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“She’s done it again! Diana Butler Bass has this unique ability to articulate clearly and compellingly what you’ve previously experienced as an intuition, a sense, a nudge. Many of us are aware of the massive shifts going on all around us, and here Diana gives us the gift of naming it, explaining it, and presenting the evidence. She’s spot-on prophetic, compelling, and most important, hopeful.”

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“Some people speak well, some people say what must be said, but fewer have both the experience and competence to speak so all can understand and even agree. Diana Butler Bass does all of the above—and even better, she does it with faith and love. Join her in rebuilding religion from the bottom up!”

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“Butler Bass has always had something significant to say in each of her books, but here she outdoes even her own winning record. Rich with tempered but optimistic insights and blessed with up-to-date statistics and the scholarship to support them, *Christianity After Religion* should be

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—Phyllis Tickle, author of *The Great Emergence*

“Diana Butler Bass is traditional without being a traditionalist. She’s smart but not a stuffy academic. She’s a mystic but still down to earth. She has a good nose to sniff out crappy religion, but she also has the eyes to see new life budding from the compost of Christendom. Diana reminds us here that, before every great awakening, folks say it is impossible . . . and after every great awakening, folks say it was inevitable.”

—Shane Claiborne, author and activist

“*Christianity After Religion* is an important and life-giving book, written by an engaged Christian who is already well-established as one of our finest religious writers. Diana Butler Bass has a keen eye for what is happening in the Christian world these days—so keen, she is able to see through the bad news for the good news that is emerging. With her historical scholarship, her hopeful eye to the future, her on-the-ground experience with the church, and her gift for lovely, lucid prose, the author has given us a book that can help us reclaim the best of our faith tradition.”

—Parker J. Palmer, author of *Healing the Heart of Democracy*
and *Let Your Life Speak*

“Interesting, insightful, impressive, and important, this gracefully written book establishes Bass as one of our foremost commentators on twenty-first century Christianity.”

—Marcus Borg, author of *Speaking Christian*

“Of Diana Butler Bass’s many excellent books, this is the most substantive, provocative, and inspiring yet. Building on substantial historical and sociological analyses of past and present, it leads to a powerful finale of sage guidance for the future. Along the way, the book overflows with generous insights—about scripture, about movements and institutions, about the point of religion and spirituality, about Christian identity, and about how endings and beginnings can be contained in the singular seed of the present moment. I expect (and hope) that this will be the must-read ‘church book’ for every Christian leader—clergy and lay—for years to come.”

—Brian D. McLaren, author of *A New Kind of Christianity*
and *Naked Spirituality*

CHRISTIANITY
AFTER
RELIGION

ALSO BY DIANA BUTLER BASS

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CHRISTIANITY
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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

God. I don't really like religion. Religion keeps us away from Jesus. It is more a . . ." I wasn't sure how to put it. "It's a spiritual thing."

My answer did not register. She turned away, flipping her long Marcia Brady-like hair impertinently in my face, and walked off.

It would be at least another decade before I would hear someone confess to being "spiritual but not religious." I was only trying to describe something that had happened to me, an experience I had with God. A few months earlier, I had started attending a new church, one where the pastor urged members to get born again. I wasn't entirely sure what that meant. But I listened to friends testify to God's presence in their lives; they said Jesus was their friend and that they felt the Holy Spirit in their hearts. Although I had grown up in a Methodist church, I had never heard anyone talk about God with such warmth or intimacy. So, one Sunday during communion, as I ate Saltine crackers followed by Welch's grape juice, I actually felt Jesus. He was there. He showed up again a few days later at youth group at a backyard pool party as we all sang, "I Wish We'd All Been Ready," a popular song about the Rapture and the end times. I didn't know how to explain it, but God had touched my heart, and I felt fresh and new, relieved that God was there. I figured this was what the pastor meant by getting "born again."

I told a friend and asked him, "What's this religion called?"

He laughed, saying, "It isn't a religion; it's a relationship."

At the time, I felt pretty special, that God had chosen me, or the small group of "us," for this experience. What I didn't know was that millions and millions of other people shared our story—of growing up in a formal religion, finding that somehow chilly or distant, and rediscovering God through a mystical experience. Many of those people would call it being "born again," but others would speak of being "filled with the Holy Spirit" or being "renewed" by God. They left traditional religion in search of new communities; they tried to reform their old churches by praying for the Spirit. They embraced all sorts of theologies, from fundamentalism to me-

dieval Catholic mysticism, from Pentecostalism to doctrines of their own design. They got baptized (or rebaptized), formed alternative communities, wrote praise songs, and raised their arms in ecstatic prayer.

And it was not only Christians. Many of my Jewish friends recount similar experiences of finding God anew in those days, as do those who grew up in agnostic or secular families. Millions reconnected with their Higher Power in recovery groups. Religion morphed from an external set of rules into a vibrant spiritual experience of God. Somehow, the word “religion” did not seem quite adequate to explain what had happened. For those of us who followed Jesus, we had stumbled into a world of Christianity after religion, a spiritual space beyond institutions, buildings, and organizations, a different sort of faith.

With hindsight, it is a little easier to understand. The 1970s were a time of profound change, a rearrangement of social relationships, a time of cultural upheaval and transformation. There were spiritual aspects to that change as well as political and social ones. Institutions and practices that once composed what was “normal” in American life began a prolonged period of decline, a failure that happened in fits and starts and that continues even today. As the old ended, Americans began an extended experiment in reordering faith, family, community, and nation.

In 1962, only a couple of years after I was born, pollsters found that 22 percent of Americans claimed to have had a “mystical experience” of God. In 1976, the year my Bible nearly broke my classmate’s toe, that number had risen to 31 percent of the population. Back in those days, we thought we were in the middle of a revival. Apparently, however, it did not end. By 2009, 48 percent of Americans confessed that they had had a mystical encounter with the divine. This was not merely some sort of short-lived emotional outburst of renewed faith. Instead, the numbers indicate that, during the past thirty years, American faith has undergone a profound and

extensive reorientation away from externalized religion toward internalized spiritual experience.

For much of this time, most journalists, historians, and theologians equated this change with a resurgence of conservative Christianity, believing that America had just experienced a massive evangelical awakening akin to the First Great Awakening in the 1740s or the Second Great Awakening in the early 1800s. In more recent years, however, something else has become clear. Not everyone who has experienced God afresh is an evangelical, fundamentalist, or Pentecostal. Indeed, they hail from many sorts of faiths, and many are not Christians.

