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CHRISTIANITY  
AFTER  
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.*

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.<sup>18</sup>

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.

127  
dimension of existence” and enable people to live more meaningful lives.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Pentecostalism and liberal Protestantism—as well as various streams of mystical Catholicism—came together in a quest for an experience of God. The Age of the Spirit dawned not only with Pentecostal fervor, but experiential faith also arrived with the reflections of William James at Harvard and in the candle-lit prayer of Roman Catholics to their saints. And it was not only Christians exploring the realm of the Spirit—restless seekers appeared across the landscape with new spiritual practices and formed new communities.<sup>19</sup> These groups competed with each other, to be sure, and often did not think the adherents of other ways would find salvation. But they all shared the traits of experiential belief—a practical spirituality that transformed beliefs about God into a living relationship with the divine. The impulse toward experience grew, developed, and deepened throughout the twentieth century, leading to increasing awareness that the nature of Christianity itself was changing. Mysticism and religious experience were no longer limited to a spiritual elite in a monastery or a forest cabin. As once predicted by the ancient Hebrew prophet Joel, the Spirit was poured out on all flesh (2:28).

*The Need for Reason.* “But anyone can have a religious experience,” protested a minister during a question-and-answer discussion. “The members of the Taliban have religious experiences; Hitler might have had mystical experiences. Experience can’t be the basis for religion, because you can’t say what counts as a valid experience. Creeds and doctrine have to be the test.”

Experiential religion is not a new phenomenon; it is an ancient one. And the question as to the validity of religious experience is about as ancient as the experiences themselves. Although many people in a tribe may have had spiritual experiences, only one arose as the shaman or wise woman. Thus, even primitive people recognized that some religious experiences were more profound than

others and set up authorities to help others achieve certain kinds of experiences. People adjudicated between experiences, discerning which ones nurtured the tribe and which ones might not foster group prosperity. Meaningful religious experiences were shared through story and ritual in an attempt to enable other people to participate in a sense of the divine. Occasionally, an independent mystic would challenge the authority of established religious leaders or rituals by claiming a new experience, leading the tribe to either accept the new insights or reject the messenger. History is rife with accounts of experiential religious figures facing the wrath of institutional doubters—Jesus, Joan of Arc, and Oscar Romero, to name only a very few.

Although Western Christianity turned toward the rational and away from the mystical in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the question of religious experience actually remained important. In the 1740s, a group of religious protesters called “evangelicals” argued against established Christians by claiming that an experience of being “born again” was necessary to faith. Their experiential religion wreaked havoc in English and colonial churches, where revivalists interrupted worship services, led people to psychological breakdowns, and undermined the social order. Women preachers and unlettered male evangelists roamed the land and stirred up the religious rabble, inciting everyone to believe that their experiences of God were equal to any theological insight proclaimed by the educated clergy. In the midst of revival fervor, Jonathan Edwards, a philosopher and pastor deeply shaped by an experience of God, tried to discern true religious affections from delusion.

Edwards condemned both intellectualism and emotionalism in religion, arguing instead that “true religion, in great part, consists in holy affections.” Although some of his learned colleagues said that “affections” were “inferior animal passions,” Edwards oriented true religion toward what he called “the heart,” a unitary faculty of will and love. “The Holy Scriptures do everywhere place religion very

much in the affections," he wrote, "such as fear, hope, love, hatred, desire, joy, sorrow, gratitude, compassion and zeal."<sup>20</sup> Affections were not only emotions, however. Affections were the capacity of the heart willing and acting upon that which was good or generous or lovely. How is one's will directed toward beauty? Edwards insisted that true religious experience emanated from a divine source that opened human beings to sensing the unity of God's love and beauty in all things. Put simply, human beings apprehend the spiritual dimension of the universe from beyond themselves through a transformative experience of what Edwards called "a divine and supernatural light."

The experience of divine light reshaped men and women in the virtues of humility, mercy, and justice. An experience of the divine leads people toward greater "tenderness of spirit . . . and a readiness to esteem others better than themselves."<sup>21</sup> True religious experience manifested itself in "beautiful symmetry and proportion" in one's character. Edwards argued that this culminated in a well-ordered and disciplined life: "Gracious and holy affections have their exercise and fruit in Christian practice."<sup>22</sup>

Of his own argument, Edwards claimed, "As that is called experimental philosophy, which brings opinion and notions to the test of fact; so is that properly called experimental religion, which bring religious affections and intentions to like test."<sup>23</sup> Edwards may sound like a rationalist here, as if he needed a scientific experiment to prove the goodness of religious experience. What counted as evidence for Edwards? The quality of one's life. **Quite simply, truthful religious experience started with the affections and deepened one's character, one's love of God, and service to neighbor; it unified and balanced head and heart.** In turn, the movement toward love served as the test for valid religious experience. Spiritual experience initiates the well-lived life; the well-lived life confirms the nature of one's spiritual experience.

