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God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run The World



Synopsis

In *God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World*, New York Times bestselling author of *Religious Literacy* and religion scholar Stephen Prothero argues that persistent attempts to portray all religions as different paths to the same God overlook the distinct problem that each tradition seeks to solve. Delving into the different problems and solutions that Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, Confucianism, Yoruba Religion, Daoism and Atheism strive to combat, *God is Not One* is an indispensable guide to the questions human beings have asked for millennia—and to the disparate paths we are taking to answer them today. Readers of Huston Smith and Karen Armstrong will find much to ponder in *God is Not One*.

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Customer Reviews

In my opinion, the introduction is the best chapter in the book. I was glad to have a book written by a professor of religion, for (during some parts) it felt like I was actually in his class. In the intro Mr. Prothero outlines four basic criteria for a religion: a problem (addressed), a solution, techniques (for achieving that solution), and exemplars (to use as guides). Every other book on religion that I had read had focused mainly on descriptions and explanations; this book begins with the premise that religions are not all the same in the end because they address different topics, see completely different "ultimate problems", and instruct their followers to do things to fix the problem that often clash with other religions. It gives you an easy to understand formula to apply to religion, and promises that based off this formula all religions are very different. So far so good. The chapters in this book cover: 1- Islam 2- Christianity 3- Confucianism 4- Hinduism 5- Buddhism 6- Yoruba 7-

Judaism⁸- Daoism⁹- Atheism

After the first chapter I was left with a feeling of disappointment. Sadly, that feeling never really went away. Although the author refutes the "perennial philosophy" of prominent authors (to include Karen Armstrong and Huston Smith) that all religions are basically the same, he does little to include and prove his argument in each chapter. The topics he does cover are communicated brilliantly, but they offer little more than what is covered in books by authors he disagrees with. I fully expected the author to apply his four point formula to the eight religions covered, and through the use of that formula prove to us that religions are NOT all different paths up the same mountain.

I'm feeling a little bit conflicted on this. On one hand, I've had Steve Prothero as a professor. He's extremely intelligent and completely engaging - more so than any other college professor I've come across. Great human being in person too. I found the book to be fair and well-researched, definitely a clear and worthy introduction to many major world religions. His unique method of introducing the problem/ solution that each religion offers is fantastic. Christianity addresses sin through salvation, Islam addresses pride through submission, etc. For its content, I think this should be the standard introduction to world religions for any high school or undergraduate course. There is never a dull moment and he draws fascinating parallels and brings in interesting anecdotes. Further, the Professor makes a very valid point. In our politically correct world, people try to underplay important differences in doctrine, ritual, and worldview and paint all religions as one. Forget about disparity between religions, huge differences exist within religions: the God of Abraham is very unlike the God of Moses or the God of Second Isaiah. This is where the Professor makes a valid and important point - these religions are not the same, so we need to stop pretending they are! Not only is it false, but it's intellectually demeaning. Now, here's where the conflict comes in. I completely disagree with the entire premise of the book, that "God is not one." In fact, the unity of Godhead is the one thing that all religions seem to share. The very definition of God itself presupposes an all-inclusiveness; if there is a God, God MUST be one.

The initial premise is intriguing: Prothero wants to disabuse us from the notion that all great religions are essentially the same--i.e., that Allah/God/Yahweh are just different names for the same deity, and "believers" are simply ascending different sides of the same mountain, but with the same ultimate goal). The book does give a reasonably good overview of eight major religions, and I am thankful for some of his insights. For example, he discusses why a "Godless" religion (like Confucianism) deserves to be thought of as a religion and not just a system of ethics. He also

points out that someone can be deeply religious but in a quiet manner: A fire-and-brimstone evangelical preacher isn't necessarily *more* religious than, say, a quietly devoted Methodist. But the book feels superficial. It reads like a professor giving an overview of religions for college freshmen, and wanting to keep it fun and fast paced: hoping to become their favorite professor. After each chapter, I found myself needing to turn to the Internet to read up on each religion for more information on the basic beliefs and practices of each. Prothero writes in a chatty, "witty" tone which some may find charming, but I found annoying: as if he's worried the material will be too dry or too impenetrable for his audiences, so he funs-it-up and dumbs-it-down. Here are the first two sentences of the chapter on Buddhism: "Buddhism begins with a fairy tale. Unlike Cinderella or Rocky, however, this is no underdog fantasy of someone who has nothing and gains the whole world." Really? That's how we're going to begin an overview of Buddhism? And does he mean that Buddhism themselves think of the story of The Buddha as a fairy tale, or is that just his opinion?

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