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Protestantism, Puritanism and Capitalism

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alone, but rather its conception of God and of His Christ. We should be poor indeed without the portrait of Jesus in the Gospels; but, having the Gospels, we are grateful for the varied imagery of the Apocalyptic picture of the Christ. Here is a rich mine for the preacher. The one or two veins exposed above may encourage him to work it further.

H. W. LANG.

PROTESTANTISM, PURITANISM AND CAPITALISM

AS logic goes this topic should have considerable interest for British Baptists. A Labour Government is duty bound to oppose capitalism. Capitalism is by many said to be the economic offspring of *laissez faire* Protestantism. Within Protestantism Calvinism is said to give the strongest support to this *laissez faire* ideology. Within Calvinism Puritanism is said to carry this ideology to the extreme. How asance, then, must a Labour Government look upon Calvinistic Baptists whose respect for the individual conscience permits the Puritan extreme its fullest latitude.

Actually logic does not work out just this way. Certain basic information has been overlooked. For one thing, Baptists are chiefly labouring and middle-class folk who have neither time nor means for extensive economic speculation. Further, the sociology and history texts which still comment disparagingly on the economic ethics of Puritanism, normative or extreme, are only evidencing an unawareness in the part of their authors of the research that has taken place on the topic in recent years. The conclusions of Tawney and Robertson have been considered final and further exploration has been considered unnecessary. But much has transpired in the field since these two wrote.

To jump immediately into a discussion of Tawney and Robertson is, however, hardly fair to the memory of the reader. We had best begin at the beginning.

This question of the relationship of Puritanism and capitalism became a major issue with the publication, in 1904, of Max Weber's "Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus," translated into English as "The Protestant's Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" (London, 1930). In this remarkable essay Weber set forth the thesis that Protestantism, particularly in its Puritan form, was the chief factor in creation of the "capitalistic spirit." Puritanism, he claimed, turned Calvin's doctrine of "calling" to economic account. Success in one's secular "calling" came to be interpreted as an outward sign of grace being bestowed on the individual by God, a sign of election, assurance of predestination to salvation. Weber supported his thesis by philological arguments satisfying to himself, and by quoting from selected Protestant writings amenable to his purpose. Philologists having taken issue

with Weber's etymological conclusions; and certainly he placed himself in an awkward position respecting the writings from which he took his exemplary quotations. He quotes almost exclusively from Spener's "Theologische Bedenken," Baxter's "Christian Directory," Barclay's "Apology" and two of Benjamin Franklin's treatises on wealth; all late seventeenth or eighteenth century publications. Only Baxter's work is Puritan in emphasis, and at the time he wrote Puritanism already had a century of history behind it. Was it safe for Weber to assume that Puritan thought throughout this preceding century was exactly that of Baxter?

Ernst Troeltsch carried on the research and published his findings in "Die Soziallehren der Christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen," 1912; translated into English as "The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches" (London, 1931). Although this work has enjoyed wide use as a text the author was too close a contemporary of Weber to be able to view the latter's thesis in critical perspective. The net effect of his work was, thus, popularisation of Weber. At the same time he left the wide gap in documentary evidence relating to Puritan thought unfilled, drawing his examples from the "sects" of Protestantism, most late in origin, some only tangentially connected with Puritanism.

R. H. Tawney's "Religion and the Rise of Capitalism" (New York, 1926; reprinted with new preface 1937*) was far enough removed from Weber in time to be able to detect three serious flaws in his argument. First, he noted that Weber over-emphasised the importance of Protestant moral and intellectual influences in the development of the capitalistic spirit. There was an abundance of capitalistic spirit in the fifteenth century in Venice, Florence, and the cities of southern Germany and Flanders, although all were located in strongly Catholic territory. Capitalism prevailed in these cities because they were situated at crossroads of commerce and were therefore natural centres for the concentration of capital. Secondly, Weber ignored the effect of intellectual movements which directed the mind to matters of pecuniary gain but had little to do with religion; for example, the political thought of the Renaissance as seen in Machiavelli, or the economic theories of business men. Thirdly, Weber over-simplified Calvinism, taking too great a liberty in assuming that Calvinism manifested itself in the same way in different countries and in different centuries. The triple blow struck at Weber is telling, and eagerly we search Tawney for detailed evidence of the actual economic ethics of Puritanism. But what do we find? Again examples of Puritan thought are drawn almost wholly from late Elizabethan thinkers and their successors. Early Tudor Puritanism is

* In 1938 this newly prefaced edition was reprinted as a Pelican Book. Pp. 255-256 of this edition carry a selected list of books and articles on the subject appearing 1927-37, but no attempt is made to analyse their approach to Puritan thought.

represented only by limited references to men like Latimer, Lever, Crowley, Bucer and Knox.

