When the mainline told us what to read

By Matt Hedstrom
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It has become cliché to note that we live in a world of information overload. Being cliché, of course, does not make it any less true. We professors are well aware of our inability to keep up with the fantastic production of new knowledge in our own specialties, yet the torrent of words overwhelms not only scholars but all readers. Who can possibly read all the books, magazines, journals, newspapers, blogs, tweets and posts worth reading? And what is worth reading, anyway?

This deluge is often ascribed to the digital revolution, and indeed the internet and pervasive connectivity have greatly expanded our reading options. Nevertheless, the historically minded will recognize in our current situation merely the ongoing ripples of earlier information revolutions. The age of print that began with Gutenberg accelerated greatly in the early 19th century with the application of steam power to printing presses, creating the first truly mass media in Western societies. As cheap print flooded American cities, the problem of choice—the problem we face so acutely today— became an everyday reality for ordinary readers.

Protestant Christians, with their characteristic devotion to the word, have felt these cultural pressures with particular force. Gutenberg's invention spurred the Reformation with new vernacular Bibles and commentaries, and in many ways the authority of these news Bibles and commentaries compensated for the lost authority of Rome. But the massive industrial output of American religious publishing that began in the 1810s and 1820s radically altered the terms on which common Protestant readers encountered religious thought. The universe of available and affordable—even free—reading options vastly expanded. Ever since, lay readers and religious leaders alike have wrestled with the destabilizing power of ubiquitous print. Upstart religions and idiosyncratic preachers, prophets and mystics could now reach mass publics, too.

American Protestants could turn neither to a magisterium in Rome nor an established church at home for reading guidance. But for much of the 19th and 20th centuries, the de facto Protestant establishment filled the vacuum. In 1870, Yale

College president Noah Porter offered this word of caution in a popular reading guidebook: “We ought to select our books—above all our favorite books—with a more jealous care than we choose our friends and intimates.” By the 1920s, this culture of Protestant reading guidance had matured into forms we recognize today.

Book clubs and book lists were its most common elements. The Religious Book Club, founded in 1927, led the way. “BOOKS, BOOKS EVERYWHERE! Are you overwhelmed each month by the flood of new books?” screamed an early advertisement. “Have you the time and eyesight to spare to discover among these volumes the one or two which will minister to your spiritual needs?” After a merger with the book club of the *Christian Century*, *Century* editor Charles Clayton Morrison assumed a leadership role with the Religious Book Club, and the Protestant mainline had its own imprimatur.

Churches, booksellers and public libraries often used selections from the Religious Book Club to guide their own reading recommendations, but its formal membership was never large. Book lists, however, were able to reach a wider audience. Beginning in the late 1920s, the American Library Association issued an annual list of the best books in religion—selected by an all-liberal-Protestant jury into the late 1930s, and by a Protestant-Catholic-Jew panel thereafter. This list not only guided acquisitions and recommendations at the nation’s public libraries but also appeared, in full, in newspapers across the country.

The Religious Book Club and the religion book lists of the American Library Association exemplify the broad cultural influence of liberal Protestantism in its mid-century heyday. Naturally, they tended to steer Americans away from evangelical or fundamentalist authors and toward the output of liberal professors and preachers.

But we live in a far different moment. No religious body or tradition has the social standing or cultural legitimacy to offer the nation a list of the “best” books in religion. Certainly the demise of liberal Protestant cultural stewardship represents a victory for religious freedom. Yet in the world of reading at least, it comes with a price. Book prizes—such as the Grawemeyer Award—and publications like the *Century* or *Books and Culture* still offer reading guidance to some. But more than ever, we are on our own. Is it any wonder that “spiritual but not religious,” the religious face of individualism and capitalism, is the order of the day?

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