FROM THE CHAIR
The High Cost of Not Knowing About Religion
by David Hackett

Why should anyone take a religion course? This question was recently debated in the student newspaper, the Alligator. Noting the recommendation of a Harvard faculty committee that all students take at least one religion course, the student columnist argued that UF students need to understand the role of religion in today's world. A number of letters to the editor responded, most stating that religion was largely irrelevant to their undergraduate education.

What is the cost of remaining uneducated about religion? Though polls show that more than 90 percent of Americans believe in God, few know anything about religion. According to a recent study of Religious Literacy by Stephen Prothero, only half of all Americans can name just one of the four Gospels; many think that Sodom and Gomorrah were a married couple; and evangelical Christians know only a little more than their non-evangelical counterparts.

This is not just a matter of choosing to ignore an area of knowledge; rather, religious illiteracy threatens our ability to understand and participate in our own civil society.

Though about two-thirds of Americans support teaching both evolution and creationism in the public schools, how can we know what creationism is all about, or intelligently debate its place in our schools, if less than half of us can identify the book of Genesis?

Biblical references abound in public conversations about stem cell research and gay marriage, so how can we make informed decisions about these hot button issues without knowing something about the Bible?

Handicapped by such illiteracy, we are unable to grasp the significance of religious references and intentions among our political leaders and fellow Americans.

It is less of a surprise but even more of a concern, because of America's role as a world leader, that the public knows even less about Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism than it does about Christianity and Judaism. As Prothero points out, after 9/11 President Bush frequently stated that "Islam is peace," while at the same time the Reverend Jerry Falwell declared that the prophet Muhammad was a "terrorist." Who did we believe? Because of our ignorance of religion, "most of us had no way to judge."

And when it comes to other religions, this ignorance can be deadly. Can we understand the war in Iraq without knowing something about Islam? Isn't it clear by now that we need to have some basic understanding of the difference between Sunnis and Shiites? Religious understandings lay beneath so many of our world's political conflicts: how can we afford to remain in the dark about basic religious history and texts?

Here is the point: whether or not we ourselves are religious, the more we learn about religion the less likely we will be to surrender our voices, through our lack of religious knowledge, to political leaders who frequently understand their actions in a religious context. The benefit, at least, is a more engaged political conversation that begins to recognize the often unchallenged and powerful influence of religion in today's world.

Educating students on the significance of religion in our contemporary global society is central to the teaching mission of our department. Taking a religion course is a step toward learning about the deeper meanings of so many of the critical issues that confront all of us today.

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