

## Modern Capitalism: A Product of Religious Ethics & Utilitarian Labor

In *the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber describes the development of the rationalism of Western culture, by means of Occidental rationalism, as one that can be traced back to the onset of religious sentiment. The expansion of ideas within the peculiar realm of thinking particular to religion created fecund conditions for modern, or natural, science to gain popularity, especially given ‘the need of the Calvinistic elect for proof with their exclusive preoccupation with the beyond’ (Chp. IV, pg. 138). The need to effectually define and construct a formula in order to evaluate the possible coexistence of Calvin’s interpretation of predestination and salvation encouraged rapid exploration of religious ideals in relation to interpretations of natural occurrences in practical life. This radical quest to make these connections was the momentous step in history that rationalized religion and led to the increase in evaluating divine will through scientific, empirical investigation. This account of the progression of rational thought described by Weber presupposes the statement he makes about its direct influence on the evolution of socioeconomic practices: “...the development of modern sciences, especially the natural sciences based on mathematics and exact rational experiment and the technique resting upon them now receives important stimulation from these capitalistic interests in its practical economic application” (Introduction, pg. 24). Therefore, in connecting ‘the spirit of modern economic life with the rational ethics of ascetic Protestantism’ (Introduction, pg. 27), Weber tactfully justifies himself in reasoning that public appropriation and ownership of all business enterprises by the state would change much less in social life than people imagine, and could not singlehandedly destroy the “iron cage” of modern capitalism.

This reasoning further asserts, in other words, that the relinquishing of capitalistic enterprises by the State, in order to adhere to traditionalistic business principles, is not sufficient enough to alter public attitudes and behaviors in regards to the modern specialized division of labor. This is because deeply engrained in the collective consciousness is the expectation to devote one’s life to their calling through labor and abide by the ethical standards that come with earning pecuniary profits, according to modern economic order, given that it is willed by God for their needs and those of the community. Furthermore, Weber’s nuanced approach is one that follows the transformation of capitalism from rational to utilitarian uses through the significant emergence of religious forces. These forces dictated to humankind that one’s calling in life directly correlated with ascetic worldly activity because it is in accordance with God’s will. According to Weber, “The emphasis on the ascetic importance of a fixed calling provided an ethical justification of the modern specialized division of labor” (Chp. 5, pg. 163). The perpetuation of this religious belief produced a significant psychological effect on the collective consciousness in regards to labor given that it was an approved ascetic technique which, in contrast to strict Calvinistic principles, allowed individuals the opportunity to work for divine glory and be worthy of God’s salvation. Therefore, it was in the form of religious duty that labor initially served to develop ‘the religious valuation of restless, continuous, systemic work in a worldly calling, as the highest means to asceticism, and at the same time the surest and most evident proof of rebirth and genuine faith’ (Chp. 5, pg. 172). Historically, this perception of labor corresponds to the four principal forms of ascetic Protestantism because each movement was able to influence shifts in the collective interpretation of religious doctrines until the immense growth of capitalistic economy became the product of a Calvinistic diaspora.

The meager change in social life is not enough to affect modern capitalism because orthodox Protestant ethics have been too strongly imparted to the collective consciousness. Thus, even

though the 'religious roots died out slowly giving way to utilitarian worldliness' (Chp. 5, pg. 176), 'the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs' (Chp. 5, pg. 182). Weber articulates that holding capitalism together as a social system is: 'the influence of certain religious ideas on the development of an economic spirit, or the *ethos* of an economic system' (Introduction, pg. 27).

Weber's interest in Benjamin Franklin as he speaks of "duty" is especially important when considering the nature of modern capitalism and its production of private wealth. He states, "Asceticism condemned both dishonesty and impulsive avarice" (Chp. 5, pg. 172), which corresponds to perhaps Franklin's most important principle of the capitalistic ethic that is generally formulated "honesty is the best policy" (Chp. 4, pg. 151). The evaluation of Benjamin Franklin and his 'social ethic of capitalistic culture' is critical to understanding the impact that religious forces had on establishing ascetic labor as obligatory for society as a collective. Weber describes Franklin's moral attitudes as being founded in utilitarianism for the purpose of conveying that his strict adherence to this doctrine is owed 'to a divine revelation which was intended to lead him in the path to righteousness' (Chp. 1, pg. 53). The terms 'divine' and 'righteousness' are particularly important because they begin to express religious sentiment as the chief motivator in the utilization of virtue to help fulfill the duty assigned to individuals through their calling in life. The Calvinistic principles inculcated in Franklin established an *ethos* that Weber sums up in stating: "The earning of money within the modern economic order is, so long as it is done legally, the result and the expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling" (Chp. 1, pg. 54).

From this, it is simple to discern that the idea of duty in relation to capitalistic acquisition stems from Benjamin Franklin reflecting a spirit of capitalism because he felt it was most appropriate to seek profit rationally and systematically in an ethical manner. The fact that the New England colonies were founded by preachers, but profit seeking, further alludes to the psychological effect on the collective consciousness, through initial religious belief and the practice of religion, which encouraged individuals to display socially practical and economic conduct in line with ethical standards. Weber articulates this best when he states: "The only way of living acceptably to God was not to surpass worldly morality in monastic asceticism, but solely through the fulfillment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. That was his calling" (Chp. 2, Pg. 80). Thus, his interest in Franklin stems from his ethical standards of capitalism serving as a link between classical religious duty, utilitarianism, and modern capitalism. The ethical socioeconomic attitude attached to duty by Benjamin Franklin certainly permeated throughout the collective consciousness of society during his time by means of his principles. In this day and age, society is still subject to these principles through a contemporarily timeless, palpable representation that transcends time and space: the hundred-dollar bill. This banknote systematically amalgamates graphic (Franklin's prudent facial expression), textual ('In God We Trust'), and social (The feeling produced from possessing the bill with the largest exchange-value) representations that all converge to form a symbol, or an emblem, embodying the spirit of capitalism under dutiful pretenses. It is as if the intended effect is to render the American, who is engaged in capitalistic enterprise, consciously aware of his obligation to the collective consciousness to act ethically with utilitarian ends in mind. This reveals a commonality between Weber's interest in Franklin's talk of duty and the reason why the United States government chose to put his face on the largest banknote in circulation.