

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

By Diana Butler Bass

HarperOne, New York, 2009 / \$25.95 hardcover

Review by Thomas E. Little

**FOR THOSE WHO WONDERED** if Christianity had any true “characters” left, beside the ones we know and love in the pews and chairs of our modern churches and communities, here is a book for the curious among us. In the same spirit as Howard Zinn’s work *The People’s History of the United States*, Diana Butler Bass leads her readers on a grand sweep through the under-reported movements, personalities, and spiritual practices that inform, ignite and sometimes mystify contemporary Christianity. Indicating her intent to provide some of the “deeper stories of tradition” and to rectify the faithful’s habit of ridding themselves of the past with a “baby out with the bathwater” tradition, Dr. Bass wants to rediscover the memory of the Christian Church as it was really lived, warts and all! She tells the story of a “generative Christianity” in an “around the campfire” style in which she highlights “meaningful spiritual practices and a renewed sense of spiritual” that she hopes will moor the development of a new emergence of the Christian faith and tell the story for our contemporary church for those both in and not yet of the fold.

In a readable 350 pages, Butler Bass addresses such diverse issues as the Christian church’s commitment to care for the environment and celebrate God in nature; defining compassion, hospitality, and social justice as the primary functions of the church; pacifism as the dominant Christian response to war; the female attributes of God; and celebrating human sexuality as a gift from God. The publisher’s notes say this is “the book that progressives and liberals have been waiting for - a deeply re-

searched history of Christianity that sheds new light on the underreported personalities and movements of the faith.” I am not sure whether it is all that; however, it is readable and enjoyable and, might I suggest, a “pithy” review of what we have been about for lo these 2,000-plus years. It is replete with footnotes and a detailed and useful index for those seeking out stories for retreats and homilies for the faithful.

A typical story that I liked is the history of the “common use” Church of St. Martin in Biberach, Germany. The feuding Lutherans and Catholics in the town figured a way (in 1649) for each congregation to share the use of the town’s disputed church building and so designated Biberach as a biconfessional city. Groundbreaking ecumenism? Yes, for 1649, perhaps less so today, but a part of the story of God’s people trying to make our way in the world.

No matter what the slant (and this truly highlights the “progressive” side of the tradition), it is a story worth telling and reading. Dr. Walter Brueggemann calls the book the story of the folk who never made the “power lists” in the church. For that reason alone it is a good read by those of us not destined for those lists. We can remember around the campfire and then Onward Christians! “Go and do likewise!”

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