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Religions: Which is better, education or ignorance?

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Americans' ignorance of religion and what to do about it was a big topic in March. At the beginning of the month, the media hyped Stephen Prothero's new book "Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know and Doesn't."

Then mid-March saw Time Magazine's feature story "The Case for Teaching the Bible," by David Van Biema. Finally, on the month's last day, Stanley Fish responded to Van Biema with a New York Times column titled "Religion without Truth." Although Fish does not address Prothero directly, the two clash swords on the question of whether it is possible to educate people about religion.

Prothero, chair of the religion department at Boston University, begins his book by describing results from religion literacy surveys. He observes that less than half of American adults can name one of the four gospels or the first book of the Bible. Most people surveyed believe Jesus was born in Jerusalem.

Evangelicals do only slightly better than the general populace: 44 percent can recognize a phrase from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount ("Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God") as opposed to 37 percent of other people surveyed. But in a recent Gallup poll, fewer born-again teenagers knew that Paul was blinded during a vision on the way to Damascus than did students attending private schools.

When the subject changes from the Bible to Christian history, the results are worse. And when other world religions are brought into the picture, poll respondents know even less.

Given this woeful lack of religious knowledge in an age when religions and religious rhetoric seem to dominate public discussion and international events, Prothero argues that Americans need to improve their knowledge of religious matters. Most importantly, what is needed is a return of religion to the K-12 classroom. This should happen in the form of academic education about world religions, rather than as a platform for proselytizing or catechism.

This is where Van Biema's article comes in. He explores various schools' attempts to teach about the Bible in a balanced manner without advocacy. He finds some teachers manage to do it successfully. His essay ends by calling for the expansion of education about the Bible and religions.

The crux of Prothero's and Van Biema's calls to reintroduce education about religions into public schools is that the subject be taught by bracketing the religions' (and the Bible's) truth claims. All religions claim to present the truth about ultimate reality, about God(s), creation, and the place of humanity in it. The problem is that these claims differ. Indeed, they differ among most Christian denominations. To prevent continual squabbling about which religion's claims are correct (an unresolvable debate), the class would teach about what different religions (or branches of a single religion) believe, but not address the question of whether or not those beliefs were true.

Stanley Fish leaps in at this point, roundly criticizing Van Biema and Prothero for gutting the heart of Judaism and Christianity. It is the truth claims of these religions, Fish argues, that give each its identity. "Take them away and all you have is an empty shell...If you're going to cut the heart out of it, why study it at all?"

At first reading, Fish's argument resonates strongly. But upon further consideration it fails to add up.

First, all religions claim the truth. If we extended Fish's logic and studied none of them, then we would never understand a sizeable portion of human belief, action and knowledge. Since religion is one of the three most influential forces in human decision making (along with family and finances), that leaves a lot of ignorance about what motivates human beings.

Second, Fish misunderstands Prothero and Van Biema when they talk about avoiding the question of truth claims. Fish holds up truth claims in general as the problem. Not so. What is bracketed out is the consideration of whether to assent or dissent from those claims. Fish fears the mere existence of calls for belief, while the academic study of religion embraces those calls. It sees in them the essence of a religion and races to study them, to understand the specifics of what people are being called to agree with. But it holds that one can study truth claims without having to address the question of belief in them.

In this world in which daily news reports reveal how religions and religious people impact our lives, the survival of our children depends on understanding the world's religions, both at home and abroad. We should find ways to educate our children in the beliefs and practices of the world's religions, as well as their own.