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## Introduction

A few years ago I was standing around the photocopier in Boston University's Department of Religion when a visiting professor from Austria offered a passing observation about American undergraduates. They are very religious, he told me, but they know next to nothing about religion. Thanks to compulsory religious education (which in Austria begins in elementary schools), European students can name the twelve apostles and the Seven Deadly Sins, but they wouldn't be caught dead going to church or synagogue themselves. American students are just the opposite. Here faith without understanding is the standard; here religious ignorance is bliss.

The religious differences between Europe and the United States are typically described in terms of beliefs and practices: Europeans are far less likely than Americans to join and attend houses of worship or to believe in heaven and hell. This book, however, focuses on religious knowledge. It begins with a paradox I had been wrestling with for some time when my Austrian colleague helped to clarify it for me. That paradox is this: Americans are both deeply religious and profoundly ignorant about religion. 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. Atheists may be as rare in America as Jesus-loving politicians are in Europe, but here faith is almost entirely devoid of content. One of the most religious countries on earth is also a nation of religious illiterates.<sup>1</sup>

### Bible Babble

The civic implications of this paradox began to dawn on me on February 25, 1993, the day the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF)



raided the Waco, Texas, compound of an obscure religious sect called the Branch Davidians. I was at the time the proud owner of a freshly minted PhD trying to hold onto my first teaching job. My specialty was (and is) American religions, but I had no real expertise in new religious movements, and certainly no close encounters of the apocalyptic kind. Still, as I watched television coverage of the raid (which left six Branch Davidians and four BATF officials dead) and followed subsequent events in the media, I felt I knew how it was going to go down. The FBI, which took over the case from the BATF after the botched raid, thought it was calling the shots. But as I saw it, the Branch Davidians' leader, David Koresh, was luring FBI agents into playing roles he had assigned to them in an end game of his own imagining—an end game whose logic derived not so much from FBI profiles or SWAT team tactics as from Koresh's own idiosyncratic interpretation of the biblical book of Revelation.

"It's going to burn," I told myself, and I remember thinking that I should pick up the phone and call the FBI, tell them what Koresh must be thinking, tell them to give him the time he had requested to unlock the cryptic meanings of the book of Revelation's Seven Seals, show them how perfectly, how eerily, they were playing the parts he had assigned to them, let them know that, if they persisted, the whole thing would end in fire. But how do you call the FBI? (Do they have an 800 number?) And why would they listen to a thirty-something like me?

I did not call. I hoped instead. I hoped that the federal government knew what it was doing—that President Bill Clinton and Attorney General Janet Reno were getting good advice from people far more knowledgeable than I about end times theology. Unfortunately, no such counsel was forthcoming. And so the siege did end in fire. As the FBI attacked the compound with tear gas and combat vehicles on April 19, 1993, flames engulfed the buildings, and Koresh and about seventy-five followers (including twenty-one children) perished.

Waco was a case of death by religious ignorance. Perhaps the outcome was fated; perhaps the Branch Davidians were, as many believed, an incendiary cult and Koresh a megalomaniac hell-bent on death and destruction. Still, it might have ended differently if there had been someone, anyone, in the White House or the FBI who knew something, anything, about apocalyptic Christianity, if federal officials had not blithely dismissed Koresh's theology as "Bible babble" unworthy of engagement.<sup>2</sup>

Religious ignorance proved deadly again in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, when an Indian American man was shot and killed at an Arizona gas station by a vigilante who believed the man's turban marked

him as a Muslim (and therefore for assassination). But what killed Balbir Singh Sodhi, who was actually a Sikh, was not simply bigotry. It was ignorance: the vigilante's inability to distinguish a Muslim from a Sikh. The moral of this story is not just that we need more tolerance. It is that we need better education—and not because it is nice to be multicultural but because the world's religions, no longer quarantined in the nations of their birth, now live and move among us: *yōga* in our church halls, *nirvana* in our dictionaries, and Sikhs at our gas stations.

Religious ignorance was also rife after 9/11 in Washington DC, where, I soon learned to my dismay, hardly anyone spoke Arabic or understood the basics of Islam. And so the nation was treated for months to theology by sound bite. "Islam is peace," President Bush stated repeatedly, as if that mantra were all Americans needed to know about the Islamic tradition. Meanwhile, the evangelist Jerry Falwell denounced Muhammad as "a terrorist," and Paul Weyrich and William Lind, prominent voices in American conservatism, called Islam "a religion of war."<sup>3</sup> Who was right? Unfortunately, Americans had no way to judge, because, when it comes to understanding the Islamic tradition, most Americans are kindergarteners at best.