H. M. Robertson's "Aspects of Rise of Economic Individualism" (Cambridge, 1933) carried Tawney's criticisms forward with a vehemence of presentation that suggested bias. The first thirty pages were devoted to a philological refutation of Weber's doctrine of "calling." The next sixty pages added support to the argument that capitalism was practised long before the Reformation began. Then attention was focussed upon Catholic thought about the time of the Reformation, the Jesuits being found to be less scrupulous in pursuit of pecuniary gain than Protestants. Some space was given to the influence of the discoveries. But on the whole the book leaves the impression of Protestant bias and a continued dearth of knowledge respecting the pre-Baxterian economic ethics of Puritans.

These Robertsonian advances upon Tawney have been supplemented in recent years by a number of works deserving special citation, viz.: J. B. Kraus, "Scholastik, Puritanismus und Kapitalismus" (Leipzig, 1930, slow to earn its way into English thought because untranslated); J. Brodrick, "The Economic Morals of the Jesuits" (London, 1934); A. Fanfani, "Cattolicesimo e Protestantismo nella Formazione Storica del Capitalismo" (Milan, 1934, translated into English in 1935 as "Catholicism, Protestantism and Capitalism"); E. D. Bebb, "Nonconformity and Social and Economic Life, 1660-1800" (London, 1935); K. W. MacArthur, "The Economic Ethics of John Wesley" (New York, 1936); A. Hyma, "Christianity, Capitalism and Communism" (Ann Arbor, 1937); A. Lincoln, "Social and Political Ideas of English Dissent, 1763-1800" (Cambridge, 1938); and M. M. Knapen, "Tudor Puritanism" (Chicago, 1939).

The first three authors and Hyma give conclusive evidence of the existence of a strong capitalistic spirit in Catholic areas both before and for some time after the Reformation. In addition they argue convincingly that the main explanation of the arrest of Capitalism in Catholic areas while it was enjoying accelerated development in Protestant countries lies in circumstances extraneous to religion. For example, there is the matter of the "displacement of trade from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, as a result of geographical discoveries and the difficulties of obtaining supplies in the markets of the Eastern Mediterranean through the advent of the Turks." There is also the need of establishing a "unified market" so as to permit "mass production," an achievement of Protestant countries like England and Germany, but not of divided Italy, the home of Catholicism. There is the question of "natural resources" indispensable to industry, the Protestant countries seeming to have a monopoly on these. So the evidence unfolds, making the link between Protestantism and capitalism weaker and weaker.

The books of Bebb, MacArthur, Lincoln and Knappen reveal a similar trend in research bent upon discovery of the more specific contribution of Puritanism to the rise of modern capitalism. Knappen, who has done so much to fill that wide gap in the knowledge in the Tudor period, concludes that the contribution of Puritanism was (1) exceedingly indirect, and (2) negative rather than positive. Capitalism arose not because of Puritanism but in spite of it.

In theory, from Tyndale through Baxter and on down the line to the New England theocracy, Puritan leaders opposed unlimited acquisition of wealth. Most of these leaders were mediaeval in their idea of the use to which excess wealth should be put; it should be placed at the disposal of the poor. They stoutly resisted economic change rather than welcomed it. In practice it so happened that the result was quite different. Gradually the secular forces propagating the capitalistic spirit grew so strong that by the time of Baxter the exhortations of Puritan leaders had little effect. As Tawney so vividly states the case in his discussion of the seventeenth century:—

“ The rules of Christian morality elaborated by Baxter were subtle and sincere. But they were like seeds carried by birds from a distant and fertile plain, and dropped upon a glacier. They were at once embalmed and sterilised in a river of ice.”

Questionable practices now crept in. In time there developed a creed that made the acquisition of wealth a moral duty and in effect equated the good Christian with the economic man.

The important thing to remember is that it took time to effect the full change—a long, long time; from Tyndale to Franklin at the shortest, at least a period of two hundred years. Calvinistic predestinarian thinking really had little to do with the process, at least not by way of radical innovation as Weber earlier suggested. Much more characteristic was the persistence of the mediaeval idea of care for the poor and the Puritan horror of what the Lord would have thought were He to step suddenly into the home and find it bedecked with luxury. This latter would mean refusal of admittance to the world beyond because of greedy attachment to the here and now.

However, as a flourishing Roman imperialism had eventually to give way to atomised feudal society, the united front which Puritan leaders would hold against capitalism had eventually to give way to rationalisation within the ranks. Few Puritans intended that it should be so. It merely happened. Social forces made further resistance useless.

G. P. ALBAUGH.