

Building Bridges: The Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding

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Dr. Robert L. Millet invites me into his office and offers me a plush chair across from his big desk; the room is like most professors' offices I have been in: books and files dominate here. Behind me are wall-to-wall shelves containing hundreds of volumes. Behind him is a long row of filing cabinets, each jam-packed with the records of a life's work. Part of that life's work is the fruit of holding the Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding from 2000 to 2004. He shows me an impressive stack of tomes: "Books to be finished within the next few months," he says. All of them are books about current thinking in the evangelical world. For Dr. Millet, staying current with the wider religious community is a big part of what "religious understanding" entails. Though he was released from the chair over two years ago, the work he did in that capacity still commands much of his attention. As Dr. David Paulsen, another past holder of the chair, explained to me: "That's one of the problems with having a chair that lasts three or four years—you can't just suddenly turn it all off. The challenge comes when you get back in a regular teaching position with a regular load, and you just can't let these things drop."

By "these things," Dr. Paulsen was referring in part to the extensive writing he has done both while holding the chair and since. His vita is crammed with articles published in high-profile journals on various Mormon topics. The dates show that many were done long after his time in the chair was finished. A list of projects completed or still in progress since his last sabbatical reveals a huge emphasis in dialoguing

with those of other faiths—he has six upcoming articles designated for publication in non-Latter-day Saint academic journals, each involving Joseph Smith.

But Dr. Paulsen was also referring to the friendships he cultivated in the Evans Chair, friendships that didn't just end when his time was up. Over the past thirty-five years, Dr. Millet, Dr. Paulsen, and the six other men who have held the Evans Chair have promoted religious understanding by working tirelessly in their fields, following the example set by the chair's namesake, Elder Richard L. Evans. But more important, in their traveling, publishing, speaking, researching, and other activities, each has found that friendship—real, enduring, personal friendship with the very people one is trying to understand—is the natural result of that work.

History of the Chair

Elder Richard L. Evans, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve from 1953 to 1971, was best known as the writer, announcer, and producer of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir's weekly broadcast, *Music and the Spoken Word*. Beginning in June 1930 and continuing for more than forty years, Elder Evans's voice reached across the nation each Sunday morning, filling the homes of listeners of all faiths with simple, eloquent messages of peace and hope.¹ His short sermons spoke of good living and practical virtue, themes applicable to all people, not just to Latter-day Saints. His tone was encouraging; his voice, wise. In one broadcast he said:

Sometimes we feel wronged. Sometimes we know we have wronged others. We all say things we wish we hadn't said, and do things we wish we hadn't done, yet often let stubbornness and pride keep us from apologizing, from clearing misunderstandings—and can't quite seem to humble ourselves to face the facts, to clear the air from feelings of offense. And we sometimes rationalize—blaming others, absolving ourselves—frequently forgetting, or not admitting, that there are two sides to most misunderstandings. . . .

There must be forgiving. There must be forgetting. There must be honest effort to make amends—not just a gesture, but attitudes and actions that prove we are sincere. Let children and parents come closer, and friends and neighbors, and let life be lived, not with quick tempers and lingering resentments, but with the understanding that knows there are two sides to most subjects.²

Though his words had the power to touch the soul, it was Elder Evans's actions that bound him in friendship to others. Lowell Berry, a California businessman, first heard Elder Evans on *Music and the*

Spoken Word in 1954. As Elder Evans's brother David explained, "On then becoming a fan of Richard, Lowell reportedly wrote to him to express appreciation, enclosing a money donation which Richard returned with a courteous 'thanks but no thanks.' Lowell next sent gifts of fruit and other perishables that he figured Richard couldn't return. No one knows how long that continued, but one day . . . Lowell walked unannounced into Richard's office in Salt Lake City and said to the secretary, 'I'm Lowell Berry, and I want to meet the preacher who won't take money.'" ³ Berry continued in his own words:

I found that he was indeed a friendly and fine person. We visited for some time in his office, and we found that we had much in common. For instance, our Rotary friendship—I had been president of the Oakland Rotary Club and he, of the Salt Lake Club, and there seemed to be a kindred fellowship in this.

