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A call for required study of the Bible

By Rich Barlow

'One of the real problems in talking about religion in America today is that we listen too much to the crazy people,' says Stephen Prothero. "And most of us are not crazy."

Trusting in that conviction, the chairman of Boston University's religion department offers this proposal: Public high schools should require one course in the Bible for all their students and another in world religions.

Prothero, a self-described "religiously confused" Christian, would also require religious studies in college. But it's his call for Bible 101 in high school, as he calls it, that may strain eyebrows to the breaking point. He wants the Bible to be studied as literature and for its use, or misuse, throughout history, from world affairs to art. His goal is to address a great irony: The most religious industrial nation on earth is drowning in religious ignorance, both about its own dominant Christianity and about other religions.

He cites surveys showing that most Americans can't even name one of the four biblical gospels and that many high school students think that Sodom and Gomorrah were a married couple. Burdened by such illiteracy, we can't understand religious references and motivations among our politicians and fellow citizens. "I want them to know that Jonah was the guy who was swallowed by the whale," says Prothero.

And when it comes to other religions, ignorance can be lethal, Prothero says. If our leaders had known the differences between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims, "They might have known that, gee, maybe the Iraqis aren't all going to get along once we give them democracy."

"This isn't some hugely innovative concept," he concedes. Eight percent of school districts nationwide offer Bible courses, "and it's not like they're erupting in civil, religious warfare." He can point to some surprising, longtime allies. Atheists, in the form of the American Humanist Association, and liberals, in the form of People For the American Way, endorsed neutral, academic study of religion and the Bible in the 1990s.

By coincidence (or providence, if you prefer), Jeremy Gunn of the American Civil Liberties Union was attending a meeting in Poland about religious education in public schools when the *Globe* asked him about Prothero's idea. Gunn, director of the ACLU's Freedom of Religion and Belief program, declined to address the specific proposal as he wasn't familiar with it. (It's in Prothero's book, "Religious Literacy," due out next month.)

But "the ACLU itself does not have a position on whether nondenominational religious education should be taught in public schools," Gunn said by e-mail. "It does have the position that if religion is taught, it should be taught as a nondevotional topic."

ACLU of Massachusetts staff attorney Sarah Wunsch wonders whether teachers should be the ones to decide that this topic deserves classroom time when art and physical education have been cut in some schools. On the other hand, writes Gunn, the holder of a doctorate in religion from Harvard, "I strongly believe that there is a serious lack of understanding about religion in America, indeed everywhere in the world. So it would be valuable for there to be more education about religion, as long as it is done in a constitutionally acceptable way."

The misconception that there's no such thing as a "constitutionally acceptable way" is a hamstring-pulling hurdle, Prothero says. Still, it's misconception. Among the Supreme Court cases he cites is *McCullum v. Board of Education*, a 1948 ruling that bans public schools from teaching "creed and catechism" in class. But in the ruling, Justice Robert Jackson explicitly green-lighted academic study of religion: "Music without sacred music, architecture minus the cathedral, or painting without the scriptural themes would be eccentric and incomplete, even from a secular point of view. Certainly, a course on English literature that omitted the Bible and other powerful uses of our mother tongue for religious ends would be pretty barren."

While covering his left flank, Prothero also has to mind his right. "The objection from the [religious] right is, 'It's important to do the Bible, but you don't want to treat it as anything other than what it is, which is the word of God.'" Those critics take an all-or-nothing stand, he says; if they can't have "Sunday school in the public schools," they want to swear off religious study altogether.

But those folks don't speak for most evangelicals, Prothero insists. During the 1990s, the National Association of Evangelicals was among the groups siding with the atheists and liberals who supported religious education.

Prothero accepts that there will be a few teachers who will either evangelize or seek to debunk the Bible. The courts will reel in the offenders, he predicts. Americans may be religiously illiterate, but "I'm going to sue" is a phrase that's clearly in our vocabulary.