

Cameron Trimble ([00:00](#)):

Dr. Diana Butler bass is an award winning author, popular speaker, inspiring preacher, and one of America's most trusted commentators on religion and contemporary spirituality. She's the author of 11 books, including Christianity after religion, grounded, grateful, and her newest book, freeing Jesus in this video, you'll hear a conversation between Cameron Trimble, the founder and CEO of convergence and Diana Butler bass.

Diana Butler Bass ([00:27](#)):

It is it's wonderful to be in conversation with you yet again, you and I have been friends, colleagues, conversation partners for a lot of years now and have created all kinds of mischief in the world, actually, as I think about all the memories and I hope we continue to, to stay at that in our conversation today. I want to start with a statistic that has kind of been screaming at all of us. So honestly, I think probably we would both say it's States what we probably already knew that Gallop released a study that said, you know, for the first time in Gallup's history of measuring or of surveying the U S population, that there are more people who would claim no religious affiliation than who do that. You know, now only 47% of people want to align with institutional religion.

Cameron Trimble ([01:26](#)):

And that matters in part because you had early instincts about that and began writing books to help the rest of us. See what was coming that may be now, the statistic helps us understand is here your latest being freeing Jesus which is truly extraordinary when I read it, I sent you a text afterwards, and I said, well, I can't, I can't say actually what I said on this. Cause I think I used a colorful word to say freaking genius. I mean, really, really good. So anyway we're in this sort of transitional space that you saw coming a long time ago, you've written a lot of books about this, help us understand this moment that we're living in.

Diana Butler Bass ([02:16](#)):

I saw that 47% as well. I just kind of had this response and my heart went, Oh, you know, I sort of close down a little bit. And I said, inwardly I wish I hadn't been right. You know, and that's not an, I told you so moment, but the truth of my life over the last 12 years really is, you know, about 2000 late, 2009, 2010. I began to realize that the demographic tsunami that I could see coming, because I knew the research that was going on among people who had not yet published the results of the work, they were just that they were finding, you know, they were finding out enormously big changes were on the horizon. And I really wanted my friends who were church leaders to understand that, that if they saw people leaving their church, it was not going to be like it was in the old days and that something new going on the shifts and the demographic change, the way people were choosing, how they were thinking about faith.

Diana Butler Bass ([03:35](#)):

And so Christianity after religion was born out of that early moment when I realized that my friends needed help in understanding what might be around the corner for, for church. And so that book was a bit of a Clarion call and there were certainly times when I was talking about it on the road that I felt a little bit alone because there were lots of people who I think at first didn't believe me especially when I would talk about how it was increasingly obvious to me that part of the decline of white American Protestantism was happening among evangelicals and that there was now, or then there were sort of signs that some of the biggest, most conservative denominations in America were on the precipice of

losing a lot of members. And so, so there was all this work that I did in 2010, 2011, Christianity after religion came out in 2012.

Diana Butler Bass ([04:51](#)):

And in the first third of that book, I talk about these trends and ever since then the trends have done nothing but become more dramatic and more obvious than the ones that I presented in that book. And then in the middle, third of that book, I use my imagination really to think about, well, if this is two of these trends are true, what, what shape might religion take in the future that would be meaningful. And I referred to it at the time I talked about it, a spiritual awakening and then suggested, you know, what kind of impacts a spiritual awakening would have in our culture and how it would resemble in certain ways, awakenings in the past but would be also profoundly different from awakenings in the past. And so, so that, that work is the work I think I, I'm not entirely sure, but I think we may have met sometime around then or a little bit before that book came out and it became the sort of the template for which all of the work since then has, has been based.

Diana Butler Bass ([06:14](#)):

So I wasn't surprised when I saw that 47% I side I, I went, Oh, you know yeah, it's really truly here. And there was also a part of me that thought, gosh, I know so many people as individuals listened to the warnings in advance, not just for me, but other people were saying similar things who were also had a bit of a, it was a voice calling the wilderness kind of ministries. I think about Brian McLaren in particular. You know, so, so there were always individuals who paid attention, but the institutions that we live in, they literally did not take this as seriously as they needed to. It was almost as if the institutions were looking at the demographics, the statistics, and what the statistics were suggesting was basically a religious climate change crisis. And they didn't handle it, handle it like that.