And what is equally true, not all of those who first understood their experience of God in the context of evangelicalism stayed evangelical. Of friends from my high-school youth group, only a very few remained on the evangelical path. Others—including myself—migrated back to the old churches we once deserted; some became Buddhists, Hindus, or Jews; more than a few became inveterate seekers, agnostics, and atheists. One experienced Allah in her prayers; another met God in nature, magic, and ancient Celtic legends. Along the way, we found plenty of other people who had met and experienced God and never called themselves “born again.” The 48 percent is, if nothing else, a theological motley crew, diverse and pluralistic in their spirituality, as ineffable as the divine itself. But whatever the differences between these people, it appears that a good many of them are traveling new paths of meaning, exploring new ways to live their lives, experiencing a new sense of authenticity and wonder, and practicing new forms of community that address global concerns of human flourishing.

Fundamentalist preachers look at this situation and shake their heads, warning against the devil appearing as an angel of light, decrying how easy it is to fall into heresy, and how the evil one roams about tempting God’s children. To them, the 1970s revival went on the skids—neither their converts’ lives nor their attempt to convert

culture unfolded as planned. They are busily training new troops to correct the course and return America (and the rest of the Christian world) to old-time religion and God's righteous path. They envision a global sawdust trail to convert the heathen masses and restore biblical inerrancy, family values, social order, clerical authority, theological orthodoxy, sexual purity, free-market capitalism, and Protestant piety.

But there is another way of looking at things. What if the 1970s were not simply an evangelical revival like those of old, but the first stirrings of a new spiritual awakening, a vast interreligious movement toward individual, social, and cultural transformation? Have we lived the majority of our lives in the context of this awakening, struggling toward new understandings of God, how we should act ethically and politically, and who we are deep in our souls? What if the awakening is not exclusively a Christian affair, but rather that a certain form of Christianity is playing a significant role in forming the contours of a new kind of faith beyond conventional religious boundaries? Is America living in the wake of a revival gone awry or a spiritual awakening that is finally taking concrete—albeit unexpected—shape?

Strange as it may seem in this time of cultural anxiety, economic near collapse, terrorist fear, political violence, environmental crisis, and partisan anger, I believe that the United States (and not only the United States) is caught up in the throes of a spiritual awakening, a period of sustained religious and political transformation during which our ways of seeing the world, understanding ourselves, and expressing faith are being, to borrow a phrase, “born again.” Indeed, the shifts around religion contribute to the anxiety, even as anxiety gives rise to new sorts of understandings of God and the spiritual life. Fear and confusion signal change. This transformation is what some hope will be a “Great Turning” toward a global community based on shared human connection, dedicated to the care of our planet, committed to justice and equality, that seeks to

raise hundreds of millions from poverty, violence, and oppression.

This awakening has been under way for some time now and has reached a crucial stage, as a new “Age of the Spirit” has dawned. Theologian Harvey Cox points out that this turn toward spirituality as the new form of faith started in the previous century. The 1970s were a significant period in a long process of moving away from old-style religion toward new patterns of faith. In the last decade, this shift has accelerated exponentially, sweeping millions more into both discontent and the longing for change.

Exponential change creates exponential fear along with exponential hope. Massive transformation creates the double-edged cultural sword of decline and renewal. Exponential change ends those things that people once assumed and trusted to be true. At the same time, upheaval opens new pathways to the future. Change is about endings and beginnings and the necessary interrelationship between the two.

Most people accept that technology, politics, and social conditions change. But many also think that religion will shield them from the consequences of change in these secular arenas. Others think that a return to the “faith of our fathers” will slow or stop worrisome or unwanted social change. Neither of these perspectives is true. Faith can neither insulate from nor prevent change. Instead, faith is swept up in the waves of global change, as every aspect of human experience is undergoing profound rearrangement. In some arenas of contemporary life, especially in Africa and South America, religion is actually leading other sorts of change. Religion rarely protects people from change. Perhaps a call to return to older forms of faith may delay change—only, however, in the way that Roman persecutions slowed the spread of Christianity or late medieval inquisitions turned back the advance of Protestantism. History teaches that the “faith of our fathers” may have won some battles, but has lost many a war.

Is there a better way to understand change and faith in these days when the ground seems so unsteady beneath us? Religion, faith, spiritual experience, mysticism, church, theology—all these are holy things, profound ways of relating to God. Yet they all exist in the context of the world, equally as dependent on the vicissitudes of human experience as any surety of divine revelation. Religious expression is not immutable; it changes all the time. Faith roils right along with other global pressures. Christianity is no exception to the historical transformation of our times, and to view faith as either irrelevant to or outside of the purview of global cultural change is foolish.

This book is concerned with religion and change—specifically how Christianity, especially Christianity in the United States, is changing and how people are questioning conventional patterns of faith and belief. At the outset, let me be perfectly clear. I do not think it is wise to adapt religions to contemporary tastes willy-nilly. As the gloomy nineteenth-century Anglican dean William Inge once said, “Whoever marries the spirit of this age will find himself a widower in the next.” I do, however, think it is exceedingly wise for faithful people to intentionally engage emerging religious questions in order to reform, renew, and reimagine ancient traditions in ways that make sense to contemporary people.

The 1970s were the beginning of the end of older forms of Christianity, and now, decades later, we are witnessing the end of the beginning. What follows is a sustained reflection on how religion has changed in our lifetime—a life lived between the beginning of an end and the end of that beginning—and what that means for Christian faith and practice. Much has changed. Where Christianity is now vital, it is not really seen as a “religion” anymore. It is more of a spiritual thing.



PART I

The End of Religion

What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today. . . . We are moving toward a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore. Even those who honestly describe themselves as “religious” do not in the least act up to it, and so they presumably mean something quite different by “religious.”

What does that mean for “Christianity”? If religion is only a garment of Christianity—and even this garment has looked very different at different times—then what is a religionless Christianity?

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER
Letters and Papers from Prison



CHAPTER ONE

The End of the Beginning

EVERY SPRING, I LOOK forward to the Easter issue of the national newsmagazines. The cover is usually beautiful, bearing an image of Jesus or other religious art that accompanies a story about faith in America. As with the Christmas issue, the secular magazines offer up a heart-warming religion story as a nod to the season.

