In the book of Luke in the New Testament there is a story of two sons, one who dutifully remains home and the other who leaves, squanders his fortune, and returns. All sorts of interesting moral and ethical issues are raised by the story, commonly known as The Parable of the Prodigal (or Lost) Son. When our very own “Saint Louis Unitarian” refers to “prodigal hymnals”, it’s an amusing non-sequitur to those who know that “prodigal” refers to the squandering, not the returning; and perhaps evokes some of the thoughtfulness of Luke. But someone unfamiliar with the text may miss the point entirely, or if they get it from context, miss the subtlety.

The main point of Professor Prothero’s book is not that secularists don’t know what’s in the Bible (although it’s not a bad thing when we do), or that Christians don’t know what’s in the Koran nor Muslims what’s in the Bible. What disturbs Professor Prothero is that Christians don’t know what’s in The New Testament; that Methodists don’t know what’s in their own confession of faith; that you can’t even count on Mormons (who do better than most) to know much about Joseph Smith. Self-proclaimed evangelical Christians do better than most but still score barely over 50% on questions that Professor Prothero considers basic biblical literacy.

American Fundamentalists are likely to blame U.S. Supreme Court decisions, especially the 1962 and 1967 decisions banning Bible reading and prayer in school, respectively, for much of our current ignorance. But Prothero insists that history doesn’t support this view. In fact religious literacy in the schools had been declining long before 1962, and it’s more likely that the Court was reflecting society than the other way around. It’s not the secularists, either; I’d long wondered how we, with our tiny numbers and small audience, could possibly have had the massive effect upon American society that the Christian right blames on us. Well, I learned in Religious Literacy that we didn’t. First the various protestant denominations wanted to band together to keep out Roman Catholic influence; then the Catholics were brought into the tent to resist the Jews; then the Jews were accepted, to fight the influence of the Godless Communists. At each step along the way the theological content of shared teaching had to be watered down - until, like a homeopathic remedy, there was nothing left.

Prothero has fired up my imagination concerning the field of religious studies. I read the last part of the book, which summarizes (in dictionary form) the most basic information that he thinks everyone should have, with rapt attention; and I’m darn glad I finally know the difference between a Sunni and a Shiite. And yet, I’m not convinced. Somehow it seems to me that religion without faith is a bit like music without instruments. Personally I do want to know about the Bible; the scholarship, the controversies, its effect upon cultures. Perhaps I will even read The New Testament before long, to see what all the fuss is about. But is it really that important for the average American citizen to know exactly what President Reagan was referring to when he mentioned The Good Samaritan in a speech? After all, we’re going to miss a lot of metaphor without a good grounding in Shakespeare, too. The tendency of 18th century writers to rely on a common knowledge of Greek and Roman tradition gradually became untenable in the 19th century, and most 20th and 21st century authors are more inclined to spell out what they want to say. Isn’t it more inclusive for the makers to learn to avoid references that their audience won’t “get”, rather than trying so hard to change the audience?
I also note that religion and the Christian Bible are not the only areas prone to massive ignorance on the part of those uninterested. Can anyone really understand American history without knowing about Jazz? I’d say no, but we sure aren’t going to get all Americans to know our own native music in any depth. And then there is the gorilla in the room, scientific literacy. One of Professor Prothero’s associates opines that, out of eleven semesters devoted to math and science, surely we can slip one or two away for the Bible. But can we? Our recently departed president may have been able to use scripture in an ad-hoc conversation, but he was woefully, dangerously ignorant of science, even at the most basic level.

My conclusion is: Bravo, Professor Prothero, and the Bible Literacy project. If you get people fired up, so that adults go back and learn it; so that parents pass more of their culture to children; so that Sunday schools incorporate some theology, whether it’s warm and fuzzy or not; I’m all for it. And if you convince public schools to return some basic Bible education to their syllabi I won’t consider it a disaster. On the other hand, I’m not going to jump enthusiastically on to that bandwagon either, be disappointed if our public schools remain entirely secular, or help promote this particular cause.