



RELIGION AND SOCIETY

A Discussion with Dr. Stephen Prothero

Greg Giberson, Alice Horning, and Jessica Tess

On November 9, 2009, Dr. Stephen Prothero, former chair of the religion department at Boston University and New York Times' bestselling author of *Religious Literacy: What Every American Should Know—and Doesn't*, visited the Oakland University campus to meet with students and give a public lecture on the importance of religious literacy in American civic life. During his visit, he graciously spoke with the three of us for a discussion about his book and other related and not-related issues. The following is an edited transcript of that discussion.

AH: Dr. Prothero, could you talk about how you worked on the book and your approach to writing generally? Some of our writing students are interested in how writers work, so could you talk about your writing process?

SP: I like that question. I am increasingly thinking of myself as a writer. Increasingly, when people ask me what I do, I sometimes now say I am a writer. More and more of my friends are publishers, editors, and writers, and fewer and fewer of my friends are college professors. So I like the question. My practice of writing is that I start by rewriting every time I sit down. I write on a computer, so I never start with a blank screen, except for the first day of a project. So, I always go back to something I have written before, and I rewrite it until I get to the point where there is almost a blank screen again; then I start

to create sentences. And I never thought of that as a method, but it definitely is a method. It's what I do on all my projects, whether it is an op-ed piece, or a book or whatever. What that means is that I do a ton of rewriting. Almost every sentence in *Religious Literacy* I read and rewrote at least fifty times. So I am a real advocate of writing as rewriting. Also, in terms of how I work, I am an historian so I tend to have evidence in front of me when I am writing about historical things. The book has two historical chapters and then things that are more like op-ed pieces or public policy writing. But I tend to work with either historical evidence or some other source that I am in conversation with. So it could be E. D. Hirsch's book for example. I might be reading it and he'll provoke me to want to say something and then that will go down on the page.

I also write a lot of my key sentences in other books I am reading. I can't read a book without a pencil in hand. I actually will be reading a book or an article that will be influencing me and I will write in the margin that this will be my lead sentence or this is my first sentence for this chapter, and I write it in the margins. On some pages, I will have some two hundred and fifty words on a page in another book that might actually not have anything to do with what I am writing. It might be a novel that I am reading and something pops into my mind. Then I can transcribe that over to my work. I also am not at all linear in my writing. I need to find the beginning of a chapter or a book. Before that I can't really get going. But once I have the beginning I jump around a lot. I am very happy to be writing the last section of a chapter or the middle section of a chapter. I also find that often the beginning that I thought was the beginning was not the beginning and that's not a problem. But I need to think myself into the belief that I have the beginning to get moving.

JT: You talked a lot about the comparison of religious knowledge in America and in Europe, and noted that in America we are very religious and in Europe not so much. So my question is, are there different religious values in America than those in Europe? Why do you think that is?

SP: One part of that is easy to answer, and that has to do with secularism. Western Europe is very secular. It's actually the only place in the world that is very secular. And it's odd that so many theorists came upon this secularization theory that was so popular not that long ago. But it was because they were looking at Europe. France is very highly secularized. East Germany is really highly secularized. So that part is easy. The United States is a really religious country; Western Europe is not religious. The other piece has more to do with the legacy of the state-church model that the public schools can mandate in religious education. And the old-fashioned mandate was that you learned about Lutheranism if you were in Germany or Sweden. And then that morphed into a kind of ethics or world religion approach. In many of the countries it's actually about ethics, whereas our model has been more a separation of church and state model.

JT: In America we are very religious but we don't have a lot of religious knowledge, while Europe isn't very religious but Europeans have a lot of religious knowledge. So I was wondering how that came about. But you said it comes from different models of teaching?

SP: Yes. I think I would answer that Europe, because it had yoked church and state, got rid of the church after the French Revolution. But in the United States, when we had our revolution, there wasn't the sense that we had to get rid of Christianity because we had gotten rid of the British. On the contrary, there was a sense that the churches might well have helped get rid of the British. And the only church that was tainted by that was Anglicanism, which was hurt. You have a revolution in Europe, and you get rid of religion. Because we didn't have that connection, that hasn't happened here. We had a different kind of Enlightenment here. We had the more moderate enlightenment and less radical enlightenment because church and state weren't in bed together the way they were in Europe. I think that's the main historical reason for that.

AH: I found very interesting the point you made about revolution and the role of religion in pulling the colonists together

and leading to the revolution. Could you talk a bit more about that?

