

## SECULAR AGAINST RELIGION IN ETHICS: A HERMENEUTIC AROUND MAX WEBER'S WRITINGS

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*Abstract: For more than one hundred years, the ruminations around Max Weber Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism rendered it as his most influencing work. Generations of scholars seek with renewed interest to draw inspiration from Weber's work or mount successive impeachments to his books in order to gain academic credentials. Fewer of them focus on the contemporary religious and economic conditions concerning the Protestant West. Even though Protestant countries continue to enjoy the highest per capita earnings in the EU, religious fervour remains low. This article aims to find the causes of such phenomenon. We argue that, after a century of various experiments with political utopias, European public sphere, and especially the Germanic space is reluctant to become yet again entrapped by secular or theological promises, therefore European act with much prudence in all political endeavours. Also this year it will be the half of millennium since humanity handled with the reform of Luther in 1517. Therefore one has enough material to celebrate a ideatic history and reflect on the trends of our time.*

*Keywords: Max Weber, Protestantism, secularism, Western world, dialectic, iron cage*

### **Introduction**

After 500 years since Protestant reform ignited from inside the Catholic Church, it is interesting to see in the recent history how the social, political and economic factors were developed in our European World. This article tries to continue the analysis of the *Ecomenics* doctrine, a scientific research bent on finding a new socio-economical and political philosophy for the 21th century. Last year, the authors, presented their seminal article about this topic in the CCI-4 in Tg. Mureş University and published it in the proceedings [P.C. Bradu, S.V. Petre, 2016, *passim*].

European continent was the fountain for what we call today the Occidental Civilization. And the European civilisation stood on two important pillars: Greek Ancient culture and the Judeo-Christian traditions [L. Bruni, 2015, *sl.* 3-6]. In comparison with the Oriental Churches, the Catholic one incorporated the the Greek philosophy, blended it with the above mentioned Judeo-Christian alloy and together moulded the body of present Western vision [T. Woods Jr., 2012, *passim*]. Further on, Modernity matured as the main result of Catholic Church coming to terms with Protestantism. While the former, personified by the Holy See and a long succesion of Popes claiming descent to Apostle Peter, aimed towards a Pan-European theocracy; protestant princes fought for their autonomy, carving the kernel for today's nation-states.

Increasingly secularised, Medieval politics gave away into kingly *raison d'état* and afterwards burst into the nationalist fever and the twin Marxist-Fascist distopias. In order to avoid the extremes that generated two world conflicts, The Founding Fathers of the European

Union set up their construct upon a political economy of solidarity, or a *political-ecomemics*, to remain faithful to our previous article. The European *Community* developed itself to become a form *immunity*, or otherwise put an imunitary system against malaise that plagued European cosmos for centuries. Bruni speaks about economy in terms of a peacebuilding toolkit able to mediate between *community* and *immunity*: “*Community as a form of immunity*”. [*ibidem*, sl. 8].

Answering Malraux by returning to Weber we repeat the same question: a religious of secular XXI century?

What is baffling when one tries to answer Malraux’s boutade about the state of spiritual affairs in the XXI by employing Weberian sociology, does not necessarily concern if Weber was indeed right or not in his argument, but the methodological predicament for starters. Namely, some deplore that contemporary civilisation grows more and more indifferent towards spiritual matters and even displays an anti-religious and anti-clerical penchant . (Barber, 5 August 2012; Mortimer, 20 October 2016), others see the reversed process: a growing fervour. (Bryner, 3 April 2015; French, 31 July 2015; Escobedo, CNN, 17 March 20217)

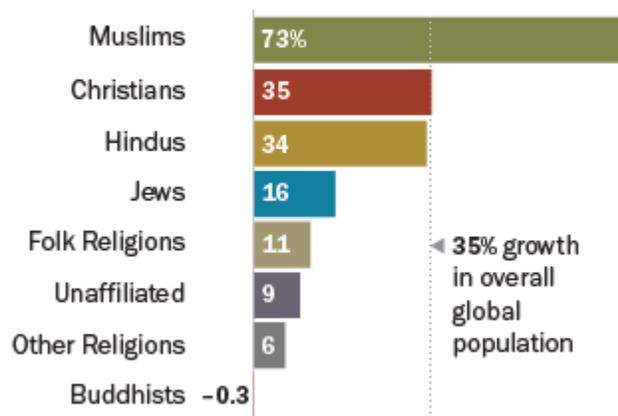
According to a recent research made by PEW by 2070 Islam which is already growing faster than any other religion should dominate the landscape:

### The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050

#### Islam Growing Fastest

*Muslims are the only major religious group projected to increase faster than the world’s population as a whole.*

