



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

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Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good morning. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs. On behalf of the Carnegie Council, I'd like to thank you all for joining us as we welcome the return of two very talented journalists, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge.

Many of you may remember John from his days as a New York bureau chief of [The Economist](#). He is now the editor-in-chief of the magazine that is often referred to as the world's leading business and current affairs weekly.

He has been responsible for the magazine's Los Angeles and New York bureaus. In addition, he was the winner of the Wincott Award, Britain's leading prize for financial journalism.

Adrian is *The Economist's* Washington bureau chief and the "Lexington" columnist. He is based in D.C. Adrian has served as the West Coast correspondent, social policy correspondent, and management editor.

They were both educated at Oxford and, after a few years in the business world, went on to work for *The Economist*. Together they have coauthored several books, including [The Witch Doctors](#); [A Future Perfect: The Challenge and Hidden Promise of Globalization](#); [The Company: A Short History of a Revolutionary Idea](#); and [The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America](#). Now, with the publication of [God Is Back: How the Global Renewal of Faith Is Changing the World](#), they have written one more.

Religion is a decisive force in our contemporary world. Far from fading away or retreating into private life, religion is once again sweeping the globe. Former communist countries are humming with mosque builders, Christian missionaries, and freelance spiritual entrepreneurs of every possible persuasion.

In China, underground house churches are proliferating so quickly that neither the authorities nor Christian leaders can keep a reliable count. In much of South and Central America, exuberant Pentecostal churches, where worshippers catch the Holy Spirit and speak in tongues, continue to spread, challenging the Roman Catholic tradition. In the United States, religious conservatives have been asserting their power in politics, the media, and culture.

In *God Is Back*, our speakers explore the thriving nature and far-reaching impact of religious faith throughout the world. Their book is an attempt to explain and understand how and why God has found his way back into the modern world. In so doing, they pay special attention to the pervasiveness of religion in America and tell us how this phenomenon will influence the global economy, politics, and more.

They write that ever since the [Enlightenment](#) there has been a schism in Western thought over the

relationship between religion and modernity. Europeans assumed that you could not become modern without throwing off the religious yoke, while Americans, for the most part, assumed that modernity and religion could live side by side.

You might ask, how was this possible, and who was right?

Our speakers write that from the very beginning, when the Founding Fathers separated church and state, a free market of religions was created in America. This market was defined by entrepreneurship, choice, and personal revelation.

Although Europeans believed that these were the very things that would destroy religion, they were wrong, because in the end, it was the combination of these forces that made religion stronger.

Today, as market forces reshape the world, the tools and ideas which have made religion in America so accessible have been taken as the model to propagate faith throughout the globe. This phenomenon is reshaping the identities and actions of an increasingly large number of people who are looking for meaning, community, and identity. It is religion by choice rather than religion imposed from above.

But can the American ideas that created our distinctive approach to religion, where different faiths coexist side by side, be applied around the globe? Can our way of practicing religion channel the rising tide of faith away from further volatility and violence that we have seen?

To answer these questions, we need to ask the experts. Please won't you join me in welcoming our guests, John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge.

It's so nice to have you back again.

Remarks

JOHN MICKLETHWAIT: Thank you very much.

Our aim this morning is to have a conversation. I know that's a phrase you associate with the most vacuous politicians pretty much anywhere around the world. There was a moment the other day when [Gordon Brown](#) used it, when you just sensed that he was doomed in some deep way. But in our case, it's a genuine offer.

I'm going to talk a bit about the world that we portray in this book and the idea that, from our perspective, looking around the world in terms of politics, in particular, we think that God is back, that he is back as part of politics. Then Adrian is going to deal with the consequences of that, which are both good and bad, and then talk about the way in which we think America offers a solution to some of those potential problems.

I thought we would start with a recent speech that, you could argue, almost encapsulates many people's fears about religion and politics. It's by Iran's president to the Parliament there. In it, [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) posed two questions: First, who are our enemies? Secondly, why do they hate us?

His answer was that Iran was faced by an "axis of evil," with all its enemies being all the wicked men in the world, whether abroad or at home. The root cause of their hatred, he argued, was religious—a hatred, a loathing of whosoever should serve the glory of the Prophet. Having gone through all, as he saw it, of [George Bush](#)'s atrocities, he told the cheering MPs, "Truly your great enemy is the American, through the enmity that is in him against all that is of God in you."

Fortunately, he argued, Iran wouldn't fight alone, because Muslims all around the world would rally to it. "Be bold," he told the MPs, "and you will find that you act for a very great many people who are God's own."

In fact, that speech was not made by Ahmadinejad, but by [Oliver Cromwell](#) in 1656, and the cheering MPs were English Puritans and the Great Satan was not America, but Catholic Spain. That was the last

great era of wars of religion. The previous [Thirty Years' War](#) had brought more death and destruction to Europe than the [Black Death](#).

Shortly after his speech, Cromwell invaded Ireland. Religion had also dominated domestic politics. You could argue that the gap between [Cavalier](#) and [Roundhead](#) was, in part, one between those who thought the king should run the country and those who thought God should. It was also a culture war between those who watched or, arguably, lived the 17th-century equivalent of [Sex and the City](#) and the then-moral majority.

