusion of Hillary Clinton invoking Harriet Tubman in a speech as an example of the thread of equality and freedom smacked more of a celebration of liberal politics than welcoming, servant Christianity.

Ultimately the narrative that Butler Bass tries to offer is hard to follow. Whether that is because of the lack of information about this alternate history due to the domination of what I generally term Imperial Christianity or due to her difficulties in storytelling I cannot say. I found the book a rewarding read overall. I only wish she'd taken more time to tell individual stories and less time seemingly saying "Look what all we did!"

Nathan says

Bass treads lightly around the more difficult and dirty issues surrounding Christianity, switching seamlessly between social reporting and personal anecdote. She posits Christianity as best realized in its post-dogma, post-church, post-conservative form, and though my personal sympathies lean slightly this way, I've heard this message countless times before. I didn't care for Bass's interest in Christian syncretism; mixing and matching your personal faith is all well and good, but she never points out the consequences of trying to make everything mean something, and in the process meaning nothing.

The populism of the book (the main point, obviously) was appreciated and will hopefully reassure those who still think of Christian faith as merely the sum of its worst enforcers. I'm not too optimistic though: the study rescues God from the bolt-throwing judge stereotype, merely to align Him with the cosmic Santa Claus/personal lifestyle guru stereotype. If you hate, fear, or dismiss what you imagine Christianity to stand for, read this book. If you have already developed a working experiential knowledge of the faith, with the necessary complexities, contradictions and nuances, skip it.

Caitlin says

I was between giving this 4 stars or 5 stars and ended up going for 5 based on how much I highlighted and how many things I wish everyone knew about Christianity. I found her to be fairly accessible, regardless of one's personal belief system, and very straightforward. I highly recommend this book to anyone who thinks the militant "Big C" Christianity (as she calls it) is the only form of Christianity that exists, as well as to anyone who wonders how Christians in the first few centuries after Jesus understood their faith down to 1945-today. This is a great book and I hope you'll read it.

Rebekah says

This is a good book for those who don't know a lot about the history of Christianity and want a broad view while also being a reasonable length and easy to read. Be warned however, that her goal is to highlight broad trends in christian thinking over the centuries and to bring out the good over the bad. She does not pretend certain events did not happen; rather she is trying to record christianity at its best. I think she does meet this goal but someone who wants more depth and a more complete history should go elsewhere. This does serve as a good starting point though.

Terence says

A People's History of Christianity is not so much a "history" (either scholarly *or* general) as it is an argument for a return to the roots of Christianity that finds fault with both modern expressions of "liberal" and "conservative" religion. As Bass argues in her introduction, liberal theologians and congregations tend to lose their "devotional" memories; their conservative cousins lose their "ethical" memory. The result is a liberal tradition that's often little more than a social club; and a conservative tradition that's often reactionary and mean spirited.

Bass comes from an unabashedly liberal perspective by which I mean she rejects – or is, at least, chary of – Christologies used to justify the state, the Church (in the "big C," institutional sense), church wealth, war, etc. Her Christ is the preacher who counsels the rich young man in Mark 10:21 to "Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me" and says in 12:29-31, "The first of all the commandments is: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. / And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and all your mind, and will all your strength.' This is the first commandment. / And the second, like it, is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these"; or the Church as represented by the spirit of Vatican II (though Bass isn't Catholic herself – I gather she was raised Methodist, and now professes Episcopalianism).

I am not the audience for this book, or not the primary audience. There's too little in the way of history to engage my interest, and too much theology whose foundation I reject. *Full Disclosure: I was raised Catholic in a thoroughly secular, middle-class American family in Missouri. Before my parents' divorce, we didn't even go to church. When mom did begin taking us and enrolled my siblings and me in weekly religion classes, I fell in love with Catholic ritual, history and tradition, and the cool robes the priests got to wear, but I was not wedded to (nor even terribly aware of) its theology until I got interested in such topics in college, and then I became an Origenist. It's been downhill (from the Vatican's POV) since then.*

Which is not to say that I didn't get something from reading this book. I have scads of post-it notes littering its pages reflecting what I learned of the variety of ways Christians have interpreted Christ's teachings through the ages, and how the "popular impulse" – often co-opted or suppressed by the institutional Church (cf., the Franciscans** or the Beguines, respectively) – keeps bubbling up to the surface to discomfit the privileged and the comfortable.

**If you want to learn more than you could ever possibly want to know about the medieval Franciscans and the related popular movements that bedeviled the Roman Church, I can't recommend enough Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*.

After the Introduction, Bass divides her narrative into five parts:

- “The Way” – Early Christianity (AD 100-500)
- “The Cathedral” – Medieval Christianity (AD 500-1450)
- “The Word” – Reformation Christianity (AD 1450-1650)
- “The Quest” – Modern Christianity (AD 1650-1945)
- “The River” – Contemporary Christianity (AD 1945-present)

And within those sections (except for the last), each is further divided into a look at “devotion” and at “ethics” – How Christians interpreted the New Testament and how they implemented what they learned in the real world.