#### Estimated change in population size, 2010-2050



Source: The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050

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## Size and Projected Growth of Major Religious Groups

	2010 POPULATION	% OF WORLD POPULATION IN 2010	PROJECTED 2050 POPULATION	% OF WORLD POPULATION IN 2050	POPULATION GROWTH 2010-2050
Christians	2,168,330,000	31.4%	2,918,070,000	31.4%	749,740,000
Muslims	1,599,700,000	23.2	2,761,480,000	29.7	1,161,780,000
Unaffiliated	1,131,150,000	16.4	1,230,340,000	13.2	99,190,000
Hindus	1,032,210,000	15.0	1,384,360,000	14.9	352,140,000
Buddhists	487,760,000	7.1	486,270,000	5.2	-1,490,000
Folk Religions	404,690,000	5.9	449,140,000	4.8	44,450,000
Other Religions	58,150,000	0.8	61,450,000	0.7	3,300,000
Jews	13,860,000	0.2	16,090,000	0.2	2,230,000
<b>World total</b>	<b>6,895,850,000</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>9,307,190,000</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>2,411,340,000</b>

Source: The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050

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**Source:** PEW Research Center<sup>1</sup>, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>

The aim of present article is to investigate the growing secularism in the Western world due to a certain type of dialectical tension between religion and the secular ethics initially created by the same religion which now matured and turns against Christian practice. To better understand our argument one should picture or take the analogy from high-school physics when the magnetic field created by the passing of an electrical flux through a coil turns against its source and ultimately chokes its circulation:



Being written at the dawn of the XXth century, "Protestant Ethics" (PE) marked Weber return to academic creativity after a period of internal mental torment. In the economics of his own biography, this would-become-bestseller divided Weber's life in a before and an after period,

<sup>1</sup> For an analysis about the future spreading of religions all across the map as well as about the geopolitical consequences stemming from there, read also: Unteanu, April 9, 2017.

according to Oxford historian of ideas, Peter Gosh (Gosh, 2014). Noticing that Protestant countries mounted higher levels of prosperity, in spite the fact they had not necessarily possessed bigger populations or richer natural resources, the German sociologist turned to cultural factors so as to find a suitable explanation.

Often misunderstood even by the more intellectual students of his work, the book does not ever assert that Protestantism really created capitalism in the first place. His thesis remains more nuanced with two major caveats: a) capitalism existed long before the early buds of Protestantism sweeping the reign of Papacy- thus it served more like a catalyst; b) speaking about a single unified Protestant ethic means to commit the error of composition → the early congregations' engagement with entrepreneurial practices must take into account the difference between Lutheranism and Calvinism. According to Weber's reading, Martin Luther was a passionate believer, but his *Weltanschauung* (his worldvision) remained entrapped into medieval setting with regard to commercial affairs. Having risen against what he considered to be Papal corruption and lust, the former Augustinian fryer strongly advocated against money making and other economic activities. His main legacy to the Protestant core-beliefs was the predestination doctrine which held that God decided the faith of each mortal even before his or her being born. People come into this world already programmed for damnation or salvation.

The one who prepared Protestantism to become a pro-market affair catechism was Jean Calvin by entailing the idea that hard work was a way of honouring Divinity and serving the others. (Weber, 1993: 114 and *passim*)

Since 1906, critical reactions to Weber's thesis can be clustered in two groups: structural and historical. The first kind, aims towards what they consider to be methodological shortcomings in PE. The second kind delve PE in statistical reality trying to figure out if the hypothesis remains or not.

### ***Greasing the 'iron cage'***

More than a hundred years later, Western Protestant countries are known for their atheistic stand. More so, future projections, like those chartered above, take the trend even further. (Gerhards, 2010: 5-2) Where can one find the causes of such phenomenon? According to Ronald Inglehart, enhanced prosperity, better salaries and longer – healthier lives take their toe in undermining religious fervour (Norris and Inglehart, 2004/2011: 71 and *passim*). Even without quoting him, it is intuitive that human psyche turns towards God or other metaphysical explanations when in predicament, and less in well-to-do periods. It is easy to see on the same map of atheism South Korea and Japan, two non-Christian succes stories in welfare matters.

Beyond this common sense conclusion we advance another one, striking at the root of modernity. Max Weber, besides other leading sociologists of his time, like Émile Durkheim, Thorstein Veblen, Ferdinand Tönnies, Dimitrie Gusti or Karl Polanyi duly noticed the consequences of rampant industrialization over the rural, traditional, kinship based European society. Most of them deplored in one way or the other the loosing and loosening of folkloric legacy and human touch. Durkheim's endeavour spoke fluently about how anomic individuals, lonely and disparaged added themselves to the gruesome statistic of suicide or criminality. In Weber's own words, modernity was to become more and more entrapped in an 'iron cage' of bureaucratic rationalism. Moreso, he predicted a diminishing of the sacred, resumed by the catchphrase *dischancement of the world*.

