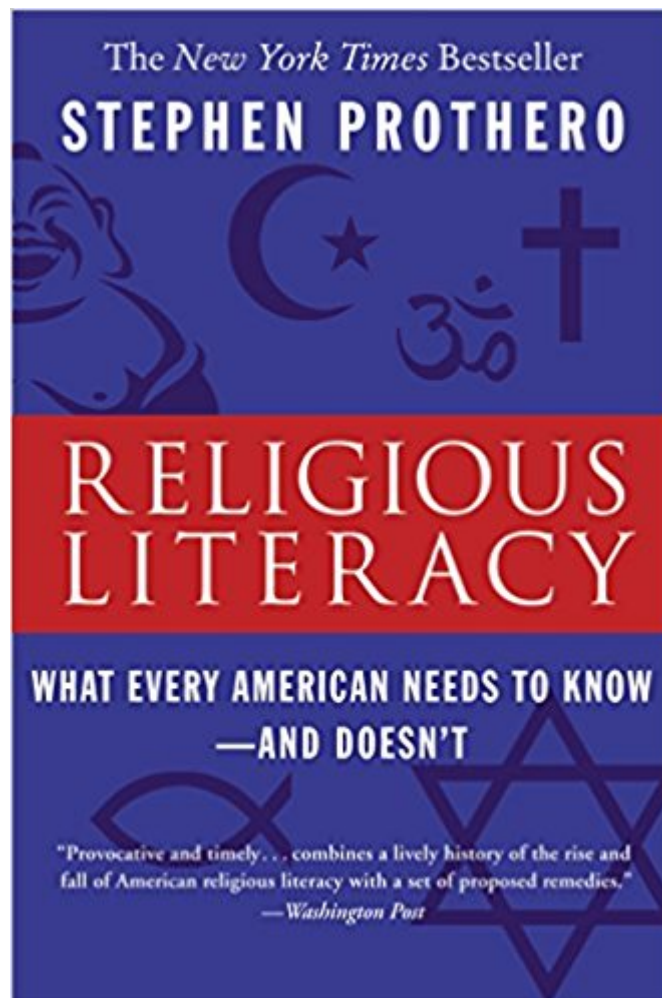




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Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs To Know--And Doesn't



Synopsis

The United States is one of the most religious places on earth, but it is also a nation of shocking religious illiteracy. Only 10 percent of American teenagers can name all five major world religions and 15 percent cannot name any. Nearly two-thirds of Americans believe that the Bible holds the answers to all or most of life's basic questions, yet only half of American adults can name even one of the four gospels and most Americans cannot name the first book of the Bible. Despite this lack of basic knowledge, politicians and pundits continue to root public policy arguments in religious rhetoric whose meanings are missed or misinterpreted by the vast majority of Americans. "We have a major civic problem on our hands," says religion scholar Stephen Prothero. He makes the provocative case that to remedy this problem, we should return to teaching religion in the public schools. Alongside "reading, writing, and arithmetic," religion ought to become the "Fourth R" of American education. Many believe that America's descent into religious illiteracy was the doing of activist judges and secularists hell-bent on banishing religion from the public square. Prothero reveals that this is a profound misunderstanding. "In one of the great ironies of American religious history," Prothero writes, "it was the nation's most fervent people of faith who steered us down the road to religious illiteracy. Just how that happened is one of the stories this book has to tell." Prothero avoids the trap of religious relativism by addressing both the core tenets of the world's major religions and the real differences among them. Complete with a dictionary of the key beliefs, characters, and stories of Christianity, Islam, and other religions, *Religious Literacy* reveals what every American needs to know in order to confront the domestic and foreign challenges facing this country today.

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Customer Reviews

I saw this book discussed on "The Jon Stewart Show" and thought the premise was interesting. I share in the author's concern about the increasing religious illiteracy of our nation. It doesn't mean that you have to be religious to appreciate the value that religion has contributed historically and culturally. As the author states, you just can't be an educated citizen without knowledge of religion, especially in times like these when religion is infusing our politics be it from the Religious Right or from dangerous misconceptions that we have about Islam. In order to be a good "world citizen," you really do need to know about religion. That is the author's premise in a nutshell. Now, having said this, the book is not exactly what I expected. It is divided into three parts, outlining what we used to know about religion starting from Colonial times, how we gradually inadvertently became increasingly illiterate about the subject, and the author's ideal proposal of how to get back our knowledge, which is a very ambitious proposal indeed. I enjoyed the first chapter or so where he discusses the extent to which Americans are illiterate about religion by citing startling statistical examples of misconceptions in the general public and humorous mistakes that students make in identifying Bible characters and stories. I also enjoyed the mini quiz that you can take to see just how illiterate you are. However, with a title like the one this book has, I expected to be told outright just what it is we need to know about religion as is relevant to our times. I did not find this in the book except for the last chapter which is a dictionary of religious terms that the author believes are essential for us to know in our modern world.

Looking over the online reviews of Stephen Prothero's superb book, "Religious Literacy," it's obvious that many readers were drawn to the book as a primer on world religions -- which Stephen could have written. He's chair of the religion department at Boston University and well qualified to write such a book. But, in fact, there are a whole lot of terrific overviews. Search for books by Huston Smith or (even though Stephen Prothero often takes issue with themes in her works) Karen Armstrong or find a terrific book like "Talking With God: Portrait of a World at Prayer" -- or "How to Be a Perfect Stranger" or "The Atlas of Religion." The list goes on and on of wonderful books that provide precisely that kind of overview experience. It's true that scholars debate among themselves on details -- Stephen and Karen would disagree on some points, for instance. But this field is well planted. What we've got here is a 150-page overview of how Americans reached this point of almost defiant ignorance about religion -- not anyone reading this review, I'm sure. You're reading this

review because you know how important it is for us all to understand the impact of faith on the world -- for good and sometimes, tragically, for ill. Then, Prothero adds a terrific 85-page "Dictionary of Religious Literacy," which is perfect for parents, students, teachers, clergy -- and professionals in almost any field who meet the public regularly. This is the kind of book you want to have handy on your shelf to pull down and flip to this concise Dictionary section. Then, he's got his widely shared quiz on religion, suggestions for further reading -- and a whole lot of "Notes" that can guide you deeper into exploring the many issues he raises.

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