I think if Cromwell looked around the modern world, he would find much that was familiar. God is very much back in combat, we see, not least because 19 young Muslims attacked the United States on September 11, 2001. If you name the conflicts that America could get dragged into beyond [Iraq](#) and [Afghanistan](#), it could indeed be Iran or it could be Pakistan and India or it could be Israel-Palestine, a once secular squabble which now has plenty of zealots on both sides of an extremely Cromwellian nature, or it could be West Africa, where you see this huge struggle between Islam surging southwards and evangelical Christianity pushing northwards.

It doesn't just have to be negative either. This book begins with a description of a house church in China. China, we argue, is on the way pretty quickly to becoming the world's biggest Christian country. More people go to church each Sunday in China than there are members of the [Communist Party](#).

I think that's a wonderful expression of religious freedom. But if you are the Chinese government, it poses an almighty challenge: Is religion the glue that is going to bind your new country together or is it the source of discontent and revolt against the regime?

So the return of God and his effect on public life is the subject of this book. It's, above all, a piece of reporting, wandering around the world, looking at it. But first, I think, we have to deal with at least part of our title.

We argue that God is back. And that, I think, to some extent, implies that he went away, because even if he did not fade quite as far into the background as many people thought, or indeed hoped, the fact is, I think, that he did disappear more from public life. To some extent, we are dealing with a world that many people, certainly 20 or 30 years ago, did not expect could exist.

That was because, as Joanne said at the beginning, most intellectuals assumed that modernity would kill religion. Ever since the Enlightenment there has been a schism in Western thought. Europeans, on the whole, have assumed that modernity would marginalize religion. In France, the revolutionaries despised religion as part of the [Ancien Régime](#), killed priests, and pushed them out.

By contrast, in your revolution, America's Founding Fathers divided church from state, not least to protect the former from the latter.

So there have always been these two views of religion around the world, and modernity. But for most intellectuals, it has been pretty clear which view has been seen as dominant. It has been the European view. Most of the people who have dominated the debate about this have been Europeans.

[Marx](#) called it "the opium of the people." [Freud](#) dismissed religion as a neurosis designed to divert attention from our real interest, which was, of course, sex. [Darwin](#) challenged the idea that God existed. A few tried even to have it both ways. [Jean-Paul Sartre](#), my favorite one, railed against God's absence: "God doesn't exist, the bastard." Yet he also celebrated the freedom that God's departure provided.

The idea that modernity would be secular, I think, was a dominant feature of the 20th century. At the extremes, you have communism, where [Mao](#) and [Lenin](#) tried to actually physically push religion out of their countries, and, more commonly, throughout the developing world you had plenty of leaders who assumed that modernization, anything to do with making their countries more modern, automatically assumed pushing religion to the side—people like the [Shah](#) in Iran, [Nehru](#) in India, [Ataturk](#) in Turkey, [Ben-Gurion](#) in Israel.

Even in America, I think at least the elite thought the world was heading that way. In 1966, in its Easter issue, [Time](#) magazine asked, "Is God Dead?" on its cover.

There was a strange parallel this week, actually, with [Newsweek](#) talking about the decline and fall of Christian America on their cover.

Lest we ourselves be seen to be exempt from this, *The Economist* was so confident of the Almighty's demise that we published his obituary in our millennium issue.

So what happened? What changed? I think, in retrospect—and it's only really clear in retrospect—the 1970s were the crucial decade. If you look back at that decade, that was the time of the [Iranian Revolution](#), the elevation of a particularly strong-minded Polish [pope](#), the foundation of the [Moral Majority](#) here, the election of the first born-again [president](#), the "religiousization," if I can use that word, of the Middle Eastern struggle, the rise of Hindu nationalism in India. A whole variety of things happened. It was a decade when the secularisms of capitalism and communism hit the buffers.

But I think underneath it, there was, as Joanne hinted, a much more fundamental turnaround. Modernity has emerged and has been helping religion spread, not actually destroying it. All these things—democracy, markets, technology, freedom, globalization itself—have actually been pushing religion recently. To make it, perhaps, worse for the secularist argument, two particular trends that were not supposed to happen have been happening.

The first is that the wrong sorts of religion have been flourishing. If you go back to the 1960s and read what people said then, the few religions that anyone expected to survive would be the most sophisticated, gentlest sorts, such as [Graham Greene](#)'s doubting Catholicism, a type of Episcopalian-Anglican thoughtfulness.

In fact, the sorts of religions which have gained ground tend to be those which either have absolute certainty that [Adam and Eve](#) met exactly 6,005 years ago or that take a particularly strong-minded view of [jihad](#). In fact, if you look over the past century, the most successful religion by a long, long way has been the most emotional of all, Pentecostalism.

Actually, at our table I was just describing what it's like to go to an exorcism in Brazil. What happens is, you sit there and about 100 or 150 housewives wander in off the streets, in a nice, upper-middle-class suburb, bringing with them their children, their shopping, their laundry.

They put them all down, and then they go through this process of agony and ecstasy. At the end, they pick up their children and go out again. It's the most amazing experience to watch. It definitely is not rooted in intellectualism. It's rooted in the emotional.

The second odd thing is that the wrong sorts of people—if I can put it that way—are the ones who have been embracing religion. According to the secularist argument, the people who should remain in religion should be the weak, the fearful, the unintelligent.

Certainly the housewives in Brazil were very upwardly mobile. The Chinese house church, with which we begin our book, is run by a young technologist. The people there were stem-cell scientists, professors, academics, and a lot of the new rich in China.

Go to the megachurches here—I was at [Saddleback](#), [Warren](#)'s church, last week—the people there are prosperous suburbanites.

