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RELIGION AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY: HELP OR HINDRANCE?

RELIGIÓN Y PROSPERIDAD ECONÓMICA: ¿AYUDA U OBSTÁCULO?

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary description of the impact of religiosity on social life, the dominant view is one dating back to Max Weber (+1920) on the importance of the Protestant ethic, which, while emphasizing the value of work, at the same time favors prosperity, seeing it as a sign of God's blessing. Based on these assumptions, some seem to suggest that Protestants earn more because their religiosity translates directly into increased profits in their professional work. Contemporary Polish economic philosophers Marcin Gorazda and Tomasz Kwarcinski seem to argue with this thesis in their latest book "Between Prosperity and Happiness." (Cracow 2020). In my paper, I will refer to a brief outline of the biblical context of the question of the propriety of wealth, the reasons for the New Testament warnings against the dangers of wealth, in order to refer to research highlighting the relationship between religiosity and economic success (for example, recent American research on the impact of religion on family firms). Thus, the thesis of Protestantism's favorability toward wealth (compared to

Catholicism) must take into account other still other factors such as demographic or sociological.

Keywords: theology of progress, religiosity and wellbeing, Thomism, Christian leadership.

RESUMEN

En la descripción contemporánea del impacto de la religiosidad en la vida social, la opinión dominante es la que se remonta a Max Weber (+1920) sobre la importancia de la ética protestante, que, al tiempo que subraya el valor del trabajo, favorece la prosperidad, considerándola un signo de la bendición de Dios. Partiendo de estos supuestos, algunos parecen sugerir que los protestantes ganan más porque su religiosidad se traduce directamente en mayores beneficios en su trabajo profesional. Los filósofos económicos polacos contemporáneos Marcin Gorazda y Tomasz Kwarcinski parecen rebatir esta tesis en su último libro "Entre la prosperidad y la felicidad". (Cracovia 2020). En mi ponencia, me referiré a un breve esbozo del contexto bíblico de la cuestión de la propiedad de la riqueza, las razones de las advertencias del Nuevo Testamento contra los peligros de la riqueza, para referirme a la investigación que destaca la relación entre religiosidad y éxito económico (por ejemplo, la reciente investigación estadounidense sobre el impacto de la religión en las empresas familiares). Así pues, la tesis de la favorabilidad del protestantismo hacia la riqueza (en comparación con el catolicismo) debe tener en cuenta otros factores aún distintos, como los demográficos o los sociológicos.

Palabras clave: teología del progreso, religiosidad y bienestar, tomismo, liderazgo cristiano.

I. INTRODUCTION

There was a lot of research about relationship between practicing religion and generating wealth, economic success or prosperity, what we consider as ‘well-being’ in business. Is religion – I will mostly refer to Christian tradition – helpful or is it not ? Is practicing Christian faith having any real impact or influence on the progress of a company and growth in its results, development etc? Is it legitimate to expect such an influence or not? Is it a by-product of religious attitude, because it is obvious that as such religion is not directed to mundane prosperity, but maybe religious formation, i.e. attending dairy Mass, is having good impact for the company's prosperity after all?

All these questions are important when we are reminded about the Gospel warnings against wealth, proving it to be a threat to authentic religiosity. It is also worth recalling the accusations formulated by modern philosophers about the functional character of religion [1]: deprived of its cognitive dimension after the Enlightenment debates, religion was treated as a means to social ends [2]. This can be seen especially in the postulates of the Marxist movement, but also in later discussions on the meaning of religiosity in the context of value theory, e.g. by Max Scheler. Beyond this, the question arises how to treat the classic posture of Max Weber regarding protestant vs catholic ethics of human labour?

In order to answer at least some of these questions, I will first deal with the notion of a 'cause', in order to understand in what sense religion can be perceived as a cause of prosperity Secondly, I will add some comments, which are derived from in-depth interviews (n-10) with CEOs working in Polish companies in various sectors of the economy.

