

WHY RELIGIOUS LITERACY MATTERS

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"Religious literacy" is not an idea with a precise meaning. What is becoming evident as our national conversation about this matter unfolds is that it means different things to different people. So let me begin my remarks with a definition. I will not be using the term here in the way it has been used by Stephen Prothero, the Boston University scholar who more than any other individual is responsible for generating the conversation we Americans are now having about this subject. For the kind of literacy Prothero has in mind is factual knowledge about the world's great religions, and the reason he is interested in this matter is that in today's world he believes it is essential that Americans have such knowledge if they are to be able to perform effectively as citizens. His concern is a civic one, in other words, and his contention is that this is something that should matter to anyone who believes in good citizenship.

As a political scientist, I understand and to some extent share that concern. But it is not what we are gathered to discuss here. We are here as churchfolk, and the topic we want to explore is the role of religious literacy in our religious lives. So that will be my focus in these remarks. But before getting into the substance of what I have to say, let me say a word more about the definitional issue. What sort of religious literacy are we talking about if our concern is more religious than political? Simply put, it is the knowledge that enables us to be authentic and faithful in practicing the religion we espouse. But that means different things in different religions,

of course. So we need to be more precise about what religious literacy means in our tradition if we are going to make any headway in discussing this topic.

We Presbyterians owe our existence to the Reformed tradition, of course, which means that we are Protestants of a certain sort. I could say a great deal here about what exactly that means for our understanding of religious literacy, but we have another speaker in this series--Eric Springsted--who will be taking up that topic directly. So let me confine myself to this brief summary statement. Above all, religious literacy in our tradition means knowledge of the Bible. But there are many different ways of appropriating what the Bible has to offer, so let me add this further clarification. Religious literacy in our tradition means both theological and Biblical literacy because we assume that the point of our study of the Bible is to learn how to think theologically about life. People need to know the basic facts of the Biblical story, in other words, but in a way that enables them to make theological sense of those stories and use the resulting knowledge intelligently.

With that clarification, let me now get to the main issue I have been asked to address: Does religious literacy matter? Does it matter, that is, religiously? And if so, why?

In discussing this topic I shall be assuming I am preaching to the choir. If I am wrong about that, please correct me in the discussion period. But my guess is that most anyone who chooses to attend an event of this sort believes in the value of religious literacy--perhaps even to the point of thinking that such literacy is necessary if one is to be effective as a disciple of Jesus Christ. But I will also be assuming that even in our churches that view is not widely shared. And I want to begin these remarks by focusing on the problem this presents and offering an explanation of why it exists.

In making the assumption that our churches are filled with people who don't think they need to have much knowledge of their religion, I do not think I am doing anything controversial. My guess is that the lack of basic knowledge of the Bible among congregants is something most church professionals (especially those involved in Christian education) take for granted. And if you listen to what lay people themselves have to say

about the matter, more often than not they will readily agree. The present generation of young adults tend to be more open about this than previous generations, but I have heard plenty of people of my generation (including no small number of session members) quietly concede their lack of knowledge. And thanks to the efforts of the Pew Forum, we now have well documented evidence that Americans as a whole tend to be ignorant about even the basic facts of the religions they themselves espouse.

Why is this the case? And why doesn't it translate into an urgent desire to learn? I am sure there are many reasons, but let me confine myself to one particular consideration that I believe has great importance. It has to do with people's understanding of the purpose of religion.

We all know that people go to church for many different kinds of reasons, some of which have little to do with the purposes churches themselves give for their existence. But there are always trends at work in these matters, and I want to suggest that the indifference to religious knowledge that is so common in our church life today is a product of two developments that are very much in evidence in the religious practice of Americans today.

1) One is the rise of religious individualism--by which I mean above all a state of affairs in which people choose the faith they espouse. This is by no means entirely new, of course, but it is much more common today than it was even 50 years ago. And it creates the following presumption: religion is a personal matter whose content people have a right and even a responsibility to define for themselves. So even if one is a member of a particular religious community, the authority in these matters becomes the individual him or herself. What a sacred text says about God or life's purpose is less important than what I think--or, more precisely, what makes sense to me.

2) The other development I have in mind is not nearly so new, but it has a new manifestation that has been ably described by Christian Smith, the sociologist who spoke at our convocation this past January. It's the idea that the point of religion is mainly to create "good" people--by which he means the sort of niceness that

makes for good neighbors. Smith says this is the understanding of the purpose of religion that young people growing up in our churches today tend to acquire, and he strongly implies that this is no accident because it is probably the view held by their parents (and many other adults in their churches as well).