In both Turkey and India, the people who have been embracing religion there are precisely the rising bourgeoisie who Nehru and Ataturk had prayed would exist, but never imagined they would drift towards religion.

What's going on? Here I think you have a problem. To believers, it's a very simple business: God is right, and that is the reason why people are inevitably drifting towards him.

On the other side, you have the rather crass notion that it's all a huge plot, and it's nothing to do with anything other than brutality or people being forced to do it.

Broadly—and I accept that there is a degree of exaggeration in this—we do think, actually, it's the triumph of an American model of religion, a bottom-up competitive religion. In fact, it's not really quite so much the triumph of religion itself; it's more the triumph of pluralism.

If you want to understand why religion is doing so well in the world at the moment, I think you only need two sacred texts. One is [Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*](#), in which he explains, remarkably simply, why established clergy—ones who are sponsored by the state—will, almost by design, be worse at actually going out and pulling in souls than those who have to go and compete and live off their own collection plate.

The second particular document, I would argue, is your own [Constitution](#). The [First Amendment](#), the division of church and state, bred competition almost by itself. If you look back at the history of America, contrary to all that stuff you read about it being a city on the hill, America was not that religious before the [Revolution](#).

If you want one example, if you go to Salem, the town that most people associate with [The Crucible](#), in 1683, 83 percent of taxpayers there said they had no religious identification. The reason why was that the Puritans had been joined by a lot of other less desirable people, many of them, perhaps wrongly, thrown out of Britain.

But once the Constitution got hold of religion, it established a marketplace, and that was where America took off.

In many ways, I think it still comes down to supply and demand. The demand is pretty simple: Man, for better or worse—and throughout this book, we make no value judgments about whether there is a God or there isn't; this is based purely on what is happening, not what should happen—man is inclined to believe in a God. He is theotropic. In some cases that's because of a desire for shelter. Go to rural India—or, for that matter, Arkansas—and you will find plenty of people who look on God as protection from the harsh world of globalization.

By contrast, I think there is a bevy of studies which show that many people actually turn to religion as the way to get on in the world. There are an increasing number of studies showing that religious people are happier, healthier, and wealthier than other sorts. There is a reason why [Ned Flanders](#) in [The Simpsons](#) is always smiling. It's no accident, I think, that America's bestselling religious book of recent times is called [The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?](#)

Think just for the moment of, I think, the new face of American religion, [Barack Obama](#), a clever, well-educated young man searching for meaning and finding it in a Chicago church.

If demand is still pushing in that direction, I think supply is also helping as well. Religion is now a gigantic industry. You have the megachurches; you have the "pastor-preneurs." This is a business which knows how to segment and resegment.

There is something for everyone. There are services for bikers, gays, and dropouts. You have the [Scum of the Earth Church](#) in Colorado, a particular favorite. You have bibles for cowboys, brides, soldiers, and rap artists: "Even though I walk through the 'hood of death, I don't back down, for you have my back."

You have theme parks for every faith. This week you can go and visit [Golgotha Fun Park](#) in Cave City, Kentucky, or the [Ave Maria Grotto](#) in Alabama, [GodCast](#), you name it. This is what America does spectacularly well.

Now I think this model is spreading. It's spreading overseas. Already five of the ten biggest megachurches in the world are in South Korea. As I mentioned, you have this huge explosion in China. In Latin America, you have the Pentecostals moving into the Catholic area, and you have, by the same

token, the Catholics beginning to fight back.

It's also moving across religions. The Hindus are embracing the same methods that the Americans have long used, and you are beginning to see Islam also doing the same thing. Islam has its own version of [televangelists](#), some of them spectacularly successful.

So it's not just American and it's not just Christian, but I think at the heart of what's happening around the world at the moment, Christian America actually is the model.

That means, in the end, it comes down to pluralism. Even in places where it's more compulsory, people are increasingly choosing the faith which they come into. They are not just going to the one they were born into. Even deciding not to go at all to church—a category that stretches from lazy, stay-in-bed agnosticism to passionate atheism—that, I think, is part of this pluralism, because it involves people actually making decisions about their relationship to God.

I think this makes a gigantic difference. People are choosing their faith, and if they choose their faith, they are not going to dump it. They are not going to leave it at home when they go to work. They are not going to leave it at home when they go to the voting booth. They are going to take it into public life. And that, I think, in essence, is where the trouble begins.

I will hand it over to Adrian.

ADRIAN WOOLDRIDGE: John has described the world that the return of God is creating. I must say, he's much better behaved now, since the exorcism.

But he has also pointed out that the more important religion becomes, the more trouble it causes. That's what I want to talk about at the moment. To put it very crudely, religion is the very devil to deal with when it gets involved with politics.

The return of religion is bringing two big sets of problems. The first is the return of wars of religion. Did you ever think you would hear the phrase "wars of religion" again? It's something that we associate with the 17th century. The mid-17th century saw a determined attempt to drive religion out of politics. You basically saw, with the [Treaty of Westphalia](#) in 1648, the establishment of the modern state system on the principle that the prince could determine the religious worship of the people who lived in his territory: [cuius regio, eius religio](#).

That was the beginning of the great secularization of foreign policy, which went on throughout the 19th century, which was dominated by the balance of power.

