

Making the list

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [October 21, 1998](#) issue

I'm not going to debate whether lists of "the best" or "the worst" are valuable or destructive. Americans like lists of bests and worsts. So there. The *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly* made a list of "the 25 most influential religious figures of the 20th century, from the point of view of Americans," and invited Peter Steinfels, Phyllis Tickle and me to comment.

Let me start controversially by saying that the following were not controversial choices, in the views of Steinfels, Tickle and Marty:

Karl Barth. He represents all the big Protestant B's of mid-century theology, edging out Bultmann and others--except for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who is also on the list (for theological and other reasons). Martin Buber. The 14th Dalai Lama. Dorothy Day. Mary Baker Eddy--yes, she's 20th century. Elijah Muhammad, a controversial choice, since he's less well known than Malcolm X. Mohandas Gandhi. Billy Graham. Abraham Joshua Heschel. Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II. Martin Luther King Jr. The Ayatollah Khomeini. C. S. Lewis. Thomas Merton. Reinhold Niebuhr. Norman Vincent Peale. Albert Schweitzer. Mother Teresa. You may have a quibble here and there, but for both who they are and what they represent, these people have been very influential.

My quibbles are with these names on the list. Rabbe Schneerson: he's huge in one little group, he's made headlines, and may be the messiah in the eyes of some, but he has had little ripple effect. Forgettable. Gustavo Gutiérrez: he's significant for liberation theology, but not a household name. Carl F. H. Henry: he stands for the intellectual side of what Billy Graham represents popularly, but he's largely unknown outside evangelical circles. Same with Walter Rauschenbusch--yes, he's the father of the Social Gospel movement, but not a household name. Elie Wiesel is without question influential--but could he be seen as a religious figure? It depends on how you define religion.

Missing from the list were such figures as Paul Tillich and Desmond Tutu. Steinfels, Tickle and Marty grumbled a bit about that. Mary Baker Eddy, Mother Teresa and Dorothy Day were the only women, and we cast about for more. Tickle made a strong pitch for including one of the founders of the Pentecostal movement, but the names she floated--Parham, Seymour and Mason--though they helped launch really new, really huge movements, are not widely known. Steinfels argued for people from the arts, including popular arts, such as Warner Sallman, whose pictures of Jesus have been reprinted 500 million fold.

Several people have wondered why I did not nominate Harry Emerson Fosdick. *Christian Century* editors at midcentury would certainly have championed him. He was the most prominent modernist or at least liberal Protestant preacher of the century, and influenced buyers of books and preachers decades ago. But modernism has disappeared almost without a trace, and with it the name of Fosdick, to all but those of us who are historians or who have long memories. No doubt others on this list will fade, as will their movements.

Before they fade, let us know who you think were influential and might be unfading. At the very least, you'll find that if you play the game, you'll soon be involved in creative controversy.