Fueled by such Protestant ethics, capitalism's rapid advancement caused rampant inequalities and finally crystallized in the extreme ideologies of the XX century. An unrepentant individualism intertwined with man's Faustian belief in his/her possibility to change the surroundings no matter the costs. Marcel Gauchet and Pierre Manent notice that Christianity is the *religion of stepping out of religion* (Gauchet, 2006; Carp, 2007: 121-131, 127) - their dictum is verifiable if one studies how nationalism, communism and nazism inspired alike from a pervert reading of Holy Scriptures.

(Even it is beyond the scope of our article, one should ponder on the fact that two of the most rampant critics of Christianity originated from the Protestant space, namely Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche). (Churchich, 1990, 154; Hudson, August 2005; da Silva, 2009: 151-159; Saliba, 2015)

For more than one hundred years, Europe served as the laboratory for all kinds of failed utopias. In order not to repeat the costly mistakes of the past, the Founding Fathers of EU strove to create a middle-way architecture, one able to accommodate both nationalism (albeit reduced in scale) and internationalism; religion and secularism; free initiative along with concern for welfarism. The philosophy of mutual exclusion based on <either-either> was to be replaced by the more tolerant logic of <and-and>.

Unlike the United States which risen to hegemony after 1945, defeated Europe was poised to reconsider its political philosophy and reflect upon the road had taken the old continent to near suicide. Homo EUropaeus would grow to become more skeptical towards everything and to fear any extreme outcome. Such might explain why in America religious devotion and patriotism still run high in charts, while European nations fly in the opposite direction. (Kagan, 2004)

Summing up all the above, the European Union was an instrument to 'grease' the iron cage of modernity and protect its peoples against the worst part in themselves.

All in all, what happened to religion? From this moment on, it was construed and re-constructed to serve civility, to help people find their salvation not in solitude, as it happened to the Protestantism seen by Weber, but through serving others. Both Catholicism as well as Protestantism (with all their shades and denominations) shouldered the functional political economy of a United Europe.

Stripped away of their political prerogatives, Christian faith would return to its original message. To illustrate all said above let's take the following examples → Watching the statistical charts of our times, one is tempted to acknowledge Weber's prophecy. However, a closer look at the reality displays another surprising twist. On one hand there is the path going from religious piety towards materialism, beyond the umbrella of churchly teachings. On the other, religion starts coming to grips to phenomena such as homosexuality and even assisted death! Contemporary theologians like Chris Glaser (Glasser, 1988; Osler, May 19th, 2012; Pearce, 02 December 2012; Vines, 2014; Straw, June 2, 2015; Pew Research Center, June 8 2015; Masci and Lipka, December 21, 2015) and Paul Badham use Bible to justify same-sex relations and, respectively, euthanasia. (Badham, 2009) Both of them emphasize Christian love and charity against the more conservative Christian views negating or opposing their standpoint.

### **Alienation issues**

In the last chapter we noticed a double swing of history within the span of a century: at the dawn of 1900s religion was retreating battered by the worldly political projects. After their

energy showed everything that was worst in modernity, religion re-entered the scene or, should we say it was brought back to help Man renegotiate his role in the universe.

Nowadays, just passing near by the dawn of the XXI century one may ask what is to do with religious faith in order to put it to use for civic endeavours!

Our plaidoirie is that one can find in Catholicism a new, more suitable economic ethics which may be instrumentalised to govern and manage current affairs.

Returning to Weber's description, we see that the Protestant ethics plunges into solipsism, determinind the believer to toil only for personal salvation, without taking into consideration his/hers neighbouring community.

Weber in his time accused Catholic Church for alienation in comparation with the ascetic protestant view.

In contrast, Catholicism has been retooled since Leon XIII published his *Rerum novarum* (1881) up until our days tries to clarify the tension between alienation and materialism.

We know from reading the New Testament and the words of Jesus Crist that a person cannot serve two master, both God and Mamon (Luke16,13). However, the wordly spirit of capitalism runs this huge risk to engulf oneself into Mamonism and nourish the entrepreneurial will with the fruits of corruption an greed.

To solve such predicament, the Social Catolic View tells us that capital must be seen like an object given to Man to be preserved, administrated towards taking care of all brethern and glorify God's Name.

