“Religious Literacy: What Every American Should Know”

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MICHAEL CROMARTIE: Our speaker is the chair of the Department of Religious Studies at Boston University. I have a copy of his book, Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – And Doesn’t. It was a New York Times bestseller. We’re delighted to have Stephen Prothero with us.

DR. STEPHEN PROTHERO: One thing that I noticed when I moved from Atlanta to Boston was that my students didn’t seem to get the references that I was making to religion as much as I expected that they would. I’ve been at Boston University now for 10 years, and it was maybe about five, six years ago I started noticing a shift. When I would say things like in Matthew, blah, blah, blah, the students would get that look like they sort of knew what I was talking about but they really didn’t. I realized they were thinking, “Matthew Perry? From “Friends?”

So I gradually realized I have to do explain this stuff: Matthew, which is one of the four Gospels, which are books in the New Testament, which is a scripture in Christianity, which is one of the world’s religions.

I would have to do this iteration with them, and it became really intriguing to me to see when I had to do that and how often I started doing that. And I found that I couldn’t assume much in terms of religious knowledge from my students. Even when they were taking an upper-level course in American Christianity. I couldn’t expect that they knew much at all about Christianity.

And so, I started giving this quiz that’s in my book. It’s my religious literacy quiz that’s been published in some of the newspapers and magazines you all work for. I started giving it to my students just to see how they would do. And it was really, really intriguing to me
how poorly they would do. Then I started trying to see how they did vis-à-vis some
surveys. I was really amazed. They did better than the general public. But I ask them to
name the four Gospels. Name one sacred text of Hinduism. What’s the Golden Rule? What
are the first five books of the Hebrew Bible? What’s Ramadan? What religion is it
practiced in? Super basic things. Not, who was the pope when [Martin] Luther nailed his
theses on the wall at Wittenberg? Nothing like that.

And students do really badly. I think about one out of nine of my students would pass
with 60 percent or better. And one thing that really intrigued me is, at the end, I would
give them a list of Bible characters and then Bible stories and I’d ask them to match them.
I’d have Adam and Eve and Paul and Moses on one side and, on the other side, I’d have
Exodus and the Road to Damascus and the Garden of Eden. I’d ask them to draw a line
between the two, and it’s amazing, the lines that they would draw in their heads. Paul
would be getting the olive branch from the dove and Jesus would be parting the Red Sea.
And again, these weren’t obscure things. It wasn’t even like David and Goliath things.

So that was part of it for me, talking with my own students. And then, as I was thinking
about this project, I’d also started talking to my kids about what they knew about religion.
There was a time when my younger daughter, she was probably 6, and she was given a
Bible at this Lutheran church that I attend. She was given this Bible, so as I was driving her
home, I thought to ask her what she knew about this book.

Why don’t you tell me some characters in the Bible, I said. She always is up for a challenge,
so she sort of smiled and I said, but not Jesus. She was disappointed with that because
her answer was going to be Jesus. So she started thinking and she was in the backseat and
she thought for a while and finally she looked up and said . . . Tom. And so, I was like,
Tom? Where does that come from? I was thinking, well, OK, there’s doubting Thomas and
maybe he was Tom to his friends...And so, I realized my kids didn’t know anything about
their own religion.

So those were the personal ways that I realized this was an interesting project. The central
paradox of the book was clarified to me by an Austrian colleague of mine, who was
teaching at Boston University with me a few years ago. He was an expert on orthodoxy.
He was teaching a course on Orthodox-Catholic relations. After a couple weeks, I saw him
around the photocopier, and he seemed a little frustrated. He said, Steve, these Americans are very strange. He said, they all go to church and they know nothing about Christianity. Nothing. He said, I have to start from the very beginning. I have to start with ... there was a guy named Jesus. That’s where I have to start when I’m trying to teach this course on Orthodox-Catholic relations, where I thought I could assume all this information about the history of Christianity and what Orthodoxy was and what Catholicism was. He was really astonished. And that helped to clarify for me the central paradox in my book, which is that the United States is one of the most religious countries on earth, but Americans know nothing about religion, their own religions or the religions of other people.

There have been surveys done on this, not very many, but most Americans cannot name any of the Gospels. It’s about 50 percent, a little below, when you ask them to name a Gospel. Most don’t know that Genesis is the first book of the Hebrew Bible. Ten percent think that Joan of Arc was Noah’s wife. A sizeable minority think that Sodom and Gomorrah were a happily married biblical couple. This is the kind of stuff you get when you ask about the Bible, you ask about Judaism and Christianity.

If you shift over to religions outside of the Judeo-Christian canopy, it’s really quite astonishing. Americans will admit to a very high level of ignorance about Islam. There have been some surveys where people are asked: What do you know about Islam? Have you ever met a Muslim? Do you know anything about it? And Americans will typically run for the side of the survey that heads towards, absolutely, positively nothing, you know, that kind of response. There was a survey done of American teenagers, where the teenagers were asked simply to name the world’s religions, and half couldn’t name Judaism as a world religion. Half couldn’t name Buddhism as a world religion. So this isn’t name the Four Noble Truths or in what century was the Buddha born, weigh in on the debate, none of that kind of stuff. Just incredibly basic information.

Now, religious illiteracy is a religious problem inside religious communities. There’s a lot of writings among Jews about Jewish illiteracy. There’s a lot of hand-wringing since Vatican II among Catholics about Catholic illiteracy. Evangelicals are very worried about biblical illiteracy. They write about it a lot. If you do Google searches on these kinds of
terms, Jewish literacy, Catholic literacy, biblical literacy and illiteracy, you get a lot of hits. And these are basically theological and religious conversations inside religious groups about what can we do about this problem.

But the angle of approach for me in this project was the civic and political side. So instead of seeing religious illiteracy as a religious problem for religious people, I’m looking at it as a civic problem and I’m looking at it from two angles. The first is the domestic angle, where we have politics now where we used to have one religious party and now we have two religious parties, in the sense that Democrats have now joined Republicans in deciding that it’s smart to talk about God and it’s smart to talk about faith because that’s the way you get elected. It didn’t seem to be such a good strategy for the Democrats in a country with 96 percent of the citizens believing in God to be the non-God party against the God party. So basically we have a politics where politicians on both sides are being encouraged to talk about religion, about their own faith, but also to connect their public policy initiatives to religious ideas, particularly to biblical ideas and Jewish and Christian ideas.

