

RELIGION IN AMERICAN HISTORY: AN INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN PROTHERO

Conducted by Randall J. Stephens

STEPHEN PROTHERO'S RELIGIOUS LITERACY: WHAT EVERY American Needs to Know—And Doesn't (HarperOne, 2007) calls for renewed commitment to religious education. A New York Times best seller, the book is a forceful critique of the growing ignorance of religion and religious history. U. S. citizens are markedly more religious than their secular European counterparts. Yet,

unlike Europeans, Americans know very little about ancient and modern religions that have shaped the East and the West. Chair of the department of religion at Boston University, Prothero has authored a number of other books and articles on American religious history. Associate editor of Historically Speaking Randall Stephens recently spoke with Prothero about his work and the state of the field.

Randall Stephens: How has the field of American religious history changed in the last few decades?

Stephen Prothero: Ethnography has dominated religious history since the 1980s. Robert Orsi's *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (Yale University Press, 1985) had a major impact. Scholars started teaching that and Karen McCarthy Brown's *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (University of California Press, 1991). Then Thomas Tweed wrote the influential *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami* (Oxford University Press, 1997). About five years ago I looked at a number of syllabi for American religion courses, and I noticed a shift away from meta-narrative to ethnographic studies, which often have a historical component.

Stephens: How then does Mark Noll's sprawling history, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford University Press, 2002), fit into the field?

Prothero: It doesn't fit. And one of the things that intrigues me is that evangelicals are more willing to do meta-narratives. I've wondered why. Is it because they live inside meta-narratives, or perhaps because they're not as tied into the fads of the profession?

Stephens: Is there a sharp division in religious studies between those who rely heavily on theory and those who don't?

Prothero: Those who do American religious history come at it either from the history profession or religious studies. The latter are trying to tell you something about religion in America, but they're also trying to tell you something about religion in general. And I think that's where theory comes in. If you look at the journal *Religion in American Culture*, the articles always include some theory. In other words, it's not enough to tell a story and provide an explanation. You have to make some broader connections, so that somebody who does Hinduism in India can read the article and think, "Oh that's interesting, what they did with 20th-cen-

tury Pentecostalism." A religious historian from the history side, like Yale's Harry Stout, does not operate with the same set of questions and constraints. Historians seem classically allergic to theory.

Stephens: Are there other concerns that shape how religious studies scholars work?

Prothero: We don't really have a discipline like historians do, so we're always ripping things off from other people. Religious studies still has a lingering status anxiety problem. It has had to justify itself. That's less the case since 9/11. Obviously it's harder for administrators to ask the stupid question: Why should we study religion? I discuss this in my book, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to*



Illustration by Randall Stephens

Know—And Doesn't (HarperOne, 2007). Not long ago I spoke on the subject at the University of Florida. Religious studies students asked, "Why don't you do more with Judaism?" And my answer was, "Because it doesn't matter as much. It doesn't have the same influence that Christianity did and does." That was a historian's answer. I wrote more about Christianity in *Religious Literacy* because 85% of Americans are Christian, because all the presidents have been Christian, and because Christianity is the language of American politics.

I think about the issue of content and emphasis in terms of the courses I teach. In my American religion class I talk about the various efforts to come up with a religious character of America. It's a Protestant nation. It's a Christian nation. It's a Judeo-Christian nation. It's a Judeo-Christian-Islamic nation. The idea of a religiously united country has a history. But then there is another image, which Diana Eck lays out in *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (HarperOne, 2001): we're secular by law, pluralistic in reality. So there's a tension between the two, between the unitive impulse and the more pluralistic impulse. The unitive impulse keeps getting broader. After 9/11 it went to the Judeo-Christian-Islamic idea. That was an interesting conversation: "Are we Judeo-Christian-Islamic or are we multicultural?" The Hindus got in there and sent a letter to George Bush that asked, "Why aren't we at the interfaith gatherings? Why is it that Christians, Jews, and Muslims define the nation religiously?" I occasionally ask my students at Boston University: "Is the United States a Christian country?" The Christians always say no and the Jews always say yes. The Jews tend to reply, "Are you kidding me? Of course it's a Christian country. I feel that every day, I have the sense every day that this is a Christian place where we get Christmas off, but we don't get Passover off."

Stephens: One of the reasons my American religious history students liked your book *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003) was because it shows so much change over time. It's primarily a work of history.

Prothero: A religious studies treatment of the topic would have been more synchronic. The tension between history and religious studies is essentially between anthropology and history.

Stephens: What drew you to the study of religious history?

