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https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_canadian-journal.php

Weber and Calvinism: The Effects of a "Calling"¹

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I

FEW STUDIES in history have aroused more academic excitement and partisanship than Max Weber's *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*) since it first appeared in 1904–05, and perhaps no study revealed how fundamentally "religious" are the emotions which economic and political prejudices engender within us.

A thesis which seemed to hold Calvinism responsible for the rise of capitalism was bound to arouse the impassioned interest of politicians who detested capitalism, of churchmen who detested Calvinism, or of Marxists who detested both. Also it has been pointed out that the thesis touched upon a wide range of disciplines and consequently drew their exponents into the ring.² Very soon, Robert W. Green observes, "the problem had become a sort of scholarly mêlée . . . the critic, or the critic-of-the-critic might be either pro-Weber or anti-Weber, historian or economist, sociologist or theologian, Catholic or Protestant, Jew or agnostic, Christian socialist or Marxist." "Furthermore," he goes on,

the valuations placed on the Weber thesis by many of the authors seemed to reflect with unfortunate frequency the economic orientation of the religious affiliation (or lack of it) of the writer involved. If the critic was an admirer of capitalism he might maintain that his particular religious faith had stimulated its development. If, on the other hand, the critic was hostile to capitalism, he perhaps would disavow any possibility that his religion had provided an impetus to capitalistic evolution. The Weber thesis, as a result, has become in some instances, the victim of partisan contention.³

It was not simply the wide span of specialized interests that caused Weber's thesis to produce such a stir. It has been shown recently that Weber brought together in the very title of his book two emotionally charged concepts: "the *ethic* of a religious belief and the *spirit* of an economic system, the cure of souls and the balancing of accounts."⁴ When the basic ethical teaching of a church is brought into relationship with the animating spirit of an impersonal

1. An address at a joint meeting of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies, the Canadian Theological Society, and the Canadian Church History Society at Kingston, Ont., in May, 1964.

2. Robert W. Green (editor), *Protestantism and Capitalism*. Boston: (Heath & Co., 1959), editor's Introduction.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. viii–ix. This is perhaps the best brief discussion of the whole debate through extracts from representative writers.

4. Herbert Luethy, "Once Again: Calvinism and Capitalism," *Encounter* (London), XXII (No. 1, Jan. 1964), 26.

and questionable business practice the argument is bound to become charged with emotional overtones, because one cannot avoid implying value judgments on the equated systems. After all, if the fundamental test of a religion is the Dominical statement "By their works ye shall know them," then the ethics of Calvinism or any other system of belief must either validate or invalidate the Faith that it expounds; and if the epitome of capitalism is to be found not simply in profit-making but in the spirit that engenders profit-making, then, if the equation can be substantiated, you have a direct line between the kind of religious faith held by Calvinists and the spirit that produces monopolies, sweated labour, discriminatory legislation, strike-breaking, price-fixing, and the rest. Indeed, in expounding the implications of Weber's thesis, R. H. Tawney unconsciously shows how easy it is to make this equation when he writes: "It is the change of moral standards which converted a natural frailty into an ornament of the spirit, and canonized as the economic virtues habits which in earlier ages had been denounced as vices. *The force which produced it was the creed associated with the name of Calvin. Capitalism was the social counterpart of Calvinist theology.*"⁵ It is precisely the absoluteness with which this equation is put forward that gives offence. It is open to objection because it goes beyond what can be proved and omits all other factors in the situation. The very abstractness of the ideas "ethics" and "spirit" make it impossible to equate the empirical data absolutely or test the equation accurately. R. H. Tawney hinted at this area of almost necessary abstraction in Weber's study when he pointed out that "the question which Weber attempts to answer is simple and fundamental. It is that of the *psychological conditions* which made possible the development of capitalist civilization . . . What influence nerved them to defy tradition? From what source did they derive the principles to replace it?"⁶

Note the term "psychological condition." A good deal of the sting is taken out of the issue if it is realized that what Weber was fundamentally concerned with was the explanation of an *ethos*, i.e. how a certain economic attitude or climate of opinion was made possible. For although Weber regarded Calvin's ethics as a principal factor in producing the spirit of capitalism, he would have admitted that more than one ingredient went into the development. These ingredients, although not the primary constituents, could become all-important, and, if so, would compel recognition that we are dealing with a modified Calvinism, even a corrupted Calvinism; and the corruption of the best may produce the worst. In other words, admit the possibility of contributory factors and what appears to be a simple equation is no longer such.

This may seem to be no more than a reaction to Weber from my own position, but I suggest it is a necessary preface to our review of the discussion simply because the debate became centred in this false, or at least incomplete equation.

5. The italics are mine. Foreword to Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958 edition), p. 2.

6. *Ibid.* My italics.

II

It would be useful at this stage to review briefly the debate that resulted from the appearance of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, but since its value to us would simply be to illustrate the point that we were trying to make in the previous section I shall refer the interested reader to the excellent précis and discussion in Robert W. Green's *Protestantism and Capitalism*.⁷

Recently two commentaries have been added from Switzerland. André Biéler has written a large work on *La Pensée économique et sociale de Calvin*, and also a shorter work, *L'Humanisme sociale de Calvin* (1961).⁸ In this, although there is no general attack on Weber, there is insistence upon the fact that in Geneva profit was rigorously limited by law—far more rigorously than elsewhere. In other words, although Calvin allowed relaxation of the medieval prohibition against usury, which had already broken down all over Europe, the practice of capitalism was put under the rule of law.⁹

The other Swiss protagonist is Herbert Luethy,¹⁰ an economic historian. Luethy regards the whole of Weber's thesis as vitiated by his methods, by the equation of the two vague terms "ethic" and "spirit," and by the fact that Weber limited his study to only one aspect of Calvinism—the Calvinist as entrepreneur, bourgeois, businessman. Calvinism, in his view, has to be seen as a yeast to the whole of society. Roman Catholicism had its opportunity to lead Europe economically in the sixteenth century, but it assassinated its own chances with the Inquisition. He also claims that economic historians are not usually competent theologians, and they have tended to equate Election and Predestination too easily with material success.

