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PROSPERITY GOSPEL

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THE PROSPERITY GOSPEL

How Greed and Bad Philosophy
Distorted Christ's Teaching

Thomas Storck

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The Prosperity Gospel: How Greed and Bad Philosophy Distorted Christ's Teaching © 2023 Thomas Storck

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*“For what doth it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and
suffer the loss of his own soul?”*

—Matthew 16:26, DV

Preface

It is easy to ridicule the followers of the Prosperity Gospel, even if at the same time we might pity them. And perhaps such ridicule may have its place at times. But it is more important, because it is more fundamental, to try to understand the cultural roots of the Prosperity Gospel, the soil on which it thrives: the private interpretation of Scripture and the privatization of religion. These Protestant principles led to the separation of religion from the real business of life, divorcing these institutions, activities, and actions from their inherent purpose, which is ultimately the salvation of our souls. For if religious doctrines are seen simply as matters of private *opinion*, then not only do they have nothing to do with the serious purposes of life in this world, but the activities and institutions of life are robbed of their inherent and objective purposes. All is now a matter of private opinion. Religion then becomes merely a means of satisfying our emotional or psychological needs.

This reduction of religion to the private realm is deep-seated in our culture. The famed English historian Christopher Dawson, during his tenure as a professor at Harvard, delivered a lecture in 1960 characterizing American religion as “detached from the objective world which was the domain of business and politics . . . , so that, as several Americans have remarked to me, they find some difficulty in relating the two concepts

of religion and civilization since these seem to belong to two quite distinct orders of existence.”¹ This attitude of detaching religion from the real business of mankind has its theoretical justification in the writings of John Locke, and Locke in turn was enthusiastically adopted even before the American Revolution as something like our official political philosopher. The historian Louis Hartz termed Locke a “massive national cliché” who “dominates American political thought, as no thinker anywhere dominates the political thought of a nation,”² something most evident in the religious liberty jurisprudence of the United States Supreme Court. It is almost astounding how closely the court’s opinions on religious freedom hew to the framework of Locke’s ideas and simply assume the general outline of the question as Locke presents it in his writings, most notably in his (first) *Letter Concerning Toleration* of 1689. The fusion of Protestant private biblical interpretation with Locke’s Enlightenment understanding of the role of religion in society has resulted in a situation where questions of meaning are relegated to private life, and the real business of living for most people becomes the pursuit of wealth, which is regarded as the obvious purpose of life. Any religious strictures against it are rejected as tainted by socialism. And in the Prosperity Gospel, it is religion itself that has come to be co-opted into serving the national infatuation with affluence. Instead of the Gospel judging, ruling, and

¹ Christopher Dawson, “America and the Secularization of Modern Culture,” a lecture delivered at the University of Saint Thomas, Houston, Texas, 1960.

² Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1955), 140.

shaping our desires and passions, it becomes the other way around: our disordered desires now determine the contents of the Gospel itself, and we end up with a situation which, as Pope Saint John Paul II put it, has led “to permissive and consumerist solutions, which under various pretexts seek to convince man that he is free from every law and from God himself, thus imprisoning him within a selfishness which ultimately harms both him and others.”³

From this fundamental cultural basis, it is not hard to see how these attitudes have overflowed into all areas of life, for it is not just our seeking after worldly goods whose ends have been perverted, but everything that this spirit of mammon touches. Education, for example, is commonly justified by its presumed or hoped for return on investment, or more bluntly put: Does it pay? Can I use it to get rich? Any other reason is seen, frankly, as quaint at best or, at worst, stupidly naive. This book will consider first the central ideas which have shaped the culture of the United States in these respects, ideas which are certainly not unique to this country and largely did not originate here, but which have found their most fertile soil in it. Then it will examine the crucial questions of freedom and of whether and how human activities and institutions have inherent purposes, purposes beyond those which each individual might confer upon them. Then we will look at the ramifications of these ideas upon some of the activities and institutions of our society, such as the economy, education, science, and so on. Doubtless, to draw such connections will be unfamiliar territory for many readers,

³ Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (May 1, 1991), no. 55.

but I believe that such a discussion can be both interesting and enlightening, and moreover, that any other treatment of such a singular phenomenon as the Prosperity Gospel runs the risk of both superficiality and an arrogant and scornful assumption of superiority. When we behold both the Prosperity preachers and their duped followers, we should keep in mind our national cultural affinity for their bizarre doings. As the saying goes, Only in America . . .

Finally, I conclude this book with some reflections on the genuine place that material goods ought to hold in our life as Catholics. God created us with a need for such goods, and even before the Fall, God put Adam “in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Gn 2:15). Therefore, the products of human work are not evil. But if we fail to see to what extent the disaster that our first parents brought upon the human race has unhinged our very selves and released our various passions from the command of reason, we will not grasp how corrupted we can be by the activities of moneymaking and consuming. Our medieval ancestors were very well aware of the need for caution in this aspect of human life, but because modern Catholics on the whole have not followed their example, we find ourselves in a situation where the whole culture has been tainted, if not corrupted, by these twin passions.

May this book contribute in some small way to the rediscovery of our pressing need to watch carefully over our possession and use of the good things of this earth so that, as the Collect for the third Sunday after Pentecost in the traditional Roman liturgy puts it, *transeamus per bona temporalia, ut non amittamus aeterna* (we may pass through temporal goods so as not to lose eternal goods).

Introduction

“Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

—Luke 12:34

Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, is the congregation pastored by the Evangelical Protestant Joel Osteen, one of the most noted of the preachers of what is often called the Prosperity Gospel, the notion that God will reward believers with the good things of this life, and in particular with wealth. The fundamental error of this belief—one hesitates to call it a theology—is that the Christian life is all about me, me, me—and about fulfilling one’s dreams and desires, whatever they may be. Their website minces no words: “At Lakewood we believe your best days are still out in front of you. . . . The Bible says when you are planted in the house of the Lord, you will flourish. Get ready to step into a new level of your destiny.”⁴ In another place, Osteen says, “Live inspired. Reach your dreams. Become all God created you to be.”⁵

Paula White, another of the promoters of such a false Gospel, is equally or more explicit: “God has a plan. . . . That

⁴ Lakewood Church (website), accessed August 23, 2022, <https://www.lakewoodchurch.com/?target=/pages/give/index.aspx>.

