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God is Back

HOW THE GLOBAL RISE
OF FAITH IS CHANGING
THE WORLD



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by
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INTRODUCTION

IT WOULD BE HARD to find a better cross-section of the “new China” than the people gathered in the sitting room of this comfortable apartment in one of Shanghai’s gated communities. The host for the day, Wang, is—right down to the BlackBerry on his belt—a prosperous, bespectacled management consultant, who once worked for Intel.¹ The guests, sitting on sofas and chairs brought in from the kitchen, or perched on the floor, include a pair of biotechnologists, a Chinese American doctor from Los Angeles, a prominent academic, a manager from a state-owned business, two ballet dancers and several successful entrepreneurs. A laptop adorns the coffee table, BMWs are parked in front of the building and advertisements for jewelry decorate the elevator. These people may not be Shanghai’s super-rich, but they are well off and educated, men and women on their way up in life.

They are gathered in Wang’s sitting room to worship God and interpret His ways to man. The proceedings are informal—as with most house churches, there is no pastor, just a group of Christians gathered together to discuss the Bible. The service is introduced by a chic young woman in a Che Guevara T-shirt. She apologizes for the late start, asking with a giggle why there are always technical problems when it is her turn. (Her husband is fiddling with the laptop.) She says a spontaneous prayer and the group sings the first hymn. The accompanying music is downloaded from the Internet and the words are beamed up on the apartment wall from

the laptop with the help of a projector that Wang normally uses for corporate presentations. True to this karaoke format, the hymns are jaunty in a slightly overwrought way: the lead singer on the downloaded track sounds like a Chinese Céline Dion. The young fashionista follows on with four unscripted prayers, interspersed with four hymns, one with a smattering of English words. Then Wang takes over.

He starts by asking everybody to introduce themselves. There are a few absentees, including the owner of the apartment, who is away finishing a deal in Shenzhen, but Wang welcomes back a pharmaceuticals executive who has just returned from a visit to New Jersey. There are handshakes and a few hugs. Most of the children are ushered into a bedroom and bribed, not altogether successfully, to stay quiet with an assortment of sweets, videos and toy guns. It is time for the real business: Romans 1:18–32. The congregation reads the text together from heavily annotated Bibles. Then the discussion, led by Wang, begins. It lasts for almost two and a half hours.

Every sentence in the scripture is examined, beginning with the idea that God is wrathful. What exactly does this mean? Wang explains that the Lord's anger is triggered only by wickedness, which Wang defines as the opposite of righteousness (the topic of the previous week's meeting). The wicked are people who knew the right path—God had revealed Himself to them—but ignored it. This is the prompt for a long discussion about different forms of revelation and their relation to nature. Various passages of scripture are scrutinized, with a striking number of corporate allusions: the meteorologist cites research by Enron into predicting the weather; Wang argues that Adam was the first chief executive—everybody flips back through their Bibles to read the passage—because he was given dominion over nature. But gradually, the discussion of revelation gives way to a passionate attack on Darwinism. Evolutionary theory, argues Wang, breaking into English to reiterate the words, is “the biggest lie,” because it pretends to be rigorous science. This is immediately confirmed by a biotechnologist who works on stem cells. Every day she looks at them, admiring their beauty and complexity: stem cells must be divine. If you trust evolution, you distrust God, rejoins the surgeon. Evolution is another false idol—not unlike Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism or any

of the other mock religions that China's Communists are trying to promote, now that they have discovered that they cannot kill God.

The second part of Romans 1:18–32 includes the New Testament's denunciation of homosexuality and other "shameful passions." ("Even the women pervert the natural use of their sex by unnatural acts. In the same way the men give up natural sexual relations with women and burn with passion for each other. Men do shameful things with each other, and as a result they bring upon themselves the punishment they deserve for their wrongdoing.") At first, Wang does not want to go there: he would rather concentrate on revelation. But he gets drawn in by one of the scientists, who asks about transsexual operations. These are not natural, advises Wang; like euthanasia, they are invading God's domain. As for homosexuality, it is plainly a sin—the text could not be clearer. But aren't homosexual urges natural in some people? The doctor backs up this observation by citing a paper from the American Psychological Association, and the group agrees that homosexual sinners should not be punished any differently from heterosexual sinners. The real problem is general immorality, which is on the increase all over Shanghai. Somebody mentions Sodom and Gomorrah. The passage is read—and one of the English speakers, perhaps wanting to show his translation skills, explains at some length how the word "sodomization" was derived. There is some awkward shuffling, relieved only when somebody else condemns gambling, citing a Royal Caribbean Cruise as evidence.

The most remarkable part of the Bible study comes at the very end. In his summary, Wang brings many of the evening's themes together—revelation, righteousness and false idols—and links them in a nationalist call to arms. Countries with lots of Christians become more powerful. America grew strong because it was Christian. The more Christian China becomes, the mightier it will be. If you want China to be a truly prosperous country, you must spread the Word to nonbelievers. If you are a patriotic Chinese, you have to be a Christian.

The service finishes with a couple of personal prayers. The worshippers wriggle out of the sofas and chairs. A few are going to a formal service that afternoon at one of Shanghai's government-recognized churches (largely for the children's sake, one person says). Most, however, seem to have

something to do. There are meetings to attend, flights to catch, offices, hospitals and laboratories to run. They will once again be Chinese on the make—and now they have a patriotic duty to spread the Word as well.

ONWARD CHINESE SOLDIERS

The Chinese still regard the militantly atheist Mao Zedong as a national hero. Mao put religion second only to capitalism in his list of reactionary evils: he killed clergy, expelled foreign missionaries and destroyed temples and churches. Now China is rethinking.

