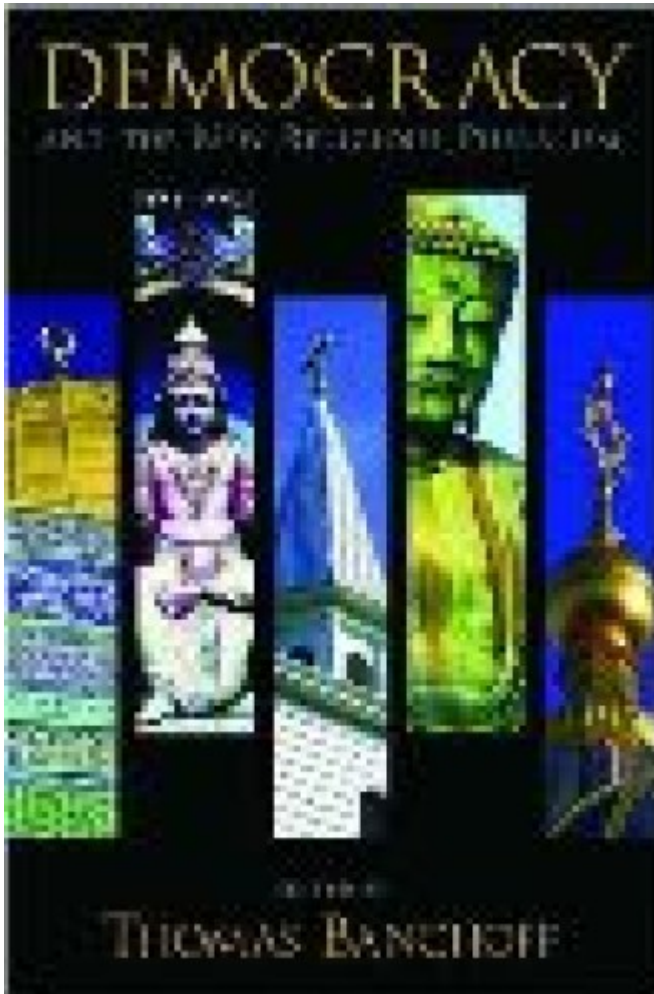


# Dumbed down

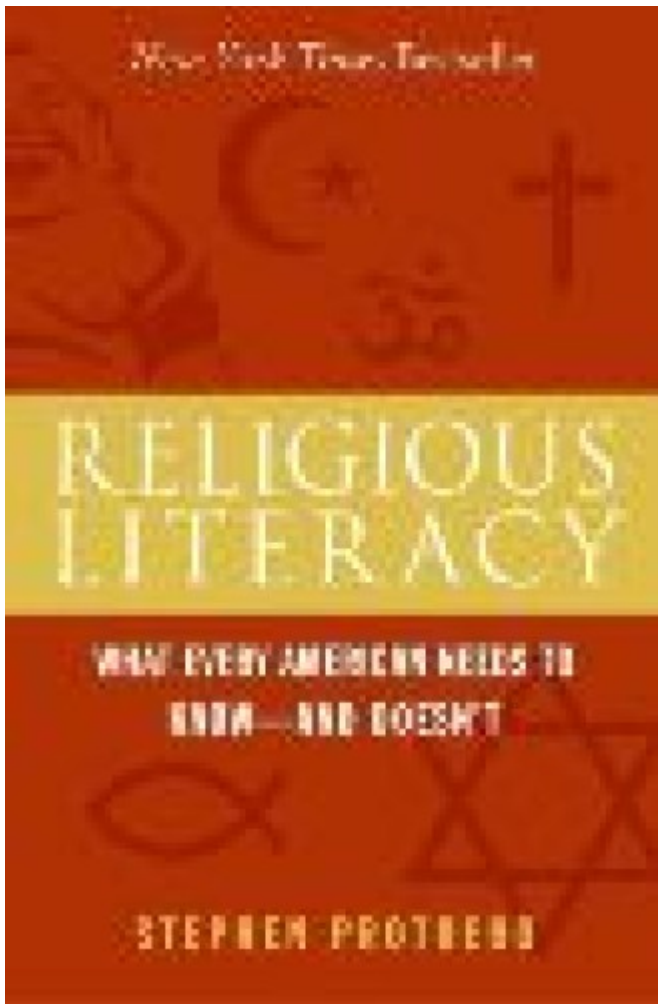
By [Timothy Mark Renick](#) in the [September 4, 2007](#) issue

## In Review



## Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism

Thomas Banchoff, ed.  
Oxford University Press



## **Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't**

Stephen Prothero  
HarperSanFrancisco

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 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.”

