



## AMERICA AND RELIGIOUS ILLITERACY

Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – And Doesn't* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006) ISBN:

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Americans rightly express surprise and alarm when they hear of the number of high school students who cannot locate specific states on a U.S. map or the percentage of college students who cannot recall the document that contains the words “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. . . .” How can students with such a lack of cultural awareness contribute meaningfully to the discussions of crucial issues that will face our nation in the days ahead? E. D. Hirsch noted in his 1987 bestseller, *Cultural Literacy*, that effective communication between members of a society is impossible without a common understanding of important people, places, events, customs, and concepts that form the foundations of the culture. According to Stephen Prothero, however, religious illiteracy is an even greater problem than cultural illiteracy. In *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – And Doesn't*, he argues convincingly . . . that Americans are not equipped for citizenship (or, for that matter, cocktail party conversation) without a basic understanding of Christianity and the world's religions. The solution, he insists, will require the re-institution of religious education in the schools in order . . . to help citizens participate fully in

social, political, and economic life in a nation and a world in which religion counts.ö

Prothero, the chair of the religion department at Boston University, begins his argument with two contrasting realities. One, the United States has been and continues to be a deeply religious country. History demonstrates the central role Christianity played in: the founding of the nation and the creation of the government; the ending of slavery; the expansion of women's rights; the promotion of universal education; the development of the economic system; and the acceptance of immigrants from all over the world. To the great disappointment of those who eagerly anticipated its death in the 1960s, religion (particularly Christianity) has resumed its place of influence in every area of society. Two, Americans know very little about their religious traditions. Although the Bible is the most influential piece of literature in the country's history, surveys have revealed the public's significant lack of knowledge of the book. Moreover, regarding religions other than Christianity, Americans confess ignorance of even basic beliefs.

Religious ignorance, however, has not always characterized the American citizen. Borrowing a concept from the French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger, Prothero describes how the home, church, schools, Sunday Schools, Bible and tract societies, and colleges formed links in a "chain of memory" that established and re-enforced the primacy of the Bible in guiding the thoughts and actions of citizens in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. According to Prothero, religious literacy began to wane by the mid-1800s, but not as a result of Enlightenment-based secularism. The anti-intellectualism of evangelicals after the Second Great Awakening and the decision by religious organizations to alter their message to accommodate immigrants with a variety of denominational backgrounds weakened and eventually broke the links in the chain. Doctrine was stripped down to generic moral principles and



spiritual experiences replaced religious learning. By the late 1800s Harvard had changed its motto from *In Christi Gloriam* (‘To the Glory of Christ’) to *Veritas* (‘Truth’) as leaders in higher education . . . finally became convinced that it was possible to teach morality quite apart from religion. Religion was reduced to simply doing good deeds and it was almost impossible to discuss the subject in most schools.

The answer to the problem of religious ignorance, according to Prothero, is religious education. Acknowledging that the primary vehicle for education is the public schools and universities, he proposes two, year-long courses for high school students that cover the Bible and world religions, as well as additional classes about religion in college. Special training will be needed to educate teachers on how to present these topics in a way that fulfills the goal of education without advocating or denigrating any particular religion. For those concerned about constitutionality, Prothero explains the relevant Supreme Court opinions to show that public schools, rather than complying with the law, actually may be defying the Constitution by indirectly promoting a materialistic worldview.

*Religious Literacy* provides a fascinating and compelling account of the gradual disappearance of religious knowledge in American society. Although his evaluation of the problem is convincing, Prothero’s recommendations for a cure are less persuasive. As he points out, organizations from both sides of the political spectrum have supported the concept of introducing classes about religion into the public schools. However, actually implementing a curriculum that is acceptable to those who are suspicious of even the slightest appearance of religious indoctrination is likely to be an arduous process. Also, teaching the finer points of constitutional law to ease liability concerns of high school

administrators will be a complicated enterprise at best. The bigger question, though, is whether or not such classes will lead to more effective citizen participation. After all, the college students who cannot remember the preamble to the Declaration of Independence are the same students who languished through several hours of required courses in American history. The problem lies in Prothero's metaphor of the chain of memory. The reason citizens were so well-versed in the fundamentals of their religion was because their doctrines and stories were re-enforced at every level of society: home, school, church, courthouse, and public square.

Today, however, the chain is broken. Without a resurgence of religious learning in homes and places of worship, it is doubtful that a course in world religions will answer the need for a more educated citizenry and greater understanding between persons with different beliefs. What seems clear, though, is that doing nothing puts the success of the next generation at great risk. As Prothero concludes, ". . . it is irresponsible to use the word *educated* to describe high school or college graduates who are ignorant of the ancient stories that continue to motivate the beliefs and behaviors of the overwhelming majority of the world's population. In a world as robustly religious as ours it is foolish to imagine that such graduates are equipped to participate fully in the politics of the nation or the affairs of the world."