

Current Christian Trends

Cultural Trends

Introduction

From the time of the birth of the church cultural trends have influenced the nature and direction of the Christian community around the world. Members of the Body of Christ live and operate within specific (but multiple) cultural milieux.

This means that expressions of the Christian message, the shape of the church, even many of its operational values, vary from one culture to another. What often results is a melange of Biblical teaching, wrapped in conventions and changed to suit individuals, with elements rusted on that have nothing to do with the Gospel, and can help or hinder proclamation and acceptance of the Message.

The Christian message (John 3:16; 12:32, Matthew 29:19) was meant for all of humanity, but it was born in a single culture, Judaism. While Jesus related impartially to all who came in contact with Him, He was perceived by many as a messenger to Jewish culture, the expected Messiah, or Christ (see God's promise to Abraham about the universality of His saving mission, cf Galatians 3:14).

The Apostle Paul, while anchoring his culture in Judaism (2 Corinthians 11:22; Philippians 3:4-6) was born in Tarsus, in modern Turkey (Acts 22:3). He was a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37-39; 22:24-30), who managed to bridge Jewish and Hellenistic (Greek) cultures and contextualise the message.

This led to divisions among the first Christian leaders (refer Galatians 2:11-16). It seems Peter was not as comfortable about crossing the cultural divide.

Paul's message at the Areopagus (Acts 17:16-34) showed that he was comfortable with preaching to non-Jews, even citing an Athenian poet.

Our cultures define us more than we realise. We need to be aware of what cultural changes that impact us mean in practice and know how to bridge divides effectively and communicate Christ cross-culturally.

What is "Culture"

In anthropological terms, there are many definitions of culture. In essence, culture is the way we are, how we live, what we share with other people, what makes "our" group/s distinct. (Many of us belong to sub-cultures.)

Culture includes:

- shared history
- perceptions of the nature of government and how society should function
- common values
- language
- dress

- cuisine
- entertainment
- art and architecture
- music
- sport
- the nature of family/kinship and other relationships
- economic systems and segmentation
- political differences
- approaches to leadership
- treatment/celebration/commemoration of the stages of life
- mannerisms
- religion
- rituals

How is “meaning” derived?

Describe what is unique about your ethnic/social culture.

The “Culture” of Contemporary Christianity

Discussion:

Your church has a “culture”. However, is it “culturally relevant”?

Describe a typical Sunday church service (from an *outsider’s* perspective).

- what practices are unique to such events?
 - o language
 - o program/ritual/process
 - o hierarchy/roles and relationships
 - o life application
- what has changed over recent years:
 - o dress
 - o format
 - o worship styles and content
 - o exposure of children to Christian teaching (roles of “Sunday Schools”)
 - o teaching styles
 - o art and architecture
 - o demographic composition
 - o women in ministry (or not)
 - o ethnic make-up of ministry
 - o acceptance and roles of minority members
 - o secularisation of leadership modelling

The idea of organised “church” turns many people off the Christian message because they (naturally) focus on external forms, ie what they *see*. The challenge to Christian leaders and congregations alike is to be “in touch” with the world at large and positioned to share the message of eternal life from the perspective of those who have “experienced” Jesus Christ in their lives. Christian “ministry” (or “service”) must reflect this reality.

Understanding “World View” in a Theological Context

Every culture has meanings against which everything else is assessed and judged.

“World view” is just that: peoples’ perceptions, or views, of the world, their “outlook” as to what is “real”. These perceptions involve systems of belief, values and behaviours, and impact how men and women interpret the world and interact with it. We can talk about an “Islamic world view” a “Marxist world view”, or an Australian Aboriginal world view.

When people cross from one world view to another, in a way that re-positions their thinking, we call this a “paradigm shift”. Turning from one life direction to another as a result of this compass change is called “conversion”.

The difference between a scientific approach to world view and the Gospel is that Biblical paradigm shifts only occur in the human heart as a result of revelation. Consider the implications of 1 Corinthians Chapter 2. Or the man healed by Jesus in John 9 “Once I was blind, but now I see”. Saving faith is not subjective; it requires divine intervention (cf Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus about being “born again” in John 3).

We need to understand the world view of those we meet, their “drivers”; otherwise we will never be able to build a bridge between us and them. This involves adapting the message, but not its truth. For example,

- Jesus teaching the early disciples about “fishing” for people
- Jesus speaking to the Samaritan woman about water and places of worship
- Matthew quoting the Old Testament to Jewish audiences
- Paul quoting pagan writers to the Athenians
- Paul describing adoption to the Romans
- Paul describing Roman military outfits to the Ephesian church
- the writer of Hebrews describing the Old Testament law, the priesthood and the offerings to struggling Jewish Christians

The Church Has Historically Undergone Continuous Cultural Change

Jewish versus Gentile Culture in the New Testament

In Jesus’ day, there was not a unified, monolithic “Jewish culture”. Josephus talks about three main schools of Judaism: the Pharisees, the Sadducees and the Essenes (each of which had theological distinctives). From other sources we know of as many as 20 additional variations. Jesus encountered ethnic Jews, Samaritans, Hellenic Jews and non-Jews, Roman administrators and soldiers, Arabs. On the Day of Pentecost:

“There were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs” (Acts 2:5, 9-11)

The earliest Christians had different cultures. Look at the book of Acts, which is our earliest internal record of the history of the church.

Followers of Jesus Christ were not called Christians until quite a bit down the road, in the context of the Hellenistic city of Antioch. (And that was pejorative.) In other words, it was not until a decade or so after the birth of the church that they were given the sobriquet “Christian”. Until then, the name that was used was a descriptive term: “the people of the Way” or “the Nazarenes.”

