March 13, 2005

ESSAY

The Calvinist Manifesto

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THIS year is the 100th anniversary of the most famous sociological tract ever written, "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," by Max Weber. It was a book that stood Karl Marx on his head. Religion, according to Weber, was not an ideology produced by economic interests (the "opiate of the masses," as Marx had put it); rather, it was what had made the modern capitalist world possible. In the present decade, when cultures seem to be clashing and religion is frequently blamed for the failures of modernization and democracy in the Muslim world, Weber's book and ideas deserve a fresh look.

Weber's argument centered on ascetic Protestantism. He said that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination led believers to seek to demonstrate their elect status, which they did by engaging in commerce and worldly accumulation. In this way, Protestantism created a work ethic -- that is, the valuing of work for its own sake rather than for its results -- and demolished the older Aristotelian-Roman Catholic doctrine that one should acquire only as much wealth as one needed to live well. In addition, Protestantism admonished its believers to behave morally outside the boundaries of the family, which was crucial in creating a system of social trust.

The Weber thesis was controversial from the moment it was published. Various scholars stated that it was empirically wrong about the superior economic performance of Protestants over Catholics; that Catholic societies had started to develop modern capitalism long before the Reformation; and that it was the Counter-Reformation rather than Catholicism itself that had led to economic backwardness. The German economist Werner Sombart claimed to have found the functional equivalent of the Protestant ethic in Judaism; Robert Bellah discovered it in Japan's Tokugawa Buddhism.

It is safe to say that most contemporary economists do not take Weber's hypothesis, or any other culturalist theory of economic growth, seriously. Many maintain that culture is a residual category in which lazy social scientists take refuge when they can't develop a more rigorous theory. There is indeed reason to be cautious about using culture to explain economic and political outcomes. Weber's own writings on the other great world religions and their impact on modernization serve as warnings. His book "The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism" (1916) takes a very dim view of the prospects for economic development in Confucian China, whose culture, he remarks at one point, provides only slightly less of an obstacle to the emergence of modern capitalism than Japan's.

What held traditional China and Japan back, we now understand, was not culture, but stifling institutions, bad politics and misguided policies. Once these were fixed, both societies took off. Culture is only one of many factors that determine the success of a society. This is something to bear in mind when one hears assertions that the religion of Islam explains terrorism, the lack of democracy or other phenomena in the Middle East.

At the same time, no one can deny the importance of religion and culture in determining why institutions work better in some countries than in others. The Catholic parts of Europe were slower to modernize economically than the Protestant ones, and they took longer to reconcile themselves to democracy. Thus, much of what Samuel Huntington called the "third wave" of democratization took place between the 1970's and 90's in places like Spain, Portugal and many countries of Latin America. Even today, among the highly secular societies that make up the European Union, there is a clear gradient in attitudes toward political corruption from the Protestant north to the Mediterranean south. It was the entry of the squeaky-clean Scandinavians into the union that ultimately forced the resignation of its entire executive leadership in 1999 over a minor corruption scandal involving a former French prime minister.

"The Protestant Ethic" raises much more profound questions about the role of religion in modern life than most discussions suggest. Weber argues that in the modern world, the work ethic has become detached from the religious passions that gave
birth to it, and that it now is part of rational, science-based capitalism. Values for Weber do not arise rationally, but out of
the kind of human creativity that originally inspired the great world religions. Their ultimate source, he believed, lay in what
he labeled "charismatic authority" -- in the original Greek meaning of "touched by God." The modern world, he said, has
seen this type of authority give way to a bureaucratic-rational form that deadens the human spirit (producing what he called
an "iron cage") even as it has made the world peaceful and prosperous. Modernity is still haunted by "the ghost of dead
religious beliefs," but has largely been emptied of authentic spirituality. This was especially true, Weber believed, in the
United States, where "the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with
purely mundane passions."

It is worth looking more closely at how Weber's vision of the modern world has panned out in the century since the
publication of "The Protestant Ethic." In many ways, of course, it has proved fatally accurate: rational, science-based
capitalism has spread across the globe, bringing material advancement to large parts of the world and welding it together
into the iron cage we now call globalization.

But it goes without saying that religion and religious passion are not dead, and not only because of Islamic militancy but also
because of the global Protestant-evangelical upsurge that, in terms of sheer numbers, rivals fundamentalist Islam as a source
of authentic religiosity. The revival of Hinduism among middle-class Indians, or the emergence of the Falun Gong
movement in China, or the resurgence of Eastern Orthodoxy in Russia and other former Communist lands, or the continuing
vibrancy of religion in America, suggests that secularization and rationalism are hardly the inevitable handmaidens of
modernization.

One might even take a broader view of what constitutes religion and charismatic authority. The past century was marked by
what the German theorist Carl Schmitt labeled "political-theological" movements, like Nazism and Marxism-Leninism, that
were based on passionate commitments to ultimately irrational beliefs. Marxism claimed to be scientific, but its real-world
adherents followed leaders like Lenin, Stalin or Mao with the kind of blind commitment to authority that is psychologically
indistinguishable from religious passion. (During the Cultural Revolution in China, a person had to be careful about what he
did with old newspapers; if a paper contained a picture of Mao and one sat on the holy image or used the newspaper to wrap
a fish, one was in danger of being named a counterrevolutionary.)

SURPRISINGLY, the Weberian vision of a modernity characterized by "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart"
applies much more to modern Europe than to present-day America. Europe today is a continent that is peaceful, prosperous,
rationally administered by the European Union and thoroughly secular. Europeans may continue to use terms like "human
rights" and "human dignity," which are rooted in the Christian values of their civilization, but few of them could give a
coherent account of why they continue to believe in such things. The ghost of dead religious beliefs haunts Europe much
more than it does America.

Weber's "Protestant Ethic" was thus terrifically successful as a stimulus to serious thought about the relationship of cultural
values to modernity. But as a historical account of the rise of modern capitalism, or as an exercise in social prediction, it has
turned out to be less correct. The violent century that followed publication of his book did not lack for charismatic authority,
and the century to come threatens yet more of the same. One must wonder whether it was not Weber's nostalgia for spiritual
authenticity -- what one might term his Nietzscheanism -- that was misplaced, and whether living in the iron cage of modern
rationalism is such a terrible thing after all.

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