

The Assurance Debate in Max Weber

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Abstract

Every introduction to sociology textbook summarizes the well-known thesis of Max Weber on the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. These overviews outline Weber's claim that Calvinist belief in predestination during the 16th and 17th centuries generated a state of anxiety in believers about their salvation. Perceiving economic success as a sign of God's blessing provided some assurance about their state of election. However, Calvinism in itself and in all its forms never expressed a state of anxiety. What was new in Calvinism was the belief in the perpetual assurance of salvation, a belief that generated a peculiar sense of peace and confidence. This study seeks to open a new window on an issue that has animated generations of scholars and still influences the way we interpret our modern age.

Key Words: Calvinism, capitalism, Max Weber, Protestantism, work ethic

"Lastly, there was another most pestilential error, which not only occupied the minds of men, but was regarded as one of the principal articles of faith, of which it was impious to doubt: that is, that believers ought to be perpetually in suspense and uncertainty as to their interest in the divine favor. By this suggestion of the devil, the power of faith was completely extinguished, the benefits of Christ's purchase destroyed, and the salvation of men overthrown."

John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*, p. 27

Several scholarly efforts have been made in the past to analyze the relationship between economics and religion. One seminal starting point for the discipline of sociology is Max Weber and his masterpiece on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905/1930). His study begins with the question of why cultural phenomena in Western civilization attained universal significance and value (1905/1930:xxviii). The study then provides statistical evidence for the impact of Protestant religious affiliation on social stratification. Weber was not the first author who reflected on this (see Mel'gunov 1875; Arnold 1878; Laveleye 1889; Keats 1899; Bendix 1967).

What makes Weber so unique is that, through a precise historical-scientific method, he explained how a non-economic element such as a specific religious belief influenced the

birth of the spirit of modern capitalism. This was done in clear opposition to the dominant interpretations of the time, such as positivism, Marxism, and neoclassical economy theory, and to those after him, such as structural functionalism, biologism, and world system theory. The “spirit of capitalism” is defined by Weber not as mere economic accumulation, but as an economic *ethos* that appeared at the birth stage of modern capitalism in Western Europe and New England (1905/1976:132). The concept of the spirit of capitalism can be understood only by considering the complex elements associated with the reality of modern history. In this sense, this spirit can be united into a conceptual whole from the standpoint of its cultural significance. As Weber states:

The peculiarity of this philosophy of avarice appears to be the ideal of the honest man of recognized credit, and above all the idea of a duty of the individual toward the increase of his capital, which is assumed as an end in itself. Truly what is here preached is not simply a means of making one’s way in the world, but a peculiar ethic. The infraction of its rules is treated not as foolishness but as forgetfulness of duty. That is the essence of the matter. It is not mere business astuteness. That sort of thing is common enough. It is an *ethos*. This is the quality which interests us. (1905/1930:16, 17)

The spirit of capitalism, therefore, can be defined as an individual’s system of values (*ethos*) able to generate an attitude toward life which sees profit as an end to itself, and an incessant pursuit of economic gain as an ultimate end to human existence. This attitude, not to be confused with the mere utilitarian attitude common to all humans, is based on a source of spiritual satisfaction that provides real purpose in all one says and does, including their economic action. This spirit of capitalism is the opposite of traditionalism, and was historically present primarily in north-western European and North American capitalism at the time of Weber. He argued that widespread forms of what he defined as “ascetic” Protestantism inadvertently legitimated the rise of acquisitive capitalism (Martinelli and Smelser 1990). The spirit of capitalism was directly generated by several beliefs prior to the Protestant ethic and developed later in contexts that were not necessarily religious. Such religious beliefs can be an explanatory factor, because according to Weber’s sociology of religion, actions, even economic actions, must be understood starting from the idea of the individual and their system of values (*ethos*).

Weber tries to identify the components, not necessarily of economic nature, that led to the formation of the spirit of capitalism, which is the ethical premise to the advent of modern capitalism (1920/1993). This does not mean that the ethical premise plays a deterministic role in the advent of modern capitalism. In his lessons on economic history, Weber makes an important distinction between the “speculative capitalism” that was present in the ancient time, and the “rational capitalism” that was a product of the modern era. Weber does not neglect the role that technical conditions, trade, rational organization of work, the advent of modern state, and the advent of a mercantile political economy all played in the formation of rational capitalism. Conversely, he does not reduce the advent of modern capitalism to those elements. Therefore, through his study of the sociology of

religion, he tries to explore the cultural conditions, and mainly the core ethic impulse, that contributed to the advent of rational capitalism (1923/2003).