In Paul’s letters and the book of Acts an assumption is made that the audience is predominantly made up of Gentiles, some of whom started out as participants in Jewish culture. For example, when Paul visited Philippi, he went out on the Sabbath (the traditional day of rest and worship) to a place where people would be gathering for prayer (the small number of Jewish men in Philippi meant there was not a synagogue in the city).

The Philippians were meeting on the Jewish holy day; praying to the Jewish God, reading the Jewish Scriptures; and yet many of them were Gentiles (consider also the story of the Gentile Cornelius in Acts 10). These followers of Paul followed the rhythms of Jewish life; they were sometimes referred to as “God-fearers”. They were familiar with the Jewish calendar and were clearly deriving some sort of meaning out of observing these days. No wonder some observers took the Christian movement to be a sub-group of Judaism.

One of the greatest challenges facing Paul and others in leadership in the New Testament church was “Judaizers”, who insisted Gentile converts to Christianity accept Moses and become Jews ritually (including submitting to the rite of circumcision) as part of their conversion to Jesus Christ. Paul’s letter to the Galatian church was prompted by his indignation over this development.

Parts of the Gentile church today still use models from Judaism/Jerusalem church.

Relationships

Acts 2:44-46 is often quoted as the norm for Christian relationships, but these patterns (eg shared living) were generally not adopted by non-Jewish Christians. The latter were Christians in their own cultural settings.

Buildings

We have inherited the notion that God dwells in particular buildings, and sanctify those buildings. We use terms such as “the House of God”, or “the presence of God”, in inaccurate ways.

Rituals

Clothing worn by priests is redolent of the Old Testament priesthood.

Mediation

The notion that priests stand between people and God, to intercede, is widespread but is not Biblical teaching.

“Laity”

Differentiating between professional clergy and the rest of the Body of Christ is not Biblical. It ends up excluding most Christians from service.

It is important not to become too legalistic about applying one cultural more to another.

Church history is full of cultural clashes and changes, not all of them pretty (consider the Crusades, or the Inquisitions in Europe).

Many of the major splits in the Christian movement have resulted from rejection of the legalistic application of old cultures not supported by the Gospel.

There are some absolutes. In Acts 15 these centred on matters of morality and worship. In recent church history they have included differences such as plural marriages in indigenous settings, such as Papua New Guinea.

Major Cultural Changes in the New Millennium

Let’s look at the major cultural trends that are influencing the culture of the world-wide Body of Christ in the new millennium.

1. Demographic Trends

World population trend data

World historical and predicted populations (in millions)									
Year	1750	1800	1850	1900	1950	1999	2008	2050	2150
Global Population (Millions)	791	978	1262	1650	2521	5978	6707	8909	9746

Source: Dr. Todd Johnson, Director of the Center for the Study of Global Christianity at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

Lausanne World Pulse - <http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/766/08-2007?pg=all>

The average Christian family in 1907 can be represented by a European family with few children (although many European families were quite large at the time). Children went to Sunday School. Today, the average Christian family is much more likely to be African or Latin American, with more children.

Ministers emerging from Bible colleges in the West today are facing age gaps of sometimes 50 years with their congregants or colleagues, becoming mired in disempowering governance procedures, and not having their ideas taken seriously. In addition, fewer young people choose to enter the ministry as a profession (although there appears to be a spike in entrants to the Roman Catholic priesthood in 2009) –presenting another challenge to the church. Young people easily drift away from church.

"Culture" is the way we live. The Christian message is not meant to be confined to buildings, creeds, programs or denominations. The Gospel is relevant to every generation. Jesus is above culture; He transcends it. Instead of changing Him into our likeness, He transforms us into His own image, by the Holy Spirit He has given us. Culture *can* get in the way, but Christ came into human culture and sends us out into the world to share His eternal message and love, within and beyond our own cultural contexts.

2. Denominational Trends

Christianity is fragmented. Christians are now found in thirty-nine thousand denominations. These range in size from millions of members to less than one hundred members and are listed for each of the world's 238 countries in the [World Christian Database](#). By 2025, there will likely be fifty-five thousand denominations. The vast majority of these denominations will be Protestant and Independent, forming the core of global evangelicalism.

3. Attitudinal Trends

The church in the West is declining in a secular environment. In developing countries it is growing. Engagement with indigenous issues is patchy and sometimes comes across as tokenistic.

According to Rev Dr Roland Croucher, Director, John Mark Ministries, five key trends have significantly impacted the Western church: individualism, privatism, pluralism, relativism, anti-institutionalism.

Let's tease them out a little.

- individualism - I'm OK, cf people do not want to be "widgets" in church programs
- privatism - people less engaged with one another (also evident in politics and public affairs, civic clubs and community organizations, work-related organizations, social clubs - a generational issue; while new religious organizations have emerged in recent years, they have been less connected to the wider community than older denominations). The privatized, "feel-good" religion of recent church history is not only inadequate for the modern age, but a corruption of the church's faith. The faithful church is a culture that embodies the communal stories of Jesus, forming the character of individuals who are part of a community
- pluralism - there are many ways to God; through immigration and an expanded interest in diverse traditions, Australia has experienced an influx and expansion of religious traditions, a religiously diverse nation. Hindu and Buddhist temples, Sikh gurdwaras, and Muslim mosques sit alongside Christian churches and Jewish synagogues
- relativism - anything goes if it can be justified, as long as it feels good, and as long as it does not hurt anyone else
- anti-institutionalism - "don't tell me what to do"

Michael Moynagh (a British Anglican) says the church must realise it now operates in a different 'It Must Fit Me' world. Summaries of his observations:

* We are moving from an off-the-peg to a tailor-made world. Post-modern values include the rejection of hierarchy, suspicion of institutions and strong emphasis on personal choice: so a different approach is needed - one that is more sensitive to the differences between people. No longer does tradition, 'the way we do things around here', guide people's behaviour and outlook. We must reach out to people on their terms/turf, rather than expecting them to come to us on ours.