The critics' criticisms all have force. When one analyses them they seem to fall into three main arguments:

1. The historical claim that capitalism existed as a going concern long before the Reformation. In so far as capitalism in the popular mind is a system based upon the exploitation of greed, it has been around for a very long time. "To invest the craft guilds with a halo of economic chivalry," declares Tawney, "is . . . inappropriate. They were, first and foremost, monopolists, and the cases in which their vested interests came into collision with the consumer were not a few."¹¹ But even beyond the question of greed, the organization of capital and its systematic use for profit seem to have been fairly well understood by such banking houses as Fuggers and the Medici dynasty.

2. There is the more theological criticism that the Reformers were not especially "advanced" in their views, economic or otherwise. Certainly

7. See Note 2 above.

8. Published in English as *The Social Humanism of Calvin*, translated by T. Fuhrmann (John Knox Press, 1964).

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 5ff.

10. For the details see Note 4 above.

11. *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (Pelican edition, 1938), pp. 32f.

Luther, in his *Address to the German Nobility*, revealed just how naïve a medievalist in economic theory he was, and although there is nothing in Calvin to parallel Luther's remarks about Fuggers and commerce, Calvin and all the Reformers were "medieval" in their fear of what money could do to the soul of a man.

3. Perhaps the most obvious criticism of Weber, and also the most serious, is the fact that none of his examples are taken from pure Calvinism. When he turns to history to find his examples, the closest he can come to Calvin is to the modified Calvinism of Richard Baxter. By far the greater number of his illustrations are from persons or groups which rejected the very doctrines on which he built his interpretation of the Calvinist ethic, i.e. Predestination and Election. Milton rejected the theory of Predestination outright, the Baptists were split on the issue, the Quakers by-passed it, and the Arminians—including Wesley—made it the very point at issue with Calvinism, which they entirely repudiated. Furthermore, the epitome of the capitalist spirit for Weber is Benjamin Franklin, and to regard Franklin, the revolutionary Deist, as a Calvinist is to stretch the claim much too far.

This criticism has even more force when we realize that Weber based his method upon "ideal types," and therefore to carry the argument the "ideal type" of Calvinist asceticism should also be the "ideal type" of capitalism, and vice versa. This Weber does not substantiate. So *if* the thesis implies a direct causal *identity* between the Calvinist ethic and the capitalist spirit, the critics are right. We may still have a shrewd suspicion that something is there, but we cannot establish the identity between the two and we shall have to give the thesis the useful Scottish verdict, "Not proven."

III

But is this the thesis? Is this identity the real heart and significance of Weber's thesis? The more I turn to Weber's writing on the subject, the less convinced I am that this is so, although I believe that the peculiar concentration of the later debate upon the Calvinist-Capitalist equation and on the economic results of the Reformation has tended to obscure the real significance of Max Weber's insight.

What was the line of Weber's thought? He begins his book¹² by admitting that the profit motive—i.e. the cupidity element—has existed in all places and at all times, but (as with many other institutions in the modern world) only in modern western Europe and America has it developed into a systematic enterprise.¹³ This is the point where so much criticism of Weber misses the mark at the outset, because it fails to distinguish between human greed

12. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, to which should be added Weber's enlightening little essay on American sectarianism, "The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism," which is included in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, translated and edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 302-322. It is clear that Weber considered this essay as a supplement to his previous work (cf. *Ibid.*, Note 1, p. 450).

13. *The Protestant Ethic . . .*, pp. 19ff.

and the *systematic* pursuit of acquisitiveness in capitalism. Weber was concerned simply with the latter, which he believed had grown up in the West in association with "free" labour.¹⁴ He recognizes that there are material factors that have helped to make this possible but it is the rational organization of this labour which has made possible both modern capitalism and modern socialism.¹⁵ The problem he sets himself is to discover how the phenomenon of the modern bourgeoisie has arisen, whence the bourgeoisie derives its norms and standards, and what brought into being the distinctive ethos that enabled capitalism to develop.

Next, basing his arguments on the survey carried out in Baden, he notes that Protestants seem to demonstrate more ambition than Catholics, and that the Reformation seems to have been most favourably received in those areas of Europe that had the highest economic potential.¹⁶ In this economic thrust Calvinism seems to have taken the lead, and various forms of Pietism. This is not due simply to the fact that members of these religious forms prefer to work better so that they may live better.¹⁷ Some other explanation must be sought.

Weber then turns to the capitalistic "spirit" and uses as his ideal type of this the practical advice given by Benjamin Franklin in his *Advice to a Young Tradesman* (1748):

Remember, that *time* is money. He that can earn ten shillings a day by his labour, and goes abroad, or sits idle, one half of that day, though he spends but sixpence during his diversion or idleness, ought not to reckon *that* the only expense; he has really spent, or rather thrown away, five shillings besides.