I think maybe he took a special favor for me. Perhaps it was because I was a fertilizer man. That was my business. I do not know whether that amused him a little or not to start with, but we grew to be the dearest of friends, in spite of the fact that we were miles apart in our homes and in our businesses and I was not of his church. But we were Christians, both of us, and I have never met, nor do I ever expect to meet, a man who has touched my heart so warmly. ⁴

This friendship with Berry in part led to Elder Evans's election as president of Rotary International in 1966. During his one-year term heading the worldwide service club of then nearly 600,000 people, he and his wife, Alice, visited sixty countries, six Canadian provinces, and twenty-five U.S. states, participating in "press conferences, luncheons, interviews, meetings, receptions, and banquets" all along the way. In addition to speaking at club functions and administering the needs of Rotary, Elder Evans was visited by "mayors, presidents, prime ministers, governors, chancellors, kings," and of course Church leaders, for during all his travels he still made time to fulfill his duties as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve and to announce *Music and the Spoken Word* each Sunday. ⁵

In all this work, Elder Evans was making friends and building bridges for the Church. In a report to President David O. McKay, who had first encouraged Elder Evans to accept leadership positions in Rotary, he said, "In almost every Rotary function I have been in worldwide, I have been introduced as a member of the Council of the Twelve, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and in almost every press clipping, in every one of 133 countries worldwide where notices have been published, the word 'Mormon' or the name

of the Church has appeared.”⁶ Elder Evans was an example of how understanding and friendship go hand in hand. The *Improvement Era* reported, “Without compromising the religious principles or practices for which his Church stands, Brother Evans seems able, in an unusual way, to win the confidence of men of all faiths and walks of life and return friendship and understanding in kind.”⁷ Elder Marion D. Hanks later said of him: “In many nations, men proudly call Richards Evans friend. . . . He was a bridge of strongest stature across the streams of differences and understanding.”⁸

The establishment of the Richard L. Evans Chair of Christian Understanding occurred one year after Elder Evans’s death in 1971 and was a direct result of the many friendships he had cultivated during his life of service. Lowell Berry first proposed the chair, calling Elder Evans “one of the great Christian philosophers of our time” and made a generous donation to fund the endowment.⁹ His initial donation was matched by others who had also been inspired by Elder Evans’s life, and on November 1, 1972, the chair was formally established at Brigham Young University for the “promotion of understanding among people of different religious faiths through teachings and other activities centered in Jesus Christ and his teachings.”¹⁰ Truman G. Madsen was its first recipient.

Truman G. Madsen

Like the chair’s namesake, Dr. Madsen kept a rigorous schedule, filled multiple roles, and was an emissary for the Church wherever he went. For over two decades, he set the tone for the chair’s future use as he promoted building bridges of understanding.

Though Dr. Madsen was already widely recognized for his writing and speaking on religious topics, the Evans Chair provided him the means to reach more and more varied audiences. Holding the chair meant a reduction in his teaching load at BYU, and it also provided funds for things such as travel, research, and hosting visiting scholars at the school. He made good use of these opportunities, visiting sixty college campuses within the first year of holding the chair.¹¹ As his work continued, Dr. Madsen “sponsored programs in colleges and civic organizations, underwriting symposia, interfaith conferences, seminars, and workshops.”¹² He brought world-renowned scholars to the BYU campus for lectures and discussions, and he even served as a “guest professor at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California; at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts; and at Haifa University in Israel.”¹³ His work took him to almost all fifty states and to

the European continent, and he made forty-five trips to Jerusalem for travel-study programs. In addition to holding the chair, he spent time as director of Judeo-Christian Studies for the Religious Studies Center at BYU, director of the Institute of Mormon Studies, and, for the last three years of his time in the chair, director of the BYU Jerusalem Center.¹⁴ Amid all this activity, he still found time to write articles, publish books, and edit various periodicals and compilations.¹⁵

