

TWO INTERPRETATIONS OF THE REFORMATION

AN ECONOMIC INTERPRATATION OF THE REFORMATION

BY MAX WEBER

(FROM: THE PROTESTANT ETHIC AND THE SPIRIT OF CAPITALISM)

The particular state of mind which produced the "modern world" was a manifestation of the same mind as underlay the Protestant revolution. The Protestant "calling" referred to by both Luther and Calvin (which was even known to medieval writers) was a treatment of worldly avocations as God-created and fulfillable in a spirit of worship. This concept enabled the Protestant to see in his ordinary daily work an activity pleasing to God and therefore to be pursued as actively and profitably as possible. On the other hand, medieval and Roman Catholic Christianity were held to have condemned the world, with consequent hostility to economic activity and especially to that essential capitalist ingredient, the taking of interest on money lent (usury). Protestantism, or rather more particularly Calvinism and later free sects such as the Quakers and the Methodists, were therefore asserted to have been the necessary precondition of the growth of modern industrial capitalism. The ethos (basic belief) of Protestantism promoted the spirit of the entrepreneur, and for that reason capitalism is found flourishing in reformed countries, while the Reformation is found spreading among the commercial and industrial middle classes.

A POLITICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE REFORMATION

BY G.R. ELTON

The desire for spiritual nourishment was great in many parts of Europe, and movements of thought which gave intellectual content to what in so many ways was an inchoate search for God have their own dignity. Neither of these, however, comes first in explaining why the Reformation took root here and vanished there-why, in fact, this complex of anti-papa! 'heresies' led to a permanent division within the Church that had looked to Rome. This particular place is occupied by politics and the play of secular ambi-tions. In short, the Reformation maintained itself wherever the lay power (prince or magistrates) favored it; it could not survive where the authorities decided to suppress it. Scandinavia, the German principalities, Geneva, in its own peculiar way also England, demonstrate the first; Spain, Italy, the Habsburg lands in the east, and also (though not as yet conclu-sively) France, the second. The famous phrase behind the settlement of 1555-cuius regio eius religio-was a practical commonplace long before anyone put it into words. For this was the age of uniformity, an age which held at all times and everywhere that one political unit could not com-prehend within itself two forms of belief or worship.

The tenet rested on simple fact: as long as membership of a secular polity involved membership of an ecclesiastical organization, religious dissent stood equal to political disaffection and even treason. Hence governments enforced uniformity, and hence the religion of the ruler was that of his country. England provided the extreme example of this doctrine in action, with its rapid official switches from Henrician Catholicism without the pope, through Edwardian

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Protestantism on the Swiss model and Marian papalism, to Elizabethan Protestantism of a more specifically English brand. But other countries fared similarly. Nor need this cause distress or annoyed disbelief. Princes and governments, no more than the governed, do not act from unmixed motives, and to ignore the spiritual factor in the conversion of at least some princes is as false as to see nothing but purity in the desires of the populace. The Reformation was successful beyond the dreams of earlier, potentially similar, movements not so much because (as the phrase goes) the time was ripe for it, but rather because it found favour with the secular arm. Desire for Church lands, resistance to imperial and papal claims, the ambition to create self-contained and independent states, all played their part in this, but so quite often did a genuine attachment to the teachings of the reformers.