So Hillary Clinton now, when she talks about immigration, she’s quite likely to talk about the Good Samaritan story and to say why don’t I think that an immigration bill, where we have to turn in people who come over the border illegally, why do I think that’s wrong? Well, because the Good Samaritan story. You know, we’re supposed to treat foreigners in a good way. We’re supposed to treat them like our neighbors, according to the Bible.

In this kind of politics, it seems to me that it’s imperative for citizens to know something about religion. How can you engage a politician who is rightly or wrongly invoking the Bible or invoking religion for political purposes on issues like gay marriage or abortion or the environment or poverty or euthanasia or capital punishment or war? How do you engage these people if they’re making religious arguments without knowing something about religion yourself? Now, of course, you can say, this is wrong. We shouldn’t have a politics that so infused with religion. Europeans, apparently, get along perfectly without it. Why do we have to be different? This is a violation in some way of at least the spirit of the First Amendment if not the letter of the First Amendment.
And my response is, well, that’s all well and good, but we have the country that we have and people are going to be talking about religion on television. Politicians are going to be invoking religious reasons for their public policy stances, and we, as citizens and as journalists and academics, should know something about religion so we can engage them, and also so we can flush out the demagogues who actually don’t have a religious argument but have a kind of religious invocation where they’re sort of invoking God or invoking religion without actually having a religious argument underneath that invocation. So that’s the domestic side.

The international side, to me, is even more urgent. This is where we have a situation like Madeline Albright observed in her book, *The Mighty and the Almighty* a couple of years ago. When she was secretary of state under [President] Clinton, she had a couple dozen economic advisers she could call any time of the day or night when she wanted to figure out what was going on with the economy of some country, or the political situation. But she had really no religion adviser; she didn’t have anybody that she could call up and say explain to me this Sunni-Shiite thing, or what’s going on in Afghanistan with religion, or in Kashmir do people really care about Hinduism and Islam there and is that operative? Or, what’s going on with the civil war in Sri Lanka between Hindus and Buddhists? I thought Buddhists were nice to each other; I didn’t think that they liked to kill people for religious reasons. She didn’t have anybody for that purpose.

She also observed in the book that there’s no requirement for ambassadors to countries that have substantial religious populations, that they know anything about that religion. There’s neither a prerequisite nor a policy of having U.S. ambassadors to Middle Eastern countries, for example, have any training in Islam, have even one course in Islam, even know how to spell the word “Koran” or be able to know one salient difference between Sunnis and Shiites, or for the ambassador to India to know that India is a Hindu country, or to know anything about Hinduism whatsoever.

I think one thing we’ve learned in terms of the Iraq War is that it doesn’t look, at least to me, like our government knew much at all about Islam before we went into Iraq, and we had a sense that we understood the situation by understanding it in terms of ethnicity, in terms of politics, in terms of the economy. But I don’t think we understood it as a religious
place, where religious reasons mattered, where people were, perhaps in many cases, primarily motivated by religion.

And so we weren’t motivated as a government to figure out what we knew and what we didn’t know, particularly, what we didn’t know. I think that one thing that this project on religious literacy can do is to make people aware of the stuff that they don’t know, particularly politicians and particularly when it comes to international affairs and foreign policy.

If you look at places like Iraq and Iran, it’s pretty clear that these are places where Islam matters. And you look at Kashmir, where we have two nuclear powers — a Hindu majority, the state of India, and the Muslim majority, the state of Pakistan — facing down each other. And we have, as I mentioned, Sri Lanka, where you have a civil war between Hindus and Buddhists.

These are places where you need to understand religion in order to understand what’s going on, in order, in my view, at least, even to start. I think it’s ironic that in a country where so many people are religious, and where religion is so much a part of domestic politics, that we still seem to be operating on this old secularization paradigm where we can understand other countries and other people purely on the basis of their economic and political thoughts and actions and motivations. It just doesn’t seem to me at all to be the case.

So religious illiteracy is a problem, not only for Americans to understand what’s going on here with Democrats and Republicans, but also to understand what’s going on in the world. So that’s the basic pitch about the book in terms of the problem that it tries to address.

I talk about the incredible religious literacy that we had in the colonial and early national periods, and then the demise of religious literacy over the course of American history. The basic argument that I make in terms of how this happened is that there was quite a remarkable level of religious literacy about the Bible and about Protestant theology, particularly Calvinist theology, in the colonial period across the colonies, even fairly well across race and gender, and that persisted until the early 19th century.
And one reason for this was because basic literacy and religious literacy were yoked in the sense that the way people learned to read was by reading the Bible. Most homes had either zero or one book, and those that had one book had a Bible. The readers and primers, they were thoroughly drenched in theology. They were the kind of books where you would be reading the 23rd Psalm, or where you’d be reading a passage from the Sermon on the Mount, in order to learn how to read the words that were included in these spellers. Kids would be learning these words: fornication, abomination, Armageddon, apocalypse. These were the words on the list, the biblical words.

So that was the situation, really through the early national period, and then the argument that I make is against a sort of received wisdom that you sometimes hear from the religious right, which is that religion goes away from the public schools in the early ’60s with the 1962 and 1963 Supreme Court rulings against devotional Bible-reading and prayer in the public schools. And there were basically the “bad” secular liberals in the Supreme Court who ran religion out of the public schools and therefore made us a nation of religious illiterates.

That actually that is off by about 100 years and the villains are the wrong people. The villains were really the religious people, particularly evangelicals, but also liberal Protestants and, to some extent, Catholics. This happened really in the period of the Second Great Awakening in the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s with the rise of evangelicalism and with the displacement of Puritanism as the dominant religious impulse, an impulse that was very keen on the integration of the head and the heart in the way religion was done, that God gave us heads, God gave us brains, God gave us reason, God gave us this book to read. And we’re supposed to use those faculties to reach God, to understand God.

