Religious Literacy
What Every American Needs to Know – And Doesn’t

Stephen Prothero

Review by Barbara Buzzard

“Moreover, we may be at a tipping point where we are realizing that you cannot really respect a religion that you do not understand…”

I was aghast at my first reading of this book. But on a slightly different level, I think I was even more aghast at my second reading. Scholar and Professor Prothero has chronicled well our descent into religious ignorance, but it is his well thought out deliberations as to how and why this has taken place that are for me riveting. For example: “Evangelical pollsters have lamented for some time the disparity between Americans’ veneration of the Bible and their understanding of it, painting a picture of a nation that believes God has spoken in scripture but can’t be bothered to listen to what God has to say.”¹ We are indeed a paradoxical nation in this regard. I hope you will find some of the following quotations as eye-opening and enlightening as I have. Prof. Prothero wrestles with how a nation can be deeply religious and profoundly ignorant (re: religion) at the same time. The answer is to me quite terrifying because it looks like deliberate rejection of intelligence and a closing of the Christian mind. Please see the book with this title.² I am afraid of ignorance and Prothero stresses over and over again how very dangerous it is. I am reminded of the statement by Dr. Richard Hiers in his book Jesus and the Future along the same lines: “Interpreters of Christian persuasion have ordinarily not been especially interested in what Jesus intended and did in his own life-time.” How staggering! Then what’s the point?!

In the publication Protestant-Catholic-Jew Will Herberg wrote, “The religion which actually prevails among Americans today has lost much of its authentic Christian (or Jewish) content.” He found that in conforming to the American culture the three above mentioned (Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism) became “so empty and contentless, so conformist, so utilitarian, so sentimental, so individualistic, and so self-righteous.”³

Author Prothero finds that we have failed to take religion seriously, and that failure he feels to be of the gravest seriousness. Although he is an educator he tells us that he writes as a citizen (an irate one)⁴ and as he puts it, he fears that “faith without knowledge is dead.”⁵ The argument of this book is that one needs religious literacy to be an effective citizen. He despairs

¹ Stephen Prothero, Religious Literacy, p. 6, emphasis added.
² Charles Freeman, The Closing of the Christian Mind,
³ Religious Literacy, p. 7
⁴ Ibid., p. 9
⁵ Ibid., p.9
when confronted time and again with what is said to be the most widely quoted verse in the Bible — God helps those who help themselves — which, of course, isn’t in the Bible! He makes a strong case when he argues that our inability to think clearly and speak confidently about not only Christianity but other religions should concern anyone who cares about public life. He gives us this comparison: when female suffrage was debated, most citizens were very aware of the 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians passages. When gay marriage or abortion are debated, Prothero argues that it would only be a rare American who could debate or even follow a debate which was biblically based.

Prothero also rails against our ignorance of Islam: “Few Americans are able to challenge claims made by politicians or pundits about Islam’s place in the war on terrorism or what the Bible says about homosexuality. This ignorance imperils our public life, putting citizens in the thrall of talking heads and effectively transferring power from the third estate (the people) to the fourth estate (the press).”

Are we aware, for example, of the fact that political expediency is what led a ruthless ruler to shut down debate within the Christian church in the 4th century and that we have inherited currently held beliefs that were imposed rather than agreed on?

One of Prothero’s skills is to stress how very different the U.S. is from Europe and the sort of hard-nosed secularism that is common there. He points out that even when American survey respondents entered “no religion” these same respondents stated that they prayed, i.e. they were unchurched but had not given up on God. “The Gospel of John instructs Christians to ‘search the scriptures’ (John 5:39), but little searching, and even less finding, is being done.” He backs up this claim with the results of many studies and has found that students learn almost nothing about the Bible in their high school years. Therefore all biblical knowledge would have had to come from Sunday School in the younger years. If they did not attend (and often if they did) no real understanding exists. There is no platform, no body of intelligence; teaching has not only disappeared from the schools but from homes and churches as well, since we seem to have taken another approach.

