Calvinism and the Making of the Modern European Economic Mind: A Comment and Call for more Research

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In a project devoted to Calvinism and the making of the European mind, reflection about Max Weber’s thesis imputing an important causal role to Calvinism in the development of modern capitalism seems *de rigueur*, and so it was that the ESF exploratory workshop at Doorn opened with a session entitled “Weber Revisited: The Economic Impact of Calvinism.” An interesting feature of the exchanges there, inspired by the mix of participants coming from very different perspectives, was to bring to light some questions about the history of the economic ethics of Calvin and Calvinism that in fact are of considerable importance for understanding the tradition’s contribution to the making of the European *mind*—not its economy or society—and that have not, to my knowledge, already been studied to the point of diminishing returns.

Having myself published only ten to twenty years ago several articles inspired directly by the arguments of Max Weber’s “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,” it would ill behoove me to suggest that the last word has been said in the discussion sparked by that great essay. Self-proclaimed Weberians or scholars visibly influenced by the central thesis of his essay can still be found in many corners of the social sciences and history. The numerous conferences and publications of 2009 recalling the 500th anniversary of

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Calvin’s birth showed that the question of “Calvinism and capitalism” remains inescapable in virtually any assessment of the reformer’s legacy. Nonetheless, among specialists dealing with what has traditionally been seen as the core period for the assessment of the Weber thesis, that is to say among economic and religious historians of Reformation and early modern Europe, it is hard to see the Weber thesis as an open question any longer. After three generations of research devoted to pertinent aspects of this topic, the preponderance of the evidence clearly seems to be running in favor of the view that features distinctive to the theological or religious makeup of Calvinism or of the Reformed tradition more generally cannot convincingly be shown to have provided an important stimulus to rational capitalist accumulation or economic success.

Weber’s original argument, of course, was quite subtle. As he emphasized at the beginning of his discussion of the “religious foundations of worldly asceticism,” he was not concerned with what was officially taught in the ethical treatises of the different churches, but with the “psychological sanctions which, originating in religious belief and the practice of religion, gave a direction to practical conduct and held the individual to it.” Furthermore, shaped as he was by the German historical tradition of economics, he did not believe that rational economic behavior was inscribed by nature in the genes of *homo economicus*; profit-maximizing rationality and the accumulation of wealth beyond the amounts that it was fun to spend were culturally conditioned behaviors. The great spur to such behavior within Calvinist religious culture, he believed, was the doctrine of predestination. Once this doctrine came to be widely proclaimed and placed at the center of pastoral concern, as later generations of Calvinists, not Calvin himself, would do, it brought believers face to face with the alarming question: am I predestined to salvation or damnation? Since widely disseminated works of Calvinist piety suggested that the answer could be found by looking to one’s behavior—upright behavior was a mark of the elect—this anxiety generated among a believers a constant pressure to keep their noses to the grindstone of their calling, such as was not the case for

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