

## **Fostering Religious Literacy Across the Disciplines**

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Religion permeates everything - being informed about it endows one with deeper insight regarding artistic, business, and international phenomena. People who are religiously literate are in a better position to examine and respond to individual, interpersonal, and political dynamics - from human development, the fine arts and identity studies to history, science, urban planning, public policy and health care. The ability to navigate and recognize the perspective and influence of world religions can inform collaborations, organizational management, and responses to current issues. It is a key that empowers people in addressing circumstances from increasingly diverse neighborhoods and workplaces to national and world events.

Opportunities exist to discuss and discern religion's influence in an array of contexts alongside the valuable scholarship taking place in departments of Religious Studies. Just as effective writing and communication are often addressed in courses that complement the lessons of English departments, religion can be tapped as a topic of study within the framework of many fields and in educational programming beyond the classroom.

In recent years, educators and policy makers have focused on articulating and assessing areas of proficiency deemed necessary for students to achieve success in the twenty-first century. Among these is the ability to discern and trace the role of religion in society as well as manifesting skills needed

to interact professionally and personally with associates who hold an array of worldviews and observe a multiplicity of customs.

## **Religious Literacy in Action**

What does religious literacy look like? The Center for Religious Literacy website (Bogen) maintains that there are three aspects to this capability. First, there is awareness of the purpose of religion as a whole; the role it plays in personal and public life, the basic questions about human experience that it attempts to answer. Second, religiously literate individuals are versed in basic details and resources about the beliefs and customs of many world religions.

Third, religious literacy encompasses the ability to critically analyze the role of faith and interactions between and among members of various groups. The capacity to determine the role of religion in belief, values, decision-making and life events can be fundamental in creating meaningful connections and interacting constructively with others in contemporary society.

The Society for Values in Higher Education's Wingspread Declaration on Religion and Public Life states that it is necessary to:

...understand how religions work.... the constructive and critical appraisals of religion's historic and contemporary significance and, in particular, its impact on public life.... the historical relationship between religion and the disciplines—sciences, humanities, arts, and social sciences—and the professions, as well as the contemporary relevance of religion to the disciplines, the professions, and public life...(this includes) the need to adhere rigorously to

disciplinary procedures for constructing hypotheses and disciplinary standards for evaluating theories and truth claims (2005, pp. 21-22).

There are several reasons an educated populace should be literate regarding world and indigenous religions. On an intellectual level, a person conversant regarding world religions is in a better position to engage in analysis of historical movements and cultural trends. People with a grasp of America's religious foundations have a greater understanding of the values and motivations that led to many of our social movements and institutions.

This is also the case when it comes to analyzing and discussing literature. English professors at top-ranked American colleges and universities were surveyed regarding student familiarity with the Bible. An overwhelming majority (92 percent) of respondents indicated that students with a working knowledge of Biblical themes and ideas have an advantage over their peers in reading literature (Wachlin and Johnson, 2006, p. 6). The professors listed thirty-six genres for which this background is crucial to deep understanding.

Among the genres listed were Medieval literature, children's books, Postmodernism and African-American poetry (p.18).

In open-ended follow-up questions, a number of respondents volunteered that knowledge of other faiths is also important in analyzing literature (p. 37). Social commentators point out that Biblical narratives commonly appear in contemporary arts and media, including movies, music and comedy, and that familiarity with these themes can enhance one's experience of these arts (Mattox, 2009).

Literacy regarding religious beliefs and practices has pragmatic implications, as well. Globalization and the internationalization of workplaces have led to increased

interactions among people of different nationalities and faiths. In order to communicate and collaborate effectively, it is necessary to be aware of the range of beliefs and rituals, as well as how these can affect the professional arena.

Competence in discerning the influence of faiths and traditions empowers interpersonal interactions outside of the workplace, as well. In neighborhoods, social, and recreational groups, religiously literate individuals may be more adept in appreciating and interacting appropriately with those whose practices differ from their own. People aware of the varieties of religious expression can be attuned to situations where religious customs may be a factor, and have a better sense of questions to ask regarding expected behavior.

It is also important to be informed regarding the role of religion in the public sphere. One cannot comprehend the foundations of America's institutions and values without being conversant in the religious ideologies on which they are based (Wachlin & Johnson, 2005). Policy and regulations that affect everyday life are often influenced by religious convictions and practices. Legal debates impacted by religious beliefs have included stem cell research guidelines, end of life care, capital punishment, displays of the Ten Commandments on public grounds, same-sex marriage, and workers' rights to be excused from work in observance of holidays. Americans with a grasp of the religio-historical background and current perspectives surrounding such issues are better equipped to fully understand and engage in the discourse around them.

There are dangers to being uninformed about religion. Religion professor Stephen Prothero warns of the consequences of an uneducated American public:

In an era when the public square is, rightly or wrongly, awash in religious rhetoric, can one really participate fully in public life without knowing something about Christianity and the worlds' other major religions?...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 (the press) (2007, p. B6).

An aptitude for discerning and discussing the role of religion in contemporary life is an important component of being an involved and productive citizen.

