

Success and Vocation:

How Weber's Account of the Protestant Work-Ethic Subverts a Reformational World-View

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- **Introduction**

The title for this paper has everything to do with Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 1930). Sociological theory still develops the implications of Weber's world-view and in doing so recognises that it was not just the "Judaean Christian tradition" which provided sociology with its "human image". The possibility of engaging in scientific reflection in the human sciences has to do with what has unfolded in a Western cultural context with its widespread Graeco-Christian heritage. According to Talcott Parsons, Weber's translator and commentator, the historical possibility for a sociology of religion, has emerged in the midst of contending religious world-views (Parsons 1961). So, then the question we need to consider is this: how did the rational analysis of religion become possible? Which religious tradition facilitated the emergence of the scientific study of religion? Clearly, it is a religious world-view which implicitly endorsed the secular and modern view of reason. This question should invite our critical investigation as we seek a critical understanding of the religious character of modern and post-modern sociology.

For Parsons, as for the discipline itself, Weber's thesis about Calvinism, capitalism and modern science is crucial. It all turns on a development said to have occurred when the modern spirit first emerged in midst of reformation and post-reformation Europe. The crucial moment, for Weber, was when Calvinistic rationality became assured of its own economic "good fortune."¹

¹ At the outset of his historical analysis of Puritanism, R H Tawney quotes Tyndale's rendition of Genesis 39:2 "And the Lorde was with Joseph, and he was a luckie fellowe." Other versions read "and he prospered" (NIV), "and everything went well with him"(JB), "he was a prosperous man" (AV), "[God] made him successful" (TEV revd), "he became a successful man"(RSV).

Christian scholars, particularly those with Protestant background, can hardly avoid Weber's claim about the pre-eminence of Calvinism in the development of capitalism and the modern (scientific) world-view. Calvinism was the crucial element, says Weber, in the social context where capitalism's this-worldly, materialistic outlook came to dominate.

So how do Christian scholars examine Weber's thesis? Do sociologists of such background concede that Weber has identified a key inner dimension of their religious character? Has Weber actually identified the specific contribution of Calvin and Calvinism?

Weber may not have intended his essay to facilitate the self-criticism of Calvinists, nor the last word on the history of Calvinism. But many Christians seem to have received *The Protestant Ethic* as if it is, at least for this life, the penultimate word on that history.²

Many Christian scholars, not only those of Calvinistic church background "read, mark learn and inwardly digest" Weber's account of their religion.

Some may try to "stop" being sociologists, perhaps for a pious moment on a Sunday morning, putting on "biblical world-view glasses" to read the Bible and attend church. But on Monday, they pick up their Weber again and learn to see themselves as he defines them in *The Protestant Ethic* – at least for their sociological studies.

This ambivalence might also explain the deep-seated Christian resistance to Christian sociology. Has Christian scholarship's dualistic

² Marx, Durkheim and Weber are received as the authors of a synoptic *didache* of the sociological "gospel".

³ "Ambivalence" in sociology is discussed at length by Smelser 1997.

⁴ See David Lee and Howard Newby 1983 p. 345. "Sociology is a difficult, stringent discipline ... The problem for the would-be sociologist lies ... [in the fact that] ... our taken-for-granted beliefs, however they arise, provide a comfortable, convenient and necessarily simplified picture of the social world. The effort required to place them under

ambivalence³ been brought about by an accommodation to Max Weber's sociological view of its inner religious drive? To begin to give an answer to this question, let us examine Weber's view.

- **Max Weber's World-view**

For Weber, it seems, when we moderns are at work within science it is not possible to avoid the tenet that science must be accepted as its own "god", even if this is not "our" personal god. This view may, after critical examination, lack logical coherence, but nevertheless it remains very influential. Many Christian students of sociology hold this view, sometimes even without knowing it. It involves a complex approach but it has been widely followed.⁴ This paper tries to unravel this complex issue about the way in which sociological theory forms an understanding of its own disciplinary character.