Remember, that *credit* is money. If a man lets his money lie in my hands after it is due, he gives me the interest, or so much as I can make of it during that time. This amounts to a considerable sum where a man has good and large credit, and makes good use of it.

Remember, that money is of the prolific, generating nature. Money can beget money, and its offspring can beget more, and so on. Five shillings turned is six, turned again it is seven and threepence, and so on, till it becomes a hundred pounds. The more there is of it, the more it produces every turning, so that the profits rise quicker and quicker. He that kills a breeding-sow, destroys all her offspring to the thousandth generation. He that murders a crown, destroys all that it might have produced, even scores of pounds.¹⁸

After this and other fairly extensive quotations Weber continues:

The peculiarity of this philosophy of avarice appears to be the ideal of the honest man of recognized credit, and above all the idea of a duty of the

14. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 22-33. It is interesting that Weber puts these two movements together as to some extent equally the outcome of the same over-all movement of history. In the example which capitalism provided for socialism of the economic power in organized labour, we may say that it helped to produce the socialist movement, although we can hardly assume that it was its intention to do so. The profit motive also seems to have had something to do with the bargaining power of the Labour movement. Is this also to be traced to Protestantism? A study of the influence of the Methodist lay preachers on the history of the early Trade Union movement in Britain would be instructive at this point.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 36ff.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 40f.

18. Quoted, *ibid.*, pp. 48f.

individual toward the increase of his capital, which is assumed as an end in itself. Truly what is here preached is not simply a means of making one's way in the world, but a peculiar ethic. The infraction of its rules are [*sic*] treated not as foolishness but as forgetfulness of duty. That is the essence of the matter. It is not mere business astuteness, that sort of thing is common enough, it is an ethos. *This* is the quality which interests us.¹⁹

It is this spirit that Weber is interested in tracing to its source, for "it had to originate somewhere, and not in isolated individuals alone but as a way of life common to whole groups of men."²⁰

He sees this capitalistic spirit as opposed particularly to "traditionalism" in labour, and he gives an interesting example of what this means by instancing the capitalistic device of offering more pay for increased output. The traditionalist attitude among workmen produced an entirely opposite effect to the one intended, for this kind of labourer stopped working as soon as his financial needs were met: "the opportunity of earning more was less attractive than that of working less."²¹ Therefore the incentive of higher piece-rates was only likely to succeed among workmen with a highly developed sense of responsibility,²² and where the age-old obstruction of habit was not so strong as to kill it. He recognizes that modern business people are largely indifferent or hostile to the Church,²³ and yet the very structure of bourgeois life with its strict values and standards demands an ethical root "It will be our task", he says, "to find out whose intellectual child the particular concrete form of rational thought was, from which the idea of a calling and the devotion to labour in that calling has grown, which is, as we have seen, so irrational from the standpoint of purely eudaemonistic self-interest, but which has been and still is one of the characteristic elements of our capitalistic culture."²⁴

The obvious beginning for this is the distinctive meaning that Luther gave to *Beruf* (calling) in his translation of the German Bible. In the Reformation, Weber declares, "one thing was unquestionably new: the valuation of fulfilment of duty in worldly affairs as the highest form which the moral activity of the individual could assume. This it was which inevitably gave every-day worldly activity a religious significance, and which first created the conception of a calling in this sense."²⁵ It leads to the point of view that sees the fulfilment of secular duties as alone the way to please God, and hence the belief that "every legitimate calling has exactly the same worth in the sight of God."²⁶

But Luther was too much a traditionalist in respect of economic questions to have set on foot a new capitalist ethic. "We must take as our starting-point in the investigation of the relationship between the old Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism the works of Calvin, of Calvinism, and the other

19. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 78.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Puritan sects."²⁷ But to this he adds some important qualifications—we are not to think that this was a conscious program, and we are certainly not to think that the spirit of capitalism could only have arisen from Protestantism or that capitalism is the creation of Protestantism.²⁸ We can only point to a direction, to an influence which religion has had on producing our world.

Chapter IV is really the heart of the thesis, and it bears the title "The Religious Foundations of Worldly Asceticism." It is significant for reasons that may become apparent later, but for the moment we must keep it in mind. By this time it is clear that Weber is speaking not only about Calvinism in its more narrow sense as a doctrinal system, but also all those movements that sprang from the Reformation and which shared with Calvinism a particular approach to vocational ethics. It is related to the context of salvation for the individual which made each individual responsible before God. Weber maintains that Calvinism and the movements that have been associated with it tear the individual away from the things to which natural man is tied in this world, and then makes these same things the objects of God's glory.²⁹ All social and other duties are seen not as natural obligations, or occasions for winning merit for ourselves, but as performed for the greater glory of God. The central doctrines in this system are Predestination and Election. Weber develops this point in a long note.³⁰

It is here, when his thesis is pushed, that it is weakest, for most of the men whom he cites as examples of his main thesis were by no means strict Calvinists. If the doctrine of Predestination is the indispensable hinge on which the whole argument turns, then we find that those who exemplify the thesis best are excluded by their doctrinal heterodoxy!

But I wonder if this is really necessary to Weber's argument. A sense of Election is not necessarily tied to Calvin's view of predestination, and it is surely the sense of being divinely chosen, providentially guided, that has given the Calvinist, and many like him, both a consciousness of purpose in life and also the conviction that he is responsible to God. When this is joined with the conviction, which came from Luther, that all callings are holy to God, there are all the ingredients for a life that lives to *work* "for the greater glory of God."

