Prof’s Picks

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Timothy F. Sedgwick, Ph.D., The Clinton S. Quin 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”:


Surgeon, professor of medicine, public health professional, MacArthur fellow, and staff writer for The New Yorker, Atul Gawande offers a memoir about his own coming of age given his care of the dying in general and his father in particular. Knowing that medicine is for health is one thing; having the conversations about treatments, consequences, and hopes is another matter. Christian faith is an *ars moriendi*, and the art of dying is holy living when there are holy conversations. This is book that will personally connect to all and offer practical wisdom.


This is the lifework of the late Robert Bellah, a big book, a great book, that from the first page to the last shouldn’t intimidate but invite and certainly reward any reader. Grounded in understandings from evolutionary biology, anthropology, and historical studies, Bellah begins with the primacy of play where mimicking connects and differentiates individuals into a world that is fundamentally social. This leads humans to the richness of religious language and practice. This story is deeply engaging where insights come together to makes sense of things and change the way you see everything.


This may be the best and most readable account of neural pathways and the neural chemistry (serotonin, noradrenalin, dopamine, and histamine) that shape human behavior. Survival mechanism of fight or flight stand in the broader context of pleasure given in forming social relations and caring for others. Upon this neurobiological scaffolding is built higher levels of representations and hence consciousness. Science thus helps makes sense of who we are and ought to be and the consequent nature and human significance of religious faiths.


Drawing from research since the 1980’s, Woodward unlocks the cultural histories that shape the distinct societies and social movements in North America. From Yankee puritans to English gentry, from New Netherland cosmopolitan entrepreneurs to populist outcasts from northern Britain, from immigration and western migration, the United States is a nation of many nations, each with their own sense of society. This begins to make sense of culture wars and is essential reading for engaging Christian faith and culture, especially for religious leaders who move from their own native land to another state in the United States.

**Judith Wolfe, Heidegger and Theology (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 242 pp., as one volume in “A Philosophy and Theology Series” published by Bloomsbury.**

Highly recommended for their quality and insight, each volume in this series offers an account of the development of the thought of one of the major philosophers of late modernity and post-modernity, from Kierkegaard to Levinas, Derrida, Foucault, and Ricoeur. Each author traces how that philosophy has shaped and illumined our understanding of religious faith and belief. In the 20th century, Martin Heidegger is the pivotal figure from which to understand the trajectory of others. For clergy and laity alike, this volume by Judith Wolfe is a foundational resource for anyone who does theology or seeks to make sense of religious believing.