Diana Butler Bass ([07:21](#)):

They handled it like a bad weather event. And we all know now that's not a very good idea, is that when you're facing a climate change crisis, you can't treat it like it's a snow storm. And so you have to have different tactics and different strategies and a different imagination in place to figure out, well, how do we meet the, what is a crisis? And I, I really, I wish I didn't have to say it, but I think that most of the denominations by and large, despite good-hearted people involved in them, I think most of the denominations have to this point failed.

Cameron Trimble ([08:04](#)):

Yes, I we are certainly in agreement and alignment on that.

Diana Butler Bass ([08:11](#)):

I really wish that was not the sentence that I had to utter right there.

Cameron Trimble ([08:14](#)):

Yeah. I think that's it's a point of great grief punctuated by that there are local churches who did get it, who, who are doing interesting things, who, who are understanding this shift what, what I didn't fully grasp until you helped me see, but there's Christianity after religion, which then launched a series of your other books. But there was a, a relationship you had begun to spot through your imagination of behave or belong believe I'm forgetting behave. And that, that you're, you understood that there was a

fundamental shift in how those behaved or how those I don't want to use that word. Let's not confuse people, but how those functioned, I guess, in, in life, in the body of Christ, if you will, or in religious life. And so help us kind of walk through the, the, the salient shifts that you think in particular right now, you know, in COVID, we're, we're seeing these stats, we're like, you know, to help us understand this shifts that that local congregational leaders really could tune into, and it would make a difference for them,

Diana Butler Bass ([09:46](#)):

The shape that I described in the central narrative, in Christianity, after religion, I talk about the statistics, and then there are four chapters, which are dedicated to imagining, you know, if our ancestors were looking back on this time and saying, Oh my gosh, we know that this is when Christianity transformed itself and it became something different. So that those four chapters look at primarily those three things you just mentioned belonging behaving and believing. And so in, in the context of the older book and Christianity, after religion, I shared two points about those three, what are actually called the three BS and there nothing new and bringing up the three BS, because if you just took a religion one Oh one class in any university in the United States there would be some reference to that because that's the way that anthropologists and sociologists and people who try to define religion.

Diana Butler Bass ([10:53](#)):

That's one of the ways they talk about religion that every religion involves these three BS belonging behaving and believing. And what I said in my book that was distinctive was one that there was a way that, that those three B's used to be arranged and sort of in the older world, before the religion climate crisis of these demographics we thought about believing, you know, being the, the first card in the deck as it were, and then from what we believed. So, you know, you believe that the Pope is the vicar of Christ. You're going to be a Catholic. You know, if you believe that salvation comes through grace alone, you're going to be a Lutheran. You know, if you believe you have to be born again, you're probably going to be a Southern Baptist. If you believe people speak in tongues, well, you're a Pentecostal.

Diana Butler Bass ([11:47](#)):

And so, so in the old world, we had divided it, Christianity up in all these categories of what we believe. And then from what we believe came, this sort of package of things that we did together as community and that, that package included formal and informal policies and rules. And so it was, you know, it could be everything like, you know, how do you run a meeting? And if you're a Presbyterian, if you believe certain things and you're a Presbyterian, you're going to say you practice Robert's rules of order and community. And that makes for good community. If you are a Baptist, you're going to say you don't drink dance, smoke, or chew, you know? And if you're a Catholic, you have, you go to mass once a week. And so, so belief behavior, and then comes this deeper sense of belonging.

Diana Butler Bass ([12:48](#)):

So if you accept the beliefs, if you act on them in a way that is appropriate, given the beliefs of that system, then you are a member of that church. And that's the way that religion was organized. And Western culture for several centuries was, was around that set of questions in that particular order. And so what I argued in Christianity after religion is that one, the questions in each one of those categories had changed significantly, that we've moved in the area of belief from asking people the question, what do you believe toward the question of how do you believe that? And then in the question of behavior, we've moved from, how do you do that? Which is what all those rule books and, and things answer. How do you do a particular practice? And now the question is more like, what are we going to do?

