

A Nation of Faith and Religious Illiterates

COMMENTARY

By Stephen Prothero

Los Angeles Times

January 12, 2005

<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-oe-prothero12jan12.story>

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The sociologist Peter Berger once remarked that if India is the most religious country in the world and Sweden the least, then the United States is a nation of Indians ruled by Swedes. Not anymore. With a Jesus lover in the Oval Office and a faith-based party in control of both houses of Congress, the United States is undeniably a nation of believers ruled by the same.

Things are different in Europe, and not just in Sweden. The Dutch are four times less likely than Americans to believe in miracles, hell and biblical inerrancy. The euro does not trust in God. But here is the paradox: Although Americans are far more religious than Europeans, they know far less about religion.

In Europe, religious education is the rule from the elementary grades on. So Austrians, Norwegians and the Irish can tell you about the Seven Deadly Sins or the Five Pillars of Islam. But, according to a 1997 poll, only one out of three U.S. citizens is able to name the most basic of Christian texts, the four Gospels, and 12% think Noah's wife was Joan of Arc. That paints a picture of a nation that believes God speaks in Scripture but that can't be bothered to read what he has to say.

U.S. Catholics, evangelicals and Jews have been lamenting for some time a crisis of religious literacy in their ranks. But the dangers of religious ignorance are by no means confined to those worried about catechizing their children or cultivating the next generation of clergy.

When Americans debated slavery, almost exclusively on the basis of the Bible, people of all races and classes could follow the debate. They could make sense of its references to the runaway slave in the New Testament book of Philemon and to the year of jubilee, when slaves could be freed, in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. Today it is a rare American who can engage with any sophistication in biblically inflected arguments about gay marriage, abortion or stem cell research.

Since 9/11, President Bush has been telling us that "Islam is a religion of peace," while evangelist Franklin Graham (Billy's son) has insisted otherwise. Who is right? Americans have no way to tell because they know virtually nothing about Islam. Such ignorance imperils our public life, putting citizens in the thrall of talking heads.

How did this happen? How did one of the most religious countries in the world become a nation of religious illiterates? Religious congregations are surely at fault. Churches and synagogues that once inculcated the "fourth R" are now telling the faithful stories "ripped from the headlines" rather than teaching them the Ten Commandments or parsing the Sermon on the Mount (which was delivered, as only one in three Americans can tell you, by Jesus). But most of the fault lies in our elementary and secondary schools.

In a majority opinion in a 1963 church-state case (*Abington vs. Schempp*), Supreme Court Justice Tom Clark wrote, "It might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion ... and its relationship to the advance of civilization." If so, the education of nearly every public school student in the nation is woefully inadequate.

Because of misunderstandings about the 1st Amendment, religious studies are seldom taught in public schools. When they are, instruction typically begins only in high school and with teachers not trained in the subtle distinction between teaching religion (unconstitutional) and teaching about religion (essential).

Though state educational standards no longer ignore religion as they did a decade or so ago, coverage of religion in history and social science textbooks is spotty at best. According to Charles Haynes, senior scholar at the First Amendment Center in Arlington, Va., "It is as if we got freedom of religion in 1791 and then we were free from religion after that."

Now that the religious right has triumphed over the secular left, every politician seems determined to get religion. They're all asking "What Would Jesus Do?" — about the war in Iraq, gay marriage, poverty and Social Security. And though the ACLU may rage, it is not un-American to bring religious reasoning into our public debates. In fact, that has been happening ever since George Washington put his hand on a Bible and swore to uphold the Constitution. What is un-American is to give those debates over to televangelists of either the secular or the religious variety, to absent ourselves from the discussion by ignorance.

A few days after 9/11, a turbaned Indian American man was shot and killed in Arizona by a bigot who believed the man's dress marked him as a Muslim. But what killed Balbir Singh Sodhi (who was not a Muslim but a Sikh) was not so much bigotry as ignorance. The moral of his story is not just that we need more tolerance. It is that Americans — of both the religious and the secular variety — need to understand religion. Resolving in 2005 to read for yourself either the Bible or the Koran (or both) might not be a bad place to start.