

REPORT FROM THE Center

Spring Programs to examine Religion in the Military

The Center's Spring 2011 programs will focus on religion in the military. Several events are planned, including a film, presentations by nationally renowned scholars, and panel discussions.



Religious scholar and military historian Jonathan Ebel, Ph.D., will speak on "The Role of Religion in Military Memorial Practices" on Wednesday, March 2, 2011. Dr. Ebel's presentation will explore the visible and invisible ways that religion helps shape various forms of honoring and memorializing our fallen soldiers. A panel discussion on these themes, featuring VWC students, faculty, and military chaplains, will follow on Thursday, March 3, in Blocker Auditorium.

On Thursday, March 3, internationally known classics scholar Kurt Raaflaub, Ph.D., will give a presentation on "The Athenian Ways of War." This event, which



Jonathan Ebel

is co-sponsored by the VWC Classics department, will offer an opportunity to compare ancient and contemporary approaches to these issues.

Finally, on Thursday, March 24, a panel featuring Center Director Paul Rasor and VWC students will discuss protests at military funerals. Discussion will include the case of Snyder v. Phelps currently before the U.S. Supreme Court, involving members of a Kansas church who picketed the funeral of a fallen Marine in order to spread their anti-homosexuality message.

For further details on these and other programs, see the Calendar of Events on page 8 and the Center's Web site.

IN THIS Issue

■ RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN THE NEWS	3
■ RECOMMENDED READING	5
■ NEXUS HIGHLIGHTS	6
■ DIRECTOR'S ACTIVITIES	6
■ SPRING 2011 SYMPOSIUM	7
■ CALENDAR OF EVENTS	8

REFLECTIONS FROM THE DIRECTOR



Religious Illiteracy and Religious Freedom

"Americans are both deeply religious and profoundly ignorant about religion."

So writes Dr. Stephen Prothero, a professor of religion at Boston University, in his 2007 book *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – And Doesn't*. The U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey, released by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life in September 2010, supports Prothero's stark assessment.

Some examples: Fewer than half of Americans can name even one of the four Gospels, only a third know that Jesus gave the Sermon on the Mount, and barely half know that

continued on page 2

Center sponsors showing of *The Tillman Story*

The program series on religion in the military will kick off with a screening of the 2010 documentary film *The Tillman Story*. Pat Tillman, who gave up his NFL career to join the Army Rangers, was killed in Afghanistan in less than clear circumstances. This engaging film follows his family's attempt to discover the truth behind his death. The film will be shown on Wednesday, February 23, at 7 p.m. in Blocker Auditorium. Discussion will follow.



continued from page 1

the Qur'an is the Muslim holy book. And it's not just that religious groups don't know about each other's faiths. Many Americans are disturbingly ignorant about the basic tenets of their own traditions. In the Pew survey, Jews and Atheists/Agnostics scored higher on knowledge about Christianity than all Christian groups except Mormons and White Evangelicals. Jews and Atheists/Agnostics also had more knowledge of world religions than any other groups, while Protestants had the least.

This kind of religious ignorance is not simply about trivial factoids. The general lack of knowledge reflected in

these and other studies raise deep concerns for our pluralistic society. It creates a vacuum all too easily filled with misinformation and stereotypes, often leading to increased intolerance and fear. Worse, when coupled with the widespread and equally disturbing misunderstanding about what the Constitution says about religion, this kind of ignorance poses a serious threat to religious freedom.

In a recent survey by the First Amendment Center, 61% of Americans could name Freedom of Speech as a right guaranteed by the First Amendment, but only 23% could name Freedom of Religion. In the same survey, while two-thirds of Americans either strongly or mildly agreed that the First Amendment requires a clear separation of church and state, more than half (53%) incorrectly agreed that the Constitution establishes a Christian nation.

With religious illiteracy so widespread, it should not be surprising when we see it displayed by candidates for public office, though it is

especially disturbing in this context. In the 2010 election cycle, the Republican candidate for Secretary of State in Minnesota, Dan Severson, argued in radio interviews that there was no requirement for separation of church and state because the U.S. is a Christian nation. More prominently, during a debate between the two candidates for U.S. Senator from Delaware, Republican/Tea Party favorite Christine O'Donnell expressed bewilderment when told that the Constitution prohibits the

Report from the Center

is published twice a year by the Center for the Study of Religious Freedom at Virginia Wesleyan College.

Paul Rasor
Director

Ann Shappell
Assistant to the Director

757.455.3129
csrf@vwc.edu
www.vwc.edu/csrf



RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

in the News

government from establishing any religion, replying: “You’re telling me that’s in the first amendment?” (Both Severson and O’Donnell lost their election bids.)