When I pulled the April 4, 2009, issue of *Newsweek* from my mailbox, nothing could have surprised me more. The cover was black, emblazoned with a headline in large red type: “The End of Christian America.” I flipped open the story, written by *Newsweek* editor Jon Meacham, and read the lead:

It was a small detail, a point of comparison buried in the fifth paragraph on the 17th page of a 24-page summary of the 2009 American Religious Identification Survey. But as R. Albert Mohler Jr.—president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, one of the largest on earth—read over the document after its release in March, he was struck by a single sentence. For a believer like Mohler—a starched, unflinchingly conservative Christian, steeped in the theology of his particular province of

the faith, devoted to producing ministers who will preach the inerrancy of the Bible and the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the only means to eternal life—the central news of the survey was troubling enough: the number of Americans who claim no religious affiliation has nearly doubled since 1990, rising from 8 to 15 percent. Then came the point he could not get out of his mind: while the unaffiliated have historically been concentrated in the Pacific Northwest, the report said, “this pattern has now changed, and the Northeast emerged in 2008 as the new stronghold of the religiously unidentified.” As Mohler saw it, the historic foundation of America’s religious culture was cracking.

“Cracking” may seem too negative a term, but the *Newsweek* analysis of the polling data is certainly on target. In the last decade, Christianity in the United States has undergone tectonic shifts that have altered the nation’s religious landscape.

For a couple of years prior to the *Newsweek* story, I had been pointing out to denominational executives, seminary presidents, and clergy leaders that the demographics of Christianity as a whole—not just liberal religion or Roman Catholicism or main-line Protestantism—were changing in unprecedented ways and that surveys indicated less religiosity in the United States than was historically the case. People were skeptical, insisting that evangelical, conservative, and megachurch Christianity was still growing. But there it was in black and white (and red) in *Newsweek*. Christianity of all sorts is struggling in America. “This is not to say that the Christian God is dead,” Jon Meacham stated, “but that he is less of a force in American politics and culture than at any other time in recent memory. To the surprise of liberals who fear the advent of an evangelical theocracy and to the dismay of religious conservatives who long to see their faith more fully expressed in public life, Christians are now making up a declining percentage of the American population.”¹

For those old enough to remember—or for eager history students—the April 2009 *Newsweek* cover harkened back to another newsmagazine cover. Forty-three years earlier, in April 1966, *Time* had a similarly bleak black-and-red cover story entitled, “Is God Dead?” That story proclaimed a radical new theology, as stated by religion professor Thomas Altizer: “We must recognize that the death of God is a historical event: God has died in our time, in our history, in our existence.” Of course, God had not died, and the United States was a decade away from electing Southern Baptist Jimmy Carter as president in the evangelical revival that swept the country in the 1970s. But memory of the cover remained, permanently making readers skeptical of such pronouncements on the part of the mainstream media. Although the old “God is dead” theologians actually made some reasonable and relevant philosophical points, *Time* treated their work as a fad and got the story wrong. As a fad, “God is dead” gave way to Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson and the religious Right, a reborn born-again revivalism that reshaped twentieth-century faith. The ensuing religious fervor made a laughingstock of the 1966 *Time* cover, and historians of religion ridiculed it in textbooks as an example of how not to analyze religion in America.

Because of the *Time* magazine “God is dead” cover debacle, *Newsweek* readers eyed “The End of Christian America” rather cynically. Yet the *Newsweek* story is not of a few university professors theorizing about secularism or existentialism. *Newsweek* reported on two major polls in American religion, both significant, sophisticated, and scientifically grounded research about grassroots American beliefs. According to *Newsweek*, these polls found that the percentage of self-identified Christians has fallen 10 points since 1990, from 86 to 76 percent, while the percentage of people who claim they are unaffiliated with any particular faith has doubled in recent years, rising to 16 percent. The number of people willing to describe themselves as atheist or agnostic has increased about fourfold

from 1990 to 2009, from 1 million to about 3.6 million.² In other words, the *Newsweek* story did not report what theologians think about religion; the *Newsweek* story reported what the American people are thinking about religion. This was a very different story.

According to Meacham, the conservative Southern Baptist Al Mohler stated: “A remarkable culture-shift has taken place around us. The most basic contours of American culture have been radically altered. . . . Clearly, there is a new narrative, a post-Christian narrative, that is animating large portions of this society.”³ He got that right.

Despite the good reporting in the *Newsweek* story, the editors may have come a little late to the conversation. For more than two decades, theologians, historians, and social scientists have been noting unanticipated shifts in religious life and discussing “the end of Christendom” and the emergence of “post-Christian” Western culture. Much of their work has focused on Europe and Great Britain, intellectually hedging their bets with vague appeals to American exceptionalism (saying things like, “The United States does not quite fit the religious pattern of other Western nations”).

Since the mid-1990s, however, observers of contemporary religion have increasingly argued that Christian belief and practice are eroding even in the United States. Traditional forms of faith are being replaced by a plethora of new spiritual, ethical, and nonreligious choices. If it is not the end of religion, it certainly seems to be the end of what was conventionally understood to be American religion. Put another way, the shift that I experienced in the 1970s may have come to a conclusion. The process of leaving religion, one that started three or four decades ago, seems to have reached a tipping point. We have most likely come to the end of the beginning of a great transformation of faith. What was is no longer. And, as a result, discontent, doubt, disillusionment, and for some, despair, are the themes of the day.

Rumblings

For the last dozen years, I have been studying what nurtures vital congregations and writing books about good churches. In the process, I have visited hundreds of strong Christian communities, small and large, old and new, modest and wealthy. Most of those congregations are “mainline Protestant” churches, a historic moniker describing denominations whose roots stretch back to the European founding of America. Although these old churches are often ignored or dismissed, I discovered that there exists an unnoticed spiritual vibrancy in some mainline congregations, based around a serious engagement with faith practices such as prayer, hospitality, and enacting justice.

Most of my work explored success stories—churches that are making it despite difficult times for their denominations more generally. However, I began to wonder if I was avoiding a more perplexing question. Despite such examples of vibrant faith, why is Christianity in the United States struggling to maintain its influence, institutions, and numerical strength?

During the same dozen years in which I analyzed successful local religious communities, new surveys and polls pointed to an erosion of organized Christianity in nearly all its forms, with only “nondenominational” churches showing a slight numerical increase. It began to appear that vital churches might well be only islands of success in the rising seas of Western unbelief and the high tides of cultural change are leaving traditional religion adrift. All sorts of people—even mature, faithful Christians—are finding conventional religion increasingly less satisfying, are attending church less regularly, and are longing for new expressions of spiritual community. As I traveled the country sharing my research with pastors, they began to relate on-the-ground stories that echoed the polling data. “People just don’t come to church anymore,” pastors told me. “It doesn’t really matter what we do or how solid our community

is. Even those who consider themselves ‘good’ members only come once a month or so now.”