### Cultural Literacy

Cultural literacy has been hotly debated ever since E. D. Hirsch's best seller of that name injected the term into the culture wars in 1987. In *Cultural Literacy*, Hirsch, a University of Virginia English professor, argued that much of our common cultural coin had been drastically devalued. ("Remember the Alamo"? Um, not really.) Hirsch traced this problem to John Dewey and other Progressive-era education reformers, who gave up in the early twentieth century on content-based learning in favor of a skills-based strategy that scorned "the piling up of information." This new educational model produced, according to Hirsch, "a gradual disintegration of cultural memory," which caused in turn "a gradual decline in our ability to communicate." Hirsch rightly understood that there are civic implications of this descent into cultural ignorance, particularly in a democracy that assumes an informed citizenry. "Having the right to vote is meaningless," he observed, "if a citizen is disenfranchised by illiteracy or semilliteracy." So Hirsch called for a return in America's schools to "core knowledge," beginning with his book's appendix of five thousand or so names, dates, concepts, and phrases essential in his view to cultural literacy.<sup>4</sup>



When I first began teaching in the early 1990s I was a follower of Dewey and the Progressives. In high school I had come to see the subject of history as nothing more than the mindless accumulation of names and dates, and I vowed upon entering college in the late 1970s that I would study every subject I could manage *except* history. Happily, I came across a professor who taught me that the vocation of history is not about memorizing names and dates but about forming judgments and contributing to debates about what happened in the past. So when I finished graduate school and became a professor myself, I told students that I didn't care about facts. I cared about having challenging conversations, and I offered my quiz-free classrooms as places to do just that. I soon found, however, that the challenging conversations I covered were not possible without some common knowledge—common knowledge my students plainly lacked. And so, quite against my prior inclinations, I began testing them on simple terms. In my world religions classes I told my students that before we could discuss in any detail the great religious traditions of the world, we would need to have some shared vocabulary in each, some basic religious literacy. In this way I became, like Hirsch, a traditionalist about content, not because I had come to see facts as the end of education but because I had come to see them as necessary means to understanding.

Today religious illiteracy is at least as pervasive as cultural illiteracy, and certainly more dangerous. Religious illiteracy is more dangerous because religion is the most volatile constituent of culture, because religion has been, in addition to one of the greatest forces for good in world history, one of the greatest forces for evil. Whereas ignorance of the term *Achilles' heel* may cause us to be confused about the outcome of a Super Bowl game or a statewide election, ignorance about Christian crusades and Muslim martyrdom can be literally lethal. When Madeleine Albright was secretary of state in the Clinton administration, she had an "entire bureau of economic experts" at her disposal but only one adviser with any expertise in religion. In *The Mighty and the Almighty* (2006) she notes that currently US ambassadors to Muslim-majority countries don't have to have any training in Islam. That is not only foolhardy, it is dangerous. The same goes for ambassadors to India who don't know anything about Hinduism or to China who don't know anything about Confucianism.<sup>5</sup>

Religion has always been a major factor in US politics and international affairs. Neither the American Revolution nor the Civil War is comprehensible in a religion vacuum. The same goes for social reform movements such as abolitionism, temperance, women's rights, civil

rights, and environmentalism—and, of course, for contemporary debates about abortion, stem cell research, capital punishment, animal rights, global warming, intelligent design, state lotteries, birth control, euthanasia, gay marriage, welfare policy, military policy, and foreign policy.

To be sure, the political, cultural, social, and economic force of religious ideas and institutions has not always been recognized. For much of the twentieth century, most American intellectuals dreamed of a public square empty of religious actors and religious arguments, and many imagined that this not-so-noble dream had become a reality—that religion had been quarantined to its rightful realm of the purely private and politics had been inoculated against the dangers of faith. Advocating for a politics stripped entirely of religious reasons—what the Catholic critic Richard John Neuhaus decried in the mid-1980s as a "naked public square"<sup>6</sup>—made sense as long as intellectuals were convinced, as they had been for the prior two decades, that religion was fading away. According to the prevailing secularization thesis, modernity and faith were antagonists in a zero-sum game; as modernity advanced, faith would retreat. But then came the deluge: the election of Jimmy Carter, the Iranian Revolution, the rise of the Moral Majority, the Reagan Revolution, 9/11, and the faith-based presidential election of 2004.

