

Pray Tell

WHAT AMERICANS DON'T KNOW ABOUT RELIGION AND WHY THEY NEED TO LEARN IT BY TAYLOR McNEIL

STEPHEN PROTHERO remembers sitting in front of a television in 1993 watching the standoff between federal agents and the obscure apocalyptic sect Branch Davidians, in Waco, Texas. "I was thinking that I knew things that the FBI didn't know," he recalls. "I'm a religious studies person and I've read the Bible and I know something about American religion. I felt I knew it was going to blow up and there was going to be a fire and everyone would die." Prothero, now chairman of the religion department in the College of Arts and Sciences, was right. Seventy-five people died in the firestorm that was ignited as the FBI swept toward the building.

What Prothero took from that experience — that an understanding of religion is essential and that most people don't have even a basic knowledge of it — started gnawing at him. Later, after the 9/11 attacks, he heard dozens of simplistic discussions of Islam, and most of them drove home this point. Again, in recent political battles, where religion seemed to play a more prominent role than it had in other elections, he found few people who really understood what was going on.

That widespread absence of basic religious knowledge is

what drove Prothero to write his latest book, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know — and Doesn't*. It's part argument, part history, but largely primer, founded on the conviction that a shared understanding of religion is required of all responsible participants in our democracy. "The question is: what religious information do we need to be informed citizens?" he says.

Each year, Prothero gives his students what he calls a religious literacy quiz (see page 43 to take the quiz). And despite the presumed interest in religion of the 200-plus kids who sign up for his elective Death and Immortality class, test scores are reliably abysmal. Prothero is flipping through the most recent batch of quizzes in his office in early February, reading off the results: 45, 0, 28, 28, 8, 6, 46, 56. "This is out of 100," he reports. "Virtually everyone's failed: evangelicals, Catholics, mainline Protestants, everyone."

How does it happen that so many people who are supposed to be educated lack even the most basic knowledge of religion? It's easy, Prothero says. Religion is not taught in schools — and no, that's not because of the 1960s Supreme Court ruling on religion in the classroom. Just

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— Stephen Prothero

as surprising, it's not taught in churches or synagogues much, either. The result is religious illiteracy, and the consequences can be dire. "There's something at stake here," he says.

"Religious illiteracy makes it difficult for Americans to make sense of a world in which people kill and make peace in the name of Christ or Allah," Prothero writes. "Today, when religion is implicated in virtually every issue of national and international import . . . U.S. citizens need to know something about religion, too. In an era when the public square is, rightly or wrongly, awash in religious reasons, can one really participate fully in public life without knowing something about Christianity and the world's religions?" Prothero thinks not. The result, he says, is that Americans are "too easily swayed by demagogues on the left or on the right."

THE LONG FALL

The decline of religious literacy has been long in the making, according to Prothero. "Some people on the religious right think that the Warren Court in the early 1960s passed these rules against school prayer and kicked God out of the public schools, and therefore the students don't learn any religion," he says. "But that explanation was about 100 years too late."

In fact, he says, religion as a subject was mostly pushed out of public schools in the mid-1800s, largely a result of what he calls "the Bible wars." In that dispute, Protestants, who controlled the public school systems, insisted on using their version of the Bible in class. Catholics had their own translation, the Douay-Rheims, and conflict was intense between the two sides, especially in areas with large Catholic populations, such as Philadelphia, New York, and Cincinnati. In the end, both sides decided it would be better to have no Bible in the classroom rather than the "wrong" Bible. Brief Bible passages lived on in textbooks like the McGuffey readers, but the elimination of religious influence in public

A stack of seven religious books is shown against a dark blue background with a white spiderweb pattern. The books are stacked from top to bottom: New Testament (green cover), Quran (dark purple cover), Talmud (red cover), Avesta (black cover), Bhagavad Gita (teal cover), Holy Bible (yellow cover), and Tao Te Ching (dark blue cover). The books are slightly worn and have a soft shadow cast on the surface below them.