And this gets replaced by a form of evangelicalism that is really much more emotional, less doctrinal, trust-the-head a lot less. It really focuses on loving Jesus, a relationship with Jesus, rather than on knowing what Jesus had to say, and that particularly led to the shift of the locus of religion inter-morality, and in fact, the confusion of religion inter-morality, where we see in our politics, really clearly today, that to be religious is to be moral, and it’s to be moral in a bedroom sort of way; it’s to be moral around issues like gay marriage and abortion and stem cell research, rather than to be moral in a more fulsome way.
This all happens in the period of the Second Great Awakening, where evangelicals move into things like temperance, abolitionism, women’s rights, prison reform, education reform, and where they start to equate being religious with being a do-gooder in the world, with making the world a better place, with making the Kingdom of God, with civilizing and Christianizing American culture. And religious literacy is a loser along the way because it becomes increasingly less important, and, in fact, it becomes a barrier to ecumenical cooperation on things like abolition for people to actually argue or to know the salient differences, say, between Methodists and Baptists. It becomes a barrier, like, why would you want to know that? You’re supposed to be cooperating with these people. Why should you be arguing about whether you should baptize people when they’re babies or when they’re grownups? It’s not really useful.

So the doctrinal side of religion and the narrative side of religion just start to fall away, and they start to bow down before the moral and emotional projects of religion. So religion becomes an emotional and moral enterprise, rather than a narrative storytelling and doctrinal enterprise.

So let me say something quickly about my proposal. This is a proposal for how to address this problem, and the argument basically goes like this: insofar as it is a civic problem, it requires a civic solution, and the place we do civic solutions is the public schools. At least, that’s one of the places we try to do civic solutions. And so I have an argument that we should do two mandatory courses in the public schools on religion, one on the Bible, and one on the world’s religions.

The Bible course would address the issue of domestic politics, where the Bible is the de facto scripture of American politics. It is the book that politicians use, that politicians manipulate, that politicians quote from. We need to know it, at least some of it, in order to fully engage these politicians in the moves that they’re making. Moreover, outside of contemporary politics, you can’t understand the history of Western art without knowing something about the Bible. You can’t make sense of American literature. At one point, I looked up the books on the Oprah Winfrey Book List. About half of them actually in their titles have “Song of Solomon,” “East of Eden.”
The second course would be a world religions course. This would address not the domestic problem, but the international problem. How do we make sense of a world in which Islam is a powerful force, in which it’s important, as the chair of the House Intelligence Committee, to know the differences between Sunnis and Shiites, which the current chair of the House Intelligence Committee was asked and couldn’t answer? It would be good if the next generation of politicians could answer very basic questions like this, and not only about Islam, because who knows how long Islam’s going to be America’s primary religious challenge?

The objections to this, you probably know what they are. One is the silly and stupid objection that it’s unconstitutional, which just isn’t true. The Supreme Court has ruled about a dozen times over the last 50 years on religion and public education explicitly, and it’s very clear, their position. It’s been pretty stable actually, which is that there’s a distinction between preaching about religion and teaching about religion. Preaching about religion can’t be done. You can’t preach atheism, you can’t preach theism, you can’t preach for or against any particular religion, but you can talk about religion and you can teach about religion. You need to make a distinction between talking about religion in a religious way and talking about religion in a secular way.

The Supreme Court doesn’t just give a kind of constitutional stamp of approval that this is a kosher enterprise to teaching about religion; it consistently goes beyond that. It says not only is it acceptable, but it’s imperative. It’s kind of unusual for the court to do this kind of thing. Usually, they just rule on the law and they leave it alone. But they actually kind of editorialize and they say, we really do need our young people to know something about the Bible and to know something about the world’s religions, and it really makes sense to say that kids aren’t educated when they get out of high school if they don’t know something about these things, and we need to have these kinds of courses.

So it’s curious to me that a lot of public school teachers, a lot of administrators continue to labor under the false assumption that religion is a sort of third rail and you need to avoid it and it’s dangerous. I talked to teachers, I talked to professors at ed schools who trained teachers, who would tell me, when students ask about religion, I say, I can’t talk about that. I’m not allowed to. It’s a public school.
The other objection is that it’s too controversial. We already have enough problems in America about religion. Why do you want to inject these problems in the public schools? Public schools should be sanctuaries from these kinds of grownup problems. I think this is based on a false assumption that is driven to a great extent by the media, that the cultural wars are sort of raging around religion. I’m of the party that doesn’t believe the culture wars are really raging out there around religion in ordinary America. I think that it’s the conflict narrative imperative of journalism that breeds the false assumption that culture wars are really rife. I think that the notion that this is too controversial really has to do with a false understanding of what’s out there in America in terms of discussion about religion.

ADRIAN WOOLDRIDGE, The Economist: I wonder if you have any comparative data, particularly about the Islamic world, because if you look at the Islamic world, you have levels of illiteracy of about 50 or 60 percent. You have only 20 percent of the Islamic world speaking Arabic, and they’re all sitting there chanting the Koran in Arabic, a language which they don’t understand. What sort of level of religious literacy is there in our great interlocutor?

DR. PROTHERO: Well, the level that you describe. I think one of the false understandings in America about Islam is that the Koran is the way in. I think that for reasons you point out, most Muslims have never read the Koran; most Muslims have no idea what is in the Koran. This is sort of a Protestant assumption, that you get to a religion through its text. And the Koran is a huge part of Islamic piety, it is more something that you say and that you hear than something that you think about. So, yes, Muslims don’t know much about their own religion.

MIKE ALLEN, Politico: What’s your theory about why this still is such a religious country, why, as you say, 96 percent of people believe in God at the same time that we don’t know what David and Goliath is?

DR. PROTHERO: The obvious theories are the First Amendment. This is a competitive spiritual marketplace, where people have a lot of religious options, where religion has not been yoked to political regimes the way it has in Europe. This is actually a really interesting
recent development. There was a study a couple of years ago in the *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* that was talking about the shift of young people from the religion camp to the spiritual but not religious camp. And one of the arguments was that the word “Christian” is starting to be associated with the word “Republican,” and that insofar as young people are liberal, they feel that to say that they’re Christian is actually to identify politically. Insofar as we’re starting to have a more informal religious establishment, where Christianity is associated with Republicanism and conservatism, I think that is potentially going to be pushing young people out.