At first, I didn’t pay much attention to these complaints. After all, religious leaders always seem overly concerned with attendance numbers, their need to recruit Sunday school teachers and committee members, and how much money is tossed into offering plates. Ever since the Great Awakening in the 1740s, American pastors prove that God is blessing their church, their revival, or their religious tribe by inflating numbers of the faithful, while others try to rouse the spiritually lazy by criticizing their lack of church attendance. American ministers vacillate between bragging about and bemoaning the number of people who attend church, in each case using numbers to underscore some theological point. As a result, most of us who study American religion are often skeptical of pastoral reports of increase and decline.

Whatever the history of ministerial exaggeration, I became convinced that the numbers were not being manipulated this time. The survey data were too consistent and coming from too many different sources for too many years. Academic polls, journalistic ones, denominational surveys, and polls with heavy theological agendas—all indicated that inherited religious identities, like “Protestant,” “Catholic,” and “Jewish,” were in a state of flux in the United States, that actual attendance at weekly religious services is significantly down, that people mix and switch religions more easily than in the past, that traditional religious institutions are in a sustained decline, and that even general belief in God has eroded over the last thirty years.

Many individual congregations may be successful, yes. But the overall picture for religious life in the United States is not terribly encouraging, especially for Christians. Put simply, religious patterns in the United States are beginning to resemble those of other Western industrialized countries and no longer indicated the American sort of spiritual exceptionalism boasted about by previous genera-

tions. As sociologist of religion Mark Chaves, from Duke University, says, “The evidence for a decades-long decline in American religiosity is now incontrovertible—like the evidence for global warming, it comes from multiple sources, shows up in several dimensions, and paints a consistent factual picture—the burden of proof has shifted to those who want to claim that American religiosity is not declining.”⁴

More anecdotally, perhaps, it has also become clear that more people are angry—or are willing to express their anger—about religion, most especially Christianity, than at any other time in the last century or so. Some comments are predictable (“I’ve invented my own religion” is a line I have heard far too many times), but others are tragic—including the one I heard from a businessman who had not attended church in more than twenty years, since his infant child had died. “At the funeral,” he said shakily, “the pastor said our baby died because we hadn’t prayed enough. It was our fault, he said, and that our lack of faith killed our son. Well, I walked out of church that day, and I have never returned.”

But anger is not the only emotion people express when talking about religion. Many people are just bored. They are bored with church-as-usual, church-as-club, church-as-entertainment, or church-as-work. Many of my friends, faithful churchgoers for decades, are dropping out because religion is dull, the purview of folks who never want to change or always want to fight about somebody else’s sex life; they see the traditional denominations as full of Mrs. Grundy priggishness. On Sundays, other things are more interesting—the *New York Times*, sports, shopping, Facebook, family time, working in the garden, biking, hiking, sipping lattes at the local coffee shop, meeting up at the dog park, getting the kids to the soccer game. Or just working. With tough economic times, lots of people work on Sunday mornings, the traditional time to attend to religious obligations.

In previous generations, scholars referred to eleven o’clock on

Sunday morning as the most segregated hour in America, meaning that white people went to one church, black people to another. Now, the line of segregation is between those who go to church and those who do not. And, judging by the number of cars parked in driveways on Sunday morning in most American cities and suburbs, it is not hard to figure out which group is growing.

Bear Market: The Great Religious Recession

It may seem overly dramatic to speak of the “end of religion,” especially in a country like the United States, which appears (especially to outsiders) to be particularly partial to God. In recent years, however, a number of fine scholars and writers have written about the religious change in which we now find ourselves, from Harvard professor Harvey Cox ruminating on the end of the “Age of Belief” in his book *The Future of Faith*, to journalist Phyllis Tickle writing of the end of Christendom in her *The Great Emergence*, to author Brian McLaren describing a “new kind of Christianity” in a book bearing that title.⁵ Certainly change is the cultural moment; transformation is the air we breathe. But an end to, of all things, religion?

Throughout the twentieth century, some insightful Christian thinkers began to wonder if Western Christianity was coming to some sort of end. As early as 1912, Wellesley College professor Vida Scudder opined that “conventional” European Christianity was “passing and will soon be forgotten”; it would be replaced by a new faith of “high adventure.”⁶ Some thirty-odd years later, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from a Nazi prison camp, speculated that Christianity might be “over” as a religion, adding that all religion as a “historical and temporary form of human expression” may well be dying. Religion was ebbing away. Pondering this change, he wondered, “What is a religionless Christianity?”⁷

Radical theologians of the 1950s and 1960s took up this line

of questioning and extended it to include God, whose death appeared imminent. Indeed, in the middle decades of the twentieth century, religion—and God along with it—looked to be in sad shape. Churches started to empty as those of the postwar generation rejected their parents' conventional faiths and opted to become religious seekers instead. At that time, Harvey Cox wrote of a "secular city," arguing against church-as-institution or traditional denomination in favor of a God who is active in the secular realm. Roman Catholics embarked on a process of modernizing their church in the great council of Vatican II. Indeed, for the intellectuals of the mid-twentieth century, Christianity seemed to be, as Scudder and Bonhoeffer had suggested, in serious trouble, if not dying altogether.

For other people, however, things did not seem as dire, for these same intellectuals paid scant attention to the intrinsic churchgoing habits of heartland America and even less to the energetic springs of a vibrant new evangelical religion. For many American pastors and revivalists in the offices of evangelical ministries and mission agencies and at the prayer meetings of Pentecostals, all the talk of God's death, religionless Christianity, and church decline fell flat. Some forms of religion may be dying, they proclaimed, but not theirs. "We're not a religion anyway," they insisted. "We're about having a relationship with Jesus." Their version of Christianity—the only "true" one from their point of view—remained robust; only liberal, overly intellectualized, apostate religion was dying. Conservative Christianity—real, potent, theologically orthodox, and politically right-wing Jesus religion—was just fine, thank you.

Their assessment seemed true for two or three decades, but it is no longer the case, for in the first decade of the twenty-first century, even the most conservative Christian churches have stopped growing. Membership gains have slowed to a crawl, and in some cases membership is dwindling. Churches in the Southern Baptist Convention, the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, and the conservative Presbyterian Church in America are reporting losses that resemble

declines their mainline counterparts suffered in the 1970s. New megachurches spring up and are successful for a time—until they are forced to close down and sell their buildings. Even the Catholic Church has barely maintained its share of the population, mostly because immigrant Catholics offset the massive loss of U.S.-born members. The old argument that liberal churches are in decline and conservative ones are growing is not true. The denominations that once seemed impervious to decline are beginning to look like most other American religious groups. Everyone is in the same situation: a religious bear market. Indeed, the first decade of the twenty-first century could rightly be called the Great Religious Recession.

