In a New Crop of Religious Books, Belief is Unbound

Books aim to broaden cultural discourse

By A. David Lewis | Nov 10, 2017

This fall and into the next, scholarly books in religious studies defy easy labels and reflect the eagerness of publishers to widen academic discourse and upset conventional wisdom in the name of new knowledge—in science, across genders, between faiths, and around the world.

At Baylor University Press, for example, director Carey Newman says he aims to publish books that transcend traditional divisions in Christianity: “For the longest time, categories like conservative, evangelical, progressive, or liberal had texture and rootage—but no more.” He points to Shelley Rambo’s Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma (out now), which centers on the spiritual impact and negotiation of trauma and does not fit neatly under the usual labels.

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**Religion AND Science**

The intersection of faith with science has fascinated scholars, particularly on the subjects of ecology and the environment. In Climate Church, Climate World: How People of Faith Must Work for Change (Rowman & Littlefield, Mar. 2018), minister Jim Antal frames climate change as a moral crisis—one the Christian church must confront.

Antal comes from the mainline Protestant United Church of Christ denomination, but this message of environmentalism and its religious impetus is shared by the pope, as demonstrated in Mercy in Motion: The Social
Authors also look beyond climate change to include other topics in science and other fields. Editors including theologian J. P. Moreland, intelligent design theorist Stephen C. Meyer, scientist Christopher Shaw, independent researcher Ann K. Gauger, and seminary professor Wayne Grudem challenge evolutionary creationism in *Theistic Evolution: A Scientific, Philosophical, and Theological Critique* (Crossway, Nov.), which gathers more than 20 experts to scrutinize the fraught relationship between human development and religious teachings, exploring alternatives for believers and scientists alike.


*The Dictionary of Christianity and Science: The Definitive Reference for the Intersection of Christian Faith and Contemporary Science* (Zondervan Academic, Apr. 2018) aims to open the space shared by faith and science, with contributions from almost 150 scholars, edited by Paul Copan, Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics at Palm Beach Atlantic University in Florida; Tremp Longman III, Robert H. Gundry Professor of Biblical Studies and chair of the religious studies department at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, Calif.; Christopher L. Reese, Lexham Press marketing strategist; and Michael G. Strauss, Davis Ross Boyd Professor of Physics at the University of Oklahoma in Norman.

In *Planetary Solidarity: Global Women’s Voices on Christian Doctrine and Climate Justice* (Fortress, out now), editors Grace Ji-Sun and Hilda P. Koster collect insights from women theologians around the world. Ji-Sun is an associate professor of theology at Earlham School of Religion, and Koster is an associate professor of religion at Concordia College.

At the intersection of the social sciences and religion is *Faithful Measures: New Methods in the Measurement of Religion* (New York Univ., out now). Editors Roger Finke—distinguished professor of sociology, religious studies, and international affairs at Pennsylvania State University—and Christopher Baden—professor of sociology at Chapman University—outline ways that data on website visits, word-use frequency, and consumer habits can reveal changing religious behaviors.

**Recognizing Women**

A number of titles continue the work of uncovering the impact of women on religions throughout history, with stories that often have remained untold. Lynn H. Cohick, professor of New Testament at Wheaton College, and Amy Brown Hughes, assistant professor of theology at Gordon College, offer *Christian Women in the Patristic World* (Baker Academic, out now), tracing the debt that modern-day Christians owe to the spiritually impassioned women of the early church. The book reflects Baker’s publishing philosophy, according to Robert Hosack, executive editor: “We are historically Reformed, evangelically rooted, and ecumenically minded these days,” he says. “We find the best Christian thinkers of the day and let them take us in the myriad directions their research might lead.”

Women’s leadership has had a profound effect on the global church. Su Yon Pak, associate professor of integrative and field-based education at Union Theological Seminary, and Jung Ha Kim, director of undergraduate studies at Georgia State University, cross global and cultural borders to show the influence of Asian women in *Leading Wisdom:...*
Along with mining the ancient and recent past for women’s influence, Rebecca Todd Peters, professor of religious studies at Elon University, grapples with the ethical issues they face today. In *Trust Women: A Progressive Christian Argument for Reproductive Justice* (Beacon, Apr. 2018), Peters mounts a defense of abortion that is based on respecting women as their own moral agents rather than shaming and punishing them.

Transcending any one era is *Mother of God: The Jewish Roots of the Virgin Mary* (Image, Oct. 2018) by Brant James Pitre, professor of sacred scripture at Notre Dame Seminary, who describes the Virgin Mary as an exemplar not only for women, but also for men of faith.

### Thinking about Judaism

Judaism, in both its ancient and current iterations, continues to be reinvestigated and reinterpreted. Kenneth R. Snow, professor emeritus of Jewish history at the University of Haifa in Israel, reaches back to the Middle Ages to detail the complexity of papal attitudes to the Jews. *Levi’s Vindication: The “1007 Anonymous” as It Really Is* (Univ. of Pittsburgh, Nov.) revisits and connects to his own *The “1007 Anonymous” and Papal Sovereignty: Jewish Perceptions of the Papacy and Papal Policy in the High Middle Ages*, originally published in 1984 and reissued in 2015. The “1007 Anonymous” text was composed in the 13th century by an unnamed author and suggests the proper relations between Jews, their lay rulers, and the pope.

