

Book Review

The Divine Economy: How Religions Compete for Wealth, Power, and People. By Paul Seabright.
Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024. 341pp. \$35.00.

Megachurches around the globe are businesses whose primary objective is profit. They “lock-in” members through their “platform” offerings of social services. Millions of people voluntarily join megachurches by tithing in exchange for these services. The attractiveness of the megachurch model is that it is independent, relying on networking to attract new members through evangelizing missions and social charity. The self-sufficiency of megachurches drives out competitors, monopolizing a population such that religious leaders can act with impunity. Violence becomes a means of protecting a religion’s assets rather than defending doctrinal beliefs. Paul Seabright’s main thesis is that unregulated religion allows for “the corporate transformation of religion” into mega-monopolistic religions where faith is the means to profit” (pp. 59–61).

Scholars and professionals (e.g., see the contributions in the edited volume by Larry Eskridge and Mark A. Knoll, *More Money, More Ministry*, 2000) have analyzed the business model introduced after World War II with the rise of the megachurch (overlapping with a parachurch). Even though the megachurch is Seabright’s main target for criticism, he criticizes any monopoly religion, including the Catholic Church. In the Irish case, the secularization of the Catholic Church occurred at the end of the nineteenth century when Irish nationalism became distinctively Catholic. The Catholic Church, supported by the Irish state, operated as a social welfare agency with large industrial schools and orphanages. The abuses and betrayal of the precepts of the Catholic Church occurred due to a secularization categorically different from the secularization of the Catholic Church in Spain. Whereas the latter can be explained by Adam Smith’s theory of monopolist behavior, the former cannot.

The weakest aspect of Seabright’s discussion is the idea that religious belief is always about calculation and improving one’s odds. Seabright begins with Pascal’s wager, which is the position a nonbeliever would assume on his deathbed to improve his odds of getting into heaven. But, then, Seabright concludes that the majority of adherents do not even engage in a form of calculation. “Their willingness to believe owes a great deal to their willingness to trust the leaders of their movement” (p. 146). He attributes this gullibility and suspension of rationality to the evolution of the human brain to trust their leaders. This is the position for which Seabright provides no evidence.

As observers of others’ behavior, we assume people are rational and that they can give us a coherent explanation for why they acted as they did. The explanation is comprehensible insofar as their reasons are consistent with their intentions and beliefs based on the relevant available evidence. We are culpable for neglecting to find out all the pertinent facts: I am distracted, lazy, inattentive, daydreaming, or fail to use my cognitive abilities, as in I simply follow my leader. We, as human agents, have a responsibility to understand our own as well as others’ thinking given our/their circumstances in order to ascertain whether our/their judgment is sound in the sense of being both rationally valid (logically consistent with other held beliefs) and consistent with the relevant evidence.

Religious beliefs, similar to other beliefs, are like this. They are not unusual, as Seabright claims. We posit a nomological relationship between our beliefs and actions in this world with other-worldly compensators (salvation, damnation). We humans hold a constellation of propositions to be true that have weak to strong evidence to support them. Seabright's analysis of religion lacks a theory of human agency, a fundamental necessity for studying economics. His approach in this book is sociological in nature, calling for more oversight and legal regulation of religious organizations. His perspective on religion reminds me of Woody Allen's comment in the movie "Annie Hall," "I wouldn't want to belong to a club [megachurch] that would have me as a member."

Rachel M. McCleary

Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

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