

## **To Work is to Pray: The History of Protestant Business Ethics**

**by L. S. Embulayeva**

The Protestant work ethic has, and continues to have, a significant impact in shaping Western culture. A number of scholarly works have been devoted to studying this ethos, most notably *Die Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, 1905) by the German philosopher and sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920).<sup>1</sup> In this work, Weber showed how Protestant theology, along with its corresponding conception of duty, radically shifted traditional economic thinking. The spirit of modern capitalism thus results from the merging of the Western European economic code of conduct with the rational ethics of Protestantism. The implications of this interconnection for the development of modern capitalism cannot be fully understood without an appreciation of the history and ongoing elaboration of Protestant dogma.

Weber established that the ideas of the rational ethics of ascetic Protestantism date back to the Puritans. Puritan doctrine is rational and devoid of all mysticism, and the believer sees worldly success as a sign of one's salvation. Moreover, since Puritans are ascetics, they are content possessing limited material goods. These ideas were assimilated, above all, by the middle class, who adopted a moderate and restrained disposition devoted to their work and their religious principles. According to Weber, the ethics of Protestantism (with its notions of professional duty, inner-worldly asceticism, frugality, self-directedness, and personal responsibility) most fully expressed the ideological conception and psychological disposition of the modern form of capitalism.<sup>2</sup>

Protestant economic ethics is based on the doctrine of salvation and the related dogmas concerning predestination and freedom of the will. Predestination is, without question, the most vexing concept of all Protestant theology. Vasili Viktorovich Pavlov (1854–1924), one of the founders of the Baptist movement in Russia, noted: “It is possible to find many texts in the Holy Scriptures both in favor of predestination and in favor of the free self-determination of man... But how to connect both is above our mind, we just need to believe that both are the truth.”<sup>3</sup> Despite Pavlov's hopes for the faithful to be unquestioning, not everyone just believed. As a result of the different interpretations of these questions, many divergent conceptions concerning

predestination, freedom of the will, and the worldly calling of individuals emerged in Protestant theology.

Most Baptists follow the teachings of John Calvin (1509-1564), who systematized and developed Martin Luther's ideas in the context of the new historical conditions. Calvin presented his theological views in *Institutio Christianae Religionis* (Institutes of the Christian Religion, 1536), a work that he would continue to revise throughout his life and that became a fundamental work of the Protestant faith.

Calvinist doctrine is premised on two fundamental principles: the idea of absolute predestination, excluding the freedom of the will of man, and the idea of divine non-interference in the laws of the world. According to Calvin, even before people had the chance to do anything, regardless if it be good or evil, God selected some individuals for eternal salvation and others for eternal damnation. Salvation is intended for a small group of individuals elected by God without regard to their merit. Likewise, no effort can save those individuals who are condemned to death. Every transgression offends the name of God and demands punishment. And although good deeds satisfy God's desire, they do not in the least exonerate a person's preordained damnation. Since a person does not have the right to seek his salvation, he can only act as if he is, in fact, one of the chosen ones. An essential point of Calvin's teaching is that the absolute submission of the individual in accepting God's predestination should instill in him a just conscience and the resolve to resist worldly authority when it contradicts the dictates of God.

If a person believes he has been chosen by God, he must prove his election through his work and life activities. And since God, according to the second doctrine, does not violate the laws of the world he created, success in worldly activities can be appealed to as a valid indicator of the person's status as chosen. According to this theological understanding, worldly activity is regarded as a divine calling, and success in these affairs is pursued as a testament to one's salvation rather than for the sake of amassing riches. Ironically, Calvin's doctrine regarding the predestination of certain individuals for salvation resulted in sanctifying mundane business affairs.<sup>4</sup>

The Protestant understanding of prayer as a means for requesting something from God provides further validation of worldly success as a Divine sign of one's salvation. G.S. Lyalina, a prominent expert on Protestantism, explains the complicated relationship between the worshiper's requests and God's response: "Success and failure equally contributed to the explosion of religious emotions; only in some cases was prayer raised in a fit of thanksgiving while in others, prayer was used as a means for forgiveness for sins. As a result, believers developed a sense of practicality and sobriety in their everyday life alongside their deep religious convictions."<sup>5</sup> Of course, the doctrine of predestination

poses an obvious problem when applied to the world of entrepreneurship since success is not guaranteed in spite of one's efforts.