Another source is the fact that we have so many different forms of religion here that everybody can find one for themselves. I think that’s a part of it too.

And then I think the ethic of religious tolerance here in some ways cuts both ways, but it makes it possible to be religious in a lot of different ways. I used to do a lot of work on Hinduism and Buddhism in the United States, and it’s really intriguing that Hindus, when they come to America, Indian-Americans who are Hindus, they become more religious rather than less. Religious — moderately religious people — become intensely religious people, and a-religious people become moderately religious people. It’s the kind of place where you articulate your identity religiously.

**MR. ALLEN:** Do you think that the rate of people who are religious eventually will decline along with the religious literacy rate?

**DR. PROTHERO:** I think the fact that Americans are religiously illiterate fuels the high rate of religiosity. I think there’s a positive correlation. In other words, I think that one reason why we’re so religiously illiterate is because we’re so enamored of forms of religion that don’t value religious knowledge, and so I the two work against one another.

**E.J. DIONNE, *The Washington Post***: Could you talk about where are school systems doing what you proposed, have you been involved in any controversies in order to bring this curriculum in, and what’s the prospect? And are you asking the public schools to dstep in where our religious traditions have failed?
DR. PROThERO: Yes, there are places where this is being done. On the side of the world religions courses, there’s an interesting experiment that’s being done in Modesto, California. Modesto, a few years ago, put in a mandatory world religions course for 9th graders, and they had an opt-out provision, which I think is smart and which I proposed in my book for these courses, if somebody really objects and they say, whatever, I’m a Lubavitcher Jew and there’s no way I’m going to have a course where religion is discussed by some secular person in a secular way for my kid. Then I think, just for political purposes, it’s fine to have an opt-out.

One thing they found is that there is hardly anybody who opts out. Three a year out of 1,000 kids taking this course opt out. There was also a study that was done about a year and a half ago that was done in terms of some of the concerns people have about world religions courses. One concern is about religious switching. Are the kids who were raised evangelicals going to come out as Hindus because they’ll think, wow, Gandhi and saris and yoga? And then they’re going to kind of be wandering around Modesto bug-eyed and trying to get flights to India?

And what people found is no religious switching, which to me is also disconcerting in a way, like the point of education is transformation, right? I wouldn’t be upset if one of my students who took a world religions class came out of it a Buddhist or a Sikh or something. That wouldn’t be out of the range of possibilities. But anyway, they found none in this high school.

I got hundreds of e-mails from people in school districts who are trying to either start Bible courses, start world religion courses, ask about curricula. The Society of Biblical Literature, the academic wing of Bible Scholars in America, is working through a committee on coming up with some kind of curriculum. And on the world religion side, I’m not aware of initiatives as much, just local initiatives. I’m not aware of people trying to come up with a good high school world religions curriculum.

There’s a legislative initiative in Massachusetts. There’s a bill that’s been introduced to basically do my proposal in Massachusetts that would link it to funding for the schools
where this legislator wants to have a mandatory Bible course and a mandatory world religions course. So there are things that are happening on that front.

Am I asking public schools to do what religious traditions have failed to do? The answer is yes and no. There are two ways to talk about religion, and the job of religious groups is to talk about religion in a religious way. And so insofar as I think Americans should be able to talk about religion in a nonreligious way, in other words, in a way that’s not filtered by a particular religious tradition for particular religious traditions purposes, then these are two different projects.

That said, religious traditions, particularly Christian churches and Jewish synagogues, used to do a good job of teaching kids basic information about the Bible, so that when they went into the high school class and they started reading Hemingway, or they started reading whomever they’re reading, would have a sense of the Bible characters and Bible stories because of their religious training. And so they would know who David and Goliath were because they had been to Sunday school or they had been to synagogue. And that isn’t the case. So in that sense, I am asking the public schools to do what religious traditions have failed to do.

MR. DIONNE: Is there ever an ideological or party split on teaching the Bible?

DR. PROTHERO: Well, I was really intrigued to learn that the Democrats are starting to get behind this, as a way to sort of say, hey, we’re into religion too and this is a way that we can be into religion because we’re not afraid of a secular Bible course or a secular world religions course. What we’re afraid of is the crazy religious right. I think, frankly, that these are projects that could have a lot of bipartisan support.

JOHN DICKERSON, Slate: I’m struck that Thursday Gov. [Mitt] Romney is going to talk and educate people about the Mormon religion. What should listeners know to process his speech? What do you think he should say, and given your experience trying to talk to audiences, what advice would you give him about – the eyes glazing over factor that you talked about earlier?
DR. PROThERO: Yes. Well, I think Americans need to know that Mormonism is a religion and that there’s a debate about to what extent it’s Christian, that it was founded in the United States in the 19th century, that it used to be polygamous but isn’t anymore. I mean, you could kind of fill these things in. To some extent, it’s the very basic information we don’t have about any so-called other religion, including Mormonism.

I think that Romney has a difficult task. When Kennedy did his thing, there was a sort of prima facie sense among, let’s say, people of goodwill that Catholicism, Judaism and Protestantism were three ways of being – three equally legitimate ways – of being religious. And this was an achievement of really the post-World War II period in America that you see in classics like [Will] Herberg’s Protestant-Catholic-Jew, where the Judeo-Christian tradition gets invented in the ’30s, it becomes popularized in the ‘40s, and it becomes pretty standard fare in the ’50s to start to think about we have Catholics, Protestants and Jews. Sure, they disagree on certain things, but they worship the same God and they’re all Americans and they believe God’s a God of history and they believe God speaks through scriptures.

Mormonism doesn’t have that status, and it doesn’t have that status among this core constituency in the Republican Party. And in that sense, I can understand why the strategy in the Romney camp has been to just hush-hush this. I don’t think hush-hush is going to work, and I think it’s smart that he’s speaking out. But I can understand why they would do that because not only does he need to educate the public about Mormonism, he needs to spin it so that he’s not talking about goofy things; he’s not making it sound weird.

