

KEY TEXT

The Power of Religious Beliefs: Re-Reading Max Weber's Protestant Ethic

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Abstract

As part of NTT JTSR's series on Key Texts, this article discusses Max Weber's famous essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In this essay Weber argues that certain religious developments in the West resulted in a specific, ascetic work ethic which, in turn, stimulated the rise of a capitalist economy. The present article summarizes Weber's line of reasoning in relative detail and briefly explains why Weber's essay is still of interest today. As regards the enduring relevancy of Weber's essay, it is mentioned that his essay can be seen as a precursor of contemporary secularization theory, that it addresses the timely issue of the relationship between religion and social stratification and that it clarifies the motivational aspects of religious beliefs on the basis of an action-theoretical approach to religion.

Keywords: Max Weber, capitalism, Protestantism, Calvinism, asceticism, secularization, stratification, action theory

Introduction

Originally published in 1904-5 as two articles in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, Weber's *Die Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*, in which he unfolds the daring thesis that capitalism is in part the result of specific religious developments in the West, remains one of the most famous and influential works of the social sciences. The work has been translated in many different languages, has been published in many different formats and is still widely available today. A quick search on [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) alone already shows more than 30 different editions of

the original German text, which are all ready to order. This fact clearly illustrates the enduring interest in Weber's essay. Why this essay is still of interest today, and especially of interest to religious studies, I will explain in this article. To do this, I will take four steps. First, I will briefly position *The Protestant Ethic* in the broader context of Weber's work, after which I will present a summary of his main line of argumentation. Next, I mention three underlying aspects of his essay, which, in my opinion, are especially relevant to current discussions in the field of religious studies. As a final step, I close this article with some concluding remarks.¹

The Protestant Ethic in the Context of Weber's Work

To begin with, it is important to note that *The Protestant Ethic* is part of a much larger comparative, historical project. By analysing and comparing the development of the ethical systems of the major world religions, Weber specifically wanted to explain why capitalism first appeared in Western Europe. He not only attributed the development of capitalism to certain religious developments, but he also wanted to show, from a comparative perspective, why only specific religious developments in the West were conducive to capitalism. To do this, Weber also studied the ethics of the religions of China (Confucianism and Taoism), India (Hinduism and Buddhism) and ancient Judaism.² These religious ethics basically tell man how salvation can be obtained, which Weber considers a universal, ideal interest of man. However, the way salvation can be obtained differs significantly between various religious worldviews and ranges from contemplative withdrawal from the world to active engagement with it. The latter, then, is typical for the West, according to Weber. Only in the West an ethical system emerges, viz. ascetic Protestantism, which urges man to strive for salvation by simultaneously engaging in this-worldly activities and upholding ascetic values. While other religions, for instance, stress mystical contemplation (Confucianism) or a world-rejecting asceticism (medieval monasteries) as

1 Quotations are taken from the following original texts: Max Weber, "Vorbemerkung," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie I*, ed. Max Weber (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1920), 1-16; Max Weber, "Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie I*, ed. Max Weber (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1920), 17-206; and Max Weber, "Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie I*, ed. Max Weber (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1920), 237-573.

2 These studies were published in 1920 in his *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*. Weber also studied the religious ethics of Islam, but did not finish this before his death.

means of salvation, ascetic Protestantism couples an ascetic lifestyle with an active engagement with the world.³ According to Weber, then, it is this in the religious history unique combination of asceticism with an active, inner-worldly orientation that made ascetic Protestantism the perfect motivational force for the development of capitalism in the West. That is not to say that Weber considers these differences in religious ethics to be the only reason of why capitalism first appeared in the West; this also occurred because other important preconditions were already in place. Rather he sees these different religious ethics, or 'Weltbilder,' as switchmen (Weichensteller) guiding economic developments in a certain direction.⁴ And in the West, then, the ethics of ascetic Protestantism set the switch for capitalism. Although one can perfectly read *The Protestant Ethic* on its own, readers should thus be aware that this essay is actually just a small part of a broader comparative study into the sources of modern, Western civilization.

