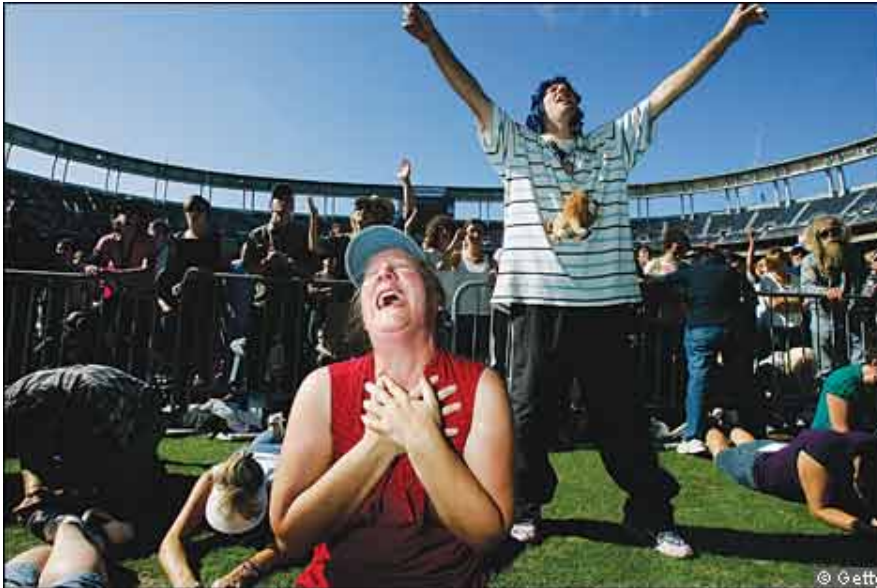


God is Back

Review by John Lloyd

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God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World

By John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge

Penguin Press \$27.95 416 pages

[FT Bookshop](#) price: £20

Many liberals in postwar Europe view those who are enthusiastic about religion with a certain amount of suspicion. To be a “religious nut” – to talk fanatically about one’s faith – would be to invite at least covert ridicule; one just has to remember how President George W Bush was mocked in Europe for his evangelism. In much of Europe, most people don’t understand why anyone should be joyously and openly religious.

In *God is Back*, The Economist’s editor John Micklethwait and its US editor Adrian Wooldridge seek to address this incomprehension, and show how it limits the understanding of what moves hundreds of millions of people round the world. Protestantism, for example, emphasises the direct experience of God through the intercession of the holy spirit, and accounts for about a quarter of the world’s 2bn Christians. This, and other extreme forms of religious belief, is widely regarded by liberals as backward, ignorant and obscurantist. The authors, however, view it as “a great force for social progress and upward mobility in the developing world”. Pentecostals, they say, “provide people with the right psychological disposition to thrive in a capitalist economy”, because of their emphasis on discipline, regular habits, thriftiness and preservation of the family.

The authors observe that, in general, “the great forces of modernity – technology and democracy, choice and freedom – are all strengthening religion rather than undermining it”. And as a result of this, they claim that the world is moving in the “American direction, where religion and modernity happily co-exist, rather than in the European direction, where secularisation marginalises religion”. In the US version of religion (predominantly Christianity), technology, marketing, the internet and popular culture are pressed into service to gain and keep the flock. As much of the literature on US religion either deprecates its rightwing bias or boosts its wonder-working power, a cool and fair analysis such as this is a welcome rarity.

The book opens in Shanghai, with an account of a group of upper middle-class people holding a Christian prayer meeting at one of their homes. The gathering is expressing ardent agreement with the Biblical text in the book of Romans, which denounces men who “give up natural sexual relations with women and burn with passion for each other”. These worshippers are the kind of people, well-educated and motivated by a desire to join or stay in the middle class, who are at China’s cutting edge, part of its formidable drive to be the leading economy in the world. As this vignette shows, such people can conjoin modern openness with prejudice, especially against homosexuals. This is

disconcerting for those who believe that 21st-century intellectual thought should be at war with bigotry.

Micklethwait and Wooldridge have co-authored books on globalisation, the nature of the business corporation and the US right. Although it may seem like a departure from the sort of subject matter one might expect senior Economist writers to cover, *God is Back* is the duo's most successful and vivid book to date. It is filled with clear and apposite examples of resurgent religiosity. Take the case of Chick-fil-A, a fast-food chain, selling chicken sandwiches. The company's mission statement is "to glorify God by being faithful stewards of all that is entrusted to us and to have a positive influence on all who come into contact with Chick-fil-A". This is not a lone or freakish instance of unembarrassed belief in God, say the authors.

The central message of this book is that the US, by separating the state from the church and decreeing religious freedom, established the lasting base for religious entrepreneurialism, and for a successful export of various forms of Christianity. Thomas Jefferson saw separation as good for religion because it would promote competition; James Madison saw it as good for the state because religion could be free "to promote public morality, unencumbered by state patronage". On their beliefs – and those of the other framers of the Constitution – an entrepreneurial religious agora was created, constantly able to renew itself, as it is now doing.

According to Micklethwait and Wooldridge, the just-departed President Bush was not out of line with postwar US presidents: Dwight Eisenhower, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan and that louche cosmopolitan Bill Clinton all affirmed their faith and sought to promote it. This was in strong contrast to most European politicians.

US evangelicals are not a collection of rednecks: their churches are often mixed-race, their interests increasingly comprehend world poverty and global warming, and they are shedding the anti-intellectual image. Marginalised from a largely secular educational establishment, they have "formed an impressive array of academic associations", which exist parallel to the state colleges and the Ivy League.

Christianity is the overwhelming focus of the narrative. In this sense, the book fails to be comprehensive and falls short of its sub-title, "How the Global Rise of Faith is Changing the World". The God that is back is a Christian one, with an American accent. Islam gets some space, much of it an assessment of the evidence on how far the faith has mutated into a series of violent campaigns to Islamise, or re-Islamise, as much of the world as possible. There is little about Orthodoxy, not much more about Judaism, while Buddhism and Hinduism must fend for themselves.

Above all, the authors destroy the equation often made by anti-Americanists between US evangelism and radical Islam. The former resides in an assumption, not just of toleration, but of pluralism: the second insists not just on the rightness of its path but on the duty to impose it by force. "History", said Jefferson, "furnishes no example of a priest-ridden country maintaining a free civil government." For all its sins against liberalism, particularly on the issue of gay sexuality, new-minted US Christianity has remained true to the founders' belief that faith should be freely found.

<http://www.thetrumpet.com/index.php?q=6076.0.114.0>