Anne, Ellen, and Sheila

On July 28, 2010, novelist Anne Rice posted her resignation on Facebook: “Today I quit being a Christian. I’m out. I remain committed to Christ as always, but not to being ‘Christian’ or to being part of Christianity.” She further explained:

I refuse to be anti-feminist. I refuse to be anti-artificial birth control. I refuse to be anti-Democrat. I refuse to be anti-secular humanism. I refuse to be anti-science. I refuse to be anti-life. In the name of Christ, I quit Christianity and being Christian. Amen.

Within twenty-four hours, more than four thousand people gave Rice’s Facebook declaration a thumbs-up, and tens of thousands more shared or retweeted it. It seemed particularly strange, because Rice had returned to her childhood Catholicism with some fanfare about a decade earlier. She wrote of her reconversion to religion in her autobiography: “In the moment of surrender, I let go of all the theological or social questions which had kept me from [God] for countless years. I simply let them go. There was the sense,

profound and wordless, that if He knew everything I did not have to know everything, and that, in seeking to know everything, I'd been, all of my life, missing the entire point.”⁸ She rejoined the Catholic Church. When she reembraced the church, Rice's affirmation of faith had been big news. Now, the prodigal daughter was going the other way—walking away from all organized religion as a self-confessed “outsider” critical of the church. Major papers, online news sites, and television stations carried word of her rejection of Christianity. Within days, Rice's anti-profession of faith was all over the Internet, on talk shows, in sermons, on blogs, and the subject of coffee-shop conversations.

Of course, when a noted public figure makes such an announcement, it is big news. But Rice's confession did not go viral simply because she is famous. Rather, popular discontent with Christianity is such that millions of Americans could relate to her words. She struck a cultural chord. She said what others only suspect or feel or secretly think—that there is a profound and painful disconnect between what Christianity (and other religions as well) has become and what we perceive that it should be.

A few weeks before Rice's Facebook testimony, I delivered a keynote address at a conference of mainline Protestant clergy and leaders. Their conference theme was “Who Are You Christians Anyway?” The question is a good one. Although the United States remains the country with the largest number of Christians in the world, even here Christianity is experiencing a decline in demographics. As noted in the *Newsweek* article, the actual percentage of Christians has dropped significantly in recent years. Many people feel increasingly anxious about identifying themselves as Christians. Some obviously reject Christianity in favor of other spiritual alternatives, while others use different terms, such as “Jesus follower,” to identify themselves.

I had been writing about this shift in a series of blogs that appeared in the weeks before Anne Rice's announcement. The com-

ments to these posts revealed that many of my readers were honestly and anxiously wrestling with religion. One minister wrote about the “difference between religion and faith,” saying that “religion seeks conformity and control—scriptural infallibility and literalism, imposition of beliefs upon others—and cannot abide any other way of encountering God that falls outside of its defined boundaries. Faith seeks freedom and life for all to experience God on their own terms and in their own ways—and then allows for communal experiences and collaboration to build a better world.” A self-described forty-something said, “I increasingly find the Catholic church and mainline Protestant churches to be irrelevant. Many churchgoers seem to be content with the status quo and are uncomfortable being challenged, especially on issues of social justice. . . . We are currently experiencing the death throes of a dinosaur.” The following sharp assessment came from an Anglican in Sydney, Australia: “I’m continually being disappointed by (bordering on disillusioned by) the institutional church. Institutional self-preservation seems more important than those on the front line who still minister to the physically, emotionally, and spiritually needy. . . . [Church] just doesn’t seem relevant to ‘modern’ lives.” And in an equally blunt observation, another noted, “Christianity has become a culture unto itself and has merely skimmed over what Jesus has said and is saying.”

Just a few days before Anne Rice proclaimed that she quit and generated a media sensation, a humble testimony appeared in the comment stream. In an entry dated July 25, 2010, a woman identified only as “Ellen” shared her churchgoing experience with the blog community:

I awoke this Sunday morning grateful that I didn’t have to go to church anymore. I still believe in the living God but after years of moving from church to church, I feel that I can wing it for now without risking my immortal soul. I grew up as the minister’s child in a white-bread mainline church that was orderly, kind

and very nice. I lived in a constrained, polite fishbowl, which I put behind me as soon as I left for college. . . . As a young mother, I chose the Episcopal church in part for the liturgy, but also as a middle ground between my husband's Roman Catholic upbringing and my Protestant one. I lived in a conservative diocese which fought women's ordination in the ugliest way imaginable, while at the same time seeming to turn its back on the poor and needy. I moved to the Roman Catholic church, which made no pretense about women's rights, but at least has a marvelous tradition in serving the outcasts and those in need. I think my best church years were within that fold. But there was always the nagging question of the Eucharist. How did it become so closed and regulated? Where did the idea of restricted access come from? Eventually I got interested in a non-denominational church, because it seemed to take the faith walk most seriously. . . . The church preached the Bible only, but of course only the parts that pounded the tithing message, the "name it and claim it" message, and endless salvation threats. I left in disgust when disagreeing with the pastor meant you were not being faithful to God. I knew when I left that I wouldn't be going anywhere else for a time. For a while I kept up the discipline of daily Bible reading and prayer, but it wasn't really feeding my soul. It had become another ritual. . . . But I realized my spiritual formation was ongoing and had been a compilation of the many Christian traditions I had been a part of. I had read the Bible cover-to-cover two or three times and had been in many Bible study groups and felt perhaps I had enough of a biblical foundation to safely put the good book aside for the time being. I enjoy reading religious books, blogs and listening to podcasts of sermons, too. But I feel most churches are way too fixed on self-preservation and preaching the gospel rather than living it. So, for now, my offering goes to Doctors Without Borders and other charities. My work is my ministry as I meet the broken-hearted and lost every day. I quietly encourage the faith of the dispirited, pray for others and try to walk humbly with my God.⁹

Ellen had been a mainline Protestant, Anglican, Roman Catholic, and evangelical. Each church had failed to live out the love of God in practical, relevant, inclusive, and healing ways. Each was too interested in its own agenda to be able to make a real difference to Ellen's life and world. Anne Rice is not the only Christ follower discontented with Christianity. Unfamous Ellen is too.

In 1985, sociologist Robert Bellah introduced his readers to Sheila Larson, a nurse whom he interviewed for his book *Habits of the Heart*. Sheila had drifted away from church and named her religion after herself, dubbing her faith "Sheilaism." She said: "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice." Sheila became a paradigm for late twentieth-century faith—individualistic, therapeutic, private, and inner-directed. "It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself," Sheila explained. "You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other."¹⁰ Although Sheila has been much maligned by theologians, sociologists, and journalists, in the years since *Habits* was published she has become the book's most enduring character, a symbol of religious change, individualistic spirituality, and the erosion of the American religious community.

