

## **Belief and Prosperity**

That material prosperity and religious belief are intertwined would seem to have been an abiding leitmotif of most major faiths and ideologies. One prophetic tradition, for instance, presents this very idea, thus: “if poverty is left unchecked, then it may well lead to disbelief!” And when Marx calls religion “the sigh of the oppressed, the heart of the heartless, the soul of the soulless, and the opium of the people”, he too makes the link, albeit for altogether different reasons. And then there’s Weber’s ‘Protestant work ethic’ which, according to him, is how Christian Europe turned work into dogma, and how, some say, the West got so far ahead of the rest.

Now comes empirical research to corroborate these views in ways that give religion in general an all new resonance in an otherwise secular world; and perhaps for Islam, in particular, an all new role in the economic lives of its adherents. A recent survey conducted by the Hudson Institute’s Center for Religious Freedom found that the weaker the economic conditions of a country the more intolerant its religious policies are likely to be—and vice versa. Thus, countries with poor economic records like Burma, Iraq, Bangladesh, Mauritania, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Vietnam, etc., also happen to have equally poor human rights records. Citizens of such countries are denied the right to live out their consciences, believe as they see fit, and practice their faiths in harmony with the national good. Not all countries admittedly fit this profile: some, like Saudi Arabia have relatively sound economies with high levels of religiosity—but with poor human rights records. This, researchers stress, is not proof that such a mix works, but rather, that economic performance in this case is quite unrelated to internal modes of production.

Lest this study by a conservative think tank be dismissed simply because the wrong people undertook them, one must remember that its findings, at least in so far as they cover our economic conditions, are in synch with those put out by other independent studies. What these studies do not examine, however, and what this finding considers key is that religion, in and of itself, has an enormous impact on economic output; and that some religions fare better than others. On the basis of the latter finding some have been quick to conclude that of all religions out there it is Christianity that best facilitates economic well being—and Islam that might actually impede it! The inherent bias of such a conclusion, I admit, is enough to undermine the entire study. But it is important to distinguish between empirical findings and biased conclusions. Clearly, it is in our best interest that we look more carefully at the ways in which religions are said to affect the economic well being of a nation than be put off by flawed conclusions!

In the past, economic prosperity was gauged by way of instrumental economic factors such as corporate and industrial productivity. But recent research has found that such productivity is itself dependent on the culture and the habits of people, on society’s willingness to grant its people the freedom to indulge those habits, and ultimately, on the ways in which their religious habits in particular, influence economic productivity. For instance, it has been found that religious diversity within a community is actually more conducive to economic growth than is doctrinal homogeneity. Living side by side with

people of various faiths and practices, that is, actually improves the material quality of life for all citizens. Conversely, state monopoly of religions or the privileging of one religion over all others creates a commercial oligarchy, whose control of the markets dampens the entrepreneurial spirit, and leads ultimately to an exodus of capital and skills. We need not look beyond ourselves for examples of how minorities who lived for centuries in our midst were forced to flee oppression taking with them invaluable skills.

On the plus side, religious freedom when coupled with belief in an after life, belief in hell, and belief in heaven all have a great influence on economic growth—of these, analysts tell us, belief in hell comes out tops. In the world of commerce apparently, the fear of burning in hell is more productive than the promise of enjoying heaven!

Then there are the economic consequences of practicing religion in the public sphere. The fact that someone attends public prayer regularly will not make him or her as economically productive as one who has a deep sense of divine punishment and reward. Simply attending religious services therefore, does not seem to have the same influence on economic growth as being mindful of the ethics and morality of one's commercial practices.

Clearly, these suggestions are no different from those enshrined in the teachings of Islam as appear in our sacred texts, and our traditions. Our economic woes would seem to lie therefore, in our failure to internalize our own business related ethics, and to grant others the right to freely exercise theirs, in keeping with their respective faiths.