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7-2002

### John Cotton and the Work Ethic

Lois M. Eveleth  
evelethl@salve.edu

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## **JOHN COTTON AND THE WORK-ETHIC**

*Dr. Lois Eveleth*

Every American knows how to define wealth, does he not? Wealth is money and property. It is assets. It is a strong portfolio, despite the current downturn in the market. If we press the question by asking how much money, property, assets are required of a person to be considered wealthy, an answer is not so easy. One may consider himself wealthy with a net worth of any amount at all, if that amount provides the lifestyle and contentment he seeks. On the other hand, if he be covetous, the estates of one hundred men would not make him content, as the Puritan minister John Cotton wrote. Perhaps knowledge is wealth. Perhaps virtue is. A wisdom which appreciates human existence and experience may also be wealth, perhaps the most difficult of all to acquire. Wealth, then, is a weasel word. Moreover, if wealth is so flexible a concept as to be ambiguous, so too is poverty. One of the challenges in fighting poverty must surely be that the definition of poverty is a moving target.

Avoiding poverty and acquiring wealth explain a great deal about American history and thought. Recently we Americans have been again told that ours is a materialistic society, and this by hard-nosed Muslim terrorists who have committed themselves to destroying this “great Satan.” One of our eminently forgettable presidents, Calvin Coolidge, managed to declare unabashedly something memorable in this regard: “The business of America is business,” he declared. On the surface this situation may seem a far cry from our colonial origins, from those salad days when John Winthrop said that “We shall be as a city upon a hill.” It is only a surface difference, however. John Winthrop would have understood Calvin Coolidge. He would even have understood how a theocratic religion tries to extricate heresy and sin, even to the point of using violence.

Americans have been trying to avoid poverty and acquire wealth from the very beginning. They have, moreover, used their work in multiple ways, e.g. identifying themselves, deciding what constitutes leisure, creating technologies with which to lessen or modify work. A constellation of interests and values surrounds the concept of work.

The work-ethic, in evolving forms, has thus been a prominent feature of the mental landscape of the United States since this nation's beginning.

The link with which to identify such change is the concept of the work-ethic, as conceived by Max Weber early in the twentieth century. 'Work-ethic' is a general term that incorporates the ideas of work (or calling, duty, profession, or vocation), success, wealth (as one kind of success), and salvation. It is the work-ethic which joins our age to that of the Puritans. All ideas, though, like their human fabricators, are changeable. By giving here an account of the changes in the work-ethic, we are able to give an account of a development which is relevant to, and explanatory of, American experience. It is claimed here that a Puritan intellectual and minister in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, John Cotton, transmitted, while transforming, what we now term the work-ethic. Key sections of his tracts and sermons provide support for this claim.

The German sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) published two articles in 1904-05 which have come to be known jointly as The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Though Weber was educated for the law, he had an abiding interest in religious matters and in the burgeoning capitalism of the Second Reich. The two essays were part of a three-volume series in the sociology of religion eventually published in 1920-21. While the series is largely ignored now, these two essays have generated much commentary and controversy.<sup>1</sup> Of key interest to any reader, whatever his interpretation or position on Weber's assumptions and methodology, is the notion of the work-ethic, variously called Protestant work-ethic, Puritan work-ethic, and simply the work-ethic.

Conventional wisdom in the history of ideas claims that the work-ethic came into mainstream America via English Puritans in seventeenth-century North American colonies. There is no good reason to question this claim. Interestingly enough, Weber himself did not even bother to make this claim but simply took it for granted. In order to achieve his larger goal, he used two texts of Ben Franklin in order to provide himself with a working definition of capitalism.<sup>2</sup> The American version was thus a sifting device for the two essays, and Weber's scrutiny of sixteenth and seventeenth century religious texts was shaped by texts of Ben Franklin written in the 1730's and 1740's. There seemed to be no doubt in Weber's mind that Calvin and Franklin were linked. While the linking is the case, the connection must be clarified. Franklin texts are simply used and

dropped in Weber. Even if a reader overlooks this methodological oddity, a larger question about the linking presents itself.

