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Religion and wealth

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RELIGION AND WEALTH: A GRAVEYARD FOR SOCIAL THEORY?

To his earlier edited volume on *Business and Religion in Britain* [1988], and to his own monograph on *Capitalists and Christians* [1990], David Jeremy, an authority on Christianity and the world of business, now adds a second edited collection, *Religion, Business and Wealth in Modern Britain* [Routledge, 195pp, £50, 1998], largely the fruit of papers given at the Anglo-American Historians' Conference in 1996.

The most widespread agreement amongst the essayists is the conviction that the Weber thesis on the direct connection between protestantism and the rise of the *spirit* of capitalism has outlived its usefulness. This is more particularly directed to the over-use, and misuse, of the idea of the protestant work ethic. Helpfully the religious and the non-religious aspects of the general theory as applied to Protestant Dissenters are here helpfully differentiated. The first derives from the Calvinist sense of the divine significance of all life, and the resultant sanctification of secular callings, but also the uncertainty of final salvation, arising out of the distinction

between the visible and invisible church, and a consequent delight in prosperity as a sign of God's favour. The second brings together the significance of tight kinship networks in the years preceding the rise of the joint stock company, the impact before the 1830s of the inability to participate in political life, and only a limited potential for a haemorrhage of talent to landed society. Several essayists accordingly turn to other excluded groups, especially the different ethnic groups that began to give leadership in trade and industry in the later nineteenth century.

Tantalizingly one author, having submitted the Weber thesis to stringent questioning, concludes his essay with the question: 'Since Dissent has declined more than Anglicanism, can this be linked in any way with the decline of British manufacturing industry?' But Wiener is proving no more than durable than Weber. In *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* [Cambridge, 1981], Wiener argued that the children of the first generation of innovating entrepreneurs were persuaded by the Church of England and public-school education to divert their wealth towards a land-based gentlemanly life of cultivated leisure at the expense of the governance of the businesses which had so handsomely resourced them. Later the church compounded the error by seeking to christianize socialism until, with the first post-war Labour Government's welfare and nationalization programme, 'anti-industrial sentiment within the church began to wane'. Such speculation runs way beyond the evidence: 'the Wiener thesis has proved as elusive as the Weber one to sustain'.

In all this Baptists appear as the dog that does not bark. Only two references relate. The first is to Sir Morton Peto's much discussed bankruptcy, based upon evidence first rehearsed in this journal. The second concerns John Rylands, the prince of Manchester textile merchants and manufacturers. For a critical twelve-years period he was, following believers' baptism in 1830, a member, and indeed for a while a deacon, of York Street Baptist Chapel, reverting to Congregationalism when John Birt, York Street's pastor, moved to Oldham. Never fully surrendering his Baptist affections, he deemed the Baptists the most dynamic cause in Christendom: in 1865 he founded Union Chapel, Stretford, and, with his wife, continued to support both the BMS and Manchester Baptist College. S.G. Green of Rawdon was one of his biographers.

Quakers and Methodists here receive the greatest attention, with a particularly useful essay by the editor analysing the business interests of leading Wesleyan laymen in 1900: a similar analysis of Baptist laymen, perhaps using the records of the Twentieth-Century Fund, would be of immense usefulness. But maybe the reason why Baptists feature so little in this exercise is that their theology of baptism provided them with too few godfathers of the same wealth as those who funded other denominations!