

## What Americans don't know about religion

# Dumbed down

by Timothy Renick

ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2001, my job got a lot easier. I had been toiling for 15 years to establish a department of religious studies at my university. Its strongly secular faculty, sensitive to political winds in a southern, conservative state, feared that such a program would inevitably be dominated by evangelical Christians. State legislators, suspicious as always of college professors, feared that religious studies in a university setting would mean state-sponsored attacks on Christian belief. The university president had nightmares about headlines in the local paper. Besides, the university had more pressing needs. Religious studies seemed either a luxury or a potential headache—something the university couldn't afford or didn't need.

Until September 11, that is. The dialogue about religious literacy changed that day. It was not merely that my arguments extolling the importance of students understanding world religions no longer fell on deaf ears; the arguments began to be made by others. The university president mentioned our efforts in religious studies in his standard stump speech to state legislators. The press began to call the university in search of expert opinions on religious sects and practices. Our Islam scholar began to appear on CNN. A major donor decided to endow a faculty chair—not in Christianity but in world religions. By 2005, the university not only had created an undergraduate department of religious studies; it had added a master's program as well.

In a world shaped not merely by 9/11 but by conflict in Iraq, Bosnia, Kashmir and the West Bank—not merely by abortion but by gay marriage, intelligent design, euthanasia and stem cells—Americans increasingly accept the idea that we need to understand religion better. What we haven't quite figured out is where and how this should happen.

Two important new books target the challenges posed by the so-called new religious pluralism, exploring ways in which religious diversity is shaping public life. Stephen Prothero makes a case for teaching about religion in public schools. Thomas Banchoff offers 15 essays by leading

scholars that examine the complex contours of religion in the public setting. Both books suggest that Americans have not paid enough attention to how religious diversity has altered the dynamics of public life and the demands of citizenship.

According to Prothero, professor of religious studies at Boston University, America has become a nation that is at once “deeply religious and profoundly ignorant

about religion.” Personal belief in God remains high, and Americans assert that their convictions shape their public behaviors and positions. A majority of Americans support the idea of religious organizations participating in public policy issues, and 90 percent of the members of Congress report that they consult their religious beliefs

when voting on legislation. On many levels ours is still a very Christian nation. (Statistically the nation is “more Christian,” Prothero points out, “than Israel is Jewish or Utah is Mormon.”)

Yet surveys show that the majority of Americans cannot name even one of the four Gospels, only one-third know that it was Jesus who delivered the Sermon on the Mount, and 10 percent think that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife. (Hey, at least they know that Noah was associated with an ark—or is that Arc?)

Some of the details reported by Prothero are funny in a perverse sort of way (“many high school seniors think that Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife”). Others are eye-opening. Prothero makes a convincing case for the claim that devout Christians are, on average, at least as ignorant about the facts of Christianity as are other Americans. Sixty percent of evangelicals think Jesus was born in Jerusalem; only 51 percent of the Jews surveyed made the same mistake. And things are not getting any better. As pollster George Barna reports, “The

**Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn't.**

*By Stephen Prothero. HarperSanFrancisco, 304 pp., \$24.95.*

**Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism.**

*Edited by Thomas Banchoff. Oxford University Press, 352 pp., \$24.95.*

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younger a person is, the less they understand about the Christian faith."

When it comes to knowledge of Islam and Asian religions, the picture is even bleaker. There are now over 1,200 mosques in the U.S. and more Hindu temples than in any country other than India, but most Americans cannot name a single Hindu scripture, let alone describe basic tenets of the religion; nor can they articulate the difference between Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims. "Islam is peace," President Bush told Americans in the wake of 9/11. Muhammad was "a terrorist," replied Jerry Falwell. Not only does one suspect that Bush and Falwell would have been hard pressed to offer any informed basis for their opposing characterizations, Prothero laments, but "Americans had no way to judge [who was right], because, when it comes to understanding the Islamic tradition, most Americans are kindergarteners at best."

**R**ELIGION IS undoubtedly important to public life. One can hardly enter a debate about gay marriage without hearing an appeal to Adam and Eve or that other famous biblical husband and wife, Sodom and Gomorrah. One cannot fathom the challenges of the situation in Iraq without coming face to face with the complexities of Islam. But since most Americans don't know Sodom, Shi'ites or Sunnis from Adam, the debate is reduced to empty sloganeering and appeals to emotion, and citizens are increasingly disenfranchised by their ignorance. How can Americans formulate concrete opinions about what should be done in Iraq when they have no understanding of the situation more nuanced than a perception that lots of people are killing each other?

Something needs to change. But what? Prothero's proposal is to require of all American public high school students a course in world religions and another in the Bible. Such courses would teach about the religions, not denigrate them or indoctrinate students. As such, the courses would have a civic rather than a theological goal: to supply students with the knowledge they need to be good citizens.

Prothero, tapping into his specialty in American religions, harkens back to times when religious literacy was not only the norm but also a marker of good citizenship. In a chapter titled "Eden (What We Once Knew)," he tells us, "Once upon a time, Americans were a people of the book." There was a time when most Americans could name the books of the Bible and recall a good many passages as well. They entered public debate about moral issues with grounding in the religious stories and the principles to which they appeal. This knowledge was widely appreciated to be not only of theological value but also of public value. As James Madison put it, "A people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives." Prothero observes that "two potent justifications for literacy developed side by side. Children would learn to read to both free themselves from

# Testing your religious literacy

A quiz by Stephen Prothero

1. Name the four Gospels. List as many as you can.
2. Name a sacred text of Hinduism.
3. What is the name of the holy book of Islam?
4. Where, according to the Bible, was Jesus born?
5. President George W. Bush spoke in his first inaugural address of the Jericho road. What Bible story was he invoking?
6. What are the first five books of the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Old Testament?
7. What is the Golden Rule?
8. "God helps those who help themselves": Is this in the Bible? If so, where?
9. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God": Does this appear in the Bible? If so, where?
10. Name the Ten Commandments. List as many as you can.
11. Name the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism.
12. What are the seven sacraments of Catholicism? List as many as you can.
13. The First Amendment says two things about religion, each in its own clause. What are the two religion clauses of the First Amendment?
14. What is Ramadan? In what religion is it celebrated?
15. Match the Bible characters with the stories in which they appear. Draw a line from one to the other. Hint: Some characters may be matched with more than one story or vice versa.

Adam and Eve	Exodus
Paul	Binding of Isaac
Moses	Olive Branch
Noah	Garden of Eden
Jesus	Parting of the Red Sea
Abraham	Road to Damascus
Serpent	Garden of Gethsemane