* Today, people want a challenging, fulfilling, interesting job: when work was drudgery people sought fulfilment somewhere else. The notion of 'parish' is based on geographical neighbourhood, but people now get together in common-interest groups (e.g. on the Internet). 'Church on Sundays' is being supplemented by church-when-ever-it's-convenient.

* 'Looking good' in a consumer culture boosts self-esteem more than the unconditional love of an invisible God. The growing groups of divorced, singles, people who cohabit feel alienated from churches. Today's songs are less 'theologically objective', more about individual themes; preaching is more life-related, less declamatory.

* Church planting is an effective strategy - provided the plants are designed for their target-audience, rather than clones of the sending church. 'Seeker services' (à la Willow Creek) attempt to be culturally relevant: but people are suspicious of organisations trying to sell them things.

* Today we can't avoid global issues: more power in fewer hands; the growing gap between rich and poor; people feeling they're simply pawns in a world where bottom-line economics rules (and today we would add: global nervousness about the dangers of terrorism).

* Alpha Courses are successful partly because they're organised by local churches to fit their particular circumstances. Also people eat together (parties are one of the icons of our age), and the emphasis is on building community (rather than its simply being a sales pitch). There's now a 'Y' course for those not ready for Alpha - people who don't know the difference between an epistle and an apostle!

* Young people live in an MTV world where images foster intuitive rather than rational modes of thought, impressions rather than logic, thinking in parallel rather than in sequence, pictures rather than paragraphs.

* Why is London's Kensington Temple church so popular? Partly because they get in touch with people new to London ('Would you like some Filippino food and meet other people from home...?').

* Prayer-visitation ministries are working in some British churches. A letter is sent to all the people in a street, with an offer for a couple from the church to come and pray, unless they say they would prefer not. One church in Rochester aims to visit every home in its area over three years. Moderns apparently don't mind no-strings-attached prayer! And city-wide prayer networks are growing...

* People have abandoned church, but not groups (there are half a million 'support' groups in the U.S.).

* Why does Vineyard-type worship attract so many? (It's 'laid-back').

* Mentoring/coaching is big these days: after-school clubs to help kids with their homework; courses on parenting, computer skills, stress etc.

But is this all compromising our biblical faith? Not at all: the apostles' strategy was to go to people and form the church around them. We must encourage radical criticism of the "it-must-fit-me" world.

See also <http://www.emergingchurch.info/reflection/michaelmoynagh/index.htm>

4. Gender and Morality Trends

Gender and morality issues have come to affect the church, often as much as the non-Christian community, including in the areas of:

- increased level of marriage collapse and divorce, including among Christians
- acceptance of homosexuality in the church, including the ministry
- moral relativism (ie "anything goes, as long as it feels OK")
- more radical types of feminism

The role of women in the church beyond reproduction and care taking has become more widespread, but not without major division about how to interpret the Scriptures on the matter.

Many of our cultural trends are far from God's will for married life and families.

5. Medical, Scientific and Ethical Trends

Many current issues do not have ready answers in Biblical text. Take, for example:

- human genetics
- genetic modification of food
- stem cell research
- contraception, family planning and assisted reproductive technology
- health policy
- global warming
- organ transplant technology, including animal to human
- cloning
- life support
- foetal research
- tackling the arms race

Scientism (the suggestion that the physical sciences are the only way to understand the world) and *positivism* (the belief that the scientific method replaces faith) have closed people's minds to the power and perception of the spiritual realm.

Post-modernism, the philosophical and cultural successor of modernism, has undermined the absolute certainty of science and other belief structures. It seeks to discredit religious faith as “truth”.

6. Economic Trends

The bulk of resources in Christian hands is located in the West. This is reflected in much of the current quantum of prosperity teaching that largely ignores the economic plight of most people in the world. The 2009 Global Economic Crisis has had major impacts on finances available to the church, including missions giving.

Someone has coined the word McChurch. McDonalds is well known for mass producing fast, bland food in a generic way, often attracting children because of give-aways (gimmicks) amid a plethora of colourful advertising. Customers landing in any city in the world where McDonalds has outlets can generally predict what the menu will look like, what the food and coffee will taste like, the physical lay-out and the broad price range.

There are many temptations in the West for churches to adopt the McDonalds franchise approach. Why have individuality when the shape and content of the burger can be prescribed and all people need to do is smile and purchase a fast food approach to faith (spiritual Happy Meals). Instant gratification; just don't hang around expecting depth or maturity.

7. Legal Trends

The Western church today is positioned in a society where practices that are inimical to the Gospel are entrenched in law. These include:

- official recognition of *de facto* marriages
- official recognition of homosexuality - and the impact this has on churches, eg employment laws
- official support (and funding) for abortion and euthanasia
- adoption by same-sex couples, undermining the role of the family
- court decisions against churches proclaiming the Gospel in a pluralistic society (eg anti-vilification laws)
- undermining of (and hostility towards) Christians values in education
- undermining of Christian counselling through privacy and disclosure rules
- differing positions on death penalty
- protection of human rights
- limitations on preaching the Gospel

Christians are increasingly being involved in social justice issues (however this often gets caught up in “right” versus “left” debates).

Some sections of the church promote “theonomy. This term describes views that see God revealed in the Bible as the sole source of human ethics. Christian Reconstructionism claims to reflect the Protestant view of the Old Testament law as espoused by many Reformers and Puritans. John Rushdoony (US, 1916-2001) was a Calvinist philosopher, historian, and theologian, widely credited as the father of Christian Reconstructionism and an inspiration for the Christian homeschool movement. His writings have exerted considerable influence on the Christian right.