Diana Butler Bass ([13:48](#)):

And then finally, the question of belonging has shifted from a sense of membership, having an external identity that you can write down on a card pledge card, magic card, whatever toured who my width who's, whose am I? So it's not just whoever yeah. In terms of the name on the card. But instead that the real question is whose am I, who who's, who, who all sitting in the circle with me and how do those relationships reshape my own sense of identity? So it's a much more internally driven sense of identity than just simply being able to say, I'm a Catholic cause I was baptized in the Catholic church. So, so that's fairly standard stuff. And then finally, what I did, of course in the book is I shifted the order. And I argued that instead of behave, believing, coming first belonging had to the category of prior to prior priority and that what we, who we understand ourselves to be with who our community is, who our tribe is, becomes the source of our behaviors. What are we going to do? Well, we kind of do the things that our friends do. And then from that then comes things that we believe, things that we believe about God, things that we believe about democracy, things that we believe about justice, et cetera. And so that was the central point of Christianity after religion. And I'll let you jump in here. So I don't completely lecture everybody, but we can continue on with this thread.

Cameron Trimble ([15:37](#)):

I suspect everyone enjoys the lecture. So then you go on to really explore that in great depth because we get grounded, grateful, and now freeing Jesus. Yeah. And, and that each, each of those books, explorers behave, belong. And now I believe,

Diana Butler Bass ([16:03](#)):

Yeah. Yeah, it's true. I think that what happened was after I wrote Christianity after religion, I'll never forget this one podcast I was on when grounded came out. So Christianity after religion was in 2012, 2015 ground, it comes out and there was a fellow who's a UCC podcaster, and he's been a great fan and a friend to become a friend over the years. And he, he said, Oh, when I opened up your new book grounded, I was so disappointed because I wanted you to talk about trends some more. And I said, well, but it's, it's, it's the follow-up, you know, it's not to say, I'm not gonna write the same book twice. That would be crazy. And although some, I guess, some authors do that, I'm just not that author. And so I said to him, I realized that I needed to explore some of the questions that I had left hanging from Christianity after religion.

Diana Butler Bass ([17:01](#)):

And one of those questions for me was the question of belonging. And I had to go back and look at my own life and say, if I wasn't going to just understand myself in terms of the cards that I carry around in my wallet. And, you know, I carry around essentially a AAA card. I carry around a driver's license. So I'm a, I'm a Virginian and I'm a, I'm a member of AAA. I have a card, that's a voter registration card that says that I'm a Democrat. I remember when my dad died, I inherited his wallet and I remember opening his wallet up. And he was, he had his rotary club card and a lion's club card. And so if I'm more than what my cards say in my wallet, who am I, and took me on a journey of discovering my life in relationship with the natural environment in which I live, and also rediscovering myself in relationship to my, to, to the neighborly environment in which I live.

Diana Butler Bass ([18:07](#)):

And so grounded makes a very simple point. And that is who are we who to whom do we belong? And the answer is we belong to nature and neighbor. And in understanding that belonging, we find ourselves

in God, we find ourselves belonging to God. And so grounded essentially goes back to a question from Christianity after religion, and then unpacks that question in a less numerical and quantitative way. And unfurls I mean, it's certain ways I, I, you know, I'm, I've been on a book tour for free and Jesus and I do love, I do love my new book very much, but in certain ways I think that grounded is the book that I've written. That's the closest to every sort of moment that beats in my heart. It's my favorite thing that I've ever written. And so there was an intimacy and a regulatory aspect about that book where it's an act of self discovery. And I invite my friends into that same kind of self-discovery as a new path of belonging,

Cameron Trimble ([19:30](#)):

You start freeing Jesus with a story. I'm sure a million people have asked you to retell, but it's, it was attention getting with this experience you had in the national cathedral. And of course I think you and I been in the national cathedral together and I, I could see exactly the scene, you know? So can you tell that story? And then we'll talk about that as a, as a, as you intended it to be an invitation into this question, Mark. I think a lot of us are holding and in fact we just mentioned Brian McLaren his next book working title is, should I stay Christian at that? We've gotten to that point where that's actually a legitimate question, you know, that we're, that, that those of us who've been shaped by the tradition are needing to ask usually from an ethics standpoint. So, so anyway you, Jesus asks you to freedom. Tell us, tell us about that moment.