Prothero and other scholars argue that at least part of the remedy for this woeful state of religious illiteracy is to include instruction about religion in the public schools. I agree with this, and with Prothero’s claim that this is justified not on religious grounds, but on secular ones – or what we might call civic grounds. Basic knowledge of world religions, including Christianity, is essential for responsible citizenship in our increasingly pluralistic world. Yet here, too, common misunderstandings of constitutional requirements often get in the way of these kinds of educational moves.

The Pew survey found that while 9 in 10 Americans know that public school teachers cannot lead their classes in prayer, less than 1 in 4 (23%) know that teachers can read from the Bible as an example of literature, and only 36% know that public schools may teach courses on comparative religion. Yet the Supreme Court has always affirmed that the general study of religion in public schools, including study of the Bible and other religious texts as part of courses in history, literature, or world religions, is fully consistent with the First Amendment. As the Pew survey notes, “many Americans think the constitutional restrictions on religion in public schools are tighter than they really are.” Good curricula for these purposes are available; one useful resource is the website of the First Amendment Center.

Religious freedom is not served by ignorance. We should relish, not fear, the opportunity to learn about each others’ faith traditions. This will do more than give us important knowledge. It will help us become more tolerant, less subject to the politics of fear, and better citizens. ■

Director’s comment: The first two items illustrate the kinds of confusion over the proper place of religion in public schools discussed in my Reflections column on page 1. All stories are from the Religion Clause Blog.

Many Charter Schools in Texas Have Religious Connections

The Dallas Morning News reported November 22, 2010, on the blurring of church-state lines as over 20% of the state’s publicly-funded charter schools have religious ties. Religious groups can set up separate non-profits to run charter schools. According to the paper: “Dozens of Texas charter school leaders or board members hold prominent positions in the church, where the schooling sometimes takes place. Parochial schools reinvent themselves as charters, often with little guidance on running a public school. And the mission of the school itself typically stems from the values of the religious group.” While most of the religiously affiliated charter schools are connected to Christian groups, in Houston one is operated by a Turkish Muslim group.

Does New Atlanta Public School Official Have Too Religious An Agenda?

Atlanta Journal Constitution reporter Maureen Downey, in an article on November 20, 2010, questioned the focus the newly selected chief of staff for the Georgia Department of Education will bring to his job. Her concerns are based on blog postings by the new pick, Joel Thorton. Downey reported that several readers found these postings troubling and felt they portended a blurring of the church/state dividing line. Among the views Thorton has posted on his blog: “We cannot offer any type of spiritual help to struggling youth because we have no place for God in our schools.” In a long blog post on home schooling, Thorton lamented hostility to Christianity found in many public school systems.

Canadian Court Hears Challenge To Polygamy Law

On November 22, 2010, the Supreme Court of the Canadian province of British Columbia began hearing arguments on the validity of Canada’s laws banning polygamy. Over 30 witnesses were expected to testify, including members of the polygamous FLDS community (Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints). A number of organizations on both sides of the issue have been granted “interested person” status to make submissions to the court. The province’s attorney general decided to bring the reference case to ask the court to clarify the validity of the polygamy ban under various sections of Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms, including its protection for freedom of religion, after unsuccessful attempts to prosecute leaders of two FLDS factions.

continued on page 4



*“...our nations
show that hundreds
of millions who
hold different
beliefs can be
united in freedom
under one flag...”*

President Obama
From speech at the University
of Indonesia in Jakarta.
November 9, 2010

In Indonesia, Obama Speaks About Religious Pluralism In Major Address

On November 9, 2010, as part of his trip to Asia, President Obama delivered a major speech at the University of Indonesia in Jakarta. Obama spent four years as a young boy in Indonesia, the country with the world's largest Muslim population. A substantial portion of the President's remarks focused on religion in Indonesia.

Here is an excerpt:

“Religion is the final topic that I want to address today, and – like democracy and development – it is fundamental to the Indonesian story. Like the other Asian nations that I am visiting on this trip, Indonesia is steeped in spirituality – a place where people worship God in many different ways. Along with this rich diversity, it is also home to the world's largest Muslim population – a truth that I came to know as a boy when I heard the call to prayer across Jakarta.

“Just as individuals are not defined solely by their faith, Indonesia is defined by more than its Muslim population. But we also know that relations between the United States and Muslim communities have frayed over many years. As President, I have made it a priority to begin to repair these relations...

