

It's Considerate to Be Literate about Religion: Poetry and Prose about Religion, Conflict, and Peace in Our World

Topics Questions for Discussion

Summary and Reading Comprehension

- The author describes five tenets of religious literacy. What are these five ways to be religiously literate, in your own words?
- On page 5, the author says that he is describing the religious literacy endorsed by the American Academy of Religion, but that there are other notions of religious literacy. What are the two notions of religious literacy mentioned in the book? Which one is the author describing in the book, and what is another notion of religious literacy?

Aspect #1: Distinguishing Inside versus Outside

- How, in your own words, are these two ways of engaging with religion different from each other: from what the author called the “inside” and the “outside”?
- Assuming that the author’s claim is true, that we all engage with and interact with religion, since religion is so deeply embedded in all aspects of human life, do you engage more from the inside or the outside?
- How is the author engaging with religion while writing this book, from the inside or the outside?
- On page 48, the author describes the danger of what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has called the “single story.” In your own words, what does she mean by “the single story”?
- Why is the “single story” dangerous?
- Can you think of any other examples of a “single story”?

Aspect #2: Recognizing That Religions Are Internally Diverse and Dynamic

- As you think of your own worldview of faith tradition, be that a particular religion or no particular religion, what are some of the differences you see among others who share in that “same” tradition?
- Think of other people you know well, who have a different faith tradition or worldview than yours; do you perceive any similarities or differences among them?

Aspect #3: Actors with Agency

- What does the term “an actor with agency” mean, in your own words?
- The author argues that people, not religions, are not actors with agency. Are there other entities in the world, other than individual people, with agency? What are some examples?
- In what small ways have you employed your agency recently? What are some ways that you think that you should do so in the future?

Aspect #4: Appreciating Religious Influences

- What are some obvious ways that religious influences exist in public life?
- Can you think of any more subtle ways that religion influences public life?

Aspect #5: Situatedness

- One of the main tenets of religious literacy described in the book is recognizing our situated perspectives. What do you think is the situatedness of the author himself? The illustrator?
- What is your situatedness regarding religion?
- On page 11, the author refers to Donna Haraway's term "the god trick." What is "the god trick," and have you ever thought that you could pull it off?

Peace and Violence

- What are the three types of violence (and peace) described in the book?
- What, in your own words, is the difference between these three types?
- How many examples can you find in the book of situations in which all three types are at work?
- Have you ever seen or experienced any of the three types of violence or peace?
- The book describes several conflicts around the world, such as in Syria, Myanmar, and Israel. What is happening in current events in these or other countries that is relevant to this book?
- In the section on Nigeria, the author (and the video mentioned on page 43) describes how Pastor James and Imam Ashafa overcame their differences to come to work together in an interfaith approach to dealing with the conflict in their country. What are some conflicts that you have experienced personally, and how did you resolve them, or transform them into something better? What are some of the things that help or hinder people in the process of conflict resolution or conflict transformation?
- The author says that neither peace nor violence is inevitable. What do you think that means?

Scripture

- When introducing religious literacy on page 5, the author mentions that the kind of religious literacy he is talking about stresses understanding concepts, as opposed to merely knowing facts about religion. How do you think these approaches are different and similar? What are the pros and cons of each type?
- In the section on scripture, does the way that the author describes the development of scripture surprise you? How does this description of scripture make you feel about your own relationship with scripture?
- The illustration on page 22 shows a fragment of ancient Greek (this particular text from the Bible's New Testament chapter 1 Timothy 3:16, in which Paul records a hymn about the mystery of godliness being manifest in the flesh: "ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ ΟΣ ΕΦΑΝΕΡΩΘΗ ΕΝ ΣΑΡ..." ("mystery that was revealed/manifest in fles..."). What are some possible reasons why the author chose that particular fragment?
- Similarly, in the section on the Holocaust, the author gives an example of how one particular story - the story of Jesus being sentenced to death - changes over time. How does this description compare with what you already knew about his sentencing? How does it make you feel?

Religious Icons

- Regarding the religious icons at the beginning and end of the book, and at the top and bottom of each page, why do you think they are in that particular order?
- Why are there more icons for some religions than others?