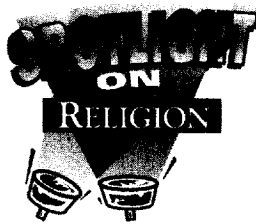


Top 10 Books in Religion

Controversial figures and issues are the stuff of the 10 books concerned with religion that found the highest favor with *Booklist* reviewers during the past 12 months. Even if they weren't main topics, fundamentalism, moral relativism, disputes over translating the Bible, political violence, and what to do about poverty loomed large in several books. Hot-button people such as Nation of Islam founder Elijah Muhammad and, hottest of all, Jesus provoked brilliant new books on who they were and what they meant. But then, one of the 10 opens our eyes to the forgotten significance of great paintings, while another is the joyous report of a spiritual seeker who found a new home for her soul. —Ray Olson



Akenson, Donald Harman. *Saint Saul: A Skeleton Key to the Historical Jesus.* 2000. Oxford, \$27.50 (0-19-514157-1).

The quest for the historical Jesus could profit by beginning with the earliest available Christian documents, the letters of Paul, Akenson asserts, for they contain information that may be unfiltered by either Christianity or rabbinic Judaism. Contentious Jesus questers will especially enjoy this provocative work.

Armstrong, Karen. *The Battle for God.* 2000. Knopf, \$27.50 (0-679-43597-2).

Whether in Christianity, Islam, or Judaism, fundamentalism is a fearful reaction to the modern predilections for materialist reason and empirical evidence, which have led to denials of the validity of truths expressed in the symbolic systems of religion. Armstrong's magisterial history spans 1,500 years of the fundamentalist impulse.

Armstrong, Karen. *Islam: A Short History.* 2000. Random/Modern Library, \$19.95 (0-679-64040-1).

Islam's attitude toward politics is Armstrong's central concern in this elegant primer. As a religion concerned more with conduct of life than transcendence, and because its great task is maintaining the Muslim community, Islam has had to be more political than Buddhism or Christianity, she says. Orthodox Islam, however, doesn't license political violence.

Drury, John. *Painting the Word: Christian Pictures and Their Meanings.* 1999. Yale, \$25 (0-300-07777-7).

The great religious paintings of Christendom exploited the common knowledge of Christian symbolism to "speak" meaningfully to their largely illiterate audiences. Drury reacquaints us with the paintings' symbolic language and their overarching message of divine love.

Ellegård, Alvar. *Jesus—One Hundred Years before Christ: A Study in Creative Mythology.* 1999. Overlook, \$35 (0-87951-720-4).

Why doesn't Paul mention any detail of Jesus' life? Ellegård asks. His fascinating response is that that is because the figure upon whom early second-century bishops based the life of Christ was a second-century B.C. Essene referred to in the Qumran scrolls.

Evanzz, Karl. *The Messenger: The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad.* 1999. Pantheon, \$28.50 (0-679-44260-X).

The remarkable figure who founded the black separatist Nation of Islam is skillfully and provocatively analyzed by Evanzz, who shows that Elijah's story is also a story about an America manipulated by government counterintelligence campaigns.

Kreeft, Peter. *A Refutation of Moral Relativism: Interviews with an Absolutist.* 1999. Ignatius, paper, \$12.95 (0-89870-731-5).

Kreeft's contemporary Socratic dialogue on moral philosophy pits a black feminist journalist, striving to uphold situation ethics, reductionism, and other relativist notions, against a Palestinian Arab theistic moral absolutist in a fascinating, fiery, and challenging colloquy.

Matthewes-Green, Frederica. *At the Corner of East and Now: A Modern Life in Ancient Christian Orthodoxy.* 1999. Putnam, \$22.95 (0-87477-987-1).

NPR commentator Matthewes-Green shows that a modern American can embrace an old East European religion and find a spiritual home by telling the story of one who did—herself. She also relates the Orthodox liturgy to her experiences, without ever sounding sappy.

Sider, Ronald J. *Just Generosity: A New Vision for Overcoming Poverty in America.* 1999. Baker, paper, \$11.99 (0-8010-6015-X).

The Bible enjoins us to do something about poverty, Sider says. He has in mind government measures evangelicals like him are supposed to dislike, and also public support for faith-based social services, school vouchers, and other policies he sees as family-friendly and empowering of the poor.

Thuesen, Peter J. *In Discordance with the Scriptures: American Protestant Battles over Translating the Bible.* 1999. Oxford, \$25 (0-19-512736-6).

Four centuries after Luther, fiery debate broke out among American Protestants over rival English translations of the Bible. Demands that the text be examined in the light of history led eventually to crises in interpretative authority. An indispensable book on the Bible in American culture.

ities of all religions, instead of the doctrinal differences. Religion should foster love and understanding, Fox says, not wars and mistrust. The idea of a world religion is nothing new—scholars of religion have been promoting the idea since the 1970s. However, Fox promotes the idea by simply providing quotations, with a small introduction to each section, from various works of religion, scientists, moral thinkers, and philosophers from around the world. He separates the writings into four sections, containing such topics as creation, divinity, our inner selves, and the future, with a final section of "New Myths and Visions." Nothing astounding here, but followers and adherents of Fox will be pleased by his new look at world religions. —Michael Spinella

Gardner, Martin. *From the Wandering Jew to William F. Buckley Jr.: On Science, Literature, and Religion.* Oct. 2000. 350p. illus. Prometheus, \$27 (1-57392-852-6). 081.

The tireless Gardner collects another batch of his articles, introductions, and reviews concerned with his great enthusiasms—science, miracle-mongering religion, and literature, especially literature concerned with science and religion. He wears two hats when he writes. One is the skeptic's, worn for pieces on the scandals of Seventh Day Adventist splinter sects; on the concept of the *meme*, invented to posit a unit of cultural self-replication analogous to the biological unit of self-replication, the gene; and for a review essay on Christian Science, which Gardner feels is culpable for countless deaths. The other is that of an intellectual publicist when he writes about forgotten popular and children's magazines, such as the puzzle-filled *John Martin's Book*, or G. K. Chesterton's novels, which contain intriguing puzzles in their multileveled allegorical structures (Gardner is, by the way, a prolific puzzle maker and anthologist, too). Reincarnation, William F. Buckley's religious beliefs, the Oz books, and the prophecies of H. G. Wells furnish further grist for Gardner's mill. He turns them all into gratifying fare for the culturally curious. —Ray Olson

Gods and Mortals: Modern Poems on Classical Myths. Ed. by Nina Kossman. Oct. 2000. 288p. index. Oxford, \$27.50 (0-19-513341-2). 808.81.

The gods and goddesses of ancient Greece truly are immortal. Dwelling in our collective unconscious, they are emblematic in their weaknesses and strengths, folly and cunning, lust and love both tragic and transcendent of all that is human and divine. Archetypes and familiars, they surface repeatedly in poetry, and Kossman, a translator and poet, has selected more than 300 outstanding twentieth-century poems from around the world, each of which offers provocative portraits of these metaphor-emblazoned figures and bold interpretations of their stories. The range of voices and styles is exciting, and her gathering of poems beneath such headings as "Lovers," "Heroes," and

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