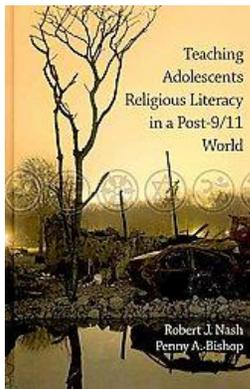


Professional Book Review

Nash, Robert J., & Bishop, Penny A. (2010). *Teaching Adolescents Religious Literacy in a Post-9/11 World*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing. 202 pp., ISBN: 978-1-60752-311-6 (pbk). \$45.99

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Scholars of religion have recently written about pedagogical approaches to religion and how particular faith traditions relate to one another. They describe three distinct concepts: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. An *exclusive* way to teach about religions other than one's own involves negating the significance of other religious traditions to the superiority of one. An *inclusive* way would be to teach that other religious traditions are indeed a part of one's own, rendering the different traditions valid, or that most of the world's religions are indeed part and parcel of universalized morality and thought. *Pluralism* offers legitimacy to each faith tradition studied. Each remains significant for pedagogical intentions. No one religion is superior, nor is there a necessarily universalized morality in a pedagogy that seeks to help the student become religiously literate. The authors' efforts advance their thesis which desires teachers of all subjects to become religiously literate.

In *Teaching Adolescents Religious Literacy in a Post-9/11 World*, co-authors Robert Nash and Penny Bishop rely most heavily on this third understanding. This is a splendid work that seeks to add depth to the emerging canon of pedagogy regarding religious literacy. The authors are academics who successfully wed practice and theory in this work. They understand that teachers, who have the temerity to approach this vital subject matter, must do so with a mind toward a pluralistic approach. They also understand that multicultural education begins with a particular sensitivity toward and knowledge of the various religious and spiritual practices that seek understanding in our increasingly cosmopolitan nation and world. Knowledge of religious difference is power, and power "builds bridges of dialogue and communication" (p. 7). These authors have been thorough in building bridges among many teachers and themselves. They have studied and questioned over 100 teachers in both middle and high school to give credence to their significant book.

On the surface this might seem to be a book that would be used in a comparative religion class or for teachers learning to teach such a class. By no means! It is the authors' intent that religious literacy needs to be acquired by our

middle and secondary school teachers regardless of the subject matter before them. Religious literacy is indeed an interdisciplinary task. Teachers lacking religious literacy, who normally teach math and science in middle and high schools, for example, are quite possibly doing a disservice to their students in our ever-changing schools. They do this by not equipping themselves to teach in classrooms that have a multiplicity of religions, not just a multiplicity of ethnicities.

In 2007 Stephen Prothero gained popularity with his excellent *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—And Doesn't*. Since then a number of helpful articles have been written. In Eugene Gallagher's "Teaching for Religious Literacy" (2009, *Teaching Theology & Religion*, vol. 12, number 3, pp. 208-221), the author, while generally favorable to Prothero's work, finds fault with the Prothero book for its lack of useful suggestions or practical pedagogical tools for the teacher of religion and other subjects. Now in Nash and Bishop's work we have a tool for such practical education. In fact, Chapter 8 of this book is entitled "Religious Literacy Toolbox, Practical Tips for Teachers" and suggests ways that such religious literacy might be approached and taught, along with providing a rationale for making interdisciplinary connections among such subjects as math, science, literature, social studies, and the creative and visual arts.

Before that chapter positing helpful ways that such a religious literacy might be taught, however, Bishop and Nash examine the narrative of each of five major religious movements in the world: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. In each chapter, as a framework for this presentation, they offer a case study. They next apply their pedagogical principles to each case. In each chapter they describe the narrative dimension, the doctrinal dimension, the ethical dimension, and the ritual dimension. Following each explication of doctrines, ethics, and practices, they add on an exceptionally helpful annotated bibliography at the end of the chapter.

This work is quite accessible, even conversational in its tone. In advocating for a pluralistic pedagogical approach, Bishop and Nash first explain their terms thoroughly before launching into the case studies. In the case study chapters they give an historical background of each faith, which helps the teacher understand basic tenets and rituals of each faith. My suggestion for later editions of this book is that they expand their last chapter, which they entitle "Some Lesser Known Religious Narratives" by including a separate section on Mormonism, as its influence in America is significant, especially in western states where in many classrooms it is the majority religion.

Overall, this is an excellent work. The authors succeed in asserting and supporting their thesis that religious literacy can only be furthered if teachers of every subject become religiously literate themselves. They provide for how that can happen with examples provided from the major world religions. They even provide background information on each of these religions, which helps the teacher become literate. I would heartily recommend this book to all who teach high school and middle school regardless of subject matter.