

“Religious Literacy 101”
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Stephen Prothero begins his book, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – And Doesn’t*, with this story

A few years ago I was standing around the photocopier in Boston University’s Department of Religion when a visiting professor from Austria offered a passing observation about American undergraduates. They are very religious, he told me, but they know next to nothing about religion. Thanks to compulsory religious education (which in Austria begins in elementary schools), European students can name the twelve apostles and the Seven Deadly Sins, but they wouldn’t be caught dead going to church or synagogue themselves. American students are just the opposite. Here faith without understanding is the standard; here religious ignorance is bliss.¹

Prothero explains that the “civic implications of this paradox,” faith and ignorance, crystallized for him in 1993 as he watched the FBI standoff with David Koresh and the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. By then Prothero had a PhD in American Religions. He writes “As I saw it . . . Koresh was luring FBI agents into playing roles he had assigned to them in an end game of his own imagining – an end game whose logic derived not so much from FBI profiles or SWAT team tactics as from Koresh’s own idiosyncratic interpretation of the biblical book of Revelations. ‘It’s going to burn,’ I told myself.” Of course the Branch Davidian compound did burn, killing most of his followers and several agents.

What interests me is that Prothero, knowing nothing about law enforcement or negotiations but a lot about American religion, knew the final outcome in advance. In the end it came down to religion, which although ignored, was hardly a secret. Koresh and his followers were all about religious extremism. Why was it so hard for the FBI and the BTAF to get a little back around information on what Koresh was thinking? Or did they get it and ignore it?

In the wake of increased religious fundamentalism in American politics, the Oklahoma City bombings, September 11, religious violence in Afghanistan and Iraq followed by American military intervention, saber rattling in Iran, recent Lebanese struggles with Palestinian fundamentalists, controversial settlements and a new wall in Israel, we need knowledge about religion so that we can be effective citizens. The thesis of Prothero’s book is that Americans can only be good citizens if they know the basics

¹ Stephen Prothero, *What Every American Needs to Know – And Doesn’t* (2007), 1.

about several world religions. He goes even further to insist that religion should be taught in public school, not as a faith, but as a subject like Chemistry or Communism.

Many of us would find this unsettling notion. But I have to admit that his assertion made me think that religious evangelism is at times too prevalent in public schools while at the same time basic education about religions is absent. I don't fully agree with Prothero (down south of here we just got the Ten Commandments off some laws), but he also has a point. We have no public educational square to learn about religion. And, we send ambassadors with no knowledge of Islam off to volatile Middle Eastern countries. Does our ambassador to India know the differences between Hindus and Muslims? What about our military leaders and advisors to the President and Congress? What about our President and Congress, and local mayors and Superintendents and doctors treating people and officers out on the streets?

For the last fifty years, Professor of the Comparative Philosophy of Religion, Huston Smith, has been trying to educate America and the world about religion. In the introduction to his 1989 text of *World Religions* he explains why

Lands around our planet have become our neighbors – China across the street, the Middle East at our back door. The change this new situation requires of us all – we who have been suddenly catapulted from town and country onto a world stage – is staggering. Twenty-five hundred years ago it took an exceptional individual like Diogenes to exclaim “I am not an Athenian or a Greek but a citizen of the world.” Today we must all be struggling to make those words our own.²

And as the Austrian professor noted, Americans, who attend congregations in record numbers, are remarkably ignorant about religion. Biblical literacy for conservative Christians has declined in the last forty years.³ American Catholics are experiencing the same trend. As much as we might wish it otherwise, Unitarian Universalists fall into the same category of religious ignorance as other Americans. Page 27 of Prothero's book includes a religious literacy quiz. I urge you to take it. Be honest. If you feel inadequate know that you are in good company. Prothero has dozens of stunning statistics in his book like “Only half of American adults can name even one of the four Gospels.”

I have been studying religion for the last fourteen years and I scored 10 out of 15. I couldn't name the Catholic sacraments (raised Presbyterian). I knew the first Noble truth of Buddhism, but not the next three. I accurately matched all the characters and stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, but I am embarrassed to say that when President George W. Bush spoke of the Jericho Road in his first inaugural address, I am one of the many Americans who didn't know what he was talking about (it was the story of the Good Samaritan). I know the story of the Good Samaritan; I just didn't know it had to do with Jericho Road.

The unconvinced might say, “Well, that is why religion doesn't belong in politics.” Friends, religion has always been in American politics, and probably always will be. Are you going to tell me that former Presidents Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter,

² Huston Smith, *The Illustrated World's Religions: A Guide to our Wisdom Traditions* (1994), 13.

³ Prothero, 31.

George Washington and Abraham Lincoln were never influenced by faith and scripture? Religion is in American politics, past, present, and probably future. And it is not all bad that it is there.

Republican Attorney General Elliot Richardson, the one man who defied President Nixon and refused to fire Special Watergate Prosecutor, Archibald Cox, was a Unitarian Universalist. In his biography he wrote “I believe profoundly in the ultimate value of human dignity and equality. I therefore believe as well in such essential contributors to these ends as fairness, tolerance, and mutual respect.”⁴ Richardson really sounds like the best of Unitarian Universalism. I’m not saying politics should be based on religion, nor that we should create a primary national religion, but our Constitution allows a variety of religions in this country, and religion has and always will influence people, and we should know about that influence. You can fight the existence of religion and remain annoyed and uneducated and do nothing or you can accept the existence of religion and become educated and effective.