Weber is right in pointing out that Calvinism, together with most of the churches that sprang from the Puritan and evangelical wing of Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, emphasizes ethics, a godly discipline, "visible saints" as indispensable features of church life—they are not the *means* of winning an eternal reward but the *evidence* of regeneration. They would also maintain that the same ethical emphasis is to be found within the New Testament.

Weber says—too glibly—that good works to the Calvinist are the means not of securing salvation but of avoiding damnation, and then he goes on to say that "in practice this means that God helps those who help themselves."³¹

27. *Ibid.*, p. 89.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 108f.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 212, Note 7.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

This is a *non sequitur*. It would be truer to say, according to what Weber himself has said, that "in practice this means that they help God whom God has helped." For the essential point that Weber is making is that membership in such churches demands a whole life, a whole system of conduct, and this is true not only of the Calvinist Churches but of all the groups he mentions in Chapter V. It leads to

the conception of the state of religious grace, common to all denominations, as a status which marks off its possessor from the degradation of the flesh, from the world. . . . The religious life of the saints, as distinguished from the natural life, was the most important point—no longer lived outside the world in monastic communities, but within the world and its institutions. This rationalization of conduct within this world, but for the sake of the world beyond, was the consequence of the concept of calling of ascetic Protestantism.

Christian asceticism, at first fleeing from the world into solitude, had already ruled the world which it had renounced from the monastery and through the Church. But it had, on the whole, left the naturally spontaneous character of daily life in the world untouched. Now it strode into the market-place of life, slammed the door of the monastery behind it, and undertook to penetrate just that daily routine of life with its methodicalness, to fashion it into a life in the world, but neither of nor for this world.³²

That is really the thesis, and if one can forget its association with the word "capitalism," it can be seen that it may be applied to a far wider area. What we are concerned with here is the vocation of the Christian *in this world*, not simply in the realm of business, but in the whole field of public action—politics, education, the development of science—indeed, in most of the things that make the modern world distinctively what it is. Weber's particular interests concentrated attention upon the realm of economics, but far beyond this what he revealed about Protestant asceticism has implications for the whole life of man in this world, and it is to these aspects of the thesis that we must now turn.

IV

Early in his book Weber pointed out that "the concept of the citizen has not existed outside the Occident, and that of the bourgeoisie outside the modern Occident."³³ Of course, it would be entirely mistaken to argue from such references that the idea of citizenship can be traced only to the Reformation—the Greek city States surely contributed something to that—but it is not too much to suggest that a new thrust to representative democracy was given by the ideas released at the Reformation, with or without the sanction of the Reformers themselves. If we can point to the development of capitalism in the areas dominated by Calvinism from the sixteenth century onwards, we can point with equal validity to the fight for and development of representative government. We can even recognize a relation between economic and political principles, for a good deal of the constitutional struggle turned on the principle "No taxation without representation."

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 153f.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

The career of a man like Oliver Cromwell is of particular interest at this point.³⁴ It is a matter of some interest that the sects which supported him were spawned largely within a "world-denying" Separatism that theoretically shunned involvement in civil life, and yet these became the backbone of the army that fought for Englishmen's civil rights and enunciated principles of representative government that are the accepted basis of democracy today.³⁵ The writings and speeches of Cromwell himself reflect the sense of responsibility with which he undertook what he regarded as his mission within the State. When his actions in trying to reconcile the various interests within the parliamentary party were misunderstood, he wrote to a friend:

Whosoever labours to walk with an even foot between the several interests of the people of God for healing and accommodating their differences is sure to have reproaches and anger from some of all sorts. And truly this is much of my portion at the present, so unwilling are men to be healed and atoned; and although it be thus with me, yet the Lord will not let it be always so. If I have innocency and integrity the Lord hath mercy and truth and will own it. If in these things I have made myself my aim, and designed to bring affairs to this issue for myself, the Lord is engaged to disown me; but if the work be the Lord's and that they are His purposes which He hath purposed in His own wisdom, He will make His own councils stand.³⁶

It is, of course, possible that an enthusiast like Cromwell might be self-deluded, but in the final issue his reliance on God's support was to "innocency and integrity" in the cause that he believed was God's own. That is, the basis for his involvement in public affairs was his understanding of Christian responsibility. After the battle of Dunbar in September 1650, he had some forthright words to say on the subject to the English Parliament:

We that serve you beg of you not to own us—but God alone. We pray, you own His People more and more for they are the chariots and horsemen of Israel. Disown yourselves; but own your Authority; and improve it to curb the proud and the insolent, such as would disturb the tranquillity of England, though under what specious pretences soever. Relieve the oppressed, hear the groans of poor prisoners in England. Be pleased to reform the abuses of all professions: and if there be any one that makes many poor to make a few rich, that suits not a Commonwealth.³⁷

Here, I suggest, we see a new kind of citizen who is not afraid to speak to the government in the name of a system of social ethics that he believes to be

34. In *The Lord Protector* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1955; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964). I have tried to trace the relation between personal religion and public action in the life of Oliver Cromwell.

35. Weber noted the ascetic element in Cromwell's army, and cites the Genoese ambassador who called it "an assembly of monks." Cf. *The Protestant Ethic . . .*, p. 235, Note 78, and pp. 235f., Note 81. This is of particular interest because one of my main reasons for writing *The Lord Protector* was to show that there was a "gathered church" relationship between Cromwell and his earliest troops. This relationship with its own "church discipline" had a very definite effect upon his actions at certain crucial points in the Civil War (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 66ff., 158f, 360-371).