8. Political Trends

The conversion of Constantine in 312 marked a radical change in the State's perception of Christianity. In 313 he issued the "Edict of Milan," which commanded official toleration of Christianity and other religions. He ordered that Sunday be granted the same legal rights as pagan feasts and that feasts in memory of Christian martyrs be recognized. Constantine's program was one of toleration and he continued to support both Christianity and paganism.

In 314, the cross appeared on Constantine's coins, but so did the figures of Sol Invictus and Mars Conervator. He raised his children as Christians and employed Christian clergy as advisors, but retained the title pontifex maximus, the chief priest of the state cult, until his death. In 380 Emperor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the empire.

Discussion: To what extent should the church be involved in politics today?

9. Dealing with Collocated Belief Systems

Inter-Faith Dialogue

Multiculturalism has led to secular governments having to deal with substantial religious differences. Sometimes such differences lead to clashes. While official policies about social harmonisation and security in the West are often articulated on relevant government websites, community experiences, views and practice are not as easily distilled, leading to disconnects in available information and analysis. The impact of policies and community programs around inter-faith dialogue (and related cross-cultural understanding) is not fully understood.

World views change. Commerce has impacted cultural diversity enormously.

Future Trend Challenges

- remaining "on message" in the face on ongoing change
- increasing globalization
- the Internet and beyond (eg in terms of mission, Christian education, pastoral care, and fellowship)
- changing demographics
- moral dilemmas inherent in new technologies
- the rising popularity of spirituality
- ecclesial reconfiguration
- new theological rethinking (while remaining true to the context of Scripture)
- fiscal challenges
- mission-driven ministries
- Christians and Christian communities need to remain dynamic, relevant and flourishing

"I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). 6.7 billion people (on current count) to be reached with the Gospel. On one level, culture can be a barrier OR a vehicle to the message. The Holy Spirit is able to break through and reach people in every culture, to bring reconciliation with God and salvation to the human race. Let's work with Him, to bring Jesus' vision one step closer.

Sharing the Good News Cross-Culturally

By Pastor Allan Davis

Those who are sharing the Gospel today must keep sending it to new addresses. The recipients are constantly changing their location and no one is forwarding the mail.

It is important that Christians understand how culture works if they are to successfully present the Gospel in a pluralistic society. This article explores the issue in some depth. The reader is encouraged to consider carefully how the elements are inter-woven, in order to communicate Christ cross-culturally (and keep up with changes in culture in order to remain relevant and appealing).

A case study

The film, “The Gods Must Be Crazy” (written and directed by South African Jamie Uys) was a hit movie in the 1980s. It told the story of a Kalahari Bushman named Xixo, whose tribe had no prior contact with the outside world. One day the pilot of a small plane passing overhead discarded a Coca Cola bottle, which landed near Xixo’s family. At first the bottle, perceived as a gift from the gods, was gratefully received and put to innovative uses in daily village life. Eventually, competition over control and ownership (a new concept in the community) of the bottle caused division and Xixo decided that the only remedy was to take the “thing” to the edge of the world and return it to the gods. (The elders concluded the gods must have been crazy to bestow this gift on the clan in the first place.)

During his journey Xixo met members of Western civilization for the first time. One was a scientist, another a teacher, and others still members of a militant group fleeing after an aborted coup attempt in a neighbouring country. As the story unfolded and the characters collided in unusual circumstances, the film presented a fascinating and funny interpretation of differences in cultures. Xixo eventually reached an escarpment where the countryside below was obscured by a solid layer of low-lying clouds. He believed this was the edge of the world and threw the bottle over the side before returning home to his relieved family.

I first saw “The Gods Must Be Crazy” on a British Airways flight from London to New York. It was the only time I ever observed rows of suited British businessmen laughing uproariously at an in-flight movie. The film has a powerful sub-plot and continues to have appeal to audiences around the world. It was recently re-released in DVD format and had high sales. One reason for its popularity is that it demonstrates graphically how cultural assumptions and misunderstandings between people can lead to major differences, with consequences that can be either amusing or disastrous for those involved.

Christians who desire to be relevant and touch the world for Christ need to understand the role of culture in informing what people believe, how they build and live out their existence and how they relate to one another.

What is culture?

Culture is the way we think, structure society, understand the world around us, interpret events, establish relationships, determine mores (norms for behaviour), provide and use shelter and act (eg dance, eat, dress, marry, work). Culture is not isolated. It is shared with other people. Culture unifies individuals through common experiences. People generally learn culture by growing up in a society, through language, watching and imitating others. This is known as “enculturation”.

Every society has a culture, reflected in its art, literature, music, beliefs, customs, institutions, inventions, language, technology, and values. “Popular” culture includes arts and entertainment expressed via such media as television, radio, sound recordings, advertising, sports, hobbies, fads, and fashions. Culture is also demonstrated symbiologically, by the use of religious symbols, national emblems, war stories, slogans and flags.

Multiculturalism (as a policy of government) recognizes that distinct cultures can be collocated. It encourages diversity where this is the case. Multiculturalism works best in a society with different ethnic groups and a political system that promotes freedom of expression and awareness of differences. Ethnic groups bring variety and richness by introducing exogenous (external) ideas and customs. However, ethnic groups that keep their values and traditions can also threaten national unity. Many people feel confused and uneasy when they deal with people of “other” cultures.

“Ethnocentrism” is an attitude that one's culture is central, that it is the best. It contributes to nationalistic militarism (remember the stories of “ethnic cleansing in the Balkans in the early 1990s). The opposite view is “cultural relativism”, which contends that no culture should be judged by the standards of others. This approach can be carried to extremes, such as promoting universal morality (or amorality) and rules that allow infanticide, genocide, cannibalism and torture.