⁵ Joel Osteen Ministries (website), accessed August 31, 2022, <https://live.joelosteen.com/>.

plan is always working. And that plan includes you! God has a BIG LIFE for you. He has designed a life of wholeness, one that is blessed and successful, for you to enjoy—one that has peace and purpose, joy, goodness, completeness, wealth, health and fullness.”⁶

But the Joel Osteens and Paula Whites of this world are not a new phenomenon, especially in the United States. They flourish on ground already well prepared for them and their message. The Baptist minister and founder of Temple University in Philadelphia, Russell Conwell (1843–1925), offered a similar message with his popular address “Acres of Diamonds,” which he delivered hundreds of times in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: “I say that you ought to be rich, and it is your duty to get rich. How many of my pious brethren say to me, ‘Do you, a Christian minister, spend your time going up and down the country advising young people to get rich, to get money?’ ‘Yes, of course I do.’ They say, ‘Isn’t that awful! Why don’t you preach the gospel instead of preaching about man’s making money?’ ‘Because to make money honestly is to preach the gospel.’”⁷

A few years later, Bruce Barton’s 1925 bestseller, *The Man Nobody Knows*, portrays our Lord as “The Founder of Modern Business.” The author tells us that “every one of the ‘principles of modern salesmanship’ on which business men so much pride themselves, are brilliantly exemplified

⁶ “You Can Have a Big Life!” Paula White Ministries, December 30, 2020, <https://paulawhite.org/news/you-can-have-a-big-life/>.

⁷ Russell H. Conwell, *Acres of Diamonds* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1915), 17–22.

in Jesus' talk and work," and he compares His teaching that (as Barton phrases it) "whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all" with the advice of one of the founders of the New York Life Insurance Company, whose idea of service was "of extending the Company's service throughout the world, of making it the finest, most useful institution of its kind." And incidentally, by doing so, "it made us rich."⁸

As time went on, this message became more detached from any Christian veneer, and it manifested more crudely what later became known as the power of positive thinking. Thus we find Napoleon Hill's 1937 volume, likewise a bestseller, *Think and Grow Rich*, a book with a considerable following still today, telling us,

If you truly DESIRE money so keenly that your desire is an obsession, you will have no difficulty in convincing yourself that you will acquire it. The object is to want money, and to become so determined to have it that you CONVINCED yourself you will have it.

Only those who become "money conscious" ever accumulate great riches. "Money consciousness" means that the mind has become so thoroughly saturated with the DESIRE for money, that one can see one's self already in possession of it.⁹

⁸ Bruce Barton, *The Man Nobody Knows: A Discovery of the Real Jesus* (Grosset & Dunlap, 1924), https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.179576/2015.179576.The-Man-Nobody-Knows-A-Discovery-Of-The-Real-Jesus_djvu.txt.

⁹ Napoleon Hill, *Think and Grow Rich* (1938), chap. 2, <https://sacred-texts.com/nth/tgr/tgr07.htm>.

This attitude toward wealth and getting rich should seem strange and alien to any Christian, for Holy Scripture teaches a radically different attitude. Even casual readers of the scriptural text will notice the often harsh language that the sacred writers employ about riches and the rich. We have the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (see Lk 16:19–31), Saint James’s striking rebuke to the rich (see Jas 5:1–3), and Our Lord’s own words, “But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation” (Lk 6:24). In one of the most famous of such passages, Saint Paul warns us against the pursuit of riches with these words: “If we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs” (1 Tm 6:8–10).¹⁰

It is often pointed out that the Apostle is not condemning money itself nor even the possession of money, but “the love of money.” Quite true. But the point is that money and the goods that money can buy are themselves temptations, for “those who desire to be rich fall into temptation.” Great wealth is a classic example of what Catholic moral theology calls a near occasion of sin. Certainly there are those who are rich yet who are detached from their money and their possessions. But I venture to say they are a decided minority. Most of us become all too attached to our possessions, and

¹⁰ For other examples, see Proverbs 23:4; Micah 6:12a; Matthew 19:24; Luke 1:53b.

often the more possessions, the greater the attachment. “The spirit of poverty is far more rare among the rich than among the poor. Saint Thomas Aquinas compares, as two things equally extraordinary, Abraham’s freedom of heart in the midst of all his riches, and Samson’s victory over the Philistines, with the ass’s jawbone as his only weapon.”¹¹

Even using a calculation based solely on self-interest, we would be foolish to ignore these words of Sacred Scripture, which is the inspired Word of God. At one point, Our Lord asked the pointed question, “For what doth it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, and suffer the loss of his own soul?” (Matt. 16:26, DV). And for anyone who believes in eternal life, the answer is obvious. It would be utterly irrational to trade a mere seventy or eighty or more years on this earth spent in riches or pleasures for an eternity of separation from God, a separation that means the total frustration of our true end as rational creatures. For believers who acknowledge these truths, this kind of calculation should be clear.

At the same time, Our Lord said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). Indeed, God desires that we live a life of fullness in this world, “a life of wholeness, one that is blessed and successful.” But with a difference! Saint John Henry Newman offers a well-known meditation on this matter: “God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission.

¹¹ Pie-Raymond Régamey, *Poverty, An Essential Element in the Christian Life* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1950), 56.

. . . He has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do his work.”¹²

Newman, however, significantly adds the following words: “If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him, in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him. If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what he is about. He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me. Still, He knows what He is about.”¹³

Even though they both speak of finding our purpose in life, clearly Cardinal Newman and the preachers of the Prosperity Gospel do not share an understanding of God’s workings in this world—that is, what it means to follow Christ. And what it means to have a mission in this world. Preachers like Joel Osteen and Paula White do not speak of serving God in sickness or perplexity or poverty or sorrow or desolation, or even of taking up one’s cross and denying oneself. What they preach is simply the opposite of the Christian spiritual life. And their glib references to Scripture are mere window dressing for a secular, this-worldly message of preoccupation with self and with a happiness that consists in the good things of this world.

Catholics are not Manicheans. We do not consider material goods as sinful. But we recognize, or should recognize,

¹² John Henry Newman, *Meditations and Devotions of the Late Cardinal Newman*, ed. William Paine Neville (London: Longmans, Green, 1907). Available on the web at numerous places, including <https://www.johnhenrynewmancatholiccollege.org.uk/john-henry-newman-prayers/>.

¹³ Newman, *Meditations and Devotions*.

two facts: First, that our earthly life must be subordinate to our eternal life, and a use of earthly goods that makes the acquisition of eternal life more difficult is at the very least an occasion of sin. Second, that the goods of this world have a purpose. We need them both to survive as well as to live a truly human life. God did not intend for us to live as hunter gatherers or cave dwellers. But having attained a sufficient level of human goods, it is not merely foolish to want more, but to the extent that such goods are an obstacle to our attainment of eternal life, they are in truth harmful to us.

Saint Augustine compared our life on this earth to a journey to our true home: “We find, however, that we must make use of some mode of conveyance, either by land or water, in order to reach that fatherland where our enjoyment is to commence. But the beauty of the country through which we pass, and the very pleasure of the motion, charm our hearts, and turning these things which we ought to use into objects of enjoyment, we become unwilling to hasten the end of our journey; and becoming engrossed in a false delight, our thoughts are diverted from that home whose delights would make us truly happy.”¹⁴

If we take a vacation, it is not wrong to enjoy our accommodations along the way. But if we forget our destination in our enjoyment of what is meant to be simply a stop on the way to that destination, then we have exchanged means for ends. Of course, in something as comparatively unimportant as a vacation, we can, if we choose, decide we like

¹⁴ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. J. F. Shaw, in *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 18 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, c. 1952), 625. I have made some alteration to this translation.

the hotel pool better than the seaside resort we originally set out for, but between heaven and earth, we do not have the liberty of making such an exchange. Our destination is fixed for us. Whether we like it or not, every day we are journeying toward eternity.