36. To Lt. Col. Wilkes, Jan. 1654/5; cf. W. C. Abbott's *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937-47), III, p. 572. The letter is also in Mrs. S. C. Lomas's edition of Carlyle's *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches* (New York and London: Methuen, 1904), III, p. 460.

37. To the Speaker of the English Parliament, Sept. 4, 1650, Abbott's *Writings and Speeches of Oliver Cromwell*, II, p. 325, Lomas-Carlyle's *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches*, II, p. 108.

God's will, and moreover, one who is prepared to accept the vocation of involvement in war or politics as a divine call to service. Early in the Civil War he asked his friend, Richard Mayor (or Major), to take charge of the education of his son, Richard Cromwell, who had recently married Mayor's daughter. In the midst of his campaigning Oliver Cromwell wrote:

I have committed my son to you; pray give him advice. I envy him not his contents [contentments]; but I fear he should be swallowed up of them. I would have him mind and understand business, read a little history, study the mathematics and cosmography—these are good, with subordination to the things of God. Better than idleness, or mere outward worldly contents. *These fit for public services, for which a man is born.*³⁸

This is a Calvinist speaking. He does not despise the happiness of the young couple, even although he regards it as of secondary importance. But he recognizes the world as the sphere of Christian action, and there such things as business, history, mathematics, and geography are to be regarded as useful, as long as they are subordinate to the "things of God." These things—all of them—fit a man for public service, "*for which a man is born.*" This was the measure not simply of the new bourgeois, but equally of the new citizen. When Weber declared that the "God of Calvinism demanded of his believers not single good works, but a life of good works combined into a unified system,"³⁹ he reached a fundamental insight about Puritanism, and if the preoccupation with capitalism had not forced the debate into blinkers, it might have been seen that such a unified system reached into every sphere of our life on earth; "the Reformation took rational Christian asceticism out of the monasteries and placed them in the service of active life in the world."⁴⁰

Weber's notes to the text often provide us with some of his most important insights, and in one such extended note he commented upon the relationship of Calvinism and Pietism to science:

The decided propensity of Protestant asceticism for empiricism, rationalized on a mathematical basis, is well known. . . . For the attitude of Protestant asceticism the decisive point was, as may perhaps be most clearly seen in Spener's *Theologische Bedenken* . . . , that just as the Christian is known by the fruits of his belief, the knowledge of God and his designs can only be attained through a knowledge of His works. The favorite science of all Puritan, Baptist, or Pietist Christianity was thus physics, and next to it all those other natural sciences which used a similar method, especially mathematics. It was hoped from the empirical knowledge of the divine laws of nature to ascend to a grasp of the essence of the world, which on account of the fragmentary nature of the divine revelation, a Calvinistic idea, could never be attained by the method of metaphysical speculation.⁴¹

38. To Richard Mayor (or Major), 13th August 1649, Abbott's *Writings and Speeches of O.C.*, II, p. 103; Lomas-Carlyle, *O.C.'s Letters and Speeches*, I, p. 451. Italics mine.

39. Weber, *The Protestant Ethic* . . . , p. 117.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 235, Note 79.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 249, Note 145. At first sight this interest in the world of nature would seem to lead them towards natural theology, but although there are some signs of natural theology in John Owen, and in the writings of John Flavel, the Puritans were more

Again, that which we would stress (which Weber noted) is the very down-to-earth interest in this world as the sphere of God's activity, and undoubtedly it was the interest in empirical science that helped to make the Nonconformist Academies of the early eighteenth century the most forward-looking educational establishments in Britain at that time, and the forerunners of modern technical education. I would point out, however, that just as the economic motive could lead to unbridled exploitation when removed from the restraints of church discipline, so the scientific interest could degenerate into scientific materialism when it became divorced from the Biblical revelation and the religious experience that went with it.

Weber speaks of the contribution of ascetic Protestantism to technical education, but I would stress the contribution to all forms of education. It is well known that most of the educational establishments set up by Puritans arose out of the need for a trained and "learned" ministry. This was true of Calvin's university at Geneva, the Huguenot institutions in France, and the establishment of such colleges as Emmanuel College (by Sir Walter Mildmay in 1584) and Sidney Sussex College (1596) in Cambridge. It was equally true for the foundation of Harvard College (1636), the string of colleges that Puritan New Englanders founded across the United States, and for the establishment of the Nonconformist Academies in England after the Restoration. But it did not stop at providing educated ministers, for if Puritanism needed a learned ministry, its doctrine of the Church *implied* a literate laity.

The Puritan faith certainly emphasized that the individual stood responsible before his God, but it also emphasized a corporate responsibility of the whole congregation for the teaching and practice of the Church. Both these principles set a premium on study as not only demanded of the ministry but as the responsibility of every church member according to his capacity. William Bradford, the second Governor of the Plymouth Colony, had not much formal education, but although he spoke several modern languages fluently through his stay in the Low Countries, he was apparently studying Hebrew at the time of his death, because, he said, "though I am grown aged, yet I have had a longing desire to see with my own eyes, something of that most ancient language, and holy tongue, in which the Law, and oracles of God were write; and in which God, and angels, spake to the holy patriarchs of old time."⁴² And with this comment there were eight pages of Hebrew roots and quotations which show that this was something more than a pious desire. It is not an accident that elementary education and the Sunday School movement began in England as direct results of the Evangelical Revival. In so far as the evangelicals shared the ascetic interests of the earlier

interested in revealed religion. However, perhaps we can best understand the interest in natural science as an investigation of the *effects* (i.e. fruits) of Creation, just as their interest in the biblical revelation was essentially centred in what God had done for our *redemption*. Cf. also the Puritan interest in events (personal and national) as the evidences of God's Providence.

