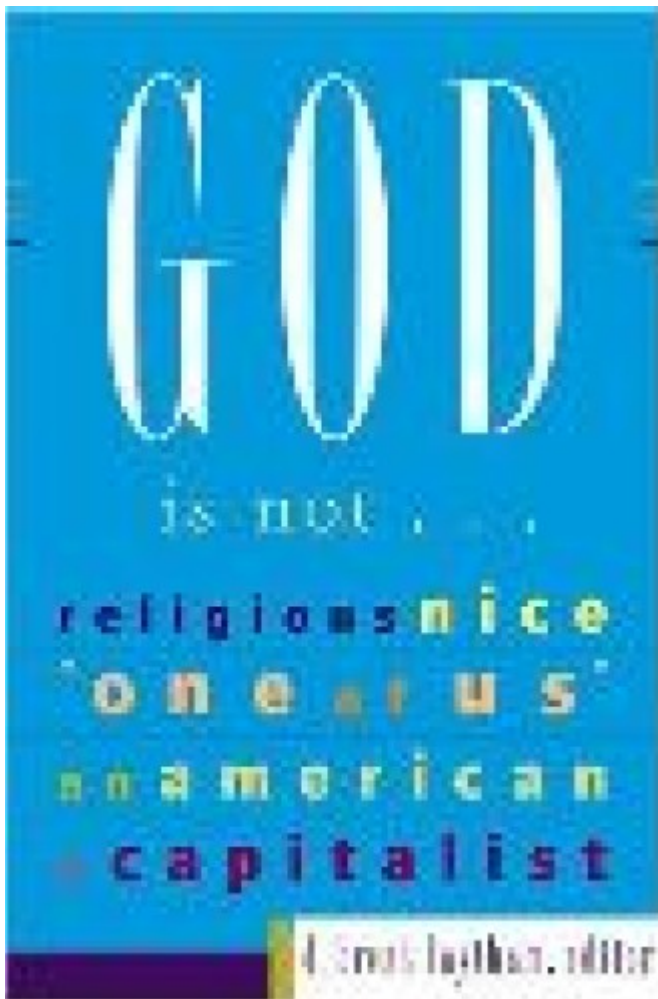


God Is Not . . . Religious, Nice, "One of Us," an American, a Capitalist

reviewed by [Craig Hovey](#) in the [May 17, 2005](#) issue

In Review



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D. Brent Laytham, ed.
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Countless apples later, it seems that we have given up on becoming like God and have settled instead for making God like ourselves. Negative theology is a venerable tradition that acknowledges the lure of this temptation and refuses it by modestly trying only to describe what God is not.

In this short but potent book of essays edited by D. Brent Laytham of North Park Seminary, the authors discuss five things that God is not: religious, nice, “one of us,” an American and a capitalist. In contrast to traditional writings of negative theology, these essays trade not on metaphysical notions but on political ones. Their aim is to show us not how being human differs from being God, but how the mistaken ways we think about humanity (and the redeemed humanity of the church) mislead us into mistaken ways of thinking about God. And what we end up saying about God tells us a great deal about how we think of ourselves.

For example, the real power in the otherwise obvious claim that God is not an American is that it raises the question of how we ever took being American to be more fundamental to our identity than being Christian. In his essay Michael Baxter explains that Christians in the U.S. have always thought that it is different from other nations—a “city on a hill” with a special calling, mission and destiny. There certainly has been no shortage of such talk since 9/11. But Baxter insists that Americans who worship an American God worship a false god and have been insufficiently formed by true worship. He argues that pledging allegiance to “one nation under God” should be a matter of contention not so much among secularists because it mentions God as among Christians because it mentions an idol. Christians should never feel at home in this “one nation” because their overriding loyalty is to “one church under God.”

D. Stephen Long notes that we have made God nice, preferring the facile banality of a celestially sanctioned “Have a nice day” to the unpredictability of God’s lovingkindness. Entertainment evangelism with its therapeutic God who “meets my needs” starts with us and makes God follow on in our image, and we consequently become victims of our own disordered desires. “We cannot think God without first thinking of ourselves.” By making God nice, we unwittingly erect a murderous deity whose sentimental geniality veils totalitarian power. Such a God, Long counsels, cannot save.

This little book is aimed at pastors and laypeople who need to be reminded that orthodox Christian beliefs are germane to the radical work of being part of a church that is able to resist conformity with the world. The book has the strength of verve and wit; it uses *The Simpsons* and the satirical newspaper *The Onion* to connect its incisive critique with the ironic side of pop culture. It is also self-consciously provocative, with “over-the-top flair,” the “theological equivalent of the *Jerry Springer Show*.” But the reader quickly sees that these are serious essays that address urgent topics as they move fluidly from Joan Osborne to Karl Barth and from Mickey Mouse to Thomas Aquinas and Nicholas of Cusa.

For all their talk of the church, the authors make clear that the real issue is God—and the fact that we have accepted a version of God that makes the church optional. Laytham goes the farthest toward saying this when he asserts that the church is one, holy, catholic and apostolic only because we worship a God who is all of these things first. The authors contend that the church needs to be faithful to its calling as a reconciled, authentic, international, witnessing people and that it fails to do so because it uncritically accepts certain forms of political community—an America in which we are primarily Americans and an economy in which we are primarily consumers—rather than accepting the church as determinative of our Christian identity. This book is a stern reminder that when we make God like ourselves, it is we who are robbed.