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## get smart ABOUT RELIGION

**Q:** Name the  
Four Noble Truths of  
Buddhism.

**Q:** What is **Ramadan?**  
In what religion is it celebrated?



**Q:** "God helps those who help themselves." Is this in **the Bible?**  
If so, where?



**Q:** The **First Amendment** says two things about religion, each in its own clause. What are the two religious clauses?

This is Stephen Prothero.

**He knows  
the answers.**

(So do we. Look below.)



He's giving a free public lecture at 6:30 p.m. Friday in the Columns Room at MU's Reynolds Alumni Center.

### Author argues that Americans lack religious literacy

By **AARIK DANIELSEN**  
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**F**or many Americans, national identity is connected, in large part, to the country's religious heritage and practice. But do Americans know enough about religion to be good citizens? Unfortunately, Stephen Prothero says, the answer is no.

Prothero, chairman of the Department of Religion at Boston University, is the author of "Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know — and Doesn't," which argues that while Americans are

widely considered a religious people, they actually know very little about religion.

Citing surveys on religious literacy, Prothero points out that only half of American adults can name one of the four Gospels, that most Americans cannot name the first book of the Bible and that 10 percent of Americans believe that Joan of Arc was Noah's wife.

In a lecture at 6:30 p.m. Friday in MU's Reynolds Alumni Center, Prothero will argue that the lack of

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# Religion: Reading, discussions can broaden grasp, author says

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religious literacy among Americans has political implications. With so much of American political life and language tied to religion, Prothero said a basic understanding of different faiths is necessary for both politicians and citizens.

Americans, he said, "are increasingly aware of the importance for politicians to know something about religion for foreign policy, particularly for the war on terror and the situation in Iraq and Iran."

As the 2008 elections draw closer, Prothero hopes voters and journalists will seek to gauge candidates' religious IQs by asking questions similar to the "gotcha questions" reporters have used to test candidates' knowledge of the political leaders of other nations.

"It isn't that I want the president to have a Ph.D in religious studies or anything," Prothero said. "I think if you know a little bit about religion, I think you know what you don't know."

One roadblock to the success of the Bush administration's Iraq policy, Prothero said, is "they don't know what they don't know."

Prothero is a strong advocate for more religious studies education in American public schools and universities. He acknowledges concerns about what many might consider an inappropriate merging of church and state but said they can be overcome with a fresh approach to religious instruction.

Religion is discussed in schools every day "one way or another" in art and history classes, Prothero said. But, for many people, there is not much difference between a course in religious studies and a Sunday school class.

"I think one of the main points that I'll make in my talk is that there's this other way of thinking and talking about religion that doesn't belong to the secular left and it doesn't belong to the religious right," he said. "It's this more academic or more objective way of talking about

religion so that you can talk about the Quran to public high school kids without the assumption that you're either trying to trash the Quran or trying to say the Quran is God's word to human beings."

Prothero said that Americans should trust teachers to deal with the world's religions fairly, just as they do when the course being taught is math or English literature.

"I don't think religion needs to be treated totally differently," he said. "We have similar problems if we have a really right-wing person teaching a course in civics. Can we trust that person to talk about the New Deal in a way that's fair and liberalism in a way that's fair? I think we can. I think that we hold teachers to standards of objectivity when it comes to other subjects, and I think we can do it with religion."

While much of Prothero's book focuses on religious studies education, he also suggests ways that American adults can improve their religious literacy. Book groups can read novels with religious content, for example, or people can simply begin talking about religion with their friends. Reading the Bible, particularly the books of Matthew and Genesis, would help citizens identify "about ninety percent of the references you'll hear in American politics," he said, "things like the Good Samaritan and the Golden Rule."

Debra Mason, director of MU's Center on Religion and the Professions, said Prothero's ideas should resonate in a place like Columbia, which she says has become more religiously diverse in recent years.

"His message is going to ring true, I think, to those who come to listen to him because they're seeing the increasing religious diversity here in Columbia more than you might see it in, say, Moberly, or some other smaller town, and yet, you know, even that's changing, too," Mason said.

## Hickman teacher introduces students to world religions

You can't blame George Frissell for Americans' lack of religious literacy. Since 1987, Frissell has been teaching a comparative religion class at Hickman High School.

The class started 20 years ago when a handful of Hickman High School students asked if the school would offer a class on religion and philosophy. Now, 80 students each year pass through the doors of Frissell's "Classical Ideas and World Religion" classroom.

Other courses in the Columbia Public Schools' curriculum, such as those in the humanities, language arts and social studies departments, touch on religion.

Frissell's course is geared toward studying religion academically and its impact on world events and cultures.

"I've always been interested in the role religion plays in culture," Frissell said.

Frissell, a social studies teacher, developed the curriculum and has taught the class since its beginning. A history major in college, Frissell studied in India on a Fulbright Scholarship and in China, Thailand and Japan through other programs.

The three sections of Frissell's class study everything from Hinduism to Zoroastrianism to the Baha'i Faith to Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Rather than relying on standard textbooks, the class uses primary sources, such as the Bible and the Quran and invites lay people and scholars of the different traditions as guest speakers.

The religious texts Frissell uses include "Bhagavad Gita," "Analects of Confucius," "Tao Te Ching" and "Sermon at Benares."

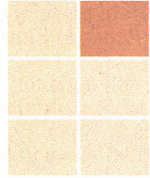
"We go into great depth," he said.

For mid-September, Frissell has arranged a special unit on the indigenous religions of Africa with guest lecturer Robert Baum of the MU religious studies department.

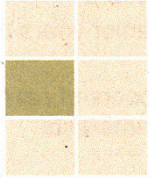
— Taylor Rausch

# answers

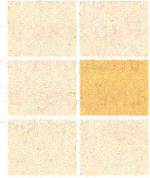
Quiz adapted from Prothero's book, "Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know — and Doesn't."



No. In fact, the statement is contradicted in Proverbs 28:26: "He who trusts in himself is a fool." The words are Ben Franklin's.



1. Life is suffering.
2. Suffering has an origin.
3. Suffering can be overcome.
4. The path is the Noble Eightfold Plan.



"Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."



It's a Muslim holiday characterized by a month of fasting.