42. Cf. the Introduction to *Bradford's History of the Plymouth Plantation* (New York: Barnes & Noble (1908), 1959 reprint), edited by William T. Davies, pp. 17f.

Puritans, they too were concerned to make the layman a literate "Bible Christian." If God was to be glorified in the whole of a man's life, he was also to be glorified through all a man's capacities.

This, I suggest, is the true implication of Weber's thesis, and if it caused a man to drive a hard bargain in the market, it also made him a formidable person when fighting for civic rights on the field of battle or in the hall of debate. If the vocational ethic of "Protestant asceticism" is in some sense responsible for the sweat-shops of England's Victorian cities, it is also responsible (largely through the lay preachers of Methodism) for the Trade Unions that opposed them. The vocational ethic that has arisen in Protestantism contributed to the modern world by laying claim to all a man's faculties, intellectual, moral, and physical, and by demanding in the name of God that he concern himself with this world as the scene of redemption.

But something else must be added. In his essay "On the Fossil of a Fanatic," G. K. Chesterton makes the typically Chestertonian remark that the trouble with the seventeenth century sects was that they died young, so that what has infected our culture since is not their life but their decay. "In most cases," he observes, "the Puritans lost their religion and retained their morality, a deplorable state of things for anybody." Of course, Chesterton had a bias that made him carry an argument to extremes, and yet I could not help being reminded of his words while re-reading Weber. What is depicted in Weber's book is not the Calvinism of the *Institutes*, nor even that of Puritanism at its best, but denatured. We have the feeling that we are witnessing what happens to a Faith when the original faith has left it. The old habits remain. Calvinism *did* give to Protestants a new sense of responsibility in the secular world, and the incentive to be "successful" in that life *ad maiorem Dei gloriam*. This tremendous drive came from Calvinism and from all the ascetic forms that arose from it or in reaction to it. But this drive to "succeed" was intended to be kept within proper limits by the exercise of godly discipline in the New Israel, where the "Saints" truly owned their citizenship, the City of God within whose laws the Elect were to reveal their election. As André Biéler has shown, the first effect of Calvin's views in Geneva was not only to legalize usury but to put it under law, to set limits to it. The point is also illustrated in the career of Cromwell in the political field. Some historians have tried to turn him into a seventeenth-century edition of Hitler, but it can be quite clearly shown that Cromwell lived under an ecclesiastical discipline that often pulled him back, and it is perhaps significant that his rule was limited by the only written constitutions that Britain has ever known, *The Instrument of Government* (1653) and *The Humble Petition and Advice* (1657). How these measures, particularly *The Instrument of Government* and its predecessor *The Agreement of the People* (1647), are related to the idea of the Church Covenant in Independent and Congregational churchmanship deserves a separate study in itself. The very idea of a written Constitution has some interesting and significant parallels in the *Mayflower Compact* (1620) of the Pilgrims and the *Fundamental*

Orders of Connecticut (1638–39). I would maintain that behind all these constitutional measures stands the conception of the Church Covenant with its reliance on a disciplined and responsible membership, and I would further submit that this has given Anglo-Saxon democracy a very different ethos from that which stemmed initially from the French Revolution.⁴³ It is when this sense of civic responsibility is allowed to languish or become subjected to sectional interests that the democratic process is liable to fall prey to the demagogue.

Similarly, I suggest that the business ethic got out of hand as soon as church discipline became looser, as it did become looser during the persecutions of the Restoration period in England, or as church life became eroded by social establishment in America, or when Puritanism became separated from its sustaining faith in Deism. Weber said that “only the methodical way of life of the ascetic sects could legitimate and put a halo around the economic ‘individualist’ impulses of the modern capitalist ethos.”⁴⁴ I suggest that goes further than the facts warrant. Certainly the effect was to do just this as soon as those same sects lost their hold upon their own members—and the same effect can be produced if they lose their distinctive churchly character and become faintly disguised social clubs. Then—and *only* then—can this kind of unholy hallowing take place.

Indeed, I would suggest that one factor inevitably pushing it in this direction was what I have called the “dual ethic” of Puritanism. I have argued elsewhere that since Puritan theology did not allow the Puritans to develop a double standard of ethics, one for the clergy and another for the laity, they found themselves in an acute dilemma when they began to take responsibility in civil affairs. What were to be their standards of conduct for action in State and Church, the realm of justice and the realm of love? I have suggested that this question led them, perhaps unconsciously, to regard the Old Testament as the *ethical* standard for the Puritan’s conduct in secular life and the New Testament as providing the standard for relationships with the “brethren” in the church. But there is some evidence in this early period of Puritanism for thinking that this “dual ethic” was originally held together by recognition that the Old Testament was still to be interpreted by *Christian* experience: the ethic of justice in secular affairs was to be applied in the light of the grace that the gospel proclaimed.⁴⁵

This was an insight in which the *church* played a vital role, but we can see the direction that business ethics would take as soon as the covenant relation with the church began to wear thin. As soon as adherents lost their

43. I am aware, of course, that many of the leading figures of the American War of Independence were predominantly influenced by movements arising out of France during the latter half of the eighteenth century, but I feel these influences are insufficient to explain all that happened, particularly the strong participation of the New England clergy. I suggest that this older, ecclesiastically oriented “republicanism” was the soil in which the newer ideas from continental Europe were able to take root.