Jonathan Edwards was both a mystic and a philosopher. At the

time he lived, it was fashionable to speak of the “beauty of reason.” For vast numbers of Christians, reason was an experience, and it was a powerful, life-changing one at that. Although difficult to remember now, reason had not yet hardened into rationalism. Reason was a capacity of deep understanding, not a set of opinions; it was a journey, a practice, and an inner adventure of soul, not a finished philosophical or theological product.

European Christianity was just moving out of a time when religious passion had resulted in schism, excommunications, exile, witch hunts, inquisitions, and wars of religion. Critical thought provided welcome relief from religious excess; reason, thankfully, muted the fervor of theological hubris and wild spiritual speculations. Reason was the gift of individuals to think for themselves, the ability to judge rightly, to make good choices. Reason sowed seeds of freedom and human rights. It was the philosophical twin of political democracy and the economic engine of an emerging middle class.

Reason did not oppose religion or religious experience. Rather, reason softened religion’s sharp edges by providing balance, harmony, and order in a supernatural world too often ruled by a seemingly capricious God. Reason was beautiful. And it was mystical. Literature is full of accounts of people transformed by words, ideas, and books—as a growing industry of popular novels taught both men and women that logic and literacy opened the way to full humanity. Priests and professors wore the same garb; the church and the college embraced a common mission. In early modern depictions of reason, angels often accompany reason, crowning it with laurels of wisdom and justice. Often personified as a god or goddess, reason bestowed divine gifts on humankind. Indeed, people were tempted to worship reason as she had opened for them a new way of understanding themselves and ordering society.

Our own age has conflicted views of reason, because we understand its limits, feel its inhumane touch, and doubt the power of pure

reason to solve our problems (indeed, we have witnessed how it has created quite a few). Long gone are the angels casting crowns; we now speak of the overly rational as “cold and calculating,” possessed of “unyielding logic,” people who “follow their ideas to the bitter end.” As a result, education is devalued, and anti-intellectualism has taken hold. Experts are eyed with suspicion. Those who care about facts are derided as part of a “reality-based community.” People make decisions “from their gut” or opine that something “just felt right” as they appeal to experience as the arbiter of personal, professional, and political choices. As our own age turns toward the authority of experience, it is good to remember that reason is not bad. Reason is part of human experience, often considered a reflection of God’s image in humankind. To be spiritual *and* religious is to call for a new wholeness of experience and reason, to restitch experience with human wisdom and to renew reason through an experience of awe. Thus, the path of Christian faith in a postreligious age must be that of experiential belief in which the heart takes the lead in believing. As Parker Palmer writes,

“Heart” comes from the Latin *cor* and points not merely to our emotions but to the core of the self, that center place where all of our ways of knowing converge—intellectual, emotional, sensory, intuitive, imaginative, experiential, relational, and bodily, among others. The heart is where we integrate what we know in our minds with what we know in our bones, the place where our knowledge can become more fully human.<sup>24</sup>

Experiential belief is integrated belief, that which brings back together capacities of knowing that modernity ripped apart. It is only in the territory of the heart where faith makes sense.

## *The Creed Revisited*

More than a decade ago, I was part of an Episcopal congregation that loved asking questions. Indeed, many people made their way to that particular church because the community valued questions. We felt free to question everything—the creeds, the prayers, the scriptures. A member once moaned to me, “I just wish we could get everyone together on this monotheism thing.”

On another occasion, we were having an argument about the resurrection, whether or not it had happened and whether or not it could be proved. One of my friends shared the story of how she had asked a liberal bishop if he actually believed in the resurrection. “Believe it?” he answered incredulously. “I’ve seen it too many times not to!”