For example, in the “Ethics” of “The Way,” Bass recounts how early Christians lived a Christ-centered life: 1. *hospitality* - all comers were welcome; 2. *communalism* - all property was held in common by the faithful; 3. *peace making* - early Christians were pacifists by and large*; 4. *aliens* - all humans were “neighbors,” even if they remained outside the church.

*St. Valentine, whose feast day we recently celebrated, was a soldier who refused to fight, as was St. Martin of Tours; and one of the chief “crimes” committed by Christians was their refusal to serve in the legions.

An example of some insights found in Bass’s “Devotion” sections: In “The Cathedral,” she devotes much ink to Peter Abelard and Heloise, arguing that they were representative of the interpretation of Christ’s Crucifixion as an expression of God’s infinite love for Man, and not a sacrifice to atone for his myriad sins and to satisfy justice.

There were some fascinating figures in modern Christianity whom I had never heard of such as Vida Scudder (1861-1954). This woman’s interpretation of Christ’s life resulted in a Christian socialism – a vision of an extended monastic society where extremes of wealth and poverty were eliminated so all could pursue devotional works without hindrance. Or Harry Fosdick (1878-1969), who preached “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” in 1922 and embraced evolution because it makes Christianity a religion of hope, implying (as it does) that people can bring about positive change. Evolution leavened with religious yeast transforms humanity’s material *existence* into human *life*. (This reminds me of the Buddhist idea that knowledge unguided by wisdom is dangerous. It also reminds me of a short story I read ages ago (written in the ‘50s) where a scientist is convinced to not develop a devastating new technology when an alien gives his toddler a gun and asks him, “Would you give a child a gun?”)

Each period deserves, at a minimum, a book-length treatment of these subjects.

John Lucy says

Obviously, what Bass's project was meant to do is rather admirable. Just as Zinn put together a people's history of the United States, she wanted to do the same for Christianity and emphasize what people were actually experiencing as Christians through the centuries. For attempting to do that, I applaud Bass. For sort of doing it, I applaud Bass.

For starters, Bass's attempt to focus on lesser-known figures from Christian history is nice. Lesser-known for laypersons anyway, which is fine, except that if you've taken a course or two on Christian history then you

may not learn much from reading this. Still, you might be pleasantly surprised about the works that Bass focuses on by the more well-known figures of Christian history. That part is good. As I read this book, I realized, though, that it's nearly impossible to actually recreate what the people of Christian history were experiencing. Most of our history is given to us through the eyes of the major figures and the wealthy. Zinn's book works because we know more about the common person after the year 1500 or so than we do before that period. Bass's book unfortunately suffers because of that.

Another reason that Bass's work suffers is that she's not strictly attempting to write about the people's history. On a biased note, I'll say that if she were trying to do that, she'd have included Soren Kierkegaard's critiques of Christianity and the people who lead/believe in Christianity. The major problem here is that Bass tells this history of Christianity in the lens of the contemporary "emergent" movement, as a means to ground the emergent movement in history. This book is supposed to be a sort of model for where the emergent principles can go from here and that we don't need to think of the emergent principles as rootless. So, "A People's History" really means, "Can we see contemporary theology rooted in the past?" Such a book is fine, though I would have been less interested in it if I knew that's what it would be. My beef being that Bass should have titled and marketed the book appropriately.

Strange to say, I think this book could have benefited by being longer. Again, to compare it to Zinn's work, which this is clearly modeled after, Zinn's work is maybe twice as long, if not longer, and covers a fourth of the chronological time that Bass's work does--in just one country, too. There's no question that Bass's work is backed by scholarship, but if she dug a little deeper this book would have been much better and covered its topic more appropriately.

Dave Smith says

This book is an answer to the question "Why would I ever want to be a Christian when the Christian Religion is responsible for such horrific and tragic events throughout history?". Diana (a history prof) concedes the horrific events, but notes that History is the story of the rich, powerful and successful. Christianity shines among the least, the last and the lost in society, and their stories are rarely ever told. This book brings to light the stories of Christian service, love, and selfless sacrifice by Christians from the first century until now. Some of the people and stories I knew of, but most were unknown to me. What a delight to see history this way - through the eyes of the common folk.

Jed says

An excellent history of Christianity from the perspective of people practicing the faith for the past two thousand years. Bass writes with a breadth of knowledge and experience that should satisfy most readers and the manner in which she writes is straight-forward and easy to read. You won't find any nuanced theological arguments here, but you will come away with a deeper appreciation for those, right up to the present day, who have sought to follow Jesus in deed and not only in word.

Becca says

I have a friend who says that a book earns 5 stars for her if it is better the second time she reads it. I think

that's a wonderful system to use. My system for rating a book 5 stars is if it makes me cry. I found myself sobbing through the last 30 pages of *A People's History of Christianity*.