Today far too many thinkers, on both the left and the right, cling to the illusion that we live in a "post-Christian" country and a secular world. But evidence of the public power of religion is overwhelming, particularly in the United States. As Boston University law professor Jay Wexler has observed, "A great many Americans rely on religious reasons when thinking and talking about public issues. Ninety percent of the members of Congress, by one report, consult their religious beliefs when voting on legislation. A majority of Americans believe that religious organizations should publicly express their views on political issues, and an even stronger majority believe it is important for a President to have strong religious beliefs." All this is to say that the "naked public square" has been, as Wexler puts it, "substantially clothed with religion." At least in the United States, religion matters. In fact, religion is now emerging alongside race, gender, and ethnicity as one of the key identity markers of the twenty-first century.<sup>7</sup>

### "A Nation of Biblical Illiterates"

If religion is this important, we ought to know something about it, particularly in a democracy, in which political power is vested in voters. But



the average voter knows embarrassingly little about Christianity and other religions.

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. The Democratic presidential aspirant Howard Dean, when asked to name his favorite New Testament book, mistakenly cited an Old Testament text (Job) instead. But such confusion is not restricted to Dean's home state of Vermont. According to recent polls, most American adults cannot name one of the four Gospels, and many high school seniors think that Sodom and Gomorrah were husband and wife. A few years ago no one in Jay Leno's *Tonight Show* audience could name any of Jesus' twelve apostles, but everyone, it seemed, was able to list the four Beattles. No wonder pollster George Gallup has called the United States "a nation of biblical illiterates."<sup>8</sup>

One might imagine that ignorance of Christianity and the Bible is restricted to non-Christians or at least to non-evangelicals. But born-again Christians do only moderately better than other Americans on surveys of religious literacy. In a 2004 study of Bible literacy among high school students, most evangelical participants were not able to identify "Blessed are the poor in spirit" as a quote from the Sermon on the Mount.<sup>9</sup>

When it comes to religions other than Christianity, Americans fare far worse. One might hope that US citizens would know the most basic formulas of the world's religions: the Five Pillars of Islam, for example, or Buddhism's Four Noble Truths. But most Americans have difficulty even naming these religions. In a recent survey of American teenagers, barely half were able to come up with Buddhism and less than half with Judaism when asked to list the world's five "major religions." Far fewer could name Islam or Hinduism. According to Harvard religious studies professor Diana Eck, "Christians in the United States are pretty abysmally ignorant about the religious traditions of the rest of the world."<sup>10</sup>

### Religion as a Chain of Memory

In *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (1987), neurologist Oliver Sacks wrote about patients with Korsakov's syndrome, a neurological illness characterized by profound amnesia. Not knowing in any given moment what they are doing or why, these patients wander around in a state of profound disorientation; in losing their memory, they have lost

themselves. Societies suffer from similar syndromes. The French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger has written eloquently about the loss of faith in Europe as a sort of amnesia. The rise of secularism in Europe, she contends, is rooted not so much in doubt as in forgetting. Religion is a "chain of memory," she argues, and Europeans have broken the chain.<sup>11</sup>

Faith is more robust in the United States, but Americans are forgetters too. Catholics have forgotten the words of the Baltimore Catechism their parents and grandparents once knew by heart. Protestants have forgotten the key plot points in the Exodus story, which beckoned New England's colonists to a New World Zion. Methodists have forgotten what distinguishes them from Baptists. And whatever Americans once knew about Islam and Asian religions, well, they have forgotten most of that too.

Many of the institutions that once forged the "chain of memory" that is religion are now some of its weakest links. Because of grave misunderstandings about the First Amendment and the separation of church and state, the subject of religion is taboo in many public schools. Moreover, churches, synagogues, and other religious congregations, which once inculcated "the Fourth R" effectively (though doubtless in their own manner) are now doing so ineffectively, or not at all.<sup>12</sup> Basic religious literacy is lacking even in seminaries, where many ministers-in-the-making are unable to describe the distinguishing marks of the denominations they are training to serve.

