The Weber Thesis –

Religion and economic action

In the early years of this century a German sociologist by the name of Max Weber wrote two essays on the relationship between religion and economic action. The conclusions he reached in these essays, which he entitled "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," aroused a controversy that raged for decades. It was joined by scholars representing different disciplines — such as history, sociology, economics, and theology — and different religious and ideological persuasions. They included protestants and Roman Catholics, Calvinists and Lutherans, agnostics and unbelievers, as well socialists of various stripes, and advocates of both limited and unlimited free enterprise. Endless numbers of articles and shelves full of books were written analyzing the Weber thesis and supporting, rejecting, or modifying it.

By now the storm of controversy has pretty well spent itself. The concept, however, is still with us. And the issue continues to be of relevance, also for Christians living almost a century after Weber first proclaimed his thesis. Perhaps especially for them. I hope to illustrate that point after I have related the story of the controversy and given some of the arguments that were presented for and against.

Contra Marx

The issue really started with Karl Marx. According to Marx the foundation (or substructure) of a culture is formed not by ideas or ideals, and certainly not by any religious convictions, but by the culture's dominant economic system. That system determines every other manifestation of the culture: its art, literature, social and economic theories, and also its religion. All these manifestations (Marx called them the superstructure) are controlled by the ruling economic class and serve to bolster the power of that class. Together they constitute little more than its propaganda tool or ideology. They will change, and change utterly, when the opposing economic class becomes dominant.

Weber's thesis

Although an admirer of Marx, Weber disagreed with his materialist interpretation and proceeded to turn it around. Concentrating in his studies on the relationship between protestantism and the rise of capitalism, he concluded that at least in that specific area it was not the economic system that determined religion, but religion that influenced economic action. More precisely, he suggested that the religious ethic of Calvinism (and to a lesser extent that of other protestant groups) had contributed to the rise of what he called the "spirit" of capitalism. With the term capitalism Weber referred to the economic system that has been dominant in the West throughout the modern period, and by its "spirit" he meant something like its psychology or driving force.

Weber noted that two of capitalism's more striking characteristics were the profit motive and the asceticism of its adherents: their desire to earn more and more money, and that not as a means: for the enjoyment of life, but as an end in itself. It was here that he saw connections with Calvinism. In his opinion Calvinism encouraged the spirit of capitalism because it saw a person's daily occupation as a religious "calling," preached the work ethic, and stressed the need for frugality and self-discipline. More than that, Weber said, it looked upon material prosperity as a sign of God's favor. Believing in the doctrine of predestination and trying to find assurance of their election in economic success, Calvinists considered the pursuit of riches as both a moral mandate and an
emotional necessity. In these ways (still according to Weber) Calvinism provided capitalism with its religious sanction.

Weber based these views not on an analysis of Reformed doctrine and confessions, and not on pronouncements on economic issues by Calvin himself, but on selected quotations from works by later protestant writers, including even deists. He made use, for example, of Benjamin Franklin’s *Advice to a Young Tradesman*. While admitting that Franklin was "a colorless deist," his opinions were relevant, Weber implied, because he came from Calvinist stock. This is what Franklin wrote:

> Remember that time is money... He who could make ten shillings a day through his work, but goes walking half the day ... has ... given up five shillings, or rather thrown it away. Remember that credit is money. If anyone leaves money with me after it falls due, he makes me a present of the interest... Remember that money can beget money. Five shillings turned over become six ... and so on till they are a hundred pounds sterling. He who kills a sow destroys its progeny till the thousandth generation. He who wastes five shillings murders all that might have been produced by it, whole columns of pounds sterling...

**Distortions**

This reference to a deist's economic credo in order to prove the teachings of John Calvin gives an indication of the type of "evidence" Weber felt was admissible. As many of his critics have pointed out, his approach was generally quite unhistorical. He neglected to take into account the facts that the rise of capitalism predates Calvinism, that it flourished in Roman Catholic Italy well before the protestant reformation, and that, on the other hand, it long failed to find a foothold in a Calvinist country like Scotland. He also forgot that the love of money is much older not only than protestantism but also than Western civilization. The appetite for wealth has always existed, and ways to organize the pursuit of riches in a rational manner have always been found. Some trace the rise of this type of capitalism to the Greeks; others find its beginnings among Muslim Arabs and Syrians.

Weber's careless analysis and very arbitrary use of evidence made his characterization of Calvinism a caricature. Later historians have marshalled a large array of evidence showing that the leading reformers, on the continent as well as in England, were very far from considering the prosperity of believers proof of their election, and also that they never ceased warning against the dangers and deceitfulness of riches. Because of limitations of space I will restrict myself to the following quotations taken from Calvin's work:

> Whenever prosperity flows uninterruptedly, its delights gradually corrupt even the best of us.... The Israelites laughed at all reproofs because God seemed propitious, as though He manifested His favor by prosperity... This is a common evil.  
> (On Deuteronomy 8:12)

> It is (spiritually) much more dangerous to be rich than to be poor.  
> (On Job 1:2-5)

> For we daily see the state of the faithful is more miserable than the state of the despisers of God.  
> (On Job 42:7)

> Therefore whosoever esteemeth this judgment of God by the present estate of men ... he must needs fall away from the faith at length into Epicurish contempt of God...  
> (On Acts 23:8)

(Quotes taken from John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism*)

Similar warnings about the spiritual dangers of riches were issued by the early leaders of other protestant groups that Weber quoted in support of his thesis. Research on the works of those whom he accused of having aided and abetted the rise of capitalism shows that Weber and his supporters have been guilty of misquoting, quoting out of context, doctoring the evidence, special pleading, and other distortions. Rather than anticipating Benjamin Franklin and advocating the
unrestrained accumulation of wealth, the early protestant leaders, whenever they dealt with economic issues, reminded their hearers of biblical messages such as the one from the Sermon on the Mount:

"Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth ... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven ... for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

And the one from James, which John Wesley was prone to quote: "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you... Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out..."