Ben Franklin's version is clearly secular, all theological and Scriptural underpinnings which the work-ethic once had having been dropped. On the other hand, not only is John Calvin's version not secular; it is even theocratic. What makes the Calvin-Franklin connection reasonable is found in the creative manipulation of Calvinism achieved by a fairly small number of Non-Conformist clergymen associated with Cambridge University during the later decades of the sixteenth century. In this Cambridge spin on Calvinism and its subsequent migration to the Massachusetts Bay Colony lies an historical account of the work-ethic. Narrowing down the task for present purposes, this writer argues that the special career of John Cotton is the American connection which Weber might have sought but did not, or, that the interrelated ideas of work and success, notions central to the work-ethic, emerged from a Puritan modification of Calvinism.

John Cotton migrated to Boston in 1633 and worked as teacher and then as minister in the First Church until his death in 1652. The achievements of those nineteen years are not the discovery of recent scholarship only, but the reputation of Cotton was already well-established in his lifetime. As the definitive edition of his correspondence by Sargent Bush in 2001 demonstrates, John Cotton was the leading Puritan intellectual of the first generation of settlers and, even more importantly, the minister consulted by other ministers for advice. He was the minister's minister.<sup>3</sup> When he took his post in 1633 there were only seven churches or communities in the colony, and all the ministerial positions were held by Cambridge University alumni, Cambridge being to the Puritans what Oxford was to the Anglicans. Cotton and his colleagues mutually formed close bonds that were based on a common pastoral task and were strengthened by a need for intellectual camaraderie in a frontier.

The move across the Atlantic in no way removed that felt need of intellectual exchange...there was a real need for these deeply read, intensely educated men to stay mentally sharp, to pursue dialogue and debate...<sup>4</sup>

Cotton's correspondence was an important part of his ministry, especially those letters to fellow ministers who depended on his guidance. His correspondence both resulted from his prominence and contributed to it. It is fair to say, then, that the pre-eminence of John Cotton nominates him as a plausible link between Calvin and Franklin. Examining his written work, we are not disappointed.

William Emerson was first, in 1812, to compile and publish a list of Cotton's theological writings.<sup>5</sup> If one excludes his famous interchange with Roger Williams, as well as his work in the Antinomian crisis, the Emerson list has twenty-one assorted tracts and pieces. Guided by Max Weber's extensive notes on the concept of the calling in Chapter III of his text, we select from the Emerson list any text which directly addresses this concept. By examining what Cotton said about the calling, we discover what happened to the work-ethic at the hands of this influential Puritan interpreter of a Calvinist tradition.

This tradition teaches that some persons are called by God to salvation. This calling (in Latin, *vocatio*; in German, *Beruf*) is central to predestination as derived from the Pauline epistles by Calvin and consistently taught by him. *Calling* refers to salvation in St. Paul, and, in medieval usage, the word was extended to refer to a call to a dedicated life in a monastery or the priesthood. Calvin's Institutes and Scriptural commentaries employ this key term almost exclusively in this theological sense of predestination.<sup>6</sup> For John Cotton, though, the calling is something more; it is two-dimensional, both religious and secular, referring both to predestination and to one's work in his world. A person is called both to salvation, he hopes, and to a life work, duty, task, or vocation. One must have work. If one has faith, he works in this world. If one has faith, such faith will find expression in work.

