

Altruism, Prayer and Transformation of Social Preferences: A Dialogue Between Theology and Economics

Gherardo Girardi

Associate Professor, St Mary's University

Abstract

The Italian economist and pioneer Antonio Genovesi argued that people need to find an appropriate balance - or, in economic terms, a trade-off - between self-interest and the interests of others (Cerrino, 2024). Being an abbot and believing that the Christian faith is “not only useful, but true and divine” (Genovesi, 1781), Genovesi would have been well aware of prayer’s ability to influence this trade-off by fostering a greater disposition toward altruism. This connection between prayer and altruism aligns with a considerable body of evidence in the social sciences, which finds a positive association between prayer and charitable giving (e.g. Greenway, Schnitker and Shephard, 2019).

Adopting a meta-preferences approach (George 2001) and a standard quadratic utility function, and positing that more time spent in prayer implies less time spent earning a wage income, this paper models prayer as a technique by which a utility maximizing individual can mould his or her social preferences towards being more altruistic. The paper's main finding is that, using a relatively conventional model, prayer can shift one's social preferences from "there is more pleasure in receiving than in giving" to "there is more pleasure in giving than in receiving," in accordance with the teachings of Jesus Christ (Bible, Acts 20:35). Furthermore, in a Nash-Cournot setting with two identical individuals earning equal wages, a sufficiently high wage leads to a single, stable equilibrium where preferences align with those described by Jesus in the Bible.

The paper incorporates St Augustin’s belief that salvation is partly the result of grace (obtained through prayer in the model) and partly the result of one’s effort (obtained by dedicating time to prayer). Salvation is understood here as experiencing more happiness from giving than from receiving, rather than the other way round. The model captures the notion of sin, defined as excessive (i.e. suboptimal) attachment to own consumption, consistently with the notion of sin as “a failure in genuine love for God and neighbour caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 1849). Finally, it captures the notions of prayer, fasting (reduced consumption) and charitable giving.

Keywords: Genovesi, prayer, social preferences, meta-preferences, altruism

Bibliography

Cerrino, B., 2024. 10 Lessons in Civil Economy (10 Lezioni di Economia Civile), Effata

Genovesi, A., 1781, *Philosophical Meditations on Religion and Morality* by the Abbot Antonio Genovesi, (Meditazioni Filosofiche sulla Religione e sulla Morale del Signor Abate Antonio Genovesi), Remondini (Venice).

George, D., 2001. Unpreferred Preferences: Unavoidable or a Failure of the Market?. *Eastern Economic Journal*, 27(4), pp.463-479.

Greenway, T., Schnitker, S. and Shephard, A., 2019. Religious Service Attendance, Moral Foundations, God Concept, and In-Group Giving: Testing Moderated Mediation. *Review of Religion Research*, 61(4), pp.301-322.

Vatican, 2023. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Ascension Press.