Religious Revival

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Not all that long ago, the great minds of Europe predicted a future with little or no religion. Science would make us highly skeptical of miracles. Psychiatry would direct all of our awe and wonder inward. Changing roles for women would weaken the patriarchal structure that props up clerics. Whatever script for modernity one followed, it had God playing a bit role.

As we all know, it didn't happen that way. Modernity arrived and improvised new starring roles for God. The Americans led the way by becoming both "the quintessentially modern country" and a very devout one, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge write in their new book, "God Is Back," and most of the world has followed that model. In rich countries and poorer ones, democratic and undemocratic, primarily Islamic and primarily Christian — everywhere, basically, except Europe — devotion to God has remained surprisingly robust.

"The very things that were supposed to destroy religion — democracy and markets, technology and reason — are combining to make it stronger," write Micklethwait, editor in chief of The Economist, and Wooldridge, the magazine's Washington bureau chief, who together have written previous books about globalization and American conservatism, two similarly sweeping topics.

To anyone who lives outside Europe, the Harvard campus or Manhattan (all faith-free zones singled out by the authors), this conclusion is not exactly startling. In most of the United States, for example, God is always back in one form or another. And various religion-stoked conflicts in the Middle East and Africa make the modern era sometimes feel like a replay of the Crusades. But the book's strength is in dissecting exactly how God managed to morph and evolve and become indispensable to the world at a time when he should have faded away.

Micklethwait and Wooldridge do not display the usual horror at overt religiosity that we heard in abundance from British and other European writers during the Bush years. Starting with the cheerful ad-speak of the title, they are instead astute social observers in the Tocquevillean mode, reporting from a distance in a tone just short of admiring. When it comes to American religion, they marvel mostly at its astounding success at replicating itself all over the world.

While fundamentalists of all kinds get most of the attention, the authors zero in on another phenomenon: the growth and global spread of the American megachurch. With no state-sanctioned religion, American churches began to operate like multinational corporations; pastors became "pastorpreneurs," endlessly branding and expanding, treating the flock like customers and seeding franchises all over the world. The surge of religion was "driven by the same forces driving the success of market capitalism: competition and choice."

The market that niche religious leaders stepped into was the hole opened up by modernity, and their product was something the authors call "soulcraft." Instead of raging against modern life, they sold themselves as easing the way for the harried middle class. Church became a place to form social bonds, get dates, meet fellow moms isolated in suburbia, lose weight. Christian America spawned a parallel world of popular culture, with books and movies telling people how to live meaningful lives. The most popular, like Rick Warren's "Purpose-Driven Life," perfectly mirrored the can-do ethos of American success culture.

ll the while, religion began shedding its association with anti-intellectualism, and became the province of the upwardly mobile middle class. Evangelicals began graduating from college in record numbers, and Christian philanthropists began building an "intellectual infrastructure," including programs and endowed chairs in the Ivy League. A new class of thinkers emerged representing what some have called "the opening of the evangelical mind," and a solid religious left began to take shape, symbolized most powerfully by Barack Obama. Obama beat Hillary Clinton for many reasons, but one was his ability to "out-God" her, they write.

Much of Micklethwait and Wooldridge's analysis of domestic evangelical culture is familiar. The most original parts of the book come when they follow the trail overseas, where homegrown Rick Warrens are popping up in unlikely places. The book opens with a scene from what sounds like a typical Wednesday night bible study in, say, Colorado Springs — a doctor, an academic, a couple of entrepreneurs, a young hipster in a Che T-shirt, sitting around someone's living room and chatting about the Bible. Only this is taking place in Shanghai, one of the many places where the casual, personalized, distinctly American style of worship is thriving. They do the same thing a group of American evangelicals would do: debate homosexuality and Darwin, vow to spread the Word, and then check their BlackBerrys before heading home.

The authors track the explosion of Pentecostalism — with its perfect mix of "raw emotion and self-improvement" — to Brazil and South Korea. The American style even has converts in the Muslim world. Indonesia's Abdullah Gymnastiar, who has been criticized as "the Britney Spears of Islam," favors wireless mikes, a chatty sermon style and casual dress. (Aa Gym, as he's known, is making a comeback after being brought low by a sex scandal in 2006.) Amr Khaled, "Egypt's answer to Billy Graham," is ushering his followers into the televangelist age. His TV show features testimonials from sports stars and actresses, and he peddles cassettes and sweatshirts on his Web site.

Much like their American models, this new generation of religious leaders is an interesting mix of modern style and traditional message. The trick they try to pull off is making concessions to modernity without diluting their message, but in the Muslim world, especially, it's not clear how much influence they have.

In many Muslim regions, democracy and the markets are leading to an explosion of religion in the opposite way, as fundamentalists react against sexual promiscuity and other excesses they see in modern life in general and American-style capitalism in particular. The Muslim world, Micklethwait and Wooldridge acknowledge, has been much slower to engage with modernity and has remained mostly hostile to it. There is no Koran equivalent of the various Bible zines that tailor their message to teenagers or hip-hop fans in America. There has never been a Muslim equivalent of the Enlightenment.

The result is a modern era that seems to be replaying the religious wars of the 17th century in a slightly altered form. Radical Islam dominates Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, casting itself as an enemy of the Judeo-Christian West. Nigeria is split along religious lines.

Despite the dark side, the authors ultimately conclude that "God is back, for better." By this they mean that religion is now a matter of choice for most people, and not a forced or inherited identity. But if that choice can lead you to either buy a sweatshirt or blow up a building, the conclusion itself seems a little forced. The reality is that God is back, for better or worse.