One quality that allowed Dr. Madsen to excel in his work of outreach was his amazing ability to reach his audience on a level they could respond to. He was “a teacher of uncommon clarity and vitality for layman and scholar alike.”¹⁶ Dr. Dillon Inouye, a one-time student and later colleague of Dr. Madsen, described his teaching skills this way: “Because he had an unusual ability to understand what was happening inside his students’ heads, he knew what to do to make his lectures clear and interesting.” As his student, Dr. Inouye learned that “although Truman’s technical gifts were well deployed, . . . they were mere accompaniments to a deep mastery of his subject matter and the testimony of the Spirit that made his lessons vital and life changing.”¹⁷ That “deep mastery of his subject matter” also allowed Dr. Madsen to interact with experts in his field. Dr. Inouye told this story of seeing him speak in his role as Evans Chair in Stanford Memorial Chapel at Stanford University:

There, he engaged our Dean of the Chapel, Robert Hamerton-Kelly, and other campus divines in a discussion of “images of God.” As one might imagine, the discussion proceeded at a high level of sophistication, with each speaker in turn offering up a different image of God. When it was Truman’s turn to speak, he acknowledged the several contributions of the panelists and then began to teach the Mormon doctrine of deity to those on the panel and those assembled *in their own theologico-philosophical tongue*. When he finished, I thought I could see on the faces of those assembled the respect they had for Professor Madsen, for his cogent comments, and for the Mormon religion he represented.¹⁸

Thus, in addition to being a fine educator, Truman Madsen utilized his skills as a fine scholar to bring “the University’s and the Church’s world view into closer communication with the American intellectual community.”¹⁹

To Dr. Madsen, the work of fostering understanding between people of different religious backgrounds did not merely mean speaking at venues around the world. It also meant inviting scholars to speak at BYU in an effort to help students and teachers there better understand

others' perspectives, and it meant gathering great minds together in conversation one with another. In the published results of one symposium, Dr. Madsen praised the participants for their "goodwill," for being "friendly to each other—and to the idea," and for having "a willingness to do the hard work of studying . . . the Mormon ethos." He identified two results of the meeting, things in perfect keeping with the mission of the chair: "first, a deepening of self-understanding within the Mormon community; second, a wider and deeper scholarly interest in Mormon studies."²⁰ In a letter to Dr. Madsen in honor of his seventieth birthday, Hugh Nibley wryly praised Dr. Madsen's ability to bring together scholars in understanding: "Who else could have brought a dozen world-famous Jewish and gentile scholars to Provo, corralled them into a snowbound cabin and make them talk, without a knife, gun, or glowing cigarette? May I remind you that these guys were Number One, top-drawer in their fields."²¹

But beyond all the conferences and publications, the work of the Evans Chair was still the work of building friendships. It was a work at which Truman Madsen excelled. By truly understanding his students, his colleagues, and his fellow Latter-day Saints, he bound them in friendship to himself. He is still in high demand as a speaker, and many of his writings are perennial classics among the Saints. A glance at the list of contributors to *Revelation, Reason, and Faith*, a Festschrift published in 2002 honoring Dr. Madsen, reveals that he has friends as far-flung as Oslo and Jerusalem, as well as all over the United States.²² But of course no list can represent the reality of friendships forged over years of common experience and understanding.

A Change in the Chair

Dr. Madsen became a professor emeritus in 1994, vacating the Richard L. Evans Chair after more than twenty years of service. "Truman established a wonderful cadre of friends for the church," said Robert Millet, who was dean of Religious Education at the time, "but it began to occur to us that many of those friends were growing older or dying and that we needed a new group of friends for the church." With the approval of the university administration and the Board of Trustees, a number of changes were made to the chair to help facilitate the continuing of its mission. The first was that the name of the chair was changed to the Richard L. Evans Chair of Religious Understanding, reflecting the hope that holders would, as Dr. Madsen had done, extend the hand of friendship to all people, not just Christians. The next was that the chair became a professorship of limited duration

rather than a lifetime appointment. Each professor chosen to occupy the chair would do so for four or five years before being released. Lastly, it became standard for two professors at a time to hold the chair, doubling the number of hands available to do the work of outreach.