Why are these developments relevant to our topic? The answer is this: if you hold either of the views of the purpose of religion I have just described, you don't really need to know much about the content of the faith you espouse at all. Even if you call yourself a Christian, you don't need to know much about (orthodox) Christian beliefs because those beliefs don't matter that much. If the substance of my religion is whatever I make it to be, the beliefs that historically have been associated with the Christian religion are only important if I decide to treat them that way. And much the same is true if I think the purpose of religion is (just) to enable me to be a "good" person. One might concede that a few of the Biblical stories (the parable of the Good Samaritan, for example) are useful, but one does not need to know much about the content of the Bible to be familiar with those stories. And in Smith's view, this is one of the reasons why so few of the young people raised in our churches end up staying connected with the church as adults. They view the training they received there much as they view driver's ed: it's a few simple ideas, easily grasped, and once you've grasped them, you don't need to keep reviewing. That would be redundant (to say the least).

So what do we say to people who think in these terms? What's the alternative view of the purpose of religion that leads some of us, at least, to think that knowledge of the Bible (among other things) is necessary? The simple answer, of course, is that there is more to being a Christian than just being a nice person (let alone believing whatever one chooses). But what exactly is it? In our tradition at least, I don't think it is difficult to answer that question. To be a Christian is to be disciple of Jesus Christ, and the purpose of our religion is to enable people to conduct their lives that way. And in order to be a good disciple, one needs to know some things. Keep in mind that in Jesus' day what it meant to be a disciple was to be a learner. His disciples were

people who were followers of this "rabbi," seeking to learn what he had to teach them, and they did this by submitting to the disciplines required in order to be effective learners.

But as true as all that may be, I think it needs to be discussed further if the way of thinking it represents is to have any persuasive power in the environment we now inhabit. In particular, we need to be prepared to answer questions about its value and practical utility. Those of us who are caught up in thinking this way are inclined to take such matters for granted, of course, but other people do not. Indeed, I think it is no exaggeration to say that for many people talk of "discipleship" in anything like the original sense is offputting, if for no other reason than it seems to make demands on their lives that conflict with the many other pressures to which they are subject. So the obvious question for anyone who is not already persuaded is this: why should I want to be religious in that way? And if one is a parent, why should I want my child to turn out that way?

One can give a straightforward theological answer to that question, but let me take a different tack here: Christian discipleship is a way to live life more deeply and thereby to have what ultimately will be a better life. Needless to say, I am not using the term "better" here in anything like the conventional sense. I am not talking about material prosperity or fame or power; those things may or may not come, but that's not the point. Nor am I talking just about "making a difference"--though that comes closer to what I have in mind. Above all, what I have in mind is a life lived with a real sense of purpose--or calling--accompanied by an understanding of things that enables the person in question to cope effectively with whatever challenges (good and bad) life brings him or her. It is the kind of life I believe is rewarding in the best sense because it is so fulfilling. It's what Calvin had in mind, I believe, when he kept saying, over and over again, that God has put each of us on this earth for our purpose, and that our task is to figure out what that purpose is and seek to fulfill it.

What does religious literacy have to do with this? I hope the answer is obvious, but let me spell it out. In our tradition the reason above all that so much emphasis has been placed on familiarity with the Bible is that this ancient book is believed to have transformative power--i.e. the power to transform people's lives. Our

forbears have recognized, to be sure, that the Bible is many things, and that it can be used in many different ways. But their primary reason for insisting that we need to be well acquainted with what it has to offer has been that it has the capacity to speak to the reader in ways that change his or her whole approach to life. This does not mean, of course, that everyone who picks it up will have such an experience. The odds are quite good, in fact, that people who have only a smattering of Biblical knowledge will never have the experience of being moved by it. It takes a deeper kind of exposure to the text for it to be able to speak to us at all effectively.

Having said these things, let me conclude with an admission of something you may have been suspecting all along. In the world we inhabit, the cultivation of religious literacy in the sense I have been discussing here is inescapably counter-cultural. I say that not just because of the obvious secularity of our culture. I also mean to refer to the pace of our lives--and the accompanying pressures to do everything in a hurry. If we want to put ourselves in a position where the Bible (or any other important work of literature, for that matter) can speak to us, we have to resist the temptation to conduct all of our lives at warp speed. We have to create space where something different can happen--where serious attention can be paid to things that really matter to us. And my guess is that an important part of the challenge we face is to persuade people of the value of structuring their lives in a way that this can happen.