Cultural can be local or national. Australian culture has been influenced by: the original inhabitants (as reflected in many place names); the settlement experience (convicts and free settlers); shared ancestries; common experiences in war and sport; national values (egalitarianism, “fairness”, mateship); religious values (particularly our “Judeo-Christian heritage”); and economic views.

Culture and religious expression

Religion has been a supreme source of inspiration in the arts. Some of the most beautiful buildings in the world are houses of worship. A lot of the greatest music is religious. Religious stories have provided countless subjects for paintings, sculptures, literature, dance, and films. The Christian music industry is an under-reported multi-billion dollar sector in every major Western economy.

Many people follow specific religions because of heritage, tribe, or family. Judaism and Christianity have been major influences in the formation of Western culture. The cultures of Asia have been shaped by Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Shintoism, and Daoism. Most extant religions have been influenced by older ones.

Rituals commemorate historical events. The Jewish Passover ritual recalls the meal the Israelites ate before their departure from slavery in Egypt. Christian celebrations of Communion (an echo of the Passover) are related to the last meal that Jesus shared with His disciples before His death. Hindu rituals reflect ancient stories. Rituals mark important life events, such as ceremonies making sacred events out of birth, marriage and death. Rites of passage (from one stage of life to another, such as puberty) serve to transition young people into the religion and society. In Judaism, circumcision is performed on baby boys. Some Christians “baptize” babies soon after birth; others baptize only teenagers or adults. Traditional Aboriginal circumcision signalled passage to manhood.

Many cultures are “closed”, not allowing outsiders into the group, even through marriage, and ostracizing those who change their religious affiliation - unless the whole group does so. (The notion of “people movements”, entire groups coming to Christ, has existed since the days of the early church).

Why people fear cultural change

Culture is never static. It is dynamic and constantly changing. Some people fear and oppose change. One effect of change can be the substitution of a culture for another (such as using the vernacular instead of Latin in Roman Catholic liturgy); loss of culture (eg young Catholics not using the rosary, or young Muslims not praying 5 times a day), incremental culture (additions to traditional forms) through television, food franchises and the Internet and fusion of new cultures on what already exists, and consequent loss of value systems, through the atrophy of language or oral traditions. Let me give an example. Roman Catholic churches in Australia were recently reproved for using gluten-free bread in masses (introduced to serve people with gluten intolerance), because the change was considered by the Vatican to be inconsistent with long-held protocols about trans-substantiation. The changes had nothing to do with Biblical truths, but those who feared change moved against it with ecclesiastical authority.

We need to understand the nature of culture if we are to appreciate the nuances of religious systems and how to reach people with the Gospel. This includes the historical role of the caste system in Hinduism; the influence of the “land” in defining Judaism; Islam as a total culture for those within its fold; the role of “the Dreaming” in Aboriginal identity and self-determination; the influence of Irish Catholicism in the Australian Labor Party and the impact of our economic and business priorities on editorial value in the print and electronic media.

How far are we prepared to tolerate pluralism? People I meet tell me they are tolerant but would object to a mosque with a 20 metre minaret being built in their street. Others have issues working with Sikhs' wearing turbans in government departments; being surrounded by people speaking another language; being served by Muslim women wearing the *hijab*, and dealing with people of other faiths who take work breaks for prayer. Celebration of multiculturalism and positive discrimination in favour of non-Christian traditions, at a government level has had the effect of making evangelicalism appear grossly intolerant. It is now considered offensive to criticize other faiths, while the radio and print media have reduced scorn of Christianity to an art form.

Christianity is not Western

I once sat on a flight between Riyadh (Saudi Arabia) and Dubai (United Arab Emirates) discussing Christianity and Islam with a Muslim cleric. He spoke about Christians and the excess of Western culture in the same breath, as though they were the same thing. He was surprised when I told him Anglo-Saxon Christians are a minority group in the world-wide Christian movement and that people he observed to be living immoral lives in the West were not true believers. I said it not to assuage his concerns, but because it is true.

Christianity is not quintessentially Western. It is a faith system that had its genesis in Judaism and oriental values, language and values. Moreover, in a sense, it is not human, because it is predicated on divine revelation. But the moment we act as though “our” culture is the right one to be a vehicle for saving faith and genuine worship we alienate the rest of the world. The same thing happens when churches take sides in political debates and alienate half the population on matters that are not even central to the Gospel (God does not vote Labor, Liberal, Democrat, Republican, or even Christian Democrat).

There is nothing efficacious about Western culture. As Christians we cannot be captive to the human environment that produced us. After all, we are born “from above” (John 3:3-8). God is our heavenly Father and His desire is to make us like His Son. The Holy Spirit in us, transforming our minds, hearts and attitudes makes us more and more like Jesus, not our cultural icons.

Improving receptivity and responsiveness

In Biblical Christianity, culture is broken down. There can be no distinction between Jews and Greeks (Galatians 3:26-28), Americans and Sudanese, Germans and Chinese. We belong to the family of God. The Bible describes a multiplicity of languages, tribes, kinships and forms of worship serving Jesus Christ in His Kingdom. These differences speak to the diversity of the Christian community, differences that make us one, not opponents or exclusive sects. If we cannot embrace a Christian from another culture because they look, act, smell, dress and sing differently, we are not acting in the spirit of Christ.

How can a Biblical Christian operate in a pluralistic world? The answer is simple. The same way the early church worked it out. The geo-political environment that obtained in the first century was characterised by pantheons of gods, hostile political systems and innumerable vested interests. Our world is not very different. In every generation, the Holy Spirit enables the people of God to transcend cultural differences and proclaim that Christ died for all people, so that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life.

