Dr. Timothy Sedgwick, Vice President for Academic Affairs and The Clinton S. Quinn Professor of Christian Ethics, at Virginia Theological Seminary recommends the following books as part of the Bishop Payne Library’s monthly series highlighting a faculty member’s “picks”.


Screen writer, director, student and teacher of philosophy, nominated and winner of major awards for each of these films, Malick is rightfully viewed by critics as among the most creative artist of film. A stated motif and images of nature play against the dramas of human lives drawn together in the narrative shaped by contrasting events and the power of music, as is said in the beginning of The Tree of Life, these are theological explorations of grace and nature. From John Smith and Pocahontas to west Texas to the Battle of Guadalcanal to the light of the cosmos, these films may be rented and savored as theological meditations and provocations.


The new atheists and the defense of the God of philosophers may capture the media, but this strand of Western thought is narrow and reductionist, as if matters of religion in general and Christian faith in particular were scientific hypotheses instead of stories that open the deep histories and mysteries that make humans human. In contrast, Robert Bellah stands in the tradition of sociology and anthropology, in line of Emil Durkheim, in the work of recovering the rituals and stories we tell as the truths of life. Drawing on understandings of brain development and the movement in “higher” primates to humans from mimicking to play to vocalization to stories to the play of narratives to critical consciousness, Bellah places critical theory (and philosophy and theology) as grounded in the unique capacity for play in which necessity gives way to matters of joy, suffering, and meaning. The stories we tell enact these capacities as they connect us to these mysteries. His account of this development of “the axial age” in ancient Israel and then from early Greek to classical Greek thought is stunning in its attention to and presentation of what we know given current scholarship. This alone is worth “the read.” Add his equally adroit account of Chinese and Indian development from ritual to critical thought and you have what some reviewers have said is the most significant work in this tradition since Durkheim. Such is the life work of a scholar and, not incidentally, a Christian (and Episcopal) worshipper.

**Andrew Solomon. Far from the Tree (Scribner, 2012), 962 pp.**

Like his National Book Award winning and Pulitzer Prize finalist volume on depression, The Noonday Demon (Scribner, 2001), Solomon again retrieves the lives “others.” Here in Far from the Tree he draws from interviews with more than 300 families with “exceptional” children, those we euphemistically say have “special needs”: autistic children, children with schizophrenia or other “mental diseases,” children with learning disabilities, those who are prodigies, those with physical disabilities, and those who carry social stigma—the child born of rape, those who have committed crimes, the transgendered. The “exceptional” illumine what is true for all about parenting, children, and the nature of love that transforms both those who give and those who receive. Here are the stories of our lives that are the wellspring for understanding love as the ground of our lives and the meaning of “God is love.”