Prothero has an intriguing theory that Americans became religiously illiterate as we became more evangelical (starting with the Great Awakening in the 1730’s). Originally this movement and others combined theology with experience, but as the Puritans with their ethic of education and critical thinking declined in popularity, American religion became more superficial and entertainment based full of catch phrases (“Jesus loves me,” “Jesus saves”) rather than any scriptural knowledge or reflection.

In the last few years I spoke with a student at Cincinnati Bible College who lamented the lack of religious education in evangelical mega churches like Crossroads and Vineyard, some of the fastest growing religious institutions in America today. A conservative Christian well versed in the scriptures, she could not bear what she saw as a slick, pseudo rock-religion concert and pat service that left people uplifted and clapping instead of deliberating meaning and texts. I recently spoke to an African American minister who saw mega churches siphoning off black members who formerly found a community center within their black church for black concerns (voter rights, civil rights, poverty). Yet Crossroads and others are catching a stream of people leaving mainline congregations.

As Unitarian Universalists we have covenanted to affirm and promote (among other values) “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations” and “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” The sources we draw from include among others) “Wisdom from the world’s religions,” “Jewish and Christian teachings,” and “Humanist teachings.” This year our worship theme is world religions and views. You can expect to hear those principles and sources I just mentioned quoted from time to time as we welcome a variety of religious leaders to our pulpit and explore religious texts and experience.

Several Sundays this year we will coordinate our worship topic with religious education classes for our children so that families can discuss what they have learned together. Mostly the coordinated topics will be on world religion, occasionally other topics. This year our children third grade and up are also learning about religious views and practices through curriculum such as “Neighboring Faiths” for grades six through eight. In Neighboring Faiths our children visit other congregations including a mosque and synagogue. As much as possible we are going to try to coordinate those trips with

⁴ Elliot Richardson, *Reflections of a Radical Moderate* (1996).

our services in the sanctuary. Next year the worship theme will be Unitarian Universalist thought and history and again, we will coordinate as many religious education courses for children with worship experiences in the sanctuary.

Why begin with world history? First, Unitarian Universalism can only be understood by backing up into Christianity, and before that, Judaism, where we have our historic roots. Second, our children were scheduled to study the topic this year and it seemed a good match. Finally, Prothero has convinced me that in order to be productive, educated citizens we must learn more about religion and it has become extremely controversial to teach and learn about religion in public schools, so where else are we going to learn about it but here?

This fall we are going to begin by exploring three of the world's major world religions, in order of existence; Hinduism, Buddhism, and Judaism. After the holidays we will get to Socrates and Plato, Christianity and Islam. And I promise you a double session on Christianity because you are so curious about its inception. In the late winter and spring we will get to atheism, fundamentalism, and cults and if time permits maybe the black church or Confucianism.

For those of you eager to get into modern issues, fundamentalism and atheism, I apologize for the wait. My experience has been that religion is nearly impossible to understand without a context, and the context develops historically (explain atheism). So we start with Hinduism, the oldest known major world religion. For example, Siddhartha, the man who would one day become known as Buddha, was born in India, and his early life was deeply influenced by Hinduism.

Each sermon on the five major world religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) will be preceded by a class on the topic taught by me earlier in the week (I'm going to need to brush up, please come and help me – we will learn together), and we will be using Smith's text for the class. I like Smith for several reasons; he writes for lay readers, he is as interested in religious experience as he is in religious scripture and thought, he likes religion (as opposed to being hostile to it), and as he explains "the book does not attempt to provide an inclusive overview of the religions included, for each hosts too many variations to make sense of in short compass. Instead of trying to catalogue them all, I try to do reasonable justice to the leading perspectives in each tradition."⁵

Smith is interested in the basic story, principles, and values of each religion. It's an overview, religious literacy 101. We might not be able to tell the difference between Tibetan and Zen Buddhism, but at the end of the year we will know they exist and where to look to learn more. Similarly, we're not going to have time to cover smaller world religions but I hope you will be curious to learn more about these religions as well.

Socrates said he was wise to the extent that he knew what he didn't know. There is a lot that we don't know about religion and we are not admitting it. As Unitarian Universalists we are committed to the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. So let's do it, without fear or discrimination. Let's open our minds to religion so that we are better neighbors and citizens, so that we can hear and understand one another, and make up our own minds.

Prothero asks how we can understand the effort to connect Christianity to family values until we know what kind of family man Jesus was. Let's sit down and find out so

⁵ Smith, 10.

that the next time someone asks us what Jesus would do, we can answer heal, feed, bless the poor and have an intimate unmarried relationship with a woman named Mary Magdalene (who some later called a prostitute), and we don't know what kind of parent he was because to the best of our knowledge he had no children. Friends, don't live in fear. Live in education.

Our first sermon, on Hinduism will be on October 28th. The introductory class on Hinduism will be earlier in the week, on Tuesday, October 23rd at 7:00 p.m. This is the text; you will need to pre-read the section on Hinduism before you come. You have six weeks to do it. Everyone is welcome; invite your friends and family. Be a good citizen of our beloved country and the world. Amen.

