

Religion sells: The publishing business

by [Marcia Z. Nelson](#) in the [October 19, 2004](#) issue

By a number of measures, sales of religion books are booming. The Association of American Publishers reports that religious publishing grew by 37 percent in 2003. The Book Industry Study Group predicts that religious book publishing will expand by 6 percent this year; it calls this sector of publishing “a growth business.” The trade magazine *Publishers Weekly* reports that 18 percent of book buyers said in a survey that they had purchased a religious or spiritual book within the past 12 months.

These industry sources aren’t working off the same data, the definitions of what makes a book a “religion” title aren’t uniform, and religion publishing still makes up only 5 percent of the general market. Still, something’s happening in this corner of the book world—something that reflects religion’s prominence in public life.

“Religion is very much in the public square,” says Lynn Garrett, religion editor at *Publishers Weekly*. “We see that today in television and movies as well as publishing. Post 9/11, a lot of today’s issues wrap themselves around religion.”

The prominence of religious or spiritual themes constitutes a rebuttal of sorts of the secularization hypothesis—the notion that religion would fade as reason advanced and benighted souls saw the error of their superstitious ways.

“It’s not that no one still thinks that, but it’s lost a lot of its credibility,” says John Wilson, founding editor of the journal *Books and Culture*. He calls it “the return of the repressed” after a time of institutional secularism that pushed religion out of public discourse. He sees religion pervading both popular and serious culture, and finds signs in unlikely places. University press catalogs tout volumes of poetry that depend on religious language even if the authors have no religion or religious intent. Dan Brown’s multimillion-selling thriller *The DaVinci Code* offers a highly unorthodox view of major Christian beliefs and institutions, and *DaVinci* fans and debunkers alike would agree that Brown is no theologian. But religion is central to the book.

“You’re talking about people using the language of Christianity whether or not they accept it,” Wilson says. “The extent to which it’s penetrated people’s imaginations shows it’s something happening on a very large scale.”

Within religion publishing, the most explosive growth is among distinctly evangelical sectors. Zondervan and Tyndale House can cite impressive growth in the past five years. Garrett says that *PW*’s survey turned up a lot of book buyers who identified themselves as evangelicals—40 percent of the group the magazine surveyed, a figure that squares with researcher George Barna’s estimate of what he calls the “born-again” population.

Evangelicals make up a sizable part of the population, evangelicals buy books, and evangelical publishers have been able to get their books into receptive hands. Their titles have penetrated the general market, and can be found in bookstores, price clubs, big-box retailers and discount stores. “Christian publishers are doing a pretty good job of marketing and selling,” Garrett says. They have also gotten better at making sure that data from the evangelical Christian market are included in sales data from the general market.

At the supply end, evangelical publishers are cultivating authors who develop a loyal following—readers eager to buy the next volume. All publishers do this, of course—John Grisham and Stephen King always sell. Evangelical authors can reach their readers via a network of congregations, seminars and conferences within the Christian subculture. These provide convenient platforms to promote authors and sell books.

Martin Marty suggests that evangelicals fill a “vacuum” left by mainliners and Catholics and the “spiritual but not religious crowd,” all of whom blend into secular culture and don’t offer a distinctive portfolio of beliefs. While evangelicals may be theoretically hostile to contemporary culture, many are at home in popular culture. The most successful have mastered the mass media, even while mainliners keep a distance. “There are a lot of paradoxes along the way,” Marty observes.

The smell of success invites a crowd, especially when the overall publishing market is flat. Wilson points out that some major publishing houses have invested in evangelical lines: Random House with WaterBrook, AOLTimeWarner with Warner Faith, HarperCollins with Zondervan. “A lot of people in publishing didn’t realize this potential because it wasn’t their world,” he says.

Some mainline publishers and other publishing specialists say a rising tide floats all boats. Presbyterian publisher Westminster John Knox and Lutheran publisher Augsburg Fortress report modest growth in sales. Many like to say they offer resources once people become interested in religious topics, whether it's Jesus, the Bible or the Knights Templar. "We clearly are riding the coattails, to some extent," says Scott Tunseth, publisher at Augsburg Fortress.

The impact of Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth am I Here For?*, published by Zondervan and nearing 19 million in sales, is inescapable. One new Augsburg title, *Leading on Purpose: Intentionality and Teaming in Congregational Life*, by Eric Burtness, consciously adapts for Lutheran leaders some of the "purpose-driven" principles Warren has developed.

Though Warren is a Southern Baptist, his book, written in what he has called deliberately "unchurchy" language, appeals to a broad audience, a spectrum of congregational study groups as well as individuals who may or may not belong to a faith group but who are examining their own lives.

"It's a very straightforward title," says Mark Tauber, associate publisher of HarperSanFrancisco, which publishes across the faith spectrum. "All blends and all stripes of people are saying, 'What are we here for?'"

