

Believers & Doubters

Books We've Read: 1990s to the Present

1. ***The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming***
by **Henri J. M. Nouwen**

Product Description

Seeing a reproduction of Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son* catapulted Henri Nouwen on a long spiritual adventure. Here he shares the deeply personal meditation that led him to discover the place within where God has chosen to dwell.

2. ***Contemplative Prayer***
by **Thomas Merton**

Amazon.com Review

This little gem of a book, newly issued with a foreword from the great Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh (who knew Merton in the 1960s) beautifully distills Merton's own reading and long experience with contemplation. Written close to the end of Merton's life, this book is not so much a "how to" guide as it is a kind of contemplation of contemplation. Immersed in the "negative theology" of St. John of the Cross and others--and influenced by his deep reading in Zen--Merton here stresses that in meditation "we should not look for a 'method' or 'system,' but cultivate an 'attitude,' an 'outlook': faith, openness, attention, reverence, expectation, supplication, trust, joy." God is found in the desert of surrender: this means giving up any expectation for a particular message and "waiting on the Word of God in silence," knowing that any answer will be "his silence itself suddenly, inexplicably revealing itself to him as a word of great power, full of the voice of God." --*Doug Thorpe*

3. ***The Great Divorce***
by **C. S. Lewis**

Amazon.com Review

The Great Divorce is C.S. Lewis's [Divine Comedy](#): the narrator bears strong resemblance to Lewis (by way of Dante); his Virgil is the fantasy writer [George MacDonald](#); and upon boarding a bus in a nondescript neighborhood, the narrator is taken to Heaven and Hell. The book's primary message is presented with almost oblique tidiness--"There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'" However, the narrator's descriptions of sin and temptation will hit quite close to home for many readers. Lewis has a genius for describing the intricacies of vanity and self-deception, and this book is tremendously persistent in forcing its reader to consider the ultimate consequences of everyday pettiness. --*Michael Joseph Gross* --*This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.*

4. ***Message of the Psalms***
by **Walter Brueggemann**

Product Description

This scholarly study of the Psalms retains its rigor while focusing particularly on the pastoral use of the Psalms, looking at how they may function as voices of faith in the actual life of the believing community.

5. *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*
by Kathleen Norris

Amazon.com Review

"Our ridiculously fallible language becomes a lesson in how God's grace works despite and even through our human frailty. We will never get the words exactly right. There will always be room for imperfection, for struggle, growth and change. And this is as it should be." With observations like this one, Kathleen Norris, author of *Dakota* and *The Cloister Walk*, has again provided a salutary corrective for contemporary Christians in *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*. The book is about how she learned to use religious words, such as "incarnation," "idolatry," and "evangelism." Norris is a feminist, a theological conservative, a sophisticate, and a country bumpkin. And she's one of the few living Christian writers who can be described as truly great. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

6. *The World's Religions*
by Huston Smith

Amazon.com Review

The World's Religions, by Huston Smith, has been a standard introduction to its eponymous subject since its first publication in 1958. Smith writes humbly, forswearing judgment on the validity of world religions.

7. *God: A Biography*
by Jack Miles

From Publishers Weekly

Former Jesuit Miles offers a detailed analysis of the nature and character of God as he appears in the Old Testament.

8. *Faith in the Living God: A Dialogue*
by John Polkinghorne, Michael Welker

About the Authors

John Polkinghorne is past President and now Fellow of Queen's College, Cambridge, and a Fellow of the Royal Society. Author of *Faith of a Physicist and Science and Theology*, among other works, he writes from a background as a theoretical physicist and theologian.

Michael Welker, author of *God the Spirit and Creation and Reality*, is Professor of Systematic Theology and Director of the Internationales Wissenschaftsforum at the University of Heidelberg, Germany.

Book Description

A dialogue for troubled friends and cultured despisers of Christianity, this exciting volume invites the reader to join in an intellectual and personal adventure, engaging mind and heart in a search for religious truth and "the living God."