Throughout the 20th century, you saw the resurgence of various ideologies in foreign affairs, but they were political ideologies, not religious ideologies. Even a decade ago, nobody really took the return of religion very seriously. In [Henry Kissinger's](#) great masterpiece, [Diplomacy](#), a 900-page-long book, the word "religion" does not appear at all in the index. Somebody did a study of the four most important American foreign policy journals between 1980 and 1999. There were a dozen articles about religion in that entire period.

There's a wonderful quote from [Madeleine Albright](#) when she was talking with a bunch of [Clintonistas](#) in the late 1990s about the Northern Ireland peace process. One of the Clintonistas says, "Can you believe that we are talking about a religious conflict at the end of the 20th century?"

Well, we are now at the beginning of the 21st century, and you can certainly believe that we are talking about religious conflict. The world is very much out of its Westphalian box.

Look at West Africa and Nigeria. You can see a potential conflict, a conflict between fundamentalist Islam and evangelical Christianity. Right along the 10th parallel, there are numerous potential wars or, indeed, real wars of religion going on. Many of the world's older and more intractable conflicts, such as the Palestine-Israeli conflict, are now getting an ever-harder religious edge. Whatever they were in the past, they are becoming real wars of religion.

As John was saying, by the mid-21st century, China could become the world's biggest Muslim country, as well as the world's biggest Christian country, which creates a huge potential for religious conflict and wars.

The problem, of course, with religion is that once it gets involved with politics, it makes things more difficult to deal with, partly because it solidifies loyalties, partly because it inflames passions. You can compromise over land eventually, but when it's a battle between truth versus truth, compromise is much, much more difficult. So wars of religion are coming back, and they are very, very difficult to deal with.

The second problem, of course, is the spread of American-style culture wars. Europeans have always looked at America and seen these culture wars as signs of, quite frankly, American derangement.

But these culture wars are now spreading to Europe and, indeed, to much of the rest of the world. Politics increasingly, in Europe and elsewhere, is being driven by questions of value, questions of identity, questions of the meaning of life. It's not just that old technocratic debate about who gets what and how we run an established welfare state.

There are fierce debates about the proper relationship between church and state, or mosque and state. That's the essence, of course, of Turkish politics for much of the time.

But also in Britain, for example, we recently had a huge argument about [Shariah](#) law and whether Muslims should be able to apply that law to themselves. We have had debates about headscarves, whether you should wear them. Again, right at the center of French politics has been the headscarf debate.

We have had debates, of course, about marriage and the origins of human life.

On free speech, there has been a huge battle about the [Danish cartoons](#). We now have the attempt by the [UN Human Rights Council](#) to classify insults to religion, essentially, to restore the blasphemy rules and to say that one of the constraints on free speech should be insults to religion. So that's coming back. It's almost as though we are again back in the 17th and 18th centuries.

This is partly driven by the rise of Islam in Europe. I think never before in human history have you seen so many people from one particular faith moving to a region of the world which has long associated with another faith.

It's partly driven by technological advance, particularly biotechnological advance. Secularists have always maintained that the rise and spread of science would actually drive religion out of politics and secularize the world.

But, in fact, the spread of biotechnology—in vitro fertilization, the potential for cloning, all sorts of interventions potentially for breeding cells that will cure you, stem cells and the rest of it—is raising religious debates, raising fundamental questions about when life starts, what the meaning of life is, what the value of life is. So the advance of science is increasing religious controversy rather than reducing it.

Of course, there is cultural change. There is a spread of this idea of an individualistic culture, a culture in which people have rights. Men have rights to marry other men, women have rights to marry other women. That's creating a fierce backlash in more traditional, more communitarian societies.

So in all sorts of ways, we see the culture wars becoming the fundamental defining wars of internal politics in the 21st century. I think this is going to be enormously intensified by what I see as the potential victory of Christianity over Islam in the war for converting souls.

Now, that might strike you as rather an unlikely proposition, that Christianity is likely to win this war rather than Islam. Islam has had a very, very good 20th century.

The number of Muslims in the world has increased from about 200 million in 1900 to 1.5 billion today.

But I nevertheless think that Christianity has inherent strengths over it. One is that Islam has not been tested by the acids of modernity. It hasn't been through its reformation; it hasn't been through its enlightenment. It must surely do that. Christianity has been through these things and survived them. Islam is just about to go through these things. That is going to have a huge impact on that religion.

The second is that Christians are much better at using the tools of modernity to spread the faith: television, radio, podcasts, translations. Many, many Muslims even have doubts about translating the Qur'an, because it's the truth revealed in Arabic to [Muhammad](#). The Christians don't have those sorts of doubts about the Bible or the infinite number of translations of the Bible.

So I think that Christianity is well placed to advance and continue to advance. Islam is going to feel threatened, and that will intensify both the culture wars and the real wars, physical wars.

What can we do about all of this? The European secularists, I think, were clearly wrong to predict the end of religion, but they were very right about one very big thing, and that is that religion is a huge source of problems. It was bad enough to have the religious wars of the 17th century. What happens if we get new religious wars with atomic bombs added to them? It's a potential Armageddon.

I think the first thing to look at is wars of religion. How do we deal with those things? I think it's important to remember that the diplomatic establishment in general, and the diplomatic establishment in the United States in particular, has actually been very bad at dealing with wars of religion, partly because they have been so secularized.

Most people in the diplomatic establishment have not had very much interest in religion at all. Insofar as they have had it, they have regarded it as a personal aberration, a bit like a taste for bondage: It's something you can do if you want to, but you don't talk about it. It's not part of your calculations.