SP: Before the revolution, we had consciousness as colonies. Even when we created the United States, we referred to it as “These United States,” for years and years; until the Civil War it was not the United States. So it was always this federal model that the states were the real entities and then there was this sort of nation that held them together. So I think that was a legacy of the colonies, obviously, that saw themselves as independent, and the first Great Awakening, which was this huge religious revival that went across the colonies, creating a kind of trans-colonial experience that people had not had before. The argument is that this knitted them together into this American consciousness that helped to produce the revolution that then gave us later on the notion of nationalism that we have now.

GG: Your proposal for what can be done or what should be done about religious illiteracy in the United States focuses primarily on public education teaching students about religion. Given your observations that Western Europe, which has much more religious literacy than the U.S., is growing more secular and less religious as objective knowledge about religion grows, what are some of the potential consequences for the religiosity of U. S. society and politics if education about religion is expanded?

SP: One thing is that we chase bogus religious conversation out of the public space. There is this whole argument in political philosophy with people like Richard Rorty who want to say that religion is a conversation stopper so we should not have religion in public spaces. Public space is for secular activities only. I disagree. I think that it is fine to have religious reasons in public space. If you have a democracy with a lot of religious people it’s a very arbitrary requirement that everyone has to translate their religious reasons into secular reasons. If you are an anti-abortion person for religious reasons, I think you should be able to say your reasons in a public space. I don’t think it’s ill-mannered or wrong. But because of the religious illiteracy issue, politicians can get away with a lot of stuff that

they wouldn't if we knew more. And I think one effect of greater religious literacy would be fewer bogus religious arguments in the public space, and I think that would be a positive development. Another would be less religious demagoguery.

If we were empowered and we knew more about religion we wouldn't be led around as much by religious demagogues telling us what we should believe. Another possibility, which is a bit more controversial, is that we might become a less religious society. That often comes up in the Q & A when a smart undergraduate student might ask, "Isn't there a reason why, in Europe, they are so unreligious and they know so much. Isn't that what happens when you know a lot about religion?" I think there's something to that. I think it depends very much on what kind of religion you're talking about. If you're talking about defending forms of religion that disdain the brain and that are all about feeling, then it is possible that widespread religious education would undercut, for example, evangelical piety. I also think that there is a very strong tradition in evangelicalism, going back to people like John Edwards in the colonial period, of really smart people who integrate the head and the heart, integrate intellect and feelings, and I think one effect would be forms of Christianity would be bent around more thoughtful and philosophically smarter traditions of Christianity rather than the sort of "tin man" forms of Christianity—not a more brainy Christianity, but a more thoughtful Christianity.

JT: At my church, our pastor always talks about how it starts with head knowledge and then there's heart knowledge.

SP: I actually think, though, that the way that Evangelical Christianity operates is more about heart knowledge. Then the question becomes whether you get head knowledge with it. Some churches that read my book responded with vigorous campaigns to educate their parishioners, saying "We are illiterate here." I know about a large church in Chicago. I think it is one of the larger black churches with a five-thousand-person congregation. They held an eight week biblical literacy cam-

paign pushing for biblical literacy in their church, saying “This is our problem, and we need to figure out how to deal with it.”

AH: We’ve done some of that in my congregation. We had a multi-session course on Islam, with a focus on how the religious issues play out in the conflicts and it was very helpful.

SP: I think one of the issues or one of the big things about greater religious literacy that’s really important, and this goes to Greg’s question about politics, is that the hope for me is not that everyone becomes a religious studies nerd in America. Or even that our future presidents are going to know everything they need to know about religion to deal with every crisis that comes up internationally. The issue for me more is, “Oh yeah, I took a World Religions course. I think religion has something to do with this. I should ask somebody.” You know what I mean? In other words, just an awareness that the world is a furiously religious place and that I don’t know what I need to know. The classic thing about education is to know what you don’t know. And I think one of the dangerous things about religious illiteracy is that we don’t know what we don’t know. We march into Iraq thinking we understand the situation because we think people want democracy. But we don’t know what we don’t know. We don’t say, “Oh my gosh. Who are these Muslims? What will happen when Hussein is no longer holding this thing together? What are the factions that will emerge? What are the religious factions? What are the cultural factions? We weren’t asking those questions in a sophisticated way. So my hope would be, with Jessica’s generation, if people are raised knowing something about religion and they are elected to office and all of the sudden there’s a big conflict in Kashmir, they’ll say, “Oh. That’s Hindus and Muslims. I need to get some Hindu/Muslim experts in to have a conversation with me so I understand what’s happening.” Whereas right now we might say “Oh. This is a conflict over trade routes into some province.”

AH: So that makes me wonder whether when you say the kind of thing you just said whether people will call you on that and

say you're just pushing for us to have a different kind of foreign policy. Do you know what I mean?