Polkinghorne and Welker, two of today's most respected and daring religious thinkers, here look freshly at Christianity's central theological questions. In a mutual encounter that allows a presentation by each with a reply by the other, they probe crucial issues of belief in God, Christian faith and hope, life in the Spirit, and the tenability of faith in light of current science and culture. Eschewing polemics, they show how our contemporary horizon re-illuminates an ancient faith and how faith in turn offers a radical critique of our most cherished assumptions.

9. *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*

by Elaine Pagels

From Publishers Weekly

In this majestic new book, Pagels (*The Gnostic Gospels*) ranges panoramically over the history of early Christianity, demonstrating the religion's initial tremendous diversity and its narrowing to include only certain texts supporting certain beliefs. At the center of her book is the conflict between the gospels of John and Thomas. Reading these gospels closely, she shows that Thomas offered readers a message of spiritual enlightenment. Rather than promoting Jesus as the only light of the world, Thomas taught individuals that "there is a light within each person, and it lights up the whole universe. If it does not shine, there is darkness." As she eloquently and provocatively argues, the author of John wrote his gospel as a refutation of Thomas, portraying the disciple Thomas as a fool when he doubts Jesus, and Jesus as the only true light of the world. Pagels goes on to demonstrate that the early Christian writer Irenaeus promoted John as the true gospel while he excluded Thomas, and a host of other early gospels, from the list of those texts that he considered authoritative. His list became the basis for the New Testament canon when it was fixed in 357. Pagels suggests that we recover Thomas as a way of embracing the glorious diversity of religious tradition. As she elegantly contends, religion is not merely an assent to a set of beliefs, but a rich, multifaceted fabric of teachings and experiences that connect us with the divine. Exhilarating reading, Pagels's book offers a model of careful and thoughtful scholarship in the lively and exciting prose of a good mystery writer.

10. *"The Sabbath"*

by Abraham Joshua Heschel

This book provides a brief yet profound meditation on the meaning of the Seventh Day, the enormously influential idea of an "architect of holiness" that appears not in space but in time. Heschel, internationally known scholar, author, activist, theologian and, professor of ethics and mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, wrote this classic of spiritual literature in 1951.

11. *"One Jesus, Many Christs"*

by Gregory Riley

Book Description

In this exciting volume, Riley reveals that from the beginning there was not just one true Christianity, but many different Christianities. United by passionate allegiance to Jesus as Hero, these early, doctrinally diverse Christianities have led to the development of many different kinds of Christian churches among us today. Riley shows that early Christianity harbored major doctrinal differences about all aspects of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and divinity.

This book provides not only a whole new understanding of the nature of earliest Christianity, but it also conveys a vital message for today about what Christian faith is really about. Riley reveals the authentic character of Christianity as inherently pluralistic and tolerant of diverse ideas while passionately centered in Jesus.

About the Author

Gregory J. Riley is Associate Professor of New Testament at the Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, Calif. His earlier Fortress Press book is *Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Controversy* (1994).

12. *"The Origin of Satan"*

by Elaine Pagels

Book Description

From the religious historian whose *The Gnostic Gospels* won both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award comes a dramatic interpretation of Satan and his role on the Christian

tradition. With magisterial learning and the elan of a born storyteller, Pagels turns Satan's story into an audacious exploration of Christianity's shadow side, in which the gospel of love gives way to irrational hatreds that continue to haunt Christians and non-Christians alike.

From Booklist

Pagels' lucid history of the social construction of Satan is not only a wealth of historical information, but also a source of important insights into the demonization of "intimate enemies" that has marked the history of Christianity. Pagels writes that she began with the assumption that Christian discourse about invisible beings, including Satan and other angels, had as its primary purpose what Austrian-born Israeli philosopher Martin Buber called the "moralizing" of the natural universe. She discovered that it had far more to do with social relations among particular persons, and that discovery informs the entire book. She traces the development of Satan in the Jewish community from a sort of roving agent acting on God's behalf--always obstructing but not always evil--to an increasingly evil force identified more and more with intimate enemies, members of one's own community with whom one is in conflict.