The economic liberalization that followed Mao's death brought the "Great Leap Forward" that Marxist orthodoxy had singularly failed to deliver. But it also brought a disorientating whirlwind of change. The pell-mell pace of economic progress—the Chinese economy has doubled in size every eight years since the 1970s—is supersizing cities and decanting millions of people from the countryside. China is building skyscrapers and highways, suburban subdivisions and gated communities, shopping centers and theme parks, on a scale unprecedented in human history. The construction industry employs a workforce the size of California's population. And the advance of the new civilization inevitably means taking a wrecking ball to the old.²

This whirlwind is boosting demand for the consolations of religion. Wang's house church is part of what may well be the biggest advance of Christianity ever. The Chinese government's own figures show the number of Christians rising from fourteen million in 1997 to twenty-one million in 2006, with an estimated fifty-five thousand official Protestant churches and forty-six hundred Catholic churches.³ (The government made religious freedom part of the constitution in 1982, though it limited worship to five official religions—Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism—each overseen by a "patriotic association."⁴) But these figures exclude both house churches and the underground Catholic Church, which is bigger than the official one. A conservative guess is that there are at least sixty-five million Protestants in China and twelve million Catholics—more believers than there are members of the Commu-

nist Party. Some local Christians think the flock is well over one hundred million.⁵

Whatever the true numbers, the world's major religions are currently engaged in a "scramble for China." According to a survey by the Pew Global Attitudes Project in 2006, 31 percent of Chinese people regard religion as very or somewhat important in their lives, while only 11 percent toe the Maoist line that religion is not at all important. A poll in 2005, asking a slightly different question, put the proportion of people who deem religion important at 56 percent.⁶

That said, for most Chinese people religion is still a vague affair, mixing folklore with ancestor worship. Only about a fifth of Chinese name a particular religion as their creed, and most of them plump for some form of Buddhism, Taoism or Confucianism, plainly the varieties the state prefers.⁷ Xinhua, the distinctly secular state news agency, recently proudly announced that there were approximately one hundred million Chinese Buddhists. The Olympics began at exactly 8 p.m. on the eighth day of the eighth month in 2008—because many Chinese people regard the number eight as lucky. It is no longer frowned on to wear prayer beads in the cities. In the countryside Buddhist temples are fast becoming part of the local economy. Every summer some two hundred thousand people visit the Black Dragon Temple in Yulin, a city in Guangxi Province, for its ten-day fair; local state officials and policemen are cut into the deal through taxes and gifts.⁸ Despite the clashes with Buddhist monks in Tibet, the government tolerates an ornate, private Tibetan shrine in the heart of Beijing, and a few members of China's new commercial and political elite have followed the imperial tradition of seeking out confessor-gurus in Tibetan monasteries.⁹

Meanwhile, Islam is also surging, especially among the Hui and Uighur peoples in Ningxia and Xinjiang Provinces. Official numbers indicate that there are about twenty million Muslims. Again, that is probably an underestimate, but the Pew researchers point out that even using that number, China has almost as many Muslims as Saudi Arabia and nearly twice as many as the European Union's twenty-seven countries. By 2050, China could well be the world's biggest Muslim nation as well as its biggest Christian one.

The growth of Christianity is nevertheless the most startling religious development. Catholicism is vigorous in parts of Beijing and especially in poor rural areas. The Virgin Mary has a particular attraction: fishermen have started dedicating their boats to her, and every May thousands of Catholics descend on Donglu, a village in Hebei Province where the Virgin is said to have appeared in 1900 to rescue local Catholics during the Boxer Rebellion. A decade ago, the authorities imprisoned an underground Catholic bishop who led the festivities there—but he was quietly released in 2007. Nowadays police cordon off the village each May.¹⁰

Yet the core of Christianity in China is urban and Protestant. Evangelical churches took off at the same time as China itself did in the 1990s, drawing heavily on American and South Korean Protestantism. China has been a fixation for American missionaries since the nineteenth century. Nowadays the South Koreans, Asia's most enthusiastic Christians (who were mostly converted by the Americans), are even more numerous. One ruse is to set up trading companies in China that are really missionary outposts. Close to the North Korean border, there is even a full-scale Protestant university, which has now wangled permission to operate in Pyongyang too.¹¹

Still, most Chinese churches are homegrown. They come in all shapes and sizes. The Fengcheng Fellowship (of house churches), which is based in Henan Province and headed by Zhang Rongliang, China's most prominent Protestant, claims to have ten million members.¹² But most house churches are like Wang's outfit: autonomous and reasonably small. Chinese Christians are inveterate downloaders. Many pastors find their stiffest competition not in the sermons of their local rivals around the corner, but in the weekly Web offerings from Asian megapreachers, such as Stephen Tong, who is based in Indonesia. Another notable characteristic, shared by both the South Koreans next door and the early Christians, is the importance of women as evangelizers: one Protestant jokes that the most popular silent prayer in house churches is for a husband, and the second most popular one is for a better husband.

House churches offer a remarkable formula for growth. They can be started by anybody: one prominent house church in Beijing was established by a foreign ministry official. Wang started his church in September 2006 with five or six friends. Now it has sprouted two offshoots: one is a special-

ist church for migrants; the other, which brings together a group similar to Wang's, uses the local office of a well-known American multinational as its base (a popular strategy, since offices are closed on Sundays). Now that the three churches attract about a hundred people, the worshippers will soon have to start another one. The Chinese government has set an informal limit of twenty-five people for an unauthorized religious gathering. Nowadays, most local authorities enforce this rule sporadically (there were twenty-eight people at Wang's Sunday service, not including the children) or not at all (in Wuhan, the capital city of Hubei Province, the congregation can run into the hundreds, reports one of Wang's flock). The danger for most house churches is not a police raid, but the possibility that a neighbor will complain about the noisy singing or, more likely still in China's overcrowded cities, about parking spaces being taken up. Yet as Wang's fast-growing flock illustrates, the twenty-five-person rule is a formula for growth, uncommonly close to that enforced on early Christians by similar demands for secrecy. It is the same cell model pioneered by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, and by South Korean Protestants. It is almost as if the government secretly wants us to take over, muses Wang.

In fact, the Chinese government seems to have mixed feelings about religion. Hardliners still associate religious faith, particularly Christianity, with insurrection. The famous Taiping Rebellion (of Great Peace) in the nineteenth century was led by a Christian who claimed to be Christ's brother—and only put down at the cost of more than twenty million lives. The authorities think that John Paul II had an outsized role in bringing down the Soviet Union. Many of the student leaders at the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989 have become Christians. Zhang Rongliang, the head of the Fengcheng Fellowship, has been in and out of jail since the 1970s. China's relentless persecution of the Falun Gong cult shows how nervous it is about independent thought and organization.