The question “Do you believe in the resurrection?” often results in long, often tedious, explanations of creeds and councils, of texts and evidence, of arguments about historic and scientific facts and in disputes between liberals and conservatives. Few, however, stop and ask what the real question might be. The question is not “What do you believe about the resurrection?” The question is simpler and more profound: “Do you trust in the resurrection?” The bishop was not interested in a doctrinal test, proving a historical event that happened many years ago. He believed—that is, he trusted and was loyal to—the resurrection, because he had witnessed it himself. “Do you trust in the resurrection?” is a much harder question than “Do you believe that Jesus was historically and scientifically raised from the dead?”

The bishop was pointing toward the same sort of belief that Jonathan Edwards suggested in the eighteenth century. He pushed the question out of the realm of scientific speculation toward experiential validation: How does the resurrection make things different in a discernable, practical way here and now in our lives, in our communities? Anyone can believe that a resurrection happened; the



awakening, that God was calling America away from the hedonism, paganism, feminism, and theological impurity of the 1960s and 1970s in order to restore the nation's previous glory and re-create the Christian America of the past. The religious movement they led certainly resembled an awakening: conservative churches were growing; the old mainline and liberal churches were dying; the religious Right possessed the power to elect a president. American flags waving, hands upraised in ecstatic prayer, and eyes closed, people sang "Shine, Jesus, Shine" and fainted at altars as they experienced God's healing power. At one revival in 1995, I stood next to a man who started barking in the spirit, just as was reported during the camp meetings of the Second Great Awakening. It sure looked like a revival, an awakening—the flames of Pentecost were sweeping over the world.

A revival of conservative politics, yes. But not *the* awakening, the transformative spiritual revitalization needed to address the real challenges and struggles of the emerging world. Some of it might have been genuine awakening for individuals, of course, the broken-hearted and lost finding themselves in God, experiencing the power of faith afresh. The Falwell-Robertson revival was the backlash, however, a counterreformation of nativism against the emerging awakening of the 1970s. Much of the religious Right of those days was powered by shrewd manipulators who were using the emotions of the fearful to forward their own agendas and turn the course of history back toward their "absolutist, sin-hating, death-dealing" God. They certainly deluded many into thinking that theirs was the real awakening, not what had happened in the experiential, romantic movements William McLoughlin depicted.

During the First Great Awakening, pro- and anti-awakening parties became known as "New Lights" and "Old Lights." New Lights embraced the spiritual awakening of the eighteenth century, urging others toward an experience of God, personal transformation, and a more democratic church and society. Old Lights resisted

this message, insisting that adherence to European creeds, ordered worship, and ministerial authority would reform society. Ever since, historians have referred to pro- and anti-awakening parties as New and Old Light. The distinction can be helpful now, if the terms are defined with contemporary realities in mind. In the twenty-first century, both pro- and anti-awakening proponents extol experiential faith, the need for personal spiritual renewal, and greater democracy. Their preachers sounding the need for spiritual and national transformation can often sound much the same.

However, the difference is threefold: the starting place of experiential faith, the end toward which it is directed, and the agency by which it is achieved. Today's New Light awakening starts with a vision of humanity created in the divine image and moves toward the hope of universal connection and wholeness through God's spirit. New Light spirituality emphasizes creation, restoration, and *shalom* (universal well-being and peace). For New Lights, the primary agency of experiential faith is the individual-in-community, following a freely chosen spiritual path, based on principles of empathy and compassion, and judged by internal authenticity. Today's Old Lights start with a vision of fallen humankind and push forward toward a world where ordered politics and an authoritative church shelter the sinful until their future reward of salvation in heaven. Old Lights emphasize the fall, rescue, and salvation. For them, the primary agency of faith is the mediating institutions of government, markets, and church. So, while Old Lights may claim to be "born again," speak in tongues, and honor spiritual mystics like Mother Teresa, all religious experiences need to be adjudicated and affirmed by external authorities. This is a very old argument. And, in a very real way, Americans have replayed New Light–Old Light arguments in every successive spiritual awakening since the eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

You can actually see patterns of this New Light–Old Light tension in sociological surveys. In their recent book *American Grace*, Robert Putnam and David Campbell trace patterns of social change

in the United States in recent decades. Like McLoughlin, they also argue that, beginning in 1960, the United States entered a period of intensive social reorientation, something that can be shown by data in indices of cultural change. On page after page, in chart after chart, they demonstrate how America increasingly became a more "New Light" society, more open and inclusive, with greater flexibility in gender roles, a quest for liberation and social equality, a marked liberalism in attitudes regarding sexuality, increased religious diversity, commitment to a wide range of spiritual practices, and acceptance of difference. Using charts and graphs, Putnam and Campbell illustrate what William McLoughlin described in 1978 as the contours of the Fourth Great Awakening. Putnam and Campbell, however, do not call it an awakening or New Light. They simply call it "The Shock," a statistic picture of dramatic change.

