



WHY **GOD** IS WINNING



Religion was supposed to fade away as globalization and freedom spread. Instead, it's booming around the world, often deciding who gets elected. And the divine intervention is just beginning. Democracy is giving people a voice, and more and more, they want to talk about God.

| By Timothy Samuel Shah and Monica Duffy Toft

After Hamas won a decisive victory in January's Palestinian elections, one of its supporters replaced the national flag that flew over parliament with its emerald-green banner heralding, "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His Prophet." In Washington, few expected the religious party to take power. "I don't know anyone who wasn't caught off guard," said U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. More surprises followed. Days after the Prophet's banner was unfurled in Ramallah, thousands of Muslims mounted a vigorous, sometimes violent, defense of the Prophet's honor in cities as far flung as Beirut, Jakarta, London, and New Delhi. Outraged by cartoons of Muhammad originally published in Denmark, Islamic groups, governments, and individuals staged demonstrations, boycotts, and embassy attacks.

On their own, these events appeared to be sudden eruptions of "Muslim rage." In fact, they were only the most recent outbreaks of a deep undercurrent that has been gathering force for decades and extends far beyond the Muslim world. Global politics is increasingly marked by what could be called "prophetic politics." Voices claiming transcendent authority are filling public spaces and winning key political contests. These movements come in very different forms and employ widely varying tools. But whether the field of battle is democratic elections or the more inchoate struggle for global public opinion, religious groups are increasingly competitive. In contest after contest,

when people are given a choice between the sacred and the secular, faith prevails.

God is on a winning streak. It was reflected in the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Shia revival and religious strife in postwar Iraq, and Hamas's recent victory in Palestine. But not all the thunderbolts have been hurled by Allah. The struggle against apartheid in South Africa in the 1980s and early 1990s was strengthened by prominent Christian leaders such as Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Hindu nationalists in India stunned the international community when they unseated India's ruling party in 1998 and then tested nuclear weapons. American evangelicals continue to surprise the U.S. foreign-policy establishment with their activism and influence on issues such as religious freedom, sex trafficking, Sudan, and AIDS in Africa. Indeed, evangelicals have emerged as such a powerful force that religion was a stronger predictor of vote choice in the 2004 U.S. presidential election than was gender, age, or class.

The spread of democracy, far from checking the power of militant religious activists, will probably only enhance the reach of prophetic political movements, many of which will emerge from democratic processes more organized, more popular, and more legitimate than before—but quite possibly no less violent. Democracy is giving the world's peoples their voice, and they want to talk about God.

DIVINE INTERVENTION

It did not always seem this way. In April 1966, *Time* ran a cover story that asked, "Is God Dead?" It was a fair question. Secularism dominated world politics in the mid-1960s. The conventional wisdom shared by many intellectual and political elites was that modernization would inevitably extinguish

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religion's vitality. But if 1966 was the zenith of secularism's self-confidence, the next year marked the beginning of the end of its global hegemony. In 1967, the leader of secular Arab nationalism, Gamal Abdel Nasser, suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Israeli Army. By the end of the 1970s, Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, avowedly "born-again" U.S. President Jimmy Carter, television evangelist Jerry Falwell, and Pope John Paul II were all walking the world stage. A decade later, rosary-wielding Solidarity members in Poland and Kalashnikov-toting mujahedin in Afghanistan helped defeat atheistic Soviet Communism. A dozen years later, 19 hijackers screaming "God is great" transformed world politics. Today, the secular pan-Arabism of Nasser has given way to the millenarian pan-Islamism of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose religious harangues against America and Israel resonate with millions of Muslims, Sunni and Shia alike. "We increasingly see that people around the world are flocking towards a main focal point—that is the Almighty God," Ahmadinejad declared in his recent letter to President Bush.

The modern world has in fact proven hospitable to religious belief. The world is indeed more modern: It enjoys more political freedom,

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more democracy, and more education than perhaps at any time in history. According to Freedom House, the number of "free" and "partly free" countries jumped from 93 in 1975 to 147 in 2005. UNESCO estimates that adult literacy rates doubled in sub-Saharan Africa, Arab countries, and South and West Asia between 1970 and 2000. The average share of people in developing countries living on less than a dollar a day fell from 28 percent to 22 percent between 1990 and 2002, according to World Bank estimates.