The Protestant Ethic: a Brief Summary

The original essay consists of two parts. In the first part, *Das Problem*, Weber introduces the problem he addresses and in the second part, *Die Berufsethik des asketischen Protestantismus*, he actually shows how, in his view, a specific branch of Protestantism brought forth the spirit of capitalism and paved the way for the rise of a modern, capitalist economy. In 1920, the year of his death, Weber also added an introduction, entitled *Vorbemerkung*, when he was preparing a reprint of his original essay in the first volume of his *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*.

This introduction is an important later addition, because it adds nuance to Weber's original thesis. In it, Weber explains what he means by capitalism and also emphasizes that his study is not meant to offer a monocausal

3 A clear and informative systematization of Weber's comparative study of the ethical systems of the world religions can be found in Wolfgang Schluchter, *Die Entwicklung des okzidentalen Rationalismus. Eine Analyse von Max Webers Gesellschaftsgeschichte* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1979), 204-255.

4 This image of worldviews (Weltbilder) as switchmen (Weichensteller) guiding economic development Weber uses himself in the introduction to his comparative study into the ethical systems of the world religions. As he puts it: "Interessen (materielle und ideelle), nicht: Ideen, beherrschen unmittelbar das Handeln der Menschen. Aber: die 'Weltbilder,' welche durch 'Ideen' geschaffen wurden, haben sehr oft als Weichensteller die Bahnen bestimmt, in denen die Dynamik der Interessen das Handeln fortbewegte. Nach dem Weltbild richtete es sich ja: 'wovon' und 'wozu' man 'erlöst' sein wollte und – nicht zu vergessen – konnte." Weber, *Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen*, 252.

explanation of the rise of capitalism. Capitalism he understands as follows: "Ein 'kapitalistischer' Wirtschaftsakt soll uns heißen zunächst ein solcher, der auf Erwartung van Gewinn durch Ausnützung von Tausch-Chancen ruht: auf (formel) friedlichen Erwerbchancen also."⁵ Crucial here is a pursuit of profit by a rational calculation of costs and benefits and the use of free labour. However, this pursuit of profit was only possible on the basis of two developments which were already on their way in the West: a separation of business from the household and rational book-keeping. The separation of business from the household meant that a workforce of formally free labour became available for mass production in factories, while rational book-keeping enabled the exact calculation of costs and benefits. By referring to these preconditions, Weber shows that he does not maintain that the Protestant ethic is the sole cause of the rise of capitalism in the West. On the contrary, in the introduction Weber explicitly refers to advances in technology and to judicial and administrative developments as additional, crucial factors for the development of capitalism. But although the Protestant ethic is by no means the sole cause of the rise of capitalism, it did have a decisive impact, according to Weber, because it gave men the necessary motivation to economically act in a certain way. As he puts it: "Denn wie von rationaler Technik und rationalem Recht, so ist die ökonomische Rationalismus in seiner Entstehung auch von der Fähigkeit und Disposition der Menschen zu bestimmten Arten praktisch-rationaler Lebensführung überhaupt abhängig."⁶ Weber's essay thus is not a monocausal account of the rise of capitalism, but it is an account of the motivational forces that contributed to its development.

In search of these motivational forces, Weber starts the first part of his essay with the empirical observation that there is a connection between religion and social stratification. That is to say, in countries with a mixed religious population the businessmen, owners of capital, technicians and higher educated people are overwhelmingly Protestant. This observation makes Weber wonder if religion perhaps adds to economic success. That does not mean that Weber thinks that the businessmen of his time are more religious. This is not the case. His interest more specifically concerns the beginning of capitalism in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, when certain Protestant groups displayed a strong connection between a capitalist business sense and intensive piety.