Modern science, oriented by the presumed self-evidence of enlightened consciousness, gained much of its momentum by calling upon the light of Reason to shine on the darkness "over there". The rule of "Stupidity, Christianity and Ignorance" would be at an end when Reason wins supremacy over all ancient superstition. But sooner or later such enlightened Reason has come around "full circle" to examine its own Enlightenment faith. And so reason becomes its own ancient superstition. It was at this point in the disclosure of the Enlightenment worldview, that sociology emerged as a critical and historical possibility.

Weber saw the development of a dual rationality in Calvinism originating in Calvin himself - a balancing act in which ultimate ends and proximate (pragmatic) needs are held together in tension. The

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Calvinist accepts that ultimately God is personal but for this life the Calvinist, presumably, has bowed to God's decree in which He is to be seen as an impersonal and fateful force.

This is the inner tension Weber ascribes to the Calvinistic world-view. His argument is widely accepted as the explanation of how the cultural process necessary for science and capitalism emerged. And many "Calvinists" also seem to identify with this view.

We should ask: how could it be possible for any person, Calvinist or not, to adopt such a viewpoint? Further, can a self-professing Calvinist do what Weber's version of a Calvinist does without actually dispensing with a Christian view for this life? It remains to be shown how any view about the here and now could ever be synthesized with deism for this life and remain satisfied with leaving the Biblical world-view for the life hereafter. Besides, there is every reason to test Weber's viewpoint precisely at the point when Calvin enjoins the reader of the *Institutes* to live here and now with the expectation that God is indeed bringing His purposes to fulfillment.

But this is not just a matter of Calvinists saying "Hey you've misrepresented us." Many "good reformed/ presbyterian" Christians adopt this world-view already. It is not only an historical question about the emergence of a Calvinistic world-view or even of a Capitalistic way of life; it is a question about how such a synthetic viewpoint, blind to its own deism, is actually possible.

- **Weber's Psychological Misreading of Calvin**

Weber's thesis is that Calvinist piety shows its inner tension when the reformed investor on the stock market thanks God for the provision of increased returns. In this way a return on investment for this life becomes part of the normative preconditions of the Calvinist world-view. But the humble prayer of thanks to God is later on subverted by a fateful historical harvest of economic inevitability via interest payments entered sequentially onto the monthly bank statement. That

becomes this life's bottom line! That is this life's entry into the book of life. The Calvinist world-view aided and abetted the view that business became, more and more, a matter of increasing profit, in an economic context of ongoing competition. To try to stand outside the demands of the market-place and to run a business was impossible; to do so is to ensure that one's business will be wrecked.

Weber attempts to sympathetically understand Calvinism's view of God. His account relies upon the Westminster Confession of Faith as his "ideal-type" of Calvinist belief. But at a crucial point, in his discussion of God, Weber diverges from these Confessional documents, avoids quotation from Calvin, and summarises with breath-taking unscientific (deistic) license about what he implies is Calvin's psychic hang-up:

The Father in heaven of the New Testament, so human and understanding, who rejoices over the repentance of a sinner as a woman over the lost piece of silver she has found, is gone. His place has been taken by a transcendental being, beyond the reach of human understanding, who with His quite incomprehensible decrees has decided the fate of every individual and regulated the tiniest details of the cosmos from eternity (Weber 1930:103-104).

As a matter of fact, easily documented, this is not Calvin's account of God who makes himself known to us in his works. It is closer to the "skied deity" of Bacon (Willey 1986:34). The Creator of Genesis chapter one, particularly as Calvin's commentary (Calvin 1578) refers to him, is ignored. Calvin's sermon on Job 13:11-15 (Calvin 1952) is out of the picture. Weber's sympathetic reconstruction has the believer bowing to an inexorable fate in this life, even as he bows to grace for his reward in the next.⁵ But Weber's characterization is caricature, and the Calvinist is simply a pawn subject to Aristotle's "unmoved mover" or Adam Smith's invisible deity giving a behind the scenes helping hand

⁵ Some Christian graduates in sociology will find it very hard to sing along with yet another rendition of "Amazing Grace". Their aesthetic appreciation has been severely malformed by a persistent implication that any desire to be faithful as a Christian must mean that they are simply dominated by a self-oriented sentimentalism that wants above all else to get out of this life and into the world beyond.

