

EIGHT THEORIES OF RELIGION

SECOND EDITION

Daniel L. Pals

New York

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

2006

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904–1905)

Few scholarly books have made their authors more of an intellectual celebrity or led to a more sustained and spirited discussion than this striking effort in cultural analysis, which Weber first published as a pair of articles in the *Archive* just after becoming one of its new editors. Debate over its famous argument, known almost everywhere as “the Weber thesis,” has continued for a full century, with little reason to think it will not go on for another. At its core is a startlingly bold but fundamentally simple thesis. Weber claims there is a close connection between religion, the rise of economic capitalism, and the birth of modern civilization in Western Europe.

Weber begins by noticing, as had others, an odd fact of life in modern Germany: In proportion to their numbers, Protestants were much better represented than Catholics among the class of business leaders, capital investors, and skilled corporate managers. To account for this fact, some had suggested that perhaps Catholics are just more spiritually inclined people, while Protestants tend to be more materialistic. Such explanations, says Weber, will not satisfy anyone who intimately knows Protestant attitudes, both past and present. If we look closely at their history, we see that the most successful of these enterprising Protestant businessmen have often also been the most intensely religious, keeping diaries that carefully recorded their daily efforts to follow the will of God in their lives. If anything, we could better suppose that something in the religiosity itself of these Protestants is what urged them toward serious enterprise in business. So inquiry can better begin with Protestantism’s founders: Martin Luther in Germany and the French lawyer John Calvin in Switzerland.

Though religiously revolutionary, Luther was socially and politically conservative. He did not directly advance new ideas about business, but he did

-160-

assert the equality of all people before God—a principle that entailed a quite unconventional view of everyday human labor. In the Catholic culture of medieval Europe, the daily labor of ordinary people received no special recognition; it was merely what people must do to eat and have shelter. Specifically religious work of the kind undertaken by monks, nuns, and priests was another matter. People who choose lives such as these do much more than everyday labor. They are specially called by God to their duties. They take solemn vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Their divinely appointed vocation (from the Latin *vocare*, “to call”) assures them of exceptional rewards in heaven. To Luther, this notion that some believers are more religious than others was unacceptable. He insisted adamantly on the complete equality of all believers before God. The effect of his teaching was to dissolve the Catholic concept of a special religious vocation simply by expanding it to include everyone. In Weber’s words, Luther “secularized” the idea of vocation, thereby giving as much importance to the everyday work of a peasant or tradesman as the Church had given to the devotional exercises of the parish priest or cloistered nun. This idea—that even the humblest tasks are solemn duties assigned by God himself—invested everyday work in the world, no less than prayer in the convent or chapel, with real religious importance, a genuine spiritual value that it had never before held. All work, not just religious work, was a calling from God; it should not just be done but done well, as faithful service carried out (in the words of the great Puritan poet John Milton) under “the great Taskmaster’s eye.”

Luther’s idea of a “secular calling” offers a start in understanding Protestant energy and success in business, but only that. It does not explain how a particular kind of economic activity seems to have predominated. Protestants chose a distinctive lifestyle marked not only by habits of discipline, thrift,

simplicity, and self-denial, but also by a systematic lifelong pattern of effort in enterprises designed to earn a profit. Moreover, it is just this kind of endeavor, whose sole motive is the orderly and incremental increase of wealth, that expresses the frame of mind we associate with the modern, and uniquely Western, economic phenomenon we call capitalism. Is there, then, a connection? Weber says emphatically “Yes.” But to explain it, to account for the distinctive ethic behind the spirit of capitalism, he turned from Luther to the French lawyer John Calvin, the most cerebral of the reformers.

Calvin was a brilliant theologian, the main architect of the Protestant doctrinal system. But it was he especially who also stressed the dark teaching of predestination, which held that God, and God alone, determines the eternal fate of all mankind, choosing some (“the elect”) to reach Heaven and eternally condemning others (“the reprobate”) to Hell. Calvin was not the first to hold this view. St. Paul, St. Augustine, Luther, and numbers of others taught

