

Religion Today
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Religion in America
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In a recent survey, college seniors were asked questions from a high-school level test on American history. More than 75 percent scored a D or below! While the disappointment expressed by history professors, politicians and the media over the students' performance is certainly justified, it was the questions on the test that I found most disappointing. Despite this country's proud religious heritage and the influence of religion at nearly every stage of our history, none of the questions asked about religion. It was as if religion had been dropped from the curriculum. So although the survey showed that students have forgotten the names, dates, and places of American history, they were never expected to know the importance of religion in shaping our country. How did our education system arrive in this situation? It all boils down to the separation of church and state. In the early part of the twentieth century, the boundaries between church and state were not clearly defined with regard to schools. All across America, school systems had a variety of relationships to local churches and religious practice. Aspects of American religious history were taught in various degrees of detail. Then, following the end of World War II, uncertainties began to arise concerning the appropriateness of the intertwining of churches and schools. The doubts continued into the 1960s when the Supreme Court ruled that schools were permitted to teach ABOUT religion(s), but they were not permitted to teach religion, i.e., to indoctrinate. Thus, the court approved teaching of the role of religion in American history. So it would seem that the matter had been resolved. But not so. The Supreme Court's ruling banning teacher-led school prayer ushered in an era of litigation over religion in schools, which has continued to this day. Although the controversy focuses on religious prayer, it has spilled over into instruction about religion. The fear of legal action has led schools to "sanitize" their curriculum, to take mention of religion out of the curriculum. This has not been from any fear of religion, but from the fear of being sued and the tremendous costs that suits entail. School district budgets are stretched as it is, without having to find several

million dollars for legal expenses. The victory granting the ability to teach students about this country's religious heritage has thus been squandered by the political controversy over school prayer. So what kinds of questions should high school students, college students, and "life-long learners" be able to answer about religion in our country's past? Here are three true/false questions you can test yourself on: 1) The Puritans believed that everyone in America should have the freedom to follow any religion and to worship in any way they chose. 2) At the time of the American Revolution and the founding of the American Republic, Baptists strongly supported the separation of church and state. 3) In the slavery debate preceding the Civil War, the Bible's explicit statements about slaves supported the pro-slavery position best. Check the answers below and see if you don't agree that religion's role in shaping American culture and history needs more emphasis at all levels of learning, from our elementary schools to our senior citizens. Answers: (1) false - Puritans were interested in freedom of religion for themselves only, it was Roger Williams, Rhode Island's founder, who promoted religious freedom for all; (2) true - historically, Baptists have been some of the strongest believers in the separation of church and state; (3) true - the Bible never explicitly condemns slavery, its statements assume that slavery is a normal part of society.