Half a century ago, in *Protestants-Catholic-Jew* (1955), sociologist Will Herberg wrote that "the religion which actually prevails among Americans today has lost much of its authentic Christian (or Jewish) content." The postwar religious revival, which saw church membership and attendance rates rocket to all-time highs, came according to Herberg at a cost. And the cost was religious content. In conforming themselves to American culture, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism had become little more than parallel paths up the mountain of the American dream. Instead of quaking in the presence of the Almighty, Herberg observed, Americans blithely pledged their allegiance to "religion that makes religion its own object." In the process Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism became, at least in their American incarnations, "so empty and contentless, so conformist, so utilitarian, so sentimental, so individualistic, and so self-righteous."<sup>13</sup>

Today what Herberg derided as "the growing 'religious illiteracy' of the American people" remains a major challenge to believers hoping to keep their children in the faith or to bring up the next generation of ministers, priests, rabbis, and imams.<sup>14</sup> Catholic leaders lament how quickly and



deeply their youth descended into Catholic illiteracy after the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) did away with rote memorization of the Baltimore Catechism. Evangelicals mourn the passing of biblical literacy at the hands of television, video games, and the Internet. Jews worry about what Jewish illiteracy portends for their community's survival. Religious literacy also troubles educators, who know how much our appreciation of literature, music, and art depends on our knowledge of the Bible—how difficult it is to understand the musical compositions of J. S. Bach and the paintings of El Greco as long as we are deaf and blind to artists' spiritual impulses and religious idioms. In 2002 the official magazine of the National Association of Independent Schools decried "a high level of religious illiteracy" even in the nation's elite private schools.<sup>15</sup>

But broken links in the chain of memory that sustains faith through the generations should not be of interest solely to believers or educators. Americans' inability to think clearly and speak confidently about Christianity and other religions should concern anyone who cares about American public life.

### A Civic Problem

I am by training a professor of religious studies. That means, among other things, that just about every time I step onto a plane or attend a party I have to explain to someone that, no, I am not a minister, no, I do not teach theology, and, no, I do not work in a divinity school. Theology and religious studies, I often say, are two very different things—as different as art and art history. While theologians *do* religion, religious studies scholars *study* religion. Rather than ruminating on God, practitioners of religious studies explore how other human beings (theologians included) ruminate on sacred things. Scholars of religion can be religious, of course, but being religious is not our job. Our job is to try to understand what religious people say, believe, know, feel, and experience. And we try to do this work as fairly and objectively as possible.

Working as a religious studies professor also means being committed to seeing the study of religion as an indispensable part of a liberal education—to viewing religious literacy as a key component, perhaps *the* key component, of what Hirsch called cultural literacy. So I share with philosopher Warren Nord the conviction that our current inattention to religion in secondary and higher education today is a failure of the highest order—that "current American education is profoundly illiberal in its refusal to take religion seriously."<sup>16</sup> In this book, however, I write more as

a citizen than as an educator. I am convinced that one needs to know something about the world's religions in order to be truly educated. And I will admit to a sneaking suspicion, likely rooted in my Episcopal upbringing, that faith without knowledge is dead. However, the argument of this book is neither that liberal education needs religious studies nor that real faith requires religious knowledge. The argument is that you need religious literacy in order to be an effective citizen.

When antebellum Americans weighed the pros and cons of slavery—almost exclusively on the basis of the Bible—most citizens could make sense of that debate's references to the runaway slave in the New Testament book of Philemon and to the year of the Jubilee (when slaves could be freed) in the Old Testament book of Leviticus. When the Seneca Falls convention of 1848 put female suffrage on the national agenda, most citizens knew that suffragettes would have to contend with the injunctions in 1 Timothy and 1 Corinthians (two New Testament letters attributed to the apostle Paul) that women should keep silent in the churches and submit to male authority. Today it is a rare American who can follow with any degree of confidence biblically inflected debates about abortion or gay marriage. Or, for that matter, about the economy, since the most widely quoted Bible verse in the United States—"God helps those who help themselves"—is not actually in the Bible.<sup>17</sup>

