

THE CATHOLIC ETHIC IN AMERICAN SOCIETY: AN EXPLORATION OF VALUES

JOHN E. TROPMAN. JOSSEY-BASS, 1995.

Reviewed by Michael D. Kurimay, S.J.

Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* established an enduring typology of the religious worldview and its importance as a basic constituent of human culture and motivator of cultural dynamics, including the social, political, and economic. In this carefully reasoned discussion, Tropman proposes that there is indeed a historically and theologically discernible Catholic ethic, which Archbishop Weakland, in his foreword, describes as "what so many of us felt instinctively" to be the case. In summary, Tropman describes the Protestant ethic as more rigid, less forgiving, more individualistic, and more supporting of material acquisition and the Catholic ethic as more forgiving, more communitarian, and more supportive of sharing even out of limited resources (p. 109).

The chapter five discussion of differing views of an economy of salvation (what Tropman calls the Protestant and Catholic Calculi) exemplifies the evocative outcomes of comparing the two views' responses to such questions as: Is salvation abundant or scarce? Is the way to salvation clear? Is salvation a gift or an exchange? Is concern about salvation faced alone or with help? And how does your being saved affect my being saved? The resulting responses make clearer these differing religious and therefore cultural viewpoints.

Tropman describes the Old Testament Hebrew roots of the sharing ethic which mature in Christianity from Acts onward. He then notes the Reformed preoccupation with predestination and development of a distinction central to the developing Protestant ethic—the distinction between the worthy poor and those unworthy.

If reaching higher social status was an indication of predestined celestial favor as well as a reward for hard work, then lower social status and poverty were an indication of the reverse.... In this view, any social assistance to the poor must be such [that those] who want the results of work must do the work themselves. (pp. 40-41)

Thus, in societies strongly affected by the Protestant ethic, Tropman notes a continuing ambivalence over social responsibility for the needy: Such aid may become in fact immoral if the recipient is unworthy. By the late 19th century, such a view could the more readily entertain even a social Darwinist

view that not only physical but also spiritual survival went to those who most effectively competed for it. The dilemma remained, of course, that such a this-worldly competition of works could not in principle contribute a jot to already predestined salvation or its opposite, but work we must nonetheless.

Tropman describes post-Reformation development of the traditional but increasingly distinct Catholic ethic and its modern socioeconomic critique of capitalism in the social encyclicals from Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* of 1891 to John Paul II's *Centessimus Annus* of 1991. The point, he says, is that they are social encyclicals: They address capitalism's successes by asserting capitalism's responsibilities. In doing so, they critique an ethic of unbridled acquisition and manipulation of wealth by insisting on wealth's abiding Christian social responsibilities. This critical acceptance of capitalism insists that a better life for the many, not more wealth for itself, is the goal (pp. 160-161). Indicative of this insistence in the Catholic ethic on a culture of social responsibility, Tropman notes, is the bishops' *Economic Justice for All* pastoral letter of 1987, in which American economic culture was itself the object of careful scrutiny in a time of renewed laissez-faire capitalism. Remember trickle-down economics?

Tropman carefully notes, however, that the Catholic ethic's culture of sharing and social responsibility may not be automatically identified with contemporary political liberalism (p. 190). Though the two value systems may at times share similar preferences and motivations, they do so only selectively. A culture of sharing does not necessarily include all aspects of the contemporary liberal political agenda; American Catholics spread themselves across the political spectrum (p. 190).

This is an evocative analysis which many will find compelling. Its presentation is predominantly sociological, including in the discussion of predestination the example of some Baptists who concluded that about 46.1% of Alabama citizens were destined for Hell. The Catholic ethicist would no doubt hope for a large margin of error. When Tropman's analysis is further enriched with scriptural and theological points of contact, his thesis is more forceful.

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