The Problem of Syncretism - Being Just Like Everyone Else

By Pastor Allan Davis

In an attempt to remain relevant and attractive in a changing world, many Christians are apt to reflect the patterns and modalities of society at large. Playing “follow-the-leader” this way may be a logical soft option, but only conforming to the image of Christ will empower us to impact our generation. Christians must be contemporary as, indeed, Jesus was, but he was not “just like everyone else”. The life of God, multiplied exponentially by the Spirit living within gave him (and will give us) the burst of power we need to make a difference.

Which God?

The mass over, the priest’s words were echoing around the niches and chapels built into the sides of San Francisco Cathedral in La Paz as the Aymara family next to me stood up and prepared to leave. Pulling his “chullo” down over his ears, to keep the cold off his head, Don Juan (not his real name) told me he was going home. I asked what the mass meant to him. He told me he had been coming to the church every week since he was a boy. Did he believe in prayer, I asked. He told me that he did, but that he didn’t understand some of the things that happened in the service. He was mainly concerned about keeping his family going. Religion was helpful, but he confided that it did not always meet his needs. When prayer failed the shaman in his village would say incantations over him, maybe sacrifice a chicken, so that the spirits would heed the sight of blood and give him the favour he needed. I asked him how he managed to balance two competing faiths. He told me they were one and the same, in his opinion. “They are all about God.” In his mind, shamanism and Christianity functioned as one paradigm. He saw no conflict, because that is how he had been brought up. He told me the spirit world of his village predated the arrival of the Spaniards and their gilt images five hundred years previously. It had kept his ancestors together and given them hope and power in times of need.

What exactly is Syncretism?

The option of mixing faith systems and observing them as one is called “syncretism”. It is a framework, a process by which elements of a single set of world views are harmonized and assimilated into another, resulting in a change in the nature of both of them and the emergence of a new system, a revised set of beliefs and rules. It is a union of theologies. The synthesized form is a new product, although separate segments retain some identifiable components, such as a high altar, or a witchdoctor’s tools of trade. I have seen syncretism at work in some African churches, where animism and other traditional religions have been wedded to the Christian message. I have observed it in Andean villages in Peru, where indigenous religions are often mapped to Christianity, giving local deities new Christian identities, so that prayers are said in old ways to new names, such as the Virgin Mary or the Apostle Peter. When our Prime Minister recently attended a Christian church service to celebrate the opening of a new parliament, nodding his assent to the creed recited, and then went to help officiate at a Hindu ceremony, he was being syncretistic. Biblical Christianity and this type of accommodation simply do not mix (2 Corinthians 6:15-16).

Syncretism is usually associated with attempts by belief systems to be relevant, less confrontational, controversial and culturally alienated by mixing and matching with local ones. It removes absolutes and works on the assumption that any belief can be adopted, melded, re-shaped, discarded, denied or repudiated, depending on whether it suits the new operating environment. Syncretism involves representation of a limited and distorted part of the underlying message, so that it fits the values and traditions of outsiders, or is rendered acceptable to them. And it is all around us.

I have been to India a number of times. Hinduism is syncretistic. I recently read a fictionalised account of an Indian boy who met a Christian missionary who explained the Gospel and led him to accept Jesus Christ as his Saviour. The boy then went home and thanked Krishna for helping him find Jesus as his new god. In spite of its claim to be universally monotheistic, Islam is also practiced alongside traditional faiths in many countries. In Indonesia, millions of Muslims tolerate traditional Javanese folk religion, parallel to the mosque.

In the West, syncretism is widespread. In essence, it means “living like everyone else”, adopting their world views and mixing them with faith, so that the new soup is palatable to everyone and no one is offended by “fundamentalist” beliefs. It involves downplaying key elements of the Gospel that are considered “old fashioned” or “not cool”, so as to be more acceptable, less eccentric. Young people growing up in church have a fear - almost a phobia - about distinctiveness, of being rejected because they are different. They don't want to be associated with the image of the small, traditional, suburban church with a hall, a manse and an aging membership. The church of the future must employ culturally sensitive evangelism, without being seduced to conform. Otherwise, the natural process of syncretism will increasingly lead to the acceptance and validation of extra-Biblical offshoots such as Christian feminism, Christian gay groups, atheistic evolution in Christian schools, removing Christ from Christmas celebrations and a host of similar developments in respectable ecclesial circles.

So, what's wrong with syncretism?

Syncretism demands that worship of God be shared with competing deities. This occurred constantly in the Old Testament, as the values of the Canaanites, Babylonians, Assyrians and others permeated ancient Israel. On one occasion, the Prophet Elijah challenged the nation to stop dithering between two opinions and decide whether Jehovah or Baal was the deity worth following (1 Kings 18:21). That should have been a no-brainer, but Baal and other gods of the Canaanites had great influence. I have visited ancient Canaanite settlements in Lebanon and seen the influence of the deities that sought to displace Jehovah in the life of his people.

Church history is filled with the struggle against syncretism from political, social, religious and economic sources. In New Testament times, Greek, Roman and so-called “mystery religions” sought to undermine the Christian community through syncretism. In subsequent centuries (particularly after Christianity became the official religion of the state following the conversion of Constantine in 312 AD) it was easier to undermine Christian faith by mandating “toleration” rather than persecuting Christians, which only led to martyrs.

One crisis that faced the early church was acceptance of non-Jewish Christian converts. Many Jewish believers acted as though their faith was an extension of their national history and identity. When God began to save Gentiles many of them were horrified. Only a major conference in Jerusalem, under the leadership of wise men of God, was able to deal with the issue (Acts 15, Galatians 2). Now we know the people of God are not identified by ethnicity, gender or social status, but their relationship to God and to one another through Christ (Galatians 3:28).

Pressures exist on all sides today, as secular humanism strives to be the common ground for solving problems. Pluralism is proclaimed as the ground for melting all religions into a porridge of new religious ideas. The values of this world view strive for a place in the church's response to both the demands for conformity and the cries for liberation confronting it.

