

# Books in search of an author

By [Edgardo Antonio Colon-Emeric](#)

This review appears in the [May 6, 2008](#) issue.

*"Of making many books there is no end," says Ecclesiastes. Certainly more books are made than can be read, and many are produced that probably didn't need to be. But there are some books that yet need to be written. Here are six suggestions:*

I have been waiting for a book on the theology of immigration. In the 16th century the Spanish theologian Francisco deVitoria wrote a theological treatise titled "On the American Indians," in which he examined Spanish imperial claims to the recently "discovered" lands and peoples. Vitoria refused to let lawyers settle the public policy issues, although jurists certainly had their place in the discussion. He also refused to treat the question of the legitimacy of Spanish claims as settled. Instead, he patiently examined these claims through the framework of Thomas Aquinas's theology of law.

I want to see a new Vitoria accept the challenge of writing a theological treatise on immigration. Much of what has been written about immigration has treated the subject and the questions arising from it (illegal immigration, national sovereignty, amnesty, deportation) as having a morality or immorality that is beyond dispute. I want to read a book that treats these issues as real questions to which serious Christian inquiry can bring real illumination. In particular, I want to read a book that assesses the theological merits of the intellectual construals that undergird the dominant immigration policy proposals.

I am looking for a 21st-century Vitoria to guide me in Thomistic reflections on the relation between natural law and human law, past the attractive but dead-end alleyways of "rights language," to a renewed appreciation for the way in which the gospel makes all things new, perhaps even in the particular case of immigration status. My hope is that such a book would clarify a lot of the muddled thinking and thoughtless rhetoric that characterizes contemporary discourse and practice of immigration, starting with my own!

— *Edgardo Colón-Emeric, director of the Hispanic Studies Program at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina*

I'm waiting for someone to write a history of the Eucharist. *But*, you object, *we already have many such histories*. Yes and no. What I want is a theologically sophisticated history—think *America's God*, by Mark Noll, or George Marsden's biography of Jonathan Edwards—massive and yet superbly readable, beginning with the institution of the sacrament and proceeding through the centuries all the way to the present moment, not ignoring the distinctive Orthodox angle. In short, a book that couldn't easily be ignored by thoughtful Christians—a book that would land on the table with a thump and demand to be reckoned with.

Moreover, this book should be written especially for—though by no means exclusively for—evangelical Protestants. It should be written by someone who intimately understands this stream of the faith and is also convinced of the centrality of the Eucharist in worship and appalled by its marginalization.

Would this then be a work of advocacy? Again, yes and no. I'm convinced that this story, simply by following the evidence where it leads, would make a powerful implicit case for the Real Presence, and would constitute a devastating indictment of the practice of the Eucharist in many churches today. But the aim would not be to point fingers; still less to hint at some golden age of eucharistic piety. The teller of this tale must be alert to sometimes savage ironies and unintended consequences as much as to the promise of the Great Feast that lies at the heart of it all. But what a story, for all its dark passages. And what a glorious promise!

—*John Wilson, editor of Books & Culture*

Pastors are always complaining about what they did not learn in seminary. The book I wish for is along these lines but is not about boiler repair, tuck-pointing and the exact measurements for an elevator that will hold a coffin. I wish I knew more about those things, but I do not want to read about them. As a pastor, I simply long to read more books by pastors about being a pastor.

It recently struck me that most of my favorite books about parish ministry are written by people who are no longer doing it. Thankfully, some pastors are writing and leaving treasures behind. But there are not enough of them. We talk about the crisis in leadership among churches, and our desire that people would consider this calling while they are young, but our vocation gets short shrift next to others.

Pastors rarely tell their stories, but lawyers, detectives, firefighters and celebrities certainly keep telling theirs.

This may require redefining a pastor's role so that it includes time for reflection, study, scholarship and writing alongside the other duties of the calling, such as fielding complaints about the furnace.

Weary at the end of a long meeting about whether to serve cookies or muffins, after which we were in such a hurry to leave that we forgot to offer a concluding prayer, pastors need occasional encouragement. After delivering a mediocre sermon that might have been great had it not been for a funeral that week that took everything we had, we need to hear from a fellow traveler about why any of this matters. We long to hear from some of those who are still doing pastoral ministry, in the hope that they will remind us why we are still doing it too.