44. Weber, “The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism,” *From Max Weber*, p. 322.

45. For the evidence and a discussion of the “dual ethic” see *The Lord Protector*, pp. 60ff, 137–9, 148f., 294, 389f.

grip on the faith or became separated from the church's discipline, their ethics could very easily degenerate into an "eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" morality.⁴⁶ I suggest, therefore, that Max Weber's illustrations are to be seen not so much as Calvinism's or Pictism's *inevitable* drive towards capitalism, but as examples of what can happen to Protestant asceticism when it is divorced from Christian doctrine or from the discipline that is its *raison d'être*.⁴⁷

V

Calvin's doctrine of Vocation is crucial at this point, although it demands a far fuller treatment than we can give it. It is important for two main reasons:

1. First, because it is the necessary complement of his doctrine of Election. The doctrine of Election by itself emphasizes a Christian's separation from the world, and can be expounded in such a way that it presents the Elect as the special favourites of the Almighty. But Vocation shows that there is no Election without responsibility, so that Election is simply the obverse side, the "Godward side" as it were, of the Christian's calling. In the third book of the *Institutes*, where Calvin sets forth the doctrine of Predestination and Election, he shows us that the fact of our salvation "must enter into our heart and pass into our daily living, and so transform us into itself that it may not be unfruitful for us."⁴⁸ The Bible, says Calvin, "commends integrity as the chief part of worshipping him . . . a sincere simplicity of mind, free from guile and feigning, the opposite of a double heart."⁴⁹ We are not our own and we must deny ourselves. "We are God's," he affirms, therefore "let all parts of our lives accordingly strive toward him as our only lawful goal."⁵⁰ A Christian must not expect to have success for he must always be prepared to bear the cross;⁵¹ the good things of this life are to be enjoyed as God's

46. Several writers have remarked upon the Puritan's use of the Old Testament and Herbert Luethy has pointed out the definite ethical standards of the prophetic tradition that the Puritans were concerned to preserve ("Once Again: Calvinism and Capitalism," p. 33). Paul N. Siegal has written an interesting article in which he argues that the character of Shylock in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* was intended as a portrayal, not of the Jew (who had been unknown in England since 1290), but of the Puritan. He says that the playwright was relying on his audience "to associate Judaism, Puritanism and usury." It is an interesting thesis and has more point if seen in relation to other things Shakespeare said about Puritanism in *Twelfth Night* (through the character of Malvolio). On the other hand, what evidence is there for specifically associating Puritanism with usury in England at this early date? The thesis really turns upon this question. Cf. Paul N. Siegal, "Shylock the Puritan," *Columbia University Forum*, V, No. 4 (Fall 1962).

47. This is particularly clear in the illustrations which Weber used from his observation of the American churches. The religious experience on which association with the church covenant originally hinged has given place to respectable morality as the test for membership. In other words the visible "fruit" is sufficient evidence, without any attempt to investigate the spiritual root. This is certainly not the religion of original Puritanism, and the rot has already set in by the time of the Halfway Covenant. Cf. the examples in "The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism."

48. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III. vi. 4. My quotations are all taken from the translation of Ford Lewis Battles, *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), Vols. XX and XXI.

49. *Ibid.*, III. vi. 5.

50. III. vii. 1.

51. III. viii.

gifts, but we are not to use these gifts indulgently but as a trust.⁵² In the important tenth chapter of Book III, he says:

The Lord bids each one of us in all life's actions to look to his calling for he knows with what great restlessness our human nature flames, with what fickleness it is borne hither and thither, how its ambition longs to embrace various things at once. Therefore, lest through our stupidity and rashness everything be turned topsyturvy, he has appointed duties for every man in his particular way of life. And that no man may thoughtlessly transgress his limits, he has named these various kinds of livings "callings." Therefore each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him by the Lord as a sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wander about through life.⁵³

From this passage and from that which immediately follows one sees that Calvin still held to a stratified view of society that was very little different from that of the feudal society out of which Europe was then emerging. Perhaps the one revolutionary idea that he was introducing was the thought that the individual's station in life was not a burden to be borne or an arena for winning merit, but a "call" to be fulfilled for the greater glory of God. In that sense he could speak eloquently about the duty of civil magistrates while other people were more concerned about claiming their Divine Right. Calvin believed that rulers were appointed by God to fulfil their proper ruling function; indeed, he placed very high value on the work of princes and rulers just *because* their functions were to be fulfilled as duties rendered to God, for "they have the means to comfort themselves greatly when they ponder in themselves that they are occupied not with profane affairs or those alien to a servant of God, but with a most holy office, since they are serving as God's deputies."⁵⁴ I suggest that the same basic insight governs Calvin's view of Christian calling in all spheres of secular life. He held it to be redeemed because it is a "call."

