



DAMNED IF SHE DOES

BY SARAH STANKORB

DISCUSSION GUIDE

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Damned If She Does offers an intimate view into the reasons many American women have questioned and ultimately left the church. Some stopped believing, others still follow the teachings of Jesus but don't want to step foot into a church, and others are seeking new spiritualities. As personal as their stories can be, the women in this book represent national trends and reflect the ways Christian belief and American politics have changed over recent decades. For generations, women made up the lifeblood of American churches and brought their families into the fold. Their departure is an important indicator for the future of faith in America and a warning to any institution that takes its core constituency for granted.

This guide is meant to aid your group in discussion of *Damned If She Does*—whether you are a book club, a church group, a secular meetup, or just a group of friends gathering to chat. Some questions will draw you into the book's main arguments. Others will prompt you to reflect on your own beliefs. Pick and choose from the questions below to best suit your group's interests. Please set ground rules for your discussion, as the book and some questions refer to sexual abuse, violence, and spiritual harm. Agree with your group in advance how deeply members are prepared to discuss such matters.

INTRO

1. In your childhood memory (and note whether you were raised Christian or not), was Jesus a figure that you thought aligned with women's liberation? Was the church a place where women were respected?
2. Have you ever gone through a major change in identity or affiliation (whether religiously, professionally, politically, or some other way in which a major identity change altered how you describe yourself)? What is it like to have a paradigm or identity shift? If you've never gone through something like this, think about a core part of your identity and what it would take for you to change or give that up.

CHAPTER 1

1. Reflect on how the changing nature of the media we consume impacts how we encounter faith leaders in new ways. How was the rise of televangelism similar to today's social media influencers? How was it different?
2. Consider how Danuta's faith and career fed into one another, giving her credibility other women did not enjoy within many evangelical spaces, while also requiring certain concessions. Are women uniquely prone to such a predicament when faith takes a public stage? Or is there something about American evangelicalism that forces a certain public presentation, paired with a fear of authentically disclosing one's experience? What would it feel like to be rejected, professionally or spiritually, over a deeply held and profoundly personal secret?

CHAPTER 2

1. Imagine a world in which Re-Imagining fully overcame the backlash of conservative forces. Can you conceive of what a global community of feminist churches would have been like? How would recent decades of history have been different?
2. If a community of leaders were to try to convene a modern version of Re-Imagining, to really change the way churches treat and perceive women, which women leaders would you invite? What sort of rituals would you create? Would you try to prepare to meet a backlash—or welcome it, prepared to call out the lies? What strategies would you use to overcome it?

CHAPTER 3

1. What do you make of the investment in ministries and evangelistic efforts aimed at recruiting men, especially in a time of rising Third Wave feminism? How were the movements responding to one another (and recent prior history)?
2. Reflect on the desire for absolute truth. How did current events and cultural changes in the 1990s and early 2000s create anxiety around uncertainty? Over religious diversity? If someone is frightened or feels like they are losing cultural relevance, can you see how they might be drawn to a figure who claims to be able to teach others exactly how to live?

CHAPTER 4

1. In your youth, did you have an understanding of what it meant to be “sexually pure”? If so, where did you learn those ideas? If “purity” wasn’t a concern, what was your sex education like? As an adult, when you think about “purity,” what other ideas do you find tucked inside the concept? (Think: control over women’s bodies? men’s bodies? racism? faith concepts?)
2. Do you think old-school purity culture is conceptually connected to modern incel culture in some way? If someone’s youthful faith linked sexuality to oppression, can they come to a healthier understanding of sexuality without deconstructing or leaving behind that faith?

CHAPTER 5

1. When was the first time you remember learning about sexual abuse within the Catholic church? Have you ever heard stories about female victims of abuse? Female abusers? How does news coverage of Catholic abuse of boys differ (if at all) from abuse of girls and young women in Protestant churches?
2. Is there something unique about the scale and structural cover-up of sexual abuse within the Catholic church? Is sexual abuse within the church different somehow from abuse and cover-up within other institutions (schools or youth organizations like Boy Scouts)? If your child was abused by a leader in an organization, do you think you could trust the organization—or any organization—again?

CHAPTER 6

1. If you attended church in 2014, did your church talk about police violence against Black Americans? Have you ever attended a church that discussed the impact of racism? Was there an effort to listen directly to people who have lived with the consequences of racism? If you are a person of faith, is there a moral or spiritual mandate to confront racism? If so, what is it? If you are not a person of faith, have you ever been part of an advocacy or protest group that united people in a way that felt like more than the sum of its individual parts?
2. What did you think about Rev. Miriam saying she thinks Christianity as we know it doesn't have a hundred years left, or maybe not even fifty? Do you think other resistance movements will force institutions beyond the church to reconsider their allegiances? How do you interpret the quote, "The more they deconstruct, the more they will decolonize, and they won't know what to put in its place. . . . And this is how Christianity will eat itself"?

CHAPTER 7

1. Do you think you could belong to an organization that did not approve of your marriage or other core relationship? Would you be more inclined to leave such a group or to stay and try to change it from the inside?
2. What conclusions do you draw from the protracted battle over LGBTQ+ inclusion and acceptance within the United Methodist Church? Is this simply how change happens—incrementally and painfully? If you had endured such a battle over years, would you want to stay once some measure of acceptance had been won, or do you think you'd be burned out and want to move on?