5 Weber, *Vorbemerkung*, 4.

6 Weber, *Vorbemerkung*, 12.

Weber clarifies this relationship between piety and a capitalistic business sense by arguing that for the early capitalists, rational, economic action was a kind of ethos or calling. They considered the pursuit of wealth in combination with an ascetic lifestyle a moral obligation. Thus, wealth should not be enjoyed but should be invested, which resulted in economic success. It is this specific combination of the pursuit of wealth coupled with an ascetic lifestyle and seeing this as calling, that Weber defines as the spirit of capitalism. To explain the rise of capitalism in the West, then, one needs to explain the development of the spirit of capitalism. Or as Weber puts it: "Die Frage nach den Triebkräften der Expansion des modernen Kapitalismus ist nicht in erster Linie eine Frage nach der Herkunft der kapitalistisch verwertbaren Geldvorräte, sondern vor allem nach der kapitalistischen Geistes."⁷

The spirit of capitalism is thus the motivational force Weber is looking for. The origins of the spirit of capitalism Weber locates in the Protestant reformation and more specifically in certain branches of Calvinism. Lutheranism fell short in this respect, because Luther's idea of the calling remained too traditionalistic. Although man was called by God to fulfil his worldly duties, Luther also emphasized that man had to adapt to the social position in which God had placed him. Man was not called to increase his earnings beyond his personal needs, because this would disrupt the social order set by God. Weber, therefore, concludes that Lutheranism, although it introduced a renewed conception of the calling, cannot be considered the religious source of the spirit of capitalism.

In the second part of his essay Weber continues his search for the origins of the spirit of capitalism by discussing four branches of ascetic Protestantism, viz. Calvinism, Pietism, Methodism and sects relating to the Baptist movement. By reconstructing their different dogmatic foundations, Weber aims to show how these different branches of ascetic Protestantism resulted in a rational ordering of ethical conduct. Hence, his focus is on "... die Ermittlung derjenigen durch den religiösen Lebens geschaffenen psychologischen Antriebe, welch die Lebensführung die Richtung wiesen und das Individuum in ihr festhielten."⁸ In short, Weber is interested in the psychological, motivational effects of religious beliefs.

Weber first discusses Calvinism and refers to the doctrine of predestination as its characteristic dogma. The doctrine of predestination is an expression of the absolute sovereignty of God and stresses that salvation

7 Weber, *Protestantische Ethik*, 53.

8 Weber, *Protestantische Ethik*, 86.

in no way depends on the work of man, the church or the sacraments. As a consequence, within Calvinism no one is certain of his state of grace and all man can do is to faithfully trust in Christ. For Calvin himself, who, according to Weber, believed he was one of the elect, this was acceptable, but for ordinary believers this was hardly satisfactory. "Für sie mußte die 'certitudo salutis' im Sinn der Erkennbarkeit des Gnadenstandes zu absolut überragender Bedeutung aufsteigen und so ist denn auch überall da, wo die Prädestinationslehre festgehalten wurde, die Frage nicht ausgeblieben, ob es sichere Merkmale gebe, an denen man die Zugehörigkeit zu den 'electi' erkennen könne."⁹ According to Calvin, then, such signs (Merkmale) were to be found in a 'fides efficax' in a faith which expresses itself in worldly conduct meant to serve the glory of God on earth. By this Calvin did not mean the performance of single good works, but a moral life of rational and systematic self-control. On the basis of the doctrine of predestination, Calvinism thus offered ordinary believers the psychological sanction for methodically rationalized, ethical conduct in this world.

A similar search for the 'certitudo salutis' by way of ascetic self-control and work in the calling Weber sees present in other branches of ascetic Protestantism, like Pietism, Methodism and certain Baptist sects. These different branches of ascetic Protestantism all share the basic idea that only a life of rational and systematic self-control can be considered a sign of man's state of grace. It is this specific idea, then, Weber considers the religious source of the spirit of capitalism.

