

Newsweek, March 12, 2007

# The Gospel of Prothero

**A Boston University professor argues that Americans, though 'spiritual,' are woefully ignorant about religion.**

By Lisa Miller

Steve Prothero is the kind of professor who makes you want to go back to college. During an hour lecture of his Boston University course "Death and Immortality," 200 students sat rapt last week as his train of thought led him from the Docetics (early Christians who believed that Jesus was all-God, not flesh), to reincarnation, to Disney World, to Hindu cremation rituals, to Plato's account of Socrates' trial (the day's assigned reading), to "Beauty and the Beast," to a hypothetical suicidal bunny, to a discussion of the merits of exile versus death for a man such as Socrates. To describe Prothero as "quick-witted" or his interests as "interdisciplinary" wouldn't quite do him justice. Prothero is a world-religions scholar with the soul of a late-night television comic.

This month, HarperSanFrancisco will publish Prothero's new book "Religious Literacy," a work whose message is far more sober than its author's affect. In spite of the fact that more than 90 percent of Americans say they believe in God, only a tiny portion of them knows a thing about religion. When he began teaching college 17 years ago, Prothero writes, he discovered that few of his students could name the authors of the Christian Gospels. Fewer could name a single Hindu Scripture. Almost no one could name the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. Prothero, who went to Yale in the early 1980s and speaks of his all-night bull sessions on politics and religion with reverence, realized that to re-create that climate in his classroom, his students first had to know something. And so he made it his job to (1) figure out what they didn't know and (2) teach it to them. He began giving religious literacy quizzes to his students, and, subsequently, to everyone he knew. Almost everybody failed.

His motivation is more than pedagogical. In a world where nearly every political conflict has a religious underpinning, Prothero writes that Americans are selling themselves short by remaining ignorant about basic religious history and texts, by not knowing the difference between a Sunni and a Shiite or the name of Mormonism's holy book. "Given a political environment where religion is increasingly important, it's increasingly important to know something about religion," he says. "The payoff is a more involved [political] conversation."

The book proposes a solution that is at once controversial and familiar: teach religion in public schools. Prothero believes that before graduation from high school, every American should take a Bible course and a world-religions course—dispassionate humanities courses whose purpose is not to catechize or evangelize but to educate. In colleges, he argues, we have science requirements, so why not religion? When Harvard decided recently not to make religion part of its core curriculum, "it missed an opportunity," he says.

The professor is not an advocate for any faith, though he's a great admirer of the faithful. He grew up on Cape Cod, Mass.; at 16, he was on the vestry of St. Peter's Episcopal Church, in Osterville, Mass. In college, he was "born again," but not for long. "The imperative of really believing your friends were wrong, and trying to convert them never made sense to me," he says. Post-college, he flirted with law school, politics and Buddhism until he found himself in graduate school at Harvard in religious history. There, he came to the crushing realization that as an American Christian he could never be a proper Buddhist, and so he returned to the mainline church. Today he defines himself as a "confused Christian."

The book is repetitive in spots and, perhaps as an indication of how fast the religion conversation in America is moving, can feel outdated. "The hard-core atheist," Prothero writes, "once a stock figure in American life, has gone the way of the freak show." Well, except for Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, whose books on atheism have topped the best-seller lists for two years. In Prothero's utopian world, Americans would have enough religious knowledge to debate ethics positions using holy texts, to understand Biblical references in political speeches, to question their own beliefs about

God—and to encourage others to question theirs. Only then will we enjoy one of the greatest privileges of the educated, which is to change our minds.