The Catholic ideal involves properly subordinating our temporal interests to those of eternity. Catholics do not deny that the goods of this world are real goods worth seeking and possessing, but we should only pursue them according to the measure in which they serve a truly human life and do not hinder our attainment of eternal life. The Prosperity Gospel and the materialism ingrained in American culture from which it arose and in which it thrives see the goods of this world as ends in themselves, as having little or no connection with anything beyond them. But this, as we have seen, is false.

But if the blandishments of the Prosperity Gospel find such ready acceptance in this country, why is this so? How and why have the promoters of worldly prosperity, such as Joel Osteen or Paula White and their earlier brethren such as Russell Conwell or Bruce Barton or Napoleon Hill, arisen? Where did they come from and why? In the rest of this book, we will consider this question and the related subject of the effects of their beliefs on the variety of human activities, including the economy, science, education, and the arts, as well as what is the proper Catholic response.

CHAPTER ONE

Culture: Protestant or Catholic

Most Catholics would smile at the naive worldliness of Joel Osteen or Russell Conwell. As the Church founded by Christ, who Himself rejected the first anti-gospel preacher, the devil in the desert, we are not so apt to fall for such blatant distortions of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As Saint Matthew's Gospel declares, "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Begone, Satan! for it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve"'" (4:8–10). False promises of earthly wealth and glory were quickly repelled by Christ. We are too rooted in Christian tradition and the wisdom of the saints to listen to such diabolical whispers of prosperity. But we should not be so sure that we ourselves are immune from these sorts of tendencies. For the influence of the surrounding Protestant culture upon American Catholics has been immense, and one of the most noteworthy characteristics of that culture is its affection for wealth.

Before looking at that specific point of the relationship between Protestant culture and moneymaking, we should first consider what culture is and how a particular culture shapes those who live within it. The word *culture*, as meaning something like “A common way of life—a particular adjustment of man to his natural surroundings and his economic needs,” and which is “based on a social tradition . . . embodied in its institutions, its literature and its art,”¹⁵ is relatively recent in Western thought, becoming current only in the second half of the nineteenth century. As one philosopher pointed out, “a few centuries ago this wide meaning of the word would have made no sense to any audience.”¹⁶ But although the term itself is recent, the concept is not, and the same meaning was often expressed less succinctly by previous writers. For *culture* does correspond to something both real and important, and this is shown by its frequent use by a number of important Catholic writers, as we will see shortly.

Using this understanding of culture as “a common way of life,” we can see that all human beings are born and brought up within a particular culture. And this culture has an enormous influence on how we think and act. It is true that we are not trapped within our cultures and that, with sufficient effort, we can see beyond the particular vision of life that our own culture proposes, but it is also true that most of us do not make much of an effort to do so. Thus when we are born

¹⁵ Christopher Dawson, *The Dynamics of World History* (La Salle, IL: Sherwood Sugden, 1978), 4, 104.

¹⁶ T. Viik, “What About the Philosophy of Culture?,” *Acta Philosophica Fennica* 65 (2000): 247.

into a culture, for the most part, we imbibe its vices along with its virtues, its errors along with its truths.

Numerous observers with differing views have noted the United States' preoccupation with money and material goods. For example, in his 1889 book *The Question of Nationality in its Relation to the Catholic Church*, Fr. Anton Walburg, a Cincinnati priest of German background, wrote, "The ideal set before every American youth is money. Money is not only needful, but is the one thing needful. Money is a power everywhere, but here it is the supreme power. . . . In Europe, a man enjoys his competence; but here, no one has enough."¹⁷

And half a century earlier, the famous French commentator Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of Americans that "one usually finds that love of money is either the chief or a secondary motive at the bottom of everything the Americans do," and, "The American will describe as noble and estimable ambition that which our medieval ancestors would have called base cupidity."¹⁸ And for a more recent example, the American economist John Kenneth Galbraith wrote some interesting words on this enduring American attitude toward wealth and material things.

In the autumn of 1954, during the Congressional elections of that year, the Republicans replied to Democratic attacks on their stewardship by arguing that this was the second best year in history. It was not,

¹⁷ In Aaron Abell, ed., *American Catholic Thought on Social Questions* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), 40, 41, 43.

¹⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. J. P. Mayer (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969), 615, 621.

in all respects, a happy defense. Many promptly said that second best was not good enough—certainly not for Americans. But no person in either party showed the slightest disposition to challenge the standard by which it is decided that one year is better than another. Nor was it felt that any explanation was required. No one would be so eccentric as to suppose that second best meant second best in the progress of the arts and the sciences. No one would assume that it referred to health, education, or the battle against juvenile delinquency. . . . Despite a marked and somewhat ostensible preoccupation with religious observances at the time, no one was moved to suppose that 1954 was the second best year as measured by the number of people who had found enduring spiritual solace.

Second best could mean only one thing—that the production of goods was the second highest in history. There had been a year in which production was higher and which hence was better. In fact in 1954 the Gross National Product was \$360.5 billion; the year before it had been \$364.5. This measure of achievement was acceptable to all. . . . On the importance of production there is no difference between Republicans and Democrats, right and left, white or colored, Catholic or Protestant.¹⁹

“On the importance of production there is no difference between . . . Catholic or Protestant.” If Catholics, then, are

¹⁹ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (New York: Mentor, 1958), 101.

more apt to reject the crude manifestations of the Prosperity Gospel as illustrated by Joel Osteen and Paula White, how is it that we are just as likely to see production or wealth as the obvious standard by which we judge whether a year or a country is better or worse? The answer lies in the overwhelmingly Protestant culture and its influence on the millions of Catholic immigrants from Europe or Latin America or elsewhere. To understand this better, we need to examine the relationship between religion and culture. Although culture is a common way of life based on an adjustment to environment and passed on to succeeding generations, it is more than this. Every culture is based on a religion, or on some secular substitute for religion. When the Catholic Middle East was seized by Muslims in the seventh century, the physical environment did not change, but the culture changed profoundly because a new religious impulse was implanted there. And when much of northern Europe broke away from Catholic unity in the sixteenth century, likewise a new culture arose in those countries. For the Protestant religion, like all religions, produced a definite type of culture, a culture in which a preoccupation with wealth and material goods came to hold a more prominent place than in Catholic cultures, or even in cultures historically formed by Catholicism.

In the early 1930s, Hilaire Belloc set forth clearly the act of the existence of these competing cultures in his seminal essay "The Two Cultures of the West": "There is a Protestant culture and a Catholic culture. The difference between these two is the main difference dividing one sort of European from another. The boundary between the Catholic and

Protestant cultures is *the* great line of cleavage, compared with which all others are secondary.”²⁰

And this “great line of cleavage” is the sign of something important and fundamental—namely, of a culture’s understanding of the Divine Nature itself. As Catholic British Historian Christopher Dawson once declared, “In the last resort every civilization is built on a religious foundation: it is the expression in social institutions and cultural activity of a faith or a vision of reality which gives the civilization its spiritual unity.”²¹ Pope Saint John Paul II also expressed this same point in a striking passage in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*.

