

Protestantism and capitalism assignment



Protestantism and the Rise of Capitalism It has been asserted that the Protestant Reformation, a Christian transformation movement beginning in the 16th century, may have impacted Western European thinking in a way that changed society in a fashion that extended well beyond the church. This paper will examine whether the Protestant movement played a role in the rise of Capitalism. A German Marxist economist, Max Weber, dubbed the term “ The Protestant Ethic” which has become common today.

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, published in 1904, Weber theorizes that Protestantism had a significant influence on the development of capitalism in Europe and that this had important repercussions on shaping modern society (Pierotti, 2003). In this work, Weber defines capitalism as an economic system that depends on the rational organization of free wage earners (Pierotti, 2003). Weber defines Protestant Ethic as a moral code stressing hard work and asceticism and that the combination of asceticism and worldliness facilitated the rise of capitalistic productive efficiency (Stark, 2005).

Weber intimates that capitalism originated in Europe since Protestantism was the only religion that emphasized a morality regarding restraint of material consumption while at the same time seeking to accumulate wealth (Stark, 2005). As well, Stark (2005) says restraint on spending was previously seen in terms of asceticism and condemnations of commerce. However, the rise of Protestantism created a culture of entrepreneurs who valued accumulation and the pursuit of wealth, which was a key feature of capitalism since capitalism relies on the creation of a consumer culture (Stark, 2005).

Sixteenth century Protestants challenged the authority of the Church and the Pope, as initiated by Martin Luther who posted his 95 thesis on the Wittenberg door in 1517 (Gonzalez, 2010, 22). Luther shocked the clergy in his bold statements against Papal authority and attacked the practice of papal indulgences and abuses in the Catholic Church (Gonzalez, 2010, 22). Noll (2000) believes that a critical turning point in the history of Christianity occurred during the 16th century, of which Martin Luther and John Calvin were instrumental in bringing about radical changes.

Protestantism and the emerging modern nation-states and the modern economy transformed European Christendom (Noll, 2000, 157). The Protestant Reformation marked a time where medieval foundations such as the papacy, the Empire and feudal system was making way for new traditions, including capitalism (Gonzalez, 2010, 123). Calvinism would go on to survive and thrive throughout the next several centuries to the present. Calvinism was carried on and transformed into Methodism in the 1700's. John Wesley, leader of the Methodist movement, was a Calvinist but departed from orthodox Calvinism (Gonzalez, 2010, 215).

In the 19th century, protestant revivals carried on through revivalist camp meeting held by figures such as Dwight L. Moody. Eventually Protestant liberalism emerged as an attempt to gain wide acceptance among the American intellectual elite (Gonzalez, 2010, 256). This liberalism made a significant impact on pitting the urban middle class against the poor (Gonzalez, 2010, 257). According to the economic liberal beliefs in the early 19th century, the law of supply and demand was adequate in regulating the marketplace (Gonzalez, 2010, 257).

Calvinists believe in an ascetic life that involved denying worldly pleasure and thought there was nothing wrong with getting rich through hard work. If they did accumulate riches through hard work, they felt strongly that it was their duty to reinvest the riches rather than enjoying them. Calvinists believed that individuals who had good material fortune were considered to be part of God's chosen elect and were thereby individuals of high moral character (Kilcullen, 1996). This led to rationalist thinking.

Weber argues that Calvinism, with its doctrine of predestination made Calvinists anxious about their salvation and overcame this by attempting to ensure economic success (Kilcullen, 1996). But Calvin did not spend his money on self-indulgence but re-invested it. The originating theology, provided a 'spirit' for capitalism and set in motion the rational investment of profits (Kilcullen, 1996). But this is an inadequate representation of Calvin and his philosophies. Kilcullen asserts that true Calvinists would not have found security in economic success upon doubting one's salvation.

Weber further argues that while Calvinism may not have directly caused capitalism, at the very least, it did not obstruct capitalist thinking (Kilcullen, 1996). However Weber does not develop the idea that some of this thinking was already in motion and that other factors and pressures were at play (Kilcullen, 1996). These factors were: industrialization, establishment of a class system, the lack of need for God in their daily lives and a shift in thinking regarding property. As the industrial revolution took place, society became more of an urbanized environment which was a drastic change from a largely agrarian environment.

