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FROM TOI PRINT EDITION

# Why religion is big business: An economic lens might explain its fortunes

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### TOI Edit

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God's work is worldly work, and religions are businesses like any other, argues The Divine Economy: How Religions Compete for Wealth, Power, and People by Paul Seabright. Churches, mosques, madrasas, temples, synagogues, prayer groups, ashrams, monasteries – these are iron-

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who debate and opine on the news and issues of the day.

fisted organisations that need capital and human resources. In US alone, the Catholic Church and faith based organisations raked in more revenues than Apple or Microsoft in 2016, for instance. They are exempt from taxes on their revenues and properties, shielded from the usual scrutiny that applies to secular businesses.


The book investigates how religious movements gain and use authority. Like modern platforms, religions connect people in new ways, expropriate some of the benefits of this connection, and also compete with each other. This competition is expressed through war and conflict, through demographic rivalry (having more children), and through persuasion. It explores how religious organisations are changing, when they flourish and when they splinter. It also asks how the power of religion is used and abused.


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While the 'secularisation thesis' once predicted that prosperity, modernity and science would cause religion to fade, this has clearly not been the case. While surveys do suggest that greater existential security in North America and western Europe caused a decline in people strongly identifying as Christian, the facts are more complicated; it indicates turbulence, not a trend.

Religious identity is intensifying in many parts of the world, even in places like China where it is a sensitive subject. The book finds a growing corporatisation at work, as local and folk religions are absorbed into a handful of global religions. Christianity and Islam are booming, Hinduism and Buddhism are

also bigger brands now.

What human needs does religion answer, that secular structures don't?

It provides a sense of the numinous, makes believers feel special and protected. Religiosity is a bundle of diverse traits, and different faiths have crafted varied appeals, from private prayer and meditation to collective spectacle to violent crusades and jihad.

All religions are patchworks, and they have messages that can be interpreted as messages of war or peace. As Adam Smith observed, their effects are not to be found in their teachings, but in the interests and incentives of religious leaders. In business and in religion, fair competition makes religions more benevolent, monopoly has the opposite effect.

When political leaders grant protection to one religious movement over others, there is more discord and violence. But ironically, this reduces the catchment area of believers. From Trump to Netanyahu to Putin and Xi, repressive leaders who claim god is on their side should know the diminishing returns of this strategy. When harnessed to conservative causes, religious authority ebbs away. In Iran, religious legitimacy had reduced by the

1990s because of the Islamic Revolution’s instrumentalisation of Shia faith, but the backlash has taken a long time to build, as recent hijab protests show.

Ultimately, a religious platform works best when it persuades, rather than coerces. It has to provide what believers are seeking, not impose itself by force. Because religious power is real and legitimate, there will always be those who use it to send soldiers to battle or voters to the ballot box, and those who are intoxicated by its call.



START A CONVERSATION

ADD COMMENT

This piece appeared as an editorial opinion in the print edition of The Times of India.

END OF ARTICLE



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