II. BROADENING THE CAUSALITY: HOW TO OVERCOME A MODERN SHIFT

When considering the causality of wealth, it is necessary to first define what we mean and what causality itself is. The first modern association leads to the obvious laws known from physics: action-reaction. This means that causality has been reduced primarily to physical motion, an interaction with fundamental particles, although there is no shortage of studies that show a broader understanding of causality in physics as well [3]. It is this phenomenon of a narrowing understanding of causality that M. Dodds points to [4], showing how modern science and its development are linked to the hegemony of the understanding of causality as a efficient cause. Among the four causes assumed

1 Stewart Guthrie, "How Is Religion Causal—and What Is It, Exactly?" *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 3 (1999), pp. 405-412. See also: Sasa Horvat, Piotr Roszak, "Is Religion Only Utilitarian? Evolutionary Cognitive Science of Religion Through a Thomistic Lens", *Theology and Science*, 3(2020), 475-489.

2 Piotr Moskal, *Religia i prawda* (Lublin: KUL, 2008).

3 Gail Fine, "Forms as Causes: Plato and Aristotle," in A. Graeser (ed.), *Mathematics and Metaphysics in Aristotle* (Bern: Haupt, 1987), pp. 69–112.

4 Michael J. Dodds, *Unlocking Divine Action: Contemporary Science and Thomas Aquinas* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012).

in Aristotle – final cause, formal cause, material cause and efficient cause - only the latter remains. For Dodds, this is a significant impoverishment of reflection, which, in a climate of strong empiricism, pays attention only to what comes from experience and remains verifiable in sense cognition.

At the same time, this is due to the adoption in practice and application to other fields than was originally intended, of the principle of Ockham's razor, which has led to the adoption in science of an approach based on the so-called principle of sufficient reason. It focuses on the selection of one main factor and the omission of all others that do not directly translate into the achievement of an effect. Only this factor is regarded as the cause, which can be attributed with direct influence and giving the final shape. Above all, the two causes, the purposive and the formal, ceased to count, and so it should come as no surprise that teleological thinking became the domain of philosophy and religion (to which questions of justification, answers to questions of why, and therefore of purpose, were ascribed), which no longer fitted in with scientific interpretation. Formal causation, which determined the arrangement and identity of being, why it is what it is, was also put in the shade. And since matter, from Descartes onwards, is merely res extensa, unpossessed of its own dynamics and capable of being displaced by an external factor, it quickly lost the rank of cause. In such a context, the question of cause became limited to a single aspect, leaving aside the understanding of cause as influencing something, rather than merely producing an effect, which was so important for Thomas Aquinas.

In this philosophical context, David Hume proponed a definition called the 'Regularity Theory of Causation': Whenever events occur regularly, directly one after the other, and remain in spatial contact with each other, we can say that the earlier was the cause of the later[5]. Without going into details, we know well that this definition does not always work; for example, a regularly falling barometer reading, preceding a change in the weather is not the direct cause of its change. The barometer does not change the weather, it only gives information about the change[6].

Today, attention is paid to causation in terms of downward causation, i.e. the influence of the structure on the part (and not just the influence of the part on the whole), but at the same time attempts are made to describe the influence of historical factors (e.g. experience) in the development of events. In the field

5 Peter J. Kail, *Efficient Causality in Hume*, in *Efficient Causality: A History*, edited by Tad M. Schmaltz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 231–257.

6 Marcin Gorazda, Tomasz Kwarciński, *Między dobrobytem a szczęściem. Eseje z filozofii ekonomii* (Kraków: Copernicus Center, 2020), p. 252-263.

of economics, there is also an ongoing discussion of causality to break the dominance of efficient causation alone, and it is only through the prism of the acting agent that explanations in economics and the prediction of market phenomena are developed. Meanwhile, as Ł. Hardt, it is worth noting dispositional explanations that appeal to the metaphysics of nature [7], and that escape simple identification with efficient causality

The challenge facing the contemporary debate between religion and science is to broaden the understanding of causality, to rediscover what it means to be a cause, and how much we need to remove from thinking the stereotypes present along with the tendencies that narrow causality.