Such worries are exacerbated by the fact that the growing religious organizations are becoming political actors in their own right. House churches have begun to add pastors, schools, libraries, even a few unofficial seminaries. One enthusiast boasts that house churches "are already the largest NGO in the country." Many churches teach the sanctity of life, a lively issue in a country where abortions have been routine. In Donglu, the Catholic nuns run a small clinic.¹³ At the Black Dragon Temple, there

is a thriving boarding school. In Xinjiang Province, the mosques control so much that the state government is worried about Muslim separatism; a scatter of terrorist incidents before the 2008 Olympics provided an excuse for a clampdown, but the problem remains. Even ancestor worship is having an unsettling effect on politics in the countryside, making it more likely that the village leader will be elected to that role because of his position in the clan hierarchy, rather than his loyalty to the party.

Yet on the other hand the regime increasingly accepts that some kind of moral code is useful to build a “harmonious society.” Indeed, some of China’s younger technocrats now openly welcome Confucianism, which Mao condemned as “feudal,” as a form of social glue in their fast-changing country. The state has sponsored several Buddhist gatherings and is building Confucian institutes around the world. In October 2007 the Communist Party added an amendment to its constitution, with the personal imprimatur of President Hu, urging its members to “rally religious believers in making contributions to economic and social development.”¹⁴ At the local level, especially in the countryside, Buddhism and communism have fused: temple chiefs are often party bosses as well. The Chinese authorities are edging toward the conclusion that God and modernization can go hand in hand.

That case has been made most explicitly by a Chinese government economist, Zhao Xiao, in a widely read essay, “Market Economies with Churches and Market Economies Without Churches.” Based on his travels around America, the paper, published in 2002, argues that the key to America’s commercial success is not its natural resources, its financial system or its technology but its churches, “the very core that binds Americans together.” The market economy, argues Zhao, is efficient because it discourages idleness, but it can also encourage people to lie and injure others. It thus needs a moral underpinning. At the end of the essay, as he travels from Boston to Indiana, “through North America’s vast lands, the serene sounds of church bells ringing in every church,” Zhao recalls an angry poem:

*Be in awe of the invincible might,
Be in awe of the lightning,
And be in awe of the thunder in the sky.*

Without that awe, argues Zhao, China will not succeed. “Only through awe can we be saved. Only through faith can the market economy have a soul.”

The people in Wang’s church share Zhao’s belief that worshipping God is the go-ahead thing to do. Asked why people become Christians, one man describes it as the sense of having joined the winner’s circle. Every city has some form of club or network for Christian businesspeople. As he sips a cup of water after the service, Wang puts it simply. “In Europe the church is old. Here it is modern. Religion is a sign of higher ideals and progress. Spiritual wealth and material wealth go together. That is why we will win.”

THE BATTLE FOR MODERNITY

Ever since the Enlightenment there has been a schism in Western thought over the relationship between religion and modernity. Europeans, on the whole, have assumed that modernity would marginalize religion; Americans, in the main, have assumed that the two things can thrive together.

This schism goes back to the modern world’s two founding revolutions. The French and American Revolutions were both the offspring of the Enlightenment, but with very different views of the role that religion should play in reason’s glorious republic. In France the *révolutionnaires* despised religion as a tool of the ancien régime. By contrast, America’s Founding Fathers took a more benign view of religion. They divided church from state not least to protect the former from the latter.

These two versions of modernity have marched in different directions ever since. In Europe established churches sided with the old regime against the new world of democracy and liberty. In America, where there was no national established church, faiths embraced both democracy and the market: the only way they could survive was to attract customers. In Europe, “religion” meant war or oppression, Edmund Burke once observed; in America, it turned out to be a source of freedom.¹⁵

For most of the past two hundred years the European view of modernity has been in the ascendant. Europe gave birth to a succession of sages

who explained, in compelling detail, why God was doomed. Karl Marx denounced religion as the “opium of the masses.” Émile Durkheim and Max Weber argued that an iron law of history was leading to “secularization” (or “the disenchantment of the world,” in Weber’s rather more poetic phrase). Friedrich Nietzsche remarked, “I find it necessary to wash my hands after I have come into contact with religious people.”¹⁶ Sigmund Freud dismissed religion as a neurosis that was designed to divert attention from man’s real interest, sex. A few intellectuals deplored God’s disappearance, worrying that a godless world would also be a barbaric one. “When people stop believing in God,” G. K. Chesterton argued, “they don’t believe in nothing, they believe in anything.” “If you will not have God (and He is a jealous God),” T. S. Eliot warned, “you should pay your respects to Hitler or Stalin.”¹⁷ Others welcomed the disappearance of an instrument of oppression and bigotry. A few tried to have it both ways: Jean-Paul Sartre railed against God’s absence (“God doesn’t exist—the bastard!”), yet celebrated the freedom that His departure provided. “Lord I disbelieve,” E. M. Forster confessed, “help thou my unbelief.”¹⁸ Still, everyone who was anyone in European public life agreed that religion was dying—and that its effect on politics was ebbing.

The European idea, that you cannot become modern without throwing off religion’s yoke, had a massive influence all around the world. It is hardly surprising that Marxist dictators such as Lenin and Mao tried to impose atheism by force. But a striking number of less dogmatic leaders in the developing world were also bent on enforcing secularization. In Turkey, Kemal Atatürk imposed a strict separation between mosque and state. (“The fez,” he once complained, “sat upon our heads as a sign of ignorance, fanaticism, an obstacle to progress and to attaining a contemporary level of civilization.”) In India, Jawaharlal Nehru tried to make “a clean sweep” of organized religion: “Almost always it seems to stand for blind belief and reaction, dogma and bigotry, superstition and exploitation and the preservation of vested interests.” In the Middle East, Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Pahlavi shahs of Iran argued that their countries faced a choice between the mosque and mechanization; superstition and fanaticism had to be left behind.

America has always posed a problem for progressive secularists. Here

was *the* quintessentially modern country. In his “Second Treatise” John Locke famously observed that “in the beginning all the world was America.” The new republic was conceived as a “*novus ordo seculorum*,” as every dollar bill reminds us, a conscious antithesis to the European world of feudalism, the divine right of kings and state religion.