Prothero: Ever since I was young I was interested in religion. In college I just met a lot of different people who had a lot of different religious perspectives—friends who were atheist, friends who were Jewish, friends who were secularist. I had a kind of crisis of faith in college, actually. I was studying religion and politics, and I took a course with Richard Wightman Fox in American history. From high school I thought that history was the most boring subject imaginable. In fact, when I went to Yale, I said I was going to take every subject except for history. Memorizing dates and names did not appeal to me. Richard taught me that history is as much about argument as it is about the past, which to me was exciting. And so I debated with others about views of the past.

I entered the field through a combination of losing my faith, being interested in religious questions, and then finding history as a way to ask those religious questions without the assumption that I had some great answer to the theological questions.

Stephens: Have you encountered any opposition from religious groups or devotees who feel that they have been misrepresented in your work?

Prothero: Well there has always been that sort of battle between the historian and the believer. After I wrote *American Jesus* I was eager to hear what evangelicals would say about it. In some ways the book is addressed to evangelicals; at least, it has a polemic there. It has a number of polemics, but I think one of them is that I haven't found a Jesus in America that isn't American. Quite a few evangelicals I spoke to commented: "The book has really made me question to what extent my faith is really Biblical and to what extent my faith is a product of American culture. I don't want it to be simply a product of American culture so I'm going to go back and check and make sure that what I believe is really based on the Bible." Quite a few others wrote: "I was really chastened because I realized that a lot of my views of Jesus came from the 1960s." I received very few letters along the lines of: "You should know that the real Jesus is . . ."

Stephens: Why is it that history courses on post-Civil War America seldom cover religious topics?

Prothero: Because academics are secularists. And I think we all have the tendency to extrapolate from our own experience. So you have a bunch of professors at Harvard or Princeton who aren't moved by religion, and they find it hard to imagine anyone else who is. The academy, the law, and the media are the three strangely secular areas of American culture.



"Christ Stilling the Tempest," painted by James Hamilton; engraved by Samuel Sartain, Philadelphia, 1867. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-DIG-pga-03265].

As such, academics have largely misunderstood fundamentalism. I praise fundamentalists for being intellectuals in *Religious Literacy*. They have taken religious thought seriously. There are so many stereotypes of fundamentalists, and one is that they read the Bible literally. That's ridiculous. How do you read a text like Revelation literally?

Stephens: Your work on representations of Jesus through American history sheds light on believers across the spectrum. What do depictions of Jesus over the last one hundred years tell us about the American religious scene?

Prothero: For many, Jesus became detached from the Bible. Visually, Jesus was once portrayed in the context of Bible stories. In *American Jesus* I included images of Jesus stilling the storm, walking on water, or Jesus on the cross. But the images that appeared after Warner Sallman painted his iconic bust of Jesus were markedly different. These new images were not narrative and were not drawn from the Bible.

Stephens: It's literally disembodied.

Prothero: It's only a headshot, but it's also utterly outside of narrative and outside of scripture. It is the visual representation of the shift from knowing Jesus to loving Jesus. What matters now is loving him, and you can love him without knowing him.

Stephens: Something similar has happened as evangelicals stopped singing hymns steeped in theology and started singing simple choruses or love songs to Jesus.

Prothero: Religious literacy involves doctrinal and narrative knowledge. One should know the Bible stories and the teachings of the church. Both of those have been replaced by an experiential engagement with Jesus. That's one feature of American evangelicalism.

Stephens: And another aspect of evangelicalism centers on morality?

Prothero: It's a morality of the bedrooms. Though, when I read the Bible I don't see a preoccupation with that.

Stephens: Why since the 1960s have certain moral issues preoccupied conservative Christians in America?

Prothero: I think it's because the religious Right defined itself against the counterculture. The counterculture as defined by rock music and sexual permissiveness received special attention.

Much of what conservative evangelicals saw in the 1960s had to do with sexuality: the emergence of sexuality in the public sphere, the acceptance of homosexuality, rising divorce rates, premarital sex, and the pill.

Stephens: There is a generational component here, right? Are younger evangelicals as motivated by some of these issues as their parents were?

Prothero: In 2002 Penny Long Marler and C. Kirk Hadaway published a study that investigated the shift among young people into the spiritual-but-not-religious demographic.¹ According to polls, some people associated being religious with being right-wing. So part of what the authors were saying wasn't just that younger Americans didn't like institutional religion; they also didn't like George Bush. In American history we've had the sense that religion is somehow alive in a particular approach to politics. The success of the Republicans in lining up with the religious Right has created an interesting climate. In some cases it has created an opening for people to want who get out of religion in the same way that Europeans have done so. Now the religious Left is trying to get the Democratic Party to strike a religious pose. It makes one wonder whether Americans will be fed up with that approach as well. If Americans see religion as a bulwark for intolerant partisans, they may become jaded.

