

Weber revisited: Christianity and Entrepreneurship in the Global Economy

A session at the World Business History Conference, Frankfurt (Germany), 16-17 March, 2014

Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* has been one of the most influential and controversial interpretations of the causes of economic growth since its publication over a century ago. The thesis compares Catholic and Protestant denominations in early modern Europe, and the role of Calvinist teachings on salvation on increasing capital accumulation and effort. The details of the thesis are much disputed, but the wider hypothesis that religious beliefs in general, and some Christian beliefs specifically, aid the formation of cognitive frameworks that have the indirect benefit of stimulating entrepreneurship remains highly influential (Ashton 1948; Landes 1998; McCloskey 2010; Munro 2010). Empirical support for the wider thesis can be seen in the disproportionate influences of inter alia non-conformists before and during the British Industrial Revolution, Protestant Evangelicals in the US Gilded Age, Jewish entrepreneurs in the US and UK, among many others (Ashton 1948; Jeremy 1990; Godley 2001; Godley and Casson 2010; Baghdiantz et al 2005).

But the last half century has seen two historic transformations. First, after remarkable growth in the world's Christian population, the demographic centre of the global Christianity has shifted from the Global North to the Global South. Within these regions, it is Protestantism (and specifically Pentecostal and Charismatic denominations) that has grown so quickly (Pew Research Center, 2011). At the same time, the integration of much of the so-called Global South into the global economy has had a dramatic effect on economic growth there, powered disproportionately by indigenous entrepreneurship (Bruton, Ahlstrom and Obloj 2008). Among sociologists there is the beginnings of systematic research that seeks to explore the relationship between these two transformations in emerging economies a growing proportion of Christians among the population and increasing levels of indigenous entrepreneurship (e.g. Tong 2012 for China).

This proposed session seeks to invite up to five presentations from business historians and other researchers (especially sociologists and others) focusing on the relationship between Christianity and entrepreneurship in emerging economies (Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America especially) in historical and comparative context. The session's aim is to encourage the empirical documentation of these recent trends and to compare them with the far better documented cases of Christian entrepreneurs in advanced economies in earlier periods.

References:

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Andrew Godley. *Jewish Immigrant Entrepreneurship in London and New York: Enterprise and Culture* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

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David Landes, *Wealth and Poverty of Nations: why some are so rich and some so poor*. 1998. New York, Norton.

Dierdre McCloskey, *Bourgeois Dignity: Why Economics Can't Explain the Modern World*. 2010, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

John Munro (2010), 'Tawney's Century, 1540-1640: The Roots of Modern Capitalist Entrepreneurship', in David Landes, Joel Mokyr and WJ Baumol (eds), *The Invention of Enterprise: Entrepreneurship from Ancient Mesopotamia to Modern Times* (Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ).

Pew Research Center, *Forum on Religion and Public Life, Global Christianity* December 2011.

Joy Kooi-Chin Tong. *Overseas Chinese Christian Entrepreneurs in Modern China: A Case Study of the Influence of Christian Ethics on Business Life* Anthem Press, London. 2012.

The session convenor is Professor Andrew Godley, Director, Henley Centre for Entrepreneurship, Henley Business School, University of Reading. Andrew is an advisor to Transforming Business (University of Cambridge) and the Entrepreneurial Leadership Initiative (University of Oxford). Peter Heslam, who directs both these projects will present a paper together with Prof Eric Wood (University of Cape Town) entitled 'Christianity and Entrepreneurship in the Global Economy', based on the 65 case studies of Christian entrepreneurs they have completed as part of the [Belief in Enterprise](#) initiative. Further conference details are available [here](#).