New Testament

QURAN

Talmud

AVESTA

BHAGAVAD GITA

HOLY BIBLE

TAO TE CHING

schools was, he reports, mostly complete by the early 1900s.

Some school districts continued to use the Bible devotionally, however, until 1963, when the Supreme Court outlawed school prayer and devotional readings. And while the court did not ban discussion of religion, Prothero points out, most people seemed unaware of that. "It wasn't secular people who hated religion who undercut education about religion," he says. "It was religious people who wanted the education tailored for their particular group. That precipitated a crisis and made us throw out education about religion altogether." Nowadays, he says, religion might be mentioned in world history classes, but only in passing.

Even churches and other religious institutions fail to adequately teach the Bible and other scriptures, says Prothero. He points to his students who failed the religious literacy quiz. "They didn't learn anything in church — that's a huge part of it," he says. "They probably go to church as much as the general population, but they're not learning anything there." Young Catholics go to Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) classes, where they "learn they should be nice to their fellow man and might learn to list the seven sacraments," he says. But they don't know Bible stories.

"Protestants used to be well versed in the Bible," says Prothero. "To be a Christian wasn't just to have Jesus in your heart, it was to know what Jesus said. Nowadays it's about having a relationship with Jesus — it doesn't matter what he said. Or it matters, but the fact that you don't know doesn't matter. One could imagine it shameful to be a Christian and not know anything about Christianity. But we're not ashamed by that."

REPAIRING THE DAMAGE

What's the solution? Prothero would like to see all public schools offer a Bible course and a world religions course. That suggestion draws flak from some of his colleagues, who

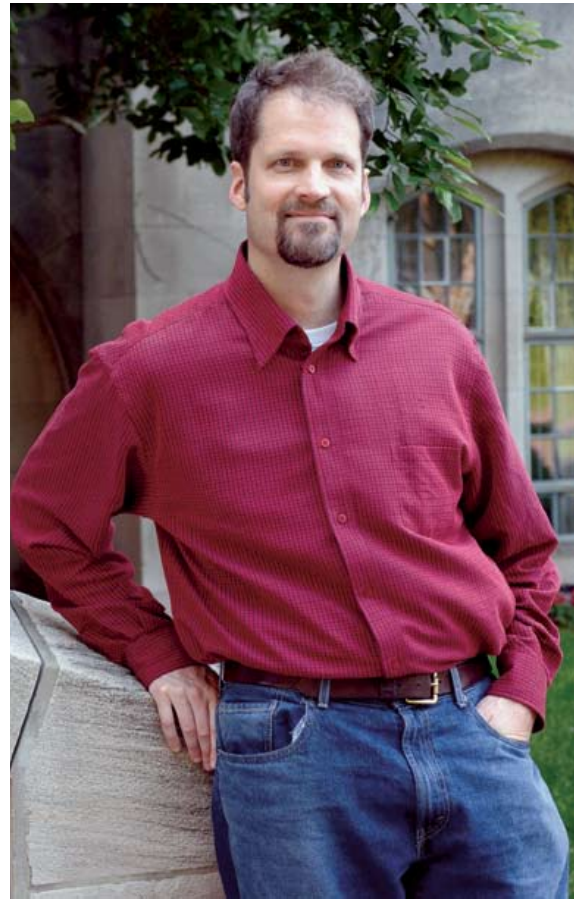
advocate for religious scriptures courses instead of focusing on the Bible. Prothero counters with his civic argument: What religious information do we need to be good citizens? "To me it's very clearly the Bible that's the scripture of American politics," he says. He turns to the *Congressional Record* for proof. "People in Congress are not quoting the Bhagavad Gita or the Quran," he says. "They are quoting the Bible."

Learning about world religions is equally important, according to Prothero. Christianity should comprise about a fifth of that course, and students should learn about Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and other major religions. "They need to know the difference between a Sunni and Shiite," he says. "How else are we going to know what to do with the situation in Iraq if we do not know the difference between Sunnis and Shiites? When people are talking about civil war and sectarian violence, they are talking about two very specific communities that are killing one another. We need to know that."

