

Essentials in Education

BIBLE LITERACY PROJECT

An educated person is familiar with the Bible

Bible Literacy Report II:

What University Professors Say Incoming Students Need to Know

What did leading English professors say when asked: “What do you think about the following statement? ‘Regardless of a person’s faith, an educated person needs to know about the Bible.’ ”

- “Absolutely. [Without the Bible] it’s like using a dictionary with one-third of the words removed.” Dr. George P. Landow, **Brown University**
- “True. You’re simply ignorant of yourself if you don’t know the Bible.” Dr. Ina Lipkowitz, **Massachusetts Institute of Technology**
- “Definitely. Agree.” Dr. Robert Kiely, **Harvard University**
- “Not to have that is almost crippling in students’ ability to be sophisticated readers.” Dr. Ulrich Knoefplmacher, **Princeton University**
- “Incontestable statement.” Dr. Ralph Williams, **University of Michigan**
- “Absolutely necessary. [Bible allusions are] more concentrated and more specific and profound and revisited over and over again; more necessary than classics.” Dr. Stuart K. Culver, **University of Utah**
- “Yes. A no-brainer.” Dr. Gordon M. Braden, **University of Virginia**
- “Every educated person deserves to know the Bible.” Dr. Leland Ryken, **Wheaton College, IL**

Executive Summary

What do today’s college students need to know about the Bible to participate fully and equally in the courses taught in America’s elite colleges and universities? This study surveyed 39 English professors at 34 top U.S. colleges and universities to learn their assessment of how important Bible literacy is to college-level study of English and American literature. What do incoming freshmen in college-level English courses need to know about the Bible?

Almost without exception, English professors we surveyed at major American colleges and universities see knowledge of the Bible as a deeply important part of a good education. The virtual unanimity and depth of their responses on this question are striking. The Bible is not only a sacred scripture to millions of Americans, it is also arguably (as one Northwestern professor stated), the “most influential text in all of Western culture.”

For example, when asked to respond to the question, “Regardless of a person’s faith, an educated person needs to know about the Bible,” no professor disagreed; nine provided additional explanation. When asked, “Some scholars say Western literature is steeped in references to the Bible. How would you respond to that?” 38 of 39 English professors agreed; 24 strongly. When asked, “In your opinion, how important is it for students who take your courses to be familiar with the Bible?” 38 of 39 professors said it was important.

Overwhelmingly, professors in this survey indicated that a lack of basic Bible literacy hampers students’ ability to understand both classics and contemporary work. Arduously “decoding”

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scripture references detracts from absorbing and responding to great works of art, both ancient and modern.

At the same time, a number of professors expressed discomfort or reservations with appearing to “take sides” in favor of the Bible in the contemporary context. They did not wish to associate themselves with a political movement around the Bible, or to seem to detract from the importance of other aspects of a good education, including the value of becoming knowledgeable about other world religions.

This report concludes that high schools should make basic Bible knowledge part of their curriculum, especially for college preparatory students. Doing so requires developing a variety of educational materials and curricula that simultaneously (a) acknowledge the Bible’s status as sacred scripture to millions of Americans, (b) are fair to students of all faith traditions, and (c) are of high academic quality.

Doing so will be an important part of meeting the next generation’s educational needs in an increasingly diverse population.

About this Report

This report, funded by the John Templeton Foundation, investigates what English professors at leading universities believe incoming students should know about the Bible. It accompanies the Bible Literacy Project’s April 2005 *Bible Literacy Report: What do American teens need to know and what do they know?* The report included: 1) a qualitative research project on what leading high school English teachers believe their students need to know about the Bible, and 2) an analysis of a nationally representative survey by The Gallup Organization on what American teens currently know about the Bible and other religious literature of the world. The conclusions reached in this report do not necessarily represent the views of the John Templeton Foundation.

About the Bible Literacy Project: The Bible Literacy Project is a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization dedicated to research and public education on the academic study of the Bible in public and private schools. In 1999 it co-published a consensus statement with the First Amendment Center, “The Bible & Public Schools: A First Amendment Guide.” In September 2005, it published the first high school Bible textbook for public schools in the last 30 years, *The Bible and Its Influence*.

Methodology

Using *U.S. News’* 2005 rankings in four college categories (national universities, public universities, liberal arts colleges, and comprehensive colleges) as a guide, we secured interviews with English professors from both the *first-* and *second-*rated schools in all four categories. ... [In total,] 11 professors from public universities, 19 professors from private non-sectarian universities, and 9 professors from religiously affiliated colleges or universities were interviewed for this study.

This document is a brief summary of *Bible Literacy Report II*. For the complete report, downloadable as a PDF, please visit <http://www.bibleliteracy.org>.