

# The Deconstruction of Catholic Values by Protestant Ethics

## The Impression of the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

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**Abstract**—The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism by German sociologist Max Weber is one of the most influential works of the 20th century. Based on the background of the rise of the protestant movement and the era of Martin Luther, this paper explains the reason why the reformation came into being in Germany in the 16th century. First, the Catholicism has a contemptuous and repellent attitude towards the accumulation of wealth. Second, considering the political situation in the German region at that time, there was never a strong royal power connecting the German region together, so the nominally holy Roman Empire was actually divided. Third, advances in technology (the invention of the movable type printing) have allowed civilians to reclaim their voice from the clergy. Secondly, from Luther's religious reform, to Calvinism, to the rise of Puritan movement in England, and finally to the development of North America, the protestant ethic has been deconstructed from the Catholic ethic.

**Keywords**—Catholicism; Labor-for-God belief; capitalism

### I. INTRODUCTION

Max Weber put forward the protestant ethic theory in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, with the labor-for-god belief as a core. Labor-for-god is to do a task assigned by god. Weber rejected the Catholic view that everything in the universe was created by god, and human beings were also created by god [1]. He believes that life is spent in the world and in various secular institutions, that the modern capitalist civilization is the product of multiple causal forces, and that the protestant ethic plays a decisive role [2]. For Chinese readers, if they want to distinguish the relationship between different denominations within Christianity, they should start with the rise of the protestant movement, which needs to be analyzed in the context of the era of Martin Luther himself.

### II. CATHOLIC "LABOR AND WEALTH"

The Catholicism has an attitude of disdain and rejection towards the accumulation of wealth. "Look at the birds in the air. They do not sow or reap or store up in barns, yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than them?" It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of god. This

kind of value was successfully instilled in the believers by the church and became a pretext for collecting money from the believers, which made the wealth produced in Germany flow to the Roman Catholic Church in large quantities and hindered the accumulation of wealth of the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie. Saint Thomas Aquinas, the most important theologian of the middle ages, was a vocal opponent of wealth hoarding and denounced it as immoral. To combat doctrines such as "the rich do not enter heaven, and merchants do not please god," reformation thinkers treated the profits earned from trade as legitimate property and accepted business practices as established facts. However, a large number of wealthy people would still give huge amounts of money to the church as compensation for their "morality". It can be seen that the profit-making spirit of capitalism in the early stage of the religious reform has not received positive ethical evaluation.

It was not until labor-for-god had triumphed over the old ideas that Protestants were able to pursue profits with a clear conscience. Luther's interpretation of labor-for-god as "the duty that god has given to man", which is a concept never found in the Bible. It is a product of the reformation. The fulfillment of duty in one's profession is defined as the highest form of morality, which means that from now on one does not have to purchase atonement to penalize oneself and to be a hermit to please god. Only by doing one's own work well, as the merchant seeks profit to the best of his ability, and the craftsman does his best, can one honor the god. This explanation of temporal duty is one of the most powerful arguments for deconstructing Catholic value system. According to Weber, cultural factors only play a role in the combination of material or institutional factors in people's social actions. In other words, the rapid rise of Protestantism met the needs of the new industrial and commercial bourgeoisie for the construction of a new Christian ethics, so that Luther could get the support of the princes and nobles who were dissatisfied with Rome after being punished by the Catholic Church.

### III. THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN GERMANY

The formation of the trade network of northern Germany in the late Middle Ages was the economic background of the reformation. As the Northern Sea connected with the Baltic

trade network, the efficiency of commerce increased, and a new mode of production hit the medieval economy. The circulation of goods and personnel increased sharply, the feudal personal attachment was weakened, and a number of cities rose on the basis of trade routes, such as Hamburg and Lubeck. A breeding ground for the Protestantism has emerged. Only a few decades later, Protestantism and its reformation swept through northern Germany, northern Europe, England, and France, leading to unprecedented religious wars. There were thirty years' war in Germany, the French-Huguenot war, the English civil war, and finally the Puritan camp led by Cromwell won and sent Charles I to the guillotine. There was never a strong royal power that held the region together in the sixteenth century; the nominal Holy Roman Empire was actually disintegrated. There are innumerable dukedoms, municipalities, knightly collars, and bishopric, which, like broken stained glass, do not belong to one another, and before the customs union was formed, each region had its own fiscal system. It was this state of vassal separation and the weakening of the crown that allowed dissidents to find shelter and support, so Luther was always able to get some of the rulers of the city-state to shelter and ally with them. This is why Luther was German, not French, Spanish or English. If Luther had been in Spain, he would have been burned by the inquisition.

