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### March 31, 2009: Religion Can Be the Worst Secularism

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Title: Religion Can Be the Worst Secularism

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3/31/2009--In today's New York Times, Michiko Kakutani reviewed the book, *God Is Back*, by John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, who both work at *The Economist*. Kakutani describes the book's central message as follows: [They] argue that religion is "returning to public life" around the world, that "the great forces of modernity — technology and democracy, choice and freedom — are all strengthening religion rather than undermining it," that these days "religion is playing a much more important role in public and intellectual life." They assert that "religion is becoming a matter of choice," something that individuals themselves decide to believe in instead of something imposed upon them, and that "the surge of religion is being driven by the same two things that have driven the success of market capitalism: competition and choice." Kakutani calls this argument "unpersuasive" and "poorly argued" because, as the recent American Religious Identity Survey shows, secularism is growing. In this way, Kakutani makes a false criticism and ignores the real problem with the book. Religion can be growing in global public importance, which it obviously is, while at the same time, secularism is also growing. How can this be? Because secularism is still quite small. The ARIS, for example, to which Kakutani referred, shows that secularism has doubled in America since 1990, but only to 15% of the population. The criticism Kakutani should have leveled is that the phenomenon the authors point to is not religion. It is capitalism. Specifically, it is consumer choice in religion. Kakutani does call some of the churches Micklethwait and Wooldridge describe "suburban malls" rather than houses of worship, with day care centers, bowling alleys, food courts and all the rest. But the problem is not the amenities but the message. Religion calls on us to confront reality, no matter how unpleasant that reality may be. This is true of sin in Christianity and of suffering in Buddhism. Real religion tells us what to we should do. Real religion is not a matter of choice, ever. Micklethwait and Wooldridge are aware of the power of this criticism. They claim that the hard stuff is inside and that the marketing is outside. But they cannot have it both ways. Either growing religion is a function of "pastopreneurs" "compet[ing] for market share" among customers "who apply the same consumerist mentality to spiritual life as they do to every other aspect of their experience" or it is a function of a genuine change in spiritual life. Since the authors believe it is the former rather than the latter, it really doesn't matter whether religion is growing. This sort of religion is the worst kind of secularism.