Why not raise the generation now, Prothero asks rhetorically, "that has some very basic familiarity with the key terms, the key symbols, the key beliefs and practices of these five or seven great religions of the world?"

He acknowledges that talk about teaching religion in public schools makes many people nervous, often because many teachers think — incorrectly — that the Supreme Court doesn't let them. According to Prothero, teachers have an absolute right to talk about religion, but not to proselytize, just as those teaching about American politics do not bring their own preferences into the classroom.

Prothero thinks religious studies should be required at universities, including BU. "It's a very simple theory: someone walking out into the world in 2007 or 2008 with a bachelor's degree who can't tell you the difference between a Sunni and Shiite, and can't tell you what the Good Samaritan is, is not an educated person," he



Stephen Prothero, whose worst nightmare keeps him worrying that I'm going to be on a TV show, and they'll give me the religious literacy quiz from the book and I won't know everything." Photo by Vernon Doucette

says. "I also don't think they are prepared for citizenship the way they should be."

For those who have had their formal schooling already, Prothero suggests holding group discussions, similar to book clubs, of religious topics. And there's always his Dictionary of Religious Literacy, which fills the final third of his book and consists of definitions of terms and concepts, from atonement and Congregationalism to nirvana and the Torah. It's not exhaustive, but instead focuses "on what U.S. citizens need to make sense of their country and the world," he writes.

Prothero keeps bringing his argument back to the classroom. "How can we talk about whether the Hindu view of the afterlife makes any sense or whether it's better than the Christian view if none of us knows anything about it?" he asks. "I want the classroom to be a space of conversation, but we can't have conversation without basic knowledge."

What Is Your Religious Literacy?



1. Name the four Gospels. List as many as you can.
2. Name a sacred text of Hinduism.
3. What is the name of the holy book of Islam?
4. Where according to the Bible was Jesus born?
5. President George W. Bush spoke in his first inaugural address of the Jericho road. What Bible story was he invoking?
6. What are the first five books of the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Old Testament?
7. What is the Golden Rule?
8. "God helps those who help themselves": Is this in the Bible? If so, where?
9. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God": Does this appear in the Bible? If so, where?
10. Name the Ten Commandments. List as many as you can.
11. Name the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism.
12. What are the seven sacraments of Catholicism? List as many as you can.
13. The First Amendment says two things about religion, each in its own clause. What are the two religion clauses of the First Amendment?
14. What is Ramadan? In what religion is it celebrated?
15. Match the Bible characters with the stories in which they appear. Draw a line from one to the other. Hint: Some characters may be matched with more than one story or vice versa.

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|--------------|------------------------|
| Adam and Eve | Exodus |
| Paul | Binding of Isaac |
| Moses | Olive Branch |
| Noah | Garden of Eden |
| Jesus | Parting of the Red Sea |
| Abraham | Road to Damascus |
| Serpent | Garden of Gethsemane |

ANSWERS (AND GRADING)

To figure out how you did, add up your total points then multiply by two to get your score on a standard 100-point scale. An A is 90 points or higher. B is 80-89. C is 70-79. A passing grade is 60 points or more. Add up your points and double them to determine your score.

1. (1 point each) Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John
2. (1 point) There are many possibilities here. They include: the Vedas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas, Upanishads, Puranas, Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Yoga Sutras, Laws of Manu, and the Kama Sutra
3. (1 point) Quran
4. (1 point) Bethlehem
5. (1 point) The Good Samaritan
6. (1 point each) Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
7. (1 point) "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matthew 7:12), or a similar sentiment from Rabbi Hillel or Confucius. ("Love your neighbor as yourself" is *not* the Golden Rule.)
8. (2 points) No, this is not in the Bible. In fact, it is contradicted in Proverbs 28:26: "He who trusts in himself is a fool." The words are Ben Franklin's.

