

God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World  
– and Why Their Differences Matter  
By Stephen Prothero

Reviewed by Jonathan Smoot

A well-educated and Reformed-informed elder in my church asks me, “Can we have a sermon this summer on why there are so many different world religions when essentially they all share the same goals?” I told him to read this book. A teenager in my church struggles to understand why her Islamic friend shuts down every time they start talking about their religions. She asks, “I mean, like, we all believe the same things, right?” After replying to her, “No, we don’t,” I told her to read this book.

In this timely, highly accessible, balanced, and nicely nuanced work, Prothero seeks to puncture the pervasive and politically-correct religious ignorance that masquerades as enlightened tolerance. Prothero, on pp 2 & 3, notes that the “lovely sentiment” of the perceived unity of the world’s religious impulses is, in fact, “dangerous, disrespectful, and untrue.” And, “it is time that we climbed out of this (wishful thinking) rabbit hole and back to reality.”

According to Prothero, religious reality is that although the major religions have some convergence in ethics, they differ sharply on core story, narratives, doctrine, and religious practices, which are the defining experiences and mainstays of an adherent’s everyday faith. Prothero also points out that although the adjective, “Great,” is used for the most influential world religions, that does not necessarily translate to a religion being “Good.” A religious system must be examined in light of all of its “gore and glory” – its potential for harm and for good. It would be easy for Prothero to be either overly censorious or fawning (unconsciously or otherwise) with respect to the world’s religions. Prothero, with an equable voice, does an admirable job of avoiding these extremes. However, it does appear to this reviewer that Prothero leans in favor of the religions of riotous color, expression, and verve, (the more “fluid” versus the “fixed” traditions) while occasionally smirking at and side-swiping the “Scandinavian and Puritanical manifestations of the more dogmatic traditions.” (As an adherent of one such allegedly colorless religion, this reviewer must suppose that sensitivity with respect to Prothero’s treatment of the religions depends on whose ox is being gored, and why.)

God Is Not One proceeds with dedicated chapters outlining the history, belief, practices, and prospects for the future of (in order of decreasing world-impact and influence) Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Yoruba Religion, Judaism, and Daoism, with a brief counterpoint coda on Atheism (which has its own belief system). Prothero organizes his examination of each religion around a clever, simple, and helpful device. Each religion is investigated using a four-part approach: (1) Each religion posits a problem to be solved, usually some identified challenge in the human condition; (2) An identified solution, which also serve as the primary religious goal and impulse; (3) A technique or series of techniques for practically moving from problem to solution, and (4) An exemplar (or exemplars) who successfully show the way or the path from problem to

solution. Overall, this device serves his purpose well, as he needs to cover an exceedingly enormous patch of ground, with a consistency of approach. However, the limitation of the device is that facile distinctions occasionally emerge that don't bear up to deeper inquiry. (e.g. The Christian concern is the way from "Sin" to "Salvation," while the Jewish concern is the way from "Exile to Restoration." The existential problem and the solution of *shalom*, are the same, for both.)

This reviewer considers himself fairly well-informed on the major tenets and practices of the major religions, yet learned much from virtually every page. (Who would have thought that Ricky Ricardo, in singing "Babaluaye," on "I Love Lucy," was singing to his favorite Yoruba deity?) The chapters read like humorous and insightful lectures in an engaging world-religions seminar at a good college, which is undoubtedly the case. Prothero writes with a deft, sure hand, marked by smooth and logical transitions in material in each chapter. His style, while never breezy, is clear and readable, accessible to ages older teenager and up. This reviewer particularly enjoyed his balance of knowledge, insight, and humor, displaying occasional, wicked wit, and regular, delicious doses of irony that should make the adherent of the religion discussed smile at him/herself, rather than take umbrage.

Up to the book's conclusion, this reviewer found himself scribbling madly after each chapter devoted to a particular religion, essentially saying, "But Stephen, with your religious analysis, you are missing the biggest picture of all. What you are talking about (but not saying) in each chapter is the flawed effort of every religious and ethical system to address the problem of what it means to be *human* (*if not also, finite*). The described religious, philosophical, and ethical attempts to touch divinity are the perennial and ever-pervasive projection of humanity's desperate need to self-understand. In the 'Great Religions' it is almost as if there is no real pursuit of Divinity, per se, in any of these religions, just a pursuit of what it means to be 'Human,' writ-large!"

Prothero gets around to a discussion of this conundrum in the Conclusion. He eloquently addresses the problem of the religions' attempts to understand what it means to be human, to become fully alive, not at the expense of any other human being. He points out that we "blind ones" all appear to be touching different parts of the "Elephant" (the Divine) and come away with different descriptions and prescriptions. And that, he writes, "should humble us, remind us that, if there really is a god or goddess worthy of the name, He or She or It must surely know more than we do about the things that matter most." And, in humanity's best interests, we can – and must - live with that mystery. Here is a suggestion: Perhaps anyone who reads this book should first read the Conclusion, as the back-drop and underlying principle to the book.

There are lacunae: (1) This reviewer wished that the book dealt head-on with the troubling fact that fundamentalism of any stripe (nationalism, or Islamicism, Christian fundamentalism, or any "ism"), sharing many of the same destructive characteristics, is a serious bane and woe for humanity, fueling the world's religious and political ills and violence, and (2) Prothero asserts that the book seeks to explain how and why the major religions are at odds, and strongly suggests this as a compelling reason for him to write

this book, yet only occasionally nibbles at the strike zone with details of that conflict. Perhaps he is leaving it up to the readers to fill in the blanks, or perhaps this will be the subject of his next book.

All in all, this book is an even-handed, scholarly yet accessible, excellent primer and introduction to the eight religions that are shaping our world, to be commended to all who wish to know more about their own faith, and the faith of their neighbors, near and far.

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