



PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

Program #5306

First broadcast November 8, 2009

WELCOME

Lydia Talbot: Welcome to “30 Good Minutes!” We’re happy you’ve joined us as for this half-hour of reflection on faith. I’m Lydia Talbot.

Lillian Daniel: And I’m Lillian Daniel. Our guest today, whom you’ll meet in a moment, is writer and scholar, Diana Butler Bass. She’s the author of “A People’s History of Christianity.” Diana will be talking with us about the importance of remembering our spiritual histories.

Lydia Talbot: We also welcome back Otis Moss III, Senior Pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. He’ll tell us how jazz music is a metaphor for faith.

Lillian Daniel: And we begin with the story of a Vietnam veteran who remained in Southeast Asia for several years after his tour of duty. There he was drawn to the teachings of Buddhism. Today, he incorporates those practices into his work as a therapist in Evanston, Illinois. Mui Baltrunas uses meditation to help patients of all faiths deal with anxiety and to make sense of grief and suffering. Let’s watch.

SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Mui Baltrunas: I teach meditation, Buddhism. I also act as a cognitive therapist. I deal with people’s cognitive processes, how to help them be happier and have more effective lives. Meditation is important because it relaxes the mind. The mind is very stresses out most of the time, but it shows up in the body as a point of tension. And when we’re in meditation we can actually scan the body and find these places of stress. I was born and raised a Catholic so I wound up going to parochial schools until I was seventeen.

The next thing I knew, I got drafted. I had been in Vietnam for about three years with the navy as a medic. And when I got out I did not want to return to the United States so I went to Bangkok. I wanted to go to some place that was exotic. I wanted to party, just drink until I was in a stupor. I was sitting at this bar after a couple of weeks and I saw these Theravada monks. Because of the color of the robe, all I could think about was carrots. There was this one very tall carrot and I must have said something aloud because he walked over to me and I thought he was going to get all Bruce Lee on me! I was in no shape to defend myself, so I was preparing myself for my comeuppance. And instead he was very kind. He was an English gentleman who had come over to study Buddhism and became a monk. He invited me over to the monastery and within a month I had ordained it. I stayed for three years.

Morality in Buddhism is the concept of compassion. Compassion starts with oneself and that means being patient with whatever arises in the mind. If we could be patient with that, then we could be patient with anybody else. He would react more calmly, with more understanding, and that means that we can really offer assistance to others. And this is the whole practice of Buddhism is not to harm oneself and not to harm others. That's it.

Bodhisattva is a highly realized being, not a god. These Bodhisattvas and Buddhas represent a quality of reality that we would like to have. This particular one represents compassion. And so we pray hoping to find more compassion in our lives. So we're essentially trying to change our karma. One doesn't pray to a Buddha saying, "I need my car fixed." They put the goat itself directly on the path in front of him by emulating that Buddha. It can be quite humbling realizing that we're not as compassionate as we should be. We're not as wise as we think we are. And so we have to admit this. Confession is good for the soul they say. Well, confession is also good for the mind. It's admitting our limitations at what we need. And this is why we pray. This is why we do these things.

SPEAKER INTRODUCTION

Lydia Talbot: Many thanks to Mui Baltrunas for sharing his spiritual journey. Now, let me tell you about today's speaker. Diana Butler Bass is an author, speaker and independent scholar specializing in American religion and culture. She holds a Ph.D. in religious studies from Duke University, and is the author of seven books including "A People's History of Christianity" and "Christianity for the Rest of Us." Diana has been a commentator for Time, Newsweek, CNN, PBS, NPR, a regular blogger for Beliefnet and has written widely in the religious press. She lives in Alexandria, Virginia, and is a member of the Episcopal Church of the Epiphany in Washington, D.C. We're delighted to welcome Diana Butler Bass to "30 Good Minutes." Welcome, Diana.

MESSAGE

Diana Butler Bass: Thank you so much, Lydia. I'm glad to be here.

Many people today talk about being spiritual but not religious, and occasionally you even hear people say that they are religious *and* spiritual. As a result, a lot of folks have become very good about talking about their own spiritual stories. They can say, "Once upon a time, my life used to be...then I engaged in a spiritual practice or met this teacher, my life was changed. And now I have hope and dreams for the future." When we do that, that is writing history. We are writing spiritual histories of our own lives. As individuals we can do that process. We understand what history is about and we understand why our own stories are important and the relationship between a vital spiritual life and the telling of such stories. But as soon as we move out of the individual realm and get into the larger realm of our congregations, our communities, sometimes our larger families—certainly our denominations and religious traditions—we often aren't quite as good telling our stories.