Still, as long as Europe remained the cultural arbiter of the world, America could be dismissed as an oddity. Perhaps America was nothing more than an evolutionary freak—the sociological equivalent of the duck-billed platypus. Americans might continue to worship God, but the rest of the world, as it modernized, would follow the European rather than the American example. Or perhaps the young country was just a little slow growing up: give it a bit more time and it would become as secular as Europe. The people you met on the cocktail circuit in New York and San Francisco seemed like sensible sorts. Surely the rubes would eventually catch up?

There were indeed signs that this was happening in the mid-twentieth century. American Evangelicals had retreated from the public square, embarrassed by the combination of Prohibition and the Scopes Monkey Trial, in 1925, where their views on evolution were mocked. Meanwhile, a growing army of American intellectuals argued that their country was becoming less exceptional. In 1959 C. Wright Mills, an influential sociologist at Columbia University, penned a self-confident summary of the modernization thesis in *The Sociological Imagination*: “After the Reformation and the Renaissance, the forces of modernization swept across the globe and secularization, a corollary historical process, loosened the dominance of the sacred. In due course, the sacred shall disappear altogether, except, possibly, in the private realm.” In 1960, the same year that Jack Kennedy reassured worried Americans that his Catholic faith would not affect his politics, Daniel Bell argued in *The End of Ideology* that modern politics was no longer about the meaning of life but about who gets what—about how you distribute the largesse of an affluent society among various interest groups. In 1966, in its Easter issue, *Time* magazine asked “Is God Dead?” on its cover, and in the same year Thomas Altizer, a theologian, published to much acclaim *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*.¹⁹ In 1968 Gallup found that sixty-seven percent of Americans believed that religion was losing

its impact on society. A year later, an American reached the moon, metaphorically conquering the heavens.

By the end of the twentieth century the intelligentsia had little doubt that modern man had outgrown God. Most trend-setting books in the 1990s saw the world through secular lenses.²⁰ Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* predicted the triumph of secularization as well as liberalism. The word "religion" does not appear in the index of *Diplomacy*, Henry Kissinger's nine-hundred-page masterpiece on statesmanship, published in 1994. In 1980–99 only half a dozen of the articles in America's four main international-relations journals dealt with religion.²¹ *The Economist* was so confident of the Almighty's demise that we published His obituary in our millennium issue.

Today an unsettling worry nags at Western liberals: what if secular Europe (and for that matter secular Harvard and secular Manhattan) is the odd one out? They are right to be worried. It now seems that it is the American model that is spreading around the world: religion and modernity are going hand in hand, not just in China but throughout much of Asia, Africa, Arabia and Latin America. It is not just that religion is thriving in many modernizing countries; it is also that religion is succeeding in harnessing the tools of modernity to propagate its message. The very things that were supposed to destroy religion—democracy and markets, technology and reason—are combining to make it stronger.

GOD IS BACK

Almost everywhere you look, from the suburbs of Dallas to the slums of São Paulo to the back streets of Bradford, you can see religion returning to public life. Most dramatically, Americans and their allies would not be dying in Iraq and Afghanistan had nineteen young Muslims not attacked the United States on September 11, 2001. America's next war could be against the Islamic Republic of Iran—or it could be dragged into a spat in Pakistan, where religious fanatics are determined to seize the country's nuclear weapons, or perhaps in West Africa, where there is a monumental clash between Evangelical Christianity surging northward and funda-

mentalist Islam heading south. Indeed, there are potential battlegrounds all around Islam's southern perimeter, along the tenth parallel, stretching through Sudan to the Philippines. Nor is it just a matter of Christians and Muslims. In Myanmar (Burma) Buddhist monks nearly brought down an evil regime; in Sri Lanka they have prolonged a bloody conflict with Hindu Tamils.

Meanwhile, many older conflicts have acquired a religious edge. The poisonous sixty-year war over Palestine began as a largely secular affair. Many of the pioneering Zionists in the early twentieth century saw the Middle East as an escape from the suffocating religiosity of Eastern European village life. Even after the Holocaust, the new "Jewish state" at first deemed religion a distraction: after Israel's founding in 1948 the secular David Ben-Gurion agreed that rabbinical law would prevail in matters such as marriage and divorce partly because he assumed the Orthodox would melt away. On the Palestinian side, many of the leaders of the PLO were Christian socialists; in Egypt, the spiritual champion of Arab nationalism, Nasser, clamped down on the radical Muslim Brotherhood. Nowadays, in the era of Hamas, Jewish settlers and Christian Zionists, the Israeli-Palestinian dispute has become a much more polarized, sectarian battle, with ever more people claiming that God is on their side.

As for the old Communist regimes, China is not the only country to have renewed its addiction to the opium of the masses. Vladimir Putin, that hardheaded product of the Soviet security apparatus, decks himself in symbols of religion in much the same way as Russian czars once did: he never takes off his baptismal cross, maintains a small chapel next door to his office in the Kremlin and has made regular visits to churches.²² The KGB's successor, the FSB, has its own Orthodox church opposite its headquarters, complete with rare icons presented by the Patriarch. One poll in 2006—fifteen years after the fall of the Soviet regime—discovered that 84 percent of the Russian population believed in God while only 16 percent considered themselves atheists.²³ Meanwhile, Mikhail Gorbachev has shown signs that he is a Christian: after spending half an hour with his daughter Irina praying at the tomb of St. Francis of Assisi, the last Soviet leader confessed that "St. Francis is, for me, the *alter Christus*, the other Christ. His story fascinates me and has played a fundamental role in my life."

Atatürk's Turkey is now in the hands of an avowedly Islamist party. The president's wife, like many cosmopolitan women, wears a headscarf, once regarded as a symbol of backwardness. For most of the past decade India has been controlled by the Hindu nationalist BJP Party, which owed its ascendancy partly to the issue of the Ayodhya Temple, a fiercely contested place of worship for both Hindus and Muslims. And it is not just the familiar, bloody Hindu-Muslim divide. Two of the most touchy issues in modern Indian politics are the legality of Christian conversions of untouchables and an underwater "bridge" to Sri Lanka supposedly built by a team of monkeys for the Lord Rama, which the more secularist Congress Party wants to tamper with so that shipping can get through.