Around the time I entered college in 1977, an "aftershock" was beginning to develop following the earlier change, a period of retrenchment that some people referred to as "a return to the fifties."<sup>11</sup> It could also be understood as an "Old Light" reaction. Through the late 1970s and early 1980s, Putnam and Campbell's indices of social change slow, level, and then drop as attitudes on significant issues move back toward pre-1960s levels. Indeed, they argue that the turn and the rise of conservative religion are roughly coterminous and that conservative religion was a major factor shaping the first cultural aftershock following the 1960s.

The case being made, the next conclusion is logical. Conservative religion, especially conservative evangelicalism, is *not* the awakening described by William McLoughlin, even if some aspects of it resemble characteristics of a typical awakening. Put simply, revivalist evangelicalism, the New Light faith of the First and Second Great Awakenings, has become the Old Light retrenchment of the contemporary spiritual movement. It resembles experiential faith mostly due to historical factors and inheritance, matters of theology and politics that have become ritualized but possess little genu-

ine power to engage the surrounding culture in deeply meaningful ways. But in the twenty-first century, New Light is passing by the groups that once bore that name; the life-giving energy of the spirit has moved on. Thus, conservative evangelical groups want to claim that they are the awakening (mostly because of their heritage they find it difficult to see things differently) while they embody so little of the new awakening's vision of spiritual, social, and political change.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the New Lights of the old awakenings have become the Old Lights of the new one.

And perhaps even worse than simply being "Old Lights" (those who ignore or resist change), some conservative evangelicals have become an active *nativist* reaction against the new awakening. Using McLoughlin's analysis, it becomes apparent that, over the course of the last half century, they worked to reverse cultural change and keep the forces of genuine social transformation at bay, as they played to people's anxieties and, in many cases, actually worked to increase fear of women, Islam, pluralism, environmentalism, and homosexuality through preaching, theology, and church discipline.<sup>13</sup> Putnam and Campbell claim that many Americans found the new ideas "deeply repugnant to their fundamental moral and religious views." Thus, religious reactions to emerging social and cultural change set in across faith communities, as significant groups of evangelicals, traditionalist Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Jews argued for order and authority.<sup>14</sup> Few groups, however, were as vocal and public as evangelicals in protesting the changes. The 1960s, Putnam and Campbell state, formed a particular threat to their values, and "heightened the appeal of conservative evangelicalism" for those feeling adrift in the new world.<sup>15</sup>

Thirty years before Putnam and Campbell's analysis, McLoughlin worried about the potential of conservative evangelical religion—even before it was called the "religious Right"—to derail a genuine spiritual awakening, saying, "Too much narrow-minded authoritarianism and obscurantism is heard from its leading church spokes-

men to enable it in its current formulations to offer 'new light' for the future. . . . [It] is a divisive, not unifying force in a pluralistic world."<sup>16</sup> Yet McLoughlin also speculated that even "within" the backlash of the larger evangelical movement there "may well lie the seeds of this awakening's new light."<sup>17</sup>

He was right, as there existed many such communities of experiential and experimental evangelical religion like Church of the Saviour, Sojourners community, Evangelicals for Social Action, or the small church at Armington Hall. Unnoticed and unknown by most of the outside world, two sorts of evangelical religion emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. One type was that of Jerry Falwell and the other moral crusaders; the other type was that of evangelical liberation theologians and other innovators. I call these forms *dogmatic evangelicalism* and *romantic evangelicalism*. The first type is of an Old Light sort: those who want to shore up boundaries, reinforce creeds, and ensure group identity through theological purity and strict behavior. The second type, a New Light form of faith, is led by those who wish to connect with people and ideas that are different, to explore the meaning of story and history, and to include as many as possible in God's embrace. *Dogmatic evangelicalism* is the Old Light of belief-centered, externally bounded religion, a realm of authority and stability; *romantic evangelicalism* is the New Light of experiential, internally driven faith, the arena of adventure and spiritual fluidity.

