

Statesman

UT professor joins growing group of men penning their spiritual journeys

By Joshunda Sanders

Posted Sep 1, 2012 at 12:01 AM

Updated Sep 27, 2018 at 3:40 AM

When University of Texas journalism professor Stephen Reese started researching the market for his latest, most personal book, he found himself at Barnes & Noble in West Lake Hills staring at row after row of faith and spirituality books geared toward women. As he puts it, “There were a lot of pink covers and sunsets.”

Reese, 56, is among a small group of male writers who have recently added a different perspective to the spiritual journey genre, which has been dominated by women — from Elizabeth Gilbert’s best-selling “Eat, Pray, Love” to Anne Lamott’s “Grace (Eventually).”

Reese’s book, “Hope for the Thinking Christian: Seeking A Path of Faith Through Everyday Life,” a memoir of his spiritual development, was published in April. That coincided with the release of “Hannah’s Child: A Theologian’s Memoir,” penned by Duke University professor and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas — who was once named the “best theologian in America” by Time magazine. In early June, well-known atheist and political writer Christopher Hitchens’ memoir, “Hitch-22,” was published.

Sally K. Gallagher, a professor of sociology at Oregon State University who has written about faith and gender, says the wave of spiritual books penned by men has been spurred by a convergence of events.

“This generation of scholars is coming to a more mature manhood at a moment historically when it is also OK to talk about your own experience and how that has shaped your life,” she said.

Reese, the associate dean at UT's College of Communications, usually writes about how globalization affects journalism, bias in reporting and emerging issues in the blogosphere. But over the years, he said, he would give talks about his faith that gave him a chance to reflect on his beliefs as he talked about them.

Reese is a pensive, deliberate speaker with a shaggy beard and a quiet voice. As a result, he said, his approach to God lacks the fervor of a "macho man."

"If men do religion at all, they want to do it forcefully and with a very powerful mind-set," he said.

The 140-page book describes a boy who grew up Methodist and remained faithful to that, even as he faced the deaths of his parents and, later, the doubts that spring from a logic-focused mind trying to sort through matters of the soul. It took time for him to "reconcile faith and beliefs with my intellectual tradition and think that through and reflect on it and realize that it's not antithetical."

Writing the book made him reflect on what men are socialized to prioritize, he said.

"Men are conditioned to pay attention to dating and building wealth and not getting past the superficial layer of who you are as a person," he said. "Doing something like this requires you to open up your soul. It takes some confidence to be public about something this intimate."

Personal details about spiritual formation are also largely regarded as female territory, he said, "to the extent that the church is regarded as a feminine activity. The servant mentality is engendered; it takes a lot of strength to be a servant, but our culture devalues those aspects."

Statistics on church attendance across denominations for years have shown that more women than men attend church. Data from a Pew Forum U.S. Religious Landscape Survey released in 2008 show that 44 percent of women attend church services weekly, compared with 34 percent of men.

Women also make up the bulk of book buyers, according to Bowker, a New Jersey-based publishing company that tracks consumer book trends: 57 percent of book buyers are women, and they purchase 65 percent of the books sold in America.

Kester Smith, a pastor with the Immanuel Austin Community, a nondenominational church that meets in homes in the Austin area, said the personal memoirs written by men that he's read tend to be from the perspective of "having left faith behind." But he points to the popularity of books like Donald Miller's 2003 "Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality" and Patton Dodd's "My Faith So Far: A Story of Conversion and Confusion," published in 2004, as evidence that there is a hunger for those kinds of stories among male readers.

"I think that men are feeling freer to ask some of these questions about faith out loud, so I would love to think that there's a shift taking place," said Smith, who works for BookPeople. "As a bookseller, I see that these are clearly the kinds of books that people want to read. As a pastor and as someone who likes to read, I find myself connecting to people's personal stories, and I'm shaped by thoughtful theologians, but books like Dodd's and Miller's give me room to ask my own questions and tell my own story."

The lack of gender balance when it comes to personal spiritual writing may have more to do with the general perception that there is a "split between the head and the heart in our times," said Michael Jenkins, academic dean at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

Jenkins said that over the years he has written 12 books, and about half of them have been academic. But when he wrote "Called to Be Human: Letters to My Children on Living a Christian Life" last year, he said, he received more of a response than he ever has to any of his other books.

"There's almost a claim that the head has to be scientific but the heart has to have faith," Jenkins said. "The culture wars are waged around this very issue, but Stephen's view just obliterates that."

Bob Lively, a guest lecturer at the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary and teacher in residence at First Presbyterian Church, was teaching a class at Oak Hill United Methodist Church, where Reese is a member, when Reese pulled him aside and said he was thinking of writing a book. He said he encouraged Reese to continue his efforts to get the book published because he thought its overriding message of religious tolerance was particularly important.

“Stephen’s not selling anything; he doesn’t have a product to sell. He’s just simply saying, “This is my life struggle, and if it helps you, good, but if it confuses you, that’s good, too,” Lively said. “He allows us to live the questions without selling us cheap answers. It’s a gift, more than anything else, to men who are thoughtful and educated and are interested in being spiritual, and they’re not sure what that means, but they’re still interested in having the gifts of spirituality like serenity and grace.”

joshundasanders@statesman.com; 445-3630