Weber pointed out a correlation, not a causal relationship, between several religious beliefs peculiar to Protestantism—here termed *preconditions*—and the genesis of a specific economic ethos, the spirit of capitalism. The first precondition that he identifies is the *Beruf*, a calling from God for one's life, specifically in the field of worldly work. This concept, fully elaborated only in the Protestant faith, was crucial in the attribution of purpose and meaning to any type of work. In the following centuries, even in contexts with no relation at all to the Protestant faith, such an idea was the background for the development of professions. This idea of *Beruf* is the starting point in Weber's analysis, and a breaking with traditional society that Martin Luther, also a prime figure of the Protestant Reformation, promoted in his theology. This concept that can be extrapolated from Luther's writings and sermons already had an antecedent in the Catholic concept of *vocatio*. However, *vocatio* referred only to the realm of the religious structure (mainly the *vocatio* to priesthood or monasticism) inside the framework of church hierarchy. Believing in the "universal priesthood" of all believers, Luther applied this concept to any aspect of life and to the specific call that each Christian must discover, discern, and pursue a job. This view not only addresses the "soul arena" of one's life, but also sees work in and of itself as a form of service to God. Such revolutionary use of the term had profound effects on all future aspects of society, especially on how the common people viewed and performed their work.

Another precondition strictly related to the first one is *inner-worldly asceticism* (*Inner-weltliche Askese*). To be "ascetic" is defined by Weber as an attitude characterized by a methodical procedure to achieve religious salvation. Such a view can be applied only to the world-rejecting form of monkish asceticism (*Wetablehnende Askese*). This clarification can be better understood when considering Weber's distinction between asceticism and mysticism. Mysticism differs from asceticism in that it is the content of salvation, not an active quality of the conduct when having executed the divine will, but a subjective condition in a state of illumination. In this sense, it would be more appropriate to talk about a Protestant "inner-worldly active mysticism" as opposed to the Catholic "world-rejecting asceticism," instead of inner-worldly asceticism by itself, with its improper salvific connotation. According to this principle, humans can live lives that please God, not through monkish asceticism as in the Catholic tradition, but through the fulfillment of worldly duties (1923/2003:176). This view pushed people to understand their work in strict connection with their spiritual life as something with intrinsic value, as a "service to Christ." The very work someone does becomes part of "service" and "ministry."

Such a view promoted by the Protestant Reformers openly went against the hierarchical importance of social roles so common during the Middle-Ages and inherited from Aristotelian philosophy. According to this last position, those who were engaged in contemplative life were to be considered the highest of the social classes. Luther and the Protestant Reformers, after their disillusionment and secession from the traditional order, plainly rejected this idea that monastic life ought to be considered as the highest level of

Christian service. On the contrary, work in all its forms should be considered a service to Christ in the world, and because of that, it had an eternal significance tied to it in the same way, and level, as a preacher ministering in the church. Protestantism in this way restrained people from behaving in an irrational or unsystematic manner, disciplining them to consider carefully the relationships among their various social activities (Martinelli and Smelser 1990). Among the features of such restraint generated by this inner-worldly asceticism in the workplace is the crucial restriction from frivolous expenditure of money, from too much dependence on the kinship network, from consuming alcohol, from disorderly conduct, and from taking breaks or walking off a job, all creating a saving mentality.

The third precondition, formalized by Weber in another of his subsequent writings (1906/1977), is the role of sects. This precondition is not only successive in terms of when it was formulated by Weber, but also in terms of its timeframe (see the shorter arrow in TABLE 1) that must here be considered in reference to a period much later than Luther and Calvin or the early stages of the Protestant Reformation. In this second writing, Weber is considering observations he made during his lifetime among North American Protestant sects. Unlike the official church, the sect is a voluntary congregation where access is possible only after a long period of examinations and tests of one's ethical qualifications. This element has more recently been defined in sociology as the core of the ritual action: disciplines where whoever fits measures and standards dictated by the scheme is recognized as a member of the discipline (Barbera and Negri 2015). This religious context fostered auto-affirmation, search for quality, charisma, and striving for rewards. For those reasons being part of a sect was very good for one's reputation and was often used as a business card representing the ethical and commercial qualities of the individual. This does not mean that the sect was important only because it was able to activate a social network between entrepreneurs. Although this may have been the case and the network had its delimited role, Weber was more interested in how the process of selection peculiar to the Protestant sect generated a good character reputation in the eyes of the outside context, and therefore was particularly fruitful in business.