13. "Who Wrote the Bible?"

by Richard Friedman

Editorial Review

"J," "P," "E," and "D" are the names scholars have given to some authors of the Bible, and, as such, they are very important letters to a lot of people. Churches have died and been born, and millions of people have lost faith or found it, because of the last two centuries of debate about who, exactly, wrote the canonical texts of Christianity and Judaism. Richard Elliott Friedman's survey of this debate, in *Who Wrote the Bible?*, may be the best written popular book about this question. Without condescension or high-flown academic language, Friedman carefully describes the history of textual criticism of the Bible--a subject on which his authority is unparalleled (Friedman has contributed voluminously to the authoritative [Anchor Bible Dictionary](#)). But this book is not just smart. Perhaps even more impressive than Friedman's erudition is his sensitivity to the power of textual criticism to influence faith. --Michael Joseph Gross

14. "The Great Poems of the Bible"

by James Kugel

From the Publisher

In *The Great Poems of the Bible*, Harvard scholar James Kugel presents original translations of the most beautiful and important poems of the Scripture. Taken together, these poems represent the very essence of the Hebrew Bible. Reading them one after another is like taking a guided tour through Scripture, meeting firsthand some of its most important teachings and opening the way to an understanding of the Bible as a whole.

From the Critics

From Algis Valiunas - Commentary (The numerous spiritual truths) to which Kugel astutely points the way in *The Great Poems of the Bible* may seem obvious enough once they have been brought to one's attention, yet one would likely never have noticed them without his help. Although Kugel's translations will hardly supersede the peerless solemn magnificence of the King James Version, they are supple, graceful, vigorous, and far preferable to most English renderings in our parched age. As for the commentaries, if one may call them that despite Kugel's disclaimer, they are models of what criticism at its most serious can achieve. This is a book to be cherished.

15. "Why Religion Matters: The Fate of the Human Spirit in an Age of Disbelief"

by **Huston Smith**

From Library Journal

Smith, the respected author of the classic best seller *The World's Religions* and former professor of religion and psychology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, now adds a brilliant and accessible title that challenges the religious dimensions of human life. In the first part, he considers the accomplishments and deficiencies of each of three historical periods--traditional, modern, and postmodern--critiquing how each era has contributed to our contemporary spiritual malaise. Not satisfied with simply judging the past, Smith focuses the second part on the future, offering hopeful alternatives to build renewed spiritual vigor. Passionate and inspiring, Smith employs personal stories and experiences with leading religious, philosophical, and scientific thinkers. This is truly a book of wisdom to accompany readers through the metaphorical tunnel into the light of a new millennium. -- John-Leonard Berg, Univ. of Wisconsin, Platteville

16. *The Lord is My Shepherd: The Healing Wisdom of the Twenty-Third Psalm*

by **Harold Kushner**

From Publishers Weekly

Many people regard the 23rd Psalm as one of the most familiar and comforting passages in the Bible. Rabbi Kushner, bestselling author of the spiritual classic *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, looks to the psalm as a microcosmic statement about God--its 57 Hebrew words, he says, present "an entire theology" about life and loss. The psalm begins in a place of perfect peace--the psalmist lacks for nothing, and is tended perfectly by God the shepherd--but that peace is shattered by "the shadow of death." Going phrase by phrase through the psalm, Kushner tackles serious questions: what does it mean to lack for nothing? Where is God when we suffer? Some of his interpretations are quite fresh and interesting; for example, "the straight paths" in which God leads the psalmist are anything but straight, he claims, noting that the Hebrew is more accurately rendered "roundabout ways that end up in the right direction." Ultimately, that phrase's message is about trusting God when the way does not seem straightforward. The psalm is not Pollyannaish, but realistic: as Kushner points out, the psalmist has enemies, has known failure and has probably lost a loved one. He draws heavily on rabbinic Judaism, but also references popular culture (including Woody Allen films), Freud, Michelangelo and other diverse sources. Kushner writes well and engagingly, and his tone will make readers feel personally welcomed into the rabbi's study for a comforting one-on-one chat.