CHAPTER 8

1. What role has the internet played in helping expose abuse within church communities, as compared to when such abuses—if reported at all—might only have been covered by local newspapers or networks?
2. Stankorb writes about the “moral about-face” many evangelical leaders took when it came to sexual abuse allegations levied against Donald Trump. These were leaders who supported a cottage industry demanding sexual “purity” of young people, but when a Republican president could make great policy strides and swing the Supreme Court, many made concessions or waved off allegations against Trump and even his “grab 'em by the pussy” quote. Is this a fair assessment of these leaders’ response? Do you find similarities or differences in the ways some leaders defended Trump and the way leaders in the Southern Baptist Convention approached sexual abuse allegations in that church body?

CHAPTER 9

1. What role do other women serve in backlashes against women's liberation movements? Has social media changed the way we perceive (or are fed) content made by women calling for a "return" to more traditional gender roles?
2. How did abortion become a faith issue? Should it be one? Is there a spiritual aspect to reproduction? If so, does that place pregnancy in the realm of the sacred—and if so, is there a way to approach the process spiritually/collectively that is not political?

CHAPTER 10

1. What do you think about Stankorb's claim that "people with deep attachment to Christian faith don't usually give up their church for just one reason"? Have you ever had trouble making a needed change—quitting a toxic job, ending a bad relationship—even though you were being forced to confront a mounting list of problems? What did it feel like to reach your tipping point?
2. Georgette is one of the few women in the book who winds up returning to the church after quitting. Were you surprised she found her way back? How is her story different from or similar to that of Joy, who tried a variety of churches before finally quitting? What do you think about Denise's situation, of still believing and still seeking online community, but not being able to trust the inner thoughts of the person sitting down the pew from her?

CHAPTER 11

1. Earlier in the book, we met Black women hurt by the silence of white church leaders after police killed Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. With the murder of George Floyd, the book describes how white women began withdrawing from the church over racism and joining advocacy movements. Does this track with what you witnessed? Did you see any faith communities respond well during the 2020 protests (or before)? What does “responding well” look like?
2. Elisabeth came from a spiritual background very different from that of many of the book’s more progressive believers. How does a theology of prophecy and spiritual warfare apply to the battle over American racism for her? How can such theology also feed into insurrection and Christian nationalism? If America is to be a country that welcomes a plurality of religious viewpoints, how might we live beside people who have a Christian nationalist notion of truth—especially if they think our truth is wrong?

CHAPTER 12

1. Whether you belong to a church or not, do you believe in any other systems that might fall under the “woo woo” umbrella (astrology, alternative medicine, spells, numerology, etc.)? If you have deconstructed or left the church, have you filled in spiritual gaps with some other beliefs?
2. As Americans secularize and detach from the church, their skepticism of religious institutions extends to other institutions (political parties, for one). Do you think Americans might be in a historic pendulum swing away from trusting and wanting to be part of institutions altogether? What sort of spirituality is appealing in such a time? And do you think the pendulum might someday swing back toward institutions based on some formulation of newer ideals? What would spiritual institutions that are safe and healthy for women offer to everyone?

CHAPTER 13

1. Do you think Americans hold any stereotypes about atheists? As more Americans have left church affiliation, do you think stigma toward atheists has changed? What about stigma toward women atheists? Are you surprised by allegations of abuse within some organized atheist communities? What aspects of patriarchy span atheism and church communities?
2. The author, Sarah Stankorb, seems skeptical of reports of religious revival nationally among young men, writing, “The changing variable in the gender-and-church story is women, not men.” What does the fact of young women departing church at higher rates than men indicate for the future of religion in America? Why do you think the media seems more eager to cover men joining, rather than women leaving—even though the data does not consistently support the narrative of men’s revival but is clear about women’s disaffiliation?

CHAPTER 14

1. Are you aware of any spirituality in your family lineage that is Indigenous or Pagan or that predates the faith affiliation with which you were raised? How do you know about these beliefs? What sort of faith legacy did you inherit? Do you ever spend time thinking about or talking to ancestors or family members who have passed away?
2. In the chapter, a woman named Sara describes deconstructing “alongside my ancestors.” She describes telling the truth of her ancestors’ history as healing for them and for her, “to declare that she does not have to live inside this violent system.” Have you ever considered the possibility of spiritual healing for those who have long since passed away? Is there healing to be had for us, today, in taking this view of history?

CHAPTER 15

1. This chapter was written in 2025. What do you think about the scene in Oasis Church in which the pastor responds to the US missile strike on Iran, particularly in light of the 2026 war in Iran? Can you imagine viewing worship as a war cry? How has Christian nationalism changed the lens through which Americans view foreign policy? How has that shift altered how you (or Americans in general) view the church?
2. Stankorb ends the book by visiting with two sources. The first, a trans person named M, had withdrawn their clergy credentials and predicted that “with the planet on fire,” people who are leaving the church might be drawn to some of humanity’s oldest, nature-based belief systems. The other, Rev. Miriam, leads a church that had responded to a natural disaster—a tornado—turning the sanctuary into an emergency site for necessities like diapers, water, and tents. Stankorb went up for communion, and describes it as “small bites that instead of representing—to me—Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection, were part of a shared meal with people both exhausted and energized by weeks spent helping their neighbors.” Stankorb felt something “release.” It wasn’t a moment of salvation or renewed faith for the author, but a “sense of freedom from mourning the church [she] left—and a little joy for the church Miriam still has. Nothing more.” Why do you think the author chose to highlight these two visions of faith?
3. How do you think Christian nationalism and the politicization of faith has reformed Americans’ view of faith? How has it shifted the spaces where people feel comfortable gathering to worship? Why does it matter that women in particular have left the church? Do you agree that women are “a canary in the coal mine,” an indicator of the future of the church and, therefore, the face of religion in America?