

Non-Fiction**Is religion just like business?**

Paul Seabright's *The Divine Economy* uses economics to understand how the world's faiths compete and succeed



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Jane Shaw 3 HOURS AGO

What makes some people join religious organisations? It's a pertinent question for our secular western world, where — with exceptions such as Poland — religion is largely on the decline. And it's usually asked by atheists who can't imagine why anyone would be so credulous, religious leaders who are desperately looking to reverse dwindling congregations or the genuinely curious. The economist Paul Seabright belongs in this last category; in *The Divine Economy* he proposes that we can understand religions and their appeal more fully through the lens of economics.

Seabright has written a wide-ranging book, full of fascinating examples from the world's many religions, reminding us that even though religion is in decline in western society, it's thriving in many other places, including countries across Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, as well as the Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh and Thailand. What's the appeal, and why do some religions do better than others in the competition for our attention and, ultimately, affiliation and loyalty?

The book opens in Accra, Ghana, with the story of a 24-year old woman, whom the author calls Grace, who earns a \$1.50 a day selling iced water to people at traffic lights. She tithes 10 per cent of that income, along with other donations, to her Protestant church, even though that means she cannot pay for some medical treatments for her aunt, with whom she lives in a tiny house in a slum neighbourhood. Understanding why Grace does this becomes even more pressing when we learn that her pastor is ostentatiously wealthy: he drives a Mercedes and “wears a belt with a big round buckle decorated with a dollar sign”.

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Seabright posits that religions are platforms, “businesses whose core activity consists in bringing together various groups of users”. There’s the demand side: members get something out of them, be that material (education or health or financial services) or spiritual (prayers and rituals). Then there’s a supply side, and Seabright suggests that it is “bringing individuals together in mutually beneficial relationships that those individuals

cannot easily bring about on their own” that religious platforms can excel.

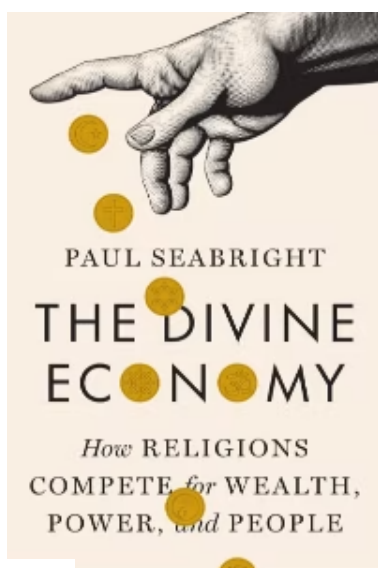
The author suggests that Grace is hoping to meet at church a respectable marital candidate who will have the imprimatur of her pastor and the church community. This is far more than a dating app could offer. Church encourages a husband to “turn up sober, in a clean suit, on a Sunday morning, knowing that many eyes will be watching to see whether he is treating his wife well”. But, as Seabright wryly comments: “Community is a blessing, but it can also lock you in.”

Members of religious institutions are not just passive consumers; they are also contributors for the good and to the welfare of others, and they find this rewarding. Grace is an usher and an assistant Sunday school teacher at her church. Many religions make helping others a core value, something to counter what’s often described as our “natural” selfishness.

Seabright argues rather that research by anthropologists and sociologists points to us being “more truly ourselves when we give to others than when we are the passive recipients of their benevolence”. Religions that offer us the opportunity to serve others are appealing, and in turn this contributes to the building of a community bound together by a shared sense of purpose.

Rituals further that group identity. Often opaque to outsiders, they serve to create a sense of belonging. They also provide something distinctly sacred: the religious institution is not, after all, just the Rotary Club — it's where liturgies are celebrated or prayer wheels turned. And when a practitioner gets good at repeated rituals such as praying or meditating, this is interpreted as evidence of God's presence or increased enlightenment. This can then give credibility to other services that the religious platform provides, imbuing them with sacred meaning.

Seabright notes that a synagogue, mosque or church can be a successful dating platform or provide good business networks precisely because it attracts people who don't think of it in those terms. All activities can therefore be given a religious meaning.



How about belief? Seabright describes it rather disarmingly as a “marketing disadvantage”, a particular problem in the scientific age. And, it turns out, people don't join religious movements because of the theology. A charismatic preacher can be a pull (and, sometimes, a potential for exploitation) but it isn't necessarily what that preacher says so much as how they say it. The telling of good stories is vital: the sacred texts of the world's religions always address the big problems that humans face — such as the great Exodus story of the Hebrew scriptures or the Hindu veneration for non-violence (*ahimsa*) in the Rig Veda of 1200BC.

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Many religions don't emphasise belief at all, such as Zen Buddhism, some Indian religions. Anglican Christianity has a Book of Common Prayer at the heart of its identity; it is religious practice that counts. And even those that do put belief upfront, such as Evangelical Protestantism or Roman Catholic Christianity don't always fully insist on it; other factors, such as community, play a bigger part in making the

religion attractive.

Using his economist's tools to analyse the lasting power of the world's religions, Seabright has produced an engaging and insightful book, which I found myself pondering long after I had read the last page. Religion is a powerful force in many parts of the world. The religions that continue to be successful in a rapidly changing environment, he concludes, keep evolving to remain so.

The Divine Economy: How Religions Compete for Wealth, Power, and People
by Paul Seabright *Princeton* £30/\$35, 504 pages

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