Chapter 7

Prosperity and Religion (A), (B), (I)

The link between prosperity¹ and religion is uncontested. In the USA, for instance (the second most competitive country worldwide; World Economic Forum, 2016), religion contributes almost one-third of the national GDP per annum (USD 4.8 trillion). The revenues of US faith-based organisations (USD 378 billion annually) exceed the global annual revenues of Apple and Microsoft combined (Grim & Grim, 2016).

Yet, the relations between prosperity and religion are reciprocal and highly complex (Berger, 1990; McCleary & Barro, 2006). In the first causal arrow, religion is a predictor (independent) variable that affects prosperity. This arrow represents a school of thought (i.e. idealism) that descends from Weber (1905), with the so-called cultural argument that the beliefs of individual Protestants led to higher prosperity. This study argues that the institutional influence of religion has been more decisive than the “cultural path” of this causal relation (see Sects. 5.3.1, 24.1, and Chap. 8). The second causal arrow moves in the opposite direction, with religion as a criterion (dependent) variable (i.e. prosperity affects religion) and stems from Marx (1859 [1913]) (i.e. materialism). Conclusively, both arrows of causality do not compete, but reinforce each other (dialecticism) (Berger, 1990; Guiso et al., 2006; Koch, 2009; McCleary & Barro, 2006) (see Fig. 2.1).

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¹This section addresses the theoretical background of the relation prosperity–religion. Please refer to Sect. 10.4.3.2 for a discussion on the “Prosperity Gospel” or “Theology of Prosperity” as a typical Pentecostal phenomenon.

This chapter offers no exhaustive review of the studies published on the prosperity–religion nexus. There are three reasons for limiting the following account to the most significant works. First, the research is too voluminous to be discussed here in full. Second, such a discussion is not the primary purpose of this book. Third, some studies have already performed this task most efficiently. For instance, Becker et al. (2016) have provided the most comprehensive review of studies on the causes and consequences of the Protestant Reformation (compared to business-as-usual Roman Catholicism). The authors cover previous empirical studies, which have used different variables at individual, city, regional, and cross-country levels. The reviewed studies come from the fields of economics, sociology, and political science.

The next sections synthesise the heated debate on prosperity and Christian religion in Europe and the Americas. Section 7.1 analyses religion as a predictor (independent) variable that affects prosperity (first causal arrow), whereas Sect. 7.2 examines the second causal arrow in the opposite direction (i.e. prosperity affects religion).

7.1 Religion as a Predictor (Independent) Variable that Affects Prosperity

Key issues in this interaction are how the institution of religion influences the institutions of law and state, and therefore, prosperity (institutional influence of religion) (see Sect. 5.3). On the cultural influence of religion (Weberian), central questions are “how religiosity affects individual characteristics, such as work ethic, honesty and thrift, and thereby influences economic performance” (McCleary & Barro, 2006, p. 49).

7.1.1 The Weberian “Cultural” Argument on Christianity and Prosperity (1)

Max Weber linked religion and economic performance arguing that the Protestant Reformation initiated modern capitalism, with Protestant societies outpacing Catholic ones economically (Weber, 1905). Weber’s classic thesis illustrated prosperity differences between diverse religious affiliations using taxable capital available in Baden in 1895. He found that tax returns from financial capital totalled over four millions marks per 1000 Jews; 954,000 marks per 1000 Protestants and 589,000 marks per 1000 Catholics (Weber, 1905, p. 133). Based on this evidence, Weber advanced a Protestant work ethic-based theory of prosperity. Accordingly, Protestant beliefs (e.g. Calvinist, Puritans) would enhance the economy “by fostering traits

such as work ethic, honesty (and hence trust), thrift, charity, hospitality to strangers and so on” (McCleary & Barro, 2006, p. 51).

Following Weber (1905), numerous quantitative studies have analysed the empirical relationships between prosperity indicators (mainly GDP) and religious affiliation (mostly the proportion of adherents). Thousands of articles and hundreds of books have discussed (and continue to discuss) Weber’s thesis. Some works widely accept his claim as one of the most valid explanations of the rise of Western Civilisation while others criticise particular points (Ferguson, 2011); (Berman, 2003, p. 24); (Becker et al., 2016).

However, empirical research on prosperity determinants typically—and blindly—neglects the influence of religion (Barro & McCleary, 2003, p. 760). Religion as a determinant suffers from similar mainstream disregards in other disciplines such as law (Berman, 2003; Witte, 2002), international relations (Snyder, 2011), or political science (Manow & van Kersbergen, 2009).

7.1.2 Some Empirical Studies Refuting Weber’s Thesis

The results and conclusions of several empirical studies associating religion and prosperity vary depending on the type of prosperity proxy variables chosen. Also, the spatial (cross-country, national, or subnational) and temporal configurations of these studies influence the different outcomes.

