

Just bluffing: "Have you read it?"

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [January 15, 2008](#) issue

In 1965, I reported in these pages on the New York World's Fair. At that event, I was wandering around in the Protestant and Orthodox pavilion where a smorgasbord of offerings to gods both known and unknown (to me) were vying for attention. Even as I tried to breeze by, the representatives of the Church of the New Jerusalem/Swedenborgian stopped me. They offered me brochures, invitations and explanations. Foolishly, I responded with a half-truth and an attempt to brush them off: "I know all about Swedenborgianism." The inviter-in-chief, who had now stepped out of the booth to speak with me, asked, "What do you know about Swedenborgianism?"

How I wish I had had Pierre Bayard's *How to Talk About Books You Haven't Read* (Bloomsbury, \$19.95). Instead, embarrassed that I, a historian of religion, knew very little about the New Church, I stammered, blushed and lied my way to the next exhibit. Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell* was beyond me.

Bayard's book is a survivor's guide to conversation at academic and literary cocktail parties, where everyone claims to have read a new book and declaims about it learnedly. You, meanwhile, cower and glide away or, if a fool, bluff when asked, "Have you read it?"

Bayard offers a new grid for readers in determining their level of involvement in such conversation: UB: Book unknown to me; SB: Book I have skimmed; HB: Book I have heard about; and FB: Book I have forgotten. Many a time I have been a USHFBluffer. Even now I am, by the way, talking about this book without having read it.

Howard Dean might have taken a cue from Bayard in the 2004 presidential campaign. Asked by a reporter to name his favorite book of the Bible, Dean answered, "If you know much about the Bible, which I do . . ." and then said his favorite book of the New Testament was Job. Was he revealing that the Bible was to him UB or SB or HB or FB? Then Dean made a nearly fatal mistake by going on to argue that the ending of Job was not optimistic enough to his liking. Charitably, I'd

say that he at least had read *about* Job (SB? HB?) and perhaps had encountered biblical critics who say that Job's happy ending had been tacked on. But the theological point had clearly been missed. Dean showed that he is a fast learner, however, when he responded to criticism by his fellow Democrats, "I'm feeling a little more Job-like recently."

But Dean is in plenty of company when treating the Bible as UB, SB, HB or FB. For example, what about Christians who advocate spanking their children on the basis of the "biblical" admonition, "spare the rod and spoil the child"? This is probably UB, because this phrase isn't even in the Bible. Not to mention those who use the Bible to support their antiabortion positions. Sorry, not one reference to abortion in the whole text. While there may be plenty of reasons to oppose abortion, that particular one is definitely UB.

I think I will rush off now to get Bayard's book. While it isn't UB or yet SB, I'm sure it won't soon be FB. Maybe I'll also pick up *Heaven and Hell* so that the next time I pass a booth of the Church of the New Jerusalem, I won't have to stammer and blush.