17. *Soul Survivor: How Thirteen Unlikely Mentors Helped My Faith Survive the Church*

by **Philip Yancey**

From Publishers Weekly

Fans of Yancey's bestseller *What's So Amazing About Grace?* may not know what to do with this book. In some ways, it is his darkest work ever, chronicling his own lover's quarrel with the institutional church specifically, the church of his childhood that promulgated racism and practiced a pharisaic legalism. In other ways, this book is one of his most hopeful, for in it he charts a spiritual path through all of the muck made by organized religion. As guides, he looks to "a baker's dozen" of thinkers, writers, doctors and activists who have taught him about Christianity. Martin Luther King Jr.'s life shamed Yancey into confronting his own racism and then helped his heart be transformed by Christ's love. Leo Tolstoy taught him self-forgiveness, while Fyodor Dostoyevsky modeled grace as a lived reality. John Donne taught him to wrestle with the ultimate enemy, death; Annie Dillard demonstrated ways to appreciate God in creation; Mahatma Gandhi showed him the power of one individual to change the course of history. The most moving chapter is perhaps the tribute to Paul Brand, an orthopedic surgeon whose work on leprosy helped Yancey to understand how pain can become a gift from God. It's not a perfect book; the chapter on G.K. Chesterton is too short, and the essay on former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop seems superficial in a book with such

theological depth. Despite these minor flaws, this multibiography is a much-needed signpost, stubbornly pointing to the life of faith.

18. *What's so Amazing about Grace?*

by [Philip Yancey](#)

Book Description

In 1987, an IRA bomb buried Gordon Wilson and his twenty-year-old daughter beneath five feet of rubble. Gordon alone survived. And forgave. He said of the bombers, "I have lost my daughter, but I bear no grudge...I shall pray, tonight and every night, that God will forgive them."

His words caught the media's ear--and out of one man's grief, the world got a glimpse of grace.

Grace is the church's great distinctive. It's the one thing the world cannot duplicate, and the one thing it craves above all else--for only grace can bring hope and transformation to a jaded world.

In *What's So Amazing About Grace?* award-winning author Philip Yancey explores grace at street level. If grace is God's love for the undeserving, he asks, then what does it look like in action? And if Christians are its sole dispensers, then how are we doing at lavishing grace on a world that knows far more of cruelty and unforgiveness than it does of mercy?

Yancey sets grace in the midst of life's stark images, tests its mettle against horrific "ungrace." Can grace survive in the midst of such atrocities as the Nazi holocaust? Can it triumph over the brutality of the Ku Klux Klan? Should any grace at all be shown to the likes of Jeffrey Dahmer, who killed and cannibalized seventeen young men?

Grace does not excuse sin, says Yancey, but it treasures the sinner. True grace is shocking, scandalous. It shakes our conventions with its insistence on getting close to sinners and touching them with mercy and hope. It forgives the unfaithful spouse, the racist, the child abuser. It loves today's AIDS-ridden addict as much as the tax collector of Jesus' day.

In his most personal and provocative book ever, Yancey offers compelling, true portraits of grace's life-changing power. He searches for its presence in his own life and in the church. He asks, How can Christians contend graciously with moral issues that threaten all they hold dear?