It is not possible to understand the human person on the basis of economics alone, nor to define the person simply on the basis of class membership. A human being is understood in a more complete way when situated within the sphere of culture through language, history, and the position one takes towards the fundamental events of life, such as birth, love, work and death. At the heart of every culture lies the attitude a person takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God. Different cultures are basically different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence.²²

²⁰ Hilaire Belloc, “The Two Cultures of the West,” in *Essays of a Catholic* (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1992), 239.

²¹ Christopher Dawson, *Understanding Europe* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1960), 211.

²² Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (May 1, 1991), no. 24.

The theological differences between the Catholic faith and the various Protestant groups extend far beyond particular points of doctrine, for these theological differences imply and foster different approaches to both understanding and living our lives in this world. G. K. Chesterton made some very perceptive remarks on how Protestant theology manifested itself in unexpected ways.

A Puritan meant originally a man whose mind had no holidays. To use his own favourite phrase, he would let no living thing come between him and his God; an attitude which involved eternal torture for him and a cruel contempt for all the living things. It was better to worship in a barn than in a cathedral for the specific and specified reason that the cathedral was beautiful. Physical beauty was a false and sensual symbol coming in between the intellect and the object of its intellectual worship. . . .

This is the essential Puritan idea, that God can only be praised by direct contemplation of Him. You must praise God only with your brain; it is wicked to praise Him with your passions or your physical habits or your gesture or instinct of beauty. Therefore it is wicked to worship by singing or dancing or drinking sacramental wines or building beautiful churches or saying prayers when you are half asleep . . . we can only worship by thinking. Our heads can praise God, but never our hands and feet.²³

²³ G. K. Chesterton, *George Bernard Shaw* (New York: John Lane, 1909), 43.

This, incidentally, is the reason that Protestants generally pray with their eyes closed, whereas Catholics can pray either way, and perhaps most often with eyes open. And so these “different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence” can manifest themselves in surprising ways, not merely in what we formally believe or how we worship. As the late Fr. George Bull, philosophy professor at Fordham University, once keenly noted, “In recent years, Catholics have become increasingly conscious of the clash between Catholicism as a *general* culture, and the culture of the world around them. The work of men like Belloc, Maritain, Christopher Dawson and others, has shown that we differ not in religion alone, but in the whole realm of unspoken and spontaneous things, which color even our daily routine.”²⁴

Although there are many differences between cultures formed by the Faith and those formed by one or another sort of Protestantism, Catholics in the United States are surrounded by an oppressive Protestant culture. Even well catechized Catholics—as perhaps a majority of American Catholics were in the first half of the last century—continue to drink from their polluted surroundings. Consequently, their attitudes will then negatively shape their daily activities and practices. Formal religious instruction necessarily deals with the sublime truths of the Faith, truths about God and His Church, the means of grace, salvation, and so on. Religious instruction also deals with obvious violations of the

²⁴ George Bull, “The Function of the Catholic Graduate School,” *Thought* 13, no. 3 (September 1938).

Ten Commandments, what we must do or avoid in order to attain to salvation. But such religious instruction rarely or never considers how these truths of faith and morals express themselves in “the sphere of culture,” outside of things such as marriage and family. Beyond these, our cultural traits are usually seen as things that are indifferent, instead of as manifestations of our deepest religious outlook.

In another passage from John Paul’s encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, the pope points out the way that cultural attitudes toward material goods reflect in fact our deepest beliefs about God and the world which He created. In a passage discussing the varying responses made after World War II to Communist materialism, he speaks of one attempt to defeat Communism as

the affluent society or the consumer society. It seeks to defeat Marxism on the level of pure materialism by showing how a free-market society can achieve a greater satisfaction of material human needs than Communism, while equally excluding spiritual values. In reality, while on the one hand it is true that this social model shows the failure of Marxism to contribute to a humane and better society, on the other hand, insofar as it denies an autonomous existence and value to morality, law, culture and religion, it agrees with Marxism, in the sense that it totally reduces man to the sphere of economics and the satisfaction of material needs.²⁵

²⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, no. 19.

Thus the fact that American Catholics in 1954 had no problem with equating “best” with the greatest “production of goods” should be a warning to us that we have absorbed much from our cultural surroundings that is at odds with the Faith we profess.

So while Catholics in the United States mostly reject the crudities of the Prosperity Gospel preachers, I am afraid that we usually neither perceive nor reject the cultural or societal background from which these preachers of personal prosperity have arisen and in which they flourish. We too, as Galbraith affirmed, tend to accept that increased production is always better and that acquiring worldly possessions is an unqualified good and the primary social criterion of better and worse. As early as 1869, the Catholic attorney and politician Charles O’Connor of New York City wrote, “In worn out, king ridden Europe, men must stay where they are born, but in America, a man is accounted a failure, and ought to be, who has not risen above his father’s station in life.”²⁶

Even if we confess in theory that the pursuit of riches can be dangerous, do we not in fact contradict this by the way we live our lives? Do we not in fact agree by our actions with O’Connor that “a man is accounted a failure, and ought to be, who has not risen above his father’s station in life”? Are not most of us happy if our children are admitted to a prestigious college that will open numerous lucrative personal contacts, even though the Faith is not taught there, and students are hardly known for their Christian moral conduct? Or if they enter upon a career likely to make them rich,

²⁶ Quoted in Daniel J. O’Brien, *Public Catholicism*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 62.

paying no heed to Saint Paul's warnings that the mere "desire to be rich" leads many "into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction"? (1 Tm 6:9). Do we not largely ignore the possibility that our children and we ourselves risk eternal separation from God for the sake of worldly riches?

In what is probably the most widely-used economics textbook in the world, Paul Samuelson posits as one of the bases of his entire understanding of economics the alleged desire of everyone, at least every American, to become rich: "An objective observer would have to agree that, even after two centuries of rapid economic growth, production in the United States is simply not high enough to meet everyone's desires. If you add up all the wants, you quickly find that there are simply not enough goods and services to satisfy even a small fraction of everyone's consumption desires. Our national output would have to be many times larger before the average American could live at the level of the average doctor or big-league baseball player."²⁷

Does the United States' economy produce "enough goods and services" so that no one need live in poverty? Can we satisfy pretty much everyone's *reasonable* desires for external goods? Certainly, yes, and if the discipline of economics is not content with that as a goal, then I submit that it is as much at odds with Holy Scripture and Christian tradition as would be a kind of psychology that promoted the unrestricted satisfaction of sexual desires with equally spurious arguments.

²⁷ Paul Samuelson, *Microeconomics*, 17th ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill Irwin, 2001), 4.

