

## **Bethel Book Study – Christianity After Religion**

This past Summer Diana Butler Bass invited people to a four-part review and updating of her book **Christianity After Religion**. She sent out a written summary of her current thinking each week. Here are some edited and highlighted comments and questions from Chapters 4-7.

### **Week 2 – Chapters 4-7**

**We start today with the single most quoted passage from [Christianity After Religion](#)**, found at the beginning of Chapter 7 on pages 202-204. It opens with an observation about Christianity and modernity by the late Canadian scholar, Winfred Cantwell Smith (whose insights were ahead of his time!):

Winfred Cantwell Smith notes that faith became both 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.” As 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.”

For the last four centuries, western people have generally assumed that the first step in the religious life is intellectual assent to a set of organized doctrines. The pattern holds true into adulthood as well—if, say, you are considering changing churches or are having a faith crisis. You find out what a group teaches, and you wrestle with their ideas. Joining depends on whether or not you agree with their creed or statement of faith or doctrine. If you find their 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. It is hard to think of many groups that people join by intellectual assent. Imagine joining a knitting group. Does anyone go to a knitting group and ask if the knitters believe in knitting? What do 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 or a theory of knitting, you will very likely never knit.

If you want to knit, you find a knitter to teach you. Go and sit in a circle where someone 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 believe that the experience of knitting makes you a better person, more spiritual, 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 dazzling new pattern, a new way to make a stitch; you might write a knitting book or become a knitting teacher. In knitting, the process is exactly the reverse of that in church: belonging to a knitting group leads to behaving as a knitter that leads to believing things about knitting.

Relationships lead to craft leads to experiential belief.

That is it. 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 which Jesus speaks that leads to God.

In the last three chapters, I have argued that answers to spiritual longings can be discerned by tweaking the traditional questions of “religion.” Another thing, however, is needful: **We must reverse the order in which the questions are asked. Instead of believing, behaving, and belonging, we need to reverse the order to belonging, behaving, and believing. And therein lies the difference between religion-as-institution and *religio* as a spiritual path.**

#### **THE STRENGTH OF CHAPTERS 4-7:**

##### **Clarity of the questions and shifts**

There’s been a real generational divide about these chapters — older readers almost always want to talk about believing, while younger ones insist that “Belonging” is the most important. It is also the case that the most overlooked chapter is the one on practice, “Behaving.”

Yet they fit together. And when understood as a trio (along with the reversal), these chapters make up the central thesis of the book — and serve as a detailed sketch of awakening. The future of religion is coming into focus through these questions and shifts. If you “get” the basic points in these chapters, the entire book makes sense — and you’ll be surprised how much you can see these questions underlying many social and political conflicts in the news.

**The whole section explores what philosopher Charles Taylor called “an expressivist revolution,” a process whereby obligatory group identity — whether of nation, family, or religion — was replaced with a new sense of authenticity and the “right of**

choice” based in personal fulfillment. External authorities have given way to internal ones, as we’ve increasingly questioned or moved away from external authorities and established social structures for finding our authentic selves in society. You may like or dislike these questions and shifts. You may think them a helpful evolution or a dangerous deception. But, in many ways, how we react is not the point. The point is that these shifts are real – and having daily impact on our lives in almost every sphere of activity.

The three questions and shifts have become clearer in the last decade:

**SHIFT 1: BELIEF - WHAT to HOW**

Away from external belief toward experiential belief: The question changes from **WHAT** do I (or we) believe? to **HOW** do I (or we) believe?

**SHIFT 2: BEHAVIOR - HOW to WHAT**

Away from rules toward creativity, improvisation, and practice: The question changes from **HOW** do I (or we) do that? to **WHAT** am I (or are we) going to do?

**SHIFT 3: BELONGING - WHO to (WHERE) AND WHOSE**

Away from “I think, therefore I am” toward locational and relational identity: The question changes from **WHO** am I? to **WHERE** and **WHOSE** am I (or are we)?

