God Is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith Is Changing the World by Adrian Wooldridge

Fun To Read But Not Fun To Contemplate

Two Economist writers show how and why religion is booming around the world and reveal its vast effects on the global economy, politics, and more

On the street and in the corridors of power, religion is surging worldwide. From Russia to Turkey to India, nations that swore off faith in the last century—or even tried to stamp it out—are now run by avowedly religious leaders. Formerly secular conflicts like the one in Palestine have taken on an overtly religious cast. God Is Back shines a bright light on this hidden world of faith, from exorcisms in São Paulo to religious skirmishing in Nigeria, to televangelism in California and house churches in China.

Since the Enlightenment, intellectuals have assumed that modernization would kill religion—and that religious America is an oddity. As God Is Back argues, religion and modernity can thrive together, and America is becoming the norm. Many things helped spark the global revival of religion, including the failure of communism and the rise of globalism. But, above all, twenty-first century religion is being fueled by a very American emphasis on competition and a customer-driven approach to salvation. These qualities have characterized this country’s faith ever since the Founders separated church and state, creating a religious free market defined by entrepreneurship, choice, and personal revelation. As market forces reshape the world, the tools and ideals of American evangelism are now spreading everywhere.
The global rise of faith will have a dramatic and far-reaching impact on our century. Indeed, its destabilizing effects can already be seen far from Iraq or the World Trade Center. Religion plays a role in civil wars from Sri Lanka to Sudan. Along the tenth parallel, from West Africa to the Philippines, religious fervor and political unrest are reinforcing each other. God Is Back concludes by showing how the same American ideas that created our unique religious style can be applied around the globe to channel the rising tide of faith away from volatility and violence.

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John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge take us on a global tour on the resurgence of religious faith after a century and a half of being attacked and retreating from secular movements, atheistic totalitarian governments, and changes in social fashion. They being their reporting in China where home Christian churches thrive and run along a razor’s edge with government authority. The authors also take us to Europe and how atheism rose and became the dominant faith in Europe today. They contrast that with two chapters on America and religious faith: one from our founding to just past the Civil War and another from 1880 to 2000. The last chapter in part one deals with modern politics and religion in the Bush, Blair, and Obama administrations.

Part Two takes us through an analysis on how religious faith is adapting to American culture and, in turn, reshaping that culture in new ways. We see churches with mission statements, pastors as businessmen, businessmen running their companies according to explicitly religious principles, and the way religion has engaged and continues to engage higher education at institutions whose faculty have never been more anti-religious.

Part three reports on how American Christianity is being exported around the world using modern communications as well as fervent missionaries. But the world is also adopting American materialism, which corrupts the Christian message and creates some strange results including a mixed form of anti-Americanism.

Part four deals with the conflict between Christianity and Islam that the Western governments want to avoid by pretence, while Islam ignores the issue and continues to press its saturation of the West with immigrants, mosques, and political agitation. The last three chapters cover other religious conflicts around the world, the way the struggle between religious values and modernity has created various versions of the culture wars, and how secular governments and people of various faiths can and must learn to live together without the kind of bloody conflict we now see too much of.

An interesting book with some fresh perspectives and interesting reporting. However, I will say that their passing discussion of Mormonism is superficial and wrong headed from my perspective as a believer. So, if
they get wrong what I know well, what are they getting wrong about things I don’t know as well?

Still, this is a very worthwhile and useful read for those interested in modern society and modern religion.

Reviewed by Craig Matteson, Ann Arbor, MI

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