

# Religion Today

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## *What do we know about religions?*

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"OK, class. Sit down. We're going to have a test."

That's how Boston University religion Professor Stephen Prothero recently began the first class meeting of an introductory course about religion, as he relates in his recent book, "Religious Literacy."

Nearly all students failed.

Perhaps some of the questions were obscure. For example, he asked them to name a Hindu religious text (any text!). Only a quarter of them could come up with the Rig Veda, the Mahabharata, or the Yoga Sutras, even though Hinduism is the world's third largest religion. How about identifying the four noble truths of Buddhism, the foundational belief of the fourth largest religion? Few non-Buddhists could answer.

Some questions weren't quite so foreign, but the results were still disappointing. Most students could not list the New Testament's four gospels, and just one in eight could give the first five books of the Bible. Only one in six could identify "Blessed are the poor in spirit" as Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

It is not just students who have poor religious literacy. National surveys reveal adult religious knowledge is just as low. Only half of American adults can name even one gospel, while most cannot identify the Bible's first book. And, although I cannot believe it, most people in one recent survey said Jesus was born in Jerusalem—even though "O Little Town of Bethlehem" is sung every Christmas.

As a professor of religious studies, I find this apparent lack of religious knowledge quite disturbing. Either people are woefully ignorant of important religious information, or religions are simply no longer important. Neither possibility seems acceptable or correct. More research is needed.

So, this fall I gave a similar test to my own introductory students. They did significantly better when 85 percent could identify all four gospels. Even more knew that Genesis was the Bible's first book, and about half recognized the first five books of the Bible. Their knowledge of non-Christian religions was not as strong. Although three-quarters knew that the Quran was Islam's holy book, less than half could identify one of Hinduism's sacred texts. Interestingly, about 40 percent knew that Ramadan was Islam's month of fasting.

Overall, my students did better than Prothero's class and other people questioned in various surveys. What accounts for

this difference? Is it that my students were that much more knowledgeable? Not really.

The difference comes from the way we asked the questions. Prothero posed fill-in-the-blank questions. I gave them multiple-choice questions. Multiple choice expects students to recognize the correct answer when presented. Fill-in-the-blank requires test takers to come up with the answer out of their memory with no hints. Like phone surveys (where someone calls when you are in the middle of doing something and expects you to answer questions on some other topic), Prothero's test was done "cold," with no studying or warning.

I once did a survey about coffee; when they asked me to list familiar brands, my mind went blank and I could not recall any. My memory failure was not atypical of how people react to a surprise test or survey.

The two question types differentiate between active and passive knowledge. Active knowledge is what we use every day. We can marshal it at will, whether in carrying out tasks at which we are skilled or in carrying on conversations with our boss or family. Passive knowledge is knowledge we recognize and with which we are familiar, but which we do not think about from week to week or month to month.

Our brains automatically move information we need on a regular basis into the active category and that which we do not need into the passive category. Ever studied hard in a course to earn an "A" but forgot everything during summer vacation? You did not forget; your brain just shifted it from active to passive when you were no longer using it.

Studies such as Prothero's fail to measure public knowledge accurately. Whether they investigate religious knowledge, historical knowledge, or the names of movie stars, they require passive knowledge to be as accessible as active knowledge.

Like a quiz show, they expect participants to hit the buzzer quickly; there is no time for recollection or preparation. They do not ask for recognition of correct information, but need immediate recall. Our active knowledge of religious information may be weak (since few of us are religious professionals), but our passive knowledge is stronger than most tests and surveys indicate.

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*More information about the program, as well as past columns, can be found on the Web at [www.uwyo.edu/relstds/index.htm](http://www.uwyo.edu/relstds/index.htm).*