SP: It's hard to see me in that position. First of all, I am really a Liberal Arts person. I'm really actually not that political. But my politics have to do with being really annoyed when people think the world is simpler than it really is. So I'm always pushing my students and taking the devil's-advocate position. I don't think my position can be understood as if I am just a guy criticizing Bush or his foreign policy. I would not have a criticism of Bush about going into Iraq if I understood that he understood the situation in proper religious terms. I don't think he did, and that's my criticism. I would apply it the same to Obama or anybody else. I don't see how religious literacy is a right or left issue. I was aware in crafting my proposals that I was trying to give proposals that both the right and the left would like. I think it should be obvious that the left is going to be more interested in world religions while republicans are more interested in the bible; so they gravitate toward that.

If I am on the Laura Ingram Show, she wants to talk to me about the bible course because she's all excited about it. So that's the right wing piece of it. That's why the student stood up today and asked "Aren't you being a right winger? Throughout the book you talk about world religions, but then the courses seem to be all about Christianity." That's the part the religious right people like. The part that the left likes is the world religions part, understanding world cultures, not being so parochial, knowing that there are a bunch of world religions. So I was aware of that when crafting my proposals.

AH: But do you get that in the various public venues that you speak at, that you're just a liberal, leftwing . . .

SP: Actually I don't. The way I come across in public venues is as more of an intellectual and less of an advocate. I think I do. I mean it also depends on the venue. When I was on Jon Stewart's *Daily Show* he was more interested in trashing Bush, and he used me to do that. And it was funny. And there were cer-

tain ways that I agreed with what he was doing. And I've been on the "Bill O'Reilly Show," and Bill O'Reilly was using me for his agenda. That's the way the media works. I would not go back on the O'Reilly Show. I would go back on the Daily Show with Jon Stewart. So maybe that betrays my politics also.

AH: This is a question that came from my students. Can you explain why you think the knowledge of the history of religious practices and attitudes and behaviors is particularly important now? My students really struggled with the history chapters the most, and so the question is, why do they need to know the history now?

SP: My first argument is, they don't. That's my non-historian part of my brain. They actually don't. They could just see the ways in which this plays out to poor effect in contemporary politics and be persuaded by me. That said, I am an historian and not just by profession; I think historically. So for me history is a liberating discipline showing people that things don't have to be the way they are because they could have been some other way and because in some other place and time they were some other way. And so you can say for example that when Americans debated slavery in the middle of the 19th century it was an incredibly sophisticated biblical discussion, which it was . . . shockingly sophisticated! That is the sort of conversation we don't have and could never have in contemporary American culture about anything. To me it's important to remember that that is possible. I also think that history is always used for political purposes, and so the Religious Right has been using their criticisms of the 1962 and 1963 Supreme Court cases that I cite in the book to say that it was the Supreme Court that secularized America and secularized the public schools. That's just not true. So, it's important to know the history because it's important to know that certain kinds of contemporary arguments are false. But of course there are some who don't care about history so they don't care about the religious right saying that it happened in 1962 and 1963.

JT: In the chapter “Eden” you talk about some of the dangers of illiteracy and how they have led to tyranny in the past. Can you talk about similar dangers we face today with our own forms of illiteracy from potential contemporary tyrants?

SP: That’s the demagoguery problem. That’s the whole issue of democracy and an informed citizenry. That is why the founders pushed so hard for education. Democracy at the time was a tricky thing and the founders were trying to figure out how to make it work. The model of course in Athens was that these were highly educated philosophers who were engaging in the republic. We did not have universal suffrage back then. Women weren’t going to vote. African Americans weren’t going to vote. You had to be a propertied white person to vote, but even so, there was a sense even then that democracy was fragile. So, the danger now is not King George the Third. It’s the demagoguery, the demagoguery of television shows, whether it’s Keith Olbermann on MSNBC or Bill O’Reilly on Fox, or Glenn Beck, who is way worse than O’Reilly, by the way. O’Reilly is an intellectual compared to Glenn Beck. I find Glenn Beck so scary. Bill O’Reilly comes out with positions sometimes that you wouldn’t expect him to take. But Glenn Beck is the kind of guy that any one of us in this room could play, like a character, because he is so predictable. So that is scary and that is based on our ignorance. Michael Moore is another example. He is the Glenn Beck of the left. He’s an absolute ideologue who just doesn’t care about facts or fairness or anything. So that is the danger. I think we rely too much on politicians and ministers and others to tell us what our religion should be informing us of.

