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Special report

RELIGION AND PUBLIC LIFE

O come all ye faithful

Nov 1st 2007
From *The Economist* print edition

God is definitely not dead, but He now comes in many more varieties

MENTION a "megachurch" and most people think of a gleaming building in the American suburbs. In fact, many of the biggest churches are outside the United States. In Guatemala, Pentecostals have built what may be the largest building in Central America: Mega Frater (Big Brother) packs a 12,000-seater church, a vast baptism pool and a heliport. One church in Lagos can supposedly bring 2m people out onto the streets. But five of the world's ten biggest megachurches are in just one country: South Korea.

Reuters

Home-cell battery

The largest of them all, Yoido Full Gospel Church, sits opposite the national assembly in Seoul, an astute piece of political positioning. It looks somewhat unprepossessing—a brownish blob surrounded by office buildings—but Yoido boasts 830,000 members, a number it says is rising by 3,000 a month. One in 20 people in greater Seoul is a member.

Each of the seven Sunday services at Yoido is a logistical challenge: apart from the 12,000 people in the main sanctuary, another 20,000 follow the service on television in overflow chapels scattered around neighbouring buildings. Some 38,000 children go to Sunday school during the day. As one service begins and the next ends, around 60,000 comers and goers are ushered by white-jacketed traffic directors. If you want to attend one of the two services starring the church's founder, David Cho, you need to be an hour early or you won't get in.

Not that you will lack entertainment whilst you wait. The massed choir (one of 12) is already belting out hymns, backed by a large orchestra (one of three). The audience sings along, with huge television screens supplying the words, karaoke style. Pictures of the service are beamed to hundreds of satellite churches around the world and to Prayer Mountain, a gruelling religious camp close to the border with the North. Translation is offered in English, Japanese, Chinese, Spanish, French, Indonesian, Malay and Arabic.

By the standards of American preachers, Mr Cho is a relatively unflashy figure. With his glasses, tie and tidy red cassock, he looks like one of the more bureaucratic kinds of Asian politician. His tone is logical and unrelenting. His theme today is "Deliver us from the Evil One".

Sin and Satan are omnipresent, he argues, but if you ignore their enticements, "your grave is already empty." As he cites scripture, the passages appear on the big television screens. Mr Cho urges the liberation of North Korea and quotes Edward Gibbon. He then invites people to touch the part of their body that most needs healing. There are shouts of success. After he sits down, a young opera singer performs while the money is collected—by the sackful in gold and scarlet bags—and piled up in front of the pulpit.

Divide and multiply

To Mr Cho's critics, Yoido, like many megachurches, is too much of a business nowadays; and there was a fuss to do with his son running the church's newspaper, Korea's fourth-largest. Yet its beginnings were humble. Mr Cho, who was converted to Pentecostalism from Buddhism by his nurse after he nearly died of tuberculosis, founded Yoido in 1956 in a battered $50 tent bought from the Marine Corps. Like Pentecostals the world over, Yoido's system is rooted in "home-cells". Most of the praying and converting is done at home, in small groups of around a dozen people. The idea is that these cells, like their biological equivalents, will multiply. Women are crucial. Mr Cho's right-hand woman was his mother-in-law, Jashil Choi, a figure known as "Hallelujah Mama". Today Yoido boasts 68,000 female deacons—twice the number of male ones. A typical evangelist will make 35 visits a week and drink an unhealthy amount of coffee in the process.

This sort of "viral marketing" might seem untraditional to those used to bishops, cardinals and popes. In fact, Christianity advanced from an obscure sect to the official religion of the Roman empire by focusing on women. Christians stressed fidelity and marriage, which attracted women to the faith, who then bore Christian babies.

The Protestant surge in South Korea has slowed down a bit recently, a development

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Ross Douthat writes about secularism in America for the *Atlantic Monthly*. Peter Berger is a professor of theology at the Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs. The *Washington Post* has an archive of articles written by Miroslav Volf. See also livecasts of David Cho, Amr Khaled's sermons and Rowan Willliams's essays. Rick Warren is the author of "The Purpose Driven Life".

which is variously blamed on changes in school laws and the abuses of some clerical families. Even so, the growth has been phenomenal. In 1950 only 2.4% of South Koreans were Protestant. Now the figure is close to 20%. Counting Catholics (which many Korean Protestants don't), Christians make up close to 30% of the population. "Koreans don't play church," says an American elder at Yoido.

