

A Few Words from the Director

April 2010

It is difficult to argue with the claim advanced by Stephen Prothero in his 2007 book on *Religious Literacy* that Americans are a nation of "religious illiterates." There is just too much evidence to confirm that idea, and it keeps accumulating all the time. Prothero, who was one of the featured speakers at the Reformed Institute's recent "Passing on the Faith" event, reports that his own research is now in the process of being augmented by an extensive new national survey conducted under the auspices of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, and my guess is that the results of that study will serve only to corroborate the truth of his claim.

But is this really a problem? Prothero makes a good case in his book for the idea that the ignorance Americans tend to have these days about the major world religions--including the ones they themselves espouse--poses a big civic problem. But is it a religious problem as well? Does it compromise people's ability to practice their own faiths?

It all depends on what the faith in question is--as well as how one conceives of religious practice. If one understands religion to be primarily an affair of the "heart" (rather than the head), a lack of religious knowledge may not matter so much. Indeed, it is not uncommon for people who conceive of religion that way actually to be suspicious of religious knowledge on the grounds that catering to the intellect can get in the way of genuine piety. Prothero points out that ever since at least the time of the Great Awakenings significant segments of American Protestantism have been attracted to this way of thinking, and this is one of the main reasons why so many of us lack basic information about even our own religious traditions.

I have no doubt that some of this sentiment can be found in Reformed churches today, including the PCUSA. We are too actively involved in the wider culture to avoid being influenced by the currents at work in that culture. But it is hardly our natural inclination. For historically Reformed churches, in this country as elsewhere, have very much valued the life of the mind, and they have done so in a principled way. For theological reasons they have insisted that people (laity as well as clergy) need to know certain things about the Christian religion in order to be able to practice it effectively. Learning has thus been an integral part of the kind of Christian piety they have espoused, and they have made it their business to insure that all those under their care (adults as well as children and youth) have been provided with ample opportunities to acquire the knowledge necessary for effective discipleship.

The culture of learned, reflective piety this has produced is one of the great achievements of the Reformed tradition, in my opinion, and I am pleased that, in principle at least, our churches still appear to be committed to maintaining that culture. But principle is one thing and practice another, and I fear that our current practice is nowhere near what it needs to be to address the problem Prothero poses at all effectively. In practice we tend to be ambivalent about the importance of education, which means that we have nowhere near the sense of urgency it would take for us to make any headway in solving the problem. So all too often we end up being more part of that problem than the source of a solution. That needs to change. Surely we can do better.

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