*—Lillian Daniel, senior minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Glen Ellyn, Illinois*

I wish someone would write a book that argues effectively for humility in religious claims. To believers, the universal truth claims of our own religion seem experientially obvious, the basis of our commitment to our worldview, practices and beliefs. How, then, can we come to regard others' religions as worthy not only of tolerance but of respect and as sources of learning?

Thoughtful people agree that it is important to respect religious perspectives other than our own, but attitudes are more elusive than ideas. The book I would like to read would first identify and analyze the subtle ways by which Christians' respect for other religions, and the people who believe and practice them, are regularly undermined. For example, Christian scripture and sermons frequently reiterate the "cluelessness" or "stupidity" of those who—like the Samaritan woman and even, on occasion, the disciples—question the authority of Jesus and his teachings. The militant hymns that Christians sing, as well as those that picture people of other religions as heathen, "sitting in darkness," also contribute to our attitudes. The book I'd like to read would picture a Christianity from which chauvinistic attitudes have been eliminated.

Ultimately, what is needed is a deep respect that can support not only interreligious dialogue, but also the work of religious people toward the goal of world peace and the alleviation of hunger and injustice. Such respect must be based on the

acknowledgment that people of all religions believe and act by faith, in the dark. We too conveniently forget that the “earthen vessels”—language and images—by which our faith is expressed and communicated are human creations. The book I would like to read would help religious people to say, “My religion is absolute for me,” and then to listen to others who describe their religion as absolute for them.

—Margaret R. Miles, emerita professor, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California

I read nonstop, all the time. At breakfast I read the cereal box. At lunch I prop up a book so that I can read and eat at the same time. When I go to the small room where the czar goes alone (as my father puts it), I read little books of poems and art. On the T, the Boston rail line, I read ads, signs, newspapers. In my work, online or offline, I’m reading texts.

What I’m looking for are books the Slow Movement hasn’t written yet. Though there are books about “slow food,” I’m looking for books on slower living, slower letter writing, slower walks on city streets, slower prayer—and slow reading.

Two months ago I began a book (*Bewildered Travel: The Sacred Quest for Confusion*, by Frederick J. Ruf) that I am only 12 pages into so far. And I think I’ve clocked about 12 hours of reading time. I read a line. I stop. Sometimes I read three words and I stop. Sometimes I think, sometimes my mind wanders, sometimes I wonder or hope or sigh. Then I turn to the book again. Then I look out the window. Then I wait.

I wish I had a mentor in slow reading. Or perhaps the book has already been written in the small lines given by the Desert Fathers and Mothers, the kinds of lines a person might take a year or two to read, a line like this: *Pray attentively and you will soon straighten out your thoughts*. I keep longing for the book that returns to words with a patient hand, written in clear lines, thoughtful and poetic, slowly written so that I might slowly read.

—Lil Copan, senior editor at Paraclete Press

For years—literally—I have urged editors to come out with a volume titled something like *Bible Stories Your Mother Never Told You*. Each time I have outlined this book, however, I have been met with “Never!” or “Too dangerous!” or sometimes just “Why?”

For my children's children and their children, for the grandparents and great-grandparents who have forgotten, and for all the young adults struggling to be Christian, I want a book that reminds us of the actual stories out of which church and faith and vision have come. I want us to wonder over, maybe even thrill to, the stories of Og of Bashan and his iron bedstead; of the Valley of the Kings and Melchizedek; of Tamar, foremother of our Lord, and of why it is that Judah himself says of her, "Her righteousness is greater than my own." I want to ponder the primal story of Jephthah's daughter as she dances across the hilltops, preparing to be sacrificed. I want the rich story of Abigail of Carmel and of how David sought her, and the mysterious story of Abishag, who, like the Mona Lisa, smiles enigmatically from both David's bed and Solomon's Song.

These are the messy, gritty stories. But these unsanitized and undoctrinalized stories have been found holy by the ages and were canonized in accord with the same set of determinants that passed on Noah and his ark, Jonah and his whale and Daniel and his lions' den—stories that have often been reduced to gruel and pap. Losing the courage to speak our truth and rejoice in our textured, natal stories invites tepid faith and more or less guarantees bland commitment. Why publish these stories? Because we can't afford not to.

—Phyllis Tickle, whose latest book is *The Words of Jesus* (Jossey-Bass)