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## A Religious Revival?

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Kultura i Polityka : zeszyty naukowe Wyższej Szkoły Europejskiej im. ks.  
Józefa Tischnera w Krakowie nr 6, 134-139

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2009

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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Clarinda E. Calma\*

## Λ RELIGIOUS REVIVAL?

(John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge. *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World*. New York: Penguin Press, 2009. pp. 373 + notes and index.)

In this new book, the Economist's Editor-in-Chief, John Micklethwait, and former Lexington Columnist Adrian Wooldridge form a tandem in analyzing religion and religiosity as a globally growing phenomenon. The title and sub-title of the book speak volumes: *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World*. At first glance, two questions immediately arise. First, has God ever *left* us, since He has presumably returned *from somewhere*? Second, how is this resurgence of religion and religiosity changing the world – this global world – in which we are currently living? These are the most important questions that the book tries to answer.

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The book opens with a short description of a Christian bible study group in a posh apartment in Shanghai. This informal gathering, headed by a young, chic female executive, opens the session with an informal prayer and then intones the singing of the Psalms using downloaded material from the Internet projected onto a screen. Finally, a discussion of a chosen fragment of the Bible closes the gathering. Among those present, there is a Chinese doctor, a well-known university professor, two ballet dancers and many prominent businessmen. Such informal bible study groups are apparently becoming more and more popular in Communist China. The reason? Here the authors offer the following explanation: on the one hand, it seems that the government has realized the growing dangers of materialism predominant among many young Chinese today. While Mao Zedong, as the authors stress, “put religion next to capitalism in his list of reactionary evils” (p. 8) throughout his rule, by October 2007, the Communist

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party added an amendment allowing the creation of religious organizations in its constitution with the blessing of President Hu Jintao. China today is rethinking its policies on religious tolerance, especially as religion, as it has been lately psychologically proven, is a crucial factor in influencing a deep sense of satisfaction and overall happiness. The government is beginning to recognize the need for non-material values as offered by Confucianism, Buddhism, and even Christianity. For, as the authors emphasise, the government today acknowledges that “some kind of moral code is useful to build a harmonious society” (p.8). This was explicitly put forth by Chinese government economist Zhao Xiao in his essay, “Market Economies with Churches and Market Economies without Churches,” published in 2002, an essay which has since been widely read. In this text, which is based on his observations of America, the economist concludes by saying that while a market economy is efficient especially in preventing idleness, it, however, encourages people to lie and even injure others. For, he argues, it is not natural resources nor the financial system that bind America together but its churches. Without a religious kind of awe, he continues, China cannot succeed. “Only through awe can we be saved. Only through faith can the market economy have a soul” (p. 9).

This particular example, like the many other equally powerful examples in the book, perfectly illustrate the main thesis of the book. Contrary to the top-down manner of imposing religion through the auspices of the State, still present in many countries today, a new way of experiencing religion is emerging. Religion is re-emerging bottom-up. Indeed, it has become truly a matter of choice, “something what individuals believe in (or not).” This phenomenon is further enabled through the skilful use of the tools of modernity, from technology to the free market, from the effective use of the mass and new media. The recipe to make these seemingly contrary ingredients compatible has been concocted and served in America ever so successfully for many years. Today, when it comes to how religion is practiced, the world is learning from the U.S.

The question of the relation of Church and State is a delicate one. And Europe, as the authors stress, throughout its history has been a testimony of this “estrangement.” From the Established Churches throughout Christian Europe, to the extremely *laïceté* approach prevalent in most European countries today, one might ask how the State came to abhor the Church. Europe reached this point, the authors claim, as a result of the Age of the Enlightenment. Throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European intellectuals, such as Thomas Woolston, Frederick the Great, Voltaire, and Frederick Ni-

etzsche believed that God and Christianity should be gradually removed from the public sphere, as God – and Christianity – would inevitably come to its end. This bold assumption is explained by the unquestionable faith in human reason and goodness. It was time to cast off the fetters of dark ignorance or superstition; it was time to “dare to know.” All this was coupled by the firm confidence in human goodness and the negation of original sin. This set men on the “right” track, by encouraging them to pursue “real virtue” and not waste their time on “saintly self-mortification” (p. 33).

But this was not enough to eradicate centuries of religiosity in Europe. It was, as the authors claim, “the French Revolution [that] cemented the link between European radicalism and European anticlericalism. This led to two distinct approaches to the Church. Intellectuals either assumed the completely radical approach of overthrowing the corrupt Church or they embraced and celebrated the Church as the symbol of the old order, endorsing the divine right of kings and celebrating social hierarchy, turning religion into “back-ward looking ideology thoroughly opposed to liberal modernity” (p. 37).