Diana Butler Bass ([20:34](#)):

Oh my gosh. I should, I should, as a, sort of just a tiny segue point out that S so I moved from grounded to grateful and grateful is obviously a book about behavior. And I had asked myself the question again, going back after grounded was written, I went back to Christianity after religion. I thought, what questions did I leave on answered? And the question, one of the questions was what practice would help me the most at this moment as Christianity is shifting and changing. And it was gratitude. And I mean, you know, we've, we've actually talked about this. I, that was actually, it was a life-changing practice for me to embrace five years ago. And I think it got me through the Trump years, actually, I'm so grateful is actually an answer to the question of what are the most life-giving behaviors, what are the most life giving practices we share as human beings, as we are moving through this huge change we're going through.

Diana Butler Bass ([21:41](#)):

And so then of course, what that meant is I was actually going to leave it with those two books. Although my friends were all saying, Oh, what are you going to write next? Grounded, grateful, grace, grounded, grateful, gray area, grounded, grateful, you know, whatever, as I was like, I was trying to think of a gr word, but it just seems to kind of phony. So, but I knew that I had to write about belief. And so that became the third remaining question from Christianity after religion, what shape would belief take? And that meant, I had to ask the question, what shape would belief take for me? And as you point out, I asked the question should, how do you remain Christian? And the very first chapter of my book, and I know that Brian's working on a project with that as a title. So I tell a story that becomes the frame of the book about a day in 2013 which is right after Christianity today appeared.

Diana Butler Bass ([22:46](#)):

And right before, right when I was working on grounded and I was stuck, Oh, I mean, I was so stuck. I just did not know how to move my own book forward. And you know, that just happens to writers once in a while. And when it happens, it can be really frightening and overwhelming. And so I, I had just

gotten back from Wyoming where I was not stuck. It was beautiful in Wyoming, you know, big sky wide, open spaces, all of that stuff. And then I find myself back in DC, you know, covered is all, all closed in. So, so I thought, Oh, I need to kind of let myself a little bit loose here. And I thought, well, I like praying at the Washington national cathedral. So I got in my car, drove up from Virginia, where I live in DC and went to the cathedral and went to the prayer chapel, which is the chapel of the Holy spirit at the cathedral.

Diana Butler Bass ([23:47](#)):

And it's a lovely chapel. It's my favorite side chapel in the national cathedral. And I went and I, I note, and I was contending with God. Like, you know, I can't hear you. I don't know where to turn what's next for my work, you know, help help me here. And I felt like I w I just didn't, he wasn't getting anywhere with my prayers. When in the midst of this wrestling prayer, I heard this voice say, get me out of here. And I literally thought that I heard of it. It was a voice. I thought there was someone in the chapel with me. And so I turned around and I looked, and there was, there was nobody there. And so I went back to my wrestling prayer and right right above this alter where I was praying, there's this gorgeous painting of Jesus.

Diana Butler Bass ([24:40](#)):

It's a pre kind of a pre-Raphaelite sort of painting. And so I I wrestled more and I, and I heard a voice a second time get me out of here. And I looked up and I said, Jesus, is, is that you? And then at K the voice came a third time, get me out of here. And at that point, I literally knew that I had heard the painting talk to me, and that Jesus was telling me to get him out of the Washington national cathedral, which was completely surprising and more than a little frightening, because I didn't want to make my friends at the Washington national cathedral, very angry, you know, Jesus is talking to your tourists and telling them that he wants to get sprung. And so, and plus, you know, I'm a mainline mainline type is that Jesus doesn't talk to us.

Diana Butler Bass ([25:41](#)):

And unless it's, you know, through the voice of tradition or in the liturgy or something like that, but this was an out loud, like command from the painting telling me, get me out of here. And so I, I kept it to myself for quite a few years, and then decided when I was working on this, this book that I, that episode called out to be the frame of this story. And I think that what Jesus is asking us to free Jesus from is first of all, the personal sort of boxes in cages, we put Jesus in. So there's an amazing amount in the book about my own personal journey. It is a memoir as it, or something like a memoir that I write here. But that Jesus also wants to be let out from the cages that the church puts around Jesus. And then finally, I think there's also a cultural cage that poor Jesus has been put in that we saw on full display, for example, at the insurrection on January 6th, when the guy held up the Jesus saves sign right next to the guillotine that had been constructed to execute Mike Pence.