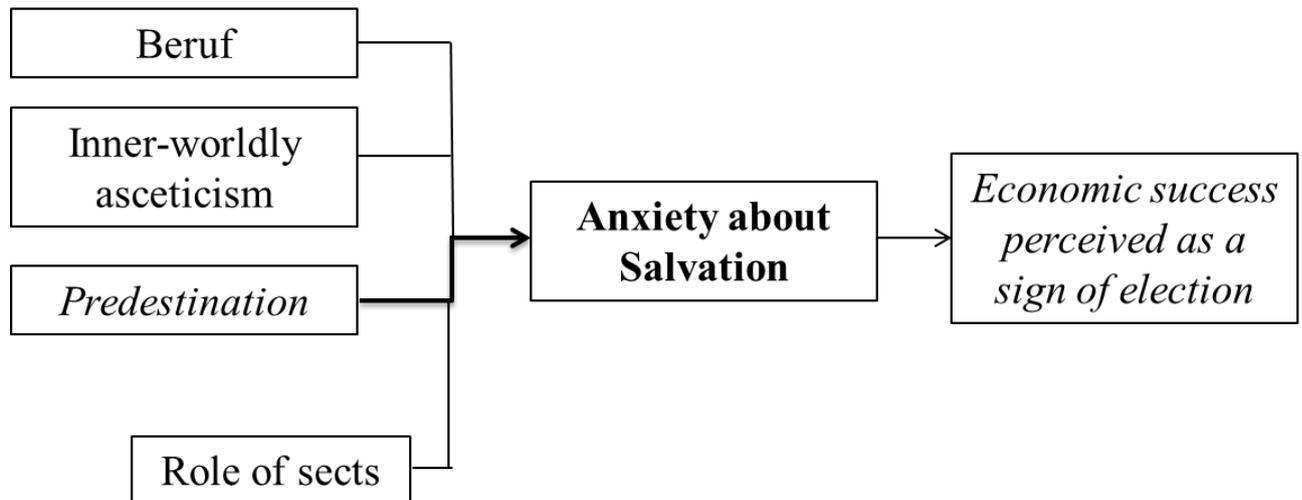
But what was the main element about Protestantism on the micro level that pushed one's economic propensity, generated by the preconditions, toward economic success? The heart of Weber's theory lies in the belief in the doctrine of predestination. This doctrine, formulated by John Calvin (1559/2009) in the sense of "double predestination," stated that before the foundation of the world God predestined some humans to eternal life, and foreordained others to eternal death (Romans 9:14-24). The Calvinist believer, according to Weber, faces the perpetual question of his own eternal destiny: "Am I elected or am I damned?" This creates a vicious cycle of anxiety that was indirectly beneficial in daily life, generating the propensity to work and strive for success. Working for the glory of God and receiving His approval through economic success, is, according to Weber, the instrument through which the Calvinist believer looked for a sign of their status as elect and predestined.

But since Calvin viewed all pure feelings and emotions, no matter how exalted they might seem to be, with suspicion, faith had to be proved by its objective results in order to provide a firm foundation for the *certitudo salutis*. It must be a *fides efficax* [...]. Especially by comparing the condition of one's own soul with that of the elect, for instance the patriarchs, according to the Bible, could the state of one's own grace be known. Only one of the elect really has the *fides efficax* [...]. It was through the consciousness that his conduct, at least in its fundamental character and constant ideal (*propositum oboedientiæ*), rested on a power within himself working for the glory of God; that it is not only willed of God but rather done by God that he attained the highest good towards which this religion strove, the certainty of salvation. (1905/1930:67-69)

Weber goes on to explain that “although good works are absolutely incapable to serve as means to obtain the eternal beatitude... yet they are essential as sign of election. They are the technical means not to buy salvation, but to be free from the anxiety of not obtaining salvation” (1905/1930:67-69).

