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How to Read the Bible

By Harvey Cox



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How to Read the Bible By Harvey Cox

Renowned religion expert and Harvard Divinity School professor Harvey Cox deepens our experience of the Bible, revealing the three primary ways we read it, why each is important, and how we can integrate these approaches for a richer understanding and appreciation of key texts throughout the Old and New Testaments.

The Bible is the heart of devotional practice, a source of guidance and inspiration rich with insightful life lessons. On the other side of the spectrum, academics have studied the Bible using scientific analysis to examine its historical significance and meaning. The gap between these readings has resulted in a schism with far-reaching implications: Without historical context, ordinary people are left to interpret the Bible literally, while academic readings overlook the deeply personal connections established in church pews, choir benches, and backyard study groups.

In *How To Read the Bible*, Cox explores three different lenses commonly used to bring the Bible into focus:

- Literary—as narrative stories of family conflict, stirring heroism, and moral dilemmas;
- History—as classic texts with academic and theological applications;
- Activism—as a source of dialogue and engagement to be shared and applied to our lives.

By bringing these together, Cox shows the Bible in all its rich diversity and meaning and offers us a contemporary activist version that wrestles with issues of feminism, war, homosexuality, and race. The result is a living resource that is perpetually evolving as our understanding changes and deepens from generation to generation.



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Editorial Review

Review

” An absolutely masterful book by one of the great theologians of our age, and of inestimable value to both scholars and beginners.” (**James Martin, SJ**, author of *Jesus: A Pilgrimage*)

“Fifty years later Cox... is still provocative. *How to Read the Bible* is a tour through both the Bible and the history of biblical criticism. Cox shows he has lost none of his talent for expressing complex ideas in accessible ways.” (*U.S. Catholic*)

“Scholars and students will be gratified by this pragmatic but profoundly insightful volume. The Bible is a complex, textured volume that can amaze and inspire, but also confuse and perplex. Cox has given readers a great gift—a clear path toward a fuller and richer appreciation for the sacred text.” (*Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review)

“In this important book, Cox takes readers of all ages and all spiritual traditions on an excursion through some of the most confounding and deeply difficult questions bible reading has to offer. Best of all, he shows us how to go beyond the words and so become more spiritual.” (**Joan Chittister, OSB**, author of *Between the Dark and the Daylight: Embracing the Contradictions of Life*)

“Cox reads the Bible as an engaging storyteller who portrays the real life drama embodied in the narratives. He also reads as a scholarly interpreter of texts, and a source of experiencing the spiritual life. Read and you will discover an integrated and intriguing way to read the Bible.” (**Murray W. Dempster**, Director of the Center for the Study of Global Pentecostalism at Southeastern University)

“No one who reads this will ever again approach the Jewish or Christian scriptures in the same way. This is a must read for the religious, the secular, and everyone in between. A monumental work, and fun to read.” (**Alan Dershowitz**, Felix Frankfurter Professor of Law emeritus at Harvard and author of *Abraham: The World's First (But Certainly Not Last) Jewish Lawyer*)

“Harvey Cox is a trustworthy and fearless guide to the Bible who brings us into dialogue with all its dimensions—from the literary and historical to the spiritual and political. In Cox’s company, the Bible becomes again a book that can change our lives.” (**Stephanie Paulsell**, Houghton Professor of the Practice of Ministry Studies, Harvard Divinity School)

“Weaving individual stories with contemporary biblical criticism, Cox presents a case for reading the Bible both as an intellectual discipline and a spiritual journey.... A handy introduction for those who are interested in a constructive analysis of the Bible.” (*Library Journal*)

“Whether he is following in the footsteps of Moses...[or] looking over the shoulders of Gospel writers...Cox proves to be a skillful interpreter of the Bible. *How to Read the Bible* shines and shimmers with all the wisdom Cox has accrued from many years of teaching.” (*Spirituality & Practice*)

“Harvard’s famous, forward-looking professor of divinity... Harvey Cox demonstrates how various critical methods clarify [the Bible’s] meanings at the time it was written and in ages thereafter, thereby helping readers answer questions about its meaning now. For thoroughgoing amateur Bible students, a godsend.” (*Booklist*)

“Harvey Cox does a service to anyone seeking to look at the Bible through 21st century lenses... What Cox manages with bringing the text into a new generation is a breath of fresh air [and]... a renewed heart for the scriptures... Cox brings a conversation back to the Bible.” (*Clarion: Journal of Spirituality and Justice*)

“If *How to Read the Bible* is read by the average American, our arguments about the Bible will be much more informed--and much less contentious. ... A splendid work by a renowned scholar.” (*The Association of Mormon Letters*)

“Harvey Cox, professor of divinity at Harvard Divinity School and a well-traveled interpreter of things secular and spiritual, provides a word of guidance to those who wish to find in the Bible spiritual meaning for today.” (*Christian Century*)

“*How to Read the Bible* is an engaging, inspirational and accessible book by one of America’s pre-eminent scholars of religion, Harvey Cox.” (*National Catholic Reporter*)

From the Back Cover

For many people, the Bible lies at the heart of their faith, an ageless source of inspiration and guidance. On the other side of the spectrum, trained biblical scholars study the Bible using a variety of modern historical and literary approaches. But there is a wide gap between these two groups of readers, a gap that brings negative consequences for both. Without an awareness of historical context, ordinary readers easily slip into a literal interpretation, while scholars sometimes overlook the deeply personal significance the Bible has for people in churches, synagogues, and Bible study groups.

In *How to Read the Bible*, renowned Harvard Divinity School professor Harvey Cox shows how these different ways of approaching the Bible can be reconciled to the enrichment of all. By discussing a range of biblical books from Genesis to Revelation, he demonstrates how the historical analysis of the Bible, rather than undercutting its spiritual significance, can enhance and deepen it. Drawing on some of the commonly used modes of biblical scholarship, such as archaeology, cultural studies, and literary criticism, Cox opens up a rich, diverse, and contemporary version of scripture, one that wrestles with issues of feminism, war, homosexuality, and race. The result is a Bible that is a timeless but contemporary resource for all.

About the Author

Harvey Cox is the Hollis Research Professor of Divinity at Harvard University, where he has taught since 1965, both at Harvard Divinity School and in the Harvard Faculty of Arts and Sciences. His classic book *The Secular City* is widely regarded as one of the twentieth century's most influential books of Protestant theology. He is also the author of *The Future of Faith*. Cox lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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