In America, the Evangelicals have long since reemerged from their caves. The religious right is an established part of politics in almost every state, and America has had a succession of "born again" presidents. The man it has just waved goodbye to was its most soul-on-the-sleeve religious leader since the nineteenth century: George Bush began each day on his knees and each cabinet meeting with a prayer, but he was a relatively moderate figure compared with Sarah Palin, the Pentecostal selected by John McCain to be his vice presidential candidate, who has undergone rites to protect her from witchcraft. The single most frequently used noun in the 2008 Republican Convention in St. Paul, Minnesota, was "God." But the left is not immune from the influence of religion either: Barack Obama borrowed the title of his autobiography, *The Audacity of Hope*, from a sermon delivered by Jeremiah Wright, the man who "brought him to God" when he was a young man (and later almost doomed his presidential campaign).

Religion is even (re-)emerging as a force in the very heartland of secularization. Europe is still a long way behind America: for instance, only one in ten French people say that religion plays an important role in their lives.²⁴ But nevertheless there are signs that the same forces that are reviving religion in America—the quest for community in an increasingly atomized world, the desire to counterbalance choice with a sense of moral certainty—are making headway in Europe. Across the Continent the loosening of the ties between church and state is opening the religious market. In France, the fastest growing creed is the most American of all, Pentecostalism. Some two million Britons have taken the so-called

Alpha Course, run by an Anglican church, Holy Trinity Brompton. After embracing modernism in the 1960s with Vatican II, the Catholic Church has now returned to a more traditional version of the faith, first under John Paul II and now under his successor, Benedict XVI. The aim is to Catholicize modernity rather than to modernize Catholicism.

The principle that European politicians do not “do God,” as Alastair Campbell, Tony Blair’s former spokesman, once angrily told an American magazine, looks out of date. Tony Blair was always a “praying person,” and converted to Catholicism shortly after leaving office. His successor, Gordon Brown, claims that he learned his socialism listening to his preacher father’s sermons. Before becoming president of France, Nicolas Sarkozy published *La République, les religions, l’espérance*, in which he called for a greater role for religion in public life. Poland’s Law and Justice Party was elected on the promise of a “moral revolution,” based on the social teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

The arrival of millions of Muslims in Europe is also turbocharging religious debates. Growing Muslim minorities are plainly having a remarkable effect on European politics. At the most extreme end, this includes the bombings in Madrid and London, the killing of a Dutch filmmaker, Theo van Gogh, the riots in the Paris *banlieues* and the brouhaha about the Danish cartoons of Muhammad. More peacefully, the growth of Islam is also forcing secular people to reexamine the importance of religion. This applies both in working-class neighborhoods, where whites, confronted by immigration, are increasingly likely to identify themselves as Christian, and also in politics, where a striking number of the Continent’s leaders, casting around for a reason not to admit Turkey to the European Union, have rediscovered Europe’s Christian origins.

THE END OF ATHEISM

Another indication of religion’s reappearance in the public sphere has been the outcry among secular intellectuals, many of whom hold that the real “clash of civilizations” is not between different religions but between superstition and modernity. A hit parade of recent books has torn into

religion—Sam Harris’s *The End of Faith*, Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion* and Christopher Hitchens’s *God Is Not Great—How Religion Poisons Everything*. The authors have crisscrossed the United States, debating religious leaders, even in the Bible Belt, in front of megachurch-sized audiences. Dawkins has set up an organization to empower atheists.

Part of that secular fury, especially in Europe, comes from exasperation. What if a central tenet of the French Enlightenment—that modernity would kill religion—is proving to be an *ancien canard*? Statistics about religious observance are notoriously untrustworthy, but most of them seem to indicate that the global drift toward secularism has been halted, and quite a few show religion to be on the increase. One estimate suggests that the proportion of people attached to the world’s four biggest religions—Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism—rose from 67 percent in 1900 to 73 percent in 2005 and may reach 80 percent by 2050.²⁵ Even if this number is padded by people moving from tribal religions to bigger ones, we are hardly seeing decline; and in terms of intensity—a harder-to-measure phenomenon—there seems to have been a considerable increase in most places outside Europe over the past half century.

For most casual observers the revival of religion means the revival of Islam. But Christianity is also growing rapidly, particularly across the developing world. In 1900 there were roughly ten million Christians in Africa. Today, thanks to waves of evangelization, there are four hundred million, almost half the population. And it is worth considering the intensity again. For instance, Latin America has been nominally Christian since the days of the conquistadores; but now the region is a much more competitive religious marketplace, with Evangelical faiths battling it out with Catholicism.

In most of these places, the growth in faith has coincided with a growth in prosperity. People are choosing to be Christians, or choosing which sort of Christians they want to be. Man, whether the neo-atheists like it or not, is a theotropic beast: given the option, he is inclined to believe in a God, not least because, as studies show, religion can increase his well-being in material as well as spiritual ways. (If one group of intellectuals is lamenting the rise of religion, another is trying to measure why it works.)

And it gets worse for the neo-atheists. There are two particularly

upsetting things about the way that religion is prospering. The first is that the “wrong sorts” of religion are flourishing. In the 1960s most thinkers imagined that, if religion was to survive at all, it would be in its most reasonable and ecumenical guise—mild Anglicanism, say, or Graham Greene’s doubting Catholicism. In fact, certainty has proved much easier to market: the sort of religions that claim Adam and Eve met exactly 6,005 years ago or that take a particularly strict interpretation of jihad. In America the tolerant-to-a-fault Episcopal Church has been in relentless decline. By contrast, the Southern Baptists have prospered. Altogether conservative Christians now make up a quarter of America’s population, according to Pew, significantly more than fifty years ago. People who seek liberation from liberation do not turn to liberation theology.

The most remarkable religious success story of the past century has been the most emotional religion of all. Pentecostalism was founded just over a century ago in a scruffy part of Los Angeles by a one-eyed black preacher, convinced that God would send a new Pentecost if only people would pray hard enough. Today there are at least five hundred million renewalists around the world.²⁶ Their beliefs are not for the fainthearted. Most adherents have witnessed divine healing, exorcisms or speaking in tongues.