*Dogmatic* and *romantic* forms of faith are not the exclusive purview of evangelicalism. Indeed, there are dogmatic Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, dogmatic Jews and Anglican and mainline Protestants; I suppose that dogmatic Buddhists and Hindus exist as well. These are people who think that the Old Light is the best guide, who resist the new spiritual revolution. *Romantic* forms of religion contributed to the spiritual transformation of the world since the 1960s; *dogmatic* forms gained the upper hand in the reversals of that transformation from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s.

Clarifying the difference between Old Light dogmatics and New

Light romantics goes a long way to understanding contemporary faith—and religious decline and the growth of spirituality—in recent decades. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) roiled with conflict in the 1980s. Commentators and combatants pitched the story as a fight between fundamentalists and liberals in the SBC, like the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the 1920s. This time, however, the fundamentalists won instead of the liberals, who were chased out of their denomination with their theological tails between their legs. But that analysis does not really fit. If you know any Southern Baptists, you know that you would be hard-pressed to find many—even today—who could rightly be considered “liberal.”

The Southern Baptists did not split over doctrine. They split between those who feared social change and wanted to reverse it and those who thought that much of America’s recent social change was good and wanted to be Christians within the new context. They split between authoritarian creed-oriented Baptists and those who wished to recapture the original, and often radical, spiritual impulses of Baptist faith. **The Southern Baptists split between dogmatics and romantics, not between conservatives and liberals.** It was a split between serious, faithful, biblically minded Christians over varying dispositions—nativism or romanticism—toward the cultural awakening that began in the 1960s.

What is interesting, however, is that dogmatics are not necessarily politically or morally conservative. Dogmatics are the guardians of the old order; they want to return to the “faith of the fathers” in order to set things aright. In Roman Catholic circles, the dogmatics attempt to turn back the theological and liturgical innovations of Vatican II. In mainline churches, institutions that are generally theologically liberal, **dogmatics regularly reject innovations in worship, church architecture, ordination, ministry, seminary education, hymnody, and polity.** Many church leaders insist that the old ways were the best ways—and the best way to guarantee the future was to maintain and re-pristiniate the past.

Nativist movements among dogmatic evangelicals, mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics, Orthodox, Jews, Buddhists, and Muslims are trying to put God back on His Throne, send Darwin, Einstein, and Stephen Hawking packing, quell the murmurings from the discontented rabble in the pews, elect godly men to be in charge, outlaw birth control and family planning, put women back in the kitchen, and shore up the bulwark of American exceptionalism. After the 1960s and 1970s, the turn toward nativism in the 1980s seemed like a sea change. As the old orthodoxies got born again, it appeared that enormous numbers of Americans opted for Old Light, wanting the security of their ancestors rather than to embark on an uncertain spiritual journey to the future.

Dogmatic religions make noise and grab headlines—and work hard to purify their ranks. Through the 1980s and 1990s, a crusading mentality set in, resulting in an exodus from evangelical churches and many Roman Catholic ones of some of the most innovative and insightful leaders of that generation. Many, many people got hurt.

With the spiritual carnage and the dogmatics' grab for power, increasing numbers of Americans came to equate the nativist faith with Christianity, indeed, practically with religion as a whole. By 2010, the polling data reflect that to be "religious" means that you reject a transcendent and open faith, are afraid to ask questions about the Bible, Jesus, or the creeds, turn your back on the planet, oppose women's rights, and dislike gays and lesbians, the poor, and immigrants. The experientialists, the romantics, the innovators—Christianity's creative class—suddenly were called "spiritual." In popular terms, "religion" stopped the real awakening, but the impulse remained, mostly around movements and practices that became increasingly shy of "religiosity" and that favored a self-understanding of being "spiritual."

Putnam and Campbell point out that the number of evangelicals was never as great as portrayed in the press. "The rise was real and statistically significant," they explain, "but it amounted to adding

roughly one American in twenty to the ranks of evangelicals. Despite the mountains of books and newspaper articles about the rise of the evangelicals, in absolute terms the change was hardly massive."<sup>18</sup> There were many fewer nativists than most of us imagined. The trends revealed something even more surprising. The evangelical rise ended rather abruptly in the mid-1990s when "the number of evangelical adherents . . . actually slumped."<sup>19</sup> Thus, Putnam and Campbell make the startling claim: "*The evangelical boom that began in the 1970s was over by the early 1990s, nearly two decades ago.*"<sup>20</sup>