Here Weber defines the crucial point of his remarks. The Calvinist believer creates their own certainty of salvation by doing good works, and through their continuous work for the glory of God tries to find an answer to the persistent question of election or damnation. A more definitive answer to this anxiety came only with the Puritan successors of Calvin, like Richard Baxter or William Perkins. According to the Weberian interpretation of those preachers, it is especially through an examination of one's professional work, through the achievement of effective economic success (as a sign of *fides efficax* and state of grace) that the person can establish their eternal state (1905/1930:220). Even though good works are not useful for salvation, they are still necessary to control the state of the true elect. The believer then, according to Weber, has an internal obligation to strive for professional success to avoid this anxiety and be sure of their state of grace.

TABLE 1: Relationship between Protestant beliefs and economic ethos according to Weber's theory.



Research, Theory, and Question

Right after the first publication of the Protestant Ethic as an article (1904:176-202, 1905:554-599), then later in his comprehensive study of the sociology of religion (1920), Weber's thesis generated a great debate. Several important sociologists were motivated to develop further analyses (Troeltsch 1906; Simmel 1906; Brentano 1916; Tawney 1922, 1926; Groethuysen 1927; Sombart 1928) and a specific field of study developed through the critiques and suggestions of many scholars (Means 1966; Bendix 1967; Parsons 1968; Mirels and Garrett 1971; Baechler 1971; Roper 1972; Bouma 1973; Razzell 1977; Kim 1977; Marshall 1982; Collins 1980; Boudon 1985; Giorgi and Marsh 1990; Fisschoff 1991; Treiber 1993; Kalberg 1996; Delacroix and Nielsen 2001; Cohen 2002; Schaefer 2007; Barbalet 2008; McKinnon 2010). The approach of these scholars toward the validity of Weber's theory of the correlation between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of modern capitalism tends to vary. A meta-analysis of the four main approaches to criticizing the validity of Max Weber's theory can be summarized as follows: an endogenous approach, a historical materialistic approach, a methodological approach, and a revisionist approach.

The first approach refers to those scholars who neglect the validity of Weber's theoretical argument, basing their critique on their personal belief or identity claims, and then try to produce facts which support their beliefs (Brentano 1916; Tawney 1922; Groethuysen 1927; Sombart 1927; Robertson 1933; Fanfani 1944; Fisschoff 1944; George 1961; Swanson 1967; Winckelmann 1968; Luthy 1970; Rope 1972; Samuelsson 1973; Marshall 1982; Martello 1992; Zaret 1992; Novak 1993; Burgos 1996). These authors tend to conceive Weber's intention as claiming the superiority of a certain religious belief over the other. But Max Weber's thesis on the Protestant ethic must be understood in the context of his comprehensive attempt to reconstruct a universal economic history. Weber had many

cultural interests and his interdisciplinary approach was always directed by an objective intellectual purpose. Nothing is so questionable as isolating the thesis from its original descriptive, explanatory, and interpretative role, and giving to it the impression that he was expressing a judgment of value. The critic stands here on a wrong and simplified interpretation of the theoretical argument, as if in Weber's opinion, capitalism is a product of the Reformation, or as if only a Protestant mentality can relate to the development of capitalism.

Those scholars move their focus to the economic role of Catholic Europe in the Middle-Ages, the Crusades, the reception of the Roman Law, the Renaissance, the counter-Reformation, or the doctrinal contribution of Erasmus of Rotterdam, as if the key factor can be found ultimately in an alternative "spiritual" cause for capitalism, either Catholicism or some secular spirit of mind. An example of this is the critique by Sombart that, although he comes from a historical methodology similar to Weber, finds a different preceding origin of the spirit of capitalism (1927). Reference here to his particular emphasis on the international role of Jews in the birth of modern capitalism, their involvement in credit, and their crucial contribution to the birth of entrepreneurship (1962).

Another primary example of this approach is Tawney in his study of religion and the genesis of capitalism (1926). The author begins by defending the economic inheritance of the Middle Ages, then questions the role of the Reformation, especially that of Calvinism or Puritanism, for the genesis of capitalism. On the other hand, he exalts the contributions of the Church of England, since he himself was Anglican. This approach, largely ideological, remains unable to provide explanations that are valid in the academic arena.