This refusal to recognize the importance of religion has led to all sorts of calamities. America completely underestimated the strength of feeling against the shah. They thought it was a few guys with beards and funny hats. There was one report sent to the CIA saying, "Look, there's something serious going on here. There's a religious revolt going on." The head honchos in the CIA looked at the report and said, "This is mere sociology. Nonsense. We're not interested in that."

America looked at [Hezbollah](#) and decided to interpret it in terms of left-right politics, secular politics, missing the slight clue in the word "Hezbollah," which means "Party of God."

You might have imagined that September 11 would have changed all of these calculations, but it really didn't. Even the supposedly God-bothering Bush Administration actually completely underestimated the Sunni-Shia split in Iraq. They didn't understand the importance of religious passions.

There was a survey done by [CQ magazine](#) that looked at how much people in Congress, people in the intelligence establishment knew about Sunnis and Shias, and the answer was virtually zero. They didn't know anything about them. The one guy who ran the intelligence department of the FBI said, "Yes, I think that's quite an important thing," and then he misidentified Iran as a Sunni country.

I think this massively damps down the capacity of the foreign policy establishments to understand what's going on in the world at the moment. It also massively reduces its capacity to solve problems, because the only way, quite often, to solve religious problems, wars of religion, is to use the people who are involved in those wars, the leaders of those religious communities, to bring them to the table, to get them to be part of the negotiations that solve these problems. You cannot provide purely secular solutions to wars of religion. You have to involve religious leaders.

That is what Britain eventually did in Northern Ireland, bringing together the leaders of the Protestant community and the Catholic community. That has to happen all around the world.

So that's the downside of how America has dealt with the return of God. I think there is also an upside. I think the solution that America has applied to human passions for religion domestically has been a very

good one. The separation of church and state, which is the basis of the Constitution in many ways, was an incredibly brilliant solution to a huge human problem. The Founders didn't want to get rid of religion. They understood that religion is a human passion, that many people will be religious.

But they wanted to control it by the Constitution. So what they did was brilliant. They separated church and state. By separating church and state, you created tolerance in the fullest sense of the word. It wasn't British tolerance, which was, "We have an established church, but we allow you other people to do your thing." It was full tolerance. There was no official church.

But what they also did was to institutionalize competition at the heart of religion. Of course, this was actually good for religion itself, because you couldn't rely on the state to support you. Everybody had to compete for customers. That turned America into the most religious country in the world.

So you have the best of both worlds: Religion flourishes, but also the state is not on one side or another in this religious war.

That might strike people as a very idealistic view of what happened in America. People say, weren't there religious riots? Didn't you have this terrible president called George Bush who tried to impose a theocracy on the country?

But what I would say, actually, is that the settlement has endured. It has worked.

If you look at the riots in the United States, religious riots, they were minor compared with what happened in Europe. If you look at what George Bush did in imposing a theocracy, in fact, gay marriage seems to be advancing; abortion rights have not been changed very much. We have essentially a settlement which most people agree with. You have a pluralistic society which has survived that. So I think that settlement works.

I have no doubt that America is a beacon to the world in this area. There are many, many reasons why we can doubt whether the 21st century will be the American century in economic terms, but I really do think, and we have argued in this book, that in many ways the 21st century will be the American century in terms of religion.

We are seeing the spread of American-style pluralism, American-style competition, American-style faith. I think that will continue. We are going to see modernity and religion going hand in hand rather than subverting each other, as they did in Europe, the American model triumphing.

But what I also hope is that we will see the triumph of the American solution to the problem of religion in terms of constitutional pluralism, accepting that there is a diversity of religious beliefs, allowing that diversity to flourish, but never allowing one person or one doctrine to impose itself by force on another doctrine, on another group of people.

With that hope and that observation about the vitality of American religion, I thank you very much.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: I think everybody would agree with your description of the importance of religion in Asia and Africa and Latin America. But is that really true about Europe and the United States? Everybody talks about Europe—at least Christian Europe—as being basically increasingly secularized. Even the pope deploras that. In the United States, certainly the November elections saw a significant diminution of the power of the religious right in affecting American politics.

Is it really fair to talk about a worldwide increase in religion or is it, rather, the fact that religion is increasing its sprawl in certain parts of the world and becoming more secularized in other parts?

JOHN MICKLETHWAIT: Europe is the place where the argument that God is back is most difficult to sustain. It's not difficult to sustain in terms of politics, I think, for all the reasons that Adrian put across.

There has been a quantum change over the past ten years. You have [Tony Blair](#)'s spokesman not that long ago saying, "We don't do God," to [Vanity Fair](#) in the sense that we don't want to discuss religion. Now suddenly religion is pushing out—not least, actually, thanks to people like Blair and, for that matter, [Gordon Brown](#) and France's [Nicolas Sarkozy](#). These are all people who have either written or talked quite a lot about religion.

But much more so, religion is entering a lot of the big public debates in Europe, partly because of the Islamic minority—perhaps, arguably, the biggest example of people of one faith moving to an area which is supposedly part of another faith in history, one of the biggest migrations in that sense, ever. And you take all the arguments about technology.

All those things are rippling across Europe. If you went to every single European country at the moment, you could look for culture wars of exactly the sort that, as Adrian said, Europeans used to be very dismissive of Americans about.

So in terms of politics, I think you are wrong. That's already under way in a fairly big way.