Why is the Weber thesis popular?

In view of all this, why was Weber's thesis so widely accepted in the first place, and why is it still popular? It is true that most historians nowadays will no longer repeat the thesis without important qualifications. In popular histories and in textbooks, however, one still meets the unadulterated version, and the general public seems to have accepted the thesis as a self-evident truth. It has become part of our cultural baggage.

One reason may be that Weber contradicts Marx's materialist interpretation of history. There is of course also the fact that the Weber thesis simplifies history. It is always tempting to explain a complex issue such as the rise of modern capitalism with reference to one overriding cause. But above all, the Weber thesis has propaganda value: it can be used for a combined attack upon the two institutions that have become increasingly unpopular in modern times: capitalism and the Christian church, especially its Calvinist branch. The economic historian H.M. Robertson, widely regarded as one of the most discerning and most thorough of Weber's early critics, wrote already in the 1930s:

It is noteworthy that the writings of the religio-sociological school on the origins of the capitalist spirit are infected with a deep hatred of capitalism. (Weber's) essay ... ushered in as heavy an attack on the capitalist position as the materialist writings of Karl Marx... It attempts to show that modern capitalism is a massive and imposing superstructure on a foundation of shifting and out-of-date religious ideas, a Moloch of Calvinist selfishness... It tries to demonstrate that capitalism is no mere piece of social mechanism which should be judged only on its own merits, but a creation of evil import and unreasonable origin.

Robertson clinched the argument by quoting the well-known novelist Aldous Huxley, who wrote (with a pen dipped in particularly poisonous ink):

The Reformers read their Old Testament and, trying to imitate the Jews, became those detestable Puritans to whom we owe... (as Weber and Tawney have shown) all that was and still is vilest, cruellest, most anti-human in the modern capitalist system.

Huxley may have been more vitriolic than most critics of Christianity and/or capitalism would choose to be, but there is no reason to assume that these critics disagree with the substance of his charge.

The situation today

The situation in the 1990s is different from that of the early 1900s. In the intervening years the Marxist alternative to capitalism has been tried and found wanting. The collapse of communism has encouraged advocates of capitalism to come out of the closet and sing its praises. Their euphoria is understandable. After all, the developments of this century have proven beyond doubt that, Huxley notwithstanding, humane values are much better served by the free enterprise system than by socialism, and formerly socialist countries are scrambling to introduce some sort of capitalist system. It is unlikely that the ideological battle has been won for all times, as some have predicted, but for the time being the free enterprise system seems to have been justified in the eyes of many all over the world.
Does this mean that Christians should take pride in being presented as the nurturers of what has turned out to be the victorious economic system? The temptation to do just that appears to be strong in some circles. Some years ago Dr. John Boersema wrote a number of articles for this magazine wherein he gave a critical review of books by conservative Christians who went so far as to state that the free enterprise system was the biblical alternative to socialism. Members of the North-American "religious right" have made similar claims. The Weber thesis itself is being paraded in support of capitalism. The conservative Canadian author William D. Gairdner, for example, in his recent book *The Trouble with Canada* (Toronto, 1990), refers to it with obvious approval. For him one of the good fruits of faith (its "productive power," as he calls it) is economic activism of the (democratic) capitalist type. Max Weber would have been in perfect agreement.

**What is to be our response?**

As I said earlier, it is not to be expected that the victory of capitalism over communism means the end of the ideological struggle. Socialism is far from dead, and even if it were, its torch would pass on to others. Some environmentalists, and also adherents of the New Age movement, have, in fact, already joined the battle, and they are as prone as Marx and Weber to blame Christianity for what they consider the evil consequences of capitalism (or, for that matter, of science and technology).

That in itself should not cause Christians to cease their defence of capitalism if it is indeed mandated by the Bible — if, to adopt Dr. Gairdner's idea, economic activism of the capitalist type is indeed to be considered one of the fruits of faith. If, on the other hand, Calvin and the other reformers are right in their interpretation of the biblical message, we have no right to defend our preference for capitalism with the claim that "God wills it." As Dr. Boersema reminded us in his review articles, Christians should be careful not to claim biblical support for positions that they cannot defend, lest they cast doubt on the Bible's true message.

Yet such support has been claimed, not only in recent years, but also in the past. Much of Weber's "evidence" for the relationship between capitalism and Calvinism came from writings by people living in the 18th century and later. By that time leaders of various Christian churches (Roman Catholics no less than Calvinists and other protestants) had capitulated to the spirit of the age and vigorously promoted the capitalist ethic — as did their unbelieving contemporaries. Now that the collapse of communism threatens to lead to a revival of such a "religious" defence, it is high time that we sat down and determined what ought to be the proper relation between our faith and our economic behavior. When doing so we will be well advised to go to the Bible for our norms — as John Calvin did.

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