Faith draws the heart of a Christian to  
live in some warrantable calling; as soon  
as ever a man begins to looke towards God,  
and the wayes of his grace, he will not rest,  
till he find out some warrantable Calling  
and employment.<sup>7</sup>

A person lives both a life of faith, known as the general calling, and a temporal life, known as the particular calling. The divided hoof of the clean animal is Cotton's favorite Biblical metaphor: "...if he have no calling but a generall, or if no calling but a

particular, he is an unclean creature.” “Those businesses which God setteth us about, we are to set our hearts and best endeavours upon them.” A life of faith and a life of work are clearly interdependent: “If we...would not have our hearts dull and unprofitable in our general calling, we must then labour to dispose our selves aright in our particular calling.”<sup>8</sup>

A calling is necessary because faith is not an intellectual assent to doctrine. Lacking such content, faith cannot even be identified or located without good works. Those who live without a calling “...either want faith or the exercise of faith.” Nonetheless, doing one’s work requires the transforming quality of faith. Work is but “dead worke,” if one is without faith.<sup>9</sup> Puritanism, having rejected the effectiveness of work for salvation, assigns the calling a different role in the scheme of things. One’s calling is the sole indicator of faith. To work at a calling is to be a person of faith, and to work diligently at a calling is to be a person of great faith. God’s ways are indeed mysterious and inscrutable to the good Puritan, and so one had no sure way of knowing whether God had granted this gift of faith. Grant it He does. The challenge was reading its signs.

One’s work may be virtually anything. Cotton gives a general description of work: “...to study the nature and course and use of all Gods works is a duty imposed by God upon all sorts of men.”<sup>10</sup> Work may be “any poore duty,” as long as it is done “with a willing mind.” “It is not for men to say they have nothing to do, or to stand idle, because no man hath hired them...behold a world of creatures for thee to study upon.”<sup>11</sup> Principles of selection are here, though, to guide one in choosing or discerning that work for which one is intended. Cotton’s word is *warrantable*. A calling is warrantable if it satisfies three conditions. It is warrantable if it aims at one’s own good and also at the common good; if one shows talents for such work; and, if one is encouraged by friends and neighbors to take up such work.<sup>12</sup> Any work is an engagement of some part of God’s creation; every business is a “heavenly business.”<sup>13</sup> The world is God’s creation, the metaphorical vineyard, as seen by Cotton, into which we all are sent as laborers. All works or duties then are holy. One’s work, if it be warrantable, will be “such as hath in it some measure of life and spirit and power of grace breathing foorth in it.” “See that there bee life and spirit in your walkings before God in both your particular and generall

calling.”<sup>14</sup> Some spirit or élan, then, will be some indicator for a person that he has made a good selection of his life’s work.

Either success or failure may attend one’s work. One must not care about success, however, for that is a burden which no person is expected to carry. Accordingly one must leave the worry of that to God. Success must also not be our goal, but serving God must be. “...in serving God (he) serves men, and in serving men, serves God.”<sup>15</sup> One must not aim at approbation or acceptance or even wealth, since these are gifts that Providence may or may not choose to bestow. The enjoyment of whatever gifts there are is itself still another gift. What each one must provide is diligence in his calling. “...and hast thou a Calling, and art never so diligent in it, it is but dead worke, if thou want faith.”<sup>16</sup> Diligence is key. Although diligence does not cause one to have faith, the bestowing of faith being locked up in an inscrutable Divine mind, diligence can reasonably be read as an indicator of this Divine favor.

He that shall be discouraged from  
beneficence in his course, and from  
faithfulness in his calling...shall never  
do good in this world, nor receive good  
in the world that is to come...Our ignorance  
and uncertainty of success, of our labours,  
in our callings, should not dishearten us,  
but rather encourage us to a greater  
diligence and fruitfulness in them.<sup>17</sup>

Faith is a necessary condition of diligence, in that diligence is symptomatic and revelatory of faith. Those who have not received faith can achieve only “dead worke”, dead in that their work can not bring lasting happiness. “...are thou not able to over-look the world, and all the comforts of it, nor to forbear the pursute of it for a minute...why then they are still deceitful treasures...” One’s purported accomplishments are “noisome, stinking weeds” instead of good fruits.<sup>18</sup> One cannot find happiness in deceitful treasures and stinking weeds if one lacks faith or is disconnected from the sovereign God who is the author of all things. Cotton warns of course against covetousness: “The earth yieldeth sufficient profit unto all sorts of men...but not to covetousness...the hunger of the Covetous cannot be satisfied with an hundred mens estates...”<sup>19</sup> “...if you set your hearts on things for themselves, you will lost your hearts, and the comfort of them together...good things come from the good heart.”<sup>20</sup>

How, then, should the man of faith understand failure or adversity?