III. WEBER'S CHALLENGE: RELIGION AS FACTOR OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

It is only against the background of such an understanding of causality that these questions can be posed. Turning to our topic of whether adherence to a particular faith has any connection with getting rich, we will trace whether economics in general can be considered in the relationship of causality with other fields of science.

Before we move on to theological considerations, let's lean into its causal relationships with sociology and demography as key to social life[8].

The beginning of economics as a science is linked, as it were, to two individuals: Adam Smith (1723-1790) a Scottish philosopher with his work 'Wealth of Nations', who is considered the father of free trade and the so-called invisible hand of the market, which based on the individualistic, selfish preferences of participants in a market creates global prosperity.

The second is David Ricardo (1772-1823) and his leading position 'Principles of Political Economy'. Ricardo laid the foundations of detailed theories, models of the market and international trade, such as the model of the theory of the land rent, the labor wage, the quantity theory of money and the model of comparative advantage. Both believed that the economic principles they formulated were universal and applied to all people regardless of when and

7 Łukasz Hardt, "In Favour of Dispositional Explanations. A Christian Philosophy Perspective with Some References to Economics", *Scientia et Fides* 1(2022) 239-261.

8 In this part I rely on . Marcin Gorazda, Tomasz Kwarciński, *Między dobrobytem a szczęściem. Eseje z filozofii ekonomii* (Kraków: Copernicus Center, 2020).

where they lived. It can be said that both were convinced that their science was ahistorical and independent of socio-geographical context.

This approach by both men was bound to meet with criticism. Therefore, a school based on history was established relatively quickly in Germany in the 19th century and the institutional school in the US at the same time.

The German school believed that economic phenomena should be looked at holistically, so not only historical conditions but also all aspects of socio-economic development could not be dismissed. Thinking in such terms necessarily had to be combined in the key of causality with analyses of a sociological and demographic nature.

Demography studies trends in the spread or contraction of certain populations, and this has implications for the intergenerational transmission of certain economic patterns. In this context, even younger academic perspectives, such as statistics and sociology, have slowly begun to seep into the consideration of economic issues. As is usually the case, there is an ongoing dispute between different schools of economics to this day, but this is not a topic for developing today's discourse, as we will slowly consider whether there is a causal relationship between economics and professed faith.

Max Weber can be considered the forerunner of this research. He studied the impact of religion on the economic development of specific regions. He posed a similar question to the one Adam Smith would repeatedly ask himself: what makes some nations richer and others poorer ? According to Weber, it is the specific Protestant ethic, which boils down to a work ethos, limiting consumption and reinvesting accumulated resources, that contributes to the richness of those regions in Germany where this religion dominates.

Weber's theses are difficult to maintain today if only for several reasons, but the most important it seems to be that even at the time he made his theses based on his research in Germany, other Protestant countries such as Sweden were in poverty while Catholic Belgium enjoyed affluence. Certain hidden assumptions can be clearly seen in him, which then affect the overall analysis, that was historical, not empirical, by the way. It is difficult to reconcile with Protestant ethics as such an emphasised value of work if, for example, a religious denomination accepts predestination. Many Catholic theologies, on the other hand, have recalled the value of daily work and the ways in which we can sanctify ourselves and others through work. The imperative to cooperate with the Creator in the work of creation played its key role, which was linked to the biblical exegesis practised by classical authors such as Thomas Aquinas[9].

Karl Marx, on the other hand, believed that existence shapes consciousness and that religion is ‘opiate of the masses.' Many economists to this day believe that social changes such as getting rich, among other things, should be attributed to technological advances.

A different view is held by David McCloskey, who argues that it is socio-cultural change that is a prerequisite for technological change. The dispute is important, and to illustrate it one can ask the question: should we educate first or give away smartphones?

IV. CONTEMPORARY BUSINESS PRACTICE AND RELIGION SIGNIFICANCE FOR WELL-BEING

My personal experience of almost 35 years in business is not clear. Many of my colleagues who are business owners believe that faith gets in the way of doing business and getting rich regardless of religious affiliation. Others, on the contrary, say openly that it was faith that helped them get to wealth.

