

TRANSCRIPT

Religious Literacy

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Why is it useful to learn about religion?

Religion might not seem relevant to the things we study, whether that's biology or plumbing, childcare or psychology, but it often turns out to be closer than we expect. Whether we have individual religious beliefs or not, living in British society means we are likely to have colleagues, classmates and friends with a wide range of religious and non-religious traditions and experiences. Nobody can know all the facts about all these traditions and experiences, but we can begin to cultivate a sensibility to help us handle complex situations and ask respectful questions when we encounter different perspectives. The cultivation of this sensibility is increasingly talked about today in terms of religious literacy.

What is religious literacy?

The American Academy of Religion defines religious literacy as “the ability to discern and analyse the intersections of religion with social, political and cultural life”. It goes on to claim that “teaching about religion ... using a non-devotional, academic perspective” can diminish the kind of “prejudice and antagonism” associated with religious illiteracy. A Report by The Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life published in 2015 takes a similar position, suggesting that “greater religion and belief literacy is needed in every section of society, and at all levels. The potential for misunderstanding, stereotyping and oversimplification based on ignorance is huge”. In short, then, religious literacy is a form of learning that addresses not merely a lack of knowledge, but the stereotypes and prejudices that are sometimes associated with religion and non-religion.

Does religious literacy work?

Some argue that there isn't much evidence that religious literacy really does diminish the stereotypes, prejudices and antagonisms associated with religious and non-religious identities. Critics maintain that religious literacy is an example of what Harvey Graff calls the “literacy myth”. The literacy myth links literacy to Western conceptions of democracy, toleration, economic growth and social progress, and ignores the historical implication of literacy initiatives in the imposition, by the West, of their knowledge and experience on less powerful others.

So if we do want to address the stereotypes, prejudices and antagonisms associated with religious and non-religious identities, what should we do?

We are not going to abandon the idea of religious literacy. In British society before religious literacy, experiences of misrepresentation and marginalisation were the norm. We want to further the public understanding of religions and non-religions in British society, and that means creating safe spaces and opportunities for individuals, groups and communities to meet, learn, ask questions and reflect. But in order to do that, we need to adjust some of the

ways we approach the problems we want to address. Firstly, just as in Gender Studies we work to understand how the idea of gender is constructed, authorised and put to work in different times and places, so what David Robertson has called “religion literacy” can enable us to do the same work with the word “religion”. For example, we might ask ourselves, “What baggage does the word religion carry and what happens when we unpack it?”

Second, we need to understand that the religion literacy we want to cultivate is not a one size fits all, fixed set of skills and dispositions that, once learned, can be applied by anyone, anywhere. Religion literacy requires a combination of understanding – appreciating how and why people do what they do – and action – can we act in ways that are not merely respectful but which are committed to mutual welfare and flourishing. Colleges can provide the kinds of safe spaces for these skills and dispositions to develop, whether that is as part of a discussion over British values in the classroom or a visit to a local place of interest where students can meet and interact with members of different religious and non-religious communities.

Thirdly, stereotypes, prejudices and antagonisms about religious and non-religious identities do not exist in a vacuum. They are often implicated in deep and longstanding experiences of political and economic inequality. Religion literacy can be a social good, but it needs to work in partnership with other initiatives which address wider patterns of disadvantage and harm in our communities and in wider society.