

# The Protestant Ethic and Capitalism

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**ABSTRACT:** The Reformation arose from society's reaction to the luxury, immorality and indifference of the clergy of the Catholic Church and returning to the original purity of New Testament Christianity. The Protestant culture supports the principle of equality and individualism. These were the basis for the development of capitalism. Various studies conclude that there is a strong link between Protestantism's behavioral patterns, concepts of secular ethics and religious doctrines of Protestantism.

**KEYWORDS:** ethic, morality, values, protestantism, capitalism, Max Weber

## Introduction

The Protestant Reformation was a 16<sup>th</sup> century religious movement that sought to reform the Catholic Church in Western Europe, with the goal of returning to the original purity of New Testament Christianity (Cairns 1997, 270).

The Reformation arose from society's reaction to the luxury, immorality and indifference of the clergy of the Catholic Church (religious causes); from incompatibility between the modern state and the universalism of the Catholic Church (political causes); from society's need to transform the church, which was an obstacle to the changes made by new capitalism (economic causes).

## The European Protestantism

Although through the action of Jan Hus, the Czech people ushered in a new period in the history of Europe – the period of religious liberation movements (Hussite principles being typical of anti-Catholic Protestantism), the Reformation was initiated by Martin Luther in Germany, when he nailed the 95 theses on the door of Wittenberg Castle Church, theses which he taught against indulgences. What gives special importance to the Hussite teaching (in general to the Protestant teaching) is the patriotic and democratic character of its principles (Gruber 1963, 324).

The Protestant Reformation led to the emergence of four major churches: Lutheran, Reformed (Calvinist or Presbyterian), Anabaptist and Anglican. Later Protestant churches (Adventist, Baptist, Pentecostal etc.) usually have their roots in these four early schools of the Reformation (Mojzes 1999, 7).

For the most part, the Reformation was limited to Western Europe and the Teutonic peoples. The Eastern Church and the Latin peoples of the Old Roman Empire did not accept the Reformation, because here the medieval ideals of unity and uniformity still prevailed (Cairns 1997, 270-271).

The Protestantism nurtures the noble aspiration to return to the primary form of Christianity. Its fundamental principles distinguish it from both Catholicism and the Orthodox Church. Protestants of all categories, Lutherans, Zwinglinist Or Calvinists, differ from the two Churches in their teaching about grace, salvation, church, holiness, the number and value of the Mysteries.

Thus, Sharpe (1997, 329) noted that although England and France are, in many respects, similar societies (approximately the same population profile, comparable socio-economic levels and technological developments), their educational systems are different. These differences come from contrasting cultural traditions: Protestant fundamental values in England, respectively Catholic in France.

The fundamental distinctions between Catholic and Protestant traditions appear regarding the role of the church in the salvation of the believer, the structure of authority and the nature of responsibility. In Catholicism, the church is the vehicle of salvation, there is no salvation without the church. In Protestantism, the believer receives only guidance, help and support, in order to help him find his individual salvation by faith. The Catholic Church has a single, universal and monolithic structure of authority. The levels of superiority and inferiority are clearly defined in bureaucratic terms of responsibility by a distinct hierarchical line. In contrast, in Protestantism, the nature of authority has more democratic, particular features. Regarding responsibility, in Catholicism these are the following: believers must agree with the doctrine of the universal Catholic Church and fulfill the obligations to the church imposed on all who want to be saved. In Protestantism, responsibility is a personal matter between the believer and God (Sharpe 1997, 331).

### **The American Protestantism**

By the end of the 18th century, the vast majority of Americans who had gained independence were white, British and Protestant. By the end of the 20th century, 63% of Americans were Protestants, 23% Catholics, 8% other religions and 6% without a declared religion. In other words, we can speak of an American Protestant culture, this being the one that supported the principle of equality and individualism, central to the American Creed (Huntington 2004, 15).

Samuel Huntington notes that America was founded as a Protestant society, and for about two hundred years, almost all Americans were Protestants. However, with the increase of Catholic immigration, this overwhelming proportion began to decline, reaching about 60% in 2000. However, Protestant beliefs, values, and dogmas continued to impact American life, society, and thinking. Protestant values are the core of American culture and have profoundly influenced both Catholicism and other American religions. Protestant values have also shaped American's attitudes toward public and private morality, economic activity, government activity, and public policy.

Returning to the Protestant origins of the Americans, Samuel Huntington said: "Protestant origins give America a unique character in the family of nations and explain why even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century religion is vital to American identity, as it is not with other Protestant peoples. For most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Americans viewed their homeland as a Protestant country, foreigners viewed it as a Protestant country, and books, cartographic documents and literature described it as a Protestant country" (Huntington 2004, 49). In other words, America was born Protestant and did not have to become so.

The American creed emphasizes individualism, equality, and the rights to freedom of religion and opinion. Protestantism, the source of the American Creed, has valued and continues to value the work ethic and the responsibility of each individual for their own success or failure in life.

Protestant culture emphasizes the role of the individual in gaining knowledge of God directly from the Bible, without the mediation of the clerical hierarchy. It also emphasizes that the individual obtains salvation by the grace of God, without church mediation. That is why this Protestant culture has made Americans the most individualistic people in the world, in the sense of individual responsibility for success or failure. An American believes that if you work hard and follow the rules, you have a chance to get as far as your God-given ability allows you to.

Another central feature of Protestant culture is work ethic. If in other societies, heredity, class, social position, ethnicity, and family are the main sources of status and legitimacy, in America it is work. American society glorifies work, to the point that almost no American dares to say he is doing nothing. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century prayer and work were closely linked and inactivity was a sin (Huntington 2004, 53-55).