If people are wealthier, more educated, and enjoy greater political freedom, one might assume

they would also have become more secular. They haven't. In fact, the period in which economic and political modernization has been most intense—the last 30 to 40 years—has witnessed a jump in religious vitality around the world. The world's largest religions have expanded at a rate that exceeds global population growth. Consider the two largest Christian faiths, Catholicism and Protestantism, and the two largest non-Christian religions, Islam and Hinduism. According to the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, a greater proportion of the world's population adhered to these religious systems in 2000 than a century earlier. At the beginning of the 20th century, a bare majority of the world's people, precisely 50 percent, were Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, or Hindu. At the beginning of the 21st century, nearly 64 percent belonged to these four religious groupings, and the proportion may be close to 70 percent by 2025. The World Values Survey, which covers 85 percent of the world's population, confirms religion's growing vitality. According to scholars Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "the world as a whole now has more people with traditional religious views than ever before—and they constitute a growing proportion of the world's population."

Not only is religious observance spreading, it is becoming more devout. The most populous and fastest-growing countries in the world, including the United States, are witnessing marked increases in religiosity. In Brazil, China, Nigeria, Russia, South Africa, and the United States, religiosity became more vigorous between 1990 and 2001. Between 1987 and 1997, surveys by the Times Mirror Center and the Pew Research Center registered increases of 10 percent or more in the proportions of Americans surveyed who "strongly agreed" that God existed, that they would have to answer for their sins before God, that God performs miracles, and that prayer was an important part of their daily life. Even in Europe, a secular stronghold, there have been surprising upticks in religiosity.

God's comeback is in no small part due to the global expansion of freedom. Thanks to the "third wave" of democratization between the mid-1970s and early 1990s, as well as smaller waves of freedom since, people in dozens of countries have been empowered to shape their public lives in ways that



Green means go: Hamas's surprise victory in Palestine was just the latest triumph for political Islam.

were inconceivable in the 1950s and 1960s. A pattern emerged as they exercised their new political freedoms. In country after country, politically empowered groups began to challenge the secular constraints imposed by the first generation of modernizing, postindependence leaders. Often, as in communist countries, secular straitjackets had been imposed by sheer coercion; in other cases, as in Atatürk's Turkey, Nehru's India, and Nasser's Egypt, secularism retained legitimacy because elites considered it essential to national integration and modernization—and because of the sheer charisma of these countries' founding fathers. In Latin America, right-wing dictatorships, sometimes in cahoots with the Catholic Church, imposed restrictions that severely limited grassroots religious influences, particularly from "liberation theology" and Protestant "sects."

As politics liberalized in countries like India, Mexico, Nigeria, Turkey, and Indonesia in the late 1990s, religion's influence on political life increased dramatically. Even in the United States, evangelicals exercised a growing influence on the Republican Party in the 1980s and 1990s, partly because the presidential nomination process depended more on

popular primaries and less on the decisions of traditional party leaders. Where political systems reflect people's values, they usually reflect people's strong religious beliefs.

Many observers are quick to dismiss religion's advance into the political sphere as the product of elites manipulating sacred symbols to mobilize the masses. In fact, the marriage of religion with politics is often welcomed, if not demanded, by people around the world. In a 2002 Pew Global Attitudes survey, 91 percent of Nigerians and 76 percent of Bangladeshis surveyed agreed that religious leaders should be more involved in politics. A June 2004 six-nation survey reported that "most Arabs polled said that they wanted the clergy to play a bigger role in politics." In the same survey, majorities or pluralities in Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates cited Islam as their primary identity, trumping nationality. The collapse of the quasi-secular Baathist dictatorship in Iraq released religious and ethnic allegiances and has helped Islam play a dominant role in the country's political life, including in its recently adopted constitution. As right- and left-wing dictatorships have declined in Latin America and democratization has

deepened, evangelicals have become an influential voting bloc in numerous countries, including Brazil, Guatemala, and Nicaragua.