And it’s very easy for Mormonism to sound weird to non-Mormons because it is fantastic. There were these people who buried this scripture and Jesus didn’t go straight to heaven. He came to North America first and the scripture got dug up, and there were these plates and then the plates got lost, and then there were these stones that were used maybe in front of your eye to read hieroglyphics and there were hieroglyphics, and the weird parallels between the King James translation and the Book of Mormon was somehow there when these were buried, even though the King James version hadn’t been written yet. I mean, there’s a lot of stuff to explain.
What should be done? I think he needs to talk about his faith, and I think he needs to do it in a fulsome way. I think that he actually is a person of faith, and I think for the Republican nomination, this is good. So he somehow needs to say he’s a person of faith. He needs to make us feel it. And then he needs to show that he’s not a person of scary faith and of goofy faith, and I think that’s a challenge. He can talk about Jesus, which Mormons are really into Jesus.

DAVID SHRIBMAN, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: I was wondering if you would give us a critique about American politicians and whether they are ignoramuses about religion too when they start talking about it.

DR. PROthero: That’s one of the assumptions of a piece I wrote for Beliefnet: “A Religious Test for the Presidency.” My argument there was not that we need to make sure that our presidents believe in God or are Christians, but we need to quiz them. And in that piece, I challenged journalists to ask factual questions of presidential candidates and to find out if they know anything about religion, if they can pass the test. I think it is really instructive when you find out that Sylvestre Reyes of the House Intelligence Committee, who’s running it, doesn’t know that al-Qaeda is a Sunni group. This is really astonishing. I don’t know how you can even make one step toward understanding Islam and terrorism without knowing that basic fact.

So my assumption is that they know very little, but as a factual matter, the only way to find out is to force them to take the test in my book, which they’re not going to do unless they’ve already got the answers ahead of time, or to have journalists ask them questions. Now, that said, that’s the assumption. I think part of the reason why I think empowering citizens to know more about religion is important is because I think some of the reflex that politicians have to just invoke religion would start to go away because right now – this is what I was trying to say about the invocation – that right now, you can just play the religion card a little bit without there being any follow-up.

DR. WILFRED M. McCLAY, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga: It seems to me that you could argue that, in fact, religious illiteracy is the defining feature of religion throughout most of human history. But then the counterargument would continue that the important thing about religion – and religion is not just a set of propositions and
doctrines, but it is an ethos, it is a social institution which can’t be readily analyzed by going to this sort of canonical scriptures and then quizzing people about their knowledge of them, that in a sense, that’s irrelevant to an understanding of the larger ethos, the way that it shapes a culture.

**DR. PROTHERO:** There’s this former religious studies professor, Ninian Smart, who has this idea that religion operates in these various dimensions. And if you look at religious traditions around the globe and across time, you’ll see that there’s a doctrinal dimension and there’s an ethical dimension, and there’s an institutional dimension and there’s an emotional dimension, and there’s a narrative or a mythological dimension.

That range of religious dimensions has narrowed in American culture, so that religion has narrowed down to being about the emotional and the ethical, and that that is unusual in the history of religions. Religious reasons are out there in the public space. And Americans are in this strange situation, in a democracy which hangs on an informed citizenry, that they’re uninformed. And so that to me is more the issue.

**NAOMI SCHAEFER RILEY, The Wall Street Journal:** Willow Creek, and any of the megachurches, what is it that they’re doing in social clubs and Bible classes?

**DR. PROTHERO:** Many of the megachurches, there’s no content that I would call standardly religious in terms of doctrine and narrative in the sermons. Protestant tradition is supposed to be about the sermon, and the Catholic is supposed to be about the Mass, the Eucharist, and so that’s one issue.

There are some megachurches that do actually old-fashioned biblical preaching, and now the sermons are about life advice kind of stuff. What they do is they provide a place where you can have a Christianized whole life and you can have the basketball team and you small groups will get together, people will come up, the needlepoint club and the book club, and this and that. So it’s clear that that’s one of the successes of these churches. The question then becomes to what extent is that religious and how narrow is our definition of religion?
And I think that religions have always provided this kind of social service. Religions have always had a secular element to them, and how you carve out the sacred and the secular is just really tricky. But from a psychological perspective, I think you can talk about this and you can ask people why they’re there, and people will often say that they’re not there because of the salvation question. They’re there because their girlfriend is there or they’re there because they want their kid to get an education in the Bible or they’re there because they love the coffee at Son’s Bucks.

RACHEL MARTIN, NPR: There was a time when faith was all about knowing the doctrine and being enmeshed in that and being able to recite things and knowing the history and the context. And this is what Vatican II was supposed to abolish, and it was about a personal Jesus and having a direct relationship. So are you arguing that this has now been an over-correction of sorts?

DR. PROTHERO: I think in the American context, you did have a peculiar form of religion with Puritanism that was peculiarly intellectual. So I do think there is an anomaly here. I think in the history of world religions, ordinary people are not running around their heads with this whole basket of doctrine. Now, they are running around with stories. So in the Hindu context, for example, in India people know the epics, even today. It’s changing over the last 25 years, but Indians can tell you the stories of what Krishna did with the Gopi girls and stuff like that. They know those stories. They don’t know what the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali say about exactly how the transformations of yoga work on your karma, but they do know the stories.

Maybe in the realm of storytelling that I see more of an anomaly here than in the realm of doctrine. I think doctrine in theology is something that in general elites tend to do, and in 17th and 18th and 19th century America, there was this interesting situation where ordinary people did doctrine too. And now we’re back to maybe a more normal situation where ordinary people aren’t doing doctrine, but the anomaly is the ordinary people not knowing the stories, because stories throughout religious history have been transmitted to ordinary people verbally. The key thing is you don’t need to be literate to know stories, and in general, people do tend to be literate who know doctrine. So I guess that’s where I’d go with that.
MR. VAN BIEMA: I’ve only had the opportunity to visit one class where this was being taught. I’m back on Bible classes again in public schools. And it was outside San Antonio, and I was very impressed by it. But I called back a couple of weeks ago, and they said the class had been canceled for lack of attendance. Part of the problem is that the Texas public schools have adopted what the woman told me was a four-by-four system, where you have to take four years and four subjects mandatorily, which really lowers the number of elected courses that you can take. So if you’re taking band and football, then forget it. You’re not going to be taking the course about the Bible. I have difficulty imagining this as being made mandatory, even with an opt-out, because I think it then becomes extremely political. The other thing that people kept saying to me was, why can’t we, rather than teaching a course about the impact of the Bible or the impact of religion in America, why can’t it be integrated into the other courses that we already teach?