The Protestant belief in predestination created a fatalistic worldview that is credited both for advancing historical development through man's active engagement in the world, as well as his alienation from it. This feature of the Protestant doctrine of salvation was noted by Georgi V. Plekhanov (1856-1918): "History shows that even fatalism was not always a hindrance to energetic, practical action; on the contrary, in certain epochs it was a psychologically necessary basis for such action. In proof of this, we will point to the Puritans, who in energy excelled all the other parties in England in the seventeenth century" (11).<sup>6</sup> Ironically, Calvinist doctrine had a major role in the development of secular culture, similar to the republican principles of religious organization. The basis of this religious order was the community of believers, who were led by the presbyters and preachers elected by the faithful. This circumstance predetermined the advancement of the strongest and most authoritative members of the community and, in turn, subordinated ordinary members to their leadership. It should be noted that the free choice of the community leader was often transformed into a formality; the communities functioned on the basis of strict discipline. At the same time, such a structure contained potential opportunities for a more democratic reorganization. Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) writes regarding this issue: "Calvin's church constitution was thoroughly democratic and republican; and where the kingdom of God was republicanised, could the kingdoms of this world remain subject to monarchs, bishops, and lords?" (XXII).<sup>7</sup>

It should be noted that there is also a second interpretation of predestination and free will in Protestant theology that goes back to the tradition of Arminianism, in spite of the fact that there is no direct connection with the teachings of the Armenians. According to this interpretation, people have the power and free will that enable them to overcome sin. People can be moral as a result of their own human efforts, and therefore can determine their own salvation. Protestants, in this tradition, believe that God granted universal salvation to all people who believe in the atoning sacrifice of Christ. This interpretation of salvation is defined as the dogma of a general redemption, which reflected the attitude of the more democratically-minded petty-bourgeois sections of believers.<sup>8</sup>

One should keep in mind that one of the central tenants of Protestantism is that one is saved by faith and not by works, and thus there arose a marked distinction between the secular and religious aspects of the believer's life. In this respect, Protestantism paradoxically contributed to the secularization of the political, economic, and cultural spheres of public life. The period from the second half of the nineteenth century into the beginning of the twentieth century

is marked by the development of theological ideas responding to the spread of socialist doctrine and the rise of labor movements in Europe and America. The ideology and politics of this time period reflected the decline of bourgeois democracy. Protestant ethics underwent changes as the Calvinist doctrine of predestination lost its authority among the masses. There was, in fact, a complete upheaval of values during this era as the traditional norms governing life lost their legitimacy. This upheaval of values cleared the way for the emergence of a new theological model predicated on reforming the world.

The Social Gospel or Social Christianity (scholars use these terms synonymously) arose in Europe as a response to the spread of scientific socialism, on the one hand, and had connections with the traditions of the Protestant church, on the other. Social Christianity asserted the idea of moral perfection and personal salvation rather than social revolution and class struggle as forms of changing the conditions of social life. The Social Gospel, through the idea of moral (and not social) equality, affirmed the concept of religious organization as a potential model of a new society. American Protestantism introduced the idea of class cooperation and struggle against monopolies. According to the Social Gospel, a Christian should not be concerned merely with his personal improvement, but should be equally concerned for improving society as a whole. Preachers of the Social Gospel include Dwight L. Moody (1837-1899), Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918), and Mark A. Matthews (1867-1940).<sup>9</sup>

In the succeeding years, liberal Protestantism emerged as an effort to unite Christianity with the labor movement. The later history of Protestantism reflects various attempts to create cooperatives between business and labor on a religious basis, and to advance the establishment of Christian republics.

In the early twentieth century, Rauschenbusch significantly advanced social Christianity through the publication of *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907), where he developed the doctrine of the “kingdom of God on earth.” Rauschenbusch grounds his appeal to social justice in his reading of Christ’s message: “It is not a matter of getting individuals to heaven, but of transforming the life on earth into the harmony of heaven” (65). He further clarifies what this entails: “If the kingdom of God is the true human society, it is a fellowship of justice, equality, and love” (77). This commitment to justice and equality led Rauschenbusch to adopt a critical stance to the economic order. While Calvin provided a theological defense of the capitalist spirit, Rauschenbusch condemned this same spirit as a violation of the fundamental principles of Christianity: “Competitive commerce exalts selfishness to the dignity of a moral principle” (265).

