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## Book explores religions and the significance of difference

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# Opinion & ARTS

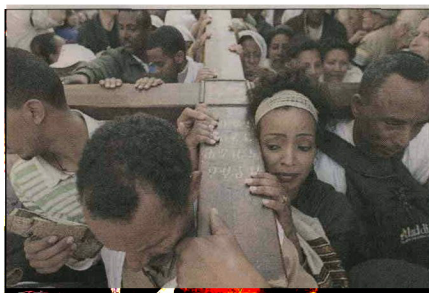
OPINION BOOKS LETTERS ARTS

NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER

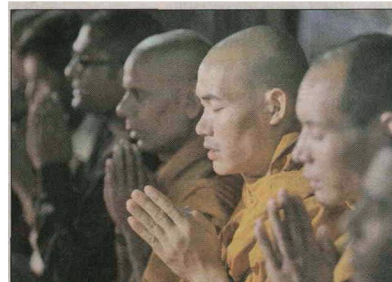
SEPTEMBER 16, 2011 • 23



—Newscom/EPA/Paul Hilton  
A woman prays with incense sticks at the Man Mo Daoist Temple in Hong Kong.



—CNS/Reuters/Ammar Awad  
Ethiopian Christian pilgrims carry a cross to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher during a Good Friday procession in Jerusalem.



—CNS/Reuters/Danish Siddiqui  
Buddhist monks pray in Mumbai, India.

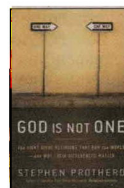
## Book explores religions and the significance of difference

Reviewed by TRACY TIEMEIER

In a world rife with religious conflict and militant fundamentalism, the temptation is strong to emphasize the unity of religions. On one side, those hostile to religion will blame all religions for similarly perpetuating ignorance and violence. For these people, the world would be a safer place without religion. On the other side, those eager to promote interreligious harmony

will argue that religions are really different paths up the same mountain. For these people, the world would be a safer place if only people could understand that, basically, all religions are saying the same thing.

According to Stephen Prothero, a professor of religion at Boston University who has appeared everywhere from CNN to "The Colbert Report," both sides are wrong. Even as adherents of religious traditions are party to some of the most



**GOD IS NOT ONE: THE EIGHT RIVAL RELIGIONS THAT RUN THE WORLD**  
By Stephen Prothero  
Published by HarperOne, \$16.99

egregious violations of human dignity, they are also behind some of the most powerful movements for peace and justice. Moreover, he contends, religious particularities and distinctions matter profoundly to believers. For him, it is therefore disrespectful to religions and their

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## Unsung (and underpaid) heroes of the parish

Store shelves are stocked with notebook paper, folders and glue sticks, so it must be time to go back to school. This year my sister will take her first child to college, I will send my last one to preschool, while millions of American families will begin the carpool rotation for everything in between.

It's also back-to-school time at church. Religious education programs begin in the fall, and directors of religious education have spent their summer vacations finding creative ways to share the good news with kids from 4 to 14. Imagine being in charge of shaping the spiritual lives of the future of our church. What an important job!

You would think.

Although teachers usually rank near the top of surveys of most admired professions, those who teach religion, as Rodney Dangerfield famously said, "don't get no respect."

It's not just the long hours and low pay, though working weekends and holidays for an average salary in the low- to mid-\$30,000s is no plus. Despite a dramatic increase in the professional standards required of parish catechetical directors, too often these unsung heroes of the parish are not treated professionally — by their bosses or by the people they serve.

Horror stories abound about pastors, clergy or diocesan personnel treating directors of religious education poorly, including setting unrealistic expectations, arbitrarily overriding their decisions and even randomly firing them. Almost worse is the increasing number of parents who condescendingly demand changes to the curriculum or accommoda-

tions for their child's sports practice.

"Why can't my kids have a weekly hour of games and pizza, with 10 minutes of Bible lesson, like the Baptists up the street?" "Could you switch the fifth-grade class to Tuesday nights so my son can have his favorite teacher?" "I'm going to be a half-hour late picking up my child because I have a hair appointment."

Not to mention parents who refuse to volunteer, to contribute financially for extras and — here's the kicker — to accompany their own kids to Mass and other sacraments to reinforce what the young ones are learning in what used to be called Sunday school.