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**THE BEST INSIGHT OF THE “BELONGING” CHAPTER:  
From proposition to preposition**

I confess: I’m with my younger readers about the importance of belonging.

Note from Rick: Pam Tindall previously had a strong reaction to Diana's ageist stereotyping of older people placing more importance on *Belonging than Believing*. Bethel seems like an exception to the stereotype.

And I can't explain belonging more clearly than this: MEMBERSHIP is not "belonging." No congregation should talk about "members" and denominations shouldn't count members. I don't know what the replacement is — but the old concept and language have failed. (I know it is very hard to move past this.)

Think of the Thomas Tweed quote on page 193: Religion is best defined as "an itinerary" in three senses: "a proposal for a journey, a representation of a journey, and the journey itself"

To borrow an old socialist turn-of-phrase, you've got "fellow travelers." Not church members. The challenge is to find one another on the way.

The shift is from an external and individual sense of belonging toward an internalized and relational identity. The shift is also far more biblical than the older model. After all, Jesus said, "Follow me," not "join a church."

And, as in the New Testament, following comes first. Friendship comes first. Leaving your old self at the side of the lake and discovering who you really are in a community of love, learning, and service is *the vision of the gospels*. "Behaving" and "believing" come as you find yourself on the journey.

Faith is primarily about identity. That is why it is so hard to change, so powerful to let go, or so meaningful to "deconstruct." And the pathway into a new sense of identity is most often acceptance, friendship, and love.

*Where are you on the journey? Who is with you and for you?*

In short, identity formation has been, perhaps, the most contentious of the “3Bs” in the last decade, as well as the most important. And we parade much of the conflict, doubt, and frankly, our inmost sins, on social media. There, we see the internal and public arguments – of people in search of themselves, a past, and a future. I regularly hear people say, “I never knew my neighbors could vote for Trump,” “I liked my family better before I read their Facebook (Twitter, Instagram, whatever) accounts,” or “I can’t go to church with these people any more, now that I know what they really think.”

“Belonging” and identity formation may be for ill – or good. It is simply a pattern of how we humans find purpose and meaning for life – and the way we weave all of that into a sense of our own existence. The way we make ourselves has changed over time – and we are in the midst of a doozy of a transition regarding the creation of selfhood.

People with unsettled identities can never work together toward a settled politics. Until there is more clarity about who we are, there can never be more coherent or cohesive action to solve problems – much less any sort of shared understanding of what to believe about God, love, justice, our neighbors, or the future.

And you can’t force “belonging” on others. You might companion others. You might mentor them. Perhaps be a trail guide. But, eventually, people really, truly have to figure it out for themselves.

I’m of a mind that’s where faith communities could help. Like knitting groups.

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## **HOW THESE CHAPTERS TIE INTO THE IDEA OF AWAKENING: Outlining a new vision**

In the five-movement pattern of awakening, this section fits into: 3) new vision and 4) following a new path.

Notice I use the terms “movement” and “pattern” to describe those five stages laid out by William McLoughlin. That’s purposeful. Movements and patterns aren’t like steps in the program or rungs on a ladder. *Christianity After Religion* isn’t “Five Steps Toward Great Awakening.” These five stages are more like cairns on a trail, recognizable markers on a journey of transformation.

The B’s come in the middle. After the crisis, after institutional failure — or sometimes simultaneously with crisis and failure.

Many people intuit, understand, or have explicitly embraced these questions — and the attending shifts. But, like all journeys, it is possible to misread the map, go back to more familiar pathways, or turn around when things get hard. For those of us who are a bit older on the journey, it can get harder to read the new markers. That’s because we’re burdened with old maps. Old maps can be beautiful (especially as art). If you are lost, however, you probably want a working GPS with a strong signal! (And if your GPS doesn’t work, you need clear trail markings!)

Think of the Three B’s as your GPS — or cairns — toward awakening.