



Review of Paul Seabright's *The Divine Economy: How Religions Compete for Wealth, Power, and People*, Princeton University Press 2024, 485 pp.

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The Divine Economy by Paul Seabright is an ambitious attempt to address several key questions scholars of religion have been asking for decades: what accounts for religion's continued attractiveness in the modern, largely disenchanted world? What are the key variables of success and failure of religious enterprises? Is there some way to explain uneven trends in religious affiliation in various parts of the world—notably differences between Europe and other continents?

In tackling these and other important issues, Seabright utilizes several components of the scientific study of religion, including sociological (the analysis of crucial demographic trends, and the assessment of the secularization debate) and psychological (which needs religion responds to and what predisposes humans to religiosity/spirituality). He successfully brings in the evolutionary approach to religion (a field still largely ignored by many humanistically inclined or traditional religious scholars) to explain why religion persists, and what functions it plays in human communities. He also employs the economic/rational choice perspective, demonstrating the potential of economic metaphors and actual pieces of economic behavior analysis in understanding religious phenomena.

While none of these perspectives is entirely new, the author successfully combines them into what he refers to (by analogy to economic markets or digital platforms) as a platform model of religion. Crucially, he conceptualizes religious organizations as enterprises whose primary function is to foster connections between users, bringing them together and providing a number of valuable services which bind them to the platform. Such an approach shifts the focus from religious beliefs and ritual behavior to participation and the social functions of religious communities. The platforms' main value is providing social networks; the other elements—doctrine and ritual—are needed to reinforce the networks, raise the opportunity costs of leaving and create the feeling of uniqueness and affinity.

It is precisely the religion-as-platform approach, rather than any specific piece of knowledge or analysis, that constitutes the main value and contribution of the book. It has plenty of explanatory power—for example, in showing persuasively why religion is still there despite losing some of the functions attributed to it earlier (e.g., supplying pre-scientific

explanation of reality, legitimizing political power and so forth), via which mechanisms religious platforms operate, and how they differ from secular ones.

On the downside, the author is not entirely consistent in the systematic application of the platform model throughout the book, and his choice of aspects of religious platforms' activity seems a bit haphazard. Why, for instance, focus on gender (rather than other variables) if, as the author argues, gender is not, overall, the major factor of religious affiliation or practice? Similarly, in part III (religion and power/politics), the focus is on exploitation and power abuse, but little systematic discussion is offered on the political systems of religious platforms and the power mechanisms they may use—especially in relation to external actors (and how they differ in theocratic vs. non-theocratic states). This renders some conclusions less persuasive. For example, the decline in religiosity—and the appearance of secularization—in the Western world is explained in the book mainly by the Christian churches' close ties with politics and the ensuing loss of public credibility and legitimacy. But the altar-throne alliance is not, of course, restricted to the West, as most religions engage with politics—from Hinduism (India, Sri Lanka), Buddhism (Thailand, Myanmar and Tibet), Islam (the Middle East, Africa and beyond) to Orthodox Christianity (Russia). These religions, too, lend legitimacy to secular rulers, receiving material and symbolic favors in return—but secularization trends vary widely among these nations. So there must be other explanations. Demographics matters, obviously, but the demand for religion may not be equal, after all, in all parts of the world. In this, perhaps, the author tends to underestimate cultural factors in arguing for objective, species-wide conditions of religiosity.

Overall, the book is a highly recommendable read for anyone seriously interested in religion. It offers a fresh, insightful, and readable contribution, demonstrating the power of an interdisciplinary approach—especially psychological/cognitive, sociological, evolutionary and economic—in understanding why religion is a stable feature of the human cultural landscape and how it navigates the increasingly complex modern world.