The hotter bits of Islam have also gained ground. As American neo-conservatives never tire of pointing out, this is partly a matter of Saudi money: petrodollars have flowed into fundamentalist madrassas around the world and paid for millions of copies of the Koran with Wahhabi interpretations (for instance, stressing jihad, in the warlike sense, not just as personal striving, as an extra pillar of Islam). But it is also a matter of choice. In the Arab heartlands fundamentalism has become a refuge for anyone worried by the spread of Western culture and power. In overseas communities where Muslims are in a minority, notably Europe, it has had more to do with a search for identity. Scholars such as Olivier Roy have shown that extremism has become a form of generational warfare, with Western-born Muslim girls choosing to wear the headscarf that their mothers jettisoned on their arrival from Pakistan and Morocco.

There are all sorts of long-term reasons why hotter, more combative religions will gain. Demography is one. From Salt Lake City to Jerusalem,

religious people marry younger and reproduce more prodigiously than nonreligious ones. An Ultra-Orthodox Jewish woman in Israel will produce nearly three times as many children as her secular counterpart. By some counts, three-quarters of the growth in the more ardent varieties of American Protestantism is the result of demography. Over the past half century the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints has grown sevenfold, with half the world's thirteen million Mormons living outside the United States. Another long-term trend that could stir up religion is climate change. Philip Jenkins, one of America's most distinguished students of religion, points out that by 2050 most of the largest Christian countries, other than the United States, will be located in the global south. He thinks that environmental change could spark intercommunal rivalry, recalling the "Little Ice Age" at the end of the thirteenth century that caused starvation and pogroms, with Christians turning on Jews in Europe and Muslims turning on Christians in Africa and Asia.²⁷

If these religious sorts sound angry and poor, that gives the wrong impression. For the second, arguably still more frustrating thing for the neo-atheists involves the sort of people who are embracing religion. According to the secularist hymnbook, those drawn to religion should be the weak, the ignorant and the fearful. That is certainly true in some cases. Pentecostalism has spread rapidly in the favelas of Brazil; go to Gaza, and it is not hard to see why radical Islam offers a form of hope for so many Palestinians. But that is not the whole picture.

In much of the world it is exactly the sort of upwardly mobile, educated middle classes that Marx and Weber presumed would shed such superstitions who are driving the explosion of faith. In both Turkey and India, modernization has helped to create the up-and-coming bourgeoisie that Atatürk and Nehru prayed for; but these people are the most fervent supporters of the religious parties. In urban China the link between commercial prosperity and religion can be strikingly explicit. For instance Zhao, the economist who wrote the paper on market economies and churches, has since converted to Christianity (slightly to his surprise—"I thought I could never be a believer in God, because I was an economist"). He was recently asked to apply his skills as an economist to reorganizing his house church—a much bigger affair than Wang's, with six hundred members, a

full-time pastor and five part-time ones. He promptly turned to the corporate world. His church now has five super-elders (or board members) to oversee the elders. Every year it has a congregational gathering (or shareholders meeting), and around two hundred people come to it. “Nobody reports us,” explains Zhao, “as long as we don’t sing.”

The United States provides an even better case study. Many American Evangelicals are well educated and well off. For prosperous suburbanites, faith has become a lifestyle coach. Far from looking backward, American Evangelicals claim they are ahead of the curve in grappling with the question of how you preserve virtue in a consumer society. How do you keep yourself on the straight and narrow when you are constantly beset by temptations? How do you raise your children in a world where an Abercrombie & Fitch clothing catalogue looks like something that ought to be kept on the top shelf? The answer, they argue, is simple: turn to the eternal truths captured in the Bible. For them, far from being a quaint relic, religion is the only way that you can navigate the torrents of modernity. It is no accident that America’s best-selling religious book is called *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?*²⁸

THE TRUTH AND THE CHANGE

What is driving this great upheaval? The answer, to use two religious phrases, is a combination of revealed truth (something that we should have recognized years ago) and genuine transubstantiation (real change).

From one angle, little of substance has changed. The only thing that has happened is that the political classes in the West are waking up, rather late, to the enduring power of religion. This “revealed truth” argument is, needless to say, popular with believers: God’s power was bound to be recognized sooner or later. But it is also popular with some people who study religion for a living. Peter Berger, the dean of sociologists of religion, argues that outside Europe most people have always been religious—and chides journalists for investigating the religious rule, not the secular exception: “Rather than studying American Evangelicals and Islamic mullahs, you should look at Swedes and New England college professors.”

On the other hand, there is also, plainly, an element of transubstantiation. To begin with, the change in the commentariat's perception of religious power may be overdue, but it is fairly gigantic. (Even Berger, who used to be one of the leading proponents of the secularization theory, realized that religion was not going to wither away only two decades ago—and it caused a furor in his discipline when he did so.) And, more important, there have been genuine changes of substance—both to do with religion itself and with its effect on politics.

In retrospect, religion's reemergence as a political force came long before Osama bin Laden declared his jihad on Jews and Crusaders. Timothy Shah, a scholar at the Council on Foreign Relations, has argued that the great turning point was the Six-Day War of 1967. The Arab world's crushing defeat persuaded many embittered Arabs to turn from Nasser's secular pan-Arabism to radical Islam. (In 1967, under Nasser, the Egyptian army went into battle crying, "Land! Sea! Air!"; six years later, under Anwar El Sadat, their new battle cry was, "Allahu Akhbar."²⁹) At the same time, Israel's "miraculous" triumph gave God a stronger voice in its politics, emboldening the settler movement. In the same year a Hindu nationalist party won 9.4 percent of the vote in India. Faith gathered pace in politics in the 1970s. By the end of that decade, America had elected its first proudly born-again Christian, Jimmy Carter; Jerry Falwell had founded the Moral Majority; Iran had replaced the worldly shah with Ayatollah Khomeini; Zia-ul-Haq was busy Islamizing Pakistan; Buddhism had been formally granted the foremost place in Sri Lanka's constitution; and an anti-Communist Pole had become head of the Catholic Church.

What caused this shift in the 1970s? Believers see a populist revolt against the overreach of elitist secularism—be it America's Supreme Court legalizing abortion or Indira Gandhi harrying Hindus. From a more secular viewpoint, John Lewis Gaddis, a Yale historian, points out that the religious revival in the 1970s coincided with the collapse of secular "isms." By then the Soviet Union's evils had made a mockery of Marxism, and capitalism had also hit some buffers (the oil shocks, hyperinflation). More generally, politicians' ability to solve problems such as crime or unemployment was thrown into doubt: faith in government tumbled just about everywhere in the 1970s—and has stayed low since.