A Catholic theologian, also disturbed by these trends, sees Catholic ignorance as akin to “retinal detachment in which a whole field of vision is pulling inexorably away toward blindness.” Also Mark Noll, who wrote The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind, certainly made his point: “The scandal of the evangelical mind is that there is not much of an evangelical mind.” Prof. Prothero gives these reasons: “Pop psychology has elbowed biblical exegesis out of many born-again pulpits (including some of the most successful megachurches), self-help books outsell theological works in most Christian bookstores, and loving Jesus has replaced affirming the Westminster Confession as the soul of evangelical piety. Despite their conviction that the Bible is the Word of God, evangelicals show scant interest in learning what scripture has to say or wrestling with what it might mean.” He then adds that even in the Bible Belt, the Scriptures are becoming “the greatest story never read.” Apparently research has shown that agnostics, non-believers and Muslims know more about religion and spirituality than Christians living in the U.S. Author Allan Bloom seems to concur.

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6 Ibid., p.10
7 Charles Freeman, The Closing of the Christian Mind,
8 Religious Literacy, p. 30
9 Ibid., p. 35, emphasis added.
10 Ibid., pp. 35, 36.
11 Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Dallas Darling
12 The Closing of the American Mind, Allan Bloom
As a citizen Prothero cites this example of the danger of biblical illiteracy: in a courtroom where the Old Testament passages of Lev. 24:20, 21; Ex. 21:23-25 and Deut. 19:21 were used to promote “eye for an eye” justice, the jurors were found to be impoverished in their exegetical skills as they were not able to supply Jesus’ interpretation of this philosophy. “The moral is rather that if jurors are going to consult scripture — and, court rulings aside, they doubtless are — then those jurors should at least have the decency (and the piety) to try to get the Bible right.”

One chapter subheading is “Textbook Ignorance (American Style)” and our author has this to say: “When religion is mentioned in US history schoolbooks, it is all too often an afterthought or an embarrassment (or both) …But after President Abraham Lincoln is buried, religion typically goes underground too, leaving students with the distinct impression that, insofar as religion has had any historical effects, those effects are now safely behind us.” The difference was that religion mattered then, and here again we see that enormous difference between Americans and Europeans (the French variety) as our revolution was motivated at least partially by religious dissent whereas France’s revolt was secular.

Prothero goes so far as to term education then as an educational Eden. By contrast it appears that today people are coming out of church as ignorant as they go in. He reminds us that biblical precepts were all around the young child — in his primer, in virtually all the stories available to him — and these precepts were as accepted as the alphabet to be true. He also points out a most interesting concept: both teachers and students paid attention to the biblical commandment to “remember.” It is true that when one loses one’s memory, it leaves one in a state of disorientation. By losing one’s identifying markers, those chains of memory which remind us of who we are and which sustain us, we become disenfranchised and a process of disintegration begins. In former times people “understood themselves to be in a covenantal relationship with God.”

Consider this for contrast: “Many children read the Bible cover to cover multiple times before adulthood, and families gathered regularly in the morning or evening (or both) to pray, sing hymns, and read the scriptures, which they received as a manual of law, literature, history, and warfare, as well as a primer for reading and of course, religion.” The contrast comes here (and for any readers who have stuck with me thus far, you deserve a little humor): Sodom and Gomorrah were married; Paul bound Isaac; Noah led the Exodus; and Moses was the one to receive the olive branch from the dove; Abraham was blinded on the Damascus road; Jesus parted the Red Sea! Stephen Prothero states that these are actual examples from his students at Boston University and colleagues confirm that the same is true at Wheaton and Chapel Hill. Many are not even aware that the pop singer Madonna was actually named after someone. The historian R. Laurence Moore wrote that Americans “are stupefyingly dumb about what they are supposed to believe.”

Prothero draws a stark comparison between what we once knew and the fall (how we forgot). The fall has been very great as we once lived in “The most literate place on earth” and regressed “Toward a new religion.” In chronicling the fall, Prothero notes how even the McGuffey readers worked hand in glove with the new philosophy. “Already Americans were

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13 Ibid., p. 38
14 Ibid., p. 44
15 Ibid., p. 45, emphasis added.
16 Ibid., p. 62
17 Ibid., p. 26
inaugurating a new form of religion — less sectarian, less doctrinal, more emotional, and more moralistic. ‘Little children, you must seek,’ one reader put it, ‘rather to be good than wise.’ Here comes the rub: it wasn’t secularism so much as religion that did religious literacy in! As Prothero points out, there was a battle between piety and learning, and learning lost, big time. In came this philosophy: “Christianity is about loving Jesus; it does not require knowing much of anything at all.” This may be 21st-century religion but it is unnerving, in the face of Scripture: “Fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Pro. 1:7b) and “For they hated knowledge and chose not to fear the LORD” (Pro. 1:29).