DR. PROthero: I have a couple of responses. One is that if that could really be done well, I probably would be good to go. So then it becomes a question of whether that’s possible and which approach is best, and I think there are a couple of problems with the integration model. One is that that’s the model we supposedly have now and it’s not working.

Another is that I think to teach about religion, given the constitutional issues, you need to be intentional about it. In other words, you need to know the difference between teaching and preaching; you need to know that it’s a sticky wicket; you need to know that it’s OK to talk about it. So there needs to be some training on teaching about religion as teaching about religion.

I also think that the issue of constitutionality and holding people to high standards about what they’re doing is easier in a dedicated course than it is in a course where you’re doing it in passing. I think that in some ways, it’s more likely to have constitutional problems with a biology teacher talking about creation than it is in a Bible course or a world religions course, where there’s going to be awareness of scrutiny with parents who are concerned or there’s the Hindu family in town and the kid’s in the Bible course. They’re going to keep an eye on it in a way that they might not keep an eye on the civics course or the social studies curriculum.
The other issue is an issue of training. Right now, we have integration of world religions into a lot of courses in social studies and world civ. A lot of these 8th and 9th grade courses that students take that are supposed to be their world civ curriculum, they spend usually two weeks on religion. That’s not that uncommon. So that means, I guess, that they spend a day on Buddhism. So in the 45 minutes that they’re doing Buddhism, they get to say stuff like there’s a religion; there was this guy named the Buddha; he sat under a tree; he achieved enlightenment and now people in Asia worship him or something.

So there’s no space to do that in that curriculum. But the fact of the matter is that it doesn’t get done that often because people don’t feel competent, and then when people do start teaching about it, often they don’t know enough about it to stay away from stereotypes and delivering incorrect information.

**MS. SCHAEFER RILEY:** If we’re trying to teach religious literacy so that people understand what they’re looking at when they go into a museum, I guess that’s purely a thought experiment. But then there’s this whole sort of political or a kind of activist element here. Are you hoping that people understand these concepts more deeply so that they can take up just causes like abolitionism or the temperance movement?

**DR. PROThERO:** Well, the way that I frame it in the book is more participation in democracy, so it’s more political and civic. I’m a professor, so I care about education. So for me I think it’s scandalous that you can graduate with a B.A. from Boston University and not know that Islam is a world religion or not know how Sunnis and Shiites differ, or not know that Ramadan is a Muslim holiday.

So the educational piece of it is an important part for me, and I think that if you’re going to pretend that high school education means that a kid is somehow educated or that a BA from an American university means that someone is fairly well-educated, then I think it’s a pretense if they don’t know anything at all about religion, and that has something to do with being an educated person. It also has something to do with citizenship, but I think the way I would go with that is mostly about the scandal of pretending you’re educated when you don’t have that kind of information.

I don’t think I’m interested in reviving biblically-based social movements. I don’t think that’s my goal. My goal is — it would be nice if students in American high schools knew
that the civil rights movement was a religious cause, which they often don’t because it’s often not described that way, which is ridiculous. It also creates contemporary misunderstandings.

There are a lot of misunderstandings about evangelicals in the United States today in part because of our lack of understanding of the civil rights movement and because of our lack of understanding of abolitionism. And for people to be told, evangelicals were at the forefront of the women’s rights movement, this is news to most Americans, certainly most New Yorkers.

STEVE LAGERFELD, *The Wilson Quarterly*: One question is about the social aspect of this, of religious practice that you talk about. I just wonder how new that really is, or how it really has changed— my scant knowledge suggests that that’s always been a very important dimension of religion. And historically, we have the lore about church suppers and courting the pastor and all sorts of things like that. And it was also a time when there were fewer competing social institutions, or institutions of any kind, for people to gather around and especially in rural America. So I wonder whether what we’re seeing is somehow qualitatively different or quantitatively different, or is it just more articulated and better marketed?

My second question has to do with this break that you described back in the 19th century with religion suddenly becoming all about morality and not about Jesus, not about the text, not about any of these other things. That’s a pretty broad statement, and I wonder what it really means, especially when I look now at the practice of morality in contemporary America, when you look at the surveys, which I can only dimly remember, of the behavior, for instance, the moral behavior of people, and you compare religious people with nonreligious people and there are surprising similarities, actually.

DR. PROTHERO: I don’t want to be misunderstood at all in saying that there’s a trend toward people being more moral. That’s not my point. The point is that there’s a trend toward people reducing religion to ethics. We’re talking about thinking about morality, not doing morality. It’s well-known that there are more activities with prostitutes at the Republican National Convention than at the Democratic National Convention.
So, no, it’s not about being more moral. It’s about thinking that religion is about ethics, which, to me, is very curious. I find ethics, frankly, a little bit boring. I think religion, to me, is exciting. Religious traditions make claims like, you are going to hell, but if you do something, you will go to heaven, or they make claims like, you can be omniscient. This is something I’ve had Buddhists tell me. It’s possible for a human being to be omniscient. That’s cool. That’s religion. Or you can achieve enlightenment; you can eliminate suffering from your life. These are amazingly interesting claims. They’re much more interesting to me than the claim that we shouldn’t kill our mothers because we’re angry at them. I don’t think Jesus came into the world to tell us to help old ladies across the street. That just seems preposterous to me. Nor did the Buddha, nor did anyone else. All societies have ethical systems. Religions incorporate ethical systems into them, but they’re not about that. That’s sort of tangential to what they are.

I just find it super-curious that the word “religion” and the word “Christian” are connected to the words “values” and “morals.” I just think it’s strange. I think it’s strange that religious people would be satisfied with understanding themselves purely in light of certain ethical positions that have political, public policy spin-offs.

And my thinking on this has just made me think about this historically. How could this possibly happen that someone would write a memoir about the Christian life where the Christian life is about not having premarital sex and not smoking pot? I don’t think Jesus came into the world to tell kids not to smoke pot. That wasn’t why he was dying on the cross.