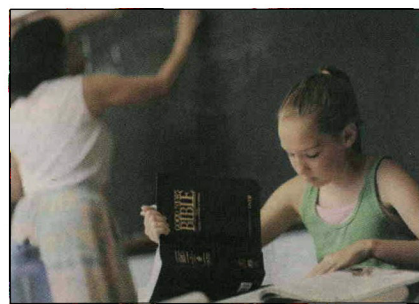
From what I hear, today's competitive, "helicoptering" parents treat "regular" teachers similarly, but I think religious educators have it worse. Despite a desire for their children to receive religious education (or perhaps only a desire for the cultural milestones of first sacraments), parents — indeed the whole church — do not value religious education the way we should.

If we did, directors of religious education — DREs — would be making as much as principals, and kids would say "teach religion" when asked what they want to do when they grow up. Or at least people would have heard of them: When I mentioned on Facebook that I was writing about DREs, one Catholic friend wondered why I cared about rapper Dr. Dre! (I'm hoping she was kidding.)

So why do thousands of people — mostly women — put up with such working conditions? Of course, most



HEIDI SCHLUMPF



—CNS/Catholic Courier/Mike Crupi  
Eleven-year-old Meghan Keyes attends a 2010 religious education class at St. Charles Borromeo Parish in Greece, N.Y.

stay because they love the church and feel called to the ministry of helping young souls discover Jesus.

But with the priesthood and diaconate currently closed to women, religious education director is also one of the few parish ministry positions open to the thousands of laywomen who have earned graduate theological degrees.

In fact, 88 percent of religious educators are women, according to the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate's National Parish Inventory and Catholic Ministry Formation database.

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## RELIGIONS: UNIQUE BIG QUESTIONS

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practitioners to dismiss or patronize them by claiming they are all the same. They all may be asking and answering big questions, but they have their own big questions that they think are significant as well as their own answers. They offer distinctive diagnoses of the human predicament, solutions to that problem, and techniques and exemplars for reaching that solution.

Given this central insight, Prothero sets out to present eight religious traditions of the world (Islam, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, the Yoruba religion, Judaism and Daoism, with an additional chapter on atheism). He does this accessibly, but also in a way that highlights their unique approaches to the world. The result is a highly readable — yet also detailed — survey of world religions.

I absolutely agree with Prothero on the significance of religious differences. Both Hinduism and Christianity may have theologies of divine incarnation, but that does not mean Hindu theologies of incarnation are the same as Christian ones. In fact, they are quite different. To pretend they are the same is to gloss over the distinctiveness of both traditions and to miss their unique spiritual insights.

At the same time, it is essential to remember that an emphasis on religious difference is no more a panacea for religious conflict than an emphasis on religious sameness. If a focus on sameness can ignore the uniqueness of

religious traditions and persons, a focus on difference can separate religious traditions and persons. Differences can easily become chasms.

Prothero admits, “Whether religion divides or unites also depends on whether we can learn to talk about it with some measure of empathetic understanding.” Toward that end, Prothero provides moments where readers are invited to come to a new appreciation of beliefs or practices that might at first glance seem problematic to outsiders of the religion. For example, he raises difficult Quranic passages on the horrors of hell and on the injunction not to befriend Jews and Christians. Not only does he explain those passages in their historical context, he shares his own shift from horror to appreciation and relates how Muslim friends reinterpret those passages for the modern world. Sections like these are important for understanding and appreciating how religious traditions are responding to the distinct challenges they face.

But such empathetic insights are few and far between. More often than not, Prothero opts for an impersonal presentation that does not provide any empathetic crossover into what really makes these distinctive traditions so rich. Prothero’s motivation for limiting commentary during his presentation of the religions is understandable. We all see the way religion is treated in the American public square, both by the political left and the political right. We yearn for something else. In light of



—CNS/Reuters/Darren Whiteside

Ultra-Orthodox Jewish boys stand together before a blessing at the Western Wall, Judaism’s holiest prayer site, in Jerusalem.

that, Prothero’s plea for “a voice that sounds more like the old-fashioned news gathering of CBS and the BBC than like the contemporary vituperations of Fox News and MSNBC” makes sense.

Unfortunately, such an impersonal voice informs without necessarily inspiring positive transformation. In fact, it can serve to alienate religious persons from each other. Like the faraway voice of a news report, a distant presentation of religion can sound like curious details about people and places far away that we simply file away

for dinner conversation. Or worse, those disconnected factual details can confirm one’s suspicion that other religious traditions are hopelessly different from our own, and therefore are unworthy of respect.

