

Marketplace Monks and Nuns:

Christian entrepreneurs as agents of reform

Peter Heslam takes the 500th anniversary of the Reformation as an opportunity to be inspired for social reform today. In doing so, he offers an alternative to conventional interpretations of Puritans and Pentecostals based on the idea of 'earthy holiness'.

In 1517 an unknown monk, Martin Luther, became one of the greatest whistle-blowers in history by nailing his 95 theses (or objections) to a German church door. In England, the movement he instigated gave rise to the Puritans, who sought to orientate their lives around scripture, rather than the dogmas of the established church.

While in their own day they were persecuted for such anti-establishment sentiment, today they are criticized for having produced the

'me-first' attitude that has produced the morally and socially bankrupt economic system that is capitalism.

While caricatures are misleading, they often contain a grain of truth. The doctrine of vocation, which was central to the Reformers' worldview, did indeed provide a basis for individualism in the economic sphere, not least because responsibility for fulfilling one's vocation lay with each human being.

But to claim that in this sense of moral obligation lies capitalism's

purported dog-eat-dog ethic is to rely on social Darwinism for an understanding of the Puritans, rather than on historical evidence. That evidence shows that leading Puritans insisted on the social implications of individual vocation.

Such Puritans include those who profoundly influenced the founders of the USA, the country most widely associated with individualism. These Puritans regarded self-centredness as the core human sin and as destructive of community, as



John Ehninger
Thanksgiving - A Thanksgiving Dinner Among the Puritans (1867)

demonstrated in the biblical story of the fall. The common good, they insisted, must never be compromised in favour of economic individualism.

They also spelt out the moral limits of self-interest and maintained that the chief calling of believers was to serve God through their service of fellow human beings. William Perkins, for instance, wrote that 'a vocation or calling is...for the common good'. He denounced the saying 'every man for himself', citing in his support St Paul's claim that every part of the body is to serve the whole (1 Cor 12.12-27).

For Puritans like Perkins, the desire for individual gain had to be moderated. This meant that thrift was not to be driven by avarice but by generosity; and that private property, while necessary for the constraint of sin, was to serve the community. Wealth, in other words, was not to be for the purposes of 'self-actualisation' (in today's language) but as an instrument of piety and social inclusion.

For the Puritans and many of their fellow Protestants, disciplined consumption enhanced their productivity. Shunning debt and excess, they developed habits of saving and investment that enabled them to establish businesses and to re-invest profits back into them, thereby stimulating the rise of the modern economy.

The influential German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) used the

term 'worldly asceticism' to typify this seeming contradiction between material engagement and detachment. Although Weber misunderstood the profit motive and downplayed Puritan social responsibility, his term captures the creative tension that helped propel the entrepreneurial endeavour that transformed culture.

It still does so today. The international research project on Christian entrepreneurship I direct with Eric Wood, some results of which have appeared in this journal, suggests that the worldly asceticism that characterised Weber's Protestants also characterises many of their spiritual heirs. Most of these marketplace 'monks' and 'nuns' belong to what I have termed the Evangelical Pentecostal Charismatic Movement (the EPCM), despite the association parts of this burgeoning movement have with the 'prosperity gospel', not known for its asceticism.²

The EPCM mainstream, it appears, embodies a disciplined approach to work and savings but also a rejection of worldly anxieties that releases energy for worldly endeavours. When such earthy holiness combines with the trust and the *hopefulness* that characterise the movement, a powerful stimulus is given to the kind of productive and sustainable enterprise that forges pathways out of poverty.³

This suggests that a good way to honour the Reformation today

(despite its many failings) is to celebrate and support the work of Christian entrepreneurs in our own communities and around the world. They stand to influence the global future of commerce and culture as profoundly as their forebears have done over the past 500 years.


They will not all be business leaders. As the broader use of the term 'entrepreneur' in contemporary English usage indicates, they can be found across a range of social spheres. They will also make mistakes, as did those involved in religious persecution, slavery, imperialism, and in various forms of discrimination and exploitation.

But millions of people around the world, including all those reading these words, are beneficiaries of Christian entrepreneurs in such areas of human rights, the rule of law, a free press, an independent judiciary, limited government, healthcare, education, the treatment of women and children, and tackling the causes and effects of poverty.

Advances in these fields have always been fragile and have never been guaranteed. They have come about as a result not of inevitable progressive forces but of real people inspired by a vision of the common good – of social betterment beyond their immediate circle. As the leading Puritan Thomas Case put it in 1641:

Reform must be universal. Reform all places, all persons and callings; reform the benches of judgement, the inferior magistrates (...) Reform the universities, reform the cities, reform the countries, reform inferior schools of learning, reform the Sabbath, reform the worship of God.

Case's words are echoed in a sentence from the eminent church historian Owen Chadwick: 'The Reformation made all secular life into a vocation of God'.

That world-transforming project continues across the globe. We are invited to join. 

1 Examples include William Perkins, William Ames, John Cotton, John Winthrop, and Cotton Mather (whose lives cover the period 1558-1728).

2 See my article 'Christianity and the Prospects for Development in the Global South', in Paul Oslington (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity and Economics* (Oxford: OUP, 2014), pp. 359-83.

3 I discuss the hopefulness of the EPCM, and the relationship between entrepreneurship and the prosperity gospel, in my above article.



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