The people who have flocked to South Korea's megachurches are the upwardly mobile. Asked (in 2004) which faith had been most instrumental in their country's modernisation, 42.7% of South Koreans named Protestantism and 11.3% Catholicism. Hahn Meerha, a professor at Hoseo University, points out that 42% of the chief executives of listed companies and a third of its senators are Protestants. There are monthly prayer breakfasts at the national parliament, and the current favourite to win the presidency in the election due in December, Lee Myung-bak, is the elder of a megachurch.

That is not an undisguised blessing for Mr Lee. If one part of the middle classes has flocked to the megachurches, another is increasingly unhappy about religion's role in society: the same 2004 poll also found that 59% of Koreans thought the churches were going in the wrong direction. When a group of clueless young Korean missionaries were captured by the Taliban in Afghanistan earlier this year, there were widespread complaints in Seoul that the youngsters had been brainwashed into going there as a marketing ploy for South Korea's churches.

Korean Protestantism is certainly export-minded: Yoido sends out 600 missionaries a year. One target is North Korea, which used to be the more Christian end of the country. Yoido already has plans to build a second sanctuary in Pyongyang. Yanbian, a district in China that has a large ethnic Korean population, is choc-a-bloc with missionaries.

But the biggest prize for Christians across Asia is China itself. Some call it "the Africa of the 21st century", recalling that the number of Christians in that continent rose from below 10m in 1900 to 400m in 2000. Officially, the Chinese government admits to 23m Christians within its borders, but it counts only churches that register with the authorities, and the real figure is probably around three times as high. Most Christians prefer private "house churches". China even has two Catholic churches, one official and one underground. One Korean ruse is to set up small businesses and get work permits for traders who are really missionaries.

On this rock

South Korea illustrates three features of modern religion: competition, heat and choice. To understand the competitive mechanism, you need only two sacred texts. The first is "The Wealth of Nations", in which Adam Smith argues that the free market works in religion as in everything else. Non-established clergy, who rely on the collection plate, show greater "zeal" in proselytising "the inferior ranks of people" than the established, salaried sort, who are more interested in sucking up to clerical bigwigs. Europe has been a textbook illustration of this (see article).

The second text is the American constitution. As a refuge for dissenters, America was always closer to Smith's vision, though it was not quite the religious city on a hill its boosters claim. The early Puritans were soon swamped by more venal colonists: in Salem, the zealous town in Arthur Miller's "The Crucible", 83% of taxpayers in 1683 had no religious allegiance. Most of the Founding Fathers thought religion was useful in a squirearchial sort of way, but they were not particularly godly: George Washington never mentions Jesus Christ in his personal papers.

Thus, the First Amendment—"that Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof"—was a compromise between dissenters (who wanted to keep the state away from religion) and more anti-clerical sorts like Thomas Jefferson (who wanted the church out of politics). Yet it became the great engine of American religiosity, creating a new sort of country where membership of a church was a purely voluntary activity.

Look back at the first great success in this free market, Methodism, and it is not difficult to spot where Yoido's growth formula came from. When Francis Asbury arrived in America in 1771, there were barely 1,000 Methodists in the country. By the time he died in 1816, 1m people, one-eighth of the entire population, were attending Methodist camp meetings (the 19th-century equivalent of megachurches). The Methodists paid their preachers only a nominal stipend, gave them no job security and told them to avoid arid theology ("Always suit your subjects to your audience," went the instruction, and "choose the plainest texts you can.")

Getty Images

The constitution explains not just why America still excels at the religion business (the late Peter Drucker, a famous management guru, used to point out that American business could learn a lot from its "pastorpreneurs") but also how it has become a huge export industry. Rick Warren, America's favourite preacher, likens his "purpose-driven formula" to an Intel operating chip that can be inserted into the motherboard of any church; there are now more than 100,000 "purpose-driven" churches in 160 countries. Korea was converted by Americans.

As the Methodists became more hierarchical in the mid-19th century, they began to lose ground to the Baptists. In all likelihood creative destruction will eventually hit Yoido and Mr Warren too. Religion in America tends to come in waves—and the current

Purposeful Warren

"awakening" may just be dying down. But an advantage of competition is that it spurs responses. For instance, the recent setback for Korean Protestantism has given a push to Catholicism (whose priests don't have sons to inherit churches). The Catholics are also fighting back against Pentecostals in Latin America, "becoming less Roman and more local", says Harvey Cox, a Harvard divinity professor. In Nigeria Catholic priests have so embraced the habits of their evangelical competitors that the Cardinal of Lagos recently warned them about the "incalculable damage" being done to services by "unorthodox spontaneous prayers by all the faithful at the same time".