“Innocent civilians in America, Indonesia, and across the world are still targeted by violent extremists. I have made it clear that America is not, and never will be, at war with Islam. Instead, all of us must defeat al Qaeda and its affiliates, who have no claim to be leaders of any religion – certainly not a great, world religion like Islam. But those who want to build must not cede ground to terrorists who seek to destroy...

“We are two nations, which have traveled different paths. Yet our nations show that hundreds of millions who hold different beliefs can be united in freedom under one flag...

“Earlier today, I visited the Istiqlal mosque – a place of worship that was still under construction when I lived in Jakarta. I admired its soaring minaret,



imposing dome, and welcoming space. But its name and history also speak to what makes Indonesia great. Istiqlal means independence, and its construction was in part a testament to the nation's struggle for freedom. Moreover, this house of worship for many thousands of Muslims was designed by a Christian architect.

“Such is Indonesia's spirit. Such is the message of Indonesia's inclusive philosophy, Pancasila. Across an archipelago that contains some of God's most beautiful creations, islands rising above an ocean named for peace, people choose to worship God as they please. Islam flourishes, but so do other faiths.”

For more information on these and other stories see the CSRF Web site: www.vwc.edu/csrf.



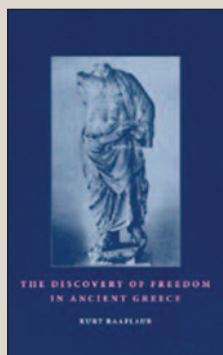
RASOR'S RECOMMENDED READING

Our recommendations begin with books by our spring speakers.
The third book relates to the Director's Reflections on page 1.

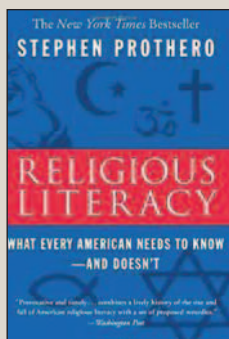


Jonathan Ebel, *Faith in the Fight: Religion and the American Soldier in the Great War* (2010)

Kurt Raaflaub, *The Discovery of Freedom in Ancient Greece* (2004)



Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – And Doesn't* (2007)



Borrowing Policy

All books in the CSRF collection are included in the college library's online catalog, and most are available to VWC faculty, students, and other interested users. If you would like to borrow a book, come to the Center offices on the first floor of Clarke Hall, during normal college business hours. If you are unable to come to the Center during these hours, please call the office at 455-3129, so other arrangements can be made. Specific policies can be found on the Center's Web site: www.vwc.edu/academics/csrf/education/library.php.

BOOKS RECEIVED

New titles in the Center's collection:

Smith, David Whitten, and Elizabeth Geraldine Burr, *Understanding World Religions: A Road Map for Justice and Peace* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2007)

Micklethwait, John, and Adrian Wooldridge, *God Is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World* (Penguin, 2009)

Adams, Arlin M., and Charles J. Emmerich, *A Nation Dedicated to Religious Liberty: The Constitutional Heritage of the Religion Clauses* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990)

Boase, Roger, ed., *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace* (Ashgate, 2005)

Brauch, Jeffrey A., *A Higher Law: Readings on the Influence of Christian Thought in Anglo-American Law* (William S. Hein, 2008)

Carter, Jimmy, *Faith and Freedom: The Christian Challenge for the World* (Duckworth, 2005)

Collins, Christopher, *Homeland Mythology: Biblical Narratives in American Culture* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007)

Conser, Walter H., and Rodger M. Payne, eds., *Southern Crossroads: Perspectives on Religion and Culture* (University Press of Kentucky, 2008)

Flowers, Ronald B., Melissa Rogers, and Steven K. Green, *Religious Freedom and the Supreme Court* (Baylor University Press, 2008)

Heck, Paul L., *Common Ground: Islam, Christianity, and Religious Pluralism* (Georgetown University Press, 2009)

Hornung, Maria, *Encountering Other Faiths* (Paulist Press, 2007)

Igrave, Michael, ed., *Justice and Rights: Christian and Muslim Perspectives* (Georgetown University Press, 2009)

NEXUS Interfaith Dialogue Series *continues:* *Experiences of Worship*

To worship is to honor or revere — to celebrate that which we hold to be of worth.