Religion 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 sin and to liberate themselves from monarchs—both to save their souls and to save the republic.”

The story Prothero tells of a subsequent fall from this Eden of religious literacy is shaped equally by secularists and evangelicals. True, the Supreme Court has sought, at times, to curb Protestant-dominated religious education in the name of protecting the interests of religious minorities: Catholics, Jews and, more recently, Buddhists, Muslims and Native Americans. (Prothero, however, makes very clear that the Supreme Court has consistently upheld the constitutionality of teaching about religion in public settings, including public schools.) True, mainline Protestants often have responded to religious pluralism by stressing the universality of God and by downplaying the specific denominational and even Christian beliefs they once held to be central. (Most readers will be familiar with this aspect of Prothero’s story, in part because it has been told repeatedly by the religious right in its indictment of the alleged secularization of America.) But the other culprit, Prothero tells us, has been evangelical Christianity itself. In stressing piety over knowledge and a personal relationship with Christ over denominational affiliation, evangelicals have let factual knowledge about Christian history, practice and doctrine and even about the Bible play a secondary role in the lives of the faithful.

This tendency has been accelerated in recent years when, in identifying themselves with a conservative political agenda, evangelicals have too simplistically equated Christianity with opposition to abortion, gay rights and other liberal social causes. The result of these various forces has been to devalue religious knowledge—and

perhaps literacy in general. Americans have been left ill equipped to meet their civic responsibilities in the modern world.

Prothero's call for greater and more systematic education about religion is compelling. His volume is filled with fascinating facts and observations, and features a useful 100-page glossary of key religious terms with lucid (and sometimes quirky) definitions. (We not only learn a bit about Yom Kippur, we also learn that, as a Jew, Sandy Koufax refused to pitch in the 1965 World Series game that fell on that day.)

Yet Prothero's use of America's past as an exemplar of happier times is curious. I do not doubt that Americans in 1800 knew more facts about Christianity than they do today. But did they really use this knowledge in the self-critical fashion that Prothero prizes? Was their religious grounding more often than not a justification for a civic intransigence? Did most Christians in 1850, for instance, use their knowledge of Genesis, Leviticus and Philemon circumspectly to judge competing positions on the issue of slavery? Given the oftentimes crude and superficial public uses of the Bible to support the institution of slavery at the time, one might conclude that there is less of a divide between historical and contemporary uses of Christianity than Prothero would have us believe.

Similarly, while a hundred years ago most Christians did indeed know that Sodom and Gomorrah were not husband and wife, they also "knew" that the story of the two cities clearly represented God's deserved and unqualified judgment on all homosexuals. Few paused to ask about alternate interpretations of the story, including some imbedded in the Bible itself. Fewer still were open to serious civic dialogue on the topic of homosexuality.

Obviously, there is a difference between knowledge about religion and religious belief. Prothero (rightly, I think) seeks to strengthen the former in our contemporary discourse, but he harkens back to a time characterized by the latter. The crucial issue is not merely *what* religious materials are learned but *how* they are learned—and how the resulting knowledge is employed. This makes 18th- and 19th-century America an odd—and potentially misleading—example to offer as the period of America's Eden.

The choice becomes even odder when we add the obvious fact that Americans of the 18th and 19th century had, on average, significantly less knowledge of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and most other religious traditions than do Americans today.

When it comes to knowledge of Islam in the American populace, the past five years, with Muslims in the news on a daily basis, are as good as it has ever been. Some statistics suggest that the same may be true of Americans' knowledge of Hinduism and Buddhism. Although our current state of religious literacy is indeed woeful, when it comes to popular knowledge of world religions, *these* may be the good old days.