Diana Butler Bass ([26:58](#)):

And so those three boxes that are personal boxes, the ecclesial boxes and the cultural boxes that are keeping Jesus from being fully and freely the Jesus that roams in the world. As you know, I mean, even CS Lewis talked about Jesus in this way. Oh, he's not a tame lion. This is really a moment when Jesus needs to be seen as untamed and let that Jesus just loose in the world.

Cameron Trimble ([27:33](#)):

Yes. I wonder. Do you think that's as, as congregations and as these systems that have shaped the both of us but we both found ways to exist kind of outside of them, but we're still in covenant with, you know, so there's this interesting rhythm to us. Do you, so they're, they're trying to imagine what the possible next best step is, what they're not 50 year future is, but just these next few years, is it your sense that this, this theological work of freeing Jesus is the essential work? If this was the, if somebody said, Hey, Diana, what's your advice for those of us who were in these systems right now? What, what, what are your instincts say?

Diana Butler Bass ([28:32](#)):

You know, no, one's asked me that question in quite that way. And it's a really good question. I was just reading this morning, a Harvard university study that found that Americans think about either the past or the future 46% of the time, which means we spend roughly half of our time imagining ourselves in places that we no longer kind of exist as it were. And only half of our time do we spend focused on the now and I've urged people over the years, you know, to think about the future, you know, think about the coming demographic wave, think about what you want to look like in the future. And I do think that that's a really important task, but I also think it raises an incredible amount of anxiety. And it's also astonishing to me as I've watched arguments develop in churches that are frightened about all these changes, how much arguments over the future can be profoundly divisive and take us to places of deep dislike and distrust of one another.

Diana Butler Bass ([29:45](#)):

So, so I I've worried about that. The pandemic in effect certainly refocused me. I was writing this book by and large during the pandemic and what th what it did was refocus me in just that day since I was writing memoir. And I think that free, and Jesus has some very interesting qualities about it as a written piece. So as it sort of, it's just a work of literary memoir. You know, when you're writing about memoir, you're writing about the past, you know, so I did, I had to think about the past a lot but what I discovered during the pandemic is if you stayed thinking about the past too much, you actually couldn't get anything done because there was so much to grieve about how you couldn't have what you had even in the most immediate past. So not only had you lost your childhood, not only had you lost, you know, your, your years in college, which were so amazing, or not only had you lost, you know, your youth, whatever it was, you, you lost your job.

Diana Butler Bass ([31:01](#)):

You lost your ability to travel freely in the world. I mean, literally we were all imprisoned and a way that should change how we see the world. And so I feel like that happened for me. So here I was writing a memoir and it was supposedly about the past, but it became tremendously about where I was located. And so I had to learn how to deal with nostalgia and understand that nostalgia is productive in so far as it gives us a sense of clarity about where we are now. So we go back in order to pick up pieces of our own lives and pieces of our own self-understanding and pieces of the things we learned along the way in order to really incorporate those things into who we have to be sitting at the table, writing our book at a given moment and that sort of function for the future as well.

Diana Butler Bass ([32:03](#)):

So while I was working on the book, oftentimes one of the things that authors think about is, well, who's going to read this and will it so well. And you know, will I finally get that Oprah interview, you know, as a result of this book and what's the world going to look like on the other side of the pandemic, will people

care about Jesus? Once we're into 2021, and where will people's imaginations be then? And I realized I had to sort of lay all that aside and say, literally well, we're on a path towards an unknown future. And just because this future is more unknown, I mean, we've always lived with a delusion, I think, or we often live with a delusion in Western culture that we know the future, that it's, there's a predictable path for the way that things are going to unfold, but the pandemic went, just dropped the bomb on that and said, yeah, you know, you think, you know, the future you're actually living in 1918 or 1423.

