

**Difference Before Dialogue: Stephen Prothero's *God Is Not One***

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Stephen Prothero's *God Is Not One* provides the reader instant access to an Introduction to World Religions course, without the discomfort of lectures and tuition fees. Each of the book's chapters tackles one of the world's "great religions" (2010, 16)—Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Yoruba, Judaism, and Daoism—with a final chapter addressing modes of atheism. The book is clearly written for a popular audience, more specifically, for those "readers confessing their ignorance of the world's religions and asking for a single book they could read to become religiously literate" (2010, 13).

Behind the RLG100 motif lies Prothero's political objective: to dispel the myth that, all things considered, the world's religions really just provide different paths to the same goal. Such a conclusion, Prothero suggests, minimizes the importance of the differences between religions, locating them in the periphery of a central message shared by all traditions. This sentiment, while well-meaning and grounded in Enlightenment notions of tolerance, is "dangerous, disrespectful, and untrue" (2010, 2). Worse still, in obscuring the role that religions and their differences can play in conflicts,

in convincing society that religion does not matter, this perspective makes the academic study of religion a completely unnecessary endeavour.

It is, of course, much easier to assume that all religions are one than to actually make the effort to figure out the significance of differences. As Prothero puts it, “The ideal of religious tolerance has morphed into the straitjacket of religious agreement” (2010, 4). In an age that fears disagreement and argument, discussion about difference has become taboo. The result is interfaith dialogue, and the fantasy that a focus on similarity can bridge the gap of difference (2010, 12). *God Is Not One* provides an alternative to this rhetoric.

Each of the eight religions presented is approached using a similar formula, one that implicitly structures each chapter. According to Prothero, each religion can be understood as a system which puts forth (a) a problem to be solved, (b) a solution to that problem, which takes the shape of the religious goal, (c) a technique for moving from the problem to the solution, (d) an exemplar, one whose pursuit of the religious goal can be emulated (2010, 14). So, to use Buddhism as an example, the problem is suffering, the goal is to put an end to reincarnation, the technique involves the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, and the exemplar would be the Buddha. This same logic, Prothero argues, can be used to understand the basics of each of the world’s religions.

Prothero justifies his selection of these eight religions by referring to their “greatness.” He breaks his choices down into the “great religions of the Middle East” (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), the “great religions of India” (Hinduism, Buddhism), and the “great religions of East Asia” (Confucianism, Daoism). Yoruba is an add-on

representative of “indigenous religions” and is chosen specifically because of the geographical breadth of its influence in light of the African slave trade. Prothero openly acknowledges that he could have gone in a number of different directions by including Jainism, Shinto, Wicca or Scientology, and he makes special mention of Sikhism’s size, adding, “some of my best students have been Sikhs” (2010, 16). Ultimately, Prothero defines the “greatness” of the religions selected as a measure of statistical membership and historical significance, not one of “quality” or “goodness” (2010, 17).

The body of the book itself is unlikely to contain anything revolutionary for the scholar of religion; we all know our world religions by now, I would think. Most interesting, perhaps, is Prothero’s position within the insider/outsider dichotomy. The chapters themselves do not shy away from historical controversy. Inter-religious conflicts and wars, intra-denominational schisms, debates over orthodoxy—all of these are addressed where relevant. This follows from Prothero’s explicit goal to “be fair” to the religions, to be willing to highlight their strengths and weaknesses dispassionately (2010, 20), a position consistent with most academic work on religion. On the other hand, part of his mission involves seeking assent from believers themselves: “But being honest also requires being true to these religious traditions themselves—by writing chapters to which adherents can say ‘Amen’ and otherwise wrestling with the fact that in writing about any religion, one is treading on dreams” (2010, 20). Now, Prothero presents this as an issue of accuracy; we wouldn’t want to regress to the 1930s and start using “sin” when referring to Hindu notions of karmic demerit, for example. In this sense, he wants practitioners to recognise themselves in his descriptions. At the same time, are we really doing our job as scholars of religion by seeking to please the insider?

We would not want this sort of appeal to the traditions to degenerate into a loss of critical edge.

The chapters themselves, following the four-point structure laid out earlier, address the points that one would expect of a well-structured “Intro to World Religions” text, adding in topics of current debate or discussion likely of interest to the reader. So Prothero pays close attention to the contrast between the Christian ethics of nonviolence in the New Testament and Quranic just war theory (2010, 45), as well as to regulations governing the treatment of Muslim women (2010, 48) and to the unity of public and private under sharia law (2010, 49). Chapters move quickly, and few topics occupy more than a page or two. Religions are presented both in their historical and modern contexts. New developments such as the global rise of Mormonism or of Pentecostalism in Christianity, or the official return to Confucian ideology in China are dealt with extensively. The definition of religion itself, with respect to Hinduism as a broad banner under which a long list of heterogeneous practices are grouped, or to Confucianism as a set of social mores, is considered. Each chapter closes with Prothero’s “assessment” of the religion in question, a carefully balanced evaluation in which the author reveals ways in which he feels each religion is outdated and ways in which he has come to respect the tradition. Here we can really see Prothero trying to get inside his reader’s head, anticipating reactions and providing counterpoints.

The final chapter presents atheism as “the way of reason” (2010, 317), a quasi-religious but venerable tradition of thought adopted by some of the world’s greatest minds and most brutal dictators alike. Historically elitist, atheism warrants attention insofar as it has “gone public” with its philosophy as a response to 9/11 and to the

explicit move of some religions into the political sphere (2010, 320). Making a distinction between strong and weak atheism, Prothero directs many of his comments toward the New Atheists, who make the same mistake as do the “all religions are one” party. In their exclusive focus on the evils of religion and their failure to see the good therein, Prothero suggests, the New Atheists fail to appreciate the differences between them. At some level, all religions are the same for the New Atheists as well. And just as the public tends to focus excessively on the militant side of religion, so too has New Atheist sensationalism drawn attention away from a softer, gentler atheism, one that is less forceful in its claims.

After three hundred pages of emphasizing difference, Prothero’s conclusion makes another interesting move: a return to similarity, an admonition against *overemphasis* of difference. Here, religions are all similar insofar as they attend “to our embodiment and to our human predicament, not least by defining what it is to be fully alive” (2010, 333). Religions transform us; they teach us to be human. Despite the romantic undertones, Prothero reminds his reader here that he seeks to correct an imbalance. An excessive focus on difference would be equally dangerous as the present ignorance of it. What is needed, then, once again, is religious literacy, an understanding of both difference *and* similarity.

## **References**

Prothero, Stephen. 2010. *God Is Not One*. New York: HarperOne