

Book Review: Seabright, Paul. (2024). *The Divine Economy: How Religions Compete for Wealth, Power, and People*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

There was once a virtual consensus among Western social scientists that religion's public influence was waning fast and destined eventually to be marginal. Sure, there would still be many people who would personally be religious, but the ability of religion to influence the world's movers and shakers – including, states, international organisations, and multinational corporations – would terminally decline.

How wrong this assumption turned out to be. My first book on religion and politics, *Religion in Third World Politics*, published in 1993 by the UK's Open University Press, was an attempt to debunk secularisation theory in a specific context and period of world history: anti-colonial struggles in the 'third world' – aka the global south – in the early and mid-20th century. This was when religion's waning public influence seemed to be most obvious in the West, especially western Europe. In Europe's 'third world' colonies, on the other hand, secular nationalism allied with religious traditions to great effect: creating potent and highly successful political movements which generally swept aside European empires and colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. Anti-colonial movement in South America a century earlier thrived on the revolutionary and nationalistic fervour of the American and French revolutions, and religion didn't have much of a role.

Paul Seabright's *The Divine Economy. How Religions Compete for Wealth, Power and People*, is cognisant of the demise of the explanatory power of secularisation theory and fully aware of the public and popular power of religion today. Seabright, who 'teaches economics at the Toulouse School of Economics' (book jacket blurb), has written research monographs on gender relations and on 'strangers' in economic life. In *The Divine Economy*, Seabright writes ostensibly from an economist's point of view (The book's sub-title gives the game away). The book however is more than this, using an economist's perspective to offer an expansive take on the role of religion in the world today. The ambitions of the book cover the so-called 'world religions' – that is, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam and Judaism. Christianity - especially in the West – and Islam – notably in the Middle East – take the lion's share of Seabright's attention.

Seabright's Big Idea is that in today's world 'religious movements are a special kind of business: they are platforms, bringing together communities of members who seek many different things from one another – spiritual fulfilment, friendship and marriage networks, even business opportunities'. Seabright persuasively and provocatively argues that 'religious platforms' have enabled religious leaders to 'consolidate and wield power' (book jacket blurb). Note that this is not merely power at the level of the state but also in relation to what might be called 'religious popular power'.

According to Seabright, committed adherents offer much of themselves – time, money, thoughts, behaviour – to their chosen religious vehicle via ubiquitous 'platforms'. My interest in the book was immediately stimulated on page 1 where he begins with an anecdote about a religious platform in Ghana. By chance, my current research project is on the political and developmental role of Pentecostal-

Charismatic churches in Ghana, and my research monograph on this topic will be published in 2007, entitled *Pentecostalisation, Politics and Development in Ghana*.

Seabright's anecdote from page 1 concerns a 2015 research visit to Ghana. He interviewed a young woman he calls 'Grace' who earned the equivalent of \$1.50 a day by selling 'iced water in little plastic sachets stored in a basket above her head' to thirsty motorists enduring endless traffic jams on the streets of Ghana's capital, Accra (p. 1). Grace comes across as highly religious and financially poor; seemingly anomalously, she devotes around one-eighth of her meagre earnings to her Pentecostal-Charismatic church. Such contributions are known as 'tithes' in Ghana. This money goes in theory to the good of the church but in practice much of it ends up in the pocket of the church Big Man: the lead pastor.

Seabright explains that the pastor is extremely, and very ostensibly, wealthy: he drives a big, fancy, car and has a silver belt buckle in the shape of a \$ sign. Why on earth, Seabright rhetorically queries, would 'Grace' – a woman of meagre means who lives in sub-standard accommodation with an aunt in a poor neighbourhood in Accra – freely give a relatively large portion of her meagre income to an obviously very rich, well-fed, and self-satisfied pastor? Seabright dismisses the idea that 'Grace' is stupid or gullible. He explains that 'Grace' gains a lot from belonging to her church – or in his terminology, membership of a 'religious platform' – including status, companionship, a sense of community, spiritual well-being, and perhaps the chance of a spiritually-suitable, benign, husband, who won't drink away his (or their) money or beat her or cheat on her. From 'Grace's perspective, Seabright asserts, church membership is well worth the entry fee and represents for her good value for money.

Seabright's book is strongly and persuasively argued. As a good social scientist, he is heavily reliant on evidence and data for his arguments and conclusions. I found much in the book to agree with, and I believe that Seabright's book is something of a milestone in the voluminous scholarly literature on religion, sociology, society and politics. The volume is divided into four parts: Part 1 - 'What does religion look like in the world today?' – is devoted to a thorough debunking of secularisation theory as an approach with universal pretensions. Part 2 is entitled 'How do religions gain their power? It examines the evolution of 'transcendent' religions, that is, those with a divine being or ultimate reality that exists beyond the physical, material world and human understanding. The third part focuses on 'Religion and the uses of power', covering political uses and abuses of religion, including in relation to gender relations. Part Four concludes the book, speculating about how religious platforms will evolve over time and what the impact might be.

I recommend this book. It is thought-provoking and nuanced, subtle and non-judgemental. I would have liked to see what Seabright makes of the current alliance between religion and nationalism – including in Trump's USA – and more material on the globally burgeoning Pentecostal-Charismatic churches and their huge and growing political and societal influence in Africa and Asia. But one book can't do everything and Seabright has made a good attempt at explaining quite a lot.

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