



Paul Seabright: The divine economy—how religions compete for wealth, power, and people

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The Divine Economy by Paul Seabright is an ambitious attempt to answer several big questions about religion using the tools of economics. Building on Iannaccone's (1992) club good model, Seabright argues that religious movements should be understood as more than just clubs or firms; rather, they are "a special kind of business—they are platforms" or "organizations that facilitate relationships that could not form, or could not function as effectively, in the platforms' absence" (p. 17). This thesis is simple, compelling, and a genuine contribution to the economics of religion literature, as it shifts attention to what religions produce, who produces it, and for whom, and places the members of a religion at the center of each. In Seabright's formulation, people join religions for the benefits they can receive, with the primary benefit being access to the network. Unlike the traditional view, however, his platform model recognizes members not only as primary beneficiaries, but also as core organizational assets whose ongoing participation generates and sustains the value of the network itself.

The platform framework does not fundamentally alter our understanding of organizational structure or membership dynamics from Iannaccone's club model, but it does provide a clearer explanation for why religions, among many possible clubs, have exhibited such persistence. Religions, Seabright argues, are especially effective as platforms because of their ability to establish and facilitate trusted and sustained relationships among members, and it is this effectiveness that helps explain the historically dominant and resilient role of religion in social life. Seabright illustrates this point by comparing a church to a secular platform. Both a church and a dating site are platform organizations that can facilitate finding a spouse. And while churches often provide goods such as food, microfinance, childcare, and social insurance, this is not what distinguishes them from dating sites. Rather, it is that in the process of participating in these other activities, members reveal genuine information about themselves that is useful for finding a spouse, among other things. Over time, mem-

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bers of a church can see who shows up on time and who comes late, who volunteers to help the church run and who merely attends, who makes financial donations consistently and who gives money rarely, and who respects the authority of the church leadership and who neglects it. This ongoing, collective involvement generates credible signals of character and commitment that are difficult to replicate online. As a result, churches are especially effective at facilitating trusted relationships that can lead to romantic partnerships, even though people do not approach them in the same way they would a dating site.

While Seabright's platform model makes an important contribution to the economics of religion, its relevance is not consistently maintained throughout the book. In several chapters, the discussion loses focus on the central economic argument and becomes bogged down in the sociology and evolutionary psychology used to buttress its core claims. For example, Chap. 5 on religion and social bonding, Chap. 7 on the role of narrative in religion (which Seabright acknowledges is speculative), and Chap. 8 on the evolutionary origins of enchantment focus more on explaining the origin and content of the religious component of a person's utility function than on applying the platform model, or economics more broadly, to explain something about religion. These non-economic sections feel out of place in a book called *The Divine Economy*.

Chapter 11, which addresses the gender gap in religion, is especially illustrative of how little the platform model is used in some parts of the book. Seabright opens the chapter with an interesting anecdote from his field research, then moves to general commentary and demographic information about religion and gender and argues that religiosity is best understood as a bundle of traits rather than a single unified characteristic. These points set up his investigation of why women are more likely than men to affiliate with religion and attend services. His answer is that the observed gender gap in religious participation is unique to Christianity and does not appear in other religions, which he attributes to two factors. First, Christianity emphasizes equal moral responsibility for chastity and fidelity across genders, which women are more likely than men to find appealing. Second, Christian platforms have more in common with book clubs than those of other religions, and women tend to like book clubs more than men. This chapter contains interesting anecdotes, demographic information, and social commentary, but there are essentially no economic arguments presented, and "platforms" is used only as a descriptive label for religious organizations, not as an analytical concept.

A broader issue I have with the book is that it attempts to answer too many big questions in too few pages. As a result, the answers the book provides often feel vague and underdeveloped, even in the more economic chapters. In the conclusion, Seabright revisits a wide range of questions that the platform model is supposed to help answer, including which human needs religions speak to, whether religiosity is a distinct psychological trait, how religion can claim to bring order to human perceptions, how religions can give people a sense of purpose, why women tend to be more religious than men, why religions take many different forms, what are the important differences between religious and secular platforms, how technology affects the intensity of religious rivalry, when rivalry between religious movements persists and when it becomes violent, why religious movements clash over abstruse points of theology, when religious movements grow, splinter, or die, and many more. Although Seabright addresses each of these throughout the book, most are often only loosely connected to the platform model of religion.

Seabright's answers to questions such as what human needs religions address, how religion brings order to human perceptions, and how religions give people a sense of purpose largely rely on the idea that humans are social creatures, so being embedded in a community fulfills human needs and gives order and meaning to their lives. This answer makes sense, but it feels inadequate for questions of this scope. His answers to more direct and applied questions can also come across as generic and insufficient. For example, his explanation for why religions take so many different forms is "that platform business models can be generalized or niche, depending on the ecosystem of other activities within which their members find themselves" (p. 332). Again, this answer is not wrong, but it is incomplete, and the importance of context is not unique to platform businesses. Other questions are not really answered at all. For instance, we are never given a clear answer to the question of when religious movements choose peace or violence against religious rivals; instead, Seabright describes how motivations for using violence vary depending on whether it is directed at one's own members, close rivals, or more distant groups.

The extensive scope of the book has other consequences that might have been avoided with a narrower focus. One example is the mishandling of the doctrine of transubstantiation. Seabright maintains that religious creeds and doctrinal statements, though presented as factual claims, function more as social signals of group belonging than as decisive reasons for why individuals join a religion. To make this point, he uses a colloquial definition of the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, describing it as "the doctrine that during Mass, the communion bread and wine become—literally, not symbolically—the body and blood of Jesus Christ" (p. 125). He then suggests that, if this were truly a factual belief, Catholics should be willing to have consecrated communion wine tested in a laboratory for hemoglobin. Yet, as he notes, most who profess that the wine is the "literal" blood of Christ would not consider such a test relevant. This implies that "literally, not symbolically" must signify something other than what is meant in ordinary language, and that the doctrine itself likely serves a function other than outlining a factual belief. For Seabright, this is evidence that religious doctrines are not primarily litmus tests that determine membership but serve instead as features of group identity.

This may be an effective illustration to show the alternative functions of a religious belief, except it misunderstands Catholic doctrine, which is not as scientifically literal as Seabright's definition suggests. Transubstantiation is the belief that the substance, not the accidents, of the bread and wine is transformed into the body and blood of Jesus Christ (Catholic Church, 2019; Ripley, 2019). A hemoglobin test would examine the accidents, not the substance, and is therefore irrelevant to the theological claim. While this discrepancy does not negate Seabright's broader point, noticing it as a non-Catholic made me question the accuracy of other claims about religious traditions with which I am even less familiar. I do not mention this to suggest malice or carelessness on Seabright's part, but rather to highlight a tendency toward oversimplification that results from the attempt to address too many issues in too little space.

Seabright's central contribution in *The Divine Economy* is the development of the platform model of religion. Unfortunately, in attempting to answer too many questions, the book often deviates from a consistent and coherent application of this model, which prevents its many potential insights from being fully realized. Nonetheless, while religious readers will likely be dissatisfied with the overall treatment of religion in the book as it tends to trade off detail for simplicity and breadth, economists will be particularly interested in

Chaps. 4, 9, and 10. The book may answer many questions unsatisfactorily, but the platform model of religion is a genuine contribution and it is exciting to consider its many possible future applications.

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