The difficult bit, which we should be straightforward about, is in terms of underlying belief. How many Europeans are actually changing? I think there is a mixed picture.

On the one hand, you're right, there is quite a lot of evidence to support that people view the secularization of Europe as continual.

Against that, I think at the margin, you see some signs of a comeback.

You see, for instance, pilgrimages or adult confirmations. If you look at adult confirmations into religions—people who are not going in as children, but are going in because they are choosing to when they are adults—those are actually on the rise, quite steeply. You see, for instance, quite a lot of things like Pentecostalism spreading. Pentecostalism in France is the fastest-growing religion, rather bizarrely.

But if you go to the East End of London, you see the mixture of immigrants, some from places like Africa, but also just homegrown religion.

Underneath it, I think, is the same Barack Obama phenomenon: suburban angst—not necessarily suburban in Obama's case, but upwardly-mobile angst—in terms of the meaning of life. I think parts of that actually still resound in Europe. If you want an example, there's a thing called the [Alpha course](#) in London, which 2 million people have been on, which is very much a religious answer.

For those perspectives, I would expect Europe to come back a bit. I don't see it coming back in the same sense or being anywhere nearly as big as America—Adrian can talk about the numbers in a second. Europe is still miles behind America.

So my broad answer is, on European politics, you are wrong; with European personal faith, it's more dodgy. That would be the honest answer.

ADRIAN WOOLDRIDGE: I just want to answer the second part of the question. It's a very good question.

It is certainly the case in the United States that we are seeing a problem with the religious right. The religious right has lost a lot of battles over gay marriage, over abortion, over stem-cell research. It's losing quite a bit of support. It feels embattled and, in some ways, it feels defeated. But I don't think we should equate problems of the religious right with the idea that religion is receding as a force in American politics.

For one thing, what happened in 2006 and again in 2008 was that the left, in general, decided that they shouldn't allow God to be monopolized by one party or monopolized by one small set of issues. What they said is, "We're just as happy to talk about God as you are." In fact, Barack Obama has talked as well as

and as eloquently about God as any Democratic leader has and any Republican leader has.

It's an interesting phenomenon. It's the first time, really, since Carter that the left has really been comfortable talking about God.

What you have also seen is people on the left saying that God in politics is not just about this narrow set of issues—abortion and gay marriage—it's about global justice; it's about justice at home; it's about bringing life to people through stem-cell research; it's about the environment.

So what you have seen is not the end of the influence of religion on public life, but I think a broadening, both politically, in the sense that the left is just as willing to talk about God as the right is willing to talk about it, and a broadening in terms of issues. There are not just two issues. There is a whole range of issues that Christian arguments are being brought to bear on.

So I see it, actually, as an advance, not a retreat.

It's quite interesting. If you look at the *Newsweek* cover this week, it's called "The End of Christian America." What is being argued there is essentially a case about the retreat of the religious right, as I was saying. But again, I would say, if you look at the underlying numbers that they produce, I think it's a recipe for more religion and more religious argument in politics, not less.

What you see in the latest numbers is a dramatic increase in the number of atheists in the country, from about 8 percent of Americans in 1990 to about 16 percent of Americans now.

But you also see, on the other side, a significant increase in the number of born-again people, the number of people who are conservative, the number of people who are Pentecostal, the number of people who take the word of God literally. In other words, you see polarization. Of course, what you get when you get polarization are more conflicts and more arguments about religion.

So in the country, instead of having this [Eisenhower](#)-style, general, warm-blanket religion, in which everybody accepts some very vague propositions, you have people who passionately care about God, who care enough to say, "I don't believe in him," or care enough to say, "I believe in everything that is said in the Bible." That is a recipe for conflict.

I think what you are going to see in Iowa, for example, with the Supreme Court of Iowa's ruling about gay marriage, is absolutely a huge battle over God in politics.

It's a very long answer to a very good and short question.

QUESTION: Can you imagine disestablishment happening in Britain, the British basically following the American model—after all, you have no constitution, so you don't have to rewrite anything—and becoming a real separation of church and state in Britain, which would better, I think, reflect the society in Britain today?

JOHN MICKLETHWAIT: The short answer is, yes, I think there is a move that way. The official title of your King of England or Queen of England is your "Defender of the Faith," because the King or the Queen, by definition, is head of the church, under the Church of England's rules. [Prince Charles](#) has already begun to talk about changing it to "Defender of Faiths," because he realizes that Catholics and Muslims, by some numbers, already outnumber the Anglicans. So that's changing.

I do think it's going that way. I was rather hoping you were going to use the word "disestablishmentarianism," which is the longest word in the English language.

ADRIAN WOOLDRIDGE: "Anti-disestablishmentarianism."

JOHN MICKLETHWAIT: But I think you're right. It is going that way. I would view that almost as likely, eventually.

QUESTION: Adrian mentioned that Islam is—I'm paraphrasing—about to have its reformation and its

enlightenment. Could you expand on that a little bit, about who the actors are, what the subject matter is, and what the timetable is?

ADRIAN WOOLDRIDGE: Ah, easy questions, all of them. The answer is, quite frankly, that I don't know.

Islam is a very, very dispersed faith. Of course, there are the Sunni and the Shia traditions, and very many other traditions as well. Also mosques are very independent from each other. There is much less central power than a lot of people think. I think it's hard to see.