to the wealth of nations. It is a fate-filled providence. This exposition of the Calvinist worldview hinges upon Weber's construction of Calvin's *inner feelings*. It is because Calvin is assumed to be utterly self-absorbed that he is oblivious to any cognitive dissonance that might later afflict his followers (Weber 1930: 110). Leaning on Ernst Troelstch (the theologian), if not Thomas Mann (the novelist), Weber might have gone even further if he had wanted to contribute to historical theology⁶, lining Calvin up with Paul, the single-minded dogmatic theologian who wants to obey a remote, impersonal Divinity.⁷ Not surprisingly, the inner piety Weber ascribes to his *ideal-type* of Calvin closely resembles the kind of spiritual inwardness we can see among graduates in all fields who study religion but adopt the spiritual orientation of value-free *deistic* sociology. And what we see in his portrayal is another instance of Enlightenment seeking to give the definitive account of religious consciousness, in Weber's case by the claim of entering sympathetically into its inner psychological core.

- **Sociology's blindness**

The rise of Calvinism is a regular part of the introduction to sociology, yet any Christian sociological interpretation of its own world-view is regularly left out. Textbooks hint at the possibility of "non-Eurocentric" world-views, announcing with post-modern or "new age" openness that Buddhist and Eastern cosmologies are possible foundations for scientific reflection (Wallerstein et al 1996; see Wearne 1998).

But when such "openness" ignores dissenting Christian sociological perspectives from within its own European and North American ambit (Timasheff 1962), a suspicion arises that sociology is manifesting a provincial, ethnocentric and religious prejudice. It may not just be against sociological oriented to Christian biblical faith. There is, of

⁶ Which he did not wish to do. (Weber 1930 ftn. 119 p.284).

⁷ Weber's also characterises Kuyper's compromise on predestination in these terms: "The neo-Calvinism of Kuyper no longer dared to maintain the pure doctrine of predestined grace" (Weber 1964:205).

course Latin American and African “liberation” theology, but there is sociological reflection oriented to Islamic social thought (Shari’ati 1980).

The Protestant Ethic may be a hypothesis that has to be proved by examination of the historical evidence, but it also functions as part of a widespread dogmatic (mis)-interpretation about the social teachings of Protestantism. Such a misinterpretation remains oblivious, in the main, to what Calvinism might have meant as a movement of **the 20th century**. But if we investigate Calvinism - its history and its literature - as defended by those living by this world-view we will find it difficult to disagree with the view that it provides an alternative and dissenting interpretation (or as Weber might have said “set of interpretations”) to the emergent “mainline” (deistic) sociological interpretation of itself. Or at least, it has within itself the possibility for such an alternative perspective, even if it be “marginal”.

For all of their “reflexivity” the variant characterizations of Weber’s thesis found in sociology textbooks, give no hint of the possibility of an alternative Calvinist *sociological* interpretation of its own contribution. “Our father in heaven” is distant and remote to Weber’s Calvinist, as distant and remote as found in the most scholastic theology, and in a cosmological parallelism with Wall Street's lack of affinity with the factory worker.

For Weber it was simply *unthinkable* that God could be personally close to the Calvinist scholar, informing, directing and encouraging any *sociological* understanding. At best such religion has to be deistic, and for God to be confessed to be close to the Christian sociologist is all well and good, but as a personal confession only. One's personal deity can not have anything to say to one's scientific analysis of the iron cage of bureaucracy, the routinisation of everyday life under the tyranny of scientisation and latter-day oligarchy. Otherwise one is standing outside the legitimate limits for sociology proper. This dogmatic prejudice against a Christian sociology is precisely where a

reformational sociological critique of Weber has to begin.⁸

- **The entrapment of reformed students**

How does Max Weber's account of the work ethic come to subvert the reformed Christian student's world-view? How is it that the hope for a Christian sociology is undermined by acceptance of Weber's account of the "work ethic"? A full answer must be complex and multi-sided. But we can say that the subversion of the reformed world-view occurs for many students from the reformed tradition because they are already inclined to understand their study, if not their social perspective, in