Has the same competitive spirit gripped other religions? Buddhism, the religion whose market share has dipped most over the past century, remains pretty passive: its adherents believe that people should discover faith for themselves rather than be energetically introduced to it. But there are some signs of awakening. In South Korea Buddhist monks, often hidden away in inaccessible rural shrines, have set up meditation areas in cities to fight off the Protestants.

Hinduism tends to be more turf-conscious. Some states in India have passed "anti-conversion" laws banning evangelists from using force or "allurement"—code for Christians and Muslims converting Hindu untouchables, who tend to get a raw deal under the caste system. And when it comes to marketing pizzazz, the trendier Hindu ashrams are more than a match for America's pastorpreneurs. The Art of Living, a Bangalore ashram that "is committed to making life a celebration on this planet", has offshoots in 141 countries.

This spirit of competition also helps to explain some of Islam's success. That may sound odd. Saudi Arabia enforces religious orthodoxy with police and prisons. Under many *sharia* systems, apostasy is still punishable by death. And in many Islamic countries mosques get far more financial help and direction from the state than Adam Smith would have approved of. But in fact there is more competition within Islam than at first appears.

Like Pentecostalism, Islam is a religion without much hierarchy: most mosques claim to be following the teachings of one preacher or another, but their real authority comes from the Koran. This helps new imams to set up shop and allows them to do pretty much what they like. But marketing has not been neglected. There are megamosques (one in east London, planned by missionaries, will hold 12,000 people, five times as many as St Paul's Cathedral) and televangelists, such as Amr Khaled, an engaging former accountant from Egypt, whose sermons are watched by millions in Europe and the Middle East. If you want a *fatwa* (religious ruling), you do not have to go to a mosque: you can get it online (and in English) from efatwa.com, muftisays.com or askimam.com.

Islam is not as evangelical as Christianity. Its followers are less intent on spreading the good news; much of their attention is focused on stiffening the resolve of communities that are already Muslim. But Islam is expansionist in some areas, including sub-Saharan Africa and the fringes of China. In Xinjiang province, the state government has got so worried about Muslim separatism that it has cracked down on Islam. China may yet end up being both the world's largest Christian country and its largest Muslim one.

The second lesson from Korea is that hotter religion does better. In the 1960s it was thought that if any sort of religion would survive, it would be the reasonable and ecumenical sort—intellectual Anglicanism, say, or Graham Greene's doubting Catholicism. In fact, certainty has proved much easier to market.

In America the famously tolerant Episcopal Church (which recently elected a gay bishop) has been in decline; the Southern Baptists (who in 1988 denounced homosexuality as "a manifestation of a depraved nature") have jumped forward. Altogether conservative Christians now make up around 25% of America's population, compared with 20% in 1960.

Hot as hell

In global terms the most remarkable religious success story of the past century has been the least intellectual (and most emotive) religion of all. Pentecostalism was founded only 100 years ago in a scruffy part of Los Angeles by a one-eyed black preacher, convinced that God would send a new Pentecost if only people would pray hard enough. There are now at least 400m revivalists around the world. Their beliefs are not for the faint-hearted. According to a study of ten countries by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, most adherents have witnessed divine healing, received a "direct revelation from God" or seen exorcisms (see chart 3).

A living God 3

Pentecostals, % who have....

	witnessed divine healings	received direct revelations from God	experienced or witnessed exorcisms
United States	62	54	34
Brazil	77	64	80
Chile	77	55	62
Guatemala	79	59	62
Kenya	87	57	86
Nigeria	79	64	75
South Africa	73	64	60
India	74	31	41
Philippines	72	58	52
South Korea	56	20	30

Source: Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, October 2006

The only other Christian faith to grow at such rates is the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, again hardly an easy-going religion. Mormonism remains a favourite butt of comedians, because of its historic belief (now abandoned) in polygamy and its ban on such worldly pleasures as beer, coffee, tea and "passionate kissing" outside wedlock; there will be more fun poked if Mitt Romney wins the Republican nomination. But clean-living certainty sells: over the past half-century the church has grown sevenfold, with half the world's 13m Mormons living outside the United States.

The hotter bits of Islam have also gained ground. As American neoconservatives never tire of pointing out, this is partly a matter of Saudi money: petrodollars have flowed into fundamentalist *madrassas* around the world and paid for millions of copies of the Koran with Wahhabi interpretations (for instance, stressing *jihad* as an extra pillar of Islam). But the main driver has been globalisation.