For fourteen years, early in my career before I wrote any of these books, I was a college professor. I remember one of my favorite jobs was teaching the introduction to Christian history to classes of undergraduates, a task where I'd have to teach all 2000 years of church history in just fourteen weeks. A class like that creates many moments of laughter and not a few moments

of frustration for the professor. But I'll never forget this one time when a young woman in class raised her hand in the middle of a lecture I was giving on the Crusades. I was talking about how the Crusades started with Pope Urban II around the year 1090, stirring up Christian passions to go and take back the Holy Land, and how his speech ignited a movement in which Christian soldiers moved across Europe and began to kill people in the name of Jesus in order to recapture Jerusalem and other parts of the world that had been taken from them by Muslims.

The young woman was very upset and rightly so. She raised her hand and she was trying to figure out how it could be that Christians were killing other people in the name of Jesus. And so she said in great frustration, "But professor, professor, where were the Protestants in all of this?" She clearly wanted to blame it on the Roman Catholics and get the blame off of her own Protestant denomination. I looked at her and I didn't want to embarrass her, but the reality of it is there were no Protestants in 1090. There were no Protestants until about 1517. So I backed up and I said, "Well, I'm sorry, they just didn't have much to say about this. There were no Protestants when the Crusades started." And she continued on bravely saying, "But where were they?"

This little story was a moment that created laughter in the class and embarrassment for the student, but in a very real way it's not funny. It's an illustration of something that I have come to call "spiritual amnesia," where religious communities suffer from a loss of memory.

Historian Joan Meacham recently won the Pulitzer Prize for his fine book on Andrew Jackson. He said recently that "history is to a country what memory is to an individual." And as soon as you hear that comment it also applies to religious communities. History is to a congregation, history is to a church, history is to a denomination or a religious tradition, what memory is to an individual.

Memory and the loss of memory is not funny. Any of those of us who have dealt with family members who have suffered from Alzheimer's know that loss of memory is eventually a fatal disease. Luckily, I don't necessarily think that our loss of memory has led to a fatal position at this point in history. Instead, I think that most people have what I would call "fuzzy memory." Instead of forgetting everything, they remember poorly. And that's demonstrated very well in a history of Christianity where people do have some memory of our tradition of Christianity's history, but nevertheless, they tell it in such a way that is very negative and, I think, oppressive and even violent. I call it "Big C" Christianity. It follows an interesting storyline. It moves from Christ to the Emperor Constantine, who legalized Christianity as the Roman Empire's religion, on to Christendom, where Christianity was imperial religion of the Middle Ages, to the Crusades, and finally then to John Calvin and a Christian America.

This story is a story of conquest and Christian manifest destiny. It starts really back in the pages of the New Testament at the end of the Gospel of Matthew where there are some words that probably were never even uttered by Jesus, but inserted by a later writer, where Christians are commanded to go out and go to the ends of the world and subdue the world with the message of Jesus Christ. That great commission has been a bad starting point for church history.

There is a better place to start and I would like to begin with thinking about the history of Christianity not at the end, but at Jesus' beginning. At the beginning of his ministry, someone came up to him and said to him, "Rabbi, rabbi, what is the greatest of all of the commandments? What will get me into heaven? How do I inherit eternal life?" And Jesus looked at this person and said, "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself."

Over the years as a historian, I've begun to wonder if we told the story of the history of Christianity not through the lens of the Great Commission, the triumphs of popes, kings, institutions, and dogmas, but if we started the history of Christianity in this humble place, in this place of humility with the love of God and the love neighbor, what would Christianity look like from that perspective? This phrase, "love God and love your neighbor," is referred to by Christians as the Great Command. So what does a Great Command Christianity look like?

A Great Command Christianity would look not like victory, but it might look like humility and it would be a Christianity that focused not on answers or winners, but, I believe, it would be a Christianity that focused on people's questions: Lord, where is the wisdom? Jesus, what must I do to follow you? What is the greatest command?

Throughout church history there have been people who have seriously engaged Jesus' call to love God and love the neighbor, and those people, those folks have often been forgotten in regular histories. Hence, a people's history of Christianity would be a history of Christianity that was not a triumphant or manifest destiny history, but rather a history about people who were able and willing to protest the church as an institution when it went wrong, were willing to stand up and fight for social justice, were willing to engage in new forms of prayer and spirituality, and were willing to change and be creative as they felt their following of Jesus asked them to be. It would be an entirely different vision of the history of Christianity. And I think that story, the story of people in a humble and holy calling to love and not to just win, is the kind of history that both Christians and our other friends who are not part of the Christian faith, but in our other brother and sister faith traditions, are crying out for us to tell.

