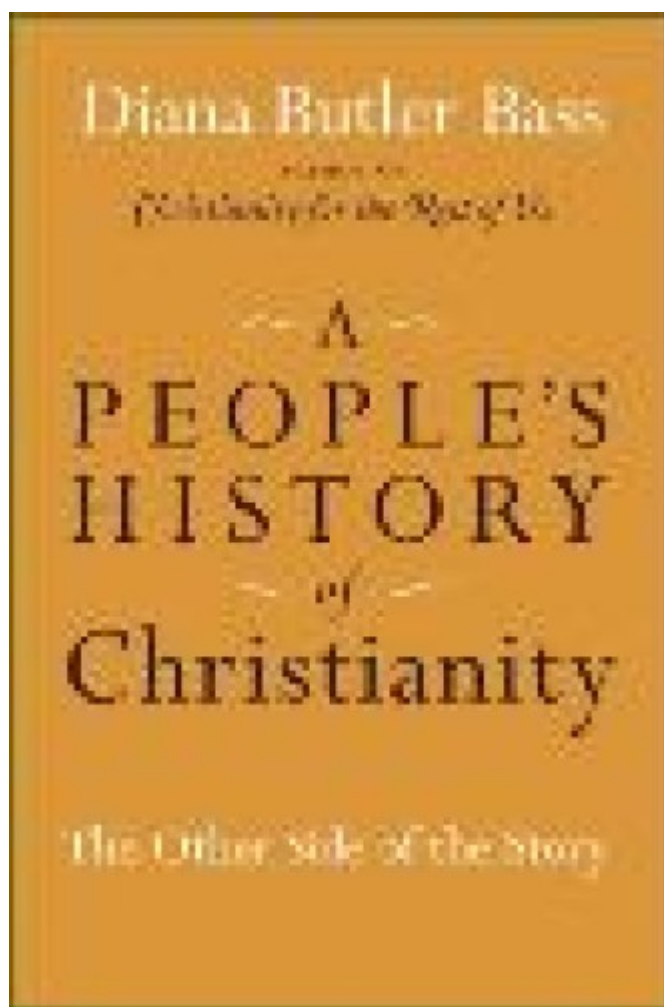


A People's History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story

reviewed by [Robert Cornwall](#) in the [Jun 16, 2009](#) issue

In Review



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

Diana Butler Bass

HarperOne

Although Diana Butler Bass doesn't refer to Jaroslav Pelikan's definition of tradition—"the living faith of the dead"—her *People's History* is a reflection of that definition. Writing for moderate-to-progressive Protestants who find little in church history to celebrate, she offers the "other side of the story," one that differs dramatically from the account of what she calls Big-C Christianity, which is denominated by Constantine, Christendom, Calvin and Christian America. Bass taps into often forgotten and neglected streams of Christian experience. The image of a river, employed in the book's final section, captures Bass's intent: the contemporary church is heir to many streams of Christian experience, and like a river it is both fluid and ever changing.

Taking inspiration from social historian Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, Bass plays the role of advocate rather than objective historian. In contrast to triumphalistic Big-C Christianity, here is what she calls Generative or Great Command Christianity—that is, Christianity defined by love of God and neighbor. For spiritual seekers—whether inside the church or not—and for believers who feel disconnected from their roots, she points the way toward important spiritual resources that have the potential to transform lives, churches and the world as a whole if people are willing to reencounter the riches of Christian tradition.

Each of the book's five sections includes an introductory chapter, followed by chapters that deal with devotional practices and ethics and that give historical definition to a period of Great Command Christianity. Although Bass does discuss doctrine, it takes a back seat to the devotional and the ethical because, she contends, Christianity has from its earliest days been marked not so much by its theology as by the Christian way of life. Indeed, Bass contends, Christianity succeeded largely because it transformed lives. The final section of the book draws together the lessons of the past for the church of the present.

Because Bass writes for a largely American Protestant audience, the focused trajectory of her account leads from Jesus to the contemporary American context. To get the broader story, one might read this book in tandem with Philip Jenkins's *The Lost History of Christianity*, which presents the largely forgotten histories of ancient Asian and African churches that flourished for a millennium or more and then largely perished over time. Taken together, these two books offer a vision of Christianity that's very different from the one that resides in the minds of most Christians and non-Christians.