Second, the historical materialistic approach involves those scholars who believe that all human institutions, including religion, are based on economic foundations (Robertson 1933; Gordon Walker 1937; Baechler 1971; Pellicani 1993; Grossman 2006; Clark 2009; Hirschman 2013). This approach does not refer uniquely to scholars who hold a Marxist view, but includes, for example, some evolutionary theorists (Razzell 1977; Blum and Dudley 2001). However, they share the interpretation that modern capitalism arose simply because of gradually increasing economic exchange, and they deny therefore that any kind of religion can have a crucial influence on the formation of the capitalistic system. Modern capitalism is born uniquely from economic reasons, and social norms are always determined by productive structures.

The absolutization of the material dimension can clearly be seen in the effort of these authors to explain the birth of capitalism by referring only to political and economic conditions. For example, they mention the price revolution, the pre-existence of usury and speculative practices, or some comprehensive geographical and biological explanations. Even the Reformation, according to them, is just the result of needs created by advances in the means of production. What these authors often misunderstand is that Weber's "spirit of capitalism" is different from acquisitive greed. It is an *ethos* with internalized rules of conduct, for which profit maximization is only a byproduct (Rimlinger 1976). This leads these authors to a reductive and erroneous conclusion, as if Weber's first objective was to define

the causes of the birth of the modern capitalistic economy. Instead, Weber's objective was to show how a specific religious belief can influence the formation of an economic ethos that led to the formulation of the spirit of modern capitalism. This approach then, is biased by an economic determinism that is as equally questionable in its conclusions as the first approach.

Third, the methodological approach involves a larger number of scholars. This approach refers to scholars who, rather than focusing on religious or economic aspects, criticize Weber's methodology in his formulation of the theory (Parsons 1929; Green 1959; Hudson 1961; McClelland 1961; Hagen 1962; Nelson 1969; Warner 1970; Trevor-Roper 1972; Giddens 1973; Glock and Hammond 1973; Collins 1980; Boudon 1985; Laitin, 1986; Lehmann and Roth 1995; Kalberg 1996; Chalcraft and Harrington 2001; Gerhardt 2007; McKinnon 2010). Some of those scholars, for example, criticize Weber's use of "ideal types," his concept of rationality, the misunderstanding related to the translation of German concepts, the Weberian difference between "capitalism in general" and "modern capitalism," or the fact that Calvinist doctrine is only a fragment of Weber's full theory that led to the neglect of his diverse theoretical contributions. One of the main concerns of these critics was the neglect of the social aspects in Weber's analysis (Trevor-Roper 1972; Boudon 1985; Stark 2006).

According to this critical position, social networks between people of the same religion might more clearly explain their economic success than their religious belief on salvation. But if this were the case, then why did the strong social network related to the adherence of faith equally present between other religious minority groups in European history, such as the Quietists and Mystics of 16th and 17th centuries never lead to a similar economic tendency, as in the case of Huguenots or other Protestant sects? Instead, it pushed the Quietists and Mystics toward hedonism and radical anti-modern positions. Once again, contrary to the opinion of Boudon, it appears that the beliefs of Calvinism tend to play a major role in any social network explanation of the constitution of the spirit of capitalism. Those authors also underline the fact that some of the entrepreneurs in the 16th century, such as in Holland or Switzerland, were not the product of Calvinistic societies but of immigrants. What they forget to mention is that those immigrants also embraced the Calvinist belief and even though Köln, Antwerp, or Liege had their own Catholic entrepreneurs, they were an exception compared to the regularities documented by Weber in the ranks of the Protestant economic elite. Critics then frequently refer to the exception of Scotland. Even though Scotland was a Calvinist state church from 1560 on, it remained economically backward until the nineteenth century. Some recent analysis (cf. Marshall 1980) again shows the superficial interpretation of that position is based on the strength of largely irrelevant evidence in the case of Scotland. The relative lowness of the Scottish capitalist development says nothing about the modern capitalist ethos that Weber intended to point out. According to Marshall (1980), examining rather different data such as the case of Scotland may in the end go against the established opinion and actually be consistent with Weber's argument.