Diana Butler Bass ([33:09](#)):

And you know, you, you can't even know if an invisible germ is going to come into your neighborhood and turn everything, you know, upside down inside out, and, and the world is, you know, it, and it's like, okay, you're right. I don't know that. And so so I think we gained a, sort of a new capacity of being more humble about the future. And I think that in that humility, at least again, this is for me personally, I was able to sort of reincorporate that into where I was in, simply just writing the book. And it also called me into living in the moment. And so we hear people say that, you know, you need to live in the moment, but really that's what we have. And I think that congregations, you know, if it happens to, you know, those of us who are just working on individual projects like me and the pandemic and writing a book congregations, you know, they get so caught up in nostalgia that they just want to return to that old thing without understanding how a healthy view of nostalgia is that you can't go back, but you can recapture what was wise and bring that into the present.

Diana Butler Bass ([34:35](#)):

And if you try to go too far this direction, looking out into the future well then you have a whole different set of problems. You know, then you have anxiety, you have people arguing because they think they understand the trajectory of where the future is going to land. And so instead of humility, you get communities that are very full of hubris, and it is less of an exploration of who are we now and what might that mean as we move into the uncertainty of a future, we can't quite see, we can see maybe some outlines of it, but that's really we're limited in our vision. How do you bring the hope that you know, that the human race will survive? The hope that we have a story that lies in front of us, the hope that the pandemic will be over, how do you bring all of those things into this moment now? And so I think that probably one of most important things for congregations at this point is to really concentrate on this. Then now bringing in the wisdom of the past, bring up the wisdom of the past, bringing for, bring backward, in a sense, a hope and hope and plan posit, both wisdom and hope into the story that we're writing here.

Diana Butler Bass ([36:02](#)):

And so that, that becomes, I think the, that was what I learned while writing this book. And I think that that is the invisible part of the story that I'm telling in this book.

Cameron Trimble ([36:15](#)):

I want to ask you just one more question, although I want to ask you a million more questions. But for the sake of time for this it's a question I've asked everyone that I've talked with and, and no pressure here, but I'm intrigued by what you might want to say. The question is if you could tweet something and you knew that all people of faith everywhere would see it, what's the message that you would tweet or what's the, the thing that needs to be said that is clear to you that might not be clear to the rest of us.

Diana Butler Bass ([36:53](#)):



Oh, I think I've tweeted it. It's, it's just love, you know, I mean, it sounds so corny and so, you know, shallow and, you know, maybe like a song or something, I don't know. I mean, but you know, God is love, love your neighbor, love yourself, love the world. And I that's it. Yeah. One of the things I write and free, and Jesus is how people have often used the versa, Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever as a sort of a way of excusing, an imaginative re-engagement with thinking about, about Jesus, you know, Oh, well, Jesus is all the same. And one is it's like people often use comments like that as a way of stopping other people from asking questions, Oh, all those things have been answered. All those questions have been answered, you know, and I think that this happens with church.

Diana Butler Bass ([37:55](#)):

I remember one time, some guy, when I was talking about the future of the church and changing the church, he literally said to me, well, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. And I said, well, that's not the church, you know, or maybe yours is, and maybe that's why you're losing members. But so, so in the, in the new book, I spent a lot of time thinking about change and spirituality and why it was that my Jesus has show up sort of different through time, even with that verse. And so I've kind of forced me into engagement and thinking about that. And I got to this point after all these months, you know, spent alone in my office, working on this, on this texts on this narrative was that there was one thing. There was one way in which Jesus Christ was the same yesterday, today and forever.

Diana Butler Bass ([38:45](#)):

It wasn't about my doctrine. It wasn't about some create it. Wasn't about how I interpreted the Bible. It wasn't about any of those things. It was about love is that there is a constant in the cosmos that was embodied in the person of Jesus. And that constant is compassion. That constant is love. And that you asked me if there was some way that, that, you know, the freeing Jesus book is like a book for now, you know, to write a book called freeing Jesus while you're in pandemic lockdown, you learn a thing or two about what real freedom is, and you learn a thing or two about what really matters. And for me, it was coming to that one

Diana Butler Bass ([39:43](#)):

On point that distillation of everything, from my experience, from what I knew from church, my hopes, dreams, fears, wisdom, and hope, all combined is that compassion is everything [inaudible].