New ideas were tossed around more and more in this concentrated urban society. Philosophy, pietism and rationalism were integral to exploration of political theories. The Roman Catholic Church opposed many of the changes and rather than embracing the ideas that people were equal under God, society adopted a class system (Snead, 2005). This resulted in the church no longer being needed on an individual level as people began to believe that part of God's calling was to pursuit accumulation of capital (Stark, 2005).

But some scholars say that it was only a small group of elite Protestant entrepreneurs that caused a change in thinking that led to capitalism, not the Protestant movement in general. Snead (2005) asserted that it was a minority group that held ideas and values now found in capitalist thinking. The Church was morally weak and the Methodist movement encouraged education and emphasized a hard work ethic. Methodism prevented a violent revolution in England and thus did not support the radical political organization of the working class (Snead, 2005).

According to Snead (2005), the Methodist movement as illustrated by John Wesley's theology was a combination of Calvinist emphases on faith, the Arminian focus on good works, and John Locke's enlightened rationalism. Although Methodism purported poverty and simply living, the Methodists prospered and became economically successful by hard work, frugality and accumulation of material possessions (Snead, 2005). Snead (2005) rejects the idea that Methodism has a legacy of creating the working class, as connoted by E. P. Thompson in his publications *The Making of the Working Class* in 1963.

Furthermore, Snead (2005) says that the work ethic and structured leisure fit the growing industrial capitalism of the era despite Thompson's assertions that the lifestyle was transforming from artisanal or agricultural labor to that of the factory. According to Delacroix and Nielsen (2001), the main reasons that Protestant movement led to capitalism were: 1) The Protestant movement fostered new attitudes. Protestant doctrines taught that work showed dedication and service to God and emphasized the value of denying the pleasures of this world and living frugally. 2) These attitudes affected behavior ??? lived thriftily 3) The new attitudes and behaviors combined to favour economic development and undermined the existing agrarian lifestyle and economic which led to the Industrial Revolution. The Protestant work ethic involved choosing an occupation with an attitude of service to God, and viewed work as a calling (Delacroix, 2001). The Calvinist method did not place greater spiritual dignity on one job than another but did approve of working diligently to achieve maximum profits, which required reinvestment of profits back into one's business (Stark, 2005).

As well, the Calvinist approach to work allowed a person to change from the craft or profession of his father, and associated success in one's work with the likelihood of being one of God's Elect (McGrath, 1990). McGrath (1990) says that by the 17th century, Calvinism and capitalism co-existed and intermingled in a way that showed the disparity between Catholic areas which were economically depressed versus the Protestant areas which were prosperous and bustling.

McGrath (1990) goes farther in saying that it was specifically the Calvinists (not Protestants in general) that developed their industrial and capitalist

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capacity. This was evidenced when Christian IV, King of Denmark, and Gustavus Adolphus, King of Sweden, wanted to bolster their economy and turned to Dutch Calvinists to do so (McGrath, 1990). The result was an industrialized, capitalist aristocracy that arose in Scandinavia (McGrath, 1990). The Protestant movement fought against the distorted authority of the Roman Catholic Church which brought about religious freedom, individualism, and emphasized personal experiences.

This thinking allowed the Protestants to embrace the modern world (McGrath, 1990). Harman (2004) asserts that European values did not create capitalism, rather it is the other way around; capitalism created European values. Becker and Wossman (2007) agree and claim Weber equated Protestant prosperity and work ethic that led to capitalism. However, Becker and Wossman (2007) believe that the economic prosperity of Protestants did not cause capitalism but that it was a result of literacy.

Becker and Wossman (2007) assert that Martin Luther and other Protestants encouraged people to read the Bible themselves and the ensuing literacy in the 18th century had a side effect of increased productivity and thus economic prosperity (Becker and Wossman, 2007). In conclusion, it seems that the Protestant movement laid the groundwork for modern thinking, industrialism and hence capitalism. Modern materialism was built around the Calvinist thinking of industriousness, hard work and frugality.

On the other hand, the individualistic attitudes that exist today and the materialism that centres on consumption rather than production is a long way from John Calvin's work ethic. REFERENCE LIST Becker, Sascha and

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The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Original German edition: ‘ Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus. ‘ Translated by Talcott Parsons. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications. Good. The paper has a clear, readable style and flows well with a good structure. The paper relies very much on the sources used and to take it to the next level a greater degree of your own “ voice,” your own analysis and assessment (not just that of your sources) should be included. Part of this would be the use of more primary sources. Overall this is a solid, well written paper. B+ (15. 8/20)