Tauber is struck by how Warren's book has become a resource for communities, helping to define a group that is exploring something together. Other authors provide material for tying communities together. HarperSanFrancisco author Marcus Borg, with his progressive, mainline Protestant credentials, gets hundreds of invitations to speak to groups. Books are a tool for the faith journey not only for freelance spiritual explorers, but also for contemporary congregations, where they provide a call to community experience. "Partly what people want is to be with other people in community," Tauber says. "Religion has always been about community."

Religious themes in other media are also fueling book sales. Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* sold not only movie tickets but books. J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy spawned a hugely successful series of movies that in turn has spawned books examining Tolkien's theology. The "gospel according to" series published by Westminster John Knox on pop culture topics (begun in 1965 with *The Gospel According to Peanuts*, by Robert L. Short, and reinvigorated in 2001 with the successful *The Gospel According to the Simpsons*, by journalist Mark Pinsky) has

mined popular media for theological meaning.

Phyllis Tickle, for many years an editor at *Publishers Weekly* and whom people in religion publishing credit with first reporting in the 1990s the wave of religious publishing, says discussion about God has undergone a seismic shift in location—from didactic nonfiction to entertainment, whether that's in fiction, television, movies or radio.

"As long as popular culture is religion for many readers, this will be a thriving area of publishing," says Henry Carrigan, North American publisher for T&T Clark International, an academic arm of Continuum, which publishes material aimed at Episcopalian interests.

One thriving genre in religion publishing is fiction, both serious and escapist varieties—some of it explicitly about religion, some of it a more subtle engagement with questions and values. Dan Brown's fictional *The DaVinci Code* would have sold fewer copies had it been about submarines, and probably would have spawned fewer than the dozen-plus books elucidating or refuting it.

Lillian Miao, CEO and publisher of Paraclete Press, credits evangelical fiction with building interest in the whole genre and making it possible for her small independent firm to publish such titles as *Unveiling*, by Suzanne Wolfe, a novel about an art restorer who experiences spiritual restoration in her own life.

"I personally find it fascinating that we can talk about these religious things in such interesting and beautiful ways," Miao says.

Though the National Endowment for the Arts has noted a decline in Americans' reading of fiction, some religion publishers are opening fiction lines or adding to them. The Catholic house Loyola Press, for example, early next year will launch Loyola Classics, reprint editions of titles of Catholic interest from the mid-20th century, among them *In This House of Brede*, by Rumer Godden, and *Do Black Patent Leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?*, by John R. Powers. Fiction's ability to use story and mobilize imagination to faith is hardly new; it was a popular vehicle in the 1950s, Tickle notes. "It's due to have its say again," she says.

Tickle and others detect a postmodern pendulum swing toward conservatism or traditionalism, or what postmoderns believe a safe and desirable past might have looked like. Tickle links the interest in *The DaVinci Code* to the interest in *The Lord of*

the Rings and television's *Joan of Arcadia*. She characterizes it as pseudo-medievalism, a post-Enlightenment reaction that is reaching far back in Western history "to try to find the mystery again."

Religion publishers say they are also selling books that help readers discover or recover religious traditions, and which give structure to an otherwise amorphous spirituality. At Eerdmans Publishing, editor-in-chief Jon Pott says the firm now sells less in specialized Christian avenues and more in general outlets. This publishing house with Dutch Calvinist roots reaches a wide range of Christian readers, and even Catholic authors approach it with manuscripts. *Dwelling in the Light: Icons in Christian Observance*, by Anglican primate Rowan Williams, exemplifies a mainline reexamination of tradition. "Rowan Williams is a great conservator of the tradition and a first-rate theologian," Pott says.

Academic presses are less likely to be affected by swings of the commercial market. At Yale University Press, which does not publish religious studies as such, religious biography and religious history are strong areas, says senior editor John Kulka. He cites the success of the press's biography of a 17th-century New England theologian, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life*, by George Marsden, as a sign of the wider culture's interest in reexamining tradition.

Mainline publishers have plenty of opportunities in the current religion scene, as well as some fundamental assurance: religious belief isn't going away. It requires detectives to spot expressions of it in culture, and historians, theologians, spiritual guides and creative artists who can provide substance and sustenance to those ready for spiritual formation. Clear, authoritative and distinctive primers also find an audience. Publishers are urging their best minds to speak to larger audiences, to write accessibly on fundamentals of Christian faith, producing such series as Westminster John Knox's *New Testament for Everyone* ([reviewed in this issue of the Century](#)), by Anglican theologian Tom Wright and Augsburg Fortress's Lutheran Voices on basic Lutheran teachings.

Henry Carrigan at T&T Clark invokes the mid-20th century insight of theologian Paul Tillich that "religion is the substance of culture and culture the form of religion." Adds Carrigan: "The vigor in religion publishing is simply helping to make more and more explicit how deeply grounded in religion our cultural forms really are."