One other thing is this . . . I am definitely partial to the prophetic tradition of Christianity and Judaism that says “No” to culture. That’s why I got into Religious Studies. I always have thought that the power of religion and culture is the power to say “No.” And there is no other force to say “No” to as powerful as religion because it can call down the authority of the transcendent to say “No” to George W. Bush or Barack Obama

or Glenn Beck or Keith Olberman and that's a rare resource in a society like ours that has such powerful distribution channels for shaping our minds, whether it's politicians or movies or television or whatever. And we lose that if we forget it, and we don't remember how those prophetic voices sound. What if Martin Luther King Jr. arises and he starts to speak the way he spoke and we are left asking ourselves, "What is he talking about?" If we don't hear Amos and Isaiah in the background while King is speaking then King isn't King. He's just a guy on a street corner with a complaint. But if we hear and understand that religious rhetorical tradition when he speaks, then he becomes a very different person. And so that's another fear that I have about contemporary religious illiteracy. We lose that part of tradition, which is a big part of American politics. It may be the subject of my next book, because of this precise concern about forgetting. So I think that's another negative effect.

JT: Have you ever read the book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*?

SP: No, I haven't but that sounds up my alley.

JT: It talks a lot about the effect of the media on us as a society and about how we used to be as a society and those kinds of sophisticated conversations in a public forum. And it talks about the effect of the media on politics and religion. Actually, when I read in your book about how American society was the biggest group of literate people in the world, I was reminded of this book, because it also talks about that. I'm sorry I can't think of the author right now but it was written in the 80's.

AH: Isn't it Neil Postman?

JT: Yes.

SP: This actually has started a little bit. George W. Bush, when talking with Christian audiences, wouldn't quote from the Bible but he would quote from popular hymns. Do you remember when this was happening? He would talk about like "the power of the blood," "the blood of the lamb" and things like that. And

it was very smart politically because it would get him kudos from the religious right and it wouldn't cost him anything from the left because the left didn't know what he was talking about. But what happened is some reporters, to their credit, started educating the public. I wish I could remember some names but they started outing him on his use of evangelical hymnity, and they would point out that he was quoting from this hymn or that hymn. So he started then to get demerits from the secular left even as he was securing his base. It started to cost him something for doing that, whereas it was free before. And I think that's true with Mike Huckabee as I mentioned. He throws out all these bible quotes and stories and even his followers don't know what he's talking about. But it's kind of like he's "Bible guy." It's kind of weird. It gives him a sense that he has this sacred canopy over him as opposed to people asking how is he using the "Widow's Mite Story" here and does it make any sense? And shouldn't he have a different tax policy if he really cared about the "Widow's Mite Story"? The more we asked questions like that the more we would flush out the things that don't make sense, even as we wouldn't flush out others. For instance, the argument against male homosexuality based on the bible is strong. It's a good resource to use if you want to use that. Not that there aren't biblical resources on the other side either. But there are other issues where the bible is just not a resource, like abortion for example.

AH: Why do you think there is a need for a book like this now and more than, say, ten years ago?

SP: I think George W. Bush really raised the hackles of Americans by speaking so publicly about religion. That's one thing. Religion was, at the time I wrote the book and continues to be today, on the public mind of America. The other reason is more obvious—9/11. For all of the things that have come from 9/11, one positive thing that has happened is that religious studies makes its own argument; it requires hardly any justification anymore. You have to have had your head underground for the last ten years to not have noticed that religion is having an impact on the world. A positive impact. A negative impact.

A deadly impact. A life-giving impact. So, given that, there's an awareness of the power of religion. It makes sense that given it's so powerful we need to know something about it. That's what made the book so timely and what made the book so interesting when it came out.

GG: When I first talked to you about coming to campus, you said you were excited about it because so many students would be reading your book [Prothero's book was the College of Arts and Sciences Community selection] and because you would have such an informed audience ready to listen and interact with you. I wonder why did that excite you and what are the benefits for students on our campus having had a program like this that included such an important discussion about religion?

SP: The first book I wrote sold five hundred copies and was probably read by fifty people because most of the books went to libraries. It took me ten years to write, so I figure I got five readers per year with that book. It's a very good book that actually won an award from the American Academy of Religion for the Best First Book in Religious Studies. I'm very proud of it, but nobody read it. If you're a writer and you spend time working on these projects you want people to read them and spend time talking about them. So I was thrilled to hear that this campus had picked this book and a lot of people were going to read it and not just by themselves. They were going to have these discussion groups and panels, and whether or not any panel was going to be positive or negative about the book at least they were going to be having these discussions. That's what any writer wants. So I was eager to come here to say that if your community is going to do this I want to be a part of it. I hope that what the campus learns from it is that there is this way to have a conversation about religion that is not scary and is not silly and is not overly emotional and is intellectual and important. To participate in that discussion is the reason I wanted to come to OU.

GG: Well, we certainly appreciate that you did. Thank you.