2. Secondly, a Christian's vocation was essentially centred in his call to serve God here and now, in this world. It is seen particularly in what he says about the civil magistrate, but it is implicit in what he has said about other vocations. Calvin holds together what often appear as paradoxical—almost antithetical—positions. There is a great deal in the *Institutes* which suggests an exclusive concentration upon the "other world" and other-worldliness: e.g., a chapter on the relationship between Election and Calling leads directly to a chapter on the Final Resurrection.⁵⁵ But the context in

52. III. x. 1-6.

53. III. x. 6; cf. also Note 8, *op. cit.* p. 724.

54. IV. xx. 6. Calvin did not differ very much from other writers of the period in recognizing the importance of the civil magistrate in society. He regarded the office as a calling, "not only lawful and holy before God, but also the most sacred and by far the most honorable of all callings in the whole life of mortal men" (xx. 4.). Subjects were to obey even the unjust ruler, and they were not free to rise against him simply because he was unjust (xx. 23, 29), but there was one exception that he recognized to this rule—when the ruler commanded something that was contrary to the will of God (xx. 32). It was upon this exception that the whole Puritan opposition to the English crown centred during the Great Rebellion. Cf. also the extracts from Samuel Rutherford's *Lex Rex* in A. S. P. Woodhouse's *Puritanism and Liberty* (London: Dent, 1938), pp. 191-212.

55. *Institutes*, III. xxiv, xxv.

which Election is demonstrated—which is the same as saying the context in which our calling is fulfilled—is always *this* life. Like the Apostle Paul before him, he never discusses high theology without bringing it directly to the test of practical ethics. Undoubtedly this did lead to a new kind of Christian asceticism; and his emphasis upon frugality and hard work, especially if it is maintained with a comfortable doctrine of Election that believes God blesses “me” just because I am “me,” can lead to the excesses of capitalist exploitation. It will certainly do that if moral standards are maintained with no better sanction than second-hand Deism, and freed from any ecclesiastical discipline. To that extent later “Calvinism” contributed to Northern England’s smoke, Chicago’s slums, and New York’s sweat-shops, but it is to be doubted whether Calvin would have confessed paternity.

What we are fundamentally concerned with in Max Weber’s thesis is the unconscious recognition that Calvin understood the world as the arena of grace, the unsolicited testimony that work in the world can be a vocation from God.

Indeed, we are reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In what is rapidly becoming a classic passage from one of his letters in prison, he reminded us of the essential secularity of Christianity:

During the last year or so I have come to appreciate the “worldliness” of Christianity as never before. The Christian is not a *homo religiosus*, but a man, pure and simple, just as Jesus was a man, compared with John the Baptist anyhow. I don’t mean the shallow this-worldliness of the enlightened, of the busy, the comfortable or the lascivious. It’s something much more profound than that, something in which the knowledge of death and resurrection is ever present. I believe Luther lived a this-worldly life in this sense. I remember talking to a young French pastor at A. thirteen years ago. We were discussing what our real purpose was in life. He said he would like to become a saint. At the time I was very much impressed, though I disagreed with him and said I should prefer to have faith, or words to that effect. For a long time I did not realize how far we were apart. . . . Later I discovered and am still discovering up to this very moment that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to believe.⁵⁶

There has been a good deal of interest in these insights in both Protestant and Catholic circles in recent years, for we recognize that it has often been a forgotten emphasis. It has recently been brought to the fore in the *Honest to God* debate stirred by Dr. J. A. T. Robinson’s book. Weber’s thesis should remind us that for all the superficial “other-worldliness” of Protestantism’s sects, the movement as a whole has made a vital contribution to the very secularity that we now discover to be in the gospel itself.

Of course, this emphasis is as fully open to danger and misuse as the “other-worldliness” from which it reacts. It may be true, as Hans Reudi Weber has suggested, that Bonhoeffer speaks more directly to our condition today than does the example of Bunyan,⁵⁷ but it might not have been so if

56. July 21st, 1944, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: S.C.M., 2nd ed., 1956), pp. 168f.

57. *Laitty* (Geneva: W.C.C., June 1957), No. 5, p. 5.

we had lived under the particular persecution and within the hedonistic society that Bunyan faced. If the "saintliness" of the cloister or conventicle degenerates easily into smug self-righteousness, the realism of the "this-worldly" attitude exemplified by Bonhoeffer can just as easily degenerate into the self-indulgence of "the enlightened, the busy, the comfortable, or the lascivious" which Bonhoeffer rejected. We have to hold the "affirmation" and the "rejection" of the world in tension, as they are held in tension by Calvin. One cannot mention Bunyan without at the same time recognizing Cromwell, and vice versa.

Certainly there is within Calvinism, and the sects that arose out of it, far more than an other-worldly interest in heaven. It was probably not Max Weber's intention, but he has actually provided us with the clearest indication that Calvin and those who followed him were essentially world-affirming, with the worldliness that Bonhoeffer recognized as belonging to the gospel—"taking life in one's stride, with all its duties and problems, its successes and failures, its experiences and helplessness."⁵⁸ Weber also unconsciously shows us that when this "holy worldliness" loses its specifically Christian content it can breed inhuman and monstrous forms.

That is a risk that goes with every new insight, and perhaps it will serve as a warning against any modern temptation to follow secularity for its own sake. Meanwhile let us note the curious and unexpected upshot of the "Honest to God" debate that arose from Weber's thesis: it seems to offer striking proof that Calvinism and the Protestant sects are essentially world affirming, and that for their adherents the worlds of business, of banking, or commerce, and beyond that, the ultimate world of politics, are not to be denied simply because they are areas in which a Christian might get dirty hands. On the contrary, "these are good, with subordination to the things of God." More than that—they represent the public service, "for which a man is born."

58. *The Protestant Ethic . . .*, p. 169.