This is the thrust of Prothero’s book: “But early Americans didn’t just know Jesus, they knew the Sermon on the Mount (often by heart). They believed…the connection between knowledge and faith, is such, that the latter cannot exist without the former…And they were convinced, as historian David Paul Nord put it, that ‘genuine religion was not about miracles, enthusiasm, direct revelation, human will, or even uninformed faith; it was about knowledge, learning, and reading the word.’ All that changed, however, with the rise to public power in the early nineteenth century of a new form of Protestantism called evangelicalism. By the end of that century a lack of elementary knowledge of Christianity would constitute evidence of authentic faith. What for generations had been shameful — religious illiteracy — would become a badge of honor in a nation besotted with the self-made man and the spirit-filled preacher.”

In a history lesson which we all need, Prothero speaks of the Bible wars of the nineteenth century culminating in the confusion of religion with morality. New generic virtues were substituted for the old, and textbooks dumped theology. Prothero quotes Ruth Miller Elson, historian, as finding that ours had become a “religion of ethics rather than of theology.” Prothero then sums up: “The effects of this exodus remain with us today, notably in our collapsing of religion into ‘values’ and ‘values’ into sexual morality, which in turn functions via an odd sort of circular reasoning as a proxy for religiosity.” He maintains that religion collapsed, but didn’t die; it just took a new turn and became something else. He speaks of former biblical exegesis being jettisoned for inoffensive homilies. Clyde Votaw of the University of Chicago is quoted as saying: “Religion means reverence, trust, obedience, faithfulness, industry, sincerity, kindness, honesty, truthfulness, [personal truth telling] righteousness, justice, purity, honor, kindness, sympathy, helpfulness, health and happiness.” Prothero points out that earlier definitions would have included truth (as in The truth) but this dimension was eliminated and “In colleges and universities, as in public schools, deeds had triumphed over creeds; religion had been reduced to doing good.” What happened in essence was a shift from the head to the heart, “from the intellect to the emotions, from doctrine to storytelling, from the Bible to Jesus, and from theology to morality. In each case a new approach to religion was offered to Americans with all the seduction of the serpent in the Garden of Eden. In each case Americans succumbed to the temptation. This time, however, knowledge was lost rather than gained.”

Prof. Prothero outlines several proposals to regain lost ground and get back to the basics. I don’t have space to expound them here. I would like to recommend very highly as a companion to this book Ben Stein’s documentary, Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed.

18 Ibid., p. 87, emphasis added.
19 Ibid., p. 88, emphasis added.
20 Ibid., p. 100
21 Ibid., p. 101
22 Ibid., p. 104
23 Ibid., p. 105, emphasis added.
A thought provoking question is posed at the end of the book: “Might American religion be thriving precisely because of Americans’ religious illiteracy? This was the suspicion of historian Richard Hofstadter, who wondered throughout Anti-Intellectualism in American Life whether ‘ignorance is the mother of devotion.’”

I regard Prof. Prothero’s contribution as important and enlightening, the work of a whistle blower. How is it that we have come to accept religion without content, with fluff instead of substance? Why is it OK that only the pastors have the answers — when the stakes are so great? How is it that we have now been talked into accepting the abdication of intellect? Especially when we need to be razor sharp so as not to be deceived. Why are American Christians perceived as shallow, “happy clappy,” unthinking? Have we become zealous idiots?

If Prof. Prothero is correct in his assessment that we are stupefyingly dumb, the tragedy is doubled in that the remedy is constantly and graciously being offered: “Come here and listen to me! I’ll pour out the spirit of wisdom upon you and make you wise” (Prov. 1:23).

Respectfully submitted,
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