And so I thought about when that happened, and I believe that that happened in the early 19th century with the takeover of American religion by evangelicals, and specifically, with the hope of Christian perfectionism and creating the kingdom of God on earth and creating a Christian civilization and that there was this great fervor and great excitement that that could happen. And there was this amazing outpouring of social reform in the 1830s and the 1840s and the 1850s, and it was amazing.

And various denominations of evangelical Protestants decided that they didn’t want to argue about being Methodists and Baptists and Lutherans and Episcopalians. They just wanted to do their thing, and so they agreed to table their religious — their theological
differences, their denominational differences, and they decided that what they were
doing was fundamentally about fill-in-the-blank, abolitionism, good causes.

That’s not the purpose of the tradition. Applied religion is sitting down and meditating
and trying to achieve enlightenment, or doing whatever it is that the Catholics tell you
you need to do in order to get salvation and the good, the big thing, like the big brass ring.

I think religions make these stupendous claims about the big brass ring, and I think that
when we confuse religion with morality, we’re narrowing religion down to something
that, to me, I find frankly boring. I find hard-core religious people who are making amazing
claims about the religious life to be fascinating, and I find people who claim that a religious
tradition is just about some moral principles — religions don’t disagree on moral
principles. This is part of why when you have ecumenical meetings, the only things that
come out of them are banal moral principles. It’s because religious people don’t agree on
anything, the religious. They only agree on accidentally religious things like morality.

MICHAEL BARONE, U.S. News & World Report: The 19th century movement toward
reform, my impression is that that comes largely out of one denominational tradition
from the New England, Yankees, Puritan, Congregationalist tradition —

DR. PROTHERO: All the great 19th century voluntary associations, all these groups were
nondenominational, and they were led sometimes by Methodists, sometimes by Baptists,
sometimes by Congregationalists. It was inside those nondenominational institutions that
Americans forged the contemporary understanding of what religious tolerance is all
about. It’s there that we get to the Eisenhower ’50s and the Protestant-Catholic-Jew thing
that we were talking about earlier, where we sort of agreed to disagree on the
differences, the religious differences, across these traditions. That was started by
Methodists and Baptists and Congregationalists, who said that in the 1830s.
And then we get to the 1950s, and we see the communists over there and we say, hey,
we’re not so far away, we Jews, Protestants and Catholics. And then after 9/11, we started
to try to incorporate Islam into that, so we have the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. That
whole thing, which is the sort of let’s agree to disagree, begins in that period, and it wasn’t
at all led by Congregationalists. They were just part of it.
JOHN SINIFF, USA Today: You talked about the distinction between candidates who invoke religion and candidates who you had said make a religious argument. And if you could elaborate a little bit on that distinction as you see it, and then do you think that the general public can distinguish between candidates who do one or the other?

DR. PROTHERO: I think the general public can’t distinguish because right now journalists don’t make the arguments, so politicians get to do the invocation. I would distinguish between an argument and invocation, and I think right now politicians get away with playing the R card or the G card, for religion or God, and this is part of the whole person-of-faith performance, the man-of-faith or the woman-of-faith performance, that it’s clear that Americans apparently want people of faith, at least as president. And so people have to pretend to be that.

I think a more educated public and maybe journalists who are especially educated on religion and have the desire to do this can draw out politicians and make them make the argument. And then to back up, I’d like to see us move from invocation to argument, in which case, some of the invocations that have no arguments would fall away, and the public space would not have as much fake religion in it and would have more real religion in it, so that issues where people are actually motivated by their religious convictions to take a position, that those religious reasons would be out there, but the bogus “I’m a religious person and therefore I feel this about this issue,” those would tend to go away. If we can move from playing the card to pushing people to actually make the arguments, then some of the arguments would actually become interesting conversations and some of the arguments would go away.

ROSS DOUTHAT, The Atlantic: I’m completely sympathetic to your argument that what’s interesting about religion goes way beyond morality, but I’m a little skeptical about the claim that all religions essentially agree on morality. And I think actually that’s part of the way that the debate gets pushed away from the really interesting tones. People say, well, all the religions basically agree.

To what extent do you think the issue of religious literacy, and the polls that we look at that show that people don’t know who David and Goliath are, are symptomatic of just a
broader cultural illiteracy? I think that we could sit and have this same conversation about Americans’ ignorance of their own political history. And that problem, I think, goes to a deeper question, which is just the extent of what we’re talking about in general is just a broad-based failure of public education almost, and we can have a class on the Bible and a class on world religion, but you’re still going to have people coming out of the public schools who are culturally illiterate. It isn’t clear that public education is a solution to the problem of religious illiteracy, given how thoroughly it’s failed to combat historical illiteracy.

DR. PRO�ERO: On religions not agreeing on morality, I agree with your point in the sense of obviously they don’t on whatever, polygamy and monogamy and things like that. I certainly do not want to be put in the camp of religions agree. A lot of my writing about religion is against this idea that all the religions are the same, and one of the main thrusts of my own work is to say they’re not, they’re different. They attend to different problems, and they come up with different solutions to very different problems. They’re not climbing the same mountain. If they’re climbing mountains, they’re climbing different mountains, and some are surfing and some are climbing mountains. So I think the religions are very different.

I think the other challenge is more of a devastating criticism, that if the public school system is a failure and if it’s not teaching students the things that are now in the curriculum, why is adding Bible and world religions to this failed system going to actually produce anything? And I think that’s an important question, and I guess I don’t really know how to answer that.

I think that you can hope for some kind of wide-scale restructuring of our public education system. It’s pretty clear that American kids, when they’re teeny, are smarter than kids, or more knowledgeable than kids, around other parts of the world, and then they get into our public school system, the K-12, and they become stupider. They become really bad, and then they get into college and they catch up because American higher education is great compared to the rest of the world. So it’s pretty clear that there is a serious failure in that relatively large space between K and 12, and I guess that’s a bigger question that I cannot answer today at least.
CLAIRE BRINBERG, CNN: My question is just more practical about how to design a curriculum to properly get at all these issues, and whether you thought there should be a national curriculum because considering there are all these regional differences and interpretations, whether it should be a national thing, if so, how that would come together. And considering how much ignorance there is of basic religious precepts, how do you train teachers to teach the stuff? Who should be teaching it? Clearly, they’re going to be getting a lot of attacks from the parents, so you really kind of need to be all buttoned up on what you’re teaching and who’s teaching it.