Fourth and finally, the revisionist approach includes some scholars who are not directly referring to Max Weber or his thesis. These authors may come from different disciplines and collateral fields of interest such as cultural anthropology or the sociology of religion, and they may embrace different schools of thought such as the post-modernist or post-colonial perspective, which may not be the focus of this study. However, from their perspective, as well as the one of similar studies, there is one main logical conclusion that undermines any role that Western society may have had in history, compared with other cultures and societies. What these authors have in common is an anti-ethnocentric perspective and a deconstruction of the concept of modernity as it is known in Western societies (Schluchter 1979, 1985, 1989, 1996; Goody 1996). The direct consequence of such an approach is the inevitable denial of the validity of Weber's theory. However, as fascinating as it may sound, the authors that hold such a position do not provide many facts and evidence for their position.

Summing up, it is possible to see that these different post-Weberian critics are not able to deny the validity of Weber's theoretical argument, including the facts and evidence that he provided in his articulated historical, cultural, and economic study of religion. Another element noticeable with many of those critics is a superficial understanding of both the conceptual background of Weber's theory as well as the historical, theological, and documental framework of the phenomenon.

TABLE 2: Critical Approaches to Weber’s thesis on Protestant ethic and the genesis of the spirit of capitalism.

Critical Approach	Main features	Critical points	Author’s
<i>Endogenous</i>	alternative “spiritual” cause for Capitalism	<i>Ideological arguments based on determinism of values</i>	Tawney, Groethuysen, Fanfani, Fischhoff, Novak, Burgos...
<i>Historical materialistic</i>	unilateral economic cause for Capitalism	<i>Ideological arguments based on economic determinism</i>	Robertson, Gordon Walker, Baechler, Lowy, Grossman, Razzell...
<i>Methodological</i>	mixed complex of causes for Capitalism	<i>Formal arguments without any alternative interpretation</i>	Parsons, Roper, Giddens, Boudon, Laitin, McKinnon...
<i>Revisionist</i>	elimination of the concept of Capitalism	<i>Denial of historical evidences without any valid support</i>	Goody, Schluchter...

Returning to Weber's original interpretation concerning anxiety and predestination, the evidence actually seems to be quite contrary to the doctrine of perpetual assurance of salvation. For as Calvin asserted, "the grace granted to the members of Jesus Christ has a strong pre-eminence of dignity, because, being united to their head, they are never cut off from their salvation" (1559/2009:1105).

For many centuries and with few exceptions, Christians believed that salvation comes through faith and good works. What was new in the Reformation, or rather a return to Christianity's origins, was that humans can be justified before God and receive this salvation by faith alone, without good works, and that they can have absolute assurance in this life of eternal salvation. All the main reformers, such as Luther or Zwingli, before their conversion, were Catholic priests, while Calvin was an educated scholar of law and humanism. This element surely inspired his systematic theology to declare the deepest implications of salvation as an eternal state of the soul that nothing in this life can change (Adamo 1994). Calvin, more than the other reformers, emphasized that the doctrine of predestination, because of the belief in perpetual assurance of salvation, leaves no room for anxiety.

The most serious and dangerous temptation that the devil has to hit the believers, is to leave them restlessness questioning their election and prompting them to look with absurd lust outside of the Way. [...] This inner turmoil is the most appropriate element able to show how perverse is to imagine predestination in that way. As the spirit of man cannot be infected with something more harmful than this mistake that may distract the conscience from the calm and rest which he should have in God. (Calvin 1559/2009:1147,1148)

In open contrast with previous Catholic theology that for centuries was characterized by a "dangerous" and "demonic" struggle to achieve salvation through human effort in order to be freed from a state of perpetual anxiety, Calvin proclaims an opposite message of "calm" and "rest" in a perpetual assurance of salvation received by faith. This doctrine does not imply a continuous state of anxiety, but a state of peace and confidence caused by the awareness of being saved forever. Although Weber states the presence of a distortion in this doctrine in subsequent developments of Calvinism, there is no trace of such a distortion either in Calvin's theology or in subsequent developments of Calvinism. In fact, Calvinism more than any other reformed tradition believed in the total depravity of humans, and in the impossibility for someone to come to salvation by any kind of effort, even if it is the effort to control their state of grace, as Weber had argued (Miegge 2010). Faith is a gift from God, sovereignly given by God's grace and dissociated from any meritorious element. According to Calvinism, any effort to gain God's favor through human efforts is in vain.