And he challenges us to become living answers to a world that desperately wants to know, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*

19. *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*

by [Richard Rice](#), [John Sanders](#), [Clark H. Pinnock](#), and [William Hasker](#)

Book Description

Voted one of Christianity Today's 1995 Books of the Year! *The Openness of God* presents a careful and full-orbed argument that the God known through Christ desires "responsive relationship" with his creatures. While it rejects process theology, the book asserts that such classical doctrines as God's immutability, impassibility and foreknowledge demand reconsideration. The authors insist that our understanding of God will be more consistently biblical and more true to the actual devotional lives of Christians if we profess that "God, in grace, grants humans significant freedom" and enters into relationship with a genuine "give-and-take dynamic." *The Openness of God* is remarkable in its comprehensiveness, drawing from the disciplines of biblical, historical, systematic and philosophical theology. Evangelical and other orthodox Christian

philosophers have promoted the "relational" or "personalist" perspective on God in recent decades. Now here is the first major attempt to bring the discussion into the evangelical theological arena.

20. *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*

by **N. T. Wright**

"Wright offers...[an] intelligent view of Christianity, and his title invites us to compare his work with Lewis's [...] Mere Christianity." (Washington Post)

21. *Prayer: Does it Make any Difference?*

by **Philip Yancey**

Book Description

Philip Yancey probes the very heartbeat—the most fundamental, challenging, perplexing, and deeply rewarding aspect—of our relationship with God: prayer. What is prayer? Does it change God’s mind or ours—or both? This book is an invitation to communicate with God the Father who invites us into an eternal partnership through prayer.

22. *What Jesus Meant (Paperback)*

by **Garry Wills**

Book Description

In what are billed “culture wars,” people on the political right and the political left cite Jesus as endorsing their views. Garry Wills argues that Jesus subscribed to no political program. He was far more radical than that. In a fresh reading of the gospels, Wills explores the meaning of the “reign of heaven” Jesus not only promised for the future but brought with him into this life. It is only by dodges and evasions that people misrepresent what Jesus plainly had to say against power, the wealthy, and religion itself. But Wills is just as critical of those who would make Jesus a mere ethical teacher, ignoring or playing down his divinity. An illuminating analysis for believers and nonbelievers alike, *What Jesus Meant* is a brilliant addition to our national conversation on religion.

23. *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions*

by **Karen Armstrong**

Book Description

In the ninth century BCE, the peoples of four distinct regions of the civilized world created the religious and philosophical traditions that have continued to nourish humanity to the present day: Confucianism and Daoism in China, Hinduism and Buddhism in India, monotheism in Israel, and philosophical rationalism in Greece. Later generations further developed these initial insights, but we have never grown beyond them. Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, for example, were all secondary flowerings of the original Israelite vision. Now, in *The Great Transformation*, Karen Armstrong reveals how the sages of this pivotal “Axial Age” can speak clearly and helpfully to the violence and desperation that we experience in our own times.

24. *What Paul Meant (Paperback)*

by **Garry Wills**

From Publishers Weekly

Wills builds on the popularity of his bestseller *What Jesus Meant* in this audio version of his newest book. The apostle Paul's teachings have caused controversy almost from the minute he penned the letters to the first-century churches he helped found. His influence on church history and doctrine is incontrovertible, but his words have often provoked anger and dissension. Wills, who writes from the Catholic tradition, carefully reveals Paul's meaning by taking listeners back to the teaching of Jesus Christ to prove that Paul's words didn't contradict, but in fact explain and expound on Christ's. Wills's precise diction and preacherlike

narration add to the listening experience. He sometimes moves too quickly between chapters and sections—listeners need a bit more time to adjust—and he occasionally reads quickly as well. But haste aside, listeners can't help appreciating Wills's voice, his scholarship and his conclusions.

25. *The Joyful Christian (Paperback)*

by C. S. Lewis

The Joyful Christian gives as good an introduction to the breadth and depth of Lewis's religious reflections as you are likely to find between two covers.

26. *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John and the Praying Imagination*

by Eugene H. Peterson

Peterson's eloquent meditation on the Revelation of St. John engages the imagination and awakens the intellect to the vitality and relevance of the last words on scripture, Christ, church, worship, evil, prayer, witness, politics, judgment, salvation, and heaven.