In his remarkable book *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres*, Henry Adams, the grandson and great-grandson of two American presidents, pointed out, “Just as the French of the nineteenth century invested their surplus capital in a railway system in the belief that they would make money by it in this life, in the thirteenth they trusted their money to the Queen of Heaven because of their belief in her power to repay it with interest in the life to come.”²⁸

How much money was entrusted to the Queen of Heaven and for what? “According to statistics, in the single century between 1170 and 1270, the French built eighty cathedrals and nearly five hundred churches of the cathedral class, which would have cost, according to an estimate made in 1840, more than five thousand millions to replace. Five thousand million francs is a thousand million dollars, and this covered only the great churches of a single century.”²⁹

And this by a society much poorer than ours, one that is often criticized, even by Catholics, for its poverty and failure to promote worldly success. “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Mt 6:21), Our Lord said on one occasion. Without a doubt, the Middle Ages and the modern world have two different hearts as revealed by the construction of their monuments. Shopping malls, amusement parks, sports arenas, massive highway systems for massive vehicles, McMansions—these are where we as a society invest our money, trusting not in heaven’s Queen but in the demon Mammon. And by and large we modern Catholics

²⁸ Henry Adams, *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* (New York: Gallery Books, 1985), 65.

²⁹ Adams, 65.

have embraced an alien scale of values, utterly changing our attitudes toward the use of money. While we might occasionally make utterances about the dangers of riches and materialism, in fact we have accepted the attitude toward material goods that our society around us holds, and the unlimited pursuit of wealth is generally seen by Catholics as an entirely legitimate activity, apparently free from all dangers to our eternal salvation. The harsh words in Scripture about the rich and their wealth are seldom attended to and facilely explained away by such techniques as I pointed out above, distinguishing between *money* and *the love of money*: true as far as it goes, but hardly to the point.

If we admit Belloc's point that "there is a Protestant culture and a Catholic culture," and that "the difference between these two is the main difference dividing one sort of European from another," then we must ask: How did the Protestant culture of this country come to embody an attitude such that "one usually finds that love of money is either the chief or a secondary motive at the bottom of everything the Americans do"? How did the likes of Joel Osteen and Paula White find such fertile soil in this country, persons whose message and whose entire behavior and demeanor would have seemed simply ridiculous, at least historically, even to Protestant Christians in Europe?

On one level, the disordered desire for riches is present in the heart of every person. Hence the harsh warnings about the pursuit of riches in Holy Scripture, both in those addressed originally to the Hebrews themselves and those of the New Testament intended chiefly for gentile converts. In this respect, Americans are neither worse nor better than

others. We all share equally in the effects of original sin. But if this is so, how comes it that in this country, this hankering for wealth is more common, more obvious, and more acceptable to public opinion than it is elsewhere? The answer lies in the exclusive cultural omnipresence of Protestantism in this country, in the absence of those cultural restraints which historically tended to check these desires.

Every European country has a Catholic past. But not the United States. It is true that the Protestant settlers of the thirteen original colonies were all physically descended from Catholics, but *as a society*, we have no shared Catholic past. In Europe, on the other hand, it is impossible to ignore the Catholic past. On an obvious but relatively superficial level, there are physical monuments of Catholicism everywhere. Whether we are speaking of ruined monasteries or church buildings appropriated by Protestants and perhaps still in use today, it is a fact impossible to deny that these physical remains testify to the former omnipresence of the Catholic Church and Catholic culture.

More important than these physical reminders, of course, each European country received an original Catholic cultural stamp, a stamp that in many cases, despite decades or even centuries of apostasy, is still perceptible and exercises a certain force. But the United States never had a corporate Catholic character. Our culture, from our intellectual life to our everyday folkways, was shaped by a Protestantism unrestrained by any corporate historical memory of a Catholic past. The United States, as a newly-constituted Protestant society, even before the Revolution, had no Catholic past to repudiate since it had no shared Catholic past at all.

Of course, it is true that certain elements of cultural life were holdovers from Catholic ages. We inherited, for example, English common law, a creation of Catholic ages. But such fragments of a Catholic past, displaced in any case from their place in a Catholic culture as a whole, did not serve to counteract the powerful effects of the new doctrines, embraced with such zeal, especially by the American colonials, and most especially by those who set the intellectual and spiritual tone of the new settlements.

Thus a new society was formed, a *Novus Ordo Seclorum* (a New Order of the Ages), as the Great Seal of the United States proclaims. And equally important as the lack of a shared Catholic past was the privatizing of religion. On a political level, the First Amendment to the newly-written Constitution effectively rendered religion a private matter in this country; for society as a whole, organized politically, religion, and especially dogmatic religious truth, was of no concern. Religion was recognized certainly as a sociological fact and a very helpful aid to social order, but not as a possible source of truth. Of course, despite this official neglect of dogmatic religion, the country's culture was Protestant. The legal and political regime reinforced the tendency already present in Protestantism to make religion a wholly private affair. Religion was one thing; public life another.

Stemming from its Protestant roots, religion in America assumed a peculiar role. Christopher Dawson wrote that "English Protestantism . . . produced a new form of culture, and indeed a new type of Christianity, which was subsequently diffused all over the world, and especially in North

America, so that it became one of the great forces that have shaped the modern world.”³⁰

But what was this “new form of culture” or “new type of Christianity”? Dawson spoke of this in a lecture he delivered in 1960: “Thus American religion was detached from the objective world which was the domain of business and politics and focused on the subjective world of religious feeling—above all the intense experience of religious conversion. This, I believe, has left a permanent mark on the American mind, so that, as several Americans have remarked to me, they find some difficulty in relating the two concepts of religion and civilization since these seem to belong to two quite distinct orders of existence.”³¹

The preoccupation with “the subjective world of religious feeling” was a result of privatizing religion, which in turn strengthened that tendency, raising a wall of separation between religion and “the objective world which was the domain of business and politics.” Consequently, actual religious doctrines are now downplayed in the United States. Religious *feeling*, what Dawson called “the subjective world of religious feeling,” not the intellectual contents of belief, was what came to matter. Religion as subjective emotion was obviously something distinct from the hardheaded world of business or politics. Most people are accustomed to think that differences in religion, at least

³⁰ Christopher Dawson, *The Dividing of Christendom* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1967), 104.

³¹ Christopher Dawson, “America and the Secularization of Modern Culture,” a lecture delivered at the University of Saint Thomas, Houston, Texas, 1960.

among Christians, are in fact comparatively unimportant. Since religion is generally held to be a private matter, not really part of the serious business of life, which is reflected chiefly in our commercial and political activity, we are apt to regard religious preference as something akin to adherence to a favorite sports team.