After Luther, Calvin pushed the reformation to a new peak and intensified the break between the reformation and Catholicism. Calvin was the father of the faith in America, the Pope in Geneva, and the colossus of the reformation. That a Frenchman can be the father of the American faith shows the broad impacts of his ideas. In Calvin's system of ethics, duty is impersonal and practical, and all work in the service of society can advance the glory of god and god's will. Predetermination is also the most important element in the ethical system that Calvin constructs, and he repeatedly tells believers to value their own salvation, because people have been divided into natural voters and abandoned people. To prove that he is the chosen one, one must fulfill his duty to glorify god. So, the puritans were alone on the road to salvation. They have to put earthly love behind duty and do their best to be voters. Calvinism has many diversions everywhere, but the core ideas of moderates and radicals remain the same.

The development of Puritan movement in Britain was full of twists and turns. As a radical branch of reformist sect, Puritan doctrine brought asceticism in capitalist ethics to an extreme. The puritans were opposed to all luxuries and worldly amusements. They wore simple clothes, lived a simple life, rigorous and sober. But behind this simple life there is the great desire of the pursuit of wealth. They regard this earthly profit as the best way to honor god, vowing to "earn every honest penny." Puritans have always been an important force in business development in England, as well as in France. Even after being persecuted in China and immigrating to North America, the puritans worked tirelessly to develop the land. It can be said that after leaving the continent, puritanism was shaped in Britain as a rigorous, meticulous and logical sect. Although once suppressed by the state religion and driven underground, it constantly drew strength from the emerging industrial and commercial bourgeoisie. Though they were few in number, they possessed a fanatical piety. The Puritan

suppression of the instinctive desire for pleasure is aimed at establishing a purely rational life and transforming it into a power to overcome the state of nature. This power sustained immigrants in the bitter cold of North America, struggling with harsh weather and high death rates. Therefore, Calvinism was a more effective denomination than Lutheran.

#### IV. PROGRESS IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

The third was the invention of Gutenberg's movable type press. Advances in technology have allowed civilians to reclaim their voice from the clergy. Before Gutenberg's printing press, most books were published in Latin, most people in society could not read them, national languages were rarely published, and most texts heard by congregations were interpreted by priests. Luther translated the Bible into German and printed it, which opened the door to the standardization of German. It is a historical trend that there was the rise of national languages and the decline of Latin. From then on, reformation theorists were able to interpret the Bible in the national language and organize the congregation. This certainly drove the clergy out of the church and created a new sect. From then on, the individual believer can speak directly to god without the guidance of the priest, and the human position is raised to a whole new level.

Puritanism plays an important ideological guiding role in the founding of the United States. Because Puritan ethics attached great importance to the spirit of abstinence, temperance, simplicity, etc., which was indispensable in the primitive accumulation stage of capitalism and was conducive to the expansion of production. As well as the pre-determinism of Calvinism, the immigrants in North America had the idea of "manifesting the destiny", to explore the wilderness under the guidance of god, to brave the wind and the waves on the sea, traffic goods to the world, so as to earn wealth and to honor god, and finally prove that they are the chosen people of god. There is a difference between Puritan abstinence and Catholic abstinence. The scope of Catholic asceticism was narrow, confined only to monks in monasteries, and any attempt to extend asceticism to daily life ended in failure. Its asceticism was only higher than the basic morality and could not be compared with the strict Puritan ethics.

#### V. CONCLUSION

In aspect of the perspective of the development of the reformation, from Luther's reformation, to Calvinism, to the rise of Puritan movement in England, and finally to North America, the protestant ethic had been deconstructed from the Catholic ethic. The American people do not spend their whole life and money to build the temple of god, namely the church. Compared with the churches in Europe, the churches in North America are paled in comparison. But they practice their righteousness and obtain salvation in productive labor and the accumulation of wealth. To sum up, under the background of the rise of the religious reform, the development of industry and commerce provided the material basis for Protestantism, the political situation of secession provided the base for Protestantism, and the invention of the printing press provided opportunities for the spread of Protestantism. Protestant theorists separated Protestantism from Catholicism and

constructed a new protestant ethic system different from Catholicism, so that individuals could get rid of the shackles of theocracy and truly own the status as people.

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