

Religion, Society, and Economics
Kuruvilla Pandikattu and Andreas Vonach (Editors)
Frankfurt, Germany: Peter Lang, 2003 (250 pages)

Religion, Society and Economics is a thought-provoking collection of fifteen papers delivered at an international conference held in Innsbruck, Austria, in May and June of 2002. The theme is globalization. The intent is to offer to a disenchanted and confused world diverse points of view on different aspects of the globalizing problem: political, social, economic, religious, and ecological. The principal idea of this series is to provide an ample and enriched background for those persons involved in the process of globalization, that they might be forewarned with an understanding of the many different crosscurrents to be encountered and armed with a sense of tolerance toward conflicting points of view. Special emphasis is placed on Hindu and Muslim concerns.

One of the fundamental attractions of the series is that it broadens one's grasp of the globalization phenomenon, widening it from its merely production and trade aspects to include other relevant considerations, such as traditions, religion, and attitudes, which most down-to-earth economists are likely to disregard.

A beautiful illustration of this is the pivotal place of religion in the mentalities of the different groups, so different from the classical liberal and modern traditions. Consider the Old Testament treatment of poverty (Fischer). Sacred writ demanded of the Israelites of old to make provision for the widows, orphans, and sojourners, forgiving debts and emancipating slaves. It mandated a most healthy set of considerations for those involved in the discussion of the problems of the poverty of half the world. The religion element is fundamental in India, with its internal conflicts among different classes of deities (Sheth). It is foremost in the Muslim mentality, wherein religion and politics are joined inseparably. The modern Occidental insistence on separation of church and state is a travesty of principle because, in the Muslim mind, religion is an essential companion of progress and politics. The economic success of the Jains in India is related to their linking of religious ethics with their economic activities (Doss).

The series teaches us through multiple examples how to foster tolerance by analyzing events under different points of view: how the Magi narrative of Saint Matthew could be understood more from a theological than from the traditionally historical perspective (Repschinski); how the Hindu nation was able to alter the religious status of its deities over time to reflect greater tolerance among the religious sects (Scheth); how Israel's religious wars at times even favored her enemies, as when she went beyond the bounds of prudence in taking advantage of political realities (Vonach). Another example of superb mental accommodation is seen in the struggle of John Henry Newman: how he wrestled with the problem of the transition of England from a traditional religious mentality to a new liberalism, whereby an infinitely greater freedom of thought was permitted, and how he managed to adapt himself to many of those undesired changes (Siebenrock). The moral in all this is tolerance. There is more than one way to look at events. We need this aperture when promoting the phenomenon of globalization.

The problem of the disenchantment of so many groups in the world may best be neutralized (Preglau, following Habermas) not by imposing new theories upon mankind, as in the past, or, the opposite, by abandoning totally all sense of truth and morality, as is the vogue today, but rather by recognizing “that all communicative understanding is embedded in a sociocultural context of cultural relations, social relations, and biographically acquired personality structures.... Communicative rationalization needs tradition in general and religious traditions in particular as a source of inspiration.” These requirements of communicating with the real cultures of real people cannot be disregarded by the globalists.

One of the most striking articles is Abraham’s “Psycho-Social Perspective” on the origins of religious fundamentalism, which no reader should miss. He follows Clare Graves and Beck and Cowan in describing six different spirals of dynamics among civilizations and the inter-reaction of these dynamics upon world consciousness: the level of those totally dedicated to basic survival; another controlled by magical animism; that of powerful and heroic leadership; that of the traditionalist, longing for the preservation of order and conformity; that of the individualist path-breaking capitalists and scientists; and finally that of the other-oriented devotees of community consciousness. These different orders of dynamism and their admixtures are well illustrated in the terrorist problem of Muslim fundamentalism today where a combination of religious fundamentalism, a yearning for the traditional, is coupled with powerful animistic leadership; as well as in the bellicose response of the United States to preserve the traditions of an order by Caesar-like arrogance.

Some of the contributions offer pregnant ideas, which, however interesting and to a certain extent relevant, cannot be accepted as a general statement of the problem of modernity. An example here is Guggenberger on Faust. Commenting on Goethe’s character, he notes how worry (uncertainty, insecurity) even amid opulence is a characteristic of modernity that creates intense antisocial rivalries. We have lost our moorings in God and the hereafter and give ourselves over to amassing riches, even to the extent of idolizing them. This indeed is a penetrating analysis of much of modern psychology, but it is not the whole picture. Not everybody is in the grip of despair.

The case of India, as emphasized in several papers, is tragic. Several of the articles seem to forebode the impossibility of the Hindu state to advance economically or politically under a regime of globalization. This seems especially remarkable due to India’s recent prominence in the outsourcing debate as the basis for rejecting the very theory of free trade inherent in the globalization process. Notwithstanding India’s remarkable advance in university education (162 institutions that award thirty-nine thousand post-baccalaureate degrees each year), certain characteristics of its society preclude it from progressing economically: elements of the psychology innate in its population, disregard of the individual person in favor of the community; the exclusiveness fostered by the caste system and the denial of women’s place in modern society (Monteiro); its attachment to the other world, implying a disregard for the materiality of this world (Pandikattu). The idealism of the free India as reflected in its constitution has not been

realized, being frustrated by politicians, big business, a cult of violence, and state terrorism (Fernando).

Unfortunately, several contributions to the collection seem to come from the pens of the intellectual brethren of the violent disrupters of the recent meetings at Seattle and Cancun. Amassed are all the fond arguments of the leftist intelligentsia, without any reference to solid views on development and contamination by such respected authors as the late Lord Peter Bauer or Julian Simon. Not much attention is given to a more balanced treatment of development or to the contributions in recent papal documents (Jayanth).

For example, “The main purpose of modern economy for example is to subdue scarcity, but the means it uses continuously reproduce scarcity.” This certainly does not describe Microsoft or Nestlé. “[The modern economy] contains an everlasting source of dangerous and violent conflict” (Guggenberger, 69–70). “The Darwinian economic principles amorally and, sometimes immorally employed by the corporate empires with scant respect for individuals, environments, communities, nations, and even governments wield enormous intrusive influence on the lives of individuals” (Abraham, 244). This surely misunderstands the role of competition and the practice of world capitalism and leaves the treatment unbalanced.

One of the principal annoyances to the reader of this collection is the hodgepodge it makes of arguments of diverse subjects in a spurious attempt to consolidate all thoughts into one congruent whole; the Preglau article seems to gloss over every sociological theory ever penned, with no clear relevance to what globalization is about. It laments the poverty of much of the world, but it never attempts to give the most obvious causes such as lack of political freedom and motivation. The guilty parties responsible for world poverty are the rich the world over—the consumers of the First World, the multinational companies, for example Coca-Cola. The poverty of India was caused by British colonialism, which destroyed Indian artifacts and mandated mass production in England and mass consumption in India.

This aspect is totally neutralized by the Pandikattu article, which details the inner social contradictions within India that perhaps only the Creator will be able to resolve. The ecological problem gets typically jeremiad treatment, never getting down to particulars but promoting every doomsday prediction and attributing the cause to the consumers of the richer hemisphere (Jayanth).

Though its focus on tolerance and understanding seem to be the laudable chief object of this series, it seems a bit unbalanced that the capitalist view of globalization has been sidestepped. The book also suffers from a dismaying number of typographical errors. Nevertheless, the book serves well for the capitalist reader to broaden his views of what has to be done to make the world more prosperous. For this, it is worth one’s while to browse through it.

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