-161-

the doctrine, but it was Calvin who made it a centerpiece of his system. He also found it a personal source of deepest assurance. No matter the circumstance, he knew with certainty that he could never be separated from the love of his God, whose divine decree could never be undone. For Calvin’s followers, however, things were more unsettling. Not sharing his natural self-confidence, many were subject to intense anguish about their eternal fate, which God alone determined. The deep psychological effect of this anxiety, says Weber, cannot be underestimated. We need to realize that the early Protestants occupied a unique time and place in Western history. Like medieval Catholics before them, they lived in an intensely religious world, well before the modern era, with its weakened sense of the supernatural. For them there was a fearsome reality in the prospect of an eternity spent either in Heaven or in Hell. On the other hand, Protestants were no longer fully medieval. They were disciples of reformers— again, Luther and Calvin—whose revolt had stripped out of Catholicism its supporting web of “magical” beliefs and customs through which the Church affirmed God’s presence and mediated his love and forgiveness to his people.

Here we should recall Weber’s ideal-type describing the disenchantment of the world. The medieval church was a nursery of the supernatural. Relics, pilgrimages and indulgences, stained glass and sculpture, the wonders of the martyrs and saints, priestly absolution declared in the confessional, the miracle of the wafer and wine turned to Christ’s body and blood in the Mass—all of these formed a vast supernatural support system that mediated God’s forgiveness and favors to the simplest believer. To Luther and Calvin, conversely, this entire system was little more than a mass of satanic superstition. They systematically reduced it to rubble. Consequently, the ordinary Protestant was left without the usual mechanisms to reassure the soul or channel divine love to the heart. They felt instead only the deep inner anxiety of the individual soul, alone in fear before a God who in sovereign mystery decides the destiny of all. This keen personal anxiety was so troubling that Calvinist pastors in later generations groped for a way to offer at least some reassurance. They counseled their congregations to live in the world as true faith requires—soberly, frugally, and with discipline, offering themselves up wholly to God through hard work as his servants in their worldly tasks. If they so lived, they could be reasonably expected to prosper, and prosperity amid simplicity could be taken as the sign of election.

This pastoral guidance, framed to reassure troubled religious souls, was momentarily important. Within it, says Weber, lay the psychological key to the economic future of Europe. For indirectly (and quite without intention) it ushered in a profound change of attitude toward worldly effort and

the acquisition of wealth. Prior to the Reformation, in almost every place and age of Catholic Christendom, any activity aimed at an increase of money or

-162-

property stood under the shadow of moral disapproval. In the eyes of the Church, the pursuit of riches was at best regarded as neutral, but more commonly as vile avarice, one of the seven deadly sins. It was the poor whom Jesus loved; the rich he condemned. Both the Bible and the Church strictly prohibited usury because a loan of money and its return with interest amounted to exploitation of the poor by those who are rich. The Church's discomfort with the pursuit of great wealth by those not born into it could be read in its cathedral architecture. Why were cathedral walls lined with chantries where prayers could be said for the souls of those who endowed them? So that those who had committed themselves to the pursuit of wealth in this life could secure unceasing prayers of forgiveness for the sin of avarice that had brought them their gold. In Catholic theology, the poor always are near to the heart of God; the rich live under a shadow.

Among the theological disciples of Calvin, however, this moral framework was subjected to a most remarkable reconstruction. The pursuit of wealth acquired an entirely new moral status: What was once a vice now became a virtue. The clearest evidence of the change is apparent—in varying degrees, of course—among the main branches of Protestantism in Europe of the early modern era. Weber specifically cites the Puritans, Presbyterians, and Methodists in Britain and America, as well as other Calvinist groups in Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, and elsewhere. In these communities we find aphorisms that urge thrift and self-discipline; diaries and autobiographies that record entire lives lived in private struggles against softness and self-indulgence; and sermons that strike the recurring themes of restraint and sober self-denial, discipline and hard work, thrift and investment, the wise use of both time and money. It is a frame of mind aptly depicted in the adages that Benjamin Franklin made popular across colonial America: “Time is money; sloth is sin.” “A penny saved is a penny earned.” These homespun phrases distill the essence of the spirit of capitalism, even as they mirror the moral reversal that produced it.