DR. PROTHERO: It’s not clear to me there will be a lot of attacks. I think the perception of controversy here is much greater than the reality of controversy. I mentioned to someone that I think the figure is current school districts, one out of eight or so, have Bible classes already.

People should be trained. I think if you’re not trained to teach a world religions course, you shouldn’t teach it, that we don’t want untrained people to do it. This is actually one of the logistical problems, there aren’t a lot of places where training can go forward for high school students. There are some programs in California and in Massachusetts, some other states, where this training is happening. I think that that’s a really important part.

Whether there should be a national curriculum, I think the answer is no. This makes this project hard because it’s basically a school district by school district proposition, rather than convincing some people at a national level to do something about it.

KATHY SLOBOGIN, CNN: Religious literacy in terms of understanding world religions, to me, that’s inarguable. It makes you a better citizen, more intellectually engaged, but in the sense of being doctrinally well-versed in your own religion – is religious literacy necessarily a good thing? If we had a revival of religious literacy, would we have a revival of intolerance and doctrinal disputes and sectarianism, and would religion become so preoccupied with these disputes that they would no longer forge alliances to make the world a better place? After all, if you look at today, one of the most religiously literate groups is Christian fundamentalists. Is that where we want to go?
DR. PROTHERO: There is a narrative arc in my story about tolerance and how tolerance is the bugaboo of religious literacy. I think I see that from the beginning all the way through. The key moments in my story have to do with moments when Americans opt for interdenominational or interreligious or interfaith cooperation and decide to forget things, and that decision to forget things is fateful, but it’s also productive in some ways. I think the value of tolerance in America is really underestimated when it comes to religion. If you look at young evangelicals, they’re extraordinarily tolerant and, in fact, tolerant to a point where all the evangelicals are worried about them. It’s a very deeply held American value, and I’m not really that worried about it going away.

Some people believe that the more you know about other religions, the more you’re likely to get along with them. I don’t actually necessarily believe that’s true. I think sometimes we kill people because we misunderstand them, and sometimes we kill them because we understand them, because we hate them, and we hate them because we know something about them. Some of my friends, some of my colleagues in religious studies have this feeling that studying the world’s religions, with it comes this ethical insight; with it comes understanding and empathy, and it can, it can. That can happen, but I don’t think it’s necessary to the fact of learning about other religious traditions.

MR. WOOLDRIDGE: Is it true that fundamentalists and evangelicals actually know more about religion than other people?

DR. PROTHERO: Yes. Fundamentalists actually do care about the intellectual side of their tradition and fundamentalism actually has an intellectual lineage that’s fairly sophisticated. But in terms of religious literacy, one of the arguments I do make is that the evangelicals don’t know as much about the Bible as you think and it would be great to know how much more evangelicals know about the Bible than others. But some of the data that I was able to find, and most of it’s not aggregated across religion or by evangelicals versus mainliners, but in the one survey that I did find that was intriguing, evangelicals only did moderately better on Bible questions than non-evangelical Christians, in some cases, worse than Jews on some questions about the New Testament, and in all cases, worse than private school students.
ANDREA STONE, USA Today: I think sometimes a problem is not biblical literacy but literalism and that too many people take every word literally. And I think just as important, more important from my perspective, is that people should know religious history and they don’t. If they did, maybe we wouldn’t be in Iraq, or if we understood what’s going on in the Middle East, if we understood the history, which of course is based on the religion.

DR. PROTHERO: I think that religious history is part of religious literacy, so part of knowing about a tradition is knowing when it started, or the key developments, that there are three big schools inside Buddhism and how they rift on each other and how they developed out of each other, the fact that the Protestants came after the Catholics, things like that would be good to know.

LINDA FELDMANN, The Christian Science Monitor: I wanted to come back to the Mitt Romney question. You talk about how tolerant, religiously tolerant, we are as a country, and yet surveys show that a substantial portion of the electorate is not willing to vote for a Mormon. Where do you see this resistance coming from? Is it illiteracy or is it that people, the resisters to him, have a little bit of knowledge about Mormonism and it’s not good?

DR. PROTHERO: Yes, this may be a case where the more we know as a country about Mormonism, the less tolerant we will become of it. I think it’s a theological and ideological battle between evangelicals and Mormons on the issue. And as many of you know, the Southern Baptist Convention was saying that Mormonism isn’t Christianity, it’s fake Christianity. And it’s an important form of fake Christianity if it’s fake because it’s growing so quickly and it’s global and it’s however many million people worldwide. And now there are more Mormons outside the U.S. than in the U.S.

This is not an inconsiderable religious tradition, and so there’s a contest over souls in America, right, that is implicated in this election and so that’s the problem. Americans are religiously tolerant, yes, but there’s concern about Mormonism, both from the more liberal side of American Christianity and from the conservative side. The liberal side is
worried that he’s just too religious and then the evangelicals are worried that he’s not the right kind of religious, so he’s in a bind there.

Let me just say one last thing about religious literacy, which is that for me the goal for high school kids or grownups isn’t to memorize the 150 terms at the back of my book, wherever they are. To me, it’s knowing enough to know that when you get to a point that has to do with religion, that you don’t know. I think that’s true of literacy of all kinds of sorts, that I think one of the concerns I have about our contemporary American politics, especially international and foreign affairs, as we get to places where we don’t know that we’re ignorant, we don’t know that we don’t know stuff. I think that was what was going on when we went into Iraq.

And so one of the goals for me for religious literacy isn’t so much of turning every high school kid into a mini-Ph.D. in religious studies. It’s to teach them enough about religion so that they have, maybe just in the back of their brains, like the Odyssey is in the back of David’s brain, some understanding of the world’s religions, so when they get to a point where it might matter, they’ll realize, gosh, I don’t really know what I should know about this and I’m going to go find out about it. That, to me, would be a goal worth reaching on this score.

**MR. CROMARTIE:** Join me in thanking Steve for a wonderful presentation.