Ellen is not Sheila. The spiritual journeys of both women began in a similar way—feeling the need to free themselves from constraining family religious patterns. According to Bellah, Sheila was "trying to find a center in herself after liberating herself from an oppressively conformist early family life."¹¹ After that, however, their spiritual journeys diverge. Sheila's major religious experiences included hearing her own voice as God's and seeing her own face as God's—both of which took place around health crises. Therapeutic mysticism shaped Sheila's path.

Unlike Sheila's, Ellen's journey is more externally driven; in it she makes considered religious choices based on theology and be-

havior. It would be easy to dismiss Ellen as a religious consumer, a “church shopper” who is never satisfied. If she is a shopper, Ellen is a remarkably serious one. She engaged the theology of each community she encountered, participated in its life over time, and evaluated the proclaimed messages of each church against the behaviors the church practiced. She asked questions about important issues, political concerns, and theology. In the end, Ellen weighed the churches against both Jesus’s teaching and her own experience in regard to women, egalitarianism, service, and authority. She tried to find a church community where words and deeds matched and where the theology embodied a robust sense of God’s love.

Ellen did not leave willingly. She did not drift away into individualism; she specifically chose to leave the church. Her conscience could no longer abide what she understood to be institutional hypocrisy—all of the denominations failed to practice what they preached. Indeed, Ellen criticized churches for being too inner-directed and institutionally absorbed. Religion, she contended, fails when it forgets the oppressed, the marginalized, the poor, and the dispirited. Although she eventually found herself on an individual spiritual path, Ellen is still reaching for connection. Even after leaving the church, she attempts to create some sort of new faith community through books, the Internet, charity, and her workplace. She has not invented her own new religion, “Ellenism,” but she has, in effect, become pastor, theologian, moral authority, teacher, and spiritual director of her own postinstitutional church.

Ellen’s and Anne Rice’s stories are tales of trying hard to be a good church member and a good Christian. Ellen and Anne are not spiritual drifters. There is a qualitative difference between their testimonies and that of Sheila. They are smart women who gave themselves seriously to their faith communities and whose religious institutions failed them. They experienced a jarring disjunction between their understandings of God and Jesus and what their churches taught and proclaimed and how they acted. Unlike Sheila,

neither Ellen nor Anne would be content with therapeutic mysticism, an undefined inner world of only the self and God. According to Anne and Ellen, churches, synagogues, and other religious organizations are broken and have made themselves irrelevant. Ellen and Anne quit because they are unwilling to live with hypocrisy and are trying to find a better way of being connected to God, Jesus, and the world—and they equate the failure of institutions with a failure of religion.

They might well go to church if they could find a community—or a Christianity—that embodied God’s love and mercy in practical and meaningful ways. Put simply, Anne and Ellen were asking more of the church, rather than less; they were searching for a community that practiced what it preached. If Sheila represented an important aspect of American religion a quarter century ago, Ellen represents an equally significant change in religion today. People are fed up. They are unwilling to put up with religious business-as-usual. And, perhaps surprisingly, their unwillingness—the rejection of religion—is also hope for the future of faith communities.

Revivals and Awakenings

Of course, religious institutions are not America’s only struggling institutions, and the religious recession runs parallel to economic, political, and social recessions as well. In its December 6, 2010, issue, *Time* magazine published a decade retrospective: “What Really Happened, 2000–2010.” The issue’s lead article posed the question “The end of history?” Beginning with the apocalyptic speculation of Y2K, author Nancy Gibbs says:

We thought we got a reprieve . . . as the lights stayed on, banks didn’t fail, planes didn’t fall from the sky, cities didn’t tumble into the sea. At least, not right away. It took more time for the bubbles

to burst and markets to plunge and cities to drown, for faith in institutions to collapse—the banks, the court, the church, the intelligence community, the press and finally the government, which nearly 1 in 3 people now say they “almost never” trust to do the right thing.¹²

Each successive story covered failure: the political failure of the 2000 presidential election; the security failure of 9/11; the failure of international policy with the war in Iraq in 2003; the failure of traditional cultural gatekeepers such as publishers and journalists throughout the decade; the failure to control or contain natural disasters, as with Hurricane Katrina in 2005; and the failure of the American economy from 2007 onward. It is an unflinching portrait of a grim decade, a picture of a nation in decline.

A few weeks before the *Time* issue, comedian Jon Stewart reminded the crowd gathered at his “Rally to Restore Sanity” that “these are hard times, not the end times.” Indeed, only two months earlier, radio and TV personality Glenn Beck had marshaled his audience at the Lincoln Memorial preaching the possible end of America, the end of Christian faith, and the end of the-world-as-folks-knew-it. Although few people ran for the hills to await the Lord’s return, Beck surely ignited a bull market for survivalist gear. These are days of doubt and discontent, of wondering why everything has changed and the fear that ensues from loss. The anxiety is such that some may well think it the end times, or the time of endings.

In such a climate, Stewart’s words acted as a reality check: this is not the end of days, only a time of very challenging days. Indeed, the *Time* editors concluded their gloomy issue with the suggestion that this is not the “end” of history, but “more like the start.” Writer Michael Elliott even named the last ten years “The Sparkling Decade,” a time of innovation and optimism pushing toward a renewed future based on the “twin forces of technological ad-

vancement and globalization.”¹³ The bigger picture, he insisted, is that of international transformation, of the birth of a new world of information sharing, education, creativity, and economic growth—with the United States, Canada, and Europe joined by China, India, Brazil, and some African nations to lift “hundreds of millions” out of poverty. The shift will continue to challenge established institutions and nations that once monopolized wealth, influence, and power. However, if you “change your vantage point,” as Elliott suggested, things looked less like a decline and more like a rebirth.¹⁴

Although the *Time* issue may seem overly optimistic to some, the lesson is clear: endings are often beginnings. Recession is the gateway to renewal. Dressed in a secular guise, this is actually a core teaching of many faith traditions—notably the idea of resurrection in Christianity, but also reincarnation in some Eastern religions, death and birth in ancestor worship, and cycles of nature in tribal or pagan faiths. This spiritual pattern suggests the possibility for new things to emerge from the demise of the old, and religion itself is not exempt from this process. Indeed, over time, religious institutions—like all institutions—and the theologies, rituals, and practices associated with particular religious expressions are born, grow, mature, and die. From a particular vantage point, it might look like the end of religion, more specifically, the end of a particular set of patterns organizing church, theology, and religious life, if not the end of Christianity. These patterns are what Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to as “religion,” or the “garment” of Christianity. The old garment of faith is taken off—or falls to shreds—as something new emerges from beneath the worn cloth.

