



Choosing God

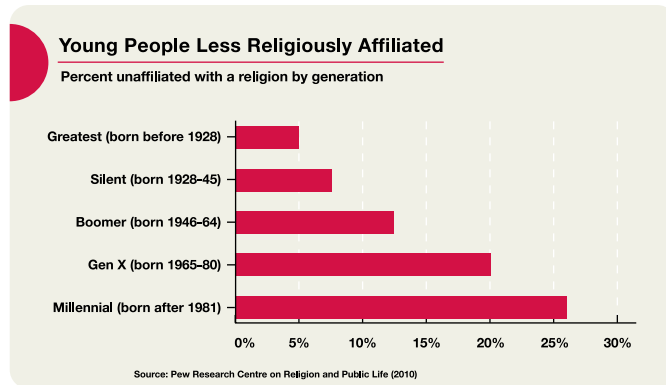
The increasing fragmentation of society and looser connection between religion and the state in some regions sees more of us turning to God.

There has always been a desire to counterbalance choice and individual responsibility with a sense of moral certainty. As John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge point out in their book, *God is Back*: 'In a world of ever greater competition, displacement and opportunity, faith has become a useful attribute for prosperous people. But religion also fulfils a role lower down in society providing support for those who have lost out in global capitalism or feel bewildered by it.' This may well explain why, across the globe, belief in God is on the increase.

Christianity and Islam are the two global religions and in the 20th century Islam has done much better than Christianity in the popularity stakes. The Muslim population has grown from 200 million in 1900 to 1.5 billion today. In comparison, Christianity has declined in the centre (there are more Catholics in the Philippines than there are in Italy) but extended into new geographies, particularly South America. Islam on the other hand is resurgent across the Arab world and some Christian scholars predict that it will overtake Christianity as the world's biggest religion by 2050. Muslim countries are also profoundly Muslim in a way that Christian countries are not – according to Pews Global Attitudes Survey, 99% of Indonesians and 98% of Egyptians say religion plays an important role in their daily lives. That is not to say that the global spread of American-style Evangelical Christianity has failed to have impact.

Indeed, Pentecostal denominations, including charismatics, are the world's fastest-growing religious movements, now comprising one-quarter of the world's Christian population compared with just 6% thirty years ago. According to the World Christian Encyclopedia, about 17 million Africans described themselves as born-again Christians in 1970. Today the figure has soared to more than 400 million, or over one-third of Africa's population. Even in China, a state historically tied to secularism, religion plays an important role, with 31% of the population regarding it as 'very' or 'somewhat' important in their lives and only 11% stating that it is not at all important. Europe alone is wrapped in secularism, with only 21% of Europeans saying religion is very important to them, and this number would be even lower if the migrant population was taken out of the equation – in London 44% of the people going to church are African or Afro-Caribbean.

There are numerous reasons for the rise in spiritual belief. In a world where millions are separated from their homes and find themselves in unfamiliar environments with very different cultural norms, religion offers a sense of security, continuity and purpose. Certainly it provides an anchor for the millions of migrants who are leaving their traditional villages for the new mega-cities. Large numbers of young men, who come to the towns looking for work, have few other traditional structures to keep



them under control. This is also true for the Muslim population in Europe, which looks set to continue its growth trajectory given the challenges at home and the opportunities in the West. However, the situation is problematic because, although the chances of work in their country of origin may well be limited, many Muslims coming from Europe's southern borders find life difficult: not only are they shocked by the liberalism they find in the European capitals but also they can feel marginalised and isolated as many of them have to pick up the low-skilled or short-term jobs that Europeans don't want any more. Religion provides an alternative to the difficulties they are faced with and offers hope for the future.

From a practical perspective religion can act as an informal club. Signs of religious commitment are generally speaking hard to fake and so provide a reliable signal to others; this produces trust and so makes business easier to transact. This is having an impact in surprising places. In a recent paper, Zhao Xiao, Professor of International Business Economics at Beijing University, argues that China's economy is

benefiting from the spread of Christianity, saying that: 'from the perspective of human society the most successful model is church + market economy. That is to say, the happy combination of a market economy that discourages idleness together with a strong faith (ethics) that discourages dishonesty and injury.' Xiao's assertion is that Christianity is a sign of higher ideas and progress and that spiritual wealth and material wealth go together. Certainly the growth in the Christian fellowship is noticeable. According to the latest surveys done by China Partner and East China Normal University in Shanghai, there are now between 39 and 41 million Protestants in China – a rise from 14 million in 1997. It should also be noted that China is not just open to Christian philosophies; it actually has as many Muslims as Saudi Arabia and nearly twice as many as the entire EU. By 2050, China could have the world's biggest Muslim and biggest Christian populations.

There seems to be an inverse relationship between the generosity of the welfare state and the success of religion. As the state takes on more responsibility for health, education and so on, the need for religious-based activities declines. This may be an additional reason why religion is enjoying growth in many developing countries which are too needy to afford Europe's welfare provision or are philosophically disinclined towards a state welfare model – China and South Korea in particular. Religious philanthropy is not exclusive to any one faith – Christians are to be found feeding the poor but the Taliban also use social welfare as way of engaging with the local population – for example, by funding and stocking hospitals with medical supplies. In general, however, this approach may also shed light on why more wealthy countries with a strong welfare state are generally more secular – take France, for example.

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Although the implications for society of increased interest in religion are huge, there was agreement throughout our discussions that the topic is not often given the significance it deserves. Indeed, quite the reverse. The tide is however turning and the secular institutions are beginning to acknowledge the issue. Until recently, secular-minded governments have tried to keep faith out of state institutions but the rise in religion may mean that many of the electorate want their faith to guide those institutions – and the politicians that run them. This debate is building momentum in primarily Muslim countries like Syria and Egypt, but expect it to affect Europe and the US too – anywhere, in fact, where there is a significant and growing religious population. In addition to migration, the internet and new methods of evangelical practice means that today's world is no longer divided into geographical areas where one faith or another predominates.

Some suggest that the rise of political Islamism, particularly in its extreme form, has prompted a backlash against all religions – and, indeed, it is true that religion is now often blamed for many of the problems we face as a society, stretching from the issues in the Middle East to localised community problems in areas such as Bradford in England or the Parisian suburbs. Certainly religion can be used as a rallying cry for those disenfranchised by their current environments but it's also worth remembering that religion has also inspired many to stand up and defend society against totalitarian states – take, for example, the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar:

Perhaps the increase in religious belief is ultimately driven by the simple wish to be happy. Faith, after all, is a powerful generator of social capital and there is a marked correlation between religion, health and happiness. Pew shows that Americans who attend religious services once or more times a week are happier (43% very happy) than those who do not. This trend has been fairly steady since Pew started the survey in the 1970s and is more robust than the link between happiness and wealth. In fact, 'attending religious services weekly rather than not at all has the same effect on happiness as moving from the bottom quartile to the top quartile of overall income distribution' and, as Micklethwait and Wooldridge point out, it is a lot easier to do. Small wonder more people are trying it.



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