How does a religion teacher get an invitation to appear on Comedy Central’s The Colbert Report? By writing a book saying that Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, and others have preached about the shared, benign beliefs unifying all great religions — and then dismissing that message as garbage.

Stephen Prothero’s God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World — and Why Their Differences Matter (HarperOne), which hit bookstores in April, argues that the globe’s eight major religions hold different and irreconcilable assumptions. They may all push the Golden Rule, as progressives like to point out, but no religion really considers ethics its sole goal. Doctrine, ritual, and myth are crucial, too, and on these, writes the College of Arts & Sciences professor, there is no meeting of the religious minds. For example, Christians who think they’re doing non-Christians a favor by saying they too can be “saved” ignore the fact that Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Confucians either don’t believe in sin or don’t focus on salvation from it. (Hinduism, Daoism, and the African religion Yoruba round out the eight.)

The notion of “pretend pluralism,” as Prothero decries it, may be nobly intended, but it is “dangerous, disrespectful, and untrue.” It blinds us to understanding, and therefore solving, Islamic fundamentalist terrorism or Jewish-Arab disputes over Jerusalem or the contest for Kashmir between two nuclear powers with competing religious majorities (Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan), he writes.

“How do Prothero’s academic colleagues feel about his latest thesis? One could say that their responses are definitely not one. Nonagenarian author Huston Smith, whose book The World’s Religions is a classic in the field, says Prothero misrepresents him as an apostle of pretend pluralism. “The historical religions are both alike and different,” Smith says. “They are alike in believing in God’s existence and that His/Her/Its will is that we love one another.” (Prothero’s book begs to differ: many Buddhists don’t believe in God, while Hindus believe in multiple gods.) “However, they are a far cry from being carbon copies of one another.”

Another noted liberal theologian, Harvard’s Harvey Cox, gives Prothero qualified support. “Steve is right that the ‘unity’ of religions has been exaggerated,” says Cox. “He helps us all see that in interfaith dialogue, we converse with a genuine ‘other.’ What he may overlook is that religions are changing, sometimes quite rapidly — the lines between them are becoming more porous — and that a considerable amount of borrowing back and forth has been going on.”

This isn’t the first time that Prothero has held a mirror to our religious views. In 2003’s American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon, he probed the personal projections we foist on the Christian Son of God. His 2007 book, Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know — and Doesn’t, achieved bestsellerdom and a spot for its author on The Daily Show by scolding Americans as religious doofuses. We think Sodom and Gomorrah are a married couple, he wrote, and he urged mandatory public-school education about religions.

**RICH BARLOW**