Since there is little interest in religious dogma, religion is held to be chiefly or wholly a moral force, morality being here purely personal—that is, having no connection with the worlds of business or politics. The 1780 Massachusetts Constitution provided “for the institution of the public worship of God and for the support and maintenance of public Protestant teachers of piety, religion and morality” (article III). In an 1810 case concerning the right of the town of Falmouth to determine which religious bodies could receive tax funds for their support, the chief justice of Massachusetts justified the provision in the Massachusetts Constitution as follows: “The object of public religious instruction is to teach, and to enforce by suitable arguments, the practice of a system of correct morals among the people, and to form and cultivate reasonable and just habits and manners, by which every man’s person and property are protected from outrage, and his personal and social enjoyments promoted and multiplied.”³² Whatever may have been the original intention of the New England settlers, by the end of the eighteenth century, the practice of government support for religion was upheld simply by moral arguments.

³² Quoted in Conrad Wright, *The Unitarian Controversy* (Boston: Skinner House, 1994), 23–24.

Nor was this something peculiar to Massachusetts. Fr. Giovanni Grassi, an Italian Jesuit who served as president of Georgetown between 1812 and 1817 wrote, “[Americans] who describe themselves as members of one or another of the sects do not thereby profess an abiding adherence to the doctrines of the founders of the sect.”³³

And about a hundred years later, the German sociologist Max Weber recorded that “in the main, the congregations refused entirely to listen to the preaching of ‘dogma’ and to confessional distinctions. ‘Ethics’ alone could be offered.”³⁴ And today, such a prominent spokesman for American Christianity as Rod Dreher, although professedly an Eastern Orthodox Christian, has explicitly subordinated questions of dogmatic truth to a vague agreement on certain currently contested moral tenets which are characteristic of, as he terms it, “conservative” Christianity.

Since American society possessed a vague Protestant veneer, the morality preached and inculcated by nearly all the religious bodies was quite similar. It was a generalized Protestant morality, although largely detached from the particular dogmatic tenets officially held by each denomination. But this morality was, as I said, purely personal and highly selective in its interest. Thus, it concerned itself to a disproportionate degree with sins against the sixth and ninth commandments or even with alcoholic consumption. At the same time, these religious bodies greatly ignored morality as it applies to the business world, especially its conduct

³³ Quoted in Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 174.

³⁴ Lipset, 177.

towards employees or competitors or questions of justification for waging war and subsequent conduct in war. All of these matters were divorced from morality or religion since they were part of the “domain of business and politics,” part of the *real* world, we may say.

In fact, the morality inculcated by this generalized American religiosity had little or no interest in questions of money, or with the desire to become rich. As a result, the preachers of the Prosperity Gospel are not seen as violating any core principle of Christian morality, as would be the case if they promoted, instead of riches, unrestricted and unlimited sexual enjoyment. They cater to our desire for riches, something which is not usually seen as a serious matter of religious conduct. For in the last analysis, but rarely admitted, the tenets of religious faith are seen to rest upon an illusion, useful for ensuring social order and helpful for psychological comfort, but hardly to be compared with the actual world of work.

This comparative lack of interest in doctrine and corresponding preoccupation with personal morality has colored American thinking about religion, even by those altogether opposed to religious belief. For example, beginning in 2008, certain atheists sponsored an ad campaign featuring a (black) man dressed in a Santa Claus suit with the caption, “Why believe in a god? Just be good for goodness’s sake.”³⁵ What is so interesting about these ads is that they did not offer arguments against the existence of God or on behalf of the self-subsistence of matter or anything of that sort whatsoever.

³⁵ Austen Ivereigh, “Atheist bus goes global,” *America*, March 21, 2009, <https://www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/atheist-bus-goes-global>.

They did not address the question of whether God exists at all. They simply exhorted one to be good without the help of God. They assumed, what Americans generally have assumed, that religion is first of all about morality, not about proclaiming or asserting truths, such as the Trinity or the incarnation or the resurrection of Our Lord. In taking the line they did, it would seem that the sponsors of the ads either shared in the general American understanding of religion or supposed that the vast majority of those who read the ads would do so.

And it seems they were right, judging from some of the responses by Protestant spokesmen to the ads. Os Guinness, a Protestant writer and social commentator, appeared to have the same understanding of the role of religion as did the atheists in his comments responding to the ads.

“Yes, you can be good without God. There are many examples of that.

“The real question is can you create a good society without God? The framers of the Constitution believed in religious liberty, for atheists too, but were leery of a whole society that was atheistic. Without God, you would not have virtue to restrain evil. Freedom requires order, and there is only one type of order compatible with freedom, self-restraint.”

In his Farewell Address as President, George Washington said, “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. . . . And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion.”

Guinness argues that “There has never been a major society that has been good and sustained its goodness without God. Atheistic societies have been profoundly evil and totalitarian.”³⁶

For Os Guinness, as for the atheists, the importance of religion appears to be not that it is or might be true but that it is socially useful, if not absolutely necessary for an individual, at least for society as a whole. This is not merely a downplaying of doctrinal questions but an apparent utter disregard of them. We might recall the apt words of C. S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* (letter 23): “Men or nations who think they can revive the Faith in order to make a good society might just as well think they can use the stairs of Heaven as a short cut to the nearest chemist’s shop.”³⁷ I do not doubt, to be sure, that Os Guinness sincerely believes in the doctrines of Evangelical Protestantism, but he easily falls into the trap of justifying belief because of its presumed good effect on morality.

Guinness’s citation of Washington’s farewell address is very interesting. Although frequently quoted by defenders of religion in American life, it seems that Washington’s indifference to the question of religious *truth* is not so frequently noted. It is no doubt true that Washington more or less equated religion here with some form of Christianity, but still his recommendation of religion was entirely based on its social benefits and could be applied to any religion at all. While this might be all that can be expected from a political figure, I do not

³⁶ www.virtueonline.org/portal/modular/news/article.php?storyid=9525. This page does not appear to exist anymore on the Internet.

³⁷ C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 120.

understand how and why his words are quoted so confidently by religious figures who are representatives of various forms of Christian belief. Do they not see that the role Washington sets forth for religion could be applied regardless of the tenets of any particular religion? Do they equate social utility with truth, or is truth not important to them?

Washington's vision of religion seems akin to the proposal of the *noble lie* in Plato's *Republic*. This was a means suggested by Socrates as a way of making the citizens of the ideal city he and his friends were drawing up more devoted to their city and to one another by teaching them that the city's inhabitants literally grew from the city's soil. And thus, these citizens were in the closest sense brothers so that "as though the land they are in were a mother and nurse, they must plan for and defend it, if anyone attacks, and they must think of the other citizens as brothers and born of the earth."

