

Stemming rampant religious illiteracy

Heidi Schlumpf | Mar. 6, 2010



(Pat Marrin)

Jesus was born in Jerusalem. Moses parted the Red Sea to let the Christians through. "God helps those who help themselves" is in the Bible.

These are just a few of the obviously incorrect answers I heard from students in last semester's Introduction to Religion class.

It gets worse.

In a religious literacy pre-test I gave to my students (most of whom are adults and nontraditional undergraduates), less than half could name all four Gospels; about the same number got at least five of the Ten Commandments. Only a handful knew that pop star Madonna was named after the mother of Jesus.

They knew even less about non-Christian faiths. One-third could name the Quran as the Muslim scripture, a few guessed that the religion yoga is associated with is Hinduism, and not one student could name any of Buddhism's Four Noble Truths.

Sadly, my students' answers are representative of rampant religious illiteracy among college and university students. And it's not much better at Catholic institutions. Anecdotal evidence from colleagues who teach in Catholic higher education suggests that graduates of Catholic high schools also are fairly ignorant in the nuts and bolts of their faith, not to mention other religions.

The implications are more serious than a "D" in my class. How can Americans evaluate U.S. foreign policy if they don't know the difference between a Sunni and a Shiite Muslim? How can citizens understand biblical references when cited by political leaders? How can Christians be so sure they have "the truth" if they aren't even aware what other religions believe?

They can't.

What's surprising is that often it's the most religiously active folks who know the least, according to Stephen Prothero, chair of the religion department at Boston University and author of *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know -- And Doesn't* (HarperCollins, 2007).

That paradox is this: Americans are both deeply religious and profoundly ignorant about religion, he writes. They are Protestants who can't name the four Gospels, Catholics who can't name the seven sacraments, and Jews who can't name the five books of Moses. ... One of the most religious countries on earth is also a nation of religious illiterates.

Prothero blames the emphasis on emotionalism that began during the Second Great Awakening, which also provided the roots of evangelical Protestantism. In other words, if Jesus is my best friend, it doesn't matter that I can't name his 12 apostles.

Prothero's solution is to add mandatory public school classes in religion to those in reading, writing and arithmetic. To maintain separation of church and state, such classes should focus on spreading knowledge, not inculcating values, he says.

I don't disagree that some formal education about religious matters would be a good start. But I refuse to jump on the blame bandwagon that berates religious educators of the past generation for not forcing Catholic teens in the 1970s, '80s and '90s to regurgitate the Baltimore Catechism. Memorizing the books of the Bible is not the only way to become religiously literate.

Rather than pump students with religious facts, I'd rather see educators, parents and churches teach students how to think critically about religion -- and in general.

I believe that religious illiteracy is indicative of a wider lack of such critical-thinking skills among college and university students -- and the American public as a whole. If Bill O'Reilly ranting on FOX News and Ed Schultz raving on MSNBC is what passes for critical discourse on the most important issues of the day, we can hardly be shocked that most Americans cannot maintain an intelligent conversation about fine theological points.

In my introductory religion class, students were required to know the Four Noble Truths, the Five Pillars of Islam and the seven Catholic sacraments. But they also had to put religious history into context; compare and contrast how religions answer basic human questions about evil, suffering and death; and examine how religious institutions deal with contemporary issues such as the role of women and global warming. Most importantly, in this journalist's opinion, they were required to dissect and evaluate how the media covers religion.

They did so, for the most part, rather enthusiastically. For their theological ignorance was matched, if not exceeded, by a keen interest and desire to learn more about religion. I didn't have to convince them of its relevance, as many of them wrote in required journal entries about the importance of their faith, uninformed as it was. Their belief had sustained them through children's illnesses, the deaths of loved ones, even a relative's abuse by a Catholic priest.

Not surprisingly, many of them taught me a thing or two.

A die-hard Baptist children's minister proved that closed minds can be opened. A pious Filipina woman showed me that not everyone who is given a second chance will take advantage of you. And a number of them reminded me that idealism does not have to end in your 20s.

It was Ben Franklin who said, "God helps those who help themselves." But I do think the Divine looks

favorably on students who work hard to increase their religious literacy. This professor does.

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