

Calvinism and the Protestant Ethic

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of Calvinism and the Protestant Ethic, through the definition and discussion of:

1. John Calvin and Predestination
2. Max Weber: The Protestant Ethic
3. Max Weber: The Spirit of Capitalism

1. JOHN CALVIN AND PREDESTINATION

Sociologist **Max Weber** argued that the ideas of capitalism and how to exist in a capitalist society were originally furthered by the religious ethos of Calvinism, developed by John Calvin.

John Calvin (1509-1564) was a part of the Protestant Reformation, and he founded a spin-off of the Roman Catholic Church, known as Calvinism.

Central to Calvinism is the idea of predestination, which is a religious teaching stating that a select few are chosen by God in advance, prior to birth, who are predestined for salvation in the next life, while the vast majority of others are condemned. Everyone's fate is known only to God, and God chose it before they were born.

IN CONTEXT

The idea of predestination made everyone nervous in society. They continually wondered, "Have I been chosen? Am I predestined for salvation in the next life, or am I condemned? How do I know? What am I supposed to do? Where am I going to find this out?" These were pertinent questions in the 1500s.

In this context, prosperity came to be seen as a sign of predestination. If somebody was prosperous, successful, and wealthy, then God had favored them and they were predestined for life in heaven. However, if somebody was destitute, poor, or morally questionable--a drunkard, for example--then God obviously didn't favor this person. Therefore, people looked at prosperity as a way to gauge their predestination.

**Max Weber**

Hugely influential, founding sociologist who argued that the ideas of Calvinism, specifically predestination, imbued people in society with a strong work ethic such that traditional attitudes towards work and labor were replaced by a capitalist orientation towards work.

John Calvin: Predestination

John Calvin was an influential thinker of the Protestant Reformation who advanced the idea of predestination and founded Calvinism. The doctrine of predestination asserts that either one's salvation in heaven, or condemnation in hell, has been predetermined by God before they are born.

2. MAX WEBER: THE PROTESTANT ETHIC

Weber argued that predestination and the idea of seeking prosperity, in turn, provided society with a **Protestant Ethic**, and helped to discipline a workforce and aid in the transition to capitalism. It helped people to transition from a traditional orientation towards work to a capitalist orientation towards work, because they were constantly laboring to earn more money.

In traditional societies, Weber claimed, if you offered a peasant a 50% raise, meaning they could make 50% more in a work day, they would rather reduce their work time by 50% in order to make the same amount of money as they made before--enough to earn a living wage--and work half the time. They could spend the other half of the time being idle or doing whatever they wanted.

This kind of worldview and orientation towards work, however, is incompatible with capitalism, which is a system that demands constant work to earn money, then reinvesting that money back into the business to generate more money. Something had to happen in order to move society from that traditional worldview into a capitalist work ethic, and Weber argued that the Protestant Ethic was what galvanized the spirit of capitalism to overcome traditionalism.



TERM TO KNOW

Protestant Ethic

An ethos born of Calvinism that champions hard work, frugality, material prosperity, and disciplined labor in a calling as pleasing to God.

3. MAX WEBER: THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM

What is the Protestant Ethic in the spirit of capitalism? Weber drew upon Benjamin Franklin, a proponent of the American capitalist ethos, to develop the main points of the Protestant Ethic.

Time is money, which is an expression you have likely heard before, as it is ingrained in American culture. If you're wasting your time being lazy and not doing anything, then you're not making money. You should look at that time not as enjoyment, but as lost wages that you didn't earn.

IN CONTEXT

Credit is also money. If you are not investing your money, you're not earning interest on that money, so you're not taking advantage of your ability to turn it into more money.

If you take \$10 and sit on it--you don't put it in the bank or invest it--then that \$10 can't become \$12, then \$15, and so on. In this way, money is prolific--it can generate and beget more money.

In addition to the importance of having good credit, remember that 'the good paymaster is lord of another man's purse,' meaning that if you're always paying back your debts, you can always get more money to reinvest and make even more money. As long as you're paying on time, you're essentially creditworthy.

Another of Benjamin Franklin's ideas that Weber used in his writings on the Protestant Ethic was that even the most trifling actions affecting a man's credit are to be regarded.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** The sound of your hammer heard by a creditor at 5:00 in the morning or 8:00 at night might placate him for six months longer. This means that if your creditor knows you are hard at work, he will let you defer your payments for another six months, but if he sees you at the billiard table or hears your voice at a tavern when you should be at work, he will demand his money the next day, in a lump sum, before you are able to pay it.

This kind of thinking is antagonistic to the traditional way of thinking. The idea of predestination and the necessity of prosperity as a sign that someone was destined for salvation in the next life, induced these work habits in people. These habits, in turn, were amenable to the capitalist system. There, Weber argued, people were able to make the transition to capitalism because the population came to be imbued with the Protestant work ethic.

Capitalism and the Protestant work ethic have some consequences for society. It demands that people deny themselves worldly pleasures and enjoyments. One needs to work hard, save, and not waste money on lavish items of consumption. Rather, you need to reinvest that money so you can accumulate more money.



THINK ABOUT IT

What do capitalists do in factories? Do they simply gather a group of people, produce a load of clothes or garments, sell them, make a profit and then say, "Well, I'm done. I'm going to take my profits and squander them on drinks, nice houses, etc.?" No, they take that money and reinvest it back into the production process in order to make more money.

This accumulation of wealth as an end in and of itself is what capitalism is all about. You're not taking money and wasting it on consumption--you're reinvesting it in the process, with money-making as an end in itself. Well-intentioned Calvinists labored hard in a calling so they could interpret their money-making as a sign of salvation from God.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **John Calvin** and Calvinism--particularly its idea of **predestination**--and its

influence upon capitalism, as theorized by sociologist **Max Weber**, in his ideas on the **Protestant Ethic** and the **Spirit of Capitalism**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

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PEOPLE TO KNOW

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Max Weber

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