It seems undeniable that even those who sincerely hold to some particular form of Christian doctrines tend to defend their religious beliefs on purely utilitarian grounds. It is seemingly natural for them to jump almost immediately from doctrine to morality, hardly realizing that they are making this leap.³⁸

The question that faces us now is a historical one. How and why did "a new form of culture, and indeed a new type of Christianity, which was subsequently diffused all over

³⁸ Of course, it is natural to think that if any particular religion is true, then it also provides benefits both social and individual. To think this does not necessarily mean that the believer seeks to justify his beliefs exclusively or primarily by means of their moral or social effects in this world, but simply as a natural result of their truth.

the world, and especially in North America,” come to be? We should recall that in discussing the American religious spirit, we are dealing with a Protestant religious spirit, one that broke away from the Catholic Church beginning in the sixteenth century. But as we saw above, the new religious doctrines created a new cultural world. That great historian of culture Christopher Dawson, whom I have already quoted more than once, describes the cultural development of Europe after the Protestant Reformation as the triumph of what he calls a bourgeois spirit or bourgeois civilization: “The conflict between these two ideals of life and forms of culture runs through the whole history of Europe from the Reformation to the Revolution and finds its political counterpart in the struggle between Spain and the Protestant powers. It is hardly too much to say that if Philip II had been victorious over the Dutch and the English and the Huguenots, modern bourgeois civilization would never have developed and capitalism in so far as it existed would have acquired an entirely different complexion.”³⁹

But this did not occur; rather the opposite. “In the lands where these [new, non-Catholic] ideals had free play—Holland, Great Britain, above all New England, a new type of character was produced, canny, methodical and laborious; men who lived not for enjoyment but for work, who spent little and gained much, and who looked on themselves as unfaithful stewards before God, if they neglected any opportunity of honest gain.”⁴⁰

³⁹ Dawson, “Catholicism and the Bourgeois Mind,” in *Dynamics of World History*, 208.

⁴⁰ Christopher Dawson, “Economics in the Medieval and in the Modern

“Above all New England,” wrote Dawson. Or as he says elsewhere, “In no country, save perhaps in the United States, does the bourgeois culture exist in the pure state as a self-subsistent whole.”⁴¹

Lacking even the physical reminders of a past Catholic civilization that the countries of Europe have, and even more lacking any significant cultural or intellectual reminders of a Catholic past, we are easy prey for the charlatans who peddle the Prosperity Gospel. If Christianity is conceived as “focused on the subjective world of religious feeling—above all the intense experience of religious conversion,” then there is little wonder that such a religion is divorced from both dogma and from any morality that goes beyond the level of individual conduct. Of course, it is true that all morality concerns the behavior of individuals. To drop bombs on civilians or to use economic pressure to lower wages or put competitors out of business are the actions of individual persons. But they are most often looked at as part of a larger and more impersonal and “objective world which was the domain of business and politics,” and as a result, not really of any moral or especially religious concern.

Now we return full circle to the Joel Osteens, Paula Whites, and others. They are able to promote their distorted Gospel because Americans have been told for hundreds of years that the serious business of life is about making money, about getting ahead economically, and that everything else, when all is

World,” *The Dawson Newsletter* 3, no. 4 (winter 1984-85): 3. (Reprinted from *Blackfriars*, July 1924.)

⁴¹ Dawson, “Bolshevism and the Bourgeoisie,” in *Dynamics of World History*, 229.

said and done, matters little or not at all. I quoted before from John Paul's encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, that "it is not possible to understand the human person on the basis of economics alone, nor to define the person simply on the basis of class membership. A human being is understood in a more complete way when situated within the sphere of culture through language, history, and the position one takes towards the fundamental events of life, such as birth, love, work and death."⁴²

But this is not how we usually view things. Culture and language and history are irrelevancies to us. Ronald Reagan, in a speech on November 7, 1988, said, "I received a letter not long ago from a man who said, 'You can go to Japan to live, but you cannot become Japanese. You can go to France, and you'd live and not become a Frenchman. You can go to live in Germany or Turkey, and you won't become a German or a Turk.' But then he added, 'Anybody from any corner of the world can come to America to live and become an American.'"⁴³

Reagan was correct in what he said. But is this for the good? Is this something to be celebrated? Does it highlight something admirable about this country? "A human being is understood in a more complete way when situated within the sphere of culture through language [and] history." Does not the fact that anyone can come to America and become an American indicate that for us, questions of culture, language, and history

⁴² Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, no. 24.

⁴³ Steven F. Hayward, "Ronald Reagan's Shining City of Exceptional Immigrants," *Forbes*, December 6, 2013, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stevenhayward/2013/12/06/ronald-reagans-shining-city-of-exceptional-immigrants/?sh=3cabfa68639f>. The same quote appears with slightly different wording elsewhere.

are not important? That becoming an American is something that can be understood largely on the basis of economics?

Earlier, I quoted the nineteenth-century Catholic politician Charles O'Connor that "in America, a man is accounted a failure, and ought to be, who has not risen above his father's station in life." If we accept this mandate, then what does this say about our feeling for *place*, for our own locality, for family even? Too often, to rise above one's father's station means to move away from where one grew up. To abandon one's family and friends, all in the name of worldly success and of increased income—does not this involve the comparative scorn for such values as culture, language, and history? Yes, there are some things money cannot buy, one of which is the happiness of living and dying by the people you love the most. And therefore, "It is not possible to understand the human person on the basis of economics alone"—but is this not what we do when we put economic advancement at the top of our wish list for our children—and for ourselves? Do we not proclaim, does our culture not proclaim, that economics is all we need to understand ourselves and one another?

Next, let us ask ourselves how it came about that, as Dawson put it, "in no country, save perhaps in the United States, does the bourgeois culture exist in the pure state as a self-subsistent whole."

For is it not the case that pretty much all of Europe has lost its Catholic culture, a demise that has been happening slowly or quickly since the French Revolution or even earlier? To consider this question fully we must look at how cultural traits continue or cease to exercise influence.

Let us begin with another quotation from Hilaire Belloc: “A nation like the French,” he wrote, “may largely lose the doctrine of the Incarnation and of the Immortality of the soul . . . but even those who have lost the whole Catholic scheme of doctrine still continue the Catholic habit. They will continue the Catholic sense that justice is more important than order; the Catholic tendency to well-divided property; and the Catholic conviction of Free will.”⁴⁴

So a society’s “morals, its intellectual habits, its strong traditions of behavior, all these proceed from the religious doctrines under which it has been formed,” even when “those doctrines may have lost their original vitality.”⁴⁵ Thus, the presence in southern Europe and Latin America, until recently at least, of a strong sense of family, including the extended family, is a cultural characteristic derived from Catholic Faith and morality. It long survived the fact that a vibrant Catholic doctrinal commitment was more and more weakening in those societies as a whole. That is why there are considerable differences between societies that can be termed post-Protestant from those that are post-Catholic. Each kind of society retains much from its theological past, even if each type has largely repudiated or forgotten the actual dogmas and doctrines which formed those societies.

The persistence of these cultural traits is one of the factors noted by Max Weber in his renowned book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber, in many respects, laid the groundwork for comparing Protestants’

⁴⁴ Hilaire Belloc, “The Two Cultures of the West,” in *Essays of a Catholic* (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1992), 240.