To explain this close relationship between ascetic Protestantism and the spirit of capitalism Weber specifically focuses on English Puritanism. English Puritanism emerged out of Calvinism, according to Weber, and offers the most consistent religious basis for the idea of the calling. To illustrate how asceticism and the idea of the calling gradually resulted in the spirit of capitalism, Weber takes the work of the Puritan theologian Richard Baxter (1615-1691) as an example. Baxter criticized the pursuit of wealth, because this enables man to live a luxurious life and keeps him away from hard work for the glory of God. Important here is Baxter's understanding of the Pauline text of 2 Thessalonians 3, 10: "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat."¹⁰ In the medieval theology of St. Thomas this, in a rather traditional sense, simply meant that everyone had to work enough just to maintain himself and the community. But in Baxter's puritan view this appeal holds for all

⁹ Weber, *Protestantische Ethik*, 104.

¹⁰ The full verse reads: "For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" (NRSV).

people irrespective of their wealth. Everyone should glorify God by working rationally and methodically whatever his position in the economic order; this is man's calling. Of major importance is, further, that profit-making is encouraged within the Puritan framework. The chance to make profit Puritans consider an opportunity created by divine providence. A God given opportunity of which a faithful Christian should take advantage. For Baxter, therefore, the acquisition of wealth is only morally reprehensible if it makes man lazy and idle. As Weber puts it: "Der Reichtum ist eben nur als Versuchung zu faulem Ausruhen und sündlichem Lebensgenuß bedenklich und das Streben danach nur dann, wenn es geschieht, um später sorglos und lustig leben zu können. Als Ausübung der Berufspflicht aber ist es sittlich nicht nur gestattet, sondern geradezu geboten."¹¹ This providential view on the making of profit thus not only legitimized the activities of the entrepreneurs, but in the long run it actually stimulated the pursuit of wealth, according to Weber.

In this way, Puritanism, as the ideal-typical example of ascetic Protestantism, coupled an ascetic lifestyle to the pursuit of wealth. As a result, the pursuit of wealth as an end in itself was condemned, but the actual acquisition of wealth as the result of rational labor in a calling was seen as a sign of one's state of grace. In Weber's words: "Denn nicht nur sah sie (asceticism PV), mit dem Alten Testament und in voller Analogie zu der ethischen Wertung der 'gute Werke,' zwar in dem Streben nach Reichtum als Zweck den Gipfel des Verwerflichen, in der Erlangung des Reichtums als Frucht der Berufsarbeit aber den Segen Gottes."¹² Furthermore, this combination of asceticism and the pursuit of wealth also had the additional, and for the development of capitalism crucial, effect of the accumulation of capital. As Weber continues, "Und halten wir nun noch jene Einschnürung der Konsumtion mit dieser Entfesselung der Erwerbstitrebens zusammen, so ist das äußere Ergebnis naheliegend: Kapitalbildung durch asketischen Sparzwang."¹³ Since capital could not be enjoyed, it had to be reinvested again and again which contributed to economic success and generated more wealth. In sum, it is this religious attitude of working hard in a calling to glorify God and at the same time leading an ascetic life, which simultaneously stimulated the pursuit of wealth and the accumulation of capital as signs of one's chosen status and which in this way brought forth modern economic man.

¹¹ Weber, *Protestantische Ethik*, 176.

¹² Weber, *Protestantische Ethik*, 192.

¹³ Weber, *Protestantische Ethik*, 192.