Yes, it may be true that when you put first God in all life activities your are risking of not gaining the maximum profit from an economic point of view, but on the other hand you may very well find your *vocation*, thus serving both local and global community, in the way Weber described early Lutherans.

In time, step by step, economists learn to surpass early reluctance and even draw inspiration from Bible for the moral framework of their science. (Halpin and Williams, April 2010; Hendrickson, July 20, 2010; Olechnowicz, 2011; Piroșcă, Rogojanu, 2012: 115-124; The Economist, Nov 2st 2013)

Weber also mentions Sir William Petty, a pre-Adam Simth economist, who had in his analyses the Holland captitalist develop and he had a strong influence in England to change some traditional perspective, i.e. he succed to introduce the interest rate, which in his period werre considerate as a sinfull in UK (Weber, 1993: 33).

Adam Smith himself, the much celebrated author of the Wealth of Nations was also a moral writer. Posterity remembers him for envisaging the silhouette of the oeconomic man, rational agent always couting the best decision in an evironment with scarce resource.

Quoters usually ignored the second dimension in his text, namely that economic actors are subjects to passions which may destroy them absent moral safety nets:

*"In what constitutes the real happiness of human life, [the poor]are in no respect inferior to those who would seem so much above them. In ease of body and peace of mind, all the different ranks of life are nearly upon a level, and the beggar, who suns himself by the side of the highway, possesses that security which kings are fighting for."* (Wight, 2005, 46-58, esp.49)

Alienation really begins, if we are to read Smith between the lines, in the moment people give up the transcendental pillars of their existence. No religion has been more prone to generate its antithesis in the form of atheism like Protestantism did. Completing Weber with Durkheim's On suicide, we may ask ourselves how Calvinism gave birth to such welfare along with abysal dispair. The answer is not hard at all: in a dire competition where everybody strives to blend

salvation with amassing riches, some win while others face the bitter taste of defeat and take their lives.

The bastardised child of Protestant ethics was Marxism. Born out of the injustice of early capitalism, it promised salvation on this kingdom, not the Next One.

Today Marxism and its incarnation, Communism remains slightly more than a buzzword. Living in a global market we need first a solid social, economical, political global healthy philosophy, with law, market and social, knitting together the map of *global governance*. (Chong, 14 Nov, 2013)

Given all the above, re-reading Weber along with the Catholic Church Social Doctrine we are reminded about the importance of the religious spirit who is an engine for moral motivation and ethic behaviors in the social life.

A Catholic faith inspired management practice can be the trick to help us build a feasible economic system.

The Catholic Church is the first generator of *Global governance*, and that since the time America was discovered. Throughout many centuries it has crafted an impressive international and cultural experience. Headed by the Pope as its spiritual leader, the Church remains dedicated to avoiding conflicts between people, advocates forgiving the enemies (many of the priests preferred to die in martyrdom than to betray their sworn duty.) More so, Catholic church has recycled the ancient legacy of Hellenistic culture. In this regard, It shares with Judaism and Islam a commitment to help the poor and alleviate their condition. In its turn, Islam restored Greek science to Medieval Europe. Even though past experience was colored by sword dangling and mutual intolerance, there is also much in each of them to help write a common understanding about civility.

In all of the religions of the book there are passages which can be construed to justify democracy.

In accordance to authors' views about with economics, Reinhardt Marx employs the Social Doctrine of Catholic Church to forge a solution, namely a „third way” between individual liberalism and collective socialism in order to improve solidarity and social justice based on the personality principle (R. Marx, 2013, *passim*). He saw how Western governments conserve the welfare state as an important pillar of democracy, for all those in need. After this important step, the concert of great powers, which are also proud civilizations, can make another so as to develop a political system in accordance with the already existing institutions: the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the UN. But this political system must also embed social justice and care for the poor. (Ahern, Sept 25, 2015) Such vision can help our present day global market practices to evolve towards a social economical free enterprise.

A social economical free market works at maximum capacity in a peaceful time and within a framework made by sustainable regulation. This global political system must have an important and simple fundamental principles common to all cultures: protection of human life, human dignity, environment and social justice.

An important role in the equation should be given to corporate responsibility. In order to succeed in Third world countries, global brands and incumbent CEOs must display cultural sensitivity. Even though their profit seeking modus operandi may not be likable for the Catholic priests and volunteers, the latter might learn how to compromise and school themselves to using corporate responsibility in order to attract capital instead of resisting change or witness how thousands die of hunger.

By fashioning a global type of governance fixed on Catholic subsidiarity and a social

market system, individuals have the chance to surpass a homo homini lupus mentality and reach their fullness as persons. In the XXI century, Western Christian countries possess the ability to live up to their name- Christian- and enact the message of the Gospel.

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