In North America, there is a name for such a religious process: awakening. The late Brown University professor William McLoughlin notes that the terms “revival” and “awakening” are often confused. However, he differentiates between the two. Revivals are essentially rituals of personal religious renewal that are often emotional and always involve a conversion of some sort. Revivals may stand on

their own—as in the yearly revival meeting at a Baptist or Pentecostal church or a massive Billy Graham meeting—or they may be the subset of an awakening.

An awakening is a much larger event. Awakenings are movements of cultural revitalization that “eventuate in basic restructurings of our institutions and redefinitions of our social goals.” As McLoughlin writes, “Revivals and awakenings occur in all cultures. They are essentially folk movements, the means by which a people or a nation reshapes its identity, transforms its patterns of thought and action, and sustains a healthy relationship with environmental and social change.”¹⁵ Awakenings begin when old systems break down, in “periods of cultural distortion and grave personal stress, when we lose faith in the legitimacy of our norms, the viability of our institutions, and the authority of our leaders in church and state.”¹⁶ A “critical disjunction” in how we perceive ourselves, God, and the world arises from the stress. The end of the old opens the way for the new.

Historians of American religion generally recognize three significant awakenings in the United States and Canada: the First Great Awakening, 1730–60; the Second Great Awakening, 1800–1830; and the Third Great Awakening, 1890–1920.¹⁷ During each period, old patterns of religious life gave way to new ones and, eventually, spawned new forms of organizations and institutions that interwove with social, economic, and political change and revitalized national life.

The First Great Awakening marked the end of European styles of church organization and created an experiential, democratic, pan-Protestant community of faith called evangelicalism. The Second Great Awakening ended Calvinist theological dominance and initiated new understandings of free will that resulted in a voluntary system for church membership and benevolent work. And the Third Great Awakening had two distinctive manifestations: the social gospel movement, with its progressive politics, and the Pentecostal movement, with an emphasis on miraculous transformation.

Despite the theological differences between the two movements, each emphasized the shift away from personal sin toward the idea of communal transformation of the social order through an experience of God active in history. The Third Great Awakening inspired new forms of mission work, possessed a keen passion for lifting the poor and oppressed, and was broadly ecumenical in vision and practice. In each of these three awakenings, older forms of Christian faith—European, Calvinist, or Protestant evangelical—were revitalized, reoriented, remade, and sometimes replaced by more culturally resonant conceptions of the self, God, community, and service to the world. In the process, new forms of Christianity came into being, with profound spiritual and political consequences.

In his small but influential book *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, William McLoughlin suggests that North American Christianity had entered into a new period of awakening, a Fourth Great Awakening, around 1960, which continues to the present. McLoughlin believed that, with the Fourth Great Awakening, Christian dominance of the United States would end, that more effusive, even romantic, forms of experiential, pluralistic religion would emerge, and that eventually new institutions would coalesce to carry the new spirit into a global, egalitarian ethic of environmentalism, community, and economic uplift.

Many writers in contemporary religion and spirituality are arguing that just that sort of new Christianity is coming into being. They speak of “postmodern,” emerging (or emergent or emergence), or new-paradigm Christianity. Phyllis Tickle, former religion editor of *Publishers Weekly*, asserts that the church is undergoing historic transformation, the sort of change that happens only once every five hundred years or so. The esteemed Harvey Cox, recently retired from Harvard Divinity School, claims that Christianity is currently making a break from the “Age of Belief,” a fifteen-hundred-year period of Western Christian dominance. Others, perhaps more modestly, say only that Christianity is moving out of a three-hundred-year cycle

that began in the Enlightenment. Whatever the exact chronological schema, the message is mostly the same: We live in a time of momentous historical change that is both exhilarating and frightening. Christianity itself is becoming something different from what it was.

With a due sense of regard for these fine discussions, trying to discern three-hundred-, five-hundred-, or fifteen-hundred-year patterns in history makes me a wee bit nervous; sometimes the biggest picture is not really the most helpful picture. It is very hard to understand how an individual, church, or faith community or a specific neighborhood or town fits in such a vast historical transformation. Certainly, it gives our times a sort of spiritual weight and helps people know their place in the unfolding of human history. It may well be exciting to live during such important times. But it may also weigh on one like spiritual determinism, a kind of historical predestination—there is not much one can do to change things, make things different, or shape the future. History happens to us. Who am I or what can I do that makes any difference as time carries everything away?

We do live in a time of change; this is a time of endings. Instead of arguing for a worldwide paradigm shift, I argue here for something less grandiose and more historically discrete. Ours is a time of awakening, even a Great Awakening, in line with other such periodic awakenings in North American history, a time of cultural revitalization and reorientation rather than a time of religious apocalypse. Since awakenings are cyclical times of endings and new beginnings, events that occur with some regularity as spiritual seasons, then it is easier to participate in what is happening around us with a sense of awareness, purpose, hope, and creative possibility.

Awakenings take work, as human beings respond to the promptings of God's Spirit in the world, but they are not the last days. There is no need to abandon family, friends, and home to run for the hills. Some things will cease to work, no longer make sense, and fail to give comfort or provide guidance. Institutions struggle to maintain only themselves, concentrating on their own survival.

Political parties wither. Religions lose their power to inspire. But that only means we have work to do here and now—to find new paths of meaning, new ways to connect with God and neighbor, to form new communities, and to organize ways of making the world a better place. These are hard times, not the end times.

A Pattern of Awakening

If we have been living for the past three or four decades in the Fourth Great Awakening, as McLoughlin proposed, why are we having such a hard time seeing it, and why is it apparently taking so long to come to fruition?

Some identify this awakening as solely an evangelical event, having begun with the Jesus movement in the 1960s. Others see the new awakening as the birth of Pentecostal fervor. Occasionally, a critic will identify a new awakening with the new spirit of Christian activism, such as the Vatican II renewal, the Protestant drive to ordain women, or the expansion of political and social egalitarianism. A few experience awakening in movements that reclaim ancient liturgy and spiritual practices. Still others see awakening in the growth of new religious movements and Eastern religions. Some proclaim the new awakening is not occurring in the old geographies of Western Christendom, but is solely an event of the Global South. Others think awakening is found in a rebirth of conservative or liberal politics. Most recently, young adults hope the Fourth Great Awakening is being born in a movement known as emergent or emerging church and in new virtual communities that exist only in cyberspace. Indeed, where some journalists, pollsters, and authors see the end of religion, others spot awakenings almost everywhere.