Acemoglu et al. (2001, 2006) found no effect of religion (adherents) on economic growth in cross-country settings. As shown, concentrating only on religious adherents is problematic (Sect. 5.3.1), yet Delacroix and Nielsen (2001) reported mixed results from comparing different historical periods and proxy variables. Other empirical studies refuting Weber’s thesis have been performed at a subnational level. Cantoni (2015), for instance, found no effects of Protestantism on population figures used as proxies of economic growth. He used a dataset comprising 272 cities in the period 1300–1900 in the German Lands of the so-called “Holy” Roman Empire. The main problem of Cantoni’s approach lies in accepting city size as a proxy of prosperity. Thus, the city-size argument might lead one to consider Sao Paulo or Mexico DC as far more prosperous than Bern or Brussels today, for instance. Moreover, while Cantoni’s finding might be accurate at a subnational level, it cannot account for the historical performance of Germany as a whole compared to other countries with a Catholic tradition (e.g. Portugal or Spain).

7.1.3 *Most Empirical Studies Confirm Weber's Thesis (Although for Different Reasons)*

Based on their comparative examination and systematic, state-of-the-art synthesis, Becker et al. (2016) concluded that historical Protestantism encouraged a wide range of societal developments. Balancing the empirical evidence, most studies have confirmed a positive impact of Protestantism on prosperity using different variables as well as diverse spatial and temporal configurations. On the whole, most empirical studies examining the consequences of the Reformation associate them with positive developments of governance and the economy (Becker et al., 2016).

Economic prosperity has also been robustly linked with secularisation and declining levels of religiosity (Barro & McCleary, 2003; Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Secularisation precedes economic growth, which means that prosperity did not cause secularisation in the past (Ruck et al., 2018). Historically, Protestantism is a well-established precursor of secularism (Snyder, 2011; Agnew, 2010; Shah & Philpott, 2011; Woodberry, 2012; Berger, 1990; Gregory, 2012; Sect. 8.3.4.4). Therefore, the causal arrows seem to run from historical Protestantism (anti-clericalism) to secularisation, to economic prosperity and security, and to postmaterialist values (Granato et al., 1996; Inglehart & Baker, 2000).

Hence, the effects of Protestantism may not be immediate (i.e. considering the previously explained causal arrows). Capitalism emerged during the three centuries after the Reformation, mainly in the Protestant regions of Europe and the New World, and among Protestant minorities in Catholic countries. In contrast, pre-industrial societies were “zero-sum systems” where little or no economic growth took place (Granato et al., 1996). Consequently, Granato et al. (1996) argued that Protestantism has been decisive as it “undermines a set of religious norms that inhibit economic achievement and are common to most preindustrial societies”. Therefore, the authors explain that “Weber is correct in arguing that the rise of Protestantism is a crucial event in the modernization of Europe” (pp. 609–610).

Furthermore, historically Protestant countries still differ considerably in their values and attitudes today compared with Roman Catholic, Orthodox, or Islamic societies. Such enduring effects influence prosperity in the *longue durée*, although few people are still religious in present-day Protestant Europe, for instance (Inglehart & Baker, 2000, p. 49; see also Chap. 10). It is therefore hardly surprising that influential works link empirically good economic outcomes to Protestantism in different sets of countries. However, such studies recognise the effect of historical Protestantism as a pivotal precursor of prosperity pillars rather than as a direct prosperity trigger in a classical Weberian sense. Thus, for instance, the robust empirical associations of Protestantism with prosperity relate to the development of democratic institutions (Woodberry, 2012), the rise of education and printing (Becker & Woessmann, 2009), and the weakening of hierarchical structures (La Porta et al., 1999; Volonté, 2015).

7.2 Religion as a Criterion (Dependent) Variable that Is Affected by Prosperity

While previous subsections concentrated on the influence of religion on prosperity, this section analyses the other direction of the arrow (i.e. the influence of prosperity on religion). A crucial question in this interaction is how political institutions and prosperity affect religious participation and beliefs (McCleary & Barro, 2006, p. 49). Hence, theories of secularisation originate from the understanding of this interaction. Two complementary perspectives are identifiable:

1. The supply-side or “top-down” factors of religion. This literature focuses on the strategic role of religious organisations and leaders in the religious markets. Accordingly, competition among providers of religion affects “the nature of the religion product” (e.g. when governments impose state religions and limit entry). This strand descends from Adam Smith (1791) and was developed by Finke and Stark (1992) and Finke and Iannaccone (1993), among others (McCleary & Barro, 2006, p. 50; Norris & Inglehart, 2004, p. 7). This approach has been related to *Rational Choice Theory*, which contends that individuals and organisations act based on the maximisation of utility (i.e. cost–benefit calculations) (Wilde et al., 2010; Young, 1997). Accordingly, the *Religious Competition Theory* argues that religious organisations that believe there is more competition work harder to win and retain members and are usually more versatile and prone to reform than organisations in monopolistic settings (Wilde et al., 2010, p. 589; Finke & Stark, 1992, p. 19). In response to the models of rational choice, the *Neo-Institutional Theory* contends that institutional contexts greatly define actors’ choices, decisions, and actions (Immergut, 1998; Ingram & Clay as cited in Wilde et al., 2010, p. 590), (see Sects. 8.2, 8.3.4, 9.1, 10.4.1.2, and 10.4.1.3).
2. The demand-side or “bottom-up” model, which emphasises the mass public preferences alongside industrialisation, “modernisation”, and prosperity. In this model, prosperity gradually erodes religious habits, thereby also diminishing the influence of organised religion on politics and governance. This perspective stems from John Wesley (1760), the founder of Methodism; and was further developed by Marx (1859 [1913]), Weber (1905), Hume (1757 [1993]), and Freud (1927), among others. Berger (1990), Norris and Inglehart (2004), among several others, have extended this idea (McCleary & Barro, 2006, p. 50; Norris & Inglehart, 2004, p. 7). Although Weber (1905) dedicates most of his attention to religion as an independent variable, he also recognises that religion can be a dependent variable (Koch, 2009 pp. 12–13).

7.2.1 Influence of Prosperity on Religion: The Theory of Existential Security

Norris and Inglehart (2004) theorised that a sense of existential security (i.e. the feeling that survival and prosperity are secure enough that they can be taken for

granted) usually weakens transcendent religion. Accordingly, the theory of existential security contends that secularisation mostly occurs in advanced industrial nations, yet religious values prevail strongly in most developing countries with rapidly growing populations (Norris & Inglehart, 2010, p. 2). The authors explain that religiosity persists, especially among disadvantaged peoples, particularly vulnerable populations in poorer countries that face personal survival threats (Norris & Inglehart, 2010, p. 5). In contrast, with rising levels of existential security (e.g. the emergence of the welfare states and economic prosperity), citizens in nearly all industrial developed nations are more oriented towards secularisation than people in poorer developing countries (Norris & Inglehart, 2010, p. 15).

Furthermore, feelings of vulnerability drive religiosity, even in rich nations, when comparing levels of economic inequality within their societies. For example, religiosity is strongest among the poorest and least secure sectors of US-American society (Norris & Inglehart, 2010, p. 12).

Additionally, Norris and Inglehart (2004) theorise that, currently, “post-Christian forms of spirituality” (e.g. yoga, astrology, or other “New Age” alternative beliefs and practices) are widespread in Western societies. Apparently, these post-Christian beliefs and practices may provide alleviation from the anxiety and stress that the secular world poses in industrial societies (Houtman & Aupers, 2007; Norris & Inglehart, 2010; Pike, 2006; Silver, 2006).

The theory of existential security constitutes a robust and revised version of the secularisation theory with empirical (quantitative) data from the World Values Survey (WVS) of 1981–2001. The WVS project conducted representative national surveys of the basic values and beliefs of the publics in all six continents (in more than 90 independent countries, containing more than 85% of the world’s population). Norris and Inglehart (2004) provide significant correlations which consistently link the prevalence of religious practices and values with multiple macro-level, empirical measures of human development, and the social and economic progress of all countries. Moreover, a large body of secondary empirical findings from diverse methods, approaches, and disciplines such as welfare studies, health care, and social psychology, is consistent with the existential security thesis (Norris & Inglehart, 2010, p. 6).

The sermon on “The Use of Money” by John Wesley (1760) constitutes an early empirical example of the theories of secularisation and existential security. Wesley preached, “gain all you can, save all you can, give all you can” but he regretted the fact that, as his congregants became wealthier, they also became less religious (McCleary & Barro, 2006, p. 49–50).

Yet, existential security as a “detrimental” principle of faith seems to have been intuitively recognised, even in more ancient times. The book of Proverbs in the Bible registers the following assertion:

... give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the Lord? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain (King James Bible, 1769, Proverbs 30: 8-9).

The author of this proverb requests a sober measure of wealth. He recognises that too much prosperity and existential security will lead him to lose his faith in God (i.e. deteriorate his religiosity), but that too little will lead him to sin (i.e. steal).

Similarly, a Protestant stakeholder interviewed in this study referred to the book of Judges in the Bible, which narrates several cycles of struggle and suffering during which the Jews sought the God of Israel (see Sect. 21.7).

This principle comes down to us historically and repetitively, for example, from the book of Judges [...] the more Israel obeyed God's law in the Bible, the better [they] got, whereas whenever they strayed far from God's commandments, they faced the worst crises. [...] this pattern is repeated cyclically over and over again in history, leading to social failure and oppression whenever people disobeyed God (Independent Protestant believer).

