Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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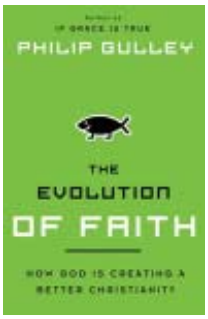
Thought-provoking new books

In the last few months I've read several new books that you may like to know about if you haven't already discovered them. Two mainly address the need to become informed about the Bible and to examine our Christian beliefs and revise some of them. One discusses current economic conditions in the U.S. Another helps us look at the religions that now are so visible all around us.

I've found each one interesting and full of information and opinions that I believe are important for Christians to be aware of. These authors' views deserve our serious consideration, it seems to me, whether or not we agree with them.

A better Christianity?

Philip Gulley is pastor of a Quaker congregation in Indiana. I wrote about his earlier book *If the Church Were Christian* in the May 2011 *Connections.* His latest is *The Evolution of Faith: How God Is Creating a Better Christianity* (HarperOne, 2011).



Although I appreciate many of the points Gulley makes in this book, its subtitle turns me off for three reasons. First, I'm always skeptical when someone claims to know exactly what God is doing. Second, I'm uneasy about seeing God portrayed as a person-like being, by attributing to God person-like actions such as creating a religion. And third, even though I feel strongly about the need for

If you're a United Methodist . . .

and especially if you're a 2012 UMC General Conference delegate, I invite you to start looking regularly at www.um-insight.net, the website of a new project named *United Methodist Insight.* It will present information, perspectives, and resources about significant issues that will come before the 2012 UMC General Conference, which will begin April 24.

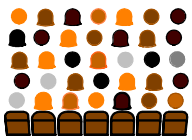
An award-winning UM journalist

Project coordinator is Cynthia B. Astle, an award-winning United Methodist journalist who is a veteran of six General Conferences. She was the first woman editor of the national newspaper, *The United Methodist Reporter.* She is currently editor of *The Progressive Christian,* a national social-justice magazine founded by 19th-century Methodist laymen.

The *UM Insight* website is hosted by St. Stephen United Methodist Church of Mesquite, Texas, and funded by a grant from the Joe B. and Louise P. Cook Foundation, which was established by my late parents. However, neither St. Stephen UMC nor the Cook Foundation has any editorial control over the content of *UM Insight.* (And *UM Insight* has no direct connection to *Connections,* which, by the way, receives no Cook Foundation funds.)

Issues that other denominations also face

UM Insight articles will cover a range of viewpoints, and the project itself will not advocate for any proposal. *UM Insight* seeks to provide a broad range of information and perspectives about key issues that will affect the future of the UMC through decisions made by its 2012 General Conference.



Similar issues are also confronting other denominations, however, so even if you're not a United Methodist you're likely to find *UM Insight* raising questions and offering insights that apply to your denomination, not just the UMC. I hope you'll give *UM Insight* a try!

Christians to be well-informed and to do what evidently had top priority for Jesus, it seems a bit presumptuous for anyone to claim to know for sure what's a better Christianity or a worse one. But because I had liked Gulley's previous book, I read this newer one despite those turnoffs, and I'm glad I did.

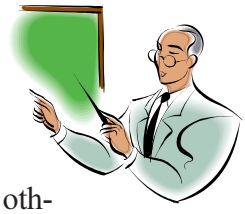
Who's well equipped and who isn't?

Here's one of Gulley's observations that I found especially thought-provoking: "unlike the fields of medicine and law, people who haven't formally studied theology feel not only perfectly equipped, but duty bound, to engage in religious discourse." But even though they engage in it, he observes, "unfortunately, we've not always made their participation easy, using language they neither know nor speak."

Are they wrong in feeling perfectly equipped? In order to be adequately equipped, must one be familiar with scholars' findings and ideas? Yes and no. In a sense, every Christian needs to take part in the church's "theological conversation"—to be a theologian. Thinking about our beliefs and knowing what scholars have discovered can keep us from misinterpreting parts of the Bible and Christian doctrines and doing harm as a result. But following Jesus and recognizing God's presence doesn't require using only what professionals consider the right words or believing what they consider the right beliefs. Our own discernment can also furnish helpful insights.

Do theologians erect barriers?

Gulley suspects that professional theologians may exclude other people deliberately. "One has to wonder," he says, "whether some who work in theology erect such barriers for the express purpose of excluding others, preferring the rarified air of theological speculation over a helpful, accessible spirituality." And in his view, "the harm this causes is obvious—by excluding so many people from theological exploration, we increase the theological ignorance in our society, making people especially vulnerable to bad theology and unscrupulous purveyors of self-serving religion."



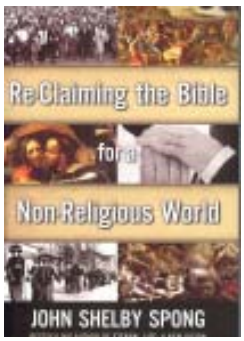
I think Gulley is right about these harmful results of Christians' failure to think about their beliefs and learn what scholars have found. Yet I haven't seen my professional theologian friends excluding people deliberately. In fact, they have been generous in discussing their work with me whenever I've shown interest. My having taken some seminary theology courses and read some theologians' books has helped me to understand their language and thoughts, however, and professional theologians often write in a style that's not clear to the many churchgoers whose backgrounds don't include that kind of study.

How could we close the gap?

How can we get our best theologians to communicate their knowledge in non-academic style that's likely to reach more churchgoers? Seminaries might help by requiring students to write their papers in vocabulary and style that would be clear to typical churchgoers. Also, more pastors could address theological issues explicitly in their sermons and classes. Church groups could invite professional theologians to speak, and then press them for further explanation if what they said didn't seem clear. Another help would be for church groups to read and discuss books like Gulley's, which use non-academic words and writing styles but address theological questions that all Christians need to be considering.