Stephens: Does knowledge of other religions lead to understanding or tolerance?

Prothero: In *Religious Literacy* I intentionally resisted a sort of happy liberal approach that holds that the more we learn about other religions, the more we're going to get along. I say in the book that sometimes you want to kill someone because you don't know anything about them, sometimes you want to kill them because you know quite well who they are. So I don't think religious literacy is a kind of magic bullet to the problem of intolerance.

Stephens: What are you working on now?

Prothero: My next book project is a world religion textbook. Some readers of *Religious Literacy* seemed to be saying, "give me religious literacy." I modeled that book on E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Vintage Books, 1988). But unlike Hirsch, who only included a list of undefined items in the back of his book, I put a dictionary in the back of my book and a religious literacy quiz. Hirsch was criticized because his list was too narrow.

Stephens: When asked why he didn't include Cinco de Mayo on his list, Hirsch drew a blank

and famously commented, "I'm afraid I don't know what that is."

Prothero: Hence, there were larger criticisms of a narrowly white male view of what mattered. In addition, Hirsch didn't even try to tell you what "Achilles' heel" meant. He just put it on his list. I thought I wanted to provide some content to reli-

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gious literacy. Still a number of readers remarked, "I wish there was more. I wish you had told me more about the world's religions." So I am going to do a book on world religions that tries to be a basic religious literacy text.

Stephens: Do you have any other projects lined up?

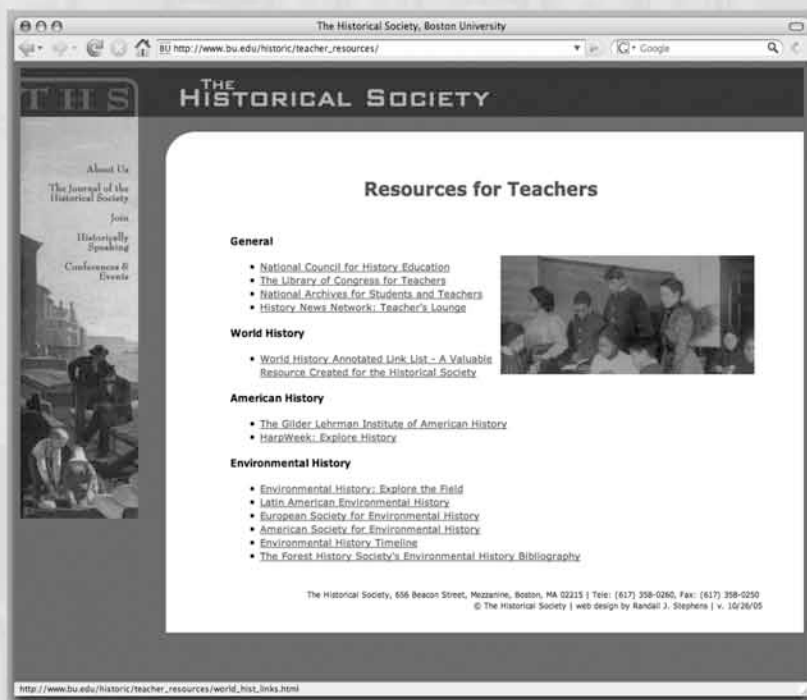
Prothero: I'm doing a history of the United States that looks at that story through the lens of the Ex-

odus narrative. Right now it's called *Exodus: How Religion Made America*, and the claim is that the Exodus story is the dominant narrative of the American people, at least through the Civil War. I'm going to look at the Puritans and other colonists, and I will focus on the early national period and the early presidents who were seen as Moses figures. The African-American story fits well: coming here was compared to crossing the Red Sea, and then northern migration was seen as moving from the Egypt of the South to the Promised Land of the North. There is also the Mormon story, of course, and then the civil rights movement as an exodus story. There's a shift that happens around the time of the death of Lincoln. Lincoln was initially interpreted as a Moses figure and then pretty quickly, a few years after his death, Americans started to see him as a Christ figure. There is a move from a more Hebraic way of reading the American story to a more Christian-like reading of the American story.

¹ Penny Long Marler and C. Kirk Hadaway, "'Being Religious' or 'Being Spiritual' in America: A Zero-Sum Proposition?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41 (June 2002): 289-300.



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