...there is not any sicknesse befalls us  
or ours, not any losse in our estates, not  
any kind of evil that befalls the places where  
we live, so farre as it reaches us, but it is a  
knocke of God's hand to turn to Him.<sup>21</sup>

'Knockes', nudges, reminders: What a person may interpret as adversity or failure should then be accepted as an urging to do more, a hint that something is amiss, that more is expected.

One of Cotton's analogies for explaining success is the fashioning of a child, both body and soul, in the womb. "A strange yet ordinary secret in nature,"<sup>22</sup> he calls it, writing in an age that knew virtually nothing of embryology. God fashions the child without our advice or supervision and similarly fashions our achievements or failures. A sovereign God is continuing the work of creation, but human instruments must not get in the way with their greed, selfishness, etc.

Human beings are instruments chosen by a sovereign God to assist in continuing His creation. "Time spendeth fast, and should be redeemed." For reasons only God knows, according to Cotton, God created and chose man to assist Him. "The good of man is not to be found in the creatures...our good cannot lie in them, but their good rather lieth in us."<sup>23</sup> Despite this gratuitous choice, the God of John Cotton remains absolutely sovereign, such sovereignty being theologically safeguarded throughout this belief system. One's work is selected by God, since a person does not truly choose his calling but rather discern a choice made for him from all eternity. Success in work is not one's own either. Satisfaction or attendant joy are God's gifts. God is the judge of whether or not a person has applied himself as diligently as his gifts allowed. At the end of one's working life the man of faith must discern the time for putting aside his work and yielding to the younger members of the community.

...faith with boldnesse resignes up his  
calling into the hands of god or man,  
whenever god calls a man to lay downe  
his calling...he lays it downe with comfort  
and boldnesse, in the fight of God and man.<sup>24</sup>

Should one lose sight of God's sovereignty, then he becomes fearful or discouraged. Fear, discouragement, worry: all such burdens inevitably are visited on



persons who trust themselves to acquire good things on their own. Their unhappiness is an indicator that they are attributing sovereignty to themselves. Humans are not sovereign. They can neither achieve success by their own merits in this world nor salvation in the next.

A conclusion can now be offered. Max Weber was right in linking Calvin and Franklin, because the written work of John Cotton has the key elements found in both of these works, the earlier theocratic version, and the later secular version, of the work-ethic. Cotton distinguished two senses of the calling without separating these. He could never have done so, for such a separation would have impugned or challenged the sovereignty of his God. Ben Franklin, though, separated what Cotton had merely distinguished, and, having separated them, discarded the theological dimension. The work done by Poor Richard, for instance, in the cosmopolitan city of Philadelphia is not urged on by religious faith but by personal ambition. Ambition has become respectable. He does not look to God to judge his work; the community and posterity are the only judges who matter. Poor Richard seeks success, for this is the only goal and salvation. He knows nothing about doing God's work. If an architect-God exists, he shall to shift for himself and politely stay out of Richard's way.

A full account of the secularization of the Puritan work-ethic at the hands of Ben Franklin waits for another day. Suffice it is say, for now, that John Cotton is important in any account of the American work-ethic.