Learning about the Bible

Another new book that would be useful for such discussion is retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong's latest, *Re-Claiming the Bible for a Non-Religious World* (HarperOne, 2011). In it, he discusses the main sections of the Bible and also most of its individual books, presenting an overview of what he sees as the consensus of leading scholars' findings about how, when, and why each was written and what those findings mean for today's people. Spong writes in a conversational style, and this book has short chapters that would make it ideal for use by lay study groups.



Some progressive Christians criticize Spong for failure to address issues of economic injustice, and in fact this book gives little attention to such issues. It gives a lot of attention, however, to the role of prophets in general and to the Hebrew prophets in particular, with their strong emphasis on the need to combat economic injustice actively.

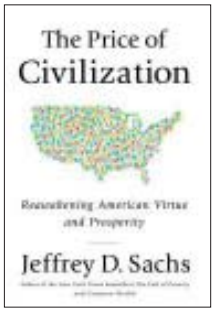
"Prophets almost always stand outside the boundaries of either political or ecclesiastical authority," Spong reminds his readers. "The established authority of religious institutions has almost always resented the prophets, for they were neither ordained nor trained. They are free spirits who somehow spoke with an authority that established figures wished they possessed. The ability to speak to those in power in a way that demands their attention is the signal mark of the prophetic spirit."

Amos's time resembled ours

Although in his ministry Spong seems to have displayed that spirit most by combating uninformed, exclusivist, literalistic Bible interpretation and the gender-related and race-related injustices that it so often leads to, his book acknowledges the need to combat economic injustice too. He points out the resemblance of our present economic situation, for example, to conditions that Amos urged the people of his time to oppose.

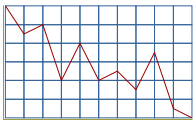
"There appeared to be little relationship between the words of the ideal religion," Spong writes, "and the practices of people's lives in the public arena. In many ways that is not dissimilar from periods in the history of Western capitalism, where with more frequency than we like to admit, the few have achieved massive fortunes by the manipulation of the markets, creating a situation in which the wealthy inevitably become wealthier and, as a direct corollary, the poor become increasingly poor."

Is the root of the economic crisis moral?



That's the situation that macroeconomist Jeffrey Sachs writes about in *The Price of Civilization: Reawakening American Virtue and Prosperity* (Random House, 2011). I found this book extremely interesting even though reading about economics usually makes my eyes glaze over in a hurry.

What I found especially helpful was Sachs's description of the long-term social, political, and economic trends that have become increasingly prominent during the terms of all recent U.S. presidents, culminating in the harmful economic conditions we're currently seeing. Sachs includes many graphs showing statistics to support his views, but for readers who like me prefer only verbal statements of the conclusions an author has arrived at, the graphs are not a distraction.



Sachs doesn't write from a religious perspective, but he feels that a mere economic fix won't solve our problems. "At the root of America's economic crisis," he says, "lies a moral crisis: the decline of civic virtue among America's political and economic elite."

"Americans are very different from the ways the elites and the media pundits want us to see ourselves," Sachs finds. "The American people are gen-

This issue, many back issues, a list of books I've written about, and more *Connections* information are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and $5 for the coming year's issues. For paper copies of any of the 19 years' back issues, send me $5 for each year or any 12 issues.

I'm a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

erally broad-minded, moderate, and generous." But in his view, the broad public no longer holds the elites or the media to account in needed ways.

Time to abandon our national illusion

Sachs urges us to create what he calls "a mindful society." He wants us to abandon what he sees as our current national illusion: that a healthy society can be organized about the single-minded pursuit of wealth. He believes America should aim for three goals—"efficiency (prosperity), fairness (opportunity for all), and sustainability (a safe environment for today and the future)." And in his opinion, "a combination of market forces and government actions is needed to achieve these three simultaneous goals."

Jeffrey Sachs discusses what has kept us from pursuing these goals, and he gives many concrete suggestions about how we might begin moving toward them. I don't know whether he's right about the specifics of those, but I found his discussion of them extremely interesting and helpful for thinking about them. And I believe the topics he's writing about are topics Christians need to be not only thinking about but also talking about openly in churches.

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Thought-provoking new books

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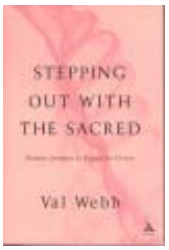

Roaming across religious traditions, leaving the big questions open

A native of Australia and a former microbiologist, with a doctorate in religious studies, Val Webb is the author of award-winning books and has taught for years at universities in the U.S. and Australia. She's a theologian who writes in easy-to-read, conversational language. Her most recent book is *Stepping Out with the Sacred: Human Attempts to Engage the Divine* (Continuum, 2010). In it, she says, "I roam across religious traditions, listening for examples and explanations of how people have engaged the Sacred." She emphasizes the fact that she leaves open the question of whether or not there *is* Something to engage, and if so, whether engaging it is possible. She assures us that her book is not a textbook on the religions of the world, which would take volumes. Neither is it a comparative religion book that tries to evaluate different religious approaches as if they could be graded.

I especially appreciate her describing the religions as human attempts to answer the questions that all people have wondered about, instead of as revelations that have somehow come from supernatural beings. "Rather than coming up with a 'This is the way it is, folks' conclusion," Webb explains, "I have gathered these stories together, describing them as best I can to invite your consideration and decision." They're stories that all Christians would do well to consider.