



Written by [James Heiser](#) on June 8, 2012

A Review of Stephen Prothero's Book "God Is Not One"

In his most recent book, [God Is Not One](#), Stephen Prothero endeavors to offer his readers an introduction to the various major religions of the world. Of necessity the book's nine chapters can only offer a brief summary of the teachings and structure of each system of belief. Still, the idea behind Prothero's book is one that is worthy of being pursued, particularly as an antidote to the shallow approach to religious belief regularly witnessed in the American media and in political discourse. However, the book is flawed — perhaps fatally so — by the author's apparently weak grasp on the religion practiced by the majority of citizens of his own country.



As a professor of religion at Boston University, Prothero might seem an unlikely candidate for public limelight. With eight books to his credit and occasional trendy media appearances on *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* — as well as dozens of appearances on more credible, if less popular, television venues — Prothero has a rare opportunity to increase public understanding of the importance of religion to every aspect of human existence.

In *God Is Not One*, Prothero profiles eight major religions and atheism as "faith groups" that he believes his readers need to understand for a more complete comprehension of the modern world: Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Yoruba, Judaism, Daoism, and Atheism. While this roster of religions and philosophies does not include the entirety of the human race within its broad ranks, it accounts for an overwhelming majority, and certainly one is well served by having at least a passing familiarity with each such belief system.

To his credit, Prothero seems openly disdainful of the fantasies of multiculturalists and the "new Atheists" — in that they are woefully unaware of their own religious worldview. The views of scholars such as Huston Smith — whom Prothero characterizes as maintaining that all religions lead to the same essential end — are shot down. To maintain that the differences are "only in the non-essentials" is, in Prothero's assessment,

a lovely sentiment but it is dangerous, disrespectful, and untrue. For more than a generation we have followed scholars and sages down the rabbit hole into the fantasy world in which all gods are one.... In fact, this naive theological groupthink — call it Godthink — has made the world more dangerous by blinding us to the clashes of religions that threaten us worldwide.

For example, while seemingly unwilling to commit himself to recognizing the full implications of 1,400 years of Islamist military expansionism against every other religion it has encountered, nevertheless Prothero acknowledges that the current conflict between the West and Islam will not vanish with a round of multicultural hand-holding and singing of "Kumbayah":

While I do not believe we are witnessing a "clash of civilizations" between Christianity and Islam, it



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is a fantasy to imagine that the world's two largest religions are in any meaningful sense the same, or that interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims will magically bridge the gap. You would think that champions of multiculturalism would warm to this fact, glorying in the diversity inside and across religious traditions. But even among multiculturalists, the tendency is to pretend that the differences between, say, Christianity and Islam are more apparent than real, and that the differences inside religious traditions just don't warrant the fuss practitioners continue to make over them.

And Prothero does not shy away from red-flagging some of the outrageous rhetoric emerging from the circles of the angry Atheists:

Some distinguish between strong atheists (who actively deny God) and weak atheists (who simply do not affirm God), but the distinction between angry and friendly atheism is more useful. New Atheists exemplify the angry type.... These militants see the contest between religion and reason as a zero-sum game, but their favorite metaphors come from war rather than from sports, and their rhetoric takes no prisoners. According to Dawkins, "faith is one of the world's great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate." ...

[Sam] Harris then attacked the idea of religious tolerance as "one of the principal forces driving us toward the abyss." "Some propositions are so dangerous," he wrote in a chilling passage, "that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing in them." For Harris, religious tolerance is almost as dangerous as religion itself. Belief in God is not an opinion that must be respected; it is an evil that must be confronted.

However, Prothero's book is marked by certain weaknesses, one of which is laid bare by the offensiveness of the book's title. Clearly the target of the negative assertion is the vacuous thought of those religious thinkers who imagine all religions to be fundamentally the same. However, deciding to entitle a book "God Is Not One" can only be received by Jews and Christians as a deliberately offensive act, contradicting one of the most central points of the teaching of Holy Scripture: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!" (Deut. 6:4 NKJV) It is, of course, "safe" to offend Jews and Christians with what they might receive as a calculated act of blasphemy. Given the fact that the author's purported intent is to increase the level of understanding of the world's major religions among his readers, a title that is needlessly offensive to most of his audience seems nonsensical. And one wonders whether the author and publisher would have been as inclined to go with a title such as "Mohammed Was a Murderous Liar" — a title that would have been almost as mismatched to its content and purpose as the one which was chosen.

One's confidence in Prothero's overall work is also shaken by the shallowness and inaccuracies of the religion with which one would have assumed the author would be most familiar: Christianity. The brevity of the chapter on Christianity does not seem to be a result of the author taking it for granted that his readers are thoroughly familiar with the subject: Actually, all of the religions he discusses are treated with similar brevity, and given the shallowness of his description of the history of Christianity and its defining teachings, one is left with grave concerns regarding the treatment of other religions.

Sometimes the inaccuracies are humorous, but trivial: For example, Prothero declares, "Unlike most Protestant Bibles, Catholic Bibles come with explanatory notes," an assertion refuted by a quick stop at any Protestant Bible bookstore, or even a passing knowledge of the use of such annotations accompanying the biblical text back to the very beginning of the Reformation.



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Other flaws, however, are more substantial. Prothero's breezy declaration that Christians adhere to a "soft monotheism" — in opposition to the "hard monotheism" of Judaism and Islam — fails to meaningfully engage the Trinitarian literature that has been written between the era of the Church Fathers and the present. A thoughtful "encounter" with the Athanasian Creed will do the reader much more good when it comes to comprehending the Christian verity than those few pages that Prothero devotes to it.

Much of Prothero's treatment of Christianity tends to be more trendy than substantive; for example, the longest section, "Brown Christians," relates the development of modern Pentecostalism in the Third World. While such a subject is certainly worthy of discussion, the relative brevity of the most substantive and enduring developments within Christianity — the division between Eastern Orthodoxy and the Latin Church, and the implications and substance of differences related to the Reformation — are treated in a less-than-adequate way.

In short, Prothero's *God Is Not One* is a step toward an introduction to the major religions of the world, but it must be read with discernment.

Stephen Prothero, [*God Is Not One — The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World — and Why Their Differences Matter*](#) (New York: Harper One, 2010 and 2011) 388 pages, hardcover and paperback, \$26.99 and \$16.99.



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