⁸ Wilhelm Hennis has linked Max Weber to Abraham Kuyper (1830-1927) in an intriguing way (Hennis 1994: 123). Kuyper's political achievements in higher education in the Netherlands were not unnoticed by Weber. The "Vrije Universiteit" raised an important structural issue about the political shape of science and scholarship. Hennis says that Kuyper's "free university" is part of the story of Weber's decisive doctrine of "value freedom". Weber's footnotes indicate he knew about Dutch neo-Calvinism and reckoned with its *bona fides* as scholarship (Weber 1946:316 and 452-3 ftn.8; 453 ftn.9; 455 ftn.19). Hennis link Kuyper's "free university" with Weber's "value freedom". This is not the conventional behavioristic interpretation of value-free sociology, in vogue when Weber started to appear in English. It is no longer a matter of a mandated psychological disposition of the theorist to leave values to one side, but refers to political dimensions about which theorising should not be blind. Sociological thought developed by neo-Calvinist social thinkers will, like Vander Stelt and Dooyeweerd, follow in Kuyper's line (Kuyper 1891; Bratt 1998; Heslam 1998; Dooyeweerd 1969; Skillen 1994). Roman Catholic thinking since *Rerum Novarum* (1891) (Timasheff 1962) also challenges the artificial privatisation of religion and the secularisation of public life and science. Such Christian developments should be on the horizon of critical sociology and Hennis' link to Kuyper suggests positive possibilities. But European Christian thought has always been extended and incorporated into North American discourse and the process of the "didactic Enlightenment" (May 1976) may also now be at work in the reception of the legacies of Leo XIII and Kuyper. New forms of accommodation with deism may be emerging even while there is a renewal in Christian thinking which repudiates deism as baseless mythology. Ironically, Christian sociology does have an historical account of itself (Lyon 1983; Poloma 1982; Kolb 1961; Kolb 1962). But its conspicuous absence must be considered by all engaged in sociology. Perhaps non-Christian sociologists, thinking through the principles of Roman Catholic and neo-Calvinist social thought, will develop detailed insight into such "religious" or Christian perspectives. This does not mean that they thereby will become Christian sociologists, but it will deepen the understanding of sociology's religious orientation by comparison and contrast. Deism as an implicit religious prejudice undergirding social formation must therefore be an important part of what sociology considers under the rubric of secularisation.

ways that are consistent with Weber's deistic misreading of their world-view.

Without an alternative Christian sociological rendering of their own world-view they are left to imbibe Weber's version. But imbibing it prayerfully at a higher level of proficiency than their non-Christian peers, does not and cannot alter the drift toward the secularization of their own thinking.

This is not a joke, nor a sneering and cynical account. The aim here is to explain some of the spiritual tensions confronted by reformed students when they attend the modern "enterprise university". If such students come from churches, families and schools with a "reformed" tag, then it is likely that they will have already come under the influence of the view that a Christian world-view is first and foremost a theology. And this is where the secularizing process is confirmed.

Max Weber's account of Calvinism assumes theology to be the basis and substance of the Christian's world-view. Students of reformed background often enter university having been taught a similar viewpoint, and by implication the Christian student's task becomes a matter of integrating the factual results of non-theological study into a framework provided *a priori* by a reformed theology.

That is the other side to gaining examination success, and the status symbol of a degree. It is in this pious way that the intellectual process of secularization is completed. It finds its root in a reformational version of scholasticism. When Christian students are encouraged to assume that it is theology that provides them with their world-view, there can be no appreciation for the *spiritual problem* thereby created.

Some Concluding Reflections:

The Kuyperian influence in Christian scholarship spans a period roughly coinciding with Max Weber's influence as that has been exercised via the *Protestant Ethic*. In the 20th century Kuyper's *Lectures*

on Calvinism have induced dozens of self-confessed Calvinists to think about the possibility of “reformational scholarship”. But Christian sociology has not developed. Weber's *Protestant Ethic* has influenced Christian scholars in their tens of thousands and this can also be seen in the strong resistance among scholars of reformational background to developing a reformational sociology. The enormity of this absence needs to be faced. It is indicative of an intellectual disaster. Even among *Christian scholars* it is Max Weber, the non-Christian, rather than Abraham Kuyper the Christian, whose influence is seen in the extant modes of sociological argument.

