

that doctrine and one can only hope that others take up his challenge to better understand America's founding political theory.

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Faithonomics: Religion and the Free Market

Torkel Brekke

New York: Oxford University Press, 2016 (256 pages)

This is a strange book, partly political advocacy for religious freedom globally, partly a Freakonomics-style discussion of religious curiosities, and partly a survey of the economics of religion. It also has an autobiographical element as the author recounts his atheistic Communist upbringing, his brief affair with a Catholic choir, and his transition to academia. If nothing else, it is engagingly written.

Brekke begins predictably (after a brief discussion of David Hume and Adam Smith) with the argument that the goods provided by religious organizations are like any other goods and can thus be analyzed with the tools of economics. He overstates his case for the private-good rather than public-good nature of religion, perhaps wanting to avoid the argument about the benefits or otherwise of religion to society. If the goods are private, then his strategy of repeated assertion that markets will resolve the issue has some force, but I am not so sure. Religions do seem to have substantial spillover effects that call for nonmarket evaluation.

A real contribution of the book is a discussion of religious markets in Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism—territory that is seldom explored in overwhelmingly North American economics of religion literature. He does succeed, I think, in establishing that the tools of economics are equally applicable in these societies as in North America.

The largest part of the book contains chapters that deal with the so-called seven sins of government intervention in religious markets. These are:

1. “Crowding Out: When Government Kills Initiative” where Brekke considers the effects of religious subsidies, concluding that they are always detrimental.
2. “Rent-Seeking: Religions Jockeying for Privilege” that discusses the particular vulnerability of religious markets to wasteful rent-seeking. Brekke's solution is always to get the government out of religious markets.
3. “Monopoly: Nordic State Churches and Communist Repression” where it is argued that monopoly reduces effort and innovation in religious markets to the detriment of society. Brekke makes a good point that the existence of different religious traditions does not mean there is competition, because religious markets are segmented so that in the US megachurches are competing with existing evangelical congregations rather than with the local mosque or Catholic church.

4. “Discrimination: Women, Gay People and God” where Brekke considers the puzzle of the reticence of churches more specifically toward women and LGBT persons, suggesting that freer religious markets might have helped.
5. “Persecution: States, Religions, and Violence” where it is suggested that more religious competition would reduce persecution and violence.
6. “Reification: How States Fix Religions in Space and Time” (where reification is defined as turning religion into a thing). I found this one of the most interesting chapters. Here he discusses the way practices came to be labeled religion in Korea, with some detrimental effects. Even more detrimental was the effect of meticulously classifying people by religion in the Netherlands, which assisted the Nazis in identifying proportionately more Jews there for the gas chambers than in any other part of Europe. Like some other parts of the book I found his case against collecting statistics on religion overstated. Relying so much on examples for his arguments leaves Brekke vulnerable to counterexamples—such as my own country, Australia, which has had a question about religion on the national census for many years, and perhaps the best data on religious activity anywhere in the world through our National Church Life Survey—without the negative effects of the other examples Brekke describes. I agree though, as does a substantial literature not cited by Brekke, that the category of religion is conceptually problematic.
7. “Imitation: Why Do Atheists and Buddhists Behave Like Christians.” I found it hard to identify the problem with government regulation that Brekke was pointing to in this chapter. The argument seemed to be that commonalities in practice make religions, even atheist religion, all the same in the end. This is a somewhat limp end to the book.

Overall I do not think Brekke’s book achieves any of its objectives as well as existing works. The argument for religious freedom is better made by sociologists Roger Finke, Brian Grim, or Timothy Shah, for instance. Brekke does not resolve puzzles as interestingly as the Freakonomics literature does—and there remains a gap for a good book in this style about religion. There are certainly plenty of religious puzzles. The book does not work nearly as well as a popular survey of economics of religion as Larry Witham’s *Marketplace of the Gods*, for instance, let alone the standard academic surveys of Laurence Iannaccone or more recently Sriya Iyer in the *Journal of Economic Literature*.

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