

## RELIGIOUS LITERACY ROUTS ISLAMOPHOBIA

Ann Deslandes | 06 April 2017

The Harvard Divinity School calls it 'religious literacy' — that is, the knowledge and understanding of the tenets of the world religions and, **in their words**, 'the roles that religions play in human experience across political, economic, and cultural spheres'.



A person with religious literacy has an understanding and appreciation of the teachings of religions in the world, is knowledgeable about the various applications and manifestations of those teachings, and, perhaps most crucially, understands how religious faith forms, informs and enriches contemporary human society.

At the same time, they are able to recognise and critique the shadow side of religious faith, such as theocratic government, forced belief, and other forms of religious fundamentalism.

In a world where Islamophobia and anti-Semitism are on the rise, endangering and taking the lives of so many innocent people of faith, it is difficult to overstate the importance of religious literacy. Hatred and fear of Islam or Judaism is often justified by misinformation about what Muslims or Jews believe — for example, that Muslims believe in terrorism or Jews believe in killing Christians.

As an adult my own faith looks more like goddess-centred witchcraft, but I grew up with Catholic religious instruction, which included some serious attention to other religious practices and the possibility of a rich co-existence. Within this, I heard from many adults about how they came to their faith and the history of their articles of faith.

One of the great benefits of such a schooling was exposure to, and education in, the presence and work of belief in the world, for better and for worse.

That is, people of faith believe in things we can't see. Some of us feel spirits on the wind and our ancestors by our side. Some of us believe in a time and space after the death of the body. We tend to worship a power that is bigger than the world, that exerts unseen and unpredictable agency over our lives and the lives of others.

When faith of any kind is attached and amassed through a human institution like an organised religion, its power is extraordinary; capable of both horrifying brutality and life-saving human solidarity. It is always cultural and also always individual.

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As well as developing my own faith, I believe my religious education generated a certain religious literacy, which helps me to live in a multi-faith world without fear. This means that when I see a person express, for example, their Muslim faith — through dress, or speech, or action — I expect that that person is part of a complex faith tradition, and that I couldn't possibly know at first glance how they personally are situated in it.

Put another way — just like I have known people of the Christian faith who are total jerks, who organise with other total jerks to make Christianity a force in the world that silences women and murders gay people, so too do I count Christians among some of the most vitally kind, loving individuals I will ever be fortunate enough to know, and who organise with other vitally kind and loving people to make Christianity a force for human liberation.

Islamophobia and anti-Semitism reduce people of faith to one-dimensional, malevolent actors. Both practices refuse to appreciate the complexity of faith's manifestation in the world; the myriad ways it is implicated in identity and action, and, particularly in highly secular societies like Australia's, the capacity of people of faith to determine for themselves how they interpret and live the articles of their faith, with others.

Such reduction and refusal is clear when a non-Muslim Australian politician publicly **shouts down** a young Muslim woman on the subject of that young woman's faith, telling that young woman that her faith is a threat to Australian society. It is clear when over 11,000 other non-Muslim Australians support a call for that young woman to be sacked from her job. It is clear when a young man, unknown to his attackers, is **punched in the neck** and called a 'fucking Jew' when walking home from synagogue in Melbourne.

Maybe if religious literacy were one of the aims of mass education, it wouldn't be so easy to decide to believe that so many of our fellow humans are plotting against us. Instead, perhaps, we'd see the mystery of faith for the complex thing that it is, and see other things that are rendered opaque and inaccessible (political power, inherited wealth, higher education) as realities we can change.