The Reality of Calvinism and Its System of Beliefs

Instead of Weberian anxiety, the research question then becomes: did belief in "perpetual assurance of salvation" provide Calvinists with a positive psychological attitude and therefore lead them to economic success? This doctrine, stated by Calvin as a

completion of Luther's *Sola Fide*, was the real novelty, or more accurately a return to the origins of historical Christianity. It states that once persons come to faith in Christ, they are forever sure of their eternal salvation and totally aware of being among the elect, not because of works, but because of a sovereign call from God. The believer then, instead of living in a state of anxiety about their eternal condition, is sure of their salvation, believing it is impossible to lose salvation. It is this perpetual state of assurance, particular to Protestantism, that enhances what social psychology identifies as *self-efficacy* (Bandura 2001; Zhao and Seibert 2006; Rauch and Frese 2007; Laguna 2013). Generating a perpetual state of peace and trust in the individual, the believer is enabled to take risks, tolerate stress, reach new experiences, embrace difficulties as good challenges rather than threats, strive for spiritual growth regardless of the obstacles faced knowing that everything, even difficulties, work for good, and be assured of one day going to heaven. Of course, that belief alone does not explain all economic propensity, although it is the foundational principle. Adding to that element, the Protestant idea of calling (*Beruf*) helps the believer to choose a specific entrepreneurial activity.

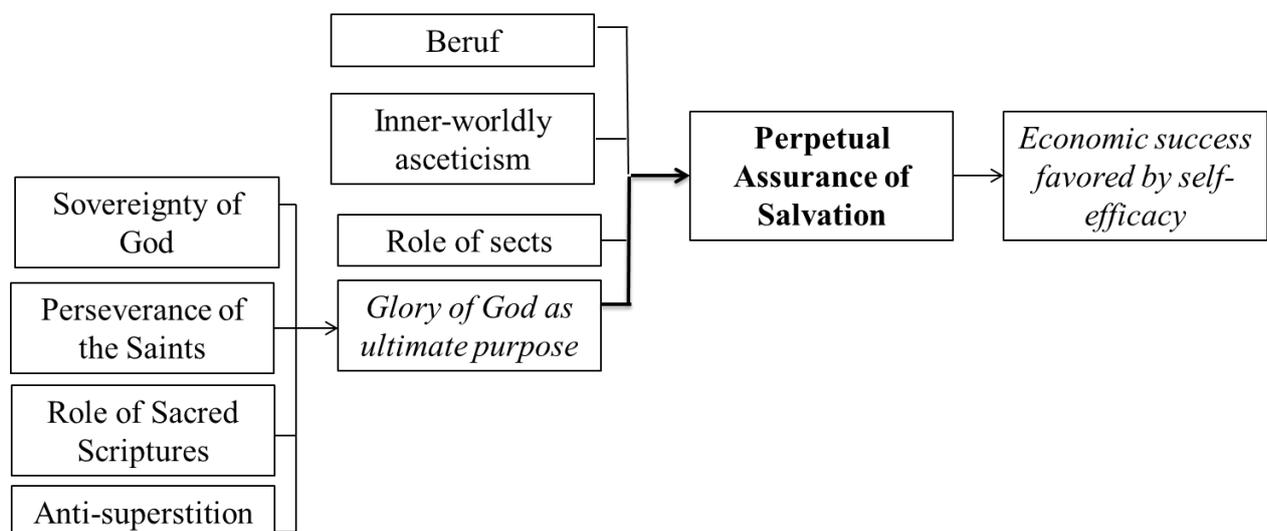
There are also several Calvinist doctrines apart from predestination that have been overlooked or only partially analyzed by Weber, and remain in need attention. They can be included in the model as "assistants" to the preconditions, not as in a strict causal relationship with the theoretical question, as if they generate belief in the perpetual assurance of salvation. But as preconditions, it is nevertheless impossible to understand fully how belief in perpetual assurance of salvation generates self-efficacy and therefore favors economic success. For example, it is instructive to analyze the negative impact of religious traditionalism on the economic ethos, specifically with reference to Calvin's anti-superstition. This can be seen clearly in Calvin's treatise on relics (1543/2010) and in his strong attack on the superstition and idolatry included in many Catholic rituals. Also important is his strong attack on any superstitious view of the sacraments, even inside the Protestant tradition (1559/2009:1490-1519,1578-1652). While Luther was supportive of a "sacramental union" of the believer with Christ in the Last Supper, Calvin, together with Zwingli, challenged this view, emphasizing the mere symbolic function of that rite. The practice of private confession, for example, almost disappeared in Calvinism.

