

Weber may have been wrong in tracing the hard work ethic to Protestantism



Social scientists have always been concerned about the role of religion for society. In the early twentieth century, there were concerns about the compatibility of Catholicism and liberal democracy; in the post-Cold War period, there were concerns that international relations might be marked by a 'Clash of Civilizations'; and today there are concerns about the compatibility of Islam and 'Western culture'. For economists, however, it is the relationship between religion and economic performance that is of prime concern.

The most famous work on the link between religion and economic performance is Max Weber's 'Protestant ethic'. Upon observing that the predominantly Protestant north of Europe was richer than the predominantly Catholic south, [Weber](#) conjectured that this could be traced back to Protestantism's promotion of the virtues of hard work and thrift. Protestants worked harder and saved more than their Catholic counterparts, according to Weber, which eventually facilitated the rise of Capitalism in Western Europe. The theory remains controversial to this day, and it has recently been [argued](#) that it was Luther's idea that Christians should be able to read the Bible and the consequential impact on human capital accumulation, rather than a Protestant ethic as such, that was the real reason why Protestants performed better than Catholics.

Still, a religion or religious order promoting hard work and thrift could surely have an impact on economic performance through cultural change, and [our](#) research argues that such influence was indeed exerted by the Catholic Order of the Cistercians, which spread around Europe from the eleventh century. The Order, an offshoot of the Benedictines, was established in 1098 in France with the aim of returning to a literal observance of the 'Rule of St. Benedict'. Unlike their Benedictine cousins, who had softened their observance over time, the Cistercians aimed to return to an austere life of hard manual labour and restraint from consumption. Thus, the values which Weber associated with Protestantism had in fact been promulgated several centuries earlier.

Because of the austere life they promoted, Cistercian monasteries became rich and successful. The Cistercians made important advances in breeding and agriculture; most importantly, they consolidated their land in 'granges' rather than the typical unenclosed village holdings of the time. Moreover, monasteries made significant use of water power for a range of industrial activities. Importantly for our work, their teachings and practices spread beyond the walls of the monastery to so-called lay brothers (illiterate peasants who followed a less demanding form of Cistercian life and worked the land), to other secular labourers they employed, and to settled communities which formed around the monasteries.

These people living around the monasteries enjoyed economic success, which in a Malthusian regime translates into reproductive success. Parents passed on Cistercian values to their children, who also enjoyed higher economic and reproductive success. In this manner, Cistercian values would eventually come to dominate society. Our analysis suggests that this might plausibly have happened within the space of just five centuries, although small initial differences in the Cistercian influence would also have led to considerable local variation in cultural values.

We investigate the plausibility of this account using historical cross-county data for England, where we have information on the location of all monasteries as well as regional population data (in a Malthusian setting greater population density indicates greater productivity). Specifically, we find that counties with a higher Cistercian influence experienced faster population growth during the period 1377-1801, long after the Dissolution of the Monasteries by King Henry VIII in the sixteenth century when all monasteries were closed and their land confiscated.

Considering the likely persistence of cultural values, we use the European Values Surveys to zero in on the cultural mechanism. That is, we investigate whether the influence of the Cistercians can be detected in contemporary cultural values across European regions. As Protestants may also have been influenced by the Reformation, we concentrate on Catholic subsamples. Consistent with the cultural mechanism, we find that areas closer to Cistercians do place greater emphasis on values regarding the importance of 'hard work' and thrift across European Catholics.

Overall, our research contributes to the literature on the effects that religious teaching can have on economic outcomes. Though our study suggests that Weber likely was wrong in tracing the origins of values favouring hard work and thrift to the Reformation, it does support a positive impact from religious teachings on economic performance along the lines of what Weber envisioned. Whether such values will be sustained as secularisation proceeds is a question only the future can answer.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on the authors' paper [Pre-reformation Roots of the Protestant Ethic](#), *The Economic Journal*, September 2017.
- The post gives the views of the interviewee, not the position of LSE Business Review or the London School of Economics.
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