Journal of Economics
https://doi.org/10.1007/s00712-022-00816-5

BOOK REVIEW

Mario Ferrero : The political economy of Indo-European polytheism: how to deal with too many gods

Springer, 2022, 199 pp, EUR 71.68 (eBook)

Eric Rasmusen[1]

Polytheism is the belief that there exist many gods—many willful superhuman beings with power over the world—and that some or all of them should be worshipped or bargained with. Indo-European polytheism is a special class of polytheism. As used in this book, it refers to the polytheisms of the lands dominated by Indo-European languages: almost all Europe, plus Persia and India.

The theory of the book is that paganism disappeared where it did (it survives in India) for two reasons:

1. It is difficult to serve numerous jealous gods who all demand sacrifice rather than a single god.
2. Without professional priests, there is not enough incentive to promote and maintain a religion.

A necessarily large part of the book is devoted to the data: to describing Indo-European polytheism. Doing so is an ambition task since the description must stretch over thousands of miles and thousands of years from Ireland to India. The story begins with the Proto-Indo-Europeans, who lived between 4500 and 2500 B.C. in southern Russia and Ukraine. As Professor Ferrero tells us, "The crop of deities produced by linguistic reconstruction is neither numerous nor particularly telling. Very few deities are secure, more are dubious. Most appear as personifications of elements of nature, not specifically Indo-European." Nonetheless, these people had a religion, and there is something in common in the polytheisms that arose from it.

In Europe polytheism survived until it was supplanted by Christianity in the Roman Empire. Celtic paganism survived in Ireland, outside the Empire, until after the Empire's Fall. The pagan Germans mostly converted around the time of the fall, (though not the Anglo-Saxons until around 600 A.D. or the Saxons around 800) and

✉ Eric Rasmusen
Erasmuse61@gmail.com

[1] Kelley School of Business (retired), Indiana University, Bloomington, USA

Published online: 05 January 2023

the Scandinavians around 1000. In Persia, Zoroastrianism lasted until the Moslem conquests in the 600s, and continues to be practised by the Parsis in India. In India, Hinduism has lasted and thrived up to the present.

These religions did evolve over time. Roman and Greek paganism added gods (by import from abroad) but did not subtract them. Scandinavian paganism, however, reduced the number of important gods. Zoroastrianism became monotheistic, with subordinate demi-gods. And Hinduism developed a vast hierarchy of gods, but also a professional hereditary priesthood of Brahmins.

Why did paganism die in Europe, became monotheistic in Persia, and survive in India? Professor Ferrero's theory is that if a religion has gods with overlapping jurisdictions and they are "jealous" gods, this is burdensome for the worshipper and that religion will diminish. If someone wishes his crops to thrive, he must sacrifice not just to one god but to all the gods with jurisdiction over crops. Homer tells the story in the Iliad of the farmer Oineus who forgot to sacrifice to the huntress goddess Artemis, who sent a boar to destroy his harvest. Oineus would much prefer a world in which he only had to sacrifice to one god, both for economy and to avoid the risk of inadvertently missing one of the many interested gods. If he prefers such a world, he may be attracted by a religion which promises such a world—psychology is implicitly a big part of the story.

Roman religion kept adding to the number of gods who need propitiation. Professor Ferrero suggests that this happens because of risk aversion and confirmation bias. It is dangerous to stop sacrificing to any of the old gods, and if a new god is introduced people will confirm their beliefs when prayers are followed by good results. Yet with so many gods, paganism became top-heavy and couldn't compete with Christianity.

Scandinavia paganism reduced its number of gods, but Christianity had the additional advantage of professional priests. Persian polytheism survived, but by becoming quasi-monotheistic. Quite early—by the sixth century B.C—it converted the pantheon of pagan gods into a hierarchy with one supreme god and numerous demigods who were subordinates, not competitors for sacrifice. Moreover, a professional priesthood developed. In India, the old religion also faced challenge, from Buddhism and Islam. It evolved from its simple roots by developing a large hierarchy of nonjealous gods promoted by a priestly Brahmin class, who monopolized religious ritual but were not attached to any individual god. Since these gods were nonjealous, Hinduism was like a firm selling differentiated products. (One might suggest something similar about Roman Catholicism and Shiite Islam.)

Such is Professor Ferrero's theory. His verbal presentation is clear and makes effective use of economic concepts such as exchange, competition, and industrial organization, but the book does introduce game matrices and equation-based models, perhaps redundantly.

The theory depends on jealousy being a feature of Indo-European paganism, a point on which I would like to have seen more evidence. Archaeological evidence would be useful. Did everybody worship many gods? The Romans had many on their calendar, but did everybody worship every god?

I am also discomfited by the reliance on confirmation bias and risk aversion. These prove too much. If they are so strong in the human psyche, why would anyone

take the risk to abandon pagan gods, after adding to their number for centuries? A key question is how people choose their religion. True, they will compare perceived cost and benefits, but this depends on their beliefs. Adopting a religion is not as simple as choosing a flavor of ice cream. It combines belief with personal preferences. When you choose a religion, it is not just because you would like that religion to be true, but because you think it likely to be true. A farmer will not choose the cheapest god, but the one who provides the best mix of sacrifice cost and weather benefit. The rational approach would be Pascal's wager. He would choose gods as he chooses planting time: based on what has worked before and the effort, risk, and evidence. What religion would emerge from the behavioral morass is hard to see. The best religion of all, for the wishful thinker, would be one in which no sacrifices were necessary at all.

Although the book is about polytheism, it inevitably involves the question of why monotheistic Christianity beat it in Europe, and monotheistic Islam beat it in Persia but not in India. For Christianity, the obvious explanation is that it was evangelical. (Of course, for us Christians, its truth is an even more obvious reason, but let's put that aside.) A religion that tries to make converts is going to beat one that doesn't, regardless of professional priesthood. Christians thought it was important to make other people Christians. This resulted in personal evangelism, professional missionaries, translation of the Christian writings into Gothic, legal proscription of pagan temples and the banning of sacrifices. The Empire did not have positive reasons to convert Christians, however, only negative ones, and even those were of small worth; why should pagans care if Christians denied their gods, and did the emperors really need to worry about Christian rebellion?

India is the real puzzle. Why did polytheism survive there? Christian missionaries could not reach that far, but Islam was an evangelistic competitor that also became the religion of the government. Ferrero's explanation is that Hinduism had both noncompetitive gods and a professional priesthood. I would, however, welcome a second book exploring why Islamic evangelicalism and power failed.