Other books also offer historical reconsiderations: *Baptists, Jews, and the Holocaust: The Hand of Sincere Friendship* (Judson, out now) by Lee B. Spitzer, general secretary of American Baptist churches, looks at how Baptists in the U.S. responded to reports of anti-Semitism, persecution, and possible genocide during World War II by sending aid and offering assistance to Jews in Europe. *Ambivalent Embrace* (Univ. North Carolina, Nov.) by University of Pittsburgh assistant professor of religious studies Rachel Kranson looks at the postwar shift in economic fortunes for Jewish communities, showing that some Jewish religious, artistic, and intellectual leaders were concerned that the ascent of large numbers of Jews into the American middle class would negatively affect their faith.


Books that explore the multivalent meanings of the Jewish experience keep coming, with titles that include *Feeling Jewish (A Book for Just About Anyone)* by Devorah Baum (Yale Univ., out now), lecturer in English literature and critical theory at University of Southampton, England, focusing on the cultural experience of Judaism.

### Evangelicalism’s Identity Crisis

As the country turns away from traditional faiths, evangelical churches—which seemed to be immune to the losses in membership experienced by the mainline Protestants and Catholics—also have declined: Pew Religion Research Institute data show the portion of Americans who call themselves evangelicals has dropped from 25% to 17% since 2006, and today many more Americans are calling themselves “spiritual but not religious.” A number of books deal with evangelicalism’s identity crisis, as many Christians wrestle with the challenges of modernity and decry the entanglement of evangelical Christianity with conservative politics.

Scandals might also have contributed to disillusionment, such as the one that toppled TV evangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, among the most public faces of evangelical Christianity in the U.S. in the 1980s. John Wigger’s *PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker’s Evangelical Empire* (Oxford Univ., out now) describes their descent, along with other scandals at that time that caused some to question the health of evangelical Christianity in America, even as evangelical mega-churches thrived.
Fast-forward to today. In the autobiographical Still Christian: Following Jesus Out of American Evangelicalism (Westminster John Knox, out now), David P. Gushee, distinguished professor of Christian ethics at Mercer University, recounts becoming a born-again Southern Baptist in 1978, only to later run into problems with evangelical stances on politics and on social issues, such as LGBTQ inclusion in the church. Gushee asks the question he has wrestled with—when a Christian man becomes disillusioned with American Christianity, where can he turn?—and comes to a more complex and nuanced faith.

InterVarsity Press has a book that also reflects the current tensions. In Search of Ancient Roots: The Christian Past and the Evangelical Identity Crisis by Kenneth Stewart (out now), professor of theological studies at Covenant College in Lookout Mountain, Ga., points to the disconnect between today’s evangelicals and the Protestant traditions that grew out of the Reformation.

Many Christian churches—and especially Christian publishers—believe young people will be their salvation, resuscitating the faith and rescuing it from diminishing numbers and fading cultural influence. In Faith Formation in a Secular Age (Baker, Oct.), Andrew Root, Carrie Olson Baalson Chair of Youth and Family Ministry at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minn., considers it vital for the Christian church to appeal to youth, but the error in that approach, he writes, is that it can reflect a larger cultural obsession with youth, and “when we link faith to the authenticity of youthfulness, we make youthfulness itself faith’s measure.”

The theme of review and reassessment suffuses the latest religious-studies lists, reopening time-honored subjects and relinking the past to the present. John Dominic Crossan, professor emeritus at DePaul University, continues this shift toward the idea of a renewed Christianity, one that operates fully in the present while adhering most closely to the purity of its past. In Resurrecting Easter: How the West Lost and the East Kept the Original Easter Vision (HarperOne, Feb. 2018), Crossan argues that the Eastern Orthodox church preserved more fully the biblical version of the resurrection and its meaning for Christians than Roman Catholicism did.

This theme can also be detected in the work of Bart Ehrman, professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill, as he leaves longtime publisher HarperOne for his first book with Simon and Schuster. The Triumph of Christianity (Feb. 2018). Ehrman details the growth of Christianity as a faith not destined to take root in Western culture, yet one that came to pervade it.

A shift away from personal piety toward greater social consciousness and activism is the way some Christians are redefining their faith. With both Rachael Keefe’s The Life-Saving Church: Reclaiming the Gospel for Suicide Prevention (Apr. 2018) and Jeff Hood’s The Execution of God: Encountering the Death Penalty (out now), Chalice Press channels the concern for saving souls into the hopeful mission of preventing deaths. Chalice president and publisher Brad Lyons says, “When we brought these books under contract, we weren’t linking the two as anti-death books.” But, he adds, “in the bigger picture, Chalice Press encourages churches and Christians to think differently about the stigmatized, taboo issues in our society, like the death penalty, suicide, racism, classism, sexuality, and other issues.”

Facing East

There also are new books on Buddhism in religious studies, including several coming from Wisdom Publications, among them Sexuality in Classical South Asian Buddhism by Jose Cabezon (out now), the Dalai Lama Professor of Tibetan Buddhist studies at the University of California–Santa Barbara. Cabezon examines sexual mores of the present in the context of Buddhist traditions.

Sexuality, cosmology, and even fetal development are key concerns for the Dalai Lama himself, and his thinking on those issues is expressed in The Physical World (Wisdom, Nov.), translated by Thupten Jinpa. Also coming from Wisdom is the second volume of the translation of Divine Stories: Divyavadana, Part 2 (Dec.), translated by Andy Rotman, professor in the religious and Buddhist studies program at Smith College. Publishing the translation aligns with the commitment to authenticity and accessibility articulated by Wisdom publisher Daniel Aitken, who says, “As
cultural and linguistic norms change, updated translations that reflect these developments will be desirable. Making these contemporary explanations of the Buddha's words available to an English-reading audience is part of Wisdom's mission."

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