Some people argue (or act on the basis that) that the best way to reach people is to live in their space and be like them. This involves "contextualising" the Gospel. I once listened in horror as a visiting speaker in a church I attended told the congregation it was OK to break the law if imprisonment could be used by God to reach non-Christian prisoners. Where do we draw the line? When God is just like everyone else, the whole reason for being a Christian is up for grabs.

Syncretism of the Christian gospel occurs when basic elements of the Bible are replaced by religious elements from other faiths. It often results from a quest to make the Gospel acceptable, less alien, or embodied in a different cultural context. In many societies, including in the West, standing up for the absolutes of Christian revelation is a criminal offence. It is safer to look for common ground and inter-faith dialogue than run the risk of being labelled a "crank".

The Bible teaches that truth comes by revelation, through the agency of the Holy Spirit. There are times when elements of traditional religion foreshadow aspects of the Gospel and can be a way of opening up communities to evangelism. This was the case in Athens (read Acts Chapter 17) and many Asian societies where missionaries eventually made inroads when they learned enough about local religions to show the people that Christ was the One they were looking for and encouraged them to abandon half-truths for the real thing.

Syncretism, on the other hand, involves adding other beliefs to Christian doctrine, with the intention of supplementing the salvation provided by Jesus - as if it were somehow incomplete. Syncretism springs from lack of faith in Christ's saving power. At issue are not methods of praying, clothing worn, songs that are sung, styles, forms and expressions that are used (let's celebrate Jesus with the best music available), languages that are spoken, or even objects used in worship, but the heart. Syncretism is a tool of Satan to water down revelation and separate God from his people by the accretion of symbols, liturgies, art forms and theologies that do not "offend". It involves a loss of moral and spiritual authority.

Squeezed, but into whose mould?

Six billion people simply do not squeeze into fixed moulds. They are influenced by a host of cultural realities that include gender, education, ethnic space, occupation, family mores, taboos and semiotic frameworks. The global cultural economy is a complex network, a sophisticated multi-dimensional jigsaw. Culture is not unified.

It is ideological, political and economic. If we are to be relevant Christians in a global village we have to recognize local dynamics, histories, subcultures, prejudices and imagined communities and try not to compartmentalize people or insist on a single “fix” on human dynamics that cannot be constrained by a single “snapshot”. Our message must be addressed to population fluidity, disjunctiveness and rapid global transformation. As Christians, being relevant in the modern world involves learning how to be simple, uncomplicated and transparent as we relate to the Eternal and His creation. It means being open to people but sticking to Truth. That is a hard juggle. If the balls fall, the message is compromised and people look elsewhere.

The First Commandment requires that we love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength (Matthew 22:37-38). Jesus is the only one through whom we can be saved (Acts 4:12). He said, “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life; no one can come to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). These are categorical statements. The Bible says that the “natural mind” of the non-Christian cannot understand the things of the Spirit, but rejects them. They are “foolish” to him (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). When we strive to be like others, and reify their values in our lives, as our guiding principles and aspirations, we are not consciously bowing to false idols or making them our “gods”, but yielding in more subtle ways.

Our efforts not to be squeezed into everyone else’s mould (Romans 12:1-2) must not be confused with religious pride and self-effort, making us so out of step that our walk is disqualified and people are turned off by our lives. (People should be drawn to the message because of our lives, not driven away from it.) My father used to tell the story of a man who went to a passing-out parade to watch his son’s graduating class. As he sat in the stands, he looked hard to make out his son. Finally he saw him. “Look”, he cried out, “There is my son. He is the only one marching in time”. No doubt his listeners realized the poor man’s son was the only one marching out of step. Instead of surveying the whole, he focused on one small aspect and missed the obvious.

God is building a contemporary church, one that overflows with his abounding life, presence and purpose, in step with the Holy Spirit. He has come to show us how to live, and how to make the reality of Christ a compelling force in our generation, tearing down false images, rather than the other way around. Sections of the modern church are working hard to reinvent techniques of praise and worship, to make it more “real”, more tangible, but fully birthed of God. This is great news. Lamentably, some traditional elements of the Body of Christ respond with criticism, rather than rejoicing.

Holding to the simplicity of Christ

In an effort not to be like the world around us, it is important that we not become so different as to turn them off. Let me give an example. I once took a flight from Perth to Melbourne, surrounded by several dozen men and women who belonged to an exclusive Christian denomination and were on their way to a conference. The women wore scarves on their heads. The men were well-dressed and spoke conservative English (not unlike the vernacular used in the version of the Bible authorised by King James in 1611). One of their number, a middle-aged farmer who sat beside me told me the group refused to have formal contact with other Christian denominations, because they considered them a” “too worldly”.

The longer we talked the more convinced I became that the focus of this group was not holiness but exclusivity. What was important, in their world view, was not the Body of Christ but externalities such as dress styles, forms of music and social intercourse. Their response to syncretism was to cut themselves off. In so doing, they lived as though they were the only ones left in God's Family. Jesus lived among us and we were attracted to him because the presence of the Spirit in Him created and celebrated overflowing life, not because he established an exclusive society. It is important that we not tie ourselves to legalistic bandwagons that focus on stereotypes about form, rather than substance. We are not different for the sake of being different, but as a consequence of a new inner life, living by new values, appetites and priorities. The normative family of God is above culture, nation, language or familial ties.

The Apostle Paul encouraged Christians in the first church at Corinth not to lose sight of their pure and simple devotion to Christ, not to add anything to it, but hold firm to the simplicity of the Christian message (2 Corinthians 11:3). We can add nothing to what Jesus has already done for us, but need to know what we believe and be committed to it, holding to the absolutes of Biblical revelation, living by our faith. God doesn't have to be so different as to be 'weird'.