9. (2 points) Yes, in the Beatitudes of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3).
10. (10 points) The Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish versions of the Ten Commandments differ. Give yourself credit for any ten of the following twelve commandments, each of which appears in at least one of those three versions:
 1. I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage.
 2. You shall have no other gods besides Me.
 3. You shall not make yourself a graven image.
 4. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
 5. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.
 6. Honor your father and your mother.
 7. You shall not kill/murder.
 8. You shall not commit adultery.
 9. You shall not steal.
 10. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
 11. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.
 12. You shall not covet your neighbor's goods.

11. (4 points) Life is suffering. Suffering has an origin. Suffering can be overcome (nirvana). The path to overcoming suffering is the Noble Eightfold Path.

12. (7 points) Baptism, Eucharist/Mass, Reconciliation/Confession/Penance, Confirmation, Marriage, Holy Orders, Anointing of the Sick/Last Rites

13. (1 point each) "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The words before the comma are referred to as the establishment clause; the words that follow constitute the free exercise clause.

14. (2 points) Ramadan is a Muslim holiday characterized by a month of fasting.

15. (7 points)

Adam and Eve	Exodus
Paul	Binding of Isaac
Moses	Olive Branch
Noah	Garden of Eden
Jesus	Parting of the Red Sea
Abraham	Road to Damascus
Serpent	Garden of Gethsemane

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Loot

IT'S TIME TO STOP ILLEGAL TRAFFICKING OF ANTIQUITIES, SAY BU
ARCHAEOLOGISTS, BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE **BY TAYLOR McNEIL**

THE ROMAN ART room in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts is dominated by a large marble goddess in flowing robes, illuminated by a spotlight. The statue, *Eirene*, dating to around the early first century A.D., has been on loan from the government of Italy since November — a friendly gesture considering that the MFA had only recently handed over thirteen Greek and Roman antiquities the museum admits had been looted from Italy. The same scenario had played out earlier that year at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York: a half dozen antiquities, the most important an exquisite Euphronios vase from about 515 B.C., were returned to Italy, where they had been looted years before. The Met's director, Philippe de Montebello, said at the time that the exchange "redresses past improprieties in the acquisitions process."

Ricardo Elia, a College of

Arts and Sciences professor of archaeology and a longtime critic of museums and their acquisition of antiquities with an unclear origin, puts it a different way. "For twenty to thirty years, the Met said, 'We're giving up the Euphronios vase over our dead bodies.' But the minute Italy had the evidence and there was going to be a big stink and a public relations disaster, they rushed off to Rome. They made a deal, everybody made nice, collaboration, cooperation — then back to business."

It's the back-to-business part that worries Elia. Museums have been buying or accepting donations of antiquities of uncertain origin for decades, he says, helping, along with other collectors, to drive a market that is leading to plundering of once-rich archaeological sites in every corner of the globe. As looters bulldoze their way to objects that fetch high prices in the

A krater, or vase, painted by Euphronios, circa 510 B.C. Another Euphronios krater was returned to Italy by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2006. Photo: Louvre, Paris, France; Peter Willi/The Bridgeman Art Library

international antiquities market, he and other archaeologists say, they destroy the past.

Wherever ancient civilizations created objects that are now desired — Guatemala, Peru, Turkey, Iraq, Italy, Greece, Cambodia, China, the list goes on — looters are active. The Lydian civilization that flourished around the sixth century B.C. in what is now eastern Turkey is one example. "There are no known Lydian tombs that have been excavated by an archaeologist," says Christina Luke, a research associate in the CAS archaeology department. "They are all gone, all looted." Had they not been plundered, the tombs could have told rich tales of the lives of Lydian rulers and given many clues about the lost civilization. Instead, all that's left are objects now in private collections and art museums, stripped of their context and much of their meaning.

Or consider the Euphronios vase at the Met. "You get a beautiful Greek vase, but you don't know where it came from — the site, the tomb, what it was found with — all of that contextual information," Elia says. "That's how we learn about the past. It's that loss of knowledge, information you can get out of studying a tomb, and you'll never get that back."