Ascetic Protestantism thus stood at the cradle of modern capitalism, because it gave the early capitalists a strong incentive to accumulate capital: attaining certainty of grace. However, as Weber also notes at the end of his essay, ascetic Protestantism did not have a lasting influence. For, as soon as capitalism was fully established the economic market became a 'stahlhartes Gehäuse' (iron cage) and started dominating the lives of man who no longer needed the motivational basis ascetic Protestantism once offered. At the final pages Weber, therefore, sighs: "Der Puritaner wollte Berufsmensch sein, wir müssen es sein."¹⁴

The Protestant Ethic: its importance for religious studies

Weber's thesis is not uncontested and soon after its publication evoked a lot of controversy and debate. For instance, criticisms have been raised against Weber's too narrow depiction of ascetic Protestantism, which mainly concerns English Puritanism while seventeenth century Dutch Calvinism could hardly be called 'ascetic.' Also, his observation that Catholics tended to be less economically successful than Protestants has been criticised as being based on insufficient empirical evidence. To name but a few controversial topics.¹⁵ But notwithstanding these criticisms, Weber's thesis continues to challenge scholars across a variety of academic disciplines including religious studies. When it comes to Weber's importance for religious studies, three underlying aspects of the *Protestant ethic* deserve mentioning.

Rationalization and secularization

Along with Comte, Marx and Durkheim, Weber not only is one of the founding fathers of modern sociology, but he is also one of the classic scholars who offered detailed descriptions of the process of rationalization and the way this process affected religion. It is not an exaggeration, therefore, to also call Weber a founding father of secularization theory. One of the key publications on secularization of the 1960's, Peter Berger's *Sacred Canopy*, is in large part based on Weber's work, while Weber's influence is again very noticeable in the work of a more contemporary secularization theorist like

¹⁴ Weber, *Protestantische Ethik*, 203.

¹⁵ A brief but insightful overview of the different criticisms raised against Weber's thesis is given by Anthony Giddens in his introduction to the reprint of the English translation of Weber's essay by Talcott Parsons. See: Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1985), vii-xvi.

Steve Bruce.¹⁶ Weber's contribution to the secularization debate is actually twofold. First, the *Protestant Ethic* is illustrative of the process sociologists refer to as 'functional differentiation.' That is the ongoing specialization of social functions, like education, health care or the economy, and the loss of religious authority over these functions that goes along with. So, when Weber at the end of his essay refers to the economic market as an 'iron cage' no longer in need of the motivational force ascetic Protestantism once offered, he is actually giving an example of the secularization of the economy. But the *Protestant Ethic* is also an illustration of the rationalization of religion itself and the disenchantment of the world resulting from it. In his essay Weber not only describes the development of capitalism, but also the development of religion in the West culminating in ascetic Protestantism devoid of all magical, i.e., sacramental, elements. Weber's essay thus is also an account of the intricate relationship between religious and societal secularization and continues to be of interest to scholars studying secularization as well as to scholars interested in post-secularity and the re-enchantment of the world.

Religion and social stratification

Next to secularization, Weber's *Protestant Ethic* also discusses the relationship between religion and social stratification. As mentioned above, this is actually the core problem Weber addresses in his essay.¹⁷ Social stratification refers to the problem of social inequality, which is one of the three core issues of modern sociology.¹⁸ By looking at the relationship between religion and social stratification Weber thus addresses a very timely issue. Even today, more than hundred years after Weber's death, this relationship between religion and social stratification can still be established, although not always in line with Weber's argument. For example, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart convincingly showed that a nation's level of religiosity strongly depends on its socio-economic development with lower levels of socio-economic development resulting in higher levels of religiosity.¹⁹ Thus

16 Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967); Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

17 The first chapter of his essay in which Weber introduces the problem he addresses is also entitled *Konfession und soziale Schichtung*.

18 The other issues being the problem of social cohesion and the problem of rationalization. See Wout Ultee, Wil Arts and Henk Flap, *Sociologie, Vragen, Uitspraken, Bevindingen* (Groningen: Martinus Nijhof, 2009), 27-28.