CONVERSATION

Lillian Daniel: If you'd like a printed transcript, audio copy or DVD of the message you just heard from Diana Butler Bass, we'll tell you how to place an order at the end of the program. Or you can visit our website at 30goodminutes.org to watch the video or read the text anytime. Now, let's talk with Diana Butler Bass.

Diana, it's great to have you on the show. You're an old friend of mine. We met when you came to my church and were doing research on congregations in America and it's wonderful to see you here. What is an example of one of the important stories that most people don't know from Christian history?

Diana Butler Bass: Oh, I think that my favorite story in the book and I think it's a very important story—it gets to the thing that I was saying at the end about what would it look like—comes from Samuel Green who in the 1850s was a freed slave in the state of Maryland who became a Methodist pastor. He had a very successful congregation and many slaves joined his church. He began preaching and preaching about the freedom in Jesus. Several people in his

church disappeared because this particular county in Maryland was one of the centers of the Underground Railroad. So authorities began to suspect that Samuel Green was in cahoots with Harriet Tubman who was also from this same county in Maryland. They came to his house one night and they raided his house, looking for evidence that he was actually helping his congregants escape slavery. They found nothing that would pin absolutely on him, that he was freeing slaves, but what they did find was a copy of the book, "Uncle Tom's Cabin," by Harriet Beecher Stowe. And for a black person in Maryland in the 1850s to own a copy of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was against the law.

He was arrested, tried, found guilty of owning a book, and sentenced to ten years hard labor in a Maryland penitentiary. The case became a *cause célèbre* for Maryland abolitionists and also Maryland's state slave holders who wanted to make an example of a Methodist minister who would dare preach about freedom or own this book. Eventually, after five years of the sentence, it was commuted. So he left prison. His wife had moved next to the penitentiary so she could be with him, as close as possible. She was there for five years. They lost everything in this affair and they left to go north to Canada. On the way to Canada they stopped in Hartford, Connecticut, where they met with Harriet Beecher Stowe. There he told her the whole story of his preaching freedom and reading the book. She said, "Well, what did you think of the book?" And he said, "I never finished it." And at that point she was really surprised. She went off to her library, got him a copy of her book, signed it to him, and then gave it to him and sent him and his wife on their way. After that we never hear from them again in history. But it was this amazing story of a man who put freedom at the center of the Gospel and paid the price for it.

Lydia Talbot: Diana, "A People's History of Christianity" is, you say, really the history of the prophetic Jesus and you dedicate it so beautifully and lovingly to your daughter, Emma Catherine Bass, about twelve years old now. This wonderful twelve-year-old daughter of yours represents the future. So carry us into the future. Toward the end of the book you use the metaphor of a river, the fluid faith and so on. I guess I want to ask you, how is the water these days and what do you hope Emma will take from this?

Diana Butler Bass: I actually have a lot of hopes and dreams about what Emma will take from it because when I published the book and dedicated it to her, she was so proud that her mom had done this. So one day in Sunday school, she was talking to another kid in the fifth grade Sunday school class and she said, "Oh, my mom has a new book that came out." And he said, "What's it about?" And she said, "It's a history of Christianity." In the Sunday school classroom from a kid raised in the church, he looked at her and said, "What's that about, killing Jews and Muslims?" My daughter's face just dropped and she came back down from Sunday school for me and she looked like someone had hit her with a brick and she said, "Mom, is that what your book is about? Is that what Christians do, kill Jews and Muslims?" I said, "Honey, no. That's not what mommy's book is about. Some Christians have done that and it's wrong and it should never, never, never happen again."

Lillian Daniel: Well, it's so interesting because she's your daughter so she's received this wonderful different history of Christianity. But why, for so many of us in school or university, is the history of religion, the history of Christianity sort of the Crusades and all the horrors and all the fighting and all the internecine feuds? What's driving that?

Diana Butler Bass: I don't entirely know. I think part of it is an appropriate sense that Christians have had over the last 20 or 30 years to examine the dark sides of their history. And many fine historians have done that in an extraordinary manner. I think of that wonderful book, "Constantine's Sword," for example on anti-Semitism. And that's necessary and that needs to happen, but there is something in the air right now that little boy in the Sunday school could pick up.

