



RELIGIOUS LITERACY

After gym class, God 101

The furor over funding religious schools obscures a third way: Giving the study of faith a full place in secular curricula

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[Stuart Laidlaw](#)

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A week Monday, one of TV's most anticipated returning shows will see a minor Old Testament prophet, who warned in turbulent times of impending disaster but offered hope of salvation, find his way through the predictions of yet another Biblical figure who willingly allowed himself to be sacrificed.

This isn't the way most people think of the wildly popular series *Heroes*. But then, many viewers don't know that the names Micah and Isaac – two characters in the show – come from the Bible.

"You can't understand history, art or literature without understanding religion," says Stephen Prothero, chair of religious studies at Boston University and author of *Religious Illiteracy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn't*.

"And TV is full of religion."

While Conservative Leader John Tory has proposed funding religious schools if he wins the Oct. 10 provincial election, there's a growing sentiment that a third option is needed somewhere between secular public education and separate religious schools: putting a little Bible study back in the public curriculum.

"I would like to see public schools become more vital," he says.

Prothero has been at the forefront of this argument. He laments the lack of basic knowledge about religious stories among North Americans, which he says threatens our understanding not only of the arts and history, but world events.

"If we learn anything through education ... we should be learning that there are people in the world who are different from us," Prothero says.

Canadian constitutional expert Peter Lauwers says there might be less demand for faith-based schools if the Bible and other religious texts could once again be studied in secular classrooms.

"Public school boards have been left without an ability to satisfy the religious demands of parents," says Lauwers.

The result has been a boon to private religious schools, which now cater to 53,000 children across Ontario. For the parents of such children, the public system has become too secular, with the values they cherish all but ignored.

"The system no longer satisfies them," Lauwers says.

It need not be that way, he says, pointing out that few inside the education system or out seem to realize that there is actually no prohibition on teaching religion in public schools – just on promoting one religion over all others.

The answer, he says, might be to allow public schools to teach religion again.

This could come in the form of in-class lessons, his preferred option, allowing religious organizations into schools to teach students of their own faith about their religions, either during class time or after school.

Whatever the choice, he says there must be opt-out options for all families.

Such moves, Lauwers says, would cut the demand for separate religious schools by satisfying the desires of those who want their children to get some religion along with their secular education.

"You might be able to get back some of the parents," he says.

Prothero warns that teaching nothing about religion sends the message to kids that religions are worth nothing – something a quick glance at newspaper headlines would prove untrue, and to which many parents object.

Lauwers, a practising Catholic who sends his children to separate schools, would prefer that in-school Bible studies come with some theology, saying they are largely meaningless otherwise. But that idea would likely face stiff opposition.

Justin Trottier, who heads the atheist Centre for Inquiry at the University of Toronto, has few problems with world religions classes — he believes nothing turns people into atheists faster than a religion class – but is adamant that there be no theology. His group has joined forces with others, including Jewish and Islamic organizations, to not only oppose Tory's idea, but to argue for an end to Catholic school funding.

Much better, he says, to have one school together where children can learn about each other and figure out how to get along. Funding faith-based schools, he warns, would see more students shifting to those schools and more faith groups taking advantage to set up their own schools, however small. "Is that the direction we want to go? One-room school for small religious groups and big lavish ones for others?"

Prothero says public schools need to teach religion because churches have done such a poor job. Both conservative and liberal churches have reduced religion down to a moral code – personal sins for conservatives, and societal sins for liberals.

"Morality is part of religion, but it's not the whole of it," he says.

That leaves it to the schools to teach children what they need to know to be fully contributing members of society, responsible voters and able to appreciate such things as the 1,300 references to the Bible in Shakespeare's works, or the meaning of speeches by the likes of Martin Luther King or George Bush.

"This is a democracy where people are supposed to be deliberating on the basis of some knowledge," he says. "But we have people who can't engage on these issues."