So does religiosity help or hinder getting rich? In the minds of people there are evangelical warnings against getting rich, the dangers associated with it, but on the other hand there are parables about investing, resourcefulness, foresight, goal orientation, which in economics in turn is crucial, that is, knowing what is the means and what is the goal or the end so to speak.

It is known that there are and have been fears of a 'reductionist' approach to religion, the so-called 'Prosperity Gospel,' that is, reducing the gospel to a simple prescription on how to become rich and happy. The approach to wealth brought by religious practice is one of the many factors that positively enhance the 'opportunities' to achieve wealth, but in a dimension that does not hinder, but develops a person. Religiosity enhances those qualities in business that turn out to be useful, but it is, so to speak, a 'by-product' of a principled moral attitude.

According to the people I spoke to, the positive role of religion in business was related to competence formation - being religious, in their view, translates into a propensity for risky behaviour. A religious person who learns to entrust

9 Piotr Roszak, “Exegesis y metafisica. En torno a la hermeneutica biblica de santo Tomas de Aquino”, *Salmanticensis* 61 (2014) 301-323; See also Piotr Roszak, “Revelation and Scripture: Exploring Scriptural Foundation of sacra doctrina in Aquinas”, *Angelicum* 93 (2016) 191-218.

his life and eternity to God will be more inclined to make courageous decisions, against the temptation of quick profit. Such skills are acquired with experience, but can also come from cultural and religious traditions. If God takes risks, said one of my interviewees, and I follow God (that's the essence of religious life in Catholicism), this influences my behaviour in business. Many of Jesus's parables are sometimes interpreted in this way by CEOs: they praise the ability to take risks, to multiply talents or denarii..

Other respondents drew attention to the leader's virtues[10] acquired through the practice of the spiritual life: it is goal orientation, a focus on the long-range, what Thomas Aquinas called *longanimitas*. In the opinion of one group of CEOs interviewed, the influence of religion on business prosperity is revealed indirectly, in the ability to focus not on one's own profit, but on the situation of employees, contractors. For others, it is important for relationship building, the tendency to have a lasting bond with the customer, to deepen and seek what is new in the relationship, rather than mindlessly replacing people or partners.

The impact of religiosity for the CEOs interviewed manifests itself in how one reacts in a crisis, when arrangements are not realised, when loss occurs. The ability to overcome difficulties, what used to be referred to as coping, appears in leaders who refer to a religious background. Religious faith provides a sense of support: "I feel I am not fighting for the contract alone", but it also breeds humility, which is a form of intellectual openness, not putting oneself in the centre. In a Christian context, this is complemented by an awareness of human fallibility, of sinfulness, which protects against relying too much on oneself and disregarding others.

There are also claims among CEOs that religion interferes with business, and this is most often linked to the morality that religion establishes, inhibiting, for example, the pursuit of profit, arousing moral dilemmas related to conscience. Others argue that religion can push a leader away from the problems of everyday life and provide him or her with a form of escape from problems, for the reason that it focuses him or her on the eschatological search for happiness. Many conclude that religion and its practice bring to the formation of a leader those qualities that are also attainable through other means, and are therefore not the exclusive domain of religion.

In assessing these statements, it is worth bearing in mind the limitations of this type of research: it is not characterised by the representativeness inherent in

10 Por. Piotr Orłowski, *Tożsamość lidera i jego etyczna formacja z perspektywy traktatu św. Tomasza z Akwinu o rządach Bożych (S.Th., I, 103–119)*, (Toruń: WN UMK, 2022).

statistical surveys, but by a certain insight that allows the research to continue in the future.

V. CONCLUSION

The aim of religion is not to make a profit, as its fundamental focus is on man's ultimate destiny. Yet, through religiosity, which shapes holistic attitudes, a person achieves many goals that benefit him. Religion strengthens rather than limits. The question, of course, is whether every religion, because, however, to reduce all to one type of behavior is a great oversimplification. This can be seen in the dispute over whether Protestantism or Catholicism promotes worldly wealth, which is why ongoing research, for example, on the influence of religion to make risky decisions is extremely inspiring today.

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