

Three Books Theological Students Should Read

A decision to read a book is a significant investment. It is an investment of time and, if purchased, financial resources. There is a finite number of books that a person can read during a lifetime. For an academic, the bulk of reading will be in one's specialized field: if you are a specialist in the Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, then it is important that one stays on top of that literature. For a clergy person, the reading is likely to be around the sermon one is about to preach or perhaps 'how to grow the congregation' and other applied texts.

However, there is a danger in this situation. The danger is this: the academic and the clergy person may lack the breath of reading which is so important in our complex world. If we know nothing beyond our specialty, then how will the academic be able to prepare students for effective leadership in the world, or the clergy person to facilitate a lay wisdom about current affairs in the congregation?

So we return to the initial dilemma: how do we select the books we are going to read? There are probably hundreds of books, which might provoke our interest in a stroll around *Borders* or *Barnes & Nobles*. So we need some help. Which are the most important books for a busy professional to read? And, of course, linked to this question: how do we ensure we read the book – rather than let it collect dust on a shelf in our home?

My solution is the book club. One day in the 1970s when I was president of Dexter Corporation (an international manufacturer of specialty chemicals), the Reverend Don Hannon, then Rector of Grace Church in Windsor, CT, showed up in my office and proposed that we ought to start a Book Club on the subject of 'Ethical Concerns'. We did, and today that Ethical Concerns Book Club, about a dozen men and women, still meets at 7 AM on the second Thursday of each month of

the school year. Our meeting place for the last several years has been at Hartford Seminary.

The book club not only helps one select an appropriate book, which justifies the investment of time, but it also motivates one actually to read the book. Knowing that the book will be discussed by a group of my peers motivates me to read the book during the month.

The book club can become a source of expertise. When Senior Editor Dean Markham asked me to write this editorial on the challenge of 'reading beyond our specialty', I thought it might be helpful if I were to recommend three nonreligious books of the kind that seminary professors and clergy ought to have read. So I turned to the Ethical Concerns Book Club and asked for their expertise. I asked them to select the three best such books we had read in the past twenty-six years. Somewhat to my surprise, within about thirty minutes we agreed on the following three books:

1. Friedman, Thomas L, *The World Is Flat [Updated and Expanded]: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006.
2. Diamond, Jared, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York: W.W.Norton & Company, 1999 (new edition 2005).
3. Wright, Robert, *NONZERO; The Logic of Human Destiny*. New York: Vintage Books, 1999 (new edition 2003).

Now all of these books have their detractors, generally well-known scholars who feel the authors have overlooked alternative or traditional points of view that should have been explored. But the reason these books have attracted the general public and done so well for so long as best sellers is because each offers a fresh and useful insight on how to think about what is going on in today's world, how you can make sense of it, and how it applies to your life and career.

For the busy academic or clergy person, these three books will help you understand this complex world of ours. Friedman's book is a thoughtful introduction to the challenge of globalization. Written by the *New York Times* columnist, he outlines the ways in which the earth has become smaller (even flat). While Friedman is contemporary, Jared Diamond sets our modern world in context, going right back to the Stone Age hunter/gatherers and telling the story of the different ways in which society evolved. Finally, Robert Wright uses games theory, coupled with the insights from anthropology, biology, zoology, along with the social sciences to explain that evolution is not a pointless process but one with a goal.

So, there you have it – three books that explain the world and are fun to read. Granted we are all busy people, but we owe it to our

students and to our congregations to find some way to stay informed. My way is the 'Book Club'. Your way, perhaps, might be to read these three books, which will help you to transcend your specialty and stay in touch with our complex world.

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