Unfortunately, the American populace is lacking in its level of religious literacy. Prothero comments that

Americans are not equipped for citizenship...without a basic understanding of... the world's...religions... There is doubtless a widening gap in the United States between what we actually know about religion and what we ought to know...the basic symbols, beliefs, practices, and narratives of...at a minimum, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and the religions of China (pp. B6-B7).

## **Facing the Challenges**

Because religion has such a broad-reaching effect on many disciplines and areas of life, there is value to studying it in the context of other fields. Faculty in the arts, professions, social sciences, and even natural sciences may find opportunities for students to examine the intersection between religion and their subject.

However, there are several challenges facing educational institutions and individuals who would like to do so. First, teaching about religion under the umbrella of other disciplines may be perceived as controversial. In *God on the Quad*, Naomi Schaefer Riley discloses that 8% of undergraduates surveyed nationally reported having attended classes in which references to religion were made on a regular basis (2005, p.3). She points out that “The attitude that faith and intellect are incompatible has a long history in America” (p.8). Academics - particularly those in secular and public institutions - may be concerned that teaching about faith may validate and strengthen its influence to the extent that poses a threat to scientific inquiry. There are members of the scientific community who experience religion as suppressing scientific progress while, in turn, some members of religious communities perceive scientists as challenging - perhaps even violating - core sacred beliefs. The heated debate about teaching evolution in public schools is a prime example of this conflict. After a long history of often extreme antipathy between both groups, it can be difficult for some academics to recognize the value of holding a worldview – including an avowedly atheistic one - and at the same time being versed in the ideologies and dynamics of world faiths.

Another aspect of this controversy arises from apprehension by some educators that teaching about beliefs implies indoctrinating or converting students to become religious adherents themselves. The distinction between teaching faith to promote belief and practice, and teaching about religion from an academic perspective, can be unclear.

Faculty may struggle with means of addressing religion – particularly in the context of other studies - in an objective, impartial manner.

A second obstacle to promoting religious literacy is that educators of disciplines outside religious studies may lack background and training to address such a complex topic that does not fall within their area of scholarly expertise and inquiry. Gathering information to teach about religion as a historical force that is also dynamic and current is no trivial venture (Henderson, 2003). The prospect of locating credible resources that provide accurate information on faiths, including those with which the instructor may be minimally acquainted, can be disconcerting.

Third, religion is often a deeply personal topic, one about which students may have strong emotional reactions.

Learners may express these reactions in class through resistance, withdrawal, confrontation, attempts to proselytize, or asserting details about their faith that conflict with widely held academic perspectives. It can be daunting for faculty to consider engaging students in scholarly discussion, exploration and critical thinking about a topic that holds so much personal meaning.

However, if we do not foster an understanding of religion and its influence in the world, we will be doing our citizens – and our nation - a disservice. Jon Butler says it is crucial for educators to examine:

... first, how religion could have survived so deeply and so aggressively in the 20th century; and secondly, how religion has survived and prospered and even changed given the nature of modernity. In what way have the conditions of modern life — anonymity, technology, the rise of the corporation, bureaucratization, the very factors that Weber thought would lead to the decline of religion — transformed the phenomena that we call religion? Have they? Shouldn't we know that? Shouldn't we know something about some

kind of transformation, standing as we do amidst a world exploding with religious vitality as well as religious conflict? (Henderson, 2003, p. 6)

The objective is to identify means of doing so in a manner that is effective and in keeping with the protocols of critical thinking and intellectual inquiry.

There are many means of promoting religious literacy across our campuses. One option is to offer courses addressing religion in the context of professional development or disciplinary inquiry. Models include the University of Missouri's Religious Literacy and the Professions e-course, Berry College's class on Religion and Politics in the United States, and the Environmental Stewardship course offered at Colorado College. Some institutions provide opportunities for students to engage in interfaith dialogue as part of established classes, as Bethel University has for select courses in social work, philosophy and literature. Others tap the arena of student life to enhance knowledge of world religions. Students at University of the Pacific have been able to participate in international expeditions focusing on matters of interfaith and social justice, and/or join a residential learning community that explores these topics. LaGuardia Community College – one of the most culturally diverse colleges in the United States – has encouraged faculty to increase expertise on the breadth and nuances of religious experience through a series of campus-wide interfaith dialogues.

Educational institutions are in a position to take the first step, to create programs across the curriculum and in student life that address the challenges and remedy the ignorance. They can provide direction and support for faculty who feel the risks of illiteracy outweigh concerns over broaching a



complex, sensitive subject. Academies can provide opportunities for students to examine religion in the context of other disciplines and events to discern how and why it has such a broad influence. And schools can offer learners means of developing skills in communication, thoughtful decision-making, and cooperation with people from a variety of backgrounds.

In an era of increased globalization and information – as well as misinformation – it is vital that educators to confront concerns, address long-standing disputes, and identify means of preparing citizens to function fully in a diverse, complex world. The opportunity exists to promote awareness and tolerance over fear and ignorance, to foster communication and cooperation over suspicion and stereotyping. The time is ripe to educate for religious literacy.

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