It should be noted that it was Rauschenbusch’s position regarding social justice that attracted the attention of the Russian Baptists, who represent one of

the leading religious institutions in the post-Soviet era. The Russian Baptists greatly influenced the English preacher Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892), who took up the cause of the underprivileged and proposed that charity should be used to eradicate poverty and to fund the construction of orphanages, colleges, and houses of worship.

In the first half of the twentieth century, a new social and ethical doctrine emerged in Germany, in large part as a result of the work of the Swiss theologian and economist Arthur Rich (1910-1992). After meeting with Nikolai Alexandrovich Berdyaev, Rich engaged in sustained study of the works of Karl Marx, Blaise Pascal, and Constantin Brunner. As a result of these studies, he developed a new socio-ethical teaching known as economic ethics. Rich's work has largely been unknown within Russia as his work *Wirtschaftsethik* (Business and Economic Ethics) was not published in a Russian translation until 1996.<sup>11</sup> In this work, Rich investigates Marx's understanding of various forms of personal and social alienation under capitalism. According to Marx, personal consciousness is only a product of structural relations. Rich argues, along with Marx, that the mode of production and its social relations are to blame for the consciousness of individuals. Rich advances the concept of workers' participation in the activities of business enterprises in his book *Mitbestimmung in der Industrie* (Participatory Decision Making in Industry, 1973).

In his magnum opus *Wirtschaftsethik*, Rich develops three theoretical elements of a new socio-ethical orientation: economic realism, radicalism, and an economic and social order based on cooperation. Rich writes, "Can an economic order that is functioning well on the whole, seen purely technically, really be economically rational, if for structural reasons it necessarily violates human justice?" (Lutz-Wimmer trans., 76).

The Protestant dogma of absolute predestination ultimately gave rise to the "spirit of capitalism." This spirit is imbued through the history of Western civilization as reflected in the slogan, "*Laborare est orare*" (To work is to pray). The significance of Protestant authors for post-Soviet Russia in the area of business ethics is beyond doubt, since the search for effective ways of reforming the economy cannot ignore the Protestant influence on European economic history. Post-Soviet economic reforms should draw on Russia's diverse and rich religious background. In particular, there are many insights regarding the moral foundation of the economy to be gained from Protestant thinkers, especially in the tradition of the Social Gospel found in the work of Rauschenbusch and Rich.

## Notes

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1. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells (New York: Penguin, 2002).

2. See A. A. Gritsanov and V. N. Semenova, eds., *Pravoslavie (protestantizm) (Protestanism)* (Minsk: Mezhdunarodnyi Knizhnyi Dom, 2006), 203-204.

3. *Archive of the State Museum of the History of Religion*, St. Petersburg, KUSH, op. 1, unit 80.

4. For discussion, see L. N. Mitrokhin, *Filosofii i praktika sovremennogo protestantizma (baptism) (Philosophy and Practice of Modern Protestantism)* (Moscow: Ph.D. dissertation-Institut filosofii AN SSSR, 1966), 141.

5. G. S. Lialina, *Novye tendentsii v ideologii baptizma (New Directions in the Ideology of Protestantism)* (Moscow: Znanie, 1979), 96.

6. Georgi Valentinovich Plekhanov, *The Role of the Individual in History*, in *Selected Works of G.V. Plekhanov*, Vol. 2 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1940).

7. Friedrich Engels, “Introduction to the English edition,” in *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* (New York: New York Labor News, 1892).

8. For discussion, see L. N. Mitrokhin, *Baptizm* (Moscow: Izd-vo polit, 1974), 19.

9. For discussion, see Al’bina Aleksandrovna Kislova, *Social’noe christianstvo v SS (Social Christianity in the United States)* (Moscow: Nauka, 1974), 9-39.

10. Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1913).

11. Arthur Rich, *Business and Economic Ethics: The Ethics of Economic Systems*, trans. David W. Lutz and Albert Wimmer (Leuven: Peeters, 2006).

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