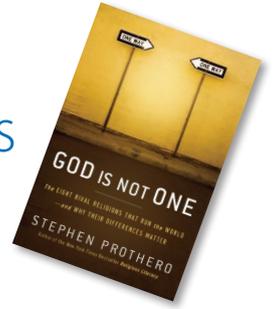




Book Review



God is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions that Run the World by Stephen Prothero (New York: Harper One, 2011)



The title of Prothero's book boldly proclaims the central thesis of his argument. A professor of religion at Boston University, Prothero suggests that the contemporary push to view all world religions as essentially similar – with areas of divergence between different religions being alternative pathways that can be followed to arrive at the same endpoint – is a great fallacy. This push does an ethical disservice to religious followers and disrespects the fundamental differences between religions.

Prothero contends that differences between religions are real to everyday practitioners. In many cases these differences have led to conflict, even death. In an effort to reduce this conflict between adherents of different religions, the concept of religious tolerance has been promoted. Accordingly, differences are tolerated or even trivialised and dismissed. It leads to an artificial unity and agreement between all religions.

Prothero introduces the term 'Godthink' to describe this ideological perspective of 'naïve theological groupthink' (p. 3). This Godthink contends that all religions are essentially the same; differences are dismissed for the 'higher goal' of unity. Prothero argues that proponents of Godthink have been blinded to (or wilfully ignore) the differences between religions. They have thus lost the ability to respond to these differences in realistic, appropriate and sensitive ways.

Prothero shares the same aspiration for peace amongst religious rivals as do the proponents of Godthink. However, he advocates a different way to achieve this goal. Rather than minimising differences between religions, Prothero believes that 'genuine dialogue across religious boundaries must recognise the existence of these boundaries and the fundamental difference between the lands they bisect' (p. 336). He argues that traditional interfaith dialogue compromises doctrine for the sake of fellowship. In contrast, his approach incorporates an awareness of, and respect for, religious differences as the key for interaction and co-existence between proponents of different religions, and managing the tension of doctrine and fellowship.

Hence, this book is an antidote to Godthink by seeking to improve the level of religious literacy amongst readers. Prothero's purpose for writing this book is to delineate the key conceptual, ideological, ethical and spiritual differences between the eight main religions of the world. His seeks to equip readers with the capacity to participate in respectful and articulate dialogue with people of other faiths, leading to peaceful co-existence among and within communities.

The book includes a separate chapter discussing each of the eight main religions: Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Yoruba Religion, Judaism and Daoism. There is a final chapter exploring Atheism. Each chapter articulates four key concepts inherent within the religion: the identification of a 'problem' confronted by humanity; a solution to this problem; a technique for moving from the problem to the solution; and an exemplar of people who or practices which have successfully charted the course from problem to solution.

One of the strengths of the book is that Prothero has successfully summarised (without being simplistic) the history, doctrines, sacred texts, ethical imperatives and contemporary issues of each religion into a single chapter. This allows contrasts and comparisons to be made. However, I think it would be even more helpful to include a condensed version of the problem, solution, technique and exemplar overview for each religion at the start of each chapter, as provided in the Christianity and Buddhism chapters.

Whilst Prothero strives to be objective in his discussion of each religion, his Christian heritage often bubbles to the surface when he provides analogies to support various arguments. He seeks to temper this acknowledged bias by referencing his active participation in dialogue and ceremonies of other religions. However, I would argue that this bias, once noted, does not need tempering. It provides a practical example of the very concept he is arguing: that religious differences should be articulated and appreciated as a pre-requisite for respectful dialogue and interaction.

For most religions, Prothero takes delight in highlighting whether orthopraxy (right practice) or orthodoxy (right doctrine) is the more dominant expression of that faith. I found this point of comparison invaluable. It provided an insight into the correlation between faith, lifestyle and belief for each religion. It also forced me to reflect on my own Christian perspective of the interaction between practice and doctrine and to view this interaction through the lens of other religions.

Prothero doesn't hesitate in proclaiming his belief that all religions are not one and they do not seek the same God. He counters the push for morphing all world religions into one big happy family; he highlights the superficiality and ignorance of this perspective. In so doing, Prothero advocates that a respectful appreciation of religious differences will ensure that future interfaith dialogue will be based on an awareness of the uniqueness of each religion, rather than a watering down of this uniqueness. Prothero's thesis is based on the concept that respect for and appreciation of religious differences will be a more effective vehicle to future peaceful co-existence than a misplaced optimism that unity will be achieved by reducing all religions to their lowest common denominator. ■

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