In the Arab heartlands fundamentalism has become a refuge for anyone worried by the spread of Western culture and power. In overseas communities where Muslims are in a minority, notably Europe, it has had far more to do with a search for identity. Scholars such as Olivier Roy have shown that extremism has become a form of generational warfare, with Western-born Muslim girls choosing to wear the headscarf that their mothers jettisoned on their arrival from Pakistan and Morocco.

One final advantage for hotter religion of all sorts is demography. From Salt Lake City to Gaza, religious people tend to marry younger and breed faster than non-religious ones. An ultra-Orthodox Jewish woman in Israel will produce nearly three times as many children than her secular peer. By some counts, three-quarters of the growth in the hotter varieties of American Protestantism is down to demography.

But heat in religion does not necessarily generate light. Relatively few Muslims have actually read all of the Koran, and although 83% of Americans regard the Bible as the word of God, half of them do not know who preached the Sermon on the Mount. American evangelicals are so worried by fundamentalists being ignorant of the fundamentals that they have set up refresher courses in Bible knowledge.

Nor does the heat always last. "You don't see many graveyards in megachurches," say the sceptics. Emotional, unhierarchical religion may be gloriously customer-centred, but it lacks a control mechanism. Pentecostal pulpits have been a home to some almighty rogues, and many Muslims would like to bring radical imams under control.

Besides, should religion really be so focused on rounding up customers? Rowan Williams, the thoughtful Archbishop of Canterbury, points to the many things his church does in the fields of social welfare and urban regeneration that pew-focused rivals do not. Pick-and-choose religion, he argues, has less depth. From the front-line in Nigeria, the Catholic Archbishop of Jos makes the same argument. He might be able to push up numbers if he spent his money on television rather than hospitals, and if he did not spend six years training priests. But that is not his job.

The value of choice

The final lesson from South Korea, however, is one that both archbishops admit is crucial. Modern religion is pluralistic and increasingly based on choice.

Often the spur is immigration. Richard Chartres, the Anglican Bishop of London, calls his city "a test case", pointing to the sprawling number of mosques, Sikh temples, synagogues, African and West Indian churches, even the Church of Scientology. In Latin America, evangelical churches now offer a ready alternative to Catholicism. And in the United States mainstream Protestants will soon account for less than half the population. Although the country remains predominantly Christian, America is home to around 10m other believers (Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus) as well as 30m agnostics and atheists.

AFP

And atheism is definitely part of this pluralism. The proportion of Americans citing no religious preference has increased from 7% to 14% (20% for young people). As Ross Douthat argued recently in the *Atlantic Monthly*, anti-religiosity has moved from America's east-coast elite to the masses. By some counts there are at least 500m declared non-believers in the world—enough to make atheism the fourth-biggest religion.

Choice is the most "modern" thing about contemporary religion. "We made a category mistake," admits Peter Berger, the Boston sociologist, who was once one of the foremost champions of secularisation but changed his mind in the 1980s. "We thought that the relationship was between modernisation and secularisation. In fact it was between modernisation and pluralism."

Demographic bonus

Religion is no longer taken for granted or inherited; it is based around adults making a choice, going to a synagogue, temple, church or mosque.

This has a profound affect on public life. The more that people choose their religion, rather than just inherit it, the more likely they are to make a noise about it. Miroslav Volf, director of Yale's Centre for Faith and Culture, says this is showing up in the workplace too: "It used to be that workers hung their religion on a coat rack alongside their coats. At home, their religion mattered. At work, it was idle. That is no longer the case. For many people religion has something to say about all aspects of life, work included."

The same applies to politics. For instance, South Korea's megachurches have recently created their own version of America's religious right. The New Right movement already has around 200,000 members, around two-thirds of whom are Christian. Its views are somewhat vague. The founder, Jin-Hong Kim, complains about the country's leftward drift, America-bashing, North Korea and corruption. His enemies say the New Right is really just a way to help his friend, Mr Lee, win the presidency. In the primary, Protestants voted overwhelmingly for Mr Lee. The churches are banned from endorsing candidates, but one prayer at Yoido asks God "to help us choose the right president".

The rest of this special report will look at the various ways in which religion intrudes into public life—from religion-based parties to attempts to challenge capitalism and science. It begins with the subject that people fear most: the wars of religion.

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