And why has religion's power continued to increase? Most obviously, there has been a series of reactions and counterreactions. Fundamentalist Islam, for instance, has helped to spur radical Judaism and Hinduism, which in turn have reinforced the mullahs' fervor. Hamas owes much to Israel's settlers. Without Falwell, there would have been slimmer royalties for Hitchens and Dawkins. But there is also something deeper going on: globalization. The biggest problem for the prophets of secularization is that the surge of religion is being driven by the same two things that have driven the success of market capitalism: competition and choice.

THE GOSPEL OF PLURALISM

To understand the competitive mechanism behind religion's revival, you need to consult only two sacred texts. The first is *The Wealth of Nations*, in which Adam Smith argues that the free market works with God as well as Mammon. Nonestablished clergy, who rely on the collection plate, show greater "zeal" in proselytizing "the inferior ranks of people" than established clerical salarymen, who are more interested in sucking up to their patrons. (Europe has been a textbook illustration of this.) The second text is the American Constitution. The First Amendment—"that Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof"—was actually a compromise between dissenters (who wanted to keep the state away from religion) and more anticlerical sorts like Thomas Jefferson (who wanted the church out of politics). Yet it became the great engine of American religiosity, creating a new sort of country where membership in a church was a purely voluntary activity.

Look back at the first great success in this free market, Methodism, and it is not difficult to spot where the growth formula for China's house churches came from. When Francis Asbury arrived in America in 1771, there were just 550 Methodists in the country. By the time he died in 1861, a million people, one-eighth of the entire population, were attending Methodist camp meetings, the nineteenth century equivalent of megachurches. The Methodists paid their preachers only a nominal stipend, gave them no job security and told them to avoid arid theology: "Always

suit your subjects to your audience,” went the instruction, and “choose the plainest texts you can.”³⁰

The competitive spirit is also infecting other religions. Buddhism, the major religion whose market share has shrunk most over the past century,³¹ remains fairly passive: its adherents believe that people should discover faith for themselves rather than be energetically introduced to it. But even here there are signs of awakening. In South Korea Buddhist monks, often hidden away in inaccessible rural shrines, have set up meditation areas in cities to fight off the Protestants. Buddhist monks were to the fore in the rescue efforts after China’s devastating earthquake in 2008.

Hinduism is more turf-conscious. Some states in India have passed “anticonversion” laws banning evangelists from using force or “allurement”—code for Christians and Muslims converting Hindu untouchables, who get a raw deal under the caste system. (In the eastern state of Orissa, where this has spilled over into violence, Hindutva politicians have even accused “fraudulent Christians” of burning their own churches.³²) Still, when it comes to marketing, the trendier Hindu ashrams are more than a match for America’s pastorpreneurs. The Art of Living, a Bangalore-based ashram that “is committed to making life a celebration on this planet,” has offshoots in 141 countries.

This spirit of competition also helps to explain some of Islam’s success. That may sound odd. Saudi Arabia enforces religious orthodoxy with police and prisons, punishing apostasy with death. In many Islamic countries mosques get a degree of financial help and direction from the state that would have scandalized Adam Smith. Islam is not as evangelical as Christianity. Its followers are less intent on spreading the good news than on stiffening the resolve of traditional Muslims. Yet there is more competition within Islam than at first appears.

Like Pentecostalism, Islam is a religion without much hierarchy: most mosques claim to be following the teachings of one preacher or another, but their real authority comes from the Koran. This helps new imams to start preaching and allows them to do pretty much what they like. Nor have they neglected marketing. There are megamosques (one in east London, planned by missionaries, will hold twelve thousand people, five times as many as St. Paul’s Cathedral)³³ and televangelists, such as Amr Khaled,

an engaging former accountant from Egypt, whose sermons are watched by millions in Europe and the Middle East. If you want a fatwa (ruling), you do not have to go to a mosque: you can get it online (and in English) from eFatwa.com, MuftiSays.com or Askimam.com.

Competition entails choice. In many parts of the world, though not crucially America, religion used to operate under the system of *cuius regio, eius religio* (whoever rules sets the religious norm—an idea from the Peace of Augsburg of 1555, which divided up a lot of what is now Germany between Protestant and Catholic princes). Now religion is becoming a much more bottom-up affair. People are increasingly likely to profess a religion out of choice rather than just because they are born into the faith. And they have far more choice about what sort of religion (or nonreligion) they will adopt.

Often the spur for pluralism is immigration. Richard Chartres, the Anglican Bishop of London, calls his city “a test case,” pointing to the sprawling number of mosques, Sikh temples, synagogues, African and West Indian churches, even the Church of Scientology. In Latin America, Evangelical churches now offer a vigorous alternative to Catholicism, and in the United States, mainstream Protestants will soon account for less than half the population.³⁴ Although the country remains predominantly Christian, nearly 5 percent belong to other religions (such as Judaism, Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism) and 16 percent are unaffiliated (of whom 9 percent claim to be atheist or agnostic).³⁵

Of course, pluralism has existed before, but never to the extent that it does now. “We made a category mistake,” admits Peter Berger. “We thought that the relationship was between modernization and secularization. In fact it was between modernization and pluralism.” For a growing number of people, religion is no longer taken for granted or inherited; it is based on adults making a choice, going to a synagogue, temple, church or mosque. Deciding not to go at all—a category that stretches from lazy stay-in-bed agnosticism to passionate atheism—is part of this pluralism, because it involves people making decisions about their relationship to God.

Zhao, the Chinese economist, also supports pluralism. Part of his argument to the Chinese government is that the way to solve its religion

problem and to prevent cults like Falun Gong is to open up the market. “Thirsty people need to drink. If there is no good-quality water, people will go to bad-quality water. We need a free market so that good-quality religions can compete.” Even Confucianism, he argues, gets corrupted when it is linked to the state. “It is much better if religion is free and separate.”