The 2010-2011 *Nexus Interfaith Dialogue Series* continues its exploration of the lived experience of worship in different religious traditions. During each program, panelists will be invited to reflect on the following questions:

- *How do I understand the role of worship in my faith tradition?*
- *What is the object of my worship?
What name or symbol do I/we use to identify the object of worship?*
- *What ritual practices are used in my/our worship experience, and how do these practices inform that experience?*
- *How am I moved or changed during worship?
What emotional and intellectual responses does worship evoke, and how are they expressed?*
- *What worship or spiritual practices do I follow away from my religious community. How does my faith tradition inform my personal or family spiritual practice?*
- *How does worship inform my life as a whole?
Why do I keep coming back?*

PANELS

Feb. 7, 2011

Jewish (Orthodox),
Muslim, Baha'i

March 7, 2011

Roman Catholic,
Quaker, Unitarian
Universalist

DIRECTOR'S ACTIVITIES

Center Director Paul Rasor had several off-campus speaking engagements during the summer and fall months, and published one scholarly article.

SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS AND PRESENTATIONS (2010)

June 24: Gave a presentation at the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly, Minneapolis.

June 23-27: UUA General Assembly; gave a presentation as part of a panel on environmental theology, and presentation on the Statement of Conscience.

July 13-17: Gave the keynote address entitled "Covenant and Unitarian/Universalist Religious Identity in an International Context" at an international theology symposium sponsored by the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists, Kerdrade, the Netherlands.

August 12: Interviewed for Zinweb, an online Dutch journal that focuses on current issues in religion and society in the Netherlands.

September 9: Led a community discussion of the film *Abraham's Children*.

September 9: Published an editorial piece on the proposed burning of copies of the Qur'an in Florida.

September 25-26: Gave the keynote presentation entitled "Reclaiming Our Religious Identity as Unitarian Universalists: Do We Know Who We Are?" and participated in a workshop and panel discussion for the Forrest Church Memorial Symposium, at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Fairfax, VA.

PUBLICATION

"The War Discourses of William Ellery Channing: Pacifism and Just War in Antebellum Religious Liberalism," *Journal for the History of Modern Theology/Zeitschrift für neuere Theologiegeschichte*, 17 (2010):56-72.

Center Web Site Conversion

If you have been to Virginia Wesleyan College's Web site recently, you will have noticed that it now has a much nicer look than in the past. The long process, which is still ongoing, has involved converting every Web page on the College's Web site, including the Center's Web pages. This conversion has resulted in some of the Center's Web pages being incomplete or hard to find for a while, and you may have found that some links did not work correctly. Fortunately, the conversion process is nearly complete, and we are now reviewing the Center's entire Web site to make sure all the pages are up to date.



You can reach our Web site by clicking on the link to Academics on the College's home page, and then the link to Departments and Programs. Or you can go directly to the Center's Web site at www.vwc.edu/csrf. Please visit our Web site and let us know how it works for you.

*The Center
for the Study
of Religious
Freedom needs
your support.*

You can support the Center in many ways: by attending Center programs, by sharing news of the Center's work with others, and by your financial contributions. Please share this newsletter with your family and friends, and encourage them to come to Center events.

If you would like to make a financial gift to support the Center, you may use the form below, or you may make a gift through our Web site: www.vwc.edu/csrf.

Your gifts allow us to improve our programs, strengthen our library and other resources, and continue our work of promoting religious freedom.

Financial Gift to The Center for the Study of Religious Freedom

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Calendar

OF EVENTS

FEBRUARY

Monday, Feb. 7, 2011

Nexus Interfaith Dialogue: Experiences of Worship

Panel: Orthodox Jewish, Muslim, Baha'i

7:30 - 9 p.m., Boyd Dining Center



Wednesday, Feb. 23, 2011

The Tillman Story (film)

7 - 9 p.m., Blocker Auditorium

MARCH

Wednesday, March 2, 2011



The Role of Religion in Military Memorial Practices

Dr. Jonathan Ebel, Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, University of Illinois
7:30 - 9 p.m., Monumental Chapel

Thursday, March 3, 2011

Religion in the Military

Panel Discussion

Dr. Jonathan Ebel, Dr. Paul Rasor, VWC Students

11 - 11:50 a.m., Blocker Auditorium

Thursday, March 3, 2011

The Athenian Ways of War

Dr. Kurt Raaflaub,
Professor Emeritus of Classics
and History, Brown University
6 - 7:30 p.m., Clarke 118



Monday, March 7, 2011

Nexus Interfaith Dialogue: Experiences of Worship

Panel: Roman Catholic, Quaker, Unitarian Universalist

7:30 - 9 p.m., Boyd Dining Center



Thursday, March 24, 2011

Protesting at Military Funerals - Panel Discussion

Dr. Paul Rasor, VWC Students

11 - 11:50 a.m., Blocker Auditorium

All events are free and open to the public. Reservations not required.

For more information, call 757.455.3129.



1584 Wesleyan Drive
Norfolk, VA 23502-5599

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