Some of the most important actors in this process of enlightenment, of reformation, I think, will come from Europe and come from the United States. They will come from people who have lived in modern societies and have tried to reconcile their faith with living in those modern societies. They will be some of the leading people in reconciling Islam with secular law and democracy.

I think there's an interesting analogy here with what happened in this country with the Catholic Church. It was a Catholic who went to the [Second Vatican Council](#) and said, "You have to reconcile yourself to democracy," in 1960, and said, "You can't just reject the modern world. You need essentially to have the American solution to this, to recognize the importance of pluralism and recognize the importance of democracy."

I wouldn't be at all surprised if you would see a similar thing happening here, that people from Europe, people from the United States will go back to the heartland of Islam and suggest ways in which you can reconcile yourself with a pluralist culture.

JOHN MICKLETHWAIT: Just to add one thing, it's not going to be soon. If you talk about reform within Islam, there is a tiny, tiny portion that believes that women should be able to teach.

The main battle with Islam is between one group which wants to go all the way back to the beginning of what the Prophet actually said and another group that persists about what different people said shortly afterwards. It's still very much looking back, in that sense.

QUESTION: I have a similar expansion of that question to Adrian. What will be the likely catalyst for a predicted reformation of Islam? Can Islam's orthodox intolerance for the infidel, as prescribed by the Qur'an, be moderated? Can a [Mandela](#)-like figure arise to become a benevolent [ayatollah](#)?

ADRIAN WOOLDRIDGE: All I can say is, let's hope so. I do think, without getting into deep theology here, there is a problem here, which is going to make everything much more difficult.

If you look at the Bible, the Bible is a series of descriptions of events, interpretations of events. People saw Jesus, for example, and wrote about that experience.

The Qur'an is not that. The Qur'an is the literal word of God. This was God talking to Muhammad and revealing himself to Muhammad, and then people wrote down his exact words. You can't quibble with those words. This is the truth.

Also Muhammad, of course, was a law giver. Jesus was in many ways a rebel, was in many ways a dissident, a leader of a civil-disobedience movement. In the Qur'an you have this fusion of power with religion, which makes it much more difficult to pry these two things apart than it is in the Christian tradition.

So this notion of the Bible as being literally the word of God and this notion of Muhammad as being this law giver who gave laws which were God's laws, and there being no separation between secular law and God's law, is going to make this process very difficult.

I think that we should not impose our own categories of reformation and enlightenment. I'm sure that's a mistake. It will be a different process and a different set of constraints. But I think it's going to be more difficult within Islam than it was within Christianity.

QUESTION: I shall next month be in the district that I for many years represented in Congress, in South Bend, Indiana, to attend the commencement exercise at the [University of Notre Dame](#), where President Obama will deliver the major address. You may be aware that there has been great criticism of his coming on the part of right-to-lifers because of his position on abortion and stem-cell research.

My question is, to what extent has this controversy in American life been reported on in Great Britain? Or is it simply passed over? Since you specialize in this issue.

JOHN MICKLETHWAIT: At *The Economist*, we have reported it, but that may be because we are more global. But within the British press, it has begun to be picked up, I think. That's the answer. I have seen articles about it in the more nationalistic British press.

I think what's interesting is that it is beginning to have some echoes in Europe. The difference in Europe is that a lot of the issues which are culture wars are being taken on by very, very different people—for instance, on the right to life. One of the main champions of that in Italy is this very large, rotund atheist called [Giuliano Ferrara](#), who takes it on very much on the basis that he thinks, as a fetus, he would have been aborted, because his mother was ill and things like that.

The issues are there. The church is involved. But it's a different group of people bringing it forward.

Yes, you are right. Obama is beginning to get reported there.

I'll just say one very quick thing about Obama. Obama is going to be an interesting element, I think, within the transatlantic divide.

For Europeans, it was very easy to look at Bush and say straightforwardly, this is a demented right-wing Christian, who only went to Christianity because he was knee-deep in alcohol and he was dragged out of it. Bush, as a fire-and-brimstone version of religion, at least as depicted in large parts of Europe, is exactly the reason why many Europeans are very, very nervous about American-style religion.

Obama, by contrast, is a different story. This is somebody that Europeans immediately identify with. Yet he is also a religious person. How do you deal with that?

ADRIAN WOOLDRIDGE: I just want to add one thing to that. I think this debate at Notre Dame is another example of the political ineptitude of the religious right in this country and one of the reasons that they are going through the problems that they are, because they are politically inept, for two reasons.

One is that it suggests that they are entwined with one political party against another political party. Taking on a president, who is president of the country, after all, who won by six and seven points, and who is a very popular president at the moment, is not politically the most sensible thing to do.

Secondly, when [Condoleezza Rice](#), who is pro-choice, spoke at a Catholic college, [Boston College](#), there were no protests, despite her position on choice, despite the fact that she was, as it were, for the Iraq War, which the Catholic hierarchy was against, despite the fact that she was for [enhanced interrogation techniques](#), which the Catholic hierarchy has rightly criticized. So it does suggest a double standard, one set of standards for the Democrats and one set of standards for the Republicans. I think that's a very foolish thing to do.

So I think that what the hierarchy is doing over Notre Dame is foolish and is yet another one of the powerful reasons why they are losing the battle for hearts and minds over and over again.

QUESTION: I haven't heard you mention Russia in all of this. What is the Orthodox Church's influence on the [Kremlin](#)?