In 1996, I covered the Republican National Convention for the *New York Times* regional newspaper syndicate. I followed Ralph Reed around the convention floor as he communicated with Christian Coalition delegates, trying to ask him about theology. I got close enough to Pat Robertson coming into the hall to shout a question, only to be pushed away by his legion of bodyguards. I attended an Operation Rescue rally of hundreds in a San Diego park, where the faithful proudly wore T-shirts boasting, "Intolerance Is a Beautiful Thing," while lifting high crosses, American flags, and photos of dead fetuses. I went to a luncheon where Phyllis Schlafly excoriated gay people and the audience applauded wildly. The members of the religious Right seemed invincible, with their high-tech devices and mobilization strategies, but something was amiss. They were too powerful, too political, too slick and prideful, and they had lost touch with the hearts and prayers of the good people who worshipped in small Baptist churches and at Pentecostal prayer meetings.

When I got home, a friend asked me how the convention had been.

"I think I witnessed the Gettysburg of the religious Right," I replied. "They can't go on as they are."

Indeed, sociologists and surveys would later prove this intuition right. Of course, they did not die then, but the tide was ready to turn. Despite some political victories, and even some rather consid-



erable ones, their fortunes would ebb with the American public in the years to come.

In earlier awakenings, nativist movements started strong and threatened to derail the cultural change of the New Light. During all three previous awakenings, nativists took over political parties, elected candidates, started crusades, split churches, and thrust dangerous demagogues into the public theater. The dogmatics typically portrayed themselves as innovative purveyors of a true spiritual awakening, offering their followers the secret to a meaningful way of life. Eventually, however, nativist movements overreached, often breeding violence. Their insistence on the old ways seemed increasingly out of step with the daily lives of regular people, who begin to accept and adapt to economic, social, and technological change. As fear ebbs, and new forms of community, work, and family become more normal, nativist movements wither and retreat to the margins of society. Even those once comforted by dogmatic promises of authority and order begin to look for new forms of faith. Awakenings can be slowed by fear, but if enough people experience, understand, and practice a new way of the spirit, they cannot be stopped.

### *Awakening and Romantic Religion: Self, Practices, and Community*

A spiritual awakening is, of course, more than politics, warmed-over liberalism, or just the values of the counterculture. Awakenings typically embody the romantic elements of religion—adventure, quest, mysticism, intuition, wonder, experience, nature, unity, historical imagination, art, and music—as a protest against systematized orthodoxies and religious convention. During the First Great Awakening, heartfelt passion for Jesus displaced formalized covenants of faith and European liturgies. During the Second, individual heroism and attention to devotional practices replaced Calvinistic deter-

minism and clerical authority. During the Third, a fascination with process, history, and archaeology led Christians to erect neo-Gothic cathedrals over sites once occupied by unadorned meetinghouses and opened the spiritual imagination to new understandings of soul in nature, poetry, and the past. The Reverend Henry Ward Beecher (1813–87), brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe and one of the greatest preachers of the day, fancied himself as “romantic evangelical” who, like many of his peers, found God in the unity of all things. The current awakening is marked by its insistence on connection, networks, relationship, imagination, and story instead of dualism, individualism, autonomy, techniques, and rules.

Some romantic movements of the past emphasized escape from the world in favor of utopian schemes. Indeed, the underside of the current spiritual awakening is the temptation toward “navel-gazing,” isolated faith, sectarianism, and moral relativism. At its best, however, the contemporary awakening is a movement of *romantic realism*. The Fourth Great Awakening imbibes the romantic spirit, but it has been chastened by the overly optimistic movements that preceded it—like schemes to perfect human society through social engineering or Christian attempts to bring about the kingdom of God on earth. The new romanticists remember, however dimly, Reinhold Niebuhr’s dictum: “Social justice cannot be resolved by moral and rational suasion alone. . . . Conflict is inevitable, and in this conflict, power must be challenged by power.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, prayer must be twinned with a vigorous passion for doing good, and spirituality itself is increasingly defined as a life of contemplation and justice. Niebuhr’s dark reminders of human sin and evil have proved increasingly truthful since 9/11, deepening the characteristics of pragmatism and realism that shape the new awakening.

The spirit of romantic realism is perhaps best developed by contemporary poets. In “The Vision,” Wendell Berry captures the mood of romantic realism. Its words could be a hymn for this awakening: