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PROTESTANT ETHICS AND CAPITALISM: THE LUTHER/WEBER DIALECTICS

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ABSTRACT

The paper evaluated and illustrated the poverty of the doctrine of protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism as propounded by Max Weber. It applied both the descriptive and psycho-analytic approaches to examine the personality of Martin Luther. In doing this, it took cognizance of the social milieu that prevailed at the time. It established that the social order in Christendom has intellectual background, and the need to guide men aright, ignited the protest movement. The framework of analysis showed that the dialectics of social protest movement and Christendom would produce multiplicity of Protestantism rather than capitalism. No association was found between protests seeking the creation of proper rituals to inherit life in the hereafter, while capitalism is of this world. The poverty of the doctrine was made known through the analysis of theological perspectives, like the psycho-analytic view, Luther's grouse with Catholicism and through the essentials of capitalism. The paper concluded that no association existed between protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism. The proclivity to accept the existence of association in the doctrine is consequently erroneous. The relations of any variables between the two concepts in the doctrine definitely need further research.

INTRODUCTION

The theory of Protest movements is based on the ideology, that every protest seeks the creation of a new social order. The theory further seeks the attainment of make-believe society which is considered better than the one in which the protest is held against. The dissent may not be with the ultimate phenomenon, but with the processes or the means to the end. The protest of Dr. Martin Luther certainly was seeking the institutionalization of proper rituals in order to guide men aright, so that they could make life in the hereafter.

The motivation for this paper arose out of the process of preparing class lectures on religion and capitalism, and not finding a

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which he considered a road-block to the end. The protest movement of Luther is popularly known as the Reformation. Reformation is the 16th century religious movement marked by rejection or modification of much of Roman Catholic doctrine and practices and establishment of the protestant churches. It was not seeking the creation of a capitalist society neither did the protest assume any capitalist coloration. If anything, the nature of capitalism as it evolved stood against everything that the protest was aiming at. The norms of capitalism are antithetical to the values of Christendom which the protest, sought the establishment of a proper code of ethics. The protest movement which resulted into the Reformation in Christendom began in 1517 through the 16th century in the church (the Age of Enlightenment). This marked the beginning of secular (scientific) attitudes of minds in the church, and the age of balkanization of the mother church into several others.

This paper upholds that before the Luther phenomenon, the church was not without heresy; Luther only built on the social cleavages that were already there. Reformation marked the period during which the dissenting views which were endemic in Catholicism went on the offensive. The high point was therefore when Luther's ninety-four theses against the Papal practices (1520) were made public. This was attested to by the fact that it was the age of the prophets, or army of God. Luther, Zwingli and Calvin all interpreted the word of God, in their ways challenging the claim of the Roman Church to its own unique valid interpretations. It also rejects the view that Protestantism is an ideological reflection of the economic changes which were incurred with the early development of capitalism

This was the scenario in which Max Weber introduced his doctrine of the dialectics of Protestant ethics, being responsible for the emergence of capitalism as a synthesis. Put differently, Max Weber one of the most celebrated social scientist to have come out of old Prussia and new Germany, had postulated that the protest movement within the Papacy-Catholicism or the resentment and heresy, championed by Dr. Martin Luther, which resulted into (Lutheran, Baptist, Presbyterians Methodists) stimulated the rise of the economic system known as Capitalism, that socio-economic system-whose political phase is

OBJECTIVES OF THE PAPER

This paper seeks to evaluate whether Luther's protest movement is synonymous with processes of capitalism. Secondly few general hypotheses in the social sciences have aroused more interest, and in recent years and won wider acceptance, than this with respect to capitalism. Consequently, it is not all previous postulates, even those of the most eminent scholars, should be the final word on the phenomenon. New evidence need to be pursued and further analyzed. New scholars should not stand in awe of established authorities but should be ready to challenge when evidence so warrant, as in this case. Finally to show that in Africa as in Europe, protest movements out of or within religious groups have not led to capitalism. All the literature gleaned in the course of this work, none have shown a nexus between protest movement and the rise of capitalism. Secondly, not any also indicated a form of association between beliefs system and the development and a particular mode of production in historical and contemporary era. One thing that is however true is that economic need is man's most fundamental need. Unless man is able to meet this need he cannot exist in the first place. Man must eat before he can do anything else-before he can worship, pursue culture or become an economist. When an individual achieves a level of economic well-being such that he can take the basic economic necessities particularly his daily food, for granted, the urgency of economic need loses its edge (Ake, 1981:1). However, it is not the religious system of man that produces a particular mode of production, but rather an economic system that produced its totems or objects of worship for the enhancement of the system. Man's mode of worship does not in essence conduce to an economic system. Rituals of worship do not in any way relate to a particular mode of production. How did Max Weber therefore condense his doctrine? This paper is seeking to evaluate this age old doctrine, how the protest movement of Martin Luther has conduced to the advancement of capitalism. The doctrine has been taken as a 'given' but in this paper it would be analyzed against the backdrop of what is known of capitalism and its cradle.

The objectives of this paper include to dispel the propagated view by the doctrine that Luther's protest movement is synonymous with the rise of capitalism. Secondly to debunk the view that the urge for

protest (push for) against the indulgence of the church, equates with the push-for capitalism, hence 'the doctrine, protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism'. The methodology of this paper is descriptive research. It would obtain data on the nature of the situation as it were then and now, and describe the processes of the growth of the 'free market' with the view of highlighting the connections if any, between protest movement and capitalism. This would be combined with the psycho-analytic theory (personality), to evaluate the circumstances in and around Dr. Martin Luther.

The psycho-analytic perspectives posits that the activities of animals as-a-whole always involve other animals or objects or forces or energies in the world about it...Because of this, it is meaningless to talk about behavior if no mention is made of the things towards which behavior is directed or of the thing that affect behavior. This means that if we are to understand an animal behavior, we must pay attention to the surroundings in which the animal has lived and in which the behavior is taking place... the psychological environment includes all those things that are capable of producing some effect on the organism, and that may therefore, affect its present or future behavior. Obviously objects...The place in which a person lives and the habits and customs of the people among whom he lives produce ways of reacting to things which are common to the group (Branca, 1964: 24-44).

This psycho-analytic background would be complemented with Luther's personality make up. Martin Luther came from a middle class family background and attended University of Erfurt, where he took a degree in classic and later studied Law to please his parents. He then proceeded to study theology where he later joined the Mendicant Order of Saint Augustine (though rich lived by begging to feed the poor. They do not own personal nor share in community property. He was later ordained a priest in 1506. In 1508 he went for further studies in the University of Wittenberg. He took a baccalaureate degree in Biblicus (the Bible). He became an overseer of 11 monasteries within which he propagated his views of what needed changes in the church (Zanden, 1979:453). The utility of this methodology enabled one to discern the disposition of the *dramatis personae*, how he may act in the circumstance, specifying the goals which may be pursued and the means one may use to pursue them. It prescribed outlets for personal and collective ambitions and set the parameters for expectations.

The statement of the problem of this paper is that the doctrine of the protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism asserted that it was not accidental that Protestantism and modern capitalism appeared on the historical scene at roughly the same time. He undertook to demonstrate that, without Protestantism, modern capitalism would not have developed. Weber based his thesis regarding a causal connection between Protestantism and capitalism on a number of observations. First, capitalism attained its highest development in Protestant countries, for example, the United States and United Kingdom; in contrast, Catholic countries, for example, Spain and Italy, lagged behind in capitalist development. Second, in countries containing both Protestant and Catholic regions, like Germany, Weber found that the Protestants-not the Catholic- regions pioneered capitalist development. Third, Weber sought to demonstrate that by and large it was the Protestants, not the Catholics, who became the capitalist entrepreneurs. And fourth, Weber found that in protestant countries capitalism was more marked in Calvinist than in Lutheran-Evangelist states. On the basis of these observations, Weber concluded that the chief source of modern capitalism was Protestantism, and more especially Calvinism and Puritanism. The spirit of capitalism, the Protestant ethic-Weber maintained, was distinguished by three main tenets: each person is predestined for heaven or hell; work is a virtue; and people should select their own calling in life (Zanden, 1979:463).

Luther drew his inferences in Europe where all the business leaders and owners of capital and skilled laborers of his time who constituted the entrepreneurs of his time were essentially Protestants. It is also true that those who are relatively comfortable and are bound-up in economic pursuit have little time for religion. The framework of analysis is the Marxian Dialectics in which everything contains two main opposing forces, one is called the thesis, and the other is called the antithesis. These two forces destroy each other, but from the destruction arises a new situation which is called a synthesis. Eventually, this synthesis breaks down into its opposites-and we have a new thesis and a new antithesis. And then out of these opposing forces arises a new synthesis-and so on. The Marxists adopts this structure to indicate that the emergent social order is always ethically superior to the previous one. (Popkin, *et al.*, 1980:83). Historical materialism which Marx converted from Hegel dialectics explicates historical processes in economic rather than metaphysical terms and applies classes rather than nations as the major elements which affect one another. This according to Weisskopf

...to explore the interrelationship between the economic and the non-economic factors in the totality of social existence (1872:53).

The higher level application of the Marxist thesis is Historical Materialism which is the general law of historical movement discovered by Marx. It posits that all social movements in history, has been determined by interrelationship between economic and noneconomic factors. In other words, Historical Materialism explicates the principal energies responsible for the emergence, transformation and the disappearance of social forces which are traceable to the ever present tension between the degree of development of the forces of production on the one side and the prevailing relations of production on the other (Weisskopf, *etal* 1972:54). The demand to meet a better objective living condition of life according to Karl Marx has been responsible for all historical movements. The suitability of this structure of analysis herein, rest on the fact that "capitalism" is an economic phase, while the Protestant Reformation was a noneconomic one. What synthesis did it produce?

POVERTY OF A DOCTRINE

In the explications of the poverty of the doctrine we are concerned with the disassociations of variables and events which could not result in the dialectics envisaged by Max Weber. This would be done in five perspectives as follows:

Theological Perspective

There is nothing in Luther's protest movement which has made it more prone to capitalism. In Luther's Christian faith, the concept of the 'dignity of labor' is inherent, sequel to the Adamic nature. Man was told that out of the brows of his sweat he will till the soil before he eats. Theology also informs us that God planted the trees in the Garden of Eden and placed man there to dress (work) and make it perfect. Man was to work to keep the garden beautiful and He would bless the labour of his hands (Genesis 2:7-12). It is instructive to point out that God did not instruct Adam to make profit out of the fruit of the garden. When one was enjoined to make profit as in (Matthew, 25:14-18), (the parable of the talents), the profit was to be socialized. Labour, therefore in Christendom, is not out of sin neither is it instigated by the capitalist spirit, but part of the process of human existence. Secondly, it is a truism in Christendom that each person is predestined for heaven or hell. This is what instigated Luther's protest to institute the correct code of ethics to

guide man on earth aright-to be able to make heaven in the hereafter. Consequently both work and the exhibition of one's skill are principles inert in the faith and not a capitalist one.

The Psycho-Analytic View

The bio-data of Luther revealed that he was well educated in morals, 'Biblicus', classics and the social sciences. A man with such an enormous scholastic pedigree is certainly disposed to building-up of norms and values regarding certain social phenomenon, spiritual and secular. The plight of the poor motivated him to join the Mendicant order (this is the opposite of capitalism which generates poverty) of Saint Augustine. It would be paradoxical for a man concerned with poverty of the poor and the excluded people to subscribe to capitalism as a liberating factor. This is because in the course of his intellectual development; he had studied poverty and found it to be the other side of the same coin of capitalism, the dominant social formation at that time.

Luther's Grouse in Catholicism

The social pedigree of Luther as discussed above put him on collision course with the church and he brought *ninety-four theses against the Pope some of which were 'the luxury and evil living of the Roman court, the draining of German ecclesiastical revenues to Rome, the advancement of foreign prelates to preferment in German churches, the corruption of the papal judiciary, and the sale of indulgences- all referred to ancient grievances* (Sabine and Thorson, 1973:337). The need for a change in the code of conduct out of these excesses by the Papacy led to the protest. What in these complaints suggest the desire for capitalism, or the drive to make profit? What was desirous was rather to guide the pew aright. Luther who had studied the Bible and became an ordained priest of the faith certainly studied the original scroll of the apostolic writings and was aware of the ethics of the offices, which in his view were not being practiced as prescribed in Catholicism. This was simply an agitation for compliance with the ethics of the faith and had nothing to do with capitalism. When we speak of Christian ethics' we are referring to the principles which prescribed the behavior of those who are Christians, such as the rules for conduct which are found in the Ten Commandments. Ethical theories, deal with such questions as 'How ought men to behave?' What is good life for man? (Sabine and Thorson, 1973)

FEUDALISM AND EARLY CAPITALISM

It would be recalled that slavery was the earlier mode of production; its collapse gave rise to feudalism. Feudalism is a system in which a naturally independent person becomes dependent on a Lord, whose Lordship, was defined by the possession of private property (Land) and the strength to protect him. This system was the social order in Europe about the 8th century, when there was no central authority strong enough to command central allegiance, following the invasion by the north-men and the Magyars. Land was the most significant stock of wealth and the Lords had appropriated this to themselves, enclosing the weak people. The structure of social relationship which developed had the Lords as the Landowners, the barons or knights as their warlords, the serfs and their families were all tenants, who paid rent in cash or kinds, to the barons, who in turn paid the Lords. The contradictions of the system led to the alliance of the barons and the serfs against the Lords. The barons withheld resources meant for the Lords and with it, the merchants class emerged. The adventure of the merchants to distance land led to colonialism and slavery. The system eventually collapsed giving birth to capitalism.

CAPITALISM

The massive wealth generated by the barons out of their feuds with the Lords of Manors in alliance with the serfs turned them into merchants. Their resources were invested in factory base production system which gave birth to industrial revolution and subsequently modern capitalism. The correlation between early entrepreneurs and Protestants is fraught with considerable misjudgment. This generated more profit through the appropriation of the surplus values created. The factory was destined to raise living standards to undreamed levels, but its initial impact was not altogether salutary. Although, the abuse and evils associated with early capitalism created an image, a system now largely dispelled in the west, it is an image still fresh and vivid in the minds of many non-westerners, to whom capitalism remains a dirty word. Late 18th and early 20th-century industrial England gave rise to a rash of literature deploring the social effects of the factory system. Factories were often noisy, dirty, smelly, dimly lit. Machinery was unguarded and crippling accidents were common; so were occupational diseases, especially lung ailments. Women worked from dawn to dark in factories and mines taking only a few days' off to deliver their children. Children

worked similar hours, escalating to as much as sixteen hours per day during rush seasons. Some began their labours at ages four to five (especially pauper children). Often children slept in shifts, using beds still warm from the previous shift. If injured or disabled (child or adult), the worker was discharged without compensation. Wages for children were pitifully low, and were little better for adults...weekend drunkenness was the workman's principal recreation; prostitution was common...vice and crime flourished (Christenson *et al.*, 1971:223). This was the face of capitalism with its values and norms at the period in reference. Could this have aggravated the Protestant (Reformation) protest? Certainly not.

A study of the development in Europe at this time indicated that there were several other activities and groups, in relation to the quest for reforms in the practices in Christendom's only church. The groups include the Lutheran, Anabaptists, Anti-Trinitarians and Calvinism. The high point was therefore when Luther's ninety-four theses against the Papal practices were made public. Which of these actually activated capitalism as they were almost at the same time? It is instructive to note that one of the most difficult questions to answer is exactly which of these led to the social formation-Capitalism. In any case, they were fighting for the correction of the practices which would earn them a place in the after now, if they conduct themselves according to the apostolic tenets. Whereas capitalism was of this world, the protest was to prepare people for life after death.

Zanden (1979) reported that Weber in his doctoral dissertation had studied the development of mercantilism in the Italian cities of Genoa and Pisa. He did not tell how the character and effect of modern commerce was masterminded by Protestant ethics. In addition, the passion with which he embarked on the study of capitalism smacked suspicion that he must have been goaded by a Protestant ethic. But he never stated that he was able to define the particular element of the ethics that had influenced his protest within the Catholic Church. It is further instructive to note that, from the perspective of analysis of this work, the consciousness of one's low material conditions of life in relations to others has always been responsible for revolutions in global history. The material condition of life of Luther in and out of the Monasteries could hardly be responsible for the protest movement. This is because the ethics of Priesthood include austere attitude, Puritanism and abdication of worldly pleasures all of which were internalized during training and

could therefore not have been the catalyst for the movement. By the perspective of this work it is considered erroneous to assume that protestant movement was the antithesis of Catholicism. Even if it was, it did not destroy Catholicism to produce capitalism as the synthesis. But rather Catholicism has grown stronger especially with the 'charismatic renewal movement'.