In short, there are almost too many candidates for the Fourth Great Awakening. Which of these many movements might shape the next phase of Western religious life and practice? Of course,

pastors, teachers, preachers, and leaders of each group have much invested in making sure their candidate wins—that any spiritual awakening will be led by their church, their theology, and their political agenda. Thus, many of these movements contend with each other—trying to outmaneuver the others for the most adherents, the spiritual bully pulpit, a seat on the president’s religious advisory council, or the cover of *Time* magazine. Spiritual awakening may well escape notice, because it looks like little other than religious chaos and division. The jumble obscures the transformation that is occurring in religion. A map—or spiritual GPS—would be helpful.

In 1956, anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace mapped awakenings as cultural change in his influential article “Revitalization Movements.” Although his study examined religious and cultural change among the Seneca peoples, he believed that the pattern applied to Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism as well. In *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, McLoughlin borrowed Wallace’s framework to explore North American Christian awakenings. He mapped the shape of religious renewal movements in American history by examining five stages of change:

1. During a *crisis of legitimacy* individuals cannot “honestly sustain the common set of religious understandings by which they believe they should act.” People wonder if they are the only ones who see the problems and experience the frustrations of the old ways. Thus, they begin to question conventional doctrines, practices, and their sense of identity.
2. People then experience *cultural distortion*, during which they conclude that their problems are not the result of personal failings, but rather “institutional malfunction,” as they seek ways to change these structures or reject them.
3. Significant individuals or communities then begin to articulate a *new vision*, new understandings of human nature, God,

spiritual practices, ethical commitments, and hope for the future. New possibilities begin to coalesce that make more sense in the light of new experiences than did the old ones.

4. As a new vision unfolds, small groups of people who understand the necessity for change begin to *follow a new path*; they experiment, create, and innovate with religious, political, economic, and family structures in a search for a new way of life. They develop new practices to give life meaning and make the world different. They embody the new vision and invite others to do so as well.
5. *Institutional transformation* occurs when the innovators manage to “win over that large group of undecided folks” who finally “see the relevance” of the new path and embrace new practices. When the undecideds “flip,” institutional change can finally take place.¹⁸

In McLoughlin’s map, the first two stages are stages of breakdown and decline; the second two are stages of imagination and possibility; the last is a stage of reform of institutions and social change. In this terrain, changed minds and hearts—that is, what we think about ourselves, God, and the world—precede institutional change (which means, of course, that those people who seek to change minds by changing institutions are probably working backward). This is not necessarily a chronological map—that is, stage one does not entirely end when stage two begins, stage two may begin before stage one is completed, and so forth. Individuals may move through these stages at differing personal rates than large groups do, and the stages overlap in time and space. Finally, maps never describe every human experience perfectly or predict the future with pinpoint accuracy. But these stages offer a way of seeing a pattern of religious and cultural change, helping us locate our larger communities and ourselves in this spiritual awakening and giving us a sense of future possibilities.

Given the limitations of any such pattern of human experience, Wallace's stages and McLoughlin's use of them can be very helpful. When many people feel lost, this can be a simple and empowering orienting device. Throughout these pages, I employ this framework of awakening to explore the endings and beginnings North Americans are currently experiencing in connection with religious faith and practice. My interest is primarily Christian, but not exclusively so, as the spiritual awakening in which the world finds itself is not only a Christian event. This book uses the five stages as a map through contemporary spiritual awakening.

Part I, "The End of Religion," outlines the breakdown of religion, especially in the past decade. This chapter, named "The End of the Beginning," presented the problem of religious decline and offered the possibility of awakening. Chapter 2 examines the "crisis of legitimacy" from the perspective of recent polling data in religion and focuses on the shifts of "believing, behaving, and belonging" (the three social markers for measuring religion and spirituality) roiling American faiths today. Chapter 3 explores the failure of institutional religion and looks at contemporary spiritual longings—the struggle to find new paths of meaning. Part II, "A New Vision," proposes that the search for a new vision is well under way in the form of experiential faith. Chapter 4 explores the new terrain of believing as experience; chapter 5, the new understandings of behaving as practice; and chapter 6, the new quest for belonging as relational and communal. Chapter 7 explores the connections between believing, behaving, and belonging.

The first two parts of this book largely cover what has already happened. The religious decline of Part I is clearly visible in polling data, surveys, statistics, and the news. The revisioning described in Part II is work that has been done by thought leaders, historians, social scientists, cultural critics, philosophers, scientists, and spiritual leaders in the past two or three decades in a number of fields. This section attempts to link much of that work in a clear, more

concerted presentation and argues that there exists a need for more spiritual, social, and political communities (whether churches, congregations, or gatherings of friends) to embody this vision in both worship and work in the world. Part II envisions the shape that a new form of Christianity is taking.

Part III, “Awakening,” turns toward what is happening now and what can happen as the awakening moves from vision to practice. Chapter 8 describes the Fourth Great Awakening as a “romantic” spiritual movement and delves into the tension between dogmatic and romantic forms of faith. Chapter 9 concludes with a call to action and offers what we can and should do as the necessary spiritual work of these times. Based on McLoughlin’s map, I believe that most people are still struggling with the first two stages of breakdown and discontent; many see and have begun to embrace the third stage’s new vision; and some have entered into the fourth stage of creating new practices and communities that embody the new vision. Only rare leaders have called for or ventured into the last stage of institutional renewal; that aspect of awakening still lies in the future, because some sort of consensus is necessary for the hard work of organizational change. We are not there yet. As a culture, the United States is struggling somewhere between the late second and early fourth stages, embroiled in significant tension over the direction of awakening.

Is it the end of Christian America? The end of Christianity? The end of religion? I think that the endings around us make a new beginning—a beginning that the Ellens of this world await as the old institutions fail. Ellen’s story signals not *the* end, but *an* end, as she expresses her discontent by walking away from what was and asking new questions of religious traditions. Ellen is far from alone.

And the awakening? What will it look like? It entails waking up and seeing the world as it is, not as it was. Conventional, comforting Christianity has failed. It does not work. For the churches that insist on preaching it, the jig is up. We cannot go back, and we should not

want to. Lot's wife turned to a pillar of salt when she looked back to catch one last glimpse of the past as her family fled to an unknown future (Gen. 19:26). Centuries later, Jesus reminded his followers, "No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:62).

But waking up is only the first step toward *awakening*. To awaken spiritually means that we develop a new awareness of God's energy in the world in order to discern what is needed to open the possibilities for human flourishing. Discernment leads to new understandings of self, neighbor, and God—a vision of what can and should be. Thus, awakening demands we act upon the new vision. Wake up, discern, imagine, and do. What will make a difference to the future is awakening to a faith that fully communicates God's love—a love that transforms how we believe, what we do, and who we are in the world.