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. How are we to understand protests against the Vietnam War, which compelled Catholic priests to burn draft records in Maryland and Buddhist monks to set fire to themselves in Vietnam, without knowing something about Catholic just war theory and the Buddhist principles of no-self and compassion? How are we to understand international conflicts in the Middle East and Sri Lanka without reckoning with the role of Jerusalem in the sacred geography of the Abrahamic faiths and with the differences between Hinduism and Buddhism in Southeast Asia? Closer to home, how are we to understand faith-based electioneering if the "reds" on the Religious Right and the "blues" on the Secular Left continue to stereotype one another as distinct species? Is it possible to weigh the merits of Supreme Court rulings on religious liberty if we are unaware of the legacies of anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, anti-Mormonism, and anti-fundamentalism in American life?<sup>18</sup>

From the time of the nation's founding, the success of the American experiment in republican government was rightly understood to rest on an educated citizenry. If suffrage was to be extended first to white males



with property and eventually to men and women of all races, then it would be essential for all Americans to understand the issues on which they were voting. How could we act responsibly as citizens if we did not know how to read, if we did not know something about politics and history and science and economics?

Today, when religion is implicated in virtually every issue of national and international import (not least the nomination of Supreme Court justices), US citizens need to know something about religion too. In an era in which 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? Without basic religious literacy? How to decide whether intelligent design is "religious" or "scientific" without some knowledge of both science and religion? How to determine whether the effort to yoke Christianity and "family values" makes sense without knowing what sort of "family man" Jesus was? How to adjudicate the debate between President Bush's description of Islam as a religion of peace and the conviction of many evangelists that Islam is a religion of war without some basic information about Muhammad and the Quran? How to determine whether the current Supreme Court's First Amendment jurisprudence discriminates against minority religions without knowing what Sikhs and Buddhists hold dear?

Unfortunately, US citizens today lack this religious literacy. As a result, they are too easily swayed by demagogues on the left or the right. 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 effectivly transferring power from the third estate (the people) to the fourth (the press).

### The Roots of Religious Illiteracy

How did this happen? And what can we do about it?

In order to answer these questions, we need to understand how one of the most religious countries in the world slipped into religious amnesia. When did we forget what we once knew about the Bible, the Apostles' Creed, the Westminster Confession, the Ten Commandments, the Exodus story, and the crucifixion? How was the chain of memory that once transmitted religious knowledge from parents to children, priests to parishioners, and schoolteachers to students severed?

This book answers these questions by going back, first, to an Eden of sorts in which basic literacy and religious literacy (at least of the Protestant sort) went hand in hand—when young people learned to read by learning to read the Bible, and Christian doctrines and stories were part of the mental furniture of virtually all adults. It then locates a moment in US history—call it the Fall—when religious faith and religious knowledge went their separate ways. Observers of today's culture wars might imagine that my account of the decline of religious literacy will turn on the events of the 1960s, notably the 1962 and 1963 US Supreme Court rulings that banned school prayer and Bible reading in the public schools. After all, the justices behind *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) and *Abington v. Schempp* (1963) have long been the whipping boys of the Religious Right, which itself emerged out of the rancor these rulings unleashed.<sup>19</sup> But public schools are not the only places where religious literacy has been cultivated (or ignored), and religion ceased to be a topic of instruction in these schools generations before the hippies became hip.

The historical portion of this book focuses instead on two religious revivals: the Second Great Awakening of the first third of the nineteenth century and the postwar revival of the 1940s and 1950s. In each case the villains were not activist judges or ACLU-style secularists hell-bent on hounding religion out of the public square but well-meaning religious folks intent on doing just the opposite. In one of the great ironies of American religious history, it was the nation's most fervent people of faith who steered Americans down the road to religious illiteracy. Just how that happened is one of the stories this book has to tell.

### Defining Religious Literacy

After making a historical diagnosis of religious illiteracy, this book goes on to prescribe a remedy. Given a problem like ignorance, the solution is obviously going to be knowledge. But what kind of knowledge do we need? And what sort of education will deliver it?

Before answering these questions, we must define more precisely what religious literacy is and what it is not. Like the term *cultural literacy*, religious literacy is obviously a metaphor of sorts. On its home ground in linguistics, literacy refers to the ability to use a language—to read and perhaps to write it, to manipulate its vocabulary, grammar, and syntax. In this sense religious literacy refers to the ability to understand and use in one's day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions—their



key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors, and narratives.