America, however, would be a completely different story. First of all, as the authors stress, American “became” religious and was not born that way. The American Revolution itself was precisely unique in that it was against an earthly regime without the questioning of the spiritual order. It was a truly “secular affair without religious grievances whatsoever” (p. 62). This had already been observed by Alexis de Tocqueville himself who observed the following of America, “There is no country in the world where the boldest doctrines of the *philosophes* of the eighteenth century in matters of politics were more fully applied than in America. ... It was only the anti-religious doctrines that never were able to make headway” (quoted on p. 61). Many of the founding fathers recognized the moral value of Christ’s teachings and the value of religion in public life. And, as the authors emphasize, the founding fathers were mainly preoccupied with how to prevent tyranny, that is, how to prevent the priest or prince from imposing their will on the ordinary folk (p. 62). The solution? Here the authors stress again and again many times in the book the precisely unique American solution: the separation of the Church and State as immortalized in the First Amendment. So while in Europe you would have the established church closely collaborating with the political establishment best described by the Reverend Mr Collins of *Pride and Prejudice*, who must perpetually pursue his patron, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, in order to financially survive, in America every pastor has had to sink or swim in the sea of turmoil, crises and difficulties in society. This is

perhaps best described in an observation made by Karl Greisenger, a German liberal who visited America in 1858 and disliked the kind of religiosity that he observed there: “Clergymen in America must .... defend themselves to the last, like other businessmen; they must meet competition and build up trade, and it’s their own fault if their income is not large enough. ... [Now it is] clear why heaven and earth are moved to drive the people to Churches, and why attendance is more common here than anywhere else in the world” (quoted in p. 65). In other words, the principles of the free market came to be naturally applied to the task of the salvation of souls. This in turn resulted in making the tools of modernity – technology and democracy – the tools of religion as well, thus challenging the theories posed by secularists.

The book is replete with examples of how this way of “doing religion” is so American and how this American style of religiosity is going global. Chapter six of the book, appropriately entitled “The God Business”, describes the rapidly growing religious industry in America. It begins by visiting Nashville, the so-called “buckle of the Bible belt,” also home to the Southern Baptist Convention (the largest Evangelical organization in America) and Thomas Nelson’s publishing house, the largest publisher of religious books in America. It is likewise home to other smaller religious publishing houses and Christian country music. Then it moves to discuss briefly the various and larger and smaller scale initiatives of various Church groups – from the Catholic Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) to Zondervan Publishing. So attractive is this market, that it has even attracted other media companies. A good example would be the Disney production of the *Chronicles of Narnia*. But catering to the spiritual needs of the market – through, books, film, and music – various religious organizations have likewise transformed their places of worship into an impressive complex of facilities, designed to appeal to every possible interest of their churchgoers. In Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois, one finds restaurants, cafes, video screens, and some 3850 parking spaces. And Willow Creek is just one of the many Evangelical Churches of that sort that have spread and continue to do so throughout the country.

In chapter eight, “Exporting America’s God,” the authors describe how American-style religiosity is being adapted throughout various Christian Churches around the world, particularly in South America, Africa and Asia. Its software technology has also become a channel of American modernity. Early on in the chapter, various megachurches with powerful broadcasting agencies catering to millions of listeners

in the Middle East, Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia, are briefly discussed. But this “style” of spreading the spiritual bread has also been adapted by other faiths. The authors, for example, describe the Iskcon Sri Radkarishna Temple, a megatemple built in 1997 thanks to funding from enormous software companies in India and America. It is equipped with every form of modern technology to attract all who are interested, from a user-friendly website to swish Powerpoint presentations. The temple has also reworked its logistics of food distribution to the poor. Instead of the long queues of the poor who had traditionally come to the temple for food, today the temple runs an ultra-modern food chain management that feeds 200,000 poor schoolchildren in Bangalore and 600,000 others through various sister temples. The trucks that distribute the food display advertisements of various food companies who support their charity work. Aside from that, the temple’s “management” is regularly audited by one of the most prominent auditing firms in the country.

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But the book is far from being a megaphone of America’s next contribution to the global market. In chapter nine, the authors discuss how America’s materialism exported through film and music at an impressive rate through the new media is corroding spiritual values everywhere. Americans, however, long ago discovered the many frailties and failures of capitalism, and turned wisely to religion for strength and inspiration, even more so in these difficult times of financial insecurity. What it stresses therefore is how America has come to terms with the presence of religion in the public sphere, a lesson that Europe should be learning from. For Europe, contrary to America, for the first time in history is being confronted with a massive immigration of people sharing one religious tradition, Islam. This situation finds Europeans, particularly secularists, endlessly cracking their heads on how to keep the Church and the state sturdily separated. Should we maintain the wall separating the Church from the State? If so, how tall should it be? If not, what consequences face us?

America has managed to solve this difficult problem, in “combining religious vitality with religious diversity and religious toleration” (p. 369). This is due thanks to the First Amendment, which has succeeded in “[keeping] the church firmly apart from the state...” and “[protecting] churches from the state” (p. 370). Are we witnessing therefore the return of religion in the public sphere? The authors say that this is an inevitability that has faced America, is facing most countries around the globe and should be facing Europe as well. Will Europe, however, follow suit?



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