THE NEW ORTHODOXIES

Far from stamping out religion, modernization has spawned a new generation of savvy and technologically adept religious movements, including Evangelical Protestantism in America, “Hindutva” in India, Salafist and Wahhabi Islam in the Middle East, Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America, and Opus Dei and the charismatic movement in the Catholic Church. The most dynamic religiosity today is not so much “old-time religion” as it is radical, modern, and conservative. Today’s religious upsurge is less a return of religious orthodoxy than an explosion of “neo-orthodoxies.”

A common denominator of these neo-orthodoxies is the deployment of sophisticated and politically capable organizations. These modern organizations effectively marshal specialized institutions as well as the latest technologies to recruit new members, strengthen connections with old ones, deliver social services, and press their agenda in the public sphere. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad, founded in 1964, “saffronized” large

swaths of India through its religious and social activism and laid the groundwork for the Bharatiya Janata Party’s electoral successes in the 1990s. Similar groups in the Islamic world include the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Jordan, Hamas in the Palestinian territories, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia. In Brazil, Pentecostals have organized their own legislative caucus, representing 10 percent of congresspeople. Religious communities are also developing remarkable transnational capabilities, appealing to foreign governments and international bodies deemed sympathetic to their cause.

Today’s neo-orthodoxies may effectively use the tools of the modern world, but how compatible are they with modern democracy? Religious radicals, after all, can quickly short-circuit democracy by winning power and then excluding non-believers. Just as dangerous, politicized religion can spark civil conflict. Since 2000, 43 percent of civil wars have been religious (only a quarter were religiously inspired in the 1940s and 50s). Extreme religious ideology is, of course, a leading motivation for most transnational terrorist attacks.

The scorecard isn’t all negative, however. Religion has mobilized millions of people to oppose authoritarian regimes, inaugurate democratic transitions,



Praise God and pass the legislation: Evangelical Christians have a growing impact on American politics and policy.

support human rights, and relieve human suffering. In the 20th century, religious movements helped end colonial rule and usher in democracy in Latin America, Eastern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia. The post-Vatican II Catholic Church played a crucial role by opposing authoritarian regimes and legitimating the democratic aspirations of the masses.

Today's religious movements, however, may not have as much success in promoting sustainable freedom. Catholicism's highly centralized and organized character made it an effective competitor with the state, and its institutional tradition helped it adapt to democratic politics. Islam and Pentecostalism, by contrast, are not centralized under a single leadership or doctrine that can respond coherently to fast-moving social or political events. Local religious authorities are often tempted to radicalize in order to compensate for their weakness vis-à-vis the state or to challenge more established figures. The trajectory of the young cleric Moqtada al-Sadr in postwar Iraq is not unusual. The lack of a higher authority for religious elites might explain why most religious civil wars since 1940—34 of 42—have involved Islam, with 9 of these being Muslim versus Muslim. We need look no further than Iraq today to see religious

authorities successfully challenging the forces of secularism—but also violently competing with each other. Even in a longstanding democracy like India, the political trajectory of Hindu nationalism has demonstrated that democratic institutions do not necessarily moderate these instincts: Where radical Hindu nationalists have had the right mix of opportunities and incentives, they have used religious violence to win elections, most dramatically in the state of Gujarat.

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The belief that outbreaks of politicized religion are temporary detours on the road to secularization was plausible in 1976, 1986, or even 1996. Today, the argument is untenable. As a framework for explaining and predicting the course of global politics, secularism is increasingly unsound. God is winning in global politics. And modernization, democratization, and globalization have only made him stronger. **FP**

[**Want to Know More?**]

Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart offer a thorough overview of politicized religion in *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004). For polls, news, and analysis of religion's impact on public life in the United States and around the world, visit the Web sites of the **Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life** and the **Pew Global Attitudes Project**.

Olivier Roy's *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) examines Islam's struggle to define the boundaries between religion and politics. Husain Haqqani peers inside the madrasas that encourage extremism in "Islam's Medieval Outposts" (FOREIGN POLICY, November/December 2002).

On the role of religion in ethnic violence and civil wars, see Monica Duffy Toft's *The Geography of Ethnic Violence: Identity, Interests and the Indivisibility of Territory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) and "Religion, Civil War and International Order," a discussion paper from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

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