Like languages, however, religions are particular creatures. Just as it is not possible to speak language in general (one must choose to speak one particular language), religious literacy in the abstract is an impossibility. (One cannot be literate in *every* religion; neither is there one generic religion to “speak.”) It would probably be most precise, therefore, to refer to specific *religious literacies*: Protestant literacy, Buddhist literacy, Islamic literacy (or, even more accurately, Methodist literacy, Zen literacy, Sunni literacy, and so on). In this context Protestant literacy might refer to knowing the basic history of the Protestant Reformation, the core beliefs of the Christian creeds, and the basic symbols, heroes, and stories of the King James Bible, while Islamic literacy might refer to knowing basic Islamic history, the key practices of the Five Pillars of Islam, and the basic symbols, heroes, and stories of the Quran. Religious literacy might also be divided into a variety of functional capacities; for example, ritual literacy (knowing how to cross yourself during the Catholic Mass or how to perform ablutions before Muslim prayers); confessional literacy (knowing what Christians affirm in the Apostles’ Creed or what Muslims affirm in the *Shahadah*); denominational literacy (knowing salient differences between Episcopalians and Catholics or between Reform and Conservative Jews); and narrative literacy (knowing what Adam and Eve are said to have done in the Garden of Eden or how the Buddha came to abandon his palace for the life of a wandering ascetic). It might even be useful to refer, as has Professor Francis Clooney of the Harvard Divinity School, to “interreligious literacy.”<sup>20</sup> But all this specificity can get unwieldy at times, so this book will refer to religious literacy in general as a shorthand for one or more of these particular religious literacies.

In the United States today the most important of these particular literacies is Christian literacy. Inside the academic study of religion it is decidedly out of fashion to emphasize Christianity over other religions. In fact, many a college course in American religion devotes more time to Vodou than it does to Methodism. The point of this multicultural approach to American religion is to underscore the fact that the United States is one of the most religiously diverse nations on earth. But the United States is also the world’s most Christian country. With a Christian population of about 250 million, there are more Christians in the United States today than there have been in any other country in the history of the world.

Christianity’s dominance, moreover, swells as you enter the corridors of power. Of all the members of the 109th Congress, 92 percent were Chris-

tians, as were 100 percent of fifty state governors in 2000. Among this elite group of state and national politicians, there were zero Muslims, zero Buddhists, and zero Hindus.<sup>21</sup> So it should be obvious that Christian literacy is more important than other religious literacies when it comes to understanding US politics. A quick search of the *Congressional Record* (the official source for Senate and House debates) reveals in excess of a thousand usages of the Golden Rule and more than five hundred invocations of the Good Samaritan over the last two decades. This same search yields hundreds of references to the Promised Land, Armageddon, and the Apocalypse. In a nationally televised address on September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush quoted from the Twenty-third Psalm. One year later, on the first anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, he concluded with a reference to John 1:5 (“The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it”).<sup>22</sup> You may be a Hare Krishna, a Jain, or an atheist yourself, but to be religiously literate in contemporary America you need to be familiar with Bible characters such as David and Goliath, Bible stories such as the trial and crucifixion of Jesus, and Bible phrases such as “an eye for an eye” and “the love of money is the root of all evil.”

Christian literacy is not enough, however. To understand foreign policy on Tibet, for example, one needs to know something about Buddhist monasticism and the Dalai Lama. To follow the ramifications of the “under God” language in the Pledge of Allegiance, one needs to know something about the nuances of both atheism and polytheism. And to fully engage in debates about the war in Iraq, one needs to be informed about jihad and the Islamic tradition of martyrdom (a tradition, it might be noted, that Muslims adapted from Christians and Jews). The war on terrorism is to a great extent—a far greater extent than most American politicians recognize—a war of ideas. To wage that war, one needs to be equipped with ideas—to understand, among other things, the religious underpinnings of Osama bin Laden’s strategy to engage “the crusader-Zionist alliance” in a clash of civilizations.<sup>23</sup>