I picked up this book because it was recommended by a friend. When I found out that Bass counts Phyllis Tickle, Marcus Borg, Brian McLaren, Barbara Brown Taylor, Jim Wallis and Lauren Winner in her circle of friends, I figured she must be alright. Turns out, she's more than just alright.

Bass writes a beautiful narrative of the history of Christianity by focusing on those who are often not included in the history books. She calls them quiet souls and she makes it her mission to give them voice and show us how they have shaped our tradition. One of the things I love most about this book is that it is steeped in feminist ideology, and yet it isn't blatantly so. Those who are weary of feminism will not be turned off by Bass' writing. Here are a few of the women who are included in this book:

Julian of Norwich, the first woman to write a book published in English

Heloise, Abelard's wife who helped Abelard develop his theology of sexuality and intimacy (saucy!)

Hildegard of Bingen, a prophet and a visionary from the 12th century

The Beguin nuns who started charity communities

Katharina Schütz, who encouraged women to speak up during the Reformation period

Anne Askew, a woman arrested for her Protestant beliefs

Elizabeth Hooton, the first female, Quaker preacher

Maria Stewart, a woman who spoke up against slavery in the 19th century

I was unfamiliar with the stories of these women, but I now count each of these women as treasured gifts to the church. Thanks to Bass, their stories as well as many others have been brought to life. She has managed to write a history book that doesn't highlight the violent, corrupt nature of Christianity. Instead she has shown that it truly can be a religion that is driven by social justice and a life of spirituality.

Dennis Wahlquist says

Mixed feelings. Many of the "historical" snippets were helpful and encouraging that what is important about faith in Christ is rooted in real people throughout the Christian age. Some stories, however, left you with the feeling, "Gee, those medieval people were just like us postmoderns..." Perhaps a bit of a stretch.

I guess I was looking for a history book relating how real people lived out the command to love God and neighbor. But what left me queasy was a feeling that the book is a polemic for postmodern universalism and perhaps even pantheism.

Drick says

I picked up this book because of the title, and assumed that it would tell a lot of untold stories, like Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. In a sense this is what Diane Butler Bass attempts to do. She says she wants to tell an alternative history to the militant story of "Big C Christianity -- Christ, Constantine, Christendom, Calvin and Christian America" (p. 4). Instead her goal is to tell a story of "generative Christianity, a kind of faith that births new possibilities of God's love in the world" (p. 11). Zinn's work takes on the the tendency for history to always be written from the perspective "winners" and instead tells US

history from the perspective of those whose stories have been distorted and or silenced by the dominant culture. I had hoped that Bass' book would do something similar by telling the stories of the minority movements within Christian history. such as the Waldensians, the Anabaptists, the Moravians and the Hutterities. Instead she talks of well known figures like Augustine, Francis of Assisi, and so on, who gave a great deal to the Christian faith, but who are hardly lesser known figures.

Perhaps my expectations were misplaced, but I raced through the latter half of the book, just to get it done - not exactly a sign I was engaged by it. However, I must say the epilogue was worth it as she concludes the book with a powerful quote from Jim Wallis on hope and the dynamics of history.

Perhaps for someone who has not read much church history, this would be a good primer, because it does focus on individuals in the history of Christianity who bring out the best of what our faith stands for, as opposed to simply painting a picture of a triumphalist faith in the vein of "Onward Christian Soldiers." Beyond that I can't recommend it and must say I was disappointed.

John says

Perhaps because I was hoping for a history like Howard Zinn's or Eduardo Galeano's. I was very disappointed with this book. I was hoping to read stories of the underside of Christianity - or, better, to read Christianity from the side of the poor, of the underdog, of the marginalized.

There are places where the author rises to the task, but I found the work plodding. I had a hard time getting past the first few chapters. The examples from her contemporary experience were, to be kind, distracting - except for a very few which provided some helpful insight.

I think would this could better be called a "liberal's" history of Christianity, whereas I was looking for a radical history of Christianity where stories of Jan Hus, the Beguines, Mother Mary McCauley, and Dorothy Day would be treated in some depth. We need a radical people's history of Christianity. Maybe Robert Ellsberg's ALL SAINTS is a good starting point (though he does put his "saints" in a chronological order).

A people's history should be about the people. I sometimes thought this was more a middle class people's history, tied to a bourgeois US understanding of Christianity that wants to be liberal, free-thinking, tolerant, etc.

What is especially disappointing is the failure to consider much outside of Europe and the US. This is a very omission. I know that the author said she was not considering this aspect of the history of Christianity.

Xavier says

i've been a churchgoer most of my life so i thought i knew what christianity was all about, and that the way it is now is the way it has always been. I was amazed to find so much information in this i had never heard before, people and ideas that have hugely influenced the version of Christianity we have today in the United States. This and the other book I reviewed, "The House Church" were big influences on my decision to join a house church network.