The Chair Today

Since the time of the change, seven professors have held the chair: David Paulsen, Darwin L. Thomas, Larry C. Porter, Robert L. Millet, Roger R. Keller, Fred E. Woods, and Paul Y. Hoskisson. Each has followed Elder Evans's example by reaching out in understanding to others regardless of their beliefs. Each has followed the model established by Dr. Madsen by publishing in reputable journals, participating in conferences, sponsoring symposia, visiting campuses, and hosting visiting scholars at BYU. But each has made his own mark on the chair by bringing unique interests and talents to the work.

As I spoke personally with many holders of the chair in the past few months, I noticed two things common to each one. First, they each had a clear understanding of what the chair was for. Although they said it in their own words, I quickly got a sense that these men regarded the chair as a responsibility to reach out both to the world and to the Saints. Second, all the professors I interviewed got visibly excited when the conversation turned toward their own interests. Their eyes lit up when they began to explain to me how their area of expertise coincided with the work of outreach. They began to open drawers and find files, flip through books, and point out facts. They each exhibited a show-and-tell excitement for sharing what was important to them—surely a trait necessary for any Evans professor.

Fred E. Woods, a current holder of the chair, joyfully explained to me the story of Kalaupapa, a leprosy settlement on the Hawaiian island of Molokai where ecclesiastical leaders, volunteers, and nurses of different cultures and religions served patients from the Latter-day Saint, Catholic, Protestant, and Japanese Buddhist religious traditions. Not only was charity rendered by a host of people who were drawn from the outside to render service at Kalaupapa, but also great love and service were given by the patients to each other. For example, many patients helped with the construction of places of worship for each other. Professor Woods noted that he was moved by the fact that when a new Latter-day Saint chapel was erected at Kalaupapa in 1965, patients who were of other faiths actually contributed more hours than the Latter-day Saints.

He has turned the story into a presentation on religious understanding. “I’m using these things as a model,” he said, “as a teaching story in a historical context, of how we can get along better now and find common ground instead of battle ground, which divides us, to make the world a better place.” It isn’t a story that only urges Catholics to work with Latter-day Saints or Protestants to understand Catholics. It espouses understanding and cooperation all around, by all parties.

Dr. Woods first presented the Kalaupapa story of interfaith collaboration for a joint jubilee commemoration at both Chaminade University of Honolulu and BYU–Hawaii in 2005. Since that time he has given this presentation at many universities, including Georgetown University, MIT, Purdue University Calumet, George Washington University, St. Mary’s University, Lourdes College, the University of Utah, the University of Texas, and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. Professor Woods is also coproducing a documentary to tell this inspiring story that he hopes to have aired on PBS.

All the Evans professors have this same sentiment—that outreach and understanding in any direction inspires more outreach and more understanding. Perhaps no one understands this better than Roger R. Keller, who held the chair from 1998 to 2005. Before joining the Church in 1986, Dr. Keller was an ordained Presbyterian minister with a doctorate in biblical studies and twentieth-century Christian theology, and he was known for his work trying to “bridge the gap of misunderstanding that existed between the LDS and non-LDS community.”²³ His appointment as an Evans professor seemed meant to be long before it happened: while serving as senior pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Mesa, Arizona, he published a book entitled *Reformed Christians and Mormon Christians: Let’s Talk!*²⁴ Knowing his background makes the following statement by Dr. Keller in the seventh annual Alice Louise Reynolds Lecture at BYU all the more meaningful:

Not only is it important to encounter the religions of the world for the purpose of being good world citizens, but it is equally important that we study them to deepen our understanding of our own faith. It is amazing what can be seen in Latter-day Saint theology and traditions when we view that heritage through the glasses tinted with perceptions and questions from other people’s religious heritages. It is not that we learn things that have not already been revealed by God through the prophets, but rather that we see elements present in our own religious traditions that have been overlooked or deemphasized in the face of other ideas. For me the study of world religions has deepened the tapestry of my own faith, moving me beyond superficial commandments

to the profundity of the theology that is inherent in the religious experience found in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.²⁵