The previous stakeholder's statement would appear to contradict the theory of existential security at first sight. However, according to the book of Judges (King James Bible, 1769), Israel prospered during numerous generations after obeying God's commandments. Yet, after prospering (i.e. after gaining existential security), the Jews turned away from the God of Israel (i.e. diminished their religiosity). Afterwards, they started worshipping other gods and idols (i.e. post-Judaism), and the entire nation fell into disgrace once more, as a consequence. In the new crises, they repented and restored their obedience to the God of Israel, and subsequently, the Jewish nation achieved prosperity again, only to then take it for granted once more after a few generations and begin a new crisis. This cycle repeats several times; therefore, the narration of the book of Judges relates a cyclical feature that demonstrates consistency with the theory of existential security.

Chapters 18, 19, 20, and 21 (case studies) will show that the theory of existential security is the most prominent principle identified after analysing the qualitative data (case studies). This study applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a qualitative method in the case studies (Sect. 17.6). Interestingly, CDA draws from Marxist theory (Hjelm, 2014, p. 856), which this study also links empirically with the theory of existential security.

7.3 Summarising the Core Messages of Chapter 7. *Prosperity and Religion*

The relationships of prosperity vis-à-vis religion as a predictor (independent) variable (e.g. Weber) or as a criterion (dependent) variable (e.g. Marx) reinforce each other and produced a vast body of theories and empirical studies. In the first causal arrow, Weber's explanations and findings in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* has attracted much criticism over the last century. The debate remains polarised. Thus, numerous quantitative studies link the relations between Christian religions and prosperity indicators. The corresponding empirical conclusions either support Weber's central thesis (mainly at cross-country levels, e.g. La Porta et al., 1999; Granato et al., 1996) or refute it (mainly selective regional examples or

subnational levels; see, for instance, Cantoni, 2015; Delacroix & Nielsen, 2001; Iannaccone, 1998).

In any event, the effects of Christianity on prosperity seem to vary depending on the leading religious denomination influencing a given society. Recent research largely confirms that the Reformation played a vital role in Europe's economic and political trajectory, although for different reasons than those advanced by Weber (Woodberry, 2012; Becker et al., 2016, p. 11). Consequently, a Protestant "work ethic" might oversimplify the intricate process that makes Protestant societies more prosperous than Roman Catholic or Orthodox ones. A particular work ethic is no more than one of many underlying mechanisms and contributing factors.

For instance, education and hierarchy are two decisive prosperity mechanisms related to religious denominations. The historical Protestant focus on education has positively influenced societal and prosperity outcomes (Becker & Woessmann, 2009). Likewise, the hierarchical power relations in Orthodoxy, Islam, or Roman Catholicism have had unfavourable long-term effects on social progress and prosperity (La Porta et al., 1997). Chapters 8, 9, 10, and 11 will elaborate on these issues.

The historical institutional influence of religion has been the crucial factor with regard to prosperity/transparency (more than the current proportion of adherents). Thus, most empirical findings contradict the prevailing Roman Catholic ideology, which has insisted (without, however, providing much empirical evidence) on restoring what it considers a "prosperous and peaceful medieval society" (see, for instance, Ratzinger & Pera, 2006; Restrepo, 1939). The Middle Ages allowed the Roman Church-State to create a theocratical order in which the papacy established a hierarchical society and in which spiritual power prevailed over temporal power. This Roman Catholic ideal meant (and still means) that the ecclesiastical hierarchy determines the legal principles and the basic norms of collective life (Figueroa, 2016, p. 155).

The second causal arrow (religion as a dependent variable vis-à-vis prosperity) resulted in, among others, secularisation theories focusing on either the supply or demand-side of religion. The theory of existential security (Norris & Inglehart, 2004) is an influential model that empirically focuses on the variations of the demand-side and revises the secularisation theory.

While cultural and institutional proxies delineate the quantitative and QCA empirical settings (2/3 of the results of this study), the theory of existential security is particularly relevant in the application of grounded theory in the qualitative part of the research (1/3 of the results). In other words, the empirical focus of the quantitative and QCA parts is the relationship of religion, as a predictor (independent) variable, to prosperity. Yet, after coding and applying grounded theory in the qualitative part, the second arrow of relation (religion as a dependent variable) appeared relevant.

Empirical Expectation

2. *I expect the empirical evidence to corroborate a trend towards higher prosperity (competitiveness) in historically Protestant countries and lower competitiveness in historically Catholic countries. This expectation is based on abundant empirical studies linking higher prosperity outcomes with Protestantism at a cross-country level.*

The next chapters further explain the close corruption/prosperity–religion nexus from an institutional-legal and from a theological perspective.

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