19 Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

they treat religion as a dependent variable and do not claim, as Weber did, that specific religious beliefs affect the socio-economic position of a specific socio-cultural group. But current research also corroborates the reversed, more Weberian-like relationship. In the United States, for instance, the hostility toward education and the anti-intellectual orientation among certain fundamentalist Protestant groups has been found to reduce educational achievement and to impede socio-economic success.²⁰ And by explicitly referring to Weber's *Protestant Ethic*, Michael Sandel recently showed that the roots of American meritocracy are of a religious nature,²¹ resulting in a harsh religious justification of the actual inequality in American society. Religious beliefs thus continue to be of importance when it comes to the socio-economic position of certain groups, which makes the *Protestant Ethic* a must read for every scholar studying the relationship between religion and social stratification.

The motivational forces of religious beliefs

Finally, Weber's *Protestant Ethic* is also of importance to religious studies, because it offers an excellent illustration of an action-theoretical approach to religion. His entire essay can be seen as an exposition of the motivational forces of religious convictions. By considering work as a 'calling' the everyday activities of the entrepreneurs got a special sense of meaning and purpose, which, as we have seen, ultimately drove the pursuit of economic success. In this way, Weber in part explains economic action by considering its underlying motivations.²² However, crucial in this respect are two important nuances. First of all, Weber does not maintain that official church teachings or dogmatics directly influenced social, economic action. Rather the early capitalists interpreted religious convictions from the perspective of their own interests, i.e. material gain and salvation, and in this way attributed meaning

20 See Scott Fitzgerald and Jennifer Glass, "Conservative Protestants, Normative Pathways, and Adult Attainment" in *Religion and Inequality: Research and Theory on Religion's Role in Stratification*, ed. Lisa Keister and Darren Sherkat (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 97-118.

21 Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2020), 37-41.

22 On the first page of his *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* Weber offers a brief description of his action-theoretical approach when he defines sociology as follows: "Soziologie (...) soll heißen: eine Wissenschaft, welches soziales Handeln deutend verstehen und dadurch in seinem Ablauf und seinen Wirkungen ursächlich erklären will. "Handeln" soll dabei ein menschliches Verhalten (...) heißen, wenn und insofern als der oder die Handelnden mit ihm einen subjektiven Sinn verbinden." Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der Verstehenden Soziologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1922), 1.

to their economic actions. Thus what counts, according to Weber, is not the theological validity of religious convictions, but the subjective appropriation of these convictions to attribute meaning to one's actions. Secondly, Weber also insisted that this interpretation need not be a very conscious process and people may not be fully aware of the underlying convictions that drive their actions.²³ Instead, they more or less unconsciously draw on basic beliefs present in the surrounding religious culture. Again, these are valuable insights for religious studies. Weber's *Protestant Ethic* not only shows that religious ideas can be powerful motivators for social action, but it also shows that this impact of religious cultures on social action may be indirect or even latent.

Conclusion

After more than a century since it was first published, the *Protestant Ethic* still deserves to be read. It is a prime example of what I consider to be two major tasks of religious studies: studying antecedents and consequences of religion. In regard to the antecedents of religion, Weber's reconstruction of the rise of capitalism in the West offers both a sketch of declining religious authority over social functions like the economy as well as an explanation as to why some religious cultures are more influential than others; i.e., those cultures are influential that fit in best with the material and ideal interests of its social bearers. In this respect, his essay is in a sense also a precursor of contemporary secularization theory and deserves the attention of every scholar interested in secularization and the relationship between religion and modernity. But the main focus of Weber's essay is on the consequences of religion. Or more specifically, the way religion affects and motivates social action. As his analysis shows, religious beliefs attribute meaning to action and can, in part, also determine the course of human action. This latter influence may be overt, for instance as motivators for third world aid or pro-life protests against abortion, or it may be more latent when the religious legacy of a country to some degree still affects the dominant values in society, as is the case in American meritocracy. Weber's essay thus teaches us to always consider the possible legacy of past religious cultures when studying the values and actions of contemporary social groups.

²³ See Hans Kippenberg, "Max Weber. Religion and Modernization" in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Peter B. Clarke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 63-78.

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