One of Elia's research specialties is ancient south Italian Greek vases that have been collected during the past two centuries. And one thing he has learned is that the most serious looting has occurred since the 1960s and 1970s. "Of 15,000 south Italian pots of this type that are documented in the world, basically 95 percent have no provenance, no traceable past," he says. "So the archaeological loss is 95 percent — that's huge." And that's not taking into consideration that for every marketable vase that plunderers find, they have to root through and mostly destroy about ten tombs, greatly magnifying the archaeological loss.

"These places are hemorrhaging antiquities," Elia says.

“When you look at the catalogs of just the auction houses and the big dealers, you see thousands of museum-quality antiquities never before described, never before known to the public, coming out of countries that have strict legislation on the books against export of antiquities, in some cases for hundreds of years. Where is it all coming from?” The answer is clear: plunder.

Collectors apparently make up most of the primary market for antiquities. According to a member survey released in early 2006 by the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD), American museum purchases account for less than 10 percent of the global market for antiquities. The fifty-three museums collectively spent on average \$7 million a year on purchases, while the global market for antiquities is estimated at more than \$100 million. “The results of this survey clearly show that the forces driving the antiquities trade lie outside the American art museum community,” says Mary Sue Sweeney Price, president of the AAMD and director of the Newark Museum. Figures for donations of antiquities to museums were not included in the survey totals.

Museums are concerned about the illicit trade in antiquities. “It is important to stress that the acquisition of unprovenanced material is the exception,” says Price. “It is not the rule in museum acquisitions of antiquities and archaeological material.”

But, says Elia, it is practiced often enough that museums must accept a fair portion of the blame for the demand-driven looting. The market is an economic system, he argues. Ordinarily, antiquities dealers receive the looted goods and furnish them either directly to museums or to private collectors. The private collectors often give the antiquities to museums eventually, enjoying sizable tax deductions. “The museums rely on private collectors,” he says. “Because most museums don’t

have enough money to buy what they want themselves, they get donations, loans, bequests.”

In recent years, according to Elia, archaeologists have been trying to shame collectors and museums into doing the right thing. “Every museum curator says looting is bad, that they don’t condone it,” he says. “But they ignore the real cause: the system of supply and demand. They are pretending it doesn’t exist. So we’re trying to make that whole arrangement clear.” Elia would like to see the museums held to a higher standard than private collectors, in part because they have a public trust, but also for more practical reasons: if they stop accepting donations of antiquities with a questionable past, then perhaps collectors would be less likely to buy them.

Unfortunately, he says, some of the museums are still in denial. He points to a statement made last year by the Met’s de Montebello. “These unprovenanced objects are orphans, as their parentage, through the absence of a known find spot, is lost,” de Montebello said. “But would these same archaeologists abandon a shivering orphaned child on a cold rainy day in the street? We museums are the orphanage of these objects.”

Elia sees it differently. “The real analogy is, first you kill the parents — the context — and then you steal the kid,” he reports. “But that’s how they create this myth about saving the antiquities.”

DOCUMENTING THE ILLICIT DIGGING

In the antiquities trade, there’s plenty of demand, so the supply keeps up with it. “It’s a predominantly Western or elite market driving this,” says Luke, coeditor of *Archaeology, Cultural Heritage, and the Antiquities Trade*, published last year. “Saudi Arabia and Dubai are up-and-coming markets, replacing Switzerland as the transit port.” Another rising market is China, for both Chinese and international antiquities. Ac-

When artwork is looted, “you don’t know where it came from — the site, the tomb, what it was found with — all of that contextual information. That’s how we learn about the past. It’s that loss of knowledge, information you can get out of studying a tomb, and you’ll never get that back.”

— Ricardo Elia, professor of archaeology

ording to Elia, even the death penalty, which can apply to Chinese convicted of looting, has not prevented it from becoming a serious problem. “It’s the new money people in China who are buying stuff up,” he says. That is part of another trend: the growing market for antiquities locally. “The wealthy, educated elites of the local countries are acquiring antiquities. And often they are selling them when they need money.”