Lydia Talbot: What your daughter's friends who made those remarks perhaps were referring to were what you write about, the "Big C" Christianity as opposed to the generative Christianity, the transforming aspect of the faith. Can you say more about that? What your scholarly friend told you—you refer in the beginning of the book—is she doesn't have a problem with Jesus, she's a non-believer.

Diana Butler Bass: It's everything that happened after.

Lydia Talbot: It's everything that happened *after* Jesus that made her mad.

Lillian Daniel: Will Willimon says people love Jesus, they just don't like his friends.

Lydia Talbot: So can you address that, the difference?

Diana Butler Bass: I think the problem with that Big C story is that there are Christians who have peddled that story and they've done it for political purposes. Most often in recent years, the religious right has had a very strong investment in that Big C story, the victory of Christianity.

Lydia Talbot: Power and domination.

Lillian Daniel: Militarism and Christian empire.

Lydia Talbot: For our viewers, what are the Big Cs.

Diana Butler Bass: The Big Cs are, once again: Christ, Constantine, Christendom, the Crusades, Calvin, and then a Christian America.

Lydia Talbot: So the militancy of that brand of Christianity.

Diana Butler Bass: I call it Christian manifest destiny and the implication, of course, is that it's going to continue until all the ends of the earth are vanquished under the rule of a particular kind of imperial Christianity. And so people have said this is it. This is the story. And a lot of folks hear that story because they hear it from pastors and preachers on TV. The problem is that folks like Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens and wonderful writers who are neo-atheists, they hear that story and they say, "Well, that's it. That's Christianity and, boy, isn't that just awful! And good for you all and manifest destiny. You might have won the war but you have lost the battle." And I think the remark of the fifth grader in Sunday school with my daughter is a "lost the

battle” kind of remark. When even Christians look at this story through a sensitive lens they see all the problems with it.

Lillian Daniel: And yet, one of the gifts that you’ve given to the Church and to the country is that you go around and tell the positive stories, not just in history but the remarkable things that are going on in congregations today.

Diana Butler Bass: Yeah. And I try not to be Sally Sunshine about the whole thing because I do know the darkness and how hard it is to have a good congregation or to have a good church.

Lydia Talbot: In five seconds, who is going to contribute most to the 21st century of Christianity?

Diana Butler Bass: I think it’s an amazing amount of people in their 20s and 30s right now who are breaking through all the boundaries and trying to create what I would call a generative faith based on love.

Lillian Daniel: And we’ve got one of them on right now.

REFLECTION INTRODUCTION

Lillian Daniel: We’re turning to our friend, Otis Moss III, who is the Senior Pastor of Chicago’s Trinity United Church of Christ. He has some thoughts on jazz music and faith.

REFLECTION

Otis Moss: The greatest gift America has given to the world, I believe, is jazz music, created in New Orleans, or New Or-LEENS, depending upon where you’re from. It was created in the Congo Square as a result of Africans being brought from West Africa. They were sold in an area called the Congo Square in New Orleans. And in that area they heard the rhythms of not only French chamber music, but also the sounds of Native Americans, and created a Creole music entitled jazz.

I believe jazz speaks to us in a very unique way of what democracy is about and about how we are to engage each other theologically. You see, jazz music is the only music that really should not be played—actually, the instruments should not be played—together. The piano, which is classical, and the saxophone, which is for a marching band, the drums that are used for the street, and also the bass, which actually should be played with a bow but instead is played with the fingers. But what is powerful about jazz music is that each person is allowed to solo. Even though they all know the same theme, they can all bring their own unique element to the table.

And what is so powerful is you will never hear a piano trying to oppress a saxophone, a saxophone trying to oppress the drum, or the drum trying to oppress the bass. Each person is given the right to solo. And I believe in American and American democracy, if we take a cue from jazz music, maybe we can solo together and maybe we will create our own love supreme.

CLOSING

Lillian Daniel: Thank you, Otis. And our thanks again to Diana Butler Bass, Mui Baltrunas and you for joining us today on “30 Good Minutes.” I’m Lillian Daniel.

Lydia Talbot: And I’m Lydia Talbot. Before we go, I encourage you to visit our website at 30GoodMinutes.org, where you’ll find an extensive collection of reflections and stories, on video and in print, to enrich your spiritual life. Now, from all of us at “30 Good Minutes,” may peace be with you in the week ahead.