



Paul Seabright <paul.seabright@gmail.com>

JEL Book Review: The Divine Economy: How Religions Compete for Wealth, Power, and People by Paul Seabright

AEA Notifications <notify@aeaweb.org>
À : PAUL.SEABRIGHT@gmail.com

19 avril 2024 à 17:15



Journal of Economic Literature Book Review

Review by [Sascha O. Becker](#), Monash University and University of Warwick

The Divine Economy: How Religions Compete for Wealth, Power, and People. By [Paul Seabright](#). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024. Pp. xi, 452. \$35.00, cloth; \$35.00, e-book. ISBN 978-0-691-13300-3, cloth; 978-0-691-25878-2, e-book. (JEL L31, Z12)

This is Paul Seabright's third book in his trilogy published by Princeton University Press (Seabright 2010, 2012). Seabright is a well-read and deep thinker. His latest book is wide ranging, drawing on evidence from psychology, anthropology, history, sociology, economics, and several more disciplines.

The key message of the book is: "Religious organizations are platforms." He makes a convincing case that they are. Iannaccone (1992), in his pathbreaking work, described religious organizations as clubs offering "some collective benefit—such as a certain quality of worship or ritual—and then they would pay a price that was the 'entry fee'; higher entry fees typically signalled a higher quality of the collective benefit" (p. 98). Seabright extends the club view:

The platform model takes the idea a step further. Instead of being passive consumers of the good that the club puts on for you, members of platforms are active contributors to that good, and thereby to the welfare of other members. And what they are paying for is not just a generalized good, available to everyone, but specifically access to other members of the quality that the church can credibly promise to give them (p. 99).

This idea permeates the book. Seabright looks at the world of religion through the lens of his platform model. This is an insightful and refreshing perspective. The (related) characterization of religious organizations as businesses also plays a prominent role in the book, but seems, on occasion, a bit overemphasised, considering that even in the richest countries, many churches are small local churches, run by business amateurs. Yet, the platform angle is novel.

Seabright often draws on personal observations made during both research-related and non-research-related trips.

The introduction starts off with his personal encounter, in Ghana, with Grace, a young woman who, despite her low income, gives generously to her local church, whose pastor "drives a large Mercedes, and wears a

belt with a big round buckle decorated with a dollar sign” (p. 3). This motivates the question why does Grace do that? Another introductory example is Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, fully endorsed by Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, motivating the question what drives the link between religion and politics? These are just two of the themes covered in the book.

The book falls into four major parts. Part 1 (“What Does Religion Look Like in the World Today?”) consists of two chapters. Chapter 1 (“What Is Religion?”) lays out the difference between immanent religion¹ and transcendental religion, Christianity being an example of the latter. “Transcendental religion is based around the hope of salvation from the human condition, and typically involves interaction with a more distant spiritual world, which is thought of as leaving human beings, most of the time, to govern their own affairs” (p. 31). The development of transcendental religion is dated to the beginning of the Axial Age, from around 800 to 200 BCE. Chapter 2 (“What is Happening to Religion in the World?”) describes recent trends in religious affiliation around the world. Those are presented in further detail in a separate statistical appendix. Seabright dismisses the simplistic view that secularization will inevitably lead to a decline in the role of religious organizations. He thinks that we are witnessing “a story of growing corporatization, with local and folk religions everywhere being gradually but inexorably absorbed into a culture dominated by churches and mosques affiliated with two of the world’s main religious brands” (Christianity and Islam) (p. 59). Looking ahead, he thinks that: “It’s competition through persuasion that will be the dominant feature of the coming century [...] something that both Christianity and Islam have proved very good at doing” (p. 61).

The meat of the book is in part 2, which comprises seven chapters: chapter 3 (“Demand for Religion”) highlights “[t]he variety of different potential needs [...] many people have little or no need for religion, but the demands of those who do range from ordinary material needs such as education, health, or financial services to more directly spiritual needs such as participation in prayers and rituals, to the sharing of narratives about the origin and purpose of our lives” (p. 63). Chapter 4 tackles the “supply side” of religion, introducing the notion of religious communities as platforms, described above. A key question in chapter 4 (“Choosing Communities: The Platform Model of Religion”) is how religious movements can be profitable even though they’re not naturally as scalable as digital platforms: “First of all, successful preaching can, indeed, reach an audience of millions through broadcasting and social-media networks, which many religious leaders develop on the back of their physical networks. Secondly, though the costs of building religious communities are important, the services they provide can be priced very highly” (p. 102). Grace, the Ghanaian woman, who gives to her church more than she spends on any other item in her budget except food, would lose the social ties if she were to switch to a different church. “Community is a blessing, but it can also lock you in” (p. 102).

Chapter 5 (“Ritual and Social Bonding”) stresses the importance of rituals as communal experiences, and underlines the value of social links between members as crucial elements of religious platforms. Chapter 6 (“Religion and Belief”) asks why theologically complex doctrine “that, on average, most nonmembers of the religion find difficult to believe” (p. 127) is not an impediment to membership:

The answer is that accepting doesn’t require believing, and believing is optional in practice for most members, most of the time (even while it passionately preoccupies some other members). It’s only after joining that most members start to shift their beliefs in the direction of the religion’s doctrines—and they do it because it comes naturally to them, not because their membership requires it (p. 127).

I found this description to be spot-on.

