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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*.

## Book Information

Paperback: 400 pages

Publisher: HarperOne; Reprint edition (May 3, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0061571288

ISBN-13: 978-0061571282

Product Dimensions: 5.3 x 0.9 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 10.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.1 out of 5 stars 222 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #899 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #1 in [Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Psychology](#) #1 in [Books > Reference > Encyclopedias & Subject Guides > Religion](#) #1 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > Religious Studies > Comparative Religion](#)

## Customer Reviews

**Exclusive: A Letter from Stephen Prothero** On my last visit to Jerusalem, I struck up a conversation with an elderly man in the Muslim Quarter. As a shopkeeper, he seemed keen to sell me jewelry. As a Sufi mystic, he seemed even keener to engage me in matters of the spirit. He told me that religions are human inventions, so we must avoid the temptation of worshipping Islam rather than Allah. What matters is opening yourself up to the mystery that goes by the word God, and that can be done in any religion. As he tempted me with more turquoise and silver, he asked me what I was doing in Jerusalem. When I told him I was researching a book on the world's religions, he put down the jewelry, looked at me intently, and, placing a finger on my chest for emphasis, said, "Do not write false things about the religions." As I wrote *God is Not One*, I came back repeatedly to this conversation. I never wavered from trying to write true things, but I knew that some of the

things I was writing he would consider false. Mystics often claim that the great religions differ only in the inessentials. They may be different paths but they are ascending the same mountain and they converge at the peak. Throughout this book I give voice to these mystics: the Daoist sage Laozi, who wrote his classic the Daodejing just before disappearing forever into the mountains; the Sufi poet Rumi, who instructs us to "gamble everything for love

Expressing his astonishment, Prothero (Religious Literacy) arrives late at the party that has been celebrating for years the diversity and plurality of the world's religions. Although he is correct in asserting that an entire generation of scholars, teachers, and interested readers have claimed in the interest of religious tolerance that the world's religions were simply different paths to the same one God, such a claim functions as little more than a red herring in what is otherwise a useful introduction to the world's religions. Once past that assertion, Prothero sets up a helpful model for examining each religion on its own terms: he explores a problem that dominates the religion, the religion's solution to the problem, the technique the religion uses to move from problem to solution, and the exemplar who charts a path from problem to solution. For example, in Buddhism the problem is suffering; the solution is nirvana; the technique is the Noble Eightfold Path; and the exemplars are the arhats, bodhisattvas, and lamas. Despite his naïveté about contemporary interreligious dialogue, Prothero's survey is a useful introduction to eight of the world's great religions. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A quick guide to eight of the major world religions which focuses on the key differences in the worldview of the various religions. While none of the sections are comprehensive, I felt like I got truly new information about African traditions and their influence on fringe religious movements in the Americas. While basic, in our age of religious and cultural illiteracy, this is a good introductory take on comparative religion that does not search for facts that make world religions seem ethically homogenous. That ecumenicism may make sense to encourage religious tolerance, but it is in the differences between religions that the context for world cultures starts to be made clear.

Fascinating discussion of the world's religions. I found his decision to focus on the questions "What does this religion see as our main problem and how is that problem solved (either by God(s) or by us or by both)?" to be an excellent way to frame each religion and really help illustrate the differences. I had only a passing knowledge of many of the religions discussed in the book and

really enjoyed finding out more about them. I found his main thesis (that all religions are really not one) to be persuasively argued and supported, especially when focusing on this question of "what problem does this religion attempt to solve?" I read it on Kindle so I had trouble going back to compare. Would have been nice to have a summary at the end of the book to remind me of the differences. I'm guessing there must be a study guide somewhere that has this sort of chart/information.

I highly recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in religions, but I especially recommend it to anyone who has a hatred of any religion or anyone who thinks that their religion is the "one true religion". Atheists and Christians alike should check this one out. This book debunks the common misconception that "all religions are different paths leading to the same place". The author does his best to remain unbiased and does not place any one religion as more "right" than any other. Stephen Prothero's simple, easy to read, matter of fact approach simply seeks to inform readers about the goals and solutions of the top eight religions of the world, while at the same time acknowledging that there are good and bad things that come from religion. Overall, I think this book helps to promote understanding about religions as a whole and as a result promotes religious tolerance.

Dr. Prothero has written a boring book in the way that thoughtful and well-reasoned ideas tend to be. His voice rises wisely (and quite often humorously) above the din of zealotry. What, he asks in writing this book, is the most useful way to engage with something that almost everyone on earth uses to some extent to get through this thing we call life? He then offers in answer to his own question a series of brief, yet informative glimpses at each of the world's "greatest" religions along very pragmatic, very human lines. To read "God Is Not One" is to take a sane step back and to get to know the members of our "religious family" in a sympathetic, albeit even-handed light.

