This is a profound and thought-provoking book that revisits the long-standing question of the role of Islam in the economic underdevelopment of Muslim-majority countries. Through a skillful combination of economic theory and historical analysis, Jean-Philippe Platteau argues that the main difference between Islam and Christianity is that Islam has a decentralized structure under which clerics are not governed by a single authority, unlike Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christianity which possess a more centralized hierarchical organization. According to the author, it is this lack of a central authority of clerics in Islam that makes autocrats in Muslim-majority populations more susceptible to political instability than their counterparts in Christian-majority populations. The reason is that even if the state succeeds in co-opting most clerics of the “high Islam,” there will likely be rebellious clerics of “low Islam” who can still cause instability because of their ability to issue religious fatwas. This situation cannot occur in Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christianity as rebellious clerics are deprived of their supernatural legitimacy. The lack of political instability induces rulers of Muslim-majority populations to invest less in progressive institutions that are conducive to economic development, and makes the transition to liberal autocracy, let alone democracy, a daunting task.

The narrative challenges a number of well-known theses on the negative impact of the doctrine of Islam on economic and political development. Among these are Max Weber’s thesis that attributes the rise of capitalism to Protestantism’s individualistic culture and work ethic, Bernard Lewis’ thesis on the non-separation of religion and politics in Islam, and more recently, Samuel Huntington’s thesis on the inevitable clash between Islam and Christianity due to their inherently conflictual characteristics.

Platteau supports his narrative by numerous historical case studies. Here, he builds on previous scholarship of historians and political scientists. In Chapter 2, he demonstrates, quite persuasively, that early medieval Europe was not characterized by a separation of religion and politics, and that Protestantism was like Islam a decentralized doctrine that enabled the emergence of revivallist and puritan movements that were often violent. In Chapter 3, he argues that religion and politics were mostly separable in Islamic history, where politics typically had the upper hand over religion. This runs contrary to Lewis’s thesis. Chapter 4 introduces the core argument of the book, which is based on a formal model where an autocrat is faced by clerics who may choose whether to rebel or not. Clerics are heterogeneous with respect to their preference for material wealth and for social and political justice. The autocrat then chooses his level of appropriation of national wealth (corruption), and the “wage” that is to be paid to co-opt (at least a proportion of) clerics. This setup generates the main predictions of the narrative. Most importantly, it shows how clerics under a centralized structure are easier to co-opt than decentralized clerics (which is the case of Islam and Protestantism).

The rest of the book supports the core argument by analyzing the underlying conflict between the autocrat and the clerics under various historical case studies. Chapter 5
discusses the cases of weak states in the history of Islam, whereas Chapter 6 provides examples from strong autocracies. Chapter 7 moves on to examine the rise of revivalist or puritan Islam in the last two centuries. Chapter 8 discusses other decentralized religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, in which revivalist movements were commonplace, as in Islam. Chapter 9 introduces the case of enlightened autocracies in twentieth-century Turkey and Tunisia. Finally, Chapter 10 concludes the narrative.

Overall, this is an original book. Its originality stems not only from its combination of economic theory (written from a political economy angle) and historical analysis, but more importantly from its interdisciplinarity and its appreciation of the notion of “historical contingency.” Unlike many studies in social sciences, the author is always aware of the complexity of the historical context and of the fact that a given set of parameters may lead to totally different outcomes depending on the context. This awareness on the part of the author is evident in two ways. First, the model is not merely a simplistic characterization of reality. It is a complex and well-thought model that produces a variety of equilibria. Second, the author is quite transparent when discussing specific historical case studies and is well aware of the limitations of the theory. This is evident, for example, when he acknowledges the role of foreign intervention in the underdevelopment of the region.

The book triggers various debates. To begin with, there is the central question of why Islam became decentralized to begin with, despite the continuous attempts of rulers and mainstream clerics to centralize it. Put differently, why did Emperor Constantine I succeed to the contrary in standardizing and centralizing Christianity in the Council of Nicea in 325, but his Muslim counterparts apparently failed? And did they really fail? One can argue, for example, that decentralization is not an inherent characteristic of Islam. After all, clerics of the four schools of jurisprudence of Sunni Islam, along with Shafi’i’s principles of Islamic jurisprudence and Ash’ari theology, became victorious over the countervailing schools by the tenth century, and have since then claimed the absolute (centralized?) authority over the doctrine of (Sunni) Islam. Moreover, outcast clerics rarely gained popularity among the masses. The main exceptions have been the split between Sunni and Shiite Islam, and the rise of Wahhabism (which can be traced back to the Hanbali school) within Sunni Islam.

Second, the model presumes that the population is only mobilized by clerics. While the author convincingly justifies this by arguing that this was most likely the case in the pre-modern period, the assumption becomes more problematic as we move to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Of particular relevance here is the role of nationalist movements. In many parts of the Arab World, nationalism was endorsed by democratic forces, fascist forces, and the post-colonial military regimes, and it often managed to mobilize the masses without the need for clerics. More importantly, secular pro-democracy nationalist mass movements are an understudied phenomenon in the history of the region. The 1919 Egyptian democratic uprising is remarkable in this regard.

Finally, there is the issue of strong states versus weak (tribal) states. Not all Arab countries are tribal. While this is likely the situation in most Arab peninsula countries, it is less so in the Levant and Egypt, and it is important to appreciate these differences.

All in all, this is a must-read for social scientists and historians who are interested in the economic and social history of the Middle East and North Africa.

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