Wealthy collectors — international or local — drive the market, and word gets back to looters. Luke says she’s heard of peasants living in remote areas of Peru who just happen to have Sotheby’s catalogs in their mud-brick homes. “This is not some secretive network — there are pretty high-level things going on here,” she says.

And while documenting the looting seems practically impossible, many archaeologists are trying. Luke is researching ongoing looting in eastern Turkey with her husband, Christopher Roosevelt, an assistant professor of archaeology in CAS. Returning in 2006 to areas they had surveyed the previous year, they found more than 50 percent had been reloomed. At some sites, she says, “we found shovels, picks, particle masks, candles, food remains — it’s very recent.”

Luke helped organize a conference in late February in Washington to try to assess what can be done to safeguard archaeological sites from looters. Among the participants were representatives from Turkey, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt. “How do they secure sites and how do they keep

Eirene, loaned by the Italian government to the Museum of Fine Arts after the MFA returned antiquities to Italy. Photo courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts





Looters got the goods from a tomb inside this mound in eastern Turkey and left behind the tools of their trade. Still, it's better than the bulldozers used to plunder archaeological sites. Photo by Christina Luke

track of antiquities — these are among the things we hope to learn,” she says.

The looting doesn't just destroy archaeological sites, but also can make life downright dangerous for archaeologists. Clemency Coggins, a CAS professor of art history and archaeology, who has long specialized in Maya antiquities, recalls the dangers faced by a Guatemalan friend, the head of a major institute of archaeology. With a team of sixty workers, she had started to excavate a major site that had been looted twice in previous decades. “They started to receive death threats, until finally these people came in and started tacking notes to the trees around the site, threatening the archaeologists personally,” she says. In the end, the looters won. The team abandoned the site.

COMPROMISE OR CONFRONTATION

Until 1983, it was not illegal to import undocumented antiquities into this country. That year, the U.S. Congress passed the Convention on Cultural Property Implementation Act, implementing a 1970 UNESCO agreement prohibiting illicit import and export of antiquities.

According to Elia, the act was watered down at the behest of American dealers, collectors, and museums, and the requirements as the act is now written make it difficult to prove that an object was looted.

Despite that handicap, he believes that things have been improving in recent years. “It is getting tighter,” he acknowledges. “If you can show an object was looted in the foreign country, American law is recognizing that as a crime of theft, and that country has the right to get it back. There have been a couple of important cases like that. They've had the FBI come in and raid houses and give objects back to Italy.”

While the recent cases brought by Italy are heartening to archaeologists, most believe that more action is necessary.

What's needed, Elia says, is for museums to simply pick a date, after which they would require proof of where an antiquity came from — or refuse to buy it. “The Getty Museum was the only one that did that,” he says, and that was after it returned looted antiquities. “The countries of origin can fight over all the older stuff — it was all looted — but to me it's more about stopping the new looting. That would



Ricardo Elia, professor of archaeology. “Every museum curator says looting is bad. . . . But they ignore the real cause: the system of supply and demand.” Photo by Michael Hamilton

diminish the future looting, because the looters won't have a market — that's the only way to do it.”

On the other hand, Coggins, who has studied the antiquities trade for almost forty years, says that so little progress has come in all that time that she feels “we have to find some common ground with collectors and museum curators. Many of these people operated entirely in good faith, and they have been turned into felons practically for doing what they really genuinely love to do.”

No one imagines finding that middle ground will be easy. One suggestion calls for originating countries to loan their antiquities to museums, rather than sell them. But even as Coggins suggests it, she acknowledges that what museums and especially collectors really want is to *own* the art.

“The sadness for me is that I should have been saying this for so many years,” she notes. “I continue to say it, but I'm trying to modulate it so that there could conceivably be a response. The two sides really hate each other so much. It's too bad. Because originally they did love archaeology, and part of that was expressed as collecting.” ■