It is in examining such claims—and the practical implications of Prothero's proposal in general—that Banchoff's volume, *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*, becomes so helpful. Banchoff asks some of the most influential scholars in the field of society and religion—Peter Berger, Diana Eck, Robert Wuthnow, Martha Nussbaum, Stanley Hauerwas and ten others—to examine public challenges posed by, and democratic responses to, religious diversity.

Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow confirms that the American population's direct exposure to a range of world religious traditions, while still modest, is growing. On the basis of his multiyear study of almost 3,000 Americans, Wuthnow reports: "If everyone who claims to have had at least 'a little' contact is considered, then almost half of the public (48 percent) has had some exposure to Muslims, and about a third (35 percent and 34 percent respectively) has had some exposure to Hindus and Buddhists." Over two-thirds of these rated their exposure to people of other faiths as positive. In addition, Wuthnow found that 10 percent of American churchgoers had participated in some sort of church-organized program or activity with Muslims, Hindus or Buddhists in the previous year.

These types of experiences seem to be impacting public opinion about non-Christian religions. While 47 percent of Americans characterize Islam as "fanatical," 40 percent say it is "peace-loving," a characterization that even more people employ when they are asked to assess Hinduism (53 percent) and Buddhism (63 percent). As Wuthnow points out, such statistics have a dark side to them: significant numbers of Americans see each of these three religions as "violent," "fanatical" and "backward." But the fact that during a survey period that began in September 2002, significant numbers of Americans saw Islam as tolerant and peace-loving may indicate that at least some religious education is not only taking place but actually taking hold. And Americans say they want more. When Wuthnow asked, "Do you think people should learn more about religions other than their own?" 83 percent responded that they should.

Other essays in the Banchoff volume serve as a caution: familiarity with world religions is no panacea for the social challenges we face. Emory sociologist Sam Cherribi writes about the perceived “Muslim problem” in Western European nations. In France, Spain, Britain and the Netherlands, immigrant Muslim populations are more established than those in the U.S. By some indicators, the citizens of these nations have had significantly more exposure to Muslims on a day-to-day basis and have better knowledge of the facts of Islam than do their American counterparts. Indeed, classes in world religions are not uncommon for school-age students in several European nations. But by several indicators, extremism and intolerance among the populations of Western Europe are on the rise, with bombings in Madrid and London, battles over Muslim garb in public schools in France, and the 2004 murder of a Dutch filmmaker who produced a film critical of the treatment of women in Islam. Cherribi’s survey of the opinions about Islam held by European members of parliament is both revealing and sobering. At times, familiarity does seem to breed contempt.

Sociologist Peter Berger suggests that despite the conflict it causes at times, such familiarity must be our goal as a society. According to Berger, modernity does not lead, as some scholars have predicted, to the decline of religion. What modernity—mass migration and travel, urbanization, new technologies of communication—inevitably leads to is religious pluralism, and, as we are seeing, pluralism has profound implications for societies. All societies depend on a shared body of knowledge, behaviors and expectations for their smooth functioning. With pluralism, “religion loses its taken-for-granted status in consciousness. No society can function without some ideas and behavior patterns being taken for granted.” For Berger, the challenge that pluralism poses is that people come in contact with individuals who do not believe and behave in ways that are familiar or predictable. Religion, once the birthright of our being born into a particular culture, has now become another difference that we must navigate.

Clearly, the resulting confusion is part of what has prompted both of these books. The religious literacy that these authors call for is not a mere accumulation of facts for curiosity’s sake; it is not akin to knowing the names of the U.S. presidents. Religious literacy is what provides us with a basic orientation for knowing who we are as a society—what we think, what we believe and how we might act. Without this knowledge, our expectations are continually thwarted by our fellow citizens, and our policies prove misdirected and misconceived. As Martha Nussbaum writes, “Although knowledge does not guarantee good behavior, ignorance is a virtual



guarantee of bad behavior.” We’ve given ignorance and apathy a fair chance; perhaps it’s time to try a different approach.