### Religious Literacy in Practice

In this book religious literacy refers to the ability to understand and use the religious terms, symbols, images, beliefs, practices, scriptures, heroes, themes, and stories that are employed in American public life. Some of this is factual information, which might be learned, as students often learn vocabulary words, by simple memorization. So this book’s proposals are open to the criticisms of “rote learning” that descended upon Hirsch



when he published his controversial list of "what every American needs to know." But religious literacy is not just the accumulation of facts. Tempting as it is to define this book's core concept entirely in terms of doctrine—as the ability to work with such Christian teachings as the atonement or such basic practices as baptism—religious literacy cannot and should not be reduced to memorizing and regurgitating dogma. To return again to the Christian example, surely religious literacy also includes knowing the key characters, images, and stories in the scriptures, rites, and history of the church. And so, in addition to doctrine, this book's definition of religious literacy includes narrative. To be religiously literate today is to be familiar with the creation story in Genesis and the apocalyptic horrors of Revelation. It is to know that David triumphed over Goliath, even though David was small and Goliath was big, perhaps to know as well that David felled the giant with a stone. Religious literacy, in short, is both doctrinal and narrative; it is conveyed through creeds and catechisms, yes, but also through creation accounts and stories of the last days.<sup>24</sup>

Like other forms of literacy, religious literacy is more a fluid practice than a fixed condition.<sup>25</sup> It is the ability to participate in our ongoing conversation about the private and public powers of religions. But that ability itself depends on knowing basic information about Christianity and other religions, and that basic information changes over time. Certain religious terms that were widely employed in American public life in 1776—Socinianism, to take just one example—are no longer in circulation today. And terms, such as Wahabism, that were not noteworthy as recently as the 1990s now circulate widely. Because of the rapid rise of religious diversity in the United States since Congress opened up immigration from Asia in 1965, understanding the basics of Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism is far more important than it was a half century ago. Nonetheless, understanding Christianity and the Bible must remain the core task of religious literacy education, if only because Christian and biblical terms are most prevalent on our radios and televisions, and on the lips of our legislators, judges, and presidents.

There are many uses to which religious literacy can be put. Religious literacy can be used to firm up the faith of young people raised in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod or Reform Judaism. It might be seen, in other words, as a way to keep teenagers on the straight and narrow, to convince young adults to marry inside the faith, or to give adults the courage to share their deepest convictions with their friends. Some read-

ers might assume that this is my agenda. After all, many who speak out on religion in public life have theological axes to grind; they are out to promote Roman Catholicism or to ridicule fundamentalism or to turn the United States into a theocracy of this or that sort. But my agenda is not religious. It is civic and secular. I was raised an Episcopalian and, if pressed, will fess up to being a Christian. I prefer, however, to describe myself as religiously confused. Like many Americans, I find far more questions than answers in the world's religious traditions, and my attitude toward people who possess firmer faith than my own is awe rather than fear. Regardless of the measure of my faith (and doubt), however, I write here not as a believer (or unbeliever) but as a citizen. My purpose is not to foster faith or to denigrate it. Neither is it to advance the liberal arts or to boost high school students' SAT scores (though these are both laudable educational ends to which religious literacy might be put). My goal is to help citizens participate fully in social, political, and economic life in a nation and a world in which religion counts.

To put this goal in more personal terms, my hope is that readers will come away from this book empowered to talk about religion in their homes, at work, in houses of worship, and in the rough-and-tumble of local and national politics. I hope that readers will be emboldened to ask questions about their own faiths and to learn about the religious traditions of others. A neighbor of mine—a conservative Catholic—told me recently that she and many of her Catholic friends go mum whenever the topic of religion comes up in everyday conversations out of a fear that, if they speak up, their ignorance will be quickly found out (presumably by biblically literate Protestants). At least one study supports this anecdotal evidence, reporting that many Catholics harbor "feelings of inadequacy" in the face of conservative Protestants "better versed in Bible knowledge." Catholics may find it reassuring to learn that the average American Protestant knows very little about the Bible. I find it troubling, however, that members of America's largest religious group (Roman Catholicism) feel that they cannot discuss religion even with their friends, not because of qualms about mixing religion and politics but because of fears about making fools of themselves. I doubt, moreover, that such anxieties are confined to Catholics. This book aims to allay these anxieties and quiet these fears by offering readers of all faiths (and none at all) the confidence they need to participate in religious discussions.<sup>26</sup>



So much for what religious literacy is and does. How might we cultivate it?