JOHN MICKLETHWAIT: They are very much back in there. You have a situation where Lenin tried to drive out religion. Now you have [Putin](#), who has a private chapel next to his office and wears a baptismal

cross around his neck. It's actually the [FSB](#), the descendant of the [KGB](#), which spent a lot of time hounding priests, rabbis, whatever, out of the Kremlin and now has its own church opposite and blessed by the Orthodox patriarch.

It's a very large part of it. There has been a lot of evidence about huge numbers of Orthodox websites, people re-embracing it.

On the bad side, there is a slightly spooky relationship between the Orthodox Church and Putin, which I think you are alluding to. That is a long and complicated story. But it strikes me that sometimes they have looked far too kindly, I think, on Putin.

After the initial fall of [perestroika](#), Orthodoxy began to increase rapidly. Now it's a little bit confused, not least because of the relationship between the Orthodox Church and the regime. But basically, Lenin would be weeping.

QUESTION: About a week ago, [Michiko Kakutani](#) took you to task in the *Times* saying that you were wrong in your book about American politics, and she felt that you were wrong in your projection about God being back now. I want to give you the opportunity to respond to her in this forum.

Second, there are a couple of issues that were raised here—one is the matter of religion in Russia and the other is environmentalism—where the point has been made that for a long time, probably 100 years, Marxism had among enlightened circles, so to speak, become a form of religion.

In this era, we see that environmentalism has taken that form. You can more or less look at the universe, as opposed to God. It's a form of worship of something that everybody can agree on and has become a religion of its own kind.

I would like you to comment on that.

ADRIAN WOOLDRIDGE: Let me comment a little bit on the *Times*. I think it's extraordinary that the *New York Times* should get its fiction reviewer to review a book about politics and foreign affairs. That's their choice, but they ought to at least get a fiction reviewer who knows a little bit about the subject.

First, when she took us to task about *The Right Nation*, in fact that book came out before the 2004 election, which, as far as I remember, George Bush won.

Secondly, in that book what we were arguing was that America is, in global terms—certainly compared with Europe—a much more conservative country than any European country.

That has not changed. We argue that whether it's the Republicans who win or the Democrats who win, the center of gravity of American politics is to the right of European politics.

I think we can see that with Obama. He is very much still constrained by sentiments in this country about taxation, about the role of government, about the nature of America's involvement in foreign affairs. It's a very different country from any European country.

Even when the fiction reviewer talked about these polls, she didn't have the gumption, I think, to read the polls, or at least to understand the polls, because what you see in these polls is precisely what I was saying before. You see an increase in polarization.

More people are willing to describe themselves as atheists, but also more people are describing themselves as conservative Christians, as born-again, as evangelical—an increase on both sides of the spectrum.

Again, that is a recipe for God being back in politics in all sorts of ways, partly because the number of people who are willing to have their politics dictated by God is going up and partly because, with polarization, you get arguments about God.

If the agnostics had won the war and we didn't care about God, he wouldn't be at the center of the

debate. You are not an atheist because you are indifferent to God. You are an atheist because you say, "God matters to me, and I'm against him," or, "I'm against people who believe in him."

The rise of atheism is precisely happening in this country because God is back at the center of political and ideological debates.

JOHN MICKLETHWAIT: I'll be more gentle. As you may have heard, we did write quite a lot about how religion is causing a few problems around the world, which she seems to have missed, and "wars of religion" seems to be a phrase she chose not to look at.

All this talk about "[creation care](#)"—it's interesting that actually the Catholic Church is also pushing it, too. There is quite a strong movement within Judaism as well. Actually, even within Islam, you are seeing quite a lot of stuff to do with the environment.

There is a natural alliance. One of the oddest things about the religious right here is that initially they fought this. It was generally a culture war. They saw the sorts of people who were environmentalists, who tended to be bearded, sandal-wearing types who were giving their allies hell about other things, and they reacted against it.

Now people like Rick Warren and that lot are very much behind the environment. I think there will be a natural fusion of those two things.

QUESTION: I wonder how much porousness you see, mixing and blending and blunting of religious. The primary example, I think, is Central American Pentecostals, who return to Catholicism and go back and forth.

I think of the adoption of liturgical seasons by the Protestant churches in the United States. I think of 25 percent of American Catholics who call themselves born-again and, with respect to the Shariah question, the fact that in the Middle East the old [Ottoman](#) solution of Shariah in private law still exists, including in Israel.

ADRIAN WOOLDRIDGE: I think one of the things that is happening is the "religion of me," in the sense that the individual chooses his religion. That's not just a choice between one tradition and another, but it's quite often a choice to mix and match, to take one bit out of one tradition, one bit out of another, to create the sort of religion that you actually want yourself, that suits you.

What these religious statistics demonstrate, I think, is not, significantly, a decline in religion. What they do demonstrate is a turning, a pluralism—a fifth of Catholics dropping out of the church, being replaced by other people. People are shifting from one tradition to another. They are choosing their religion rather than having it ascribed to them and imposed on them.

I think, again, that's a very American thing. The person I go back to is [Thomas Jefferson](#), who sat there and cut up his Bible, kept the bits he liked, threw the bits that he didn't like away. It's a very American approach to religion. I think we are seeing this globalizing at the moment. People are taking what they want and rejecting the rest.

Whether that's good or bad I don't know, but I think that's the world we are living in.

JOANNE MYERS: I would just like to say, as articulate and clever as they were in their presentation, the book reflects their eloquence, so I suggest that you buy it and read it.

Thank you very much.

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