⁴⁵ Belloc, 240.

and Catholics' cultural approach to economic life. He noted, for example, that "among journeymen . . . the Catholics show a stronger propensity to remain in their crafts, that is they more often become master craftsmen, whereas the Protestants are attracted to a larger extent into the factories in order to fill the upper ranks of skilled labour and administrative positions. The explanation of these cases is undoubtedly that the mental and spiritual peculiarities acquired from the environment, here the type of education favoured by the religious atmosphere of the home community and the parental home, have determined the choice of occupation, and through it the professional career."⁴⁶

We see here encapsulated the different attitudes toward work and moneymaking that lie at the heart of the two cultures. On the one hand, the desire to become a master of a craft—that is, to have a real connection with actual work and pride in that labor and with the actual economic process of fulfilling human needs by means of work; on the other hand, a preference for the administrative positions which are one step removed from the actual productive work of the firm and hence closer to the defining note of capitalism, the separation of ownership and work. But it is an ethic, a culture, which lies behind these choices. As Weber further declares:

In fact, the *summum bonum* of this ethic, the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict

⁴⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner's, 1958), 38–39.

avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life, is above all completely devoid of any eudaemonistic, not to say hedonist, admixture. It is thought of so purely as an end in itself, that from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual, it appears entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational. Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs. This reversal of what we should call the natural relationship, so irrational from a naive point of view, is evidently as definitely a leading principle of capitalism as it is foreign to all peoples not under capitalistic influence.⁴⁷

Here we introduce a new note: the fact that capitalism's preoccupation with work and moneymaking is not always greed, *per se*, but something more than greed, in fact, a quasi-religious attitude. A late nineteenth-century German immigrant commented on his father-in-law.

“Couldn't the old man be satisfied with his \$75,000 a year and rest? No! The frontage of the store must be widened to 400 feet. Why? That beats everything, he says. In the evening when his wife and daughter read together, he wants to go to bed. Sundays he looks at the clock every five minutes to see when the day will be over—what a futile life!” In these terms the son-in-law (who had emigrated from Germany) of

⁴⁷ Weber, 53.

the leading dry-goods man of an Ohio city expressed his judgment of the latter, a judgment which would undoubtedly have seemed simply incomprehensible to the old man. A symptom of German lack of energy.⁴⁸

The spirit of capitalism is something new in human affairs, and it reverses the natural and hitherto dominant relationship between the worker and his work. Here we encounter the notion of work and of moneymaking as an *ethical* imperative, expressing the attitude toward reality at the heart of that culture, which had produced, as Christopher Dawson noted, “a new type of character . . . , canny, methodical and laborious; men who lived not for enjoyment but for work, who spent little and gained much, and who looked on themselves as unfaithful stewards before God, if they neglected any opportunity of honest gain.”⁴⁹

We may contrast this with the life which Weber calls the “most important opponent with which the spirit of capitalism . . . has had to struggle” and which he says “we may designate as traditionalism.”⁵⁰ What did this “traditionalism” comprise? There was the formal organization of a business firm, but beyond that there was the spirit which animated it: “The form of organization was in every respect capitalistic. . . . But it was traditionalistic business, if one considers the spirit which animated the entrepreneur: the traditional manner of life, the traditional rate of profit, the traditional amount of work, the traditional manner of regulating the

⁴⁸ Weber, 283.

⁴⁹ Dawson, “Economics in the Medieval and in the Modern World,” 3.

⁵⁰ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 58–59.

relationships with labour, and the essentially traditional circle of customers and the manner of attracting new ones.”⁵¹

Here we may see the essence of the matter. I previously quoted Fr. Anton Walburg’s 1889 book *The Question of Nationality in its Relation to the Catholic Church*, that “the ideal set before every American youth is money. Money is not only needful, but is the one thing needful. Money is a power everywhere, but here it is the supreme power. . . . In Europe, a man enjoys his competence; but here, no one has enough.”⁵²

This desire for gain is not always simply an example of greed, or rather, not simply an example of pure greed. It possesses a religious meaning, albeit a perversion of the authentic Gospel of Jesus Christ, revealed most clearly in the Calvinism that dominated the colonial American religious landscape.

The exhortation of the apostle to make fast one’s own call is here interpreted as a duty to attain certainty of one’s own election and justification in the daily struggle of life. In the place of the humble sinners to whom Luther promises grace if they trust themselves to God in penitent faith are bred those self-confident saints whom we can rediscover in the hard Puritan merchants of the heroic age of capitalism and in isolated instances down to the present. On the other hand, in order to attain that self-confidence intense worldly activity is recommended as the most suitable means.

⁵¹ Weber, 67.

⁵² Abell, *American Catholic Thought on Social Questions*, 40, 41, 43.

It and it alone disperses religious doubts and gives the certainty of grace.⁵³

For, “labour came to be considered in itself the end of life, ordained as such by God.”⁵⁴ Hence were produced “men who lived not for enjoyment but for work, who spent little and gained much, and who looked on themselves as unfaithful stewards before God, if they neglected any opportunity of honest gain,” to quote Dawson once again. Thus Russell Conwell’s advice, “I say that you ought to get rich, and it is your duty to get rich.”⁵⁵ Your *duty*, note, or else we run the risk of being “unfaithful stewards before God.”

An example of this disordered notion of work and leisure was the seventeenth-century English controversy between Puritans and Anglicans, who retained a measure of the old Catholic spirit. “As we have seen, this asceticism turned with all its force against one thing: the spontaneous enjoyment of life and all it had to offer. This is perhaps most characteristically brought out in the struggle over the *Book of Sports* which James I and Charles I made into a law expressly as a means of counteracting Puritanism, and which the latter ordered to be read from all the pulpits.”⁵⁶

⁵³ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 111–12.

⁵⁴ Weber, 159.

⁵⁵ Russell H. Conwell, *Acres of Diamonds* (Project Gutenberg, 2008), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/368/368-h/368-h.htm>.

⁵⁶ Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 166–67. The *Book of Sports* was a work commissioned by King James I to promote wholesome recreation on Sundays, contrary to the Puritans, who espoused an extreme Sabbatarianism which forbade such recreations.

This spirit manifested itself even in “the decline of lyric poetry and folk-music, as well as the drama, after the Elizabethan age in England.”⁵⁷ All that remained then, was the pursuit of riches. “What the great religious epoch of the seventeenth century bequeathed to its utilitarian successor was, however, above all an amazingly good, we may even say a pharisaically good, conscience in the acquisition of money, so long as it took place legally.”⁵⁸

We see here two different conceptions of life, fueled, as Pope Saint John Paul II put it, by “the attitude a person takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God . . . different ways of facing the question of the meaning of personal existence.”⁵⁹ The attitudes toward the Divine that different cultures possess manifest themselves in multiple ways, perhaps especially in their attitudes toward economics. We have seen some examples of how these are exhibited in Protestant cultures, particularly in that one culture in which Protestant attitudes have been most unopposed by any countervailing forces—that is, the culture of the United States. Our next task is to look at the specific ways that this Protestant culture has affected the various aspects of society.

⁵⁷ Weber, 272.

⁵⁸ Weber, 176.

⁵⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, no. 24.