

God is not one

Maureen Fiedler | Jun. 6, 2010 NCR Today

God Is Not One is the title of a new and iconoclastic book jolting the interfaith movement. Most folks involved in inter-religious dialogue spend their waking energy searching for the *commonalities* among faith traditions. Some even say that different faiths are simply different paths to the same God.

“Not so,” says Stephen Prothero, a professor of religion at Boston University, and one of the most lucid writers in the world of religion that I have encountered. The full title of this newest book is: *God is Not One: the Eight Rival Religions that Run the World and Why Their Differences Matters*. I interviewed him this week on "[Interfaith Voices](#) [1].”

He regards these “we are really one at our core” statements as a kind of interfaith “kumbaya” — a hopeful mythology that ignores the real differences among faith traditions. He says this trend is not only incorrect, but even dangerous in today’s world because it glosses over differences that influence world affairs. Moreover, it keep us from appreciating the richness of each tradition — the treasure trove of practices, ritual, creeds, and sacred days.

Interfaith relations, he asserts, are better modeled on good interracial relations where those in conversation do not try to make everyone the same, but appreciate the richness of each heritage.

He then discusses the world’s faith traditions in what he sees as their order of impact on the world. Number One is Islam, not Christianity, which he says is losing “market share” (followers) in the world today, while Islam is growing rapidly. But Christianity is second, followed by Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Yoruba Religion (African), Judaism and Daoism.

I strongly recommend this fascinating book, partly because its overall thesis is, I believe, a needed “course correction” in interfaith dialogue. But it also provides one of the best summaries of each of the above traditions (in 30-35 pages each) that you will find anywhere. Prothero has a lucid and “gingerly” style of writing that makes theology and historical trends come alive. He’s a man who enjoys what he does, and it shows!

His earlier book, *Religious Literacy*, is likewise excellent. But in that book, he simply says we *need* to be religiously literate in today’s world. His newest book actually helps the reader get part way to that goal.

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[1] <http://interfaithradio.org/node/1360>