

# Success and Vocation

## How Max Weber's account of the work ethic subverts the reformed world-view

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June 2nd 2000AD

### • 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 accepts that it was not just the "Judaean Christian tradition" which provides a "human image" for sociology. The possibility of engaging in scientific reflection in the human sciences has to do with the common Graeco-Christian heritage. The historical possibility for a sociology of religion, according to Talcott Parsons, Weber's translator and commentator, 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. The manner in which this question is asked needs to be looked at very carefully if we are to come to an 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 was when Calvinistic rationality became assured of its own economic "good fortune."<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> At the commencement 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." The point is that in pious talk much will often hang on the difference between "luck" and "success". Other versions read "and he prospered" (NIV), "and

how do Christian scholars examine Weber's thesis? Do sociologists of such background see themselves in the terms Weber identified as 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 receive *The Protestant Ethic* as if it is, at least for this life, the penultimate word on that history<sup>2</sup>.

Many Christian scholars of Calvinistic 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 Weber again and learn to see themselves as he defines them in *The Protestant Ethic*. This ambivalence might also explain the deep-seated Christian resistance to Christian sociology. If so Christian scholarship's dualistic ambivalence<sup>3</sup> brought about itself may derive from accepting Max Weber's sociological view of its motives. Therefore let us examine Weber's view.

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

For Weber, when we are at work within science we must accept science as its own "god", even if this is not "our" personal god. This view is 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.<sup>4</sup> This paper tries to unravel this complex issue about the way in which sociology seeks to understand itself as a discipline.

Modern science, basing upon the presumed self-evidence of enlightened consciousness, calls upon the light of Reason to shine on the darkness "over there". The rule of "Stupidity, Christianity and Ignorance" is at an end when Reason wins supremacy over all ancient superstition. But sooner or later such enlightened Reason comes around to examine the Enlightenment faith itself. Reason becomes its own ancient superstition. This is the point at which critical sociology emerged as an historical possibility.

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everything went well with him"(JB), "and he was a prosperous man" (AV), "and made him successful" (TEV revd), "and he became a successful man"(RSV).

<sup>2</sup> Marx, Durkheim and Weber are received as the synoptic *didache* of the sociological "gospel".

<sup>3</sup> "Ambivalence" in sociology is discussed by Smelser 1997.

<sup>4</sup> 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 critical review and to keep them there, is almost superhuman."

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 Calvinist accepts that ultimately God is personal but for this life he is seen to be an impersonal and fateful force.

This is the tension Weber identifies in 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 identify with this view.

We should ask: how could it be possible for any person, Calvinist or not, could adopt such a viewpoint? Further, can a self-professing Calvinist do what Weber's version of a Calvinist does without giving up a Calvinist world-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.

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 its emergence; 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 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.

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 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.<sup>5</sup> But Weber's characterization is caricature, more in line with Aristotle's "unmoved mover" or Adam Smith's invisible deity giving a behind the scenes helping hand 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 utterly self-absorbed that he is oblivious to any cognitive dissonance which 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 theology<sup>6</sup>, lining Calvin up with Paul, the single-minded dogmatic theologian who wants to obey a remote, impersonal Divinity<sup>7</sup>. 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.

- **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). But when such "openness" ignores dissenting Christian sociological perspectives from within its own European and North American ambit (Timasheff 1962) it shows a provincial prejudice against biblical faith. Reference may be made to Latin American or African "liberation" theology, and neither is there any reference 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)-

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<sup>5</sup> You may at this point appreciate why some Christian graduates in sociology find it very hard to sing along with "Amazing Grace".

<sup>6</sup> Which he did not wish to do. Weber 1930 ftn 119 p.284.

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 viewpoint we conclude 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. 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 scholastic theology, 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 is deistic, and for God to be confessed to be close to the Christian sociologist is all well and good, but as a personal confession. 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 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<sup>8</sup> because it is where Weber proscribes the "value-relatedness" of sociology qua scientific endeavour.

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<sup>7</sup> Weber's also characterises Kuyper's compromise on predestination as "The neo-Calvinism of Kuyper no longer dared to maintain the pure doctrine of predestined grace" (Max Weber 1964:205).

<sup>8</sup> 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 ft.8; 453 ft.9; 455 ft.19)<sup>8</sup>. 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

- **The entrapment of reformed students**

How does Max Weber's account of the work ethic come to subvert the reformed student's Christian 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 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 alter the drift toward secularisation.

This is not a joke, nor a sneering and cynical account. It explains some of the spiritual tensions confronted by reformed students at university. If such students come from churches, families and schools with a 'reformed' tag, then it is likely that they will have come under the influence of the idea that their world-view is first and foremost a matter of theology. And this is where the secularising process is confirmed.

Max Weber's account of Calvinism assumes theology to be 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 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 secularisation is completed. It finds its root in the reformed version of scholasticism. When Christian students are encouraged to assume that their world-view is the same as the science of theology there is no appreciation what spiritual problem this creates for them.

- **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

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religious orientation by comparison and contrast. Deism as an implicit religious prejudice undergirding social

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 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 is much smaller as a scholarly movement 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 which fail to sharply distinguish Christian vocation from the post-reformation "work ethic."

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 seen a titanic struggle 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 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 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 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 into what being reformed means is one cogent explanation of why the reformed cause is 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 <sup>9</sup>.

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 outworking Max Weber's version of the work ethic. They may appeal to their commercial and business successes, and success should be respected. But 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 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 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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<sup>9</sup> 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 "value freedom", we might well inquire as to whether Weber thought that Kuyper's neo-Calvinism was a departure from his Calvinism in favour of a "secular" freedom for the academy. Clearly Weber saw neo-Calvinism as a compromise with modernity.

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