People of influence

How can we be people of influence, relevant, dynamic, attractive, persuasive and still be able to proclaim the message, with integrity to the truth. How do we avoid syncretism in our church, family and personal lives?

None of us is free from the innate desire to be accepted by others and to be like the world around us. The human heart reaches out to gods in all forms. Dealing effectively with the temptation to compromise on many levels is an essential part of Christian growth and maturity. We cannot long mask the subtle attachments we feel to "our" world, and the hunger to be part of what is going on.

God calls us to be different, to escape the downward drag and be re-made in the image of His Son. The Bible says that true liberty comes from the Lordship of the Holy Spirit, as He makes us less like others and more like Jesus (2 Corinthians 3:17-18). Only He can give us power to be different. Regardless of culture or personal background, believers don't have to live by the standards and patterns of everyone else, because they are "born of God" and their Biblical praxis is predicated on the person and presence of His Son. Let's allow Him to bring this about in a transforming way.

Jesus in China: Christianity's Rapid Rise

Evan Osnos | Tribune correspondent , *June 22, 2008*

The rise of Christianity is reshaping the officially atheist nation, its politics and the way many Chinese view the world. The Tribune's Evan Osnos reports from Beijing and the countryside.

Rev. Jin Mingri peered out from the pulpit and delivered an unusual appeal: "Please leave," the 39-year-old pastor commanded his followers, who were packed, standing-room-only on a Sunday afternoon, into a converted office space in China's capital. "We don't have enough seats for the others who want to come, so, please, only stay for one service a day."

A choir in hot-pink robes stood to his left, beside a guitarist and a drum set bristling with cymbals. Children in a playroom beside the sanctuary punctuated the service with squeals and tantrums. It was a busy day at a church that, on paper, does not exist.

Christianity – repressed, marginalized and, in many cases, illegal in China for more than half a century – is sweeping the country, overflowing churches and posing a sensitive challenge to the officially atheist Communist Party.

By some estimates Christian churches, most of them underground, now have roughly 70 million members, as many as the party itself. A growing number of those Christians are in fact party members.

Christianity is thriving in part because it offers a moral framework to citizens adrift in an age of Wild West capitalism that has not only exacted a heavy toll in corruption and pollution but also harmed the global image of products "Made in China."

Some Chinese Christians argue that their faith is an unexpected boon for the Communist Party, because it shores up the economic foundation that is central to sustaining party rule.

"With economic development, morality and ethics in China are degenerating quickly," prayer leader Zhang Wei told the crowd at Jin's church as worshipers bowed their heads. "Holy Father, please save the Chinese people's soul."

At the same time, Christianity is driving citizens to be more politically assertive, emboldening them to push for greater freedoms and testing the party's willingness to adapt. For decades, most of China's Christians worshiped in underground churches—known as "house churches"—that avoided attention for fear of arrest on various charges such as "disturbing public order."

But in a sign of Christianity's growing prominence, in scores of interviews for a joint project of the Tribune and PBS' FRONTLINE/World, clerical leaders and worshipers from coastal boomtowns to inland villages publicly detailed their religious lives for the first time.

They repeat a seemingly shared belief that the time has come to proclaim their place in Chinese society as the world focuses on China and its hosting of the 2008 Olympics, set to begin in August.

"We have nothing to hide," said Jin, a former Communist Party member who broke away from the state church last year to found his Zion Church.

Jin embodies a historic change: After centuries of foreign efforts to implant Christianity in China, today's Christian ascension is led not by missionaries but by evangelical citizens at home. Where Christianity once was confined largely to poor villages, it is now spreading into urban power centers with often tacit approval from the regime.

It reaches into the most influential corners of Chinese life: Intellectuals disillusioned by the 1989 crackdown at Tiananmen Square are placing their loyalty in faith, not politics; tycoons fed up with corruption are seeking an ethical code; and Communist Party members are daring to argue that their faith does not put them at odds with the government.

The boundaries of what is legal and what is not are constantly shifting. A new church or Sunday school, for instance, might be permissible one day and taboo the next, because local officials have broad latitude to interpret laws on religious gatherings.

Overall, though, the government is permitting churches to be more open and active than ever before, signaling a new tolerance of faith in public life. President [Hu Jintao](#) even held an unprecedented Politburo "study session" on religion last year, in which he told China's 25 most powerful leaders that "the knowledge and strength of religious people must be mustered to build a prosperous society."

This rise, driven by evangelical Protestants, reflects a wider spiritual awakening in China. As communism fades into today's free-market reality, many Chinese describe a "crisis of faith" and seek solace everywhere from mystical Taoist sects to Bahai temples and Christian megachurches.

Today the government counts 21 million Catholics and Protestants—a 50 percent increase in less than 10 years—though the underground population is far larger. The World Christian Database's estimate of 70 million Christians amounts to a 5 percent share of the population, second only to Buddhism.

At a time when Christianity in Western Europe is dwindling, China's believers are redrawing the world's religious map with a growing community already exceeding all the Christians in Italy. And increasing Christian clout in China has the potential to alter relations with the United States and other nations.

But much about the future of faith in China is uncertain, shaped most vividly in bold new evangelical churches such as Zion, where a soft-spoken preacher and his fervent flock do not yet know just how far the Communist Party is prepared to let them grow.

April 26, 2009

Religious Revival

By **HANNA ROSIN** (Author of “God’s Harvard: A Christian College on a Mission to Save America.”)

GOD IS BACK

How the Global Revival of Faith Is Changing the World

By John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge

405 pp. The Penguin Press. \$27.95

Not all that long ago, the great minds of Europe predicted a future with little or no religion. Science would make us highly sceptical 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.

All 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 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 check their BlackBerrys before going 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 magazines 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.