Chapter 7 (“Religion, Narrative, and Meaning”) stresses the role of narratives that pull together a coherent story that gives meaning to life:

In short, religious platforms developed by the transcendent religions could deploy the human fascination with narrative with an overall ambition and coherence unknown to immanent religion. They brought consolation to the downtrodden, and thereby increased their values as allies to a privileged elite. It was the inspired conjunction of an organizational innovation—the religious platform, which underscored the way in which all the components of the religious life fit together, and how the individual could make sense of that fit through membership of a community—and an appeal to a much more ancient human need, the need for stories (p. 172).

I found chapter 8 (“The Evolutionary Origins of Enchantment”) the most fascinating, drawing on research farthest away from economics, on how religious behavior and religious institutions evolved throughout prehistory. The theme of believing versus belonging (see chapter 6) is shown to have an equivalent in the evolution of religion. Drawing on Kim Sterelny’s work, “religion could have developed without imposing large costs on its practitioners, because it involved ritual long before it involved belief” (p. 183).

Chapter 9 (“The Temple Society—and Other Business Models”) looks at four features of each religious institution: its mission, its structure, its strategies, and its message. Since the mission of a religious movement is typically defined by its founder, a key challenge is for the movement to survive its founder. Here, Seabright makes insightful comparisons drawing on academic research on CEO succession. Structural questions become key as successful movements continue to grow. The Catholic Church is used as a prime example of an organization that has a surprisingly flat hierarchy with just four levels: pope, bishops, local priests, and believers. This structure gives a lot of autonomy to lower levels, which also leads to lack of strict control that in turn facilitated the cover-up of sexual abuse scandals for far too long (see part 3, “Religion and the Uses of Power”). Chapter 9 is rounded up with a discussion about different strategies: what types of service to offer and what types of members to target, as well as which messages to employ. The analogy of “single-homing” and “multi-homing” makes an appearance here: some religious organizations offer a wide range of services in order to be the single (religious) home of their members whereas others might target individual services for specific types of “multi-homing members.”

Part 3 starts with chapter 10 (“Religion and Politics”). Seabright discusses the horse trade of legitimization of political leaders by religious authorities in exchange for monopoly protection for the religious leaders and their organizations. Turning to US politics, Seabright observes that the increasing polarization may creep into religious organizations, to the dismay of some members who turn their backs to churches they consider to be not neutral enough. Chapter 11 (“The Great Religion Gender Gap?”) notes that while most religious leaders are male, some statistical measures of personal religiosity tilt slightly female, on average. Seabright dismisses the view that religious organizations are generally more female-biased. If anything, while church attendance of women may be higher in Christianity, this is not bound to continue, and does not apply to other world religions anyway. Chapter 12 (“The Abuse of Religious Power”) discusses, amongst others, sexual abuse scandals. While these scandals are not limited to religious organizations—as they also occur in other “industries,” for instance, in sports and entertainment—Seabright points out that religious organizations have some structural features and some ways of functioning that make abuse particularly likely. This chapter also has a moving personal touch, as Seabright reports about interactions he had as a teenager in evangelical Christian holiday camps with John Smyth, who was involved in a sadistic beatings scandal: “Of the many revelations of sexual abuse in religious organizations that have been published in recent years, this one resonated with me particularly, because I had once known John Smyth. [...] I was never approached by him, and never heard any rumors of his sadistic proclivities, but I found him creepy” (p. 281). Seabright urges stricter regulation of religious organizations. They should be subject to the same degree of accountability and outside scrutiny as regular businesses, because formal accountability “legitimizes the asking of tough questions—and consequently enables breaches in a culture of silence” (p. 291).

Finally, part 4 concludes with chapters 13 (“The Past and Future of Religion”) and 14 (“Conclusion”). Seabright’s key takeaway is that

The twenty-first century will therefore not see religion disappear, because it will continue to minister to real human needs more effectively than most available alternatives. But precisely because its success is legitimately acquired, powerful political interests will continue to manipulate religion to send soldiers to the battlefield and voters to the ballot box, and some of their citizens will continue to be intoxicated by the call. Constraining religion to wear its power more lightly than it has done so often in the past is therefore a project that ought to unite all reasonable people of any faith or of none (p. 324).

Even though I am quite familiar with the literature on economics of religion (*JEL* code Z12), I found Seabright’s book an insightful and enjoyable read. His platform view makes for a fresh look at religious organizations. I suspect that all scholars of religion economics will find the book equally insightful. For those less familiar with the economics of religion, the book is also an easy-to-read launchpad to the field. Since the book is nicely linked with literatures from neighboring disciplines, it will enthuse broad-minded social scientists as well. Finally, since the book addresses “big questions” in an accessible and engaging style, it

will also be of interest to nonspecialists.

REFERENCES

Iannaccone, Laurence R. 1992. "Sacrifice and Stigma: Reducing Free-Riding in Cults, Communes, and Other Collectives." *Journal of Political Economy* 100 (2): 271–91.

Seabright, Paul. 2010. *The Company of Strangers: A Natural History of Economic Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Seabright, Paul. 2012. *The War of the Sexes: How Conflict and Cooperation Have Shaped Men and Women from Prehistory to the Present*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

NOTES

¹In immanent religions, human interactions with the spiritual world "are typically frequent and often transactional" (p. 21).

If you no longer wish to receive emails of *JEL* book reviews, click [here](#) to unsubscribe.