This is an enlightening and entertaining book. It would be a pleasure to be one of Professor Prothero's students. The thesis underlying the title, "God Is Not One", is spot on and conforms to my own experiences and observations as I've traveled around the world. Although some reviewers have taken exception with this thesis, it is one that is easily confirmed by simply asking people what they believe. In India, for example, I found many if not most Hindus believe in many gods and according to some as many as 330 million. In Hindu temples you often find Buddha and several of the Hindu gods worshipped side by side. In Indochina spirit houses abound alongside Buddhist

temples. In Thailand, King Bhumibol is worshiped as a god. In Central Asia, Muslims pray to the sky god while warding off evil spirits through various rituals. Prothero aptly demonstrates how various gods are invoked throughout the major religions of the world. I found the chapter on the Yoruba religion, of which I knew very little, to be quite illustrative of his "God Is Not One" Hypothesis. Prothero is also spot on when he denies that differences among religions are likened to taking different paths up the same mountain. The Buddhist goal of nirvana, the Hindu goal of moksha, the Confucian goal of harmony, and the Christian goal of everlasting life are not the same. I agree with Prothero, that we are better off to recognize these differences so we can find ways to live in peace with one another. Prothero is also quick to point out, and I would agree, that in spite of the differences there is generally little to separate religions with respect to their ethical standards. The golden rule seems to apply across religious differences. So far so good, but to get to this point Prothero finds it necessary to reject the traditional definition of religion as the belief in a supernatural power and instead posits a four-step approach to defining religion: (1) a problem, (2) a solution, (3) a technique, and (4) exemplars. This allows him to include groups as diverse as Christians who believe in a god and a hereafter and the billion plus "Confucianists" who don't believe in a god, a hereafter, or wouldn't even think of calling themselves "Confucianists." He goes further to include also atheism as a religion although ironically, here he uses the term "religion" pejoratively, as some religious people are prone to do, to minimize and dismiss Atheism's contribution to the world's cultural and intellectual history. He alleges, "Atheism is not a great religion. It has always been for elites rather than ordinary folk. And until the twentieth century, its influence on world history was nonexistent as Woody Allen's god." Wow, can he actually be serious. Where's the scholarship behind this outrageous statement. For those interested in some excellent scholarship in this area, I would recommend "Doubt - a History" by Jennifer Michael Hecht. If Prothero can define Confucianism and Atheism as religions, why not Capitalism, Communism, Maoism, Hedonism, American Elitism or any other -ism. They all identify a problem, a solution, a technique, and have exemplars up the yin yang. In fact, it's hard for me to imagine what human enterprise would fall outside his four-step definition of religion and, I guess, Prothero may be suggesting the same when he has his students create their own religions, supposedly following his criteria. It's not just that his definition of religion is too broad; it also leads to the wrong conclusions. By defining Confucianism and Atheism as religions, he's throwing a deaf ear to the billions of non-believers and doubters and the tremendous influence they have had throughout world history. He literally cuts this line of inquiry off when he states in his introduction, "...nine out of every ten Americans believe in God, and, with the notable exception of Western Europe, the rest of the world is furiously religious." Of course, the

world is "furiously" religious if any definition of god or human activity can be assumed by his four-step criteria. I want to ask, are the nine out ten Americans surveyed referring to the god of Thomas Jefferson who as a professed Epicurean saw god as not having an active role in our lives or the god of crusading Evangelists who see God's handiwork everywhere? Having been brought up in a fundamentalist family, it often surprised me to encounter Christians who do not believe in miracles, Christ's resurrection, or his virgin birth. Like Jefferson, to us these were non-believers, deists, or in the technically correct parlance of today atheists. In China where the majority of people I met did not seem comfortable referring to themselves as atheists, they had no problem stating that they did not belong to a religion or believe in a god. Here, it should be pointed out, as Prothero himself acknowledges, not even the Chinese government considers Confucianism a religion. So then, why has he? One final example, in the former Central Asian soviet countries where about 80% of the population is Muslim I saw little evidence during the month of Ramadan of the Muslim faith in practice. "Muslim light" is what some called it. Are these non-practicing Muslims actually Muslims? Prothero has no qualms in assuming that they are although he acknowledges that each religion has its non-believers, but then fails to plumb the depth and breadth of this phenomenon and as a result ends up drawing the wrong conclusions. I submit that had he used the traditional definition of religion, he would have found that the world is largely non-religious and that this has had a positive moderating influence on the religious extremism that continues to threaten the world today. This criticism aside, I feel obligated to give the book four stars because it moves the discussion of world religions in the direction of understanding and self-examination. Professor Prothero should be applauded for that.

I Had to get this book for my World Religions class in college. My Professor essentially taught from this book along with her knowledge. Overall, this book vividly outlines the major religions in the world and their beliefs remarkably well. Definitely buy this book if you want to know about the people you live with.

I've read it before and will use this new copy as a Christmas gift for my son.....another significant contribution toward religious literacy !!

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