## ENDNOTES

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1. Gordon Marshall's critical essay is still helpful for tracing the Weberian debate and identifying key contributors. In Search of the Spirit of Capitalism. An Essay on Max Weber's Protestant Ethic Thesis. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
  2. Specifically, "Necessary Hints to Those That Would Be Rich" (1736) and "Advice to a Young Tradesman" (1748).
  3. The two earliest biographies make a point of this. Samuel Whiting (1597-1679) wrote that "...he (Cotton) answered many letters that were sent far and near, wherein were handled many difficult cases of conscience, and many doubts by him cleared to the greatest satisfaction." John Norton also, in "Abel Being Dead, Yet Speaketh" (1658). Both are cited in Sargent Bush, "Epistolary Counseling in the Puritan Movement: The Example of John Cotton", contained in Puritanism, Transatlantic Perspectives on a Seventeenth-Century Anglo-American Faith, Francis J. Bremer, editor. Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1993.
  4. Sargent Bush, Jr., "After Coming Over: John Cotton, Peter Bulkeley, and Learned Discourse in the Wilderness," Studies in the Literary Imagination, Vol.27 (Spring 1994), p.2.

5. This was incorporated into his history of the parish, An Historical Sketch of the First Church of Boston from Its Formation to the Present Period (Boston: Munroe and Francis, 1812). William Emerson (1769-1811) was himself a pastor here, and the father of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The very first church in Boston, it was known affectionately as “Old Brick.”
6. Robert M. Mitchell combed through Calvin’s Institutes and Commentaries with a view to clarifying the meaning of ‘calling’. He concluded that “...in all instances, as far as it was possible for this author to discern, they (sc. references to ‘calling’) had nothing to do with a secular vocation in the sense Mr. Weber uses the term.” Calvin’s and the Puritan’s View of the Protestant Ethic (New York: University Press of America, 1979), p.14. But Mitchell may have missed one. We read in the Institutes (3.10.06): “(sc. God)...has appointed duties for every man in his particular way of life.” This is exceptional, though, and Mitchell’s observation is sound enough for present purposes. Institutes of the Christian Religion, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics Series, Vol.XX-XXI (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).
7. John Cotton, “The Life of Faith,” p.437, in “The Way of Life.” References to all Cotton texts cited briefly here are given fully below.
8. Ibid, p.438; and “A Briefe Exposition...upon the Whole Book of Ecclesiastes,” p.24; “A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace,” p.4.
9. Cotton, “The Life of Faith,” p.449.
10. Cotton, “A Briefe Exposition...upon the Whole Book of Ecclesiastes,” p.24.
11. John Cotton, “The Saints Deliverance out of Tribulations,” Everett Emerson, ed., p.24.
12. This is a summary of Cotton’s words, in “The Life of Faith,” pp. 439-440.
13. Cotton, “The Life of Faith,” p.443.
14. John Cotton, “God’s Mercie Manifest in His Justice,” Everett Emerson, ed., p.65.
15. Cotton, “The Life of Faith,” p.442.
16. Ibid, p.449.
17. Cotton, “A Briefe Exposition...upon the Whole Book of Ecclesiastes,” pp.238, 243.
18. Cotton, “The Saints Deliverance...” p.46; “God’s Mercie Manifest...” p.66.
19. Cotton, “A Briefe Exposition...” p.100.  
Cotton was a colleague of the lawyer Nathaniel Ward in codifying the laws of the colony. He obviously saw to it that the covetous were given a warning with these words: “To the intent that all oppression in buying and selling may be avoyded, it shall be lawfull for the Iudges in every Towne, with the consent of the free Burgesses to appointment selectment, to set reasonable rates upon all commodities, and proportionably to limit the wages of workemen and labourers, and the rates agreed upon by them.”  
John Cotton, “An Abstract of the Lawes of New England,” in The New England Way, Vol.12 in A Library of American Puritan Writings, The Seventeenth Century. Series Editor: Sacvan Bercovitch. New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1983.
20. John Cotton, “The Christians Charge,” in The Way of Life, pp.207 and 214.
21. Cotton, “Gods Mercy in His Peoples Deliverance,” Everett Emerson, ed., p.10.
22. Cotton, “A Briefe Exposition...” p.237.
23. Ibid, pp.24 and 62.
24. Cotton, “The Life of Faith,” pp.446-7.

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*I owe special thanks to the Massachusetts Historical Society for allowing me access to now-fragile first editions and reprints of works of John Cotton.*

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