
John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge:

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GOD IS BACK: HOW THE GLOBAL REVIVAL OF FAITH IS CHANGING THE WORLD

Allen Lane; London, 2009, 405 pages

Theoreticians of the 19th century such as Freud, Frazer, Taylor and others believed that religion would eventually wither away. The functionalists asserted that it would be replaced with another institution, one that would not be founded in the supernatural. In the late 1960s, sociologist of religion, Peter Berger, maintained that in no less than a few decades religious believers would become a minority, clustering together in sects. Is that what we have arrived at today? Not at all – say John Micklethwait, editor of the Economist, and the magazine’s Washington bureau chief Adrian Wooldridge. The influence of religion is increasing worldwide, they claim, and the ‘salvation’ is all thanks to the invisible hand of the market: God is Back reveals the immense world of belief, from depicting home grown Christian churches in China to the crime-fighting ‘God Squads’ of Philadelphia. Owing to the power of liberal capitalism, most American churches, led by ‘pastorprenuers’ and spreading internationally, have come to resemble corporations. Modernity has not succeeded in casting the religious out of people’s lives (if that ever was its aspiration), and secularisation has not pushed religion into the exile of the private realm. Instead, Micklethwait and Wooldridge make a claim that thanks to the intense exportation of the flourishing American model of faith, the world of the future will be a place which religion and modernity can cohabit in peace.

The principal value of this book is in its sketching out of the developmental path that put God into the spotlight of the modern capitalist United States of America. The theatrical title is somewhat misleading – contrary to the expectations they create with it, the authors tell a history of religion in America with great attention to detail and are successful in their attempt to do so from a distance. By focusing on the difference between religious development in the States and Europe, the narrative wraps up with an analysis of the present day consequences of this on the global level. Using carefully researched sources, the authors show that it is thanks to the American Revolution that religion and modernity never became mutually exclusive in the States, but instead, by becoming an issue of “individual conscience” the freedom of belief was placed alongside other defining American values such as reason and liberalism. In Europe the opposite was the case – ever since the French Revolution, religion came to represent the enemy of liberalism as it was seen as part of the ancien régime and reactionary, inducing a strong sentiment of anticlericalism. The animosity persists to this day – as

the authors say, "For many European liberals, American religiosity is its [America's] least attractive characteristic. They cannot believe any modern person can be religious unless that person is either stupid or insane."

Therefore, the authors set out to prove that "the very things supposed to destroy religion – democracy and markets, technology and reason – are combining to make it stronger", and they provide proof of this in the rapid growth and global expansion of American 'religious franchises'. Many examples are used to demonstrate that 'God' may be America's best export - the success of Pentecostalism in Brazil and South Korea or the modern methods utilized by the religious leadership of a Hindu temple in Bangalore to lure believers – which all mirror the style and organization of American megachurches. The philosophers of the Enlightenment believed that the sustainability of religion in the States was a strange anomaly that would succumb to the forces of secularisation at some point. Conversely, the core message of God is Back is to "look around the world and [see that] the exception is plainly not today's America but post-war Europe." The American model of religion is driven by the same forces as capitalism – it is thriving because it is based on free choice and competition and has, thus, managed to put "God back into modernity." Predicting that "Europe is more likely to move in America's direction than America in Europe's", the authors are little short of marvelling at the astounding success of American religiosity in reproducing itself all over the world.

In fact, the authors take a very economist approach in their analysis that is abundant in economic phrases and statistics. The book consists of a plethora of data: in the States, 92% of adults believe in the existence of God or some kind of universal spirit and 70% are "absolutely" certain of His existence; 44% of Americans belong to a religion other than the one in which they were raised; according to official figures, there are more Christians than members of the Communist Party in China; Catholics in San Francisco make up a quarter of the population but 60% of churchgoers... The numbers are complemented by discussions on the changes of the 'market shares' of different religions, the 'start-up costs' of setting up religious businesses or the characteristics and number of 'religious consumers' in different countries. This all leads the authors to uncover the secret of the fantastic commercial success of American religion.

"If God died in the cities of the industrial revolution, he has risen again in the post-industrial cities of the developing world", they say, and He has taken the shape of a product that consumers have become increasingly reliant on. Faced with the uncertainties of modernity, people seek out the "soulcraft" produces of religion – or all that can "offer a helping hand where help is lacking, provide purpose where life might seem purposeless, and community where community is lacking." Thus, it is belief in the secular welfare state that has failed us, as have alternative forms of community, however, in order to succeed, capitalism needs to be propped up by "old-fashioned bourgeois virtue". The place from which to fight the devastating effects that capitalism has on community and in which to find these virtues is in the churches – a realization that, as the authors show us, even Chinese economists have arrived at.

There is no doubt that Micklethwait and Wooldridge make countless valid observations, however, it is the consequence they draw from these – an argument for the universal spread of American religiosity - that is problematic. Not the least because religion is portrayed in the book as solely monotheistic – mostly either as Christianity

or Islam, and with a predominant Protestant focus. While the authors successfully build an argument about the failure of the theory of universal global secularisation, their theory of the universal global rise of the American type of religion is lacking, most so because they touch upon different examples only superficially (and ignore others altogether) in order to prove their point. The forces of globalization of the world capitalist system may be encouraging the spread of Protestantism, but what the authors overlook is that globalization, like modernity, is not only homogenizing but also imbued with many contradictions. Modes of religious organization become contextualized in each of the new surroundings they are immersed in and it is hardly possible that a single unitary type of religiosity will emerge in the world – the most obvious challenge being fundamentalism.

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