We can make some generalisations about this absence. In the first place “reformational scholarship” as a movement is marginal, much smaller than many of its advocates would like to admit. Second, scholars of reformed background, who might indeed be amenable to viewing the student vocation in terms of a reformational world-view, are often diverted in subtle ways from this work because of the unreformed sociological ideas they continually confront in the circles in which they move and develop their thinking. Many reformed people think a reformed version of the “work ethic” is sufficient, and do not realize that the “Protestant work ethic”, as articulated by Weber, subverts their Christian world-view. The vocation of the Christian scholar is at risk when educational institutions, churches and organisations develop policies that fail to sharply distinguish Christian vocation from the post-reformation “work ethic.” One can see this in the many Christian graduates who seem to assume that active involvement in the world requires some kind of heroic confrontation.

The view of the “work ethic”, integral to Enlightenment economics, was a re-fashioning of the Renaissance image of man. It assumes that the most important thing for modern life is the achievement of one's own status in this life by a disciplined and rational approach to life. Success comes from hard work. Of course, since the 19th century, we have witnessed the consequences of titanic struggles between

individualistic, corporatistic, socialistic and communistic versions of this humanistic "work ethic". Each assumes, in its own way, that it is what a person does that will determine who that person is in a social sense. And it will make no difference if, with Christian piety we assert that the Christian student has to make her/himself into a Christian scholar by adopting a Christian world-view. It is the over-arching taken-for-granted framework of self-creation that is awry here. The Christian view of vocation is not compatible with the assumption of human self-creation no matter how much it is dressed up with piety.

The reformed view of vocation may be quite distinct, but reformed churches, schools and associations around the world, are engaged in a life and death struggle against the legacy of the "work ethic" which threatens to swamp and suffocate authentic Biblical religion. In Australia we could say it is very nearly extinguished. There is simply too little work being done which discusses the difference between a Christian view of vocation and the various forms of the "modern work ethic". This lack of true understanding is one cogent explanation of why the Christian cause seems so impoverished. For example, the mistake of equating an independent, private church college with a free Christian public university, is completely consistent with this misunderstanding.⁹

Some who actively promote Christian post-secondary education do so claiming that their credentials come from having become successful in business. Such a rationale needs to be studied closely even if "practical" businessmen do not like to be subject to such "academic" scrutiny. There is a *prima facie* case for assuming that this is a practical

⁹ Given what Weber says about Kuyper's inability to maintain the traditional Calvinistic view of predestination, and Hennis' attempt to link Kuyper's "Vrije Universiteit" with the Weberian doctrine of "Wertfreiheit", we might well inquire as to whether Weber thought of Weber's neo-Calvinism as an in-principle departure from Calvinism in favour of a "secular" freedom for the academy. Clearly Weber considered neo-Calvinism to be an inevitable compromise with the modern *Weltanschauung*. (See Skillen and Carlson-Thies 1982)

outworking Max Weber's version of the work ethic. They may appeal to their commercial and business successes, and such success should not too readily be dismissed. But business success is no basis upon which to build Christian higher education. It is a privilege for any person, successful or not, in business or in other fields, to become involved in Christian higher education. The privilege means a willingness to learn from those with understanding as to how a Christian and reformational movement in higher education can be mounted.

But when the "success" motif injects itself into reformed discussion about CHE, as it has in recent times, then the integrity of efforts to support the Christian student vocation is thoroughly compromised. To suggest that such "movers and shakers" should first acquaint themselves with the reformed scientific outlook courts angry confrontation. The suggestion that they study Abraham Kuyper and Herman Dooyeweerd is likely to antagonize them. But when such offense is taken all it can show is a serious lack of spiritual discernment about the difference between the Christian vocation and the "work ethic".

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