Religious choice has a profound effect on public life. The more that people choose their religion, rather than just inherit it, the more likely they are to make a noise about it. If you have made a commitment to your faith, why would you leave it in the closet at home, or outside the voting booth? At its most basic, that commitment can be violent. Since 2000, 43 percent of civil wars have been religious. (The figure in the 1940s and 1950s was only about a quarter.)³⁶ But the main weapon is often the ballot box. Around the world, people have repeatedly chosen to exercise their new freedoms by increasing, not decreasing, the role of religion in politics. The newly democratized, from Moscow to Cairo to Beijing, have reinserted God back into the public square—and the profoundly secular foreign policy establishment in the West has struggled to deal with it.

THE RETURN OF THEOLOGY

However you look at it, faith is more likely to impinge on you than it once did, either because it is part of your life or because it is part of the lives of some of those around you—neighbors, colleagues at work, even your rulers or people seeking to topple them. This book is an attempt to explain this phenomenon—to understand how and why God has fought His way back into the modern world.

At its most basic, it is a book about politics and religion, but its underlying theme is the battle for modernity. That struggle is a global one, so this book travels the world—to look at persecuted Muslims in India, megachurches in Guatemala and the religious front line in northern Nigeria. In many cases our experience has been similar to the one we had with our last book, on American conservatism: reporting on a huge, hidden world that most outsiders barely know exists and that many insiders view through a

highly personal lens. Repeatedly, we have been asked in a surprised, somewhat flattered way, “Why are you interested?”—and the question usually comes from people who have just insisted that religion was the most important thing in their lives. A young mother who has earlier collapsed howling to the floor in São Paulo, as a devil is cast out, can be shrugging her shoulders a few minutes later, worrying about the time it must have taken you to get there. A passionate Hindu nationalist who has survived several assassination attempts is so amazed by your interest that he dives into the Delhi traffic to find you a taxi, to the horror of his bodyguards.

Indeed, in trying to describe this phenomenon, we have been greatly helped by one thing: the amazing number of people, around the world, prepared to give their time freely. Many of the more extreme views catalogued in this book have been delivered calmly over cups of tea. Two journalists from a secular magazine have been evangelized, prayed for and pitied. Only very occasionally have we been prevented from going into places, and then often for good reasons—Israeli soldiers, for instance, worried that letting us near the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem at a troubled moment would be provocative.

If this book travels the world, it focuses more on America than anywhere else for a simple reason: because, perhaps for the first time since the dawn of the modern era, the world seems to be moving decisively in the American rather than the European direction. The American model of religion—one that is based on choice rather than state fiat—is winning. America has succeeded in putting God back into modernity partly because it put modernity, or at least choice and competition, back into God. In many parts of the world, it is American missionaries and products you find to the fore: *The Jesus Film*, put out by Campus Crusade for Christ, has supposedly been seen by more than a billion people in eighty languages. And America is the pioneer in religious politics too. If it has given the world megachurches and megapreachers, it has also exported its culture wars. Meanwhile, as the battered superpower, it is fated to deal with most of the world’s new wars of religion.

If America plays an outsized role in our story, so does Christianity. Again the reason for this is straightforward: Christianity has spent longer grappling with modernity than other religions, notably Islam. There are

plenty of modern Muslims; and there are also plenty of places, from Dubai to Detroit and the Dardanelles, where Islam sits quite comfortably with modernity. But in its Arab heartland, it plainly does not. And, overall, it remains the world religion that has found pluralism hardest to cope with. Islam has not been through a Reformation, let alone an Enlightenment. Look at every debate, from the relationship between the mosque and the state to the ethics of stem cells, and you tend to discover that Christian culture has got there first. Islam is still relevant to our argument—especially when it comes to the competition between religions. But, for all its power, we believe it is less of a harbinger of the future than Christianity.

The first part of the book tries to explain why Europe and America have evolved in such different ways over the past two hundred or so years. The second part examines the way that religion (and especially pluralism) is thriving in today's America—as an economic force, an intellectual catalyst and a political influence. The third part examines how America is exporting its version of religion. The fourth part examines the spread of wars of religion, in various guises, from the battles for people's souls to culture wars to terrorism and violence. In the conclusion we look for the best formulas for avoiding future explosions.

This book comes with two health warnings. The first is that it is not a book about whether religion is good or bad. If you want polemic about religion, either for or against, there are plenty of other books available. It neither praises nor damns believers, except when they do obviously magnificent or malignant things. For the record, it is written by a Roman Catholic and an atheist: no doubt some of the holy warriors on both sides will uncover examples of "bias." Our hope, however, is that whatever biases we bring have canceled each other out.

The second health warning concerns numbers. Statistics on religion are fraught with ambiguities. For instance, figures on church attendance are often collected by churches—organizations with a strong interest in promoting themselves. As for surveys about faith, people may not be telling the truth when they say they are believers (would you confess to atheism in Texas, let alone Jeddah?); and even if they are telling the truth, do they really believe what they are supposed to? Many pious Evangelicals and Muslims have peculiar ideas of what the Bible and Koran actually say.

Academics and polling organizations are struggling to catch up. For what it is worth, we have tried to stick to figures from the Pew organization as much as possible.

Yet there is also a danger of missing the forest for the trees. Even if the number of true believers is exaggerated, at least by the believers themselves, it is clear, to us at least, that God is back. The most important development is not quantitative but qualitative: the fact that religion is playing a much more important role in public and intellectual life. We might not go as far as Philip Jenkins, who claims that when historians look back at this century, they will probably see religion as “the prime animating and destructive force in human affairs, guiding attitudes to political liberty and obligation, concepts of nationhood and, of course, conflicts and wars.”³⁷ But God will pose practical problems for politicians, be they in Berlin, Baltimore or Beijing.

In that, at least, Wang is surely right: religion is part of the modern world. Which brings us back to an important reason for putting America at the heart of this book. The Founding Fathers’ clever compromise over religion not only allowed God to survive and prosper in America, it also provided a way of living with religion—of ensuring that different faiths can coexist, and of taming a passion that so often turns the religious beast to savagery. This was one of the Founders’ greatest gifts to man: getting rid of the established church, establishing a firm distinction between public reason and private faith, and consigning theocracy to the past along with monarchy and aristocracy. Our instinct is that this is a lesson that people the world over—believers, atheists and agnostics—need now more than ever.