Finally the doctrine assumed that the adoption of 'Bureaucracy' by the church gives it away as a capitalist instrument. This is a flawed assertion though 'Bureaucracy' as a model of administration propounded by Max Weber for the capitalist money economy, was adopted by the Catholic Church. This was simply as a matter of convenience rather than as a result of the emergence of the spirit of capitalism. It is also on record that the Holy Roman Empire lasted for along time in spite of the almost complete absence of bureaucracy (Gerth et al., 1946:209).

POVERTY OF THE DOCTRINE - AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

At the time of the Reformation, considerable developments were taking place in Africa. Ethiopia a Christianized African state represents a clear rebuttal of the Weberian doctrine. The Tigrean and the Amharic ruling classes traced their descent to the Biblical Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. By this origin, the Emperor of Ethiopia was addressed as the 'conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God, Emperor of Ethiopia, king of kings'. Then a group emerged within the Ethiopians religious group, known as the Zagwe in the 12th century, who laid claims to being descended from Moses within the faith. The Zagwe distinguished themselves by building churches carved out of rocks. This Protestantism within the family and faith did not result in capitalism. As Rodney (1972:61) would say, Ethiopia of course never reached that stage of transition to capitalism. Africa is known for traditional religious practices. Several protests have led to breakaway from the various faiths. The result has always been the various factions get to practice their brand of worships. This is true of both the Muslims, Christians and the traditional religious worshippers. None of these have resulted in any thing other than the same faith in irrespective of the time in history.

More so, protestant ethics within the traditional religious groups which led in most cases to the embrace of Christianity, did not lead to capitalism. The African environment created forms of social relations, forms of government, patterns of behavior and systems of beliefs which together constituted the superstructure. The Superstructure imposed a

social order which Nwalimu Julius Nyerere termed 'African Socialism' where property was collectively owned, work was done in common, and goods were shared out equally. Under this form of social formation, it was evil to want to practice capitalism characterized by concentration of wealth in few hands, unequal distribution of the products of human labour and possessive individualism. This accounts for why protestant ethics could not at the time result into capitalism either in Europe or in Africa. It is noteworthy to state herein that the only area of association in the doctrine is probably that while the protest-reformation movement led to the appearance of Protestant churches other than Catholicism, it was a similar protest by the barons-knights in alliance with the serfs against the Lords of the manor, which led to the collapse of feudalism and the eventual materialization of capitalism. Again it would be erroneous to qualify all Protestants as capitalist.

CONCLUSION

By the end of feudalism, Europeans began to narrow the area of human life in which religion and the church played a part. Religion ceased to dominate politics, geography, and medicine etc. To free those things from religious restraints, it had to be argued that religion had its own sphere and the things of this world have their own secular sphere. This secularization of life speeded up the development of capitalism and later socialism. In contrast religion pervaded African life in the period before the coming of the whites, just as it pervaded life in other pre-feudal societies. (Rodney, 1972:43). It must be noted that it is not a law that protest movement in Christendom would always lead to capitalism, whether in Asia, Europe or Africa. The growth of capitalism would take place anywhere when the necessary conditions for it emergence would have been established. Africa with the break-ups in its traditional religious or western religious beliefs, would either have moved towards capitalism if need be, or any other social formation such as African socialism given the nature of its superstructure. The protest (Reformation) was a 'process' whether it would have transformed into a capitalist society, no one could have known except if he were God.

A process or method could metamorphose into anything depending on a number of factors. Unless Max Weber is able to isolate the variables, which if not subjected to control, would become spurious and result to capitalism, no one is competent to state categorically what form of protest equates capitalism. The inability of Luther to evolve a

clear association between Protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism was as a result of the complexity of his essays. It is herein recommended that the matter is in need of further research as to the nature of the spirit, (which is metaphysics) and style of protest that conduces to capitalism. Put differently, further research on the subject matter should attempt the identification of the element in the spirit of protest movement which led or would lead to capitalism. When this is done, we would have to face the issue of why the rest of us have not become entrepreneurs as postulated by Weber.

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