Dr. Keller's study of world religions has blessed the lives of others as he has shared his knowledge in more places than just his religion classes at BYU. He and Dr. Millet, who held the chair at the same time, often received invitations to speak to groups of Latter-day Saints on topics such as "Am I a Saved Christian?"—topics that reflect a need to understand the perspective of those around us. They still receive such invitations, in fact, owing to their expertise in the area of understanding. While Dr. Keller's work primarily involves world religions, Dr. Millet's focuses mostly on evangelical Christianity. As a result, Dr. Millet is often invited to address missionaries serving in the Midwest and the Bible Belt to help them understand the kinds of questions and perspectives they might encounter in their work.

And even though each holder of the Evans chair has affected wide audiences through writing and speaking, each has still affected—and has been affected by—the friends they've made.

When I met Darwin L. Thomas recently, a retired professor of sociology and family sciences who held the chair from 1996 to 1999, he was clutching two books, each with a scrap of paper sticking out, marking some important passage. I asked him about his work in the chair, his vision for its use, and the successes he saw as its holder—he answered each question politely and articulately, touching on the themes illustrated above. But when I asked him about the personal friendships he'd developed during his time in the chair, his eyes lit up, and out came the bookmarked volumes. He explained that for him, developing those friendships opened his eyes to the "profound spiritual experiences" occurring in the lives of scientists the world over, experiences that he often had a part in bringing about. He read me Dr. Candace Pert's account of a personal experience she had when visiting BYU for a conference, and he recalled how Dr. Gerald Schroeder had told him repeatedly that "BYU is a very important set of experiences in [my] own life."²⁶

Building Friendships

Dr. Millet explained to me how these friendships expand and begin to touch other lives, remarking that "once understanding exists, then great things begin to happen." He told me about how several times a year he'll get a call from a graduate student whose research touches on a doctrine or practice of the Church. The student will explain that his or her faculty adviser recommended he or she call Dr. Millet for

details. Dr. Millet, sitting behind his desk stacked with books and papers, smiled at me: “Now that sounds like a little thing, but that’s a big thing. That means they’re going to the source; they’re going to somebody who knows something about this.”

I asked why it’s him they call, and he answered off-handedly: “Oh, their professor is a good friend of mine. I’ve gone out to see him; he’s come to see me. And so, the exchanges like that are not just so you can have friends. It’s to build better understanding—in this case, among the students.”

Any Evans professor could tell a number of stories demonstrating the same thing: that friendship begets understanding, which begets more friendships. And all this understanding, all this outreach, can do nothing but be a blessing in the lives of those who experience it. Dr. Millet also told me this story which demonstrates how understanding can be more than a superficial respect and how friendship can open doors for individuals, for BYU, and for the Church:

I remember an episode where our group of evangelicals and our group of Latter-day Saints—we get together twice a year to have discussions—came together, and I had sent copies of the book I had done on the prodigal son to all of these evangelical friends. Well, they were complimenting me and telling me why they enjoyed it, and one of them said, “Bob, I was just stunned by the number of non-LDS sources you used in this Deseret Book publication.”

I said, “Yeah, I used quite a few.”

“Do you know how many you used?”

I said no, and he said, “Well I counted them. You used exactly 50 percent non-LDS and 50 percent LDS.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. That’s a great accomplishment, and it’s a great tribute that you think that we have something to say.”

Everybody agreed, and then I turned to him and said, “And at what point do you suppose you’ll start quoting us?” Well, there’s this long pause and he said, “It could be a while.”

One week ago I got an e-mail from that professor saying: “Your words have haunted me now for five years. I have a book coming out, and it covers the period of time from Acts to Revelation, and I want you to know that I’ve quoted seventeen times from David Paulsen in philosophy, from Andy Skinner and Kelly Ogden in Religious Education, and from you. So there.”

Dr. Millet ended his story with another sly smile: “Again, you say that’s not a big thing—it’s a very big thing. That means they think we have something to say.”