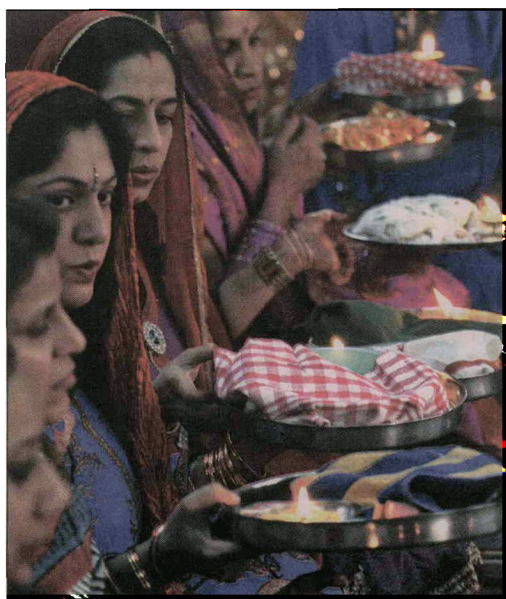
Further preventing the necessary empathy Prothero ultimately calls for is his ranking of the religions according to their greatness. By greatness, he means influence, not goodness. Of course, one can define influence in any number of ways. This makes Prothero’s ranked order (Islam, Christianity, Confu-

cianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Yoruba Religion, Judaism and Daoism) both arbitrary and problematic. What is the purpose of ranking religions according to greatness? It seems to contribute neither to religious literacy nor to empathy. If anything, it perpetuates the idea that these traditions are fundamental rivals.

As a Catholic immersed in the world of interreligious dialogue, I cannot help but hope for something more. I want the faith of the person to be integral to the conversation. I want the impetus to understand another religion or religious person to come from a profound sense of religious commitment (and not despite it). For me, it is my Catholic faith that calls me to know and love all my religious (and nonreligious) neighbors in their unique ways, to appreciate their spiritual riches, and to cooperate with them in building a better world.

In the end, Prothero’s insight on religious difference is important, as is his accessible presentation of the religions of the world. While I noticed a number of factual errors and misleading statements, the book does provide a good overview of the religious traditions it considers. At the same time, the book could do much more to move readers to a deeper sense of appreciation in difference and unity without sameness. Without that deeper sense, an emphasis on difference simply breeds confusion, apathy and even intolerance.

[Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier is assistant professor of theological studies at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles.]



—CNS/Reuters/Parivartan Sharma

Women pray inside a Hindu temple in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh during the celebration of Diwali, the feast of lights.

## A READING LIST TO DELVE INTO WORLD FAITHS

*Stephen Prothero’s God Is Not One sparked an interesting discussion among my friends and colleagues about what texts on world religions we might recommend to a mostly Catholic Christian audience. We thought it important to include a variety of approaches, balancing descriptive accounts, theological perspectives and spiritual encounters. What follows is by no means an exhaustive list, but it is a beginning for those interested to do some further reading.*

—Tracy Sayuki Tiemeier

*Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, in the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation* by Eboo Patel (Beacon Press, 2010)

*A Border Passage: From Cairo to America — a Woman’s Journey* by Leila Ahmed (Penguin Books, 2000)

*A Christian’s Guide to Judaism* by Michael Lotker (Paulist Press, 2004)

*A Concise Introduction to World Religions* (Second Edition), edited by Willard Oxtoby and Alan Segal (Oxford University Press, 2011)

*Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras* by Diana L. Eck (Beacon Press, 2003)

*Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* by James L. Fredericks (Paulist Press, 1999)

*Hindu Wisdom for All God’s Children* by Francis X. Clooney, S.J. (Wipf & Stock, 2005)

*Jewish-Christian Dialogue: One Woman’s Experience* (Madeleva Lecture in Spiritu-

ality) by Mary C. Boys (Paulist Press, 1997)

*Meeting Faith: The Forest Journals of a Black Buddhist Nun* by Faith Adiele (W.W. Norton & Company, 2004)

*Oil & Water: Two Faiths: One God* by Amir Hussain (CopperHouse, 2006)

*Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* by Paul F. Knitter (Oneworld, 2009)

*World Religions: Eastern Traditions* (Third Edition), edited by Willard Oxtoby and Roy Amore (Oxford University Press, 2010)

*World Religions: Western Traditions* (Third Edition), edited by Willard Oxtoby and Amir Hussain (Oxford University Press, 2010)