American politics has been and remains a politics of morality and moral passion. American political values are embodied by the Creed. The individual has the responsibility to follow the American dream and to achieve everything in his power through his skills, character and work. At the collective level, Americans have the responsibility to do everything they can to make their society a realm of promise. The emphasis is on the reform of the individual, on the regeneration of the soul of the individual, rather than on social and political reforms, because Protestantism emphasizes the individual. Thus, the Great Religious Awakenings in American History, which aimed at reforming the individual, were closely linked to periods of political reforms: changing religious feelings about duties and obligations, improving social and political situation (promoting temperance, fighting tobacco use, stopping prostitution, supporting education, etc.), bridging the gap between institutions and ideals for creating a just and equitable society, antitrust measures, women's suffrage, private initiative, referendum, the need to reduce government authority, social assistance and tax programs, government restrictions on abortion, etc. (Huntington 2004, 58-60).

### **Protestant Ethic and Capitalism**

At the end of the 19th century, Martin Offenbacher examined the denominational composition of secondary schools in Baden, Germany. This study shows that Protestants outclass Catholics in various secondary schools, on various subjects like science, mathematics or other practical subjects (Becker 2000, 311-312). Offenbacher's study was the basis for other studies that confirmed the existence of a link between Protestant ethics and the development of capitalism and science (Parsons 1968; Knapp & Goodrich 1952; McClelland 1967; Weber 2003, 25-35).

Various studies have concluded that Protestantism, compared to Catholicism, has been inclined towards modernity, the development of capitalism and science (Lehman & Witty 1931; Knapp & Goodrich 1952; Knapp & Greenbaum 1953; Lenski 1963; Ben-David 1965; Feldhay & Elkana 1989).

Max Weber and Robert K. Merton reproduced Offenbacher's statistics from Baden (1885-1895) and demonstrated the superiority of Protestants in terms of capitalist entrepreneurship (Weber 2003, 28) and in terms of scientific efforts (Merton 1968, 628-660). Later, a number of authors have confirmed the link between Protestant ethics and the emergence and development of industrialized capitalism in 19<sup>th</sup> century's Europe (Barclay 1969; Buck 1993).

However, not all researchers agreed with Weber's theory. Becker has denied the theory, saying that there is not a significant difference between Protestants and Catholics (Becker 2000). Delacroix and Nielsen (2001, 510-511) concluded that the link between Protestant ethic and the emergence of industrial capitalism in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe is an illusion (Delacroix and Nielsen World Values Survey conducted in 1990 found that, in the cultural terms of defining the role of Protestantism, Weber's theory does not work in Latin America (Gill 2004).

Murove (2005, 390) conducted a study in post-colonial Africa found the failure of Western capitalism in this region. The failure is explained by the lack of Protestant ethics, the Western economic system being based on individualism, which is in conflict with community-oriented African economic relations. Therefore, Protestant ethics is indispensable for the development of capitalism.

The study by Baker & Forbes (2006, 23-26) concluded that Protestants, compared to non-Protestants, tend to take more responsibility (pro-market attitude, which suggests that the market is embedded in the moral system, just as it is incorporated into social relations networks). Moral values also influence pro-market attitudes.

## **Protestant Ethic, Capitalism and Max Weber**

Max Weber, one of the great contemporary thinkers, remains famous for his study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, 2003). In this section we will briefly present some of the ideas expressed by the famous author in this study.

He makes a comparative analysis of the dominant theological doctrines during early capitalism, which leads him to conclude that there is a strong link between Protestantism's behavioral patterns, concepts of secular ethics and religious doctrines of Protestantism (Protestant doctrines contain encouragements of the new type of economic behavior especially in the doctrine of predestination). Thus, Weber explains why capitalism appeared in a certain part of the world, why it succeeded only in certain societies and not in others.

The doctrine of predestination and other Protestant theological doctrines encourage an active life and work. Work, done according to divine precepts, is the only way to gain certainty regarding God's grace. Also, theological doctrines encourage one to plan and to permanently pursue the economic gain.

An element of Weber's analysis is the German term *Beruf*, which suggests a religious conception, that of a mission set by God. Through the undeniable influence of Luther's thinking, Protestants regarded the fulfillment of duty in secular professions as the supreme content that ethical self-determination would have otherwise adopted. This conclusion resulted in the idea that everyday secular work had a religious significance and produced for the first time this sense of the concept of profession.

Protestants did not seek to awaken the capitalist spirit. None of the reformers, ever focus of ethical programs. They have not founded ethical culture societies, nor were they representatives of aspirations for social or humanitarian reforms or cultural ideals. The salvation of the soul was the central point of their life and activity. Their ethical objectives and the practical effects of their doctrine were all anchored here, being consequences of purely religious motives.

The cultural effects of the Reformation were unforeseen and downright unintended consequences of the work of the reformers, often very distant or even opposed to all of the ideas they had. The Reformation should not be inferred from economic change as a necessity for the "evolution's history".

## **Conclusions**

Protestantism is not just a religious movement, a branch of Western Christianity, but it is one of the great cultural currents of modernity, which emphasizes ethical and political values. God created man and placed him in this world, and man's task is to inhabit and transform it.

For Protestants, religious faith, ethics, politics and technology form an indivisible whole. This thinking led to Protestantism being said to have contributed decisively to the birth of modernity.

Protestantism was characterized, first of all, by its democratic character, fighting for the freedom of the individual; secondly, through the patriotism it has shown, fighting for the development of culture in the national language of that country; lastly, through its ethics, contributing to the emergence and development of capitalism.

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