Weber's chosen term for this new ethic was “inner-worldly asceticism”—self-denial within everyday society rather than apart from it. The “otherworldly asceticism” of the medieval Church idealized withdrawal from the world to the seclusion of the convent or monastery. The new ethic of Protestantism was just as ascetic, just as self-denying, just as intense and lifelong as the sacred vow of any medieval monk, but its execution was different. It required disciplined mastery of the self *within* the arena of the everyday world. God's call was not to a spiritual practice performed while in hiding from the world but to a disciplined mastery of the world while active in it. That inner-worldly asceticism is the Protestant ethic. As applied to economics, it is hard to mistake; it is the spirit that drives all of modern capitalistic enterprise.

-163-

As he unfolded this argument, Weber was careful to address certain objections and clarify points of confusion. One obvious problem centers on the meaning of the term “capitalism.” If all we mean by that concept is “striving to get rich,” then what is so special about the Protestant connection? Old-fashioned greed certainly can be found anywhere in the world, long before Protestants came along and far away from Europe.

Weber answers this point by making a distinction. Loosely speaking, capitalism can indeed mean any effort to gain wealth; driven by greed or opportunism, it can even take criminal forms like

piracy or theft, and these, certainly, are things we find in all times and places. Long before the Reformation, ancient merchants and conquerors practiced buccaneer capitalism, traveling “through hell itself should it singe the sails” in order to get rich. But true capitalism, the economic ethic created in Europe at the dawn of modern times, is something quite different. The merchant or buccaneer seeks wealth for one purpose—to indulge it, to live in luxury and buy pleasures. The principles that guided the Calvinist businessman in London or Rotterdam of the 1600s are virtually the exact opposite. He earns money with the intent to *save* it, not to spend it. God calls him to a serious, restrained life of self-denial, so he has no interest in luxuries or expensive personal pleasures. His focus is on making a profit as a duty of his calling and a mark of divine election, not on spending money in sinful self-gratification. It is true that this habit of saving leads to the creation of even more wealth—what modern economists call new capital formation—because there is no other place for it to go. But that comes not because of any vice in the heart of the Calvinist; it is, on the contrary, a natural (if unintended) consequence of his virtues. Instead of spending, he saves, reinvests, and thus increases his wealth. Modern capitalism, therefore, is not the everyday greed of all people and places; it is a distinct and different phenomenon that first appeared in one place, Western Europe, and for historical reasons quite specific to the faith and values of Protestantism.

Weber was clear also about another issue. This spirit of capitalism is the key thing, but not the only thing, that makes up this unique modern form of economic activity. In framing the ideal-type that guides his discussion, he lists other elements that define it: rational bookkeeping, separation of the workplace from the home and of corporate from personal property, decisions based on careful calculation, use of free (rather than slave) labor, dependence on mathematical and experimental science, and reliance on a social structure shaped by the rule of law and orderly administration. All of these elements belong to a wider pattern of “rationalization” in Western society, on which Weber placed great importance. Although it is intimately tied to this larger process, it is clear nonetheless that capitalism could not have appeared without the specific impulse that came from the Protestant ethic. It is this idea that has led some to

-164-

refer to Weber as the theorist who “stood Marx on his head.” Weber himself found that assessment too simplistic. But it bears a kernel of truth—applicable as well, we might add, to the reductionism of Freud and Durkheim. In the case of one of the most important socioeconomic revolutions in world history, Weber concludes not that religion is a mere reflection of social structure or economic forces, but precisely the reverse. For him, it is the new religious ideas and behaviors of Protestantism that usher in a reversal of attitudes toward acquiring wealth, and from that reversal has come the culture of commerce, markets, and capitalism that defines Western civilization as we know it today.

Finally, Weber was careful to distinguish the original capitalism of the early modern centuries (1550–1750) from capitalism of his own day and ours. Today Catholics as well as Protestants are capitalists, and among Protestants, most have no awareness or even memory of the old religious motives. The new ethic is now ingrained, and thrives purely on the power of its own economic efficiency; once introduced to a culture, it drives out all rivals, as history has shown. Over the centuries from 1500 to 2000, capitalism has traced a steady rise to dominance both in the West and the world beyond it. Today it governs all economic practice, long after its original Protestant coloring has faded.

From almost the moment it appeared, *The Protestant Ethic* sparked a vigorous intellectual debate that has never really ended. It is quite alive today, a full century after the essays were first

published. Weber himself participated in the first phase of discussion, offering various responses and clarifications to criticisms that appeared, mainly in Germany, over the next five years. By 1910, however, he had run out of patience with the critics and turned from defending his ideas to developing them.