Another crucial aspect in Calvinism is the role of the Sacred Scriptures. More than any other reformed tradition, Calvinism exalted the Holy Bible as the only infallible rule of faith and conduct, and the only source for the knowledge of God. This view was not only crucial for the subsequent development of society by fostering writing, rationalization, and scientific inquiry, but it also exalted the Biblical principles of business. The Scriptures command every person to work and consider themselves responsible before God of its high accomplishment. Financial success is seen here as a result of "doing the right thing" and obeying the Biblical principles of business. The role of Sacred Scriptures refers here to the principles and teachings contained in the Bible (especially the wisdom literature of the Old Testament) concerning business. Protestantism, more than any other religious group, puts emphasis on the strict application of those principles in order to have a prosperous business.

Among other things, the Scriptures give no tolerance to idleness, no countenance to carelessness, and they emphasize the importance of respecting worldly concerns. Industry is considered the duty and true happiness of humans in the state of innocence before the fall. The surest means to increase one's property, according to the Scriptures, requires a wise economy of personal resources rather than rapid gains, in order to promote the greatest promise for long-term success.

All those auxiliary aspects cannot be understood completely if they are not incorporated within the most crucial precondition that cooperates with *inner-worldly asceticism*, *Beruf*, and *role of sects*, and prevents the potential shift from the perpetual assurance of salvation into a mere state of unproductive contentment. This precondition refers to the pursuit of the glory of God as the ultimate purpose of life. All aspects of life, especially work and worldly duties, contain a greater spiritual purpose that pushes the individual to strive for excellence. In this sense, every work activity, even the most despised, has its internal dignity; it can be "sanctified" into a legitimate "act of worship" and therefore has spiritual purpose in light of a common good that is lacking in the individualistic reconstruction of Weber (Beeke 2009:360,361). Therefore, both in the theologian's thought and its consequences for the common believer, it is possible to trace the absence of anxiety.

TABLE 3: The relationship between Protestant beliefs and the economic ethos



Conclusions and Discussion

Max Weber's thesis on the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism remained for a long time an unavoidable argument in sociological theory. The sociological relevance of this argument can be identified in how an individual religious belief is able to generate a specific economic ethos which permeates several aspects of life, including the achievement of economic success. However, despite the transformation of the discipline and the amount of criticism Weber's thesis has received, it remains largely unresolved.

This analysis began by looking at the relationship between religion and economic behavior according to Weber's controversial argument. It was suggested throughout that a proper understanding of the concept of the spirit of capitalism is crucial to comprehending the matter, before proposing an interpretation of Weber's thesis. Critics have commonly lacked an adequate understanding of Weber's terminology, and have failed to offer a valid alternative explanation to Weber's argument. In light of other historical studies, both quantitative and qualitative, religious affiliation on a large scale still seems to play a role in economic growth. For these reasons, the validity of Weber's argument for the advent of modern capitalism in the western world remains compelling.

In sum, a system of beliefs prior to Calvinism was able to transform economic action in Western Europe during the 16th and 17th centuries. Belief in predestination was already rooted in the western Christian tradition long before the time of Reformation. Contrary to anxiety about one's salvation identified by Weber, it was belief in the perpetual assurance of salvation that was the real innovation, or restoration of original Christianity prior to Calvinism. It was assurance, not anxiety, that generated a peace and confidence that enhanced economic success among the Protestant believers of the 16th and 17th centuries.

The question now is where to go from here. Perhaps scholars have closed consideration of this theoretical issue before realizing their own flaws. This is partly due to original misunderstandings in the theory itself. A redirection of the matter is therefore necessary to open again a debate that is still unresolved. Yet such interpretation must be rooted in a more accurate understanding of the religious phenomenon. This study points out the need to reconsider one of the main sociological theses contained in every introduction to sociology textbook. The implications of this analysis lead to the conclusion that Weber was headed in the right direction, but some of his main conclusions were erroneous. Evidence from further empirical studies in the future may help to identify the validity of this study, and renew a debate of great sociological importance.

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