### What to Do?

One way of course is for individuals to read the Bible or the Quran, or both. Individuals can also peruse the Dictionary of Religious Literacy in chapter 6 of this book. This dictionary defines key terms from Christianity and other religions, focusing on the religious symbols, beliefs, rituals, holidays, scriptures, people, places, and historical events employed in public life for political purposes. It also refers in many cases to specific instances in which these terms have been used—references to Adam and Eve and Sodom and Gomorrah in the gay marriage debate, for example, or President George W. Bush's description of the war on terrorism as a crusade, or Senator Hillary Clinton's characterization of restrictive immigration legislation as contrary to the spirit of the Good Samaritan. This dictionary delivers, in other words, the basic vocabulary one needs to become a religiously literate US citizen, and to allay anxieties about discussing religion over the water cooler or in the living room.

In addition to empowering individual readers with the basic building blocks of religious literacy, this book suggests how religious literacy might be cultivated in our collective lives. Churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples can do much to address our collective ignorance—to follow the commandment to “remember” made repeatedly in the Hebrew Bible. Religious leaders can preach from their scriptures more plainly and more regularly. Religious congregations can go “back to basics” in their Sunday schools and religious camps. But even if America's religious congregations were to step up and start teaching effectively the faiths of their fathers and mothers, that would affect only regular attenders. And even they would come to know only their own religious tradition (and from one particular perspective).

The media could help too. Since 9/11 mainstream print and broadcast media have gotten religion. Many major newspapers have religion beat writers, and it is no longer rare to see an intelligent program on religion broadcast on national television. But it no longer appears to be the media's vocation to educate the public—entertainment is the new god—and even if it were, the media's own plague of religious illiteracy would prevent them from doing much good.

The most effective way forward, therefore, is to focus on secondary schools and colleges. America's private and public educational institutions need to get religion, to start seeing teaching about religion not as a

third rail but as the “Fourth R.” Two barriers currently stand in the way: misinformation about the constitutionality of teaching about religion in schools, and a misguided approach to religious studies in colleges and universities. Each of these barriers can be overcome if American citizens come to understand what the US Supreme Court has actually said about religion in the public schools, and if religious studies experts stop preaching the gospel of religious relativism.

This book argues for both the constitutionality and the necessity of teaching about religion in public schools and higher education. In this respect its proposals might be understood as advocating “civic education,” which one group defines as the inculcation of the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and virtues necessary for “self-government” in our “constitutional democracy.”<sup>27</sup> And my proposals do engage the “civic education” debate. This book shares with the writings of Professors Eck and Wexler the conviction that teaching about religion is first and foremost a civic enterprise. However, unlike others who have advanced civic arguments for the study of religion in our schools, I focus on spreading knowledge rather than inculcating virtues. Today many are not so sure that morality needs religion as a prop or that religion's first order of business should be performing such a role. Scores of books have been written about America's moral decline. This book addresses a different problem: our descent into religious ignorance.

My argument concerning the academic study of religion in secondary and higher education is threefold: first, that teaching about religion is an essential task for our educational institutions; second, that the primary purpose of such teaching should be civic; and third, that this civic purpose should be to produce citizens who know enough about Christianity and the world's religions to participate meaningfully—on both the left and the right—in religiously inflected public debates. High school and college graduates who have not taken a single course about religion cannot be said to be truly educated.

Like the scene in *The Wizard of Oz* in which Dorothy opens the door to a Technicolor munchkin land, many key chapters in US and world history leap from black-and-white to color once you realize the role religion played in them—how the Inner Light of Quakers shaped the abolitionist movement, how biblical criticism lent the women's rights movement much of its early brio, and how the theological mouthful of “dispensational premillennialism” fed the bottom line of software firms during the months before Y2K. The same is true of the stories that appear in the morning paper and on the nightly news. Suicide bombings in the Middle



East, the enduring popularity of *The Da Vinci Code*, the latest diet fad, the Yankees–Red Sox morality play, and the ritual cycles of presidential elections all make far more sense (and are far more intriguing) if these tales are not stripped of the coat of many colors that is religion.

But more intriguing is not the whole story here, since in addition to making the world more interesting, religious literacy also makes it less dangerous. Of course, getting past religious ignorance is not the panacea some advocates of interreligious dialogue imagine it to be. (People sometimes kill their enemies not because they do not understand them but precisely because they do.) Still, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that some of the bloodletting in such places as Waco and Afghanistan and Iraq might have been avoided if we had understood a bit better our own religions traditions, and those of others.

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## Part 1

# The Problem