Conclusion

As I sit in Dr. Millet’s office listening to him tell stories, it is clear that he loves this. He loves talking with people, telling his stories, hearing theirs, commiserating, connecting. All the Evans professors do. It is the basis of their understanding, the foundation of the friendships to which Dr. Paulsen was referring when he lamented about not being able to just drop them. He was being sarcastic, of course—I saw it in his eyes as he spoke of his colleagues as dear friends.

These men know that understanding is not about seeing eye to eye on every issue or about compromising personal beliefs. Dr. Woods was quick to clear that up for me by quoting Saint Augustine: “In the essentials, unity; in the nonessentials, liberty; and in all things, charity.”

They also know that understanding isn’t always about proselytizing either; it’s about people. Dr. Millet and I sit surrounded by his work—shelves, books, files, and papers—but still he looks me in the eye and says: “While we’ll always take the great commission of the Savior to take the gospel to all the world very seriously, there are other reasons to build friendships. It isn’t just to do missionary work. It’s that it really does enrich your life. I have wonderful friendships with many fine Christian gentlemen and ladies across the country and across the world that have just simply made me a better person.” As he speaks, it’s easy to see that he means it. **RE**

Notes

1. <http://www.musicandthespokenword.com/history/richard-l-evans.php>.
2. Richard L. Evans Jr., *Richard L. Evans: The Man and the Message* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1973), 108–9.
3. David W. Evans, *My Brother, Richard L.* (United States: Beatrice Cannon Evans, 1984), 63.
4. Evans, *The Man and the Message*, 88–89.
5. Evans, *The Man and the Message*, 69–77.
6. Evans, *The Man and the Message*, 76.
7. Evans, *The Man and the Message*, 78.
8. Evans, *The Man and the Message*, 78.
9. Evans, *My Brother, Richard L.*, 95.
10. Ernest L. Wilkinson, ed., *Brigham Young University: The First One Hundred Years* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1976), 4:195–97; Evans, *The Man and the Message*, 86.
11. Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 4:197.
12. Dillon K. Inouye, “Truman Madsen, Valued Teacher,” in *Revelation*,

Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), xxxii.

13. Truman G. Madsen, ed., *The Temple in Antiquity: Ancient Records and Modern Perspectives* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1984), 191.

14. Inouye, “Truman Madsen, Valued Teacher,” xxxii–xxxiii.

15. For a complete listing of Truman G. Madsen’s published works, see Daniel B. McKinlay, comp., “Works by Truman G. Madsen,” in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 753–77.

16. CES speech biographical information.

17. Inouye, “Truman Madsen, Valued Teacher,” xxv.

18. Inouye, “Truman Madsen, Valued Teacher,” xxxii–xxxiii; emphasis in original.

19. Wilkinson, *Brigham Young University*, 4:197.

20. Truman G. Madsen, ed., preface to *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaeo-Christian Parallels* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1978), ix–x.

21. Hugh Nibley to Truman Madsen on his seventieth birthday, quoted in Inouye, “Truman Madsen, Valued Teacher,” xxx.

22. See “Contributors” in *Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 779–82.

23. <http://www.lib.byu.edu/lectures/alr/Keller/1995.pdf>.

24. In the preface to his book, Roger Keller writes: “Dr. Truman G. Madsen, holder of the Chair of Christian Understanding at Brigham Young University, deserves special thanks for his willingness to read and re-read the manuscript, offering comments for consideration and resources to be consulted” (*Reformed Christians and Mormon Christians: Let’s Talk!* [United States: Pryor Pettengill, 1986], xii).

25. <http://www.lib.byu.edu/lectures/alr/Keller/1995.pdf>.

26. Dr. Candace Pert is a world-renowned pharmacologist with a PhD from Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. The story shared by Dr. Thomas is found in her book, *Molecules of Emotion: The Science Behind Mind-Body Medicine* (New York: Touchstone, 1999), 313–14. Dr. Gerald Schroeder is a nuclear physicist and planetary scientist. He earned his PhD at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and then taught there before moving to Jerusalem in 1971. He has published three books dealing with the intersection of science and religion: *Genesis and the Big Bang* (1990), *The Science of God* (1997), and *The Hidden Face of God* (2002).