



European journal of American studies Reviews 2014-1

Bozenna Chylińska, *The Gospel of Work and Wealth in the Puritan Ethic: From John Calvin to Benjamin Franklin.*

Zbigniew Mazur



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10250>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.10250

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Zbigniew Mazur, « Bozenna Chylińska, *The Gospel of Work and Wealth in the Puritan Ethic: From John Calvin to Benjamin Franklin.* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2014-1, document 2, Online since 09 January 2014, connection on 03 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/10250> ; DOI : 10.4000/ejas.10250

This text was automatically generated on 3 May 2019.

Creative Commons License

Bożenna Chylińska, *The Gospel of Work and Wealth in the Puritan Ethic: From John Calvin to Benjamin Franklin.*

Zbigniew Mazur

REFERENCES

Warsaw: Warsaw University Press, 2012. Pp. 336. ISBN: 978-83-235-0981-3

- 1 In her book Bożenna Chylińska offers an extensive, well-documented, and detailed discussion of the concept of work in Puritan theology and life. Tracing the evolution of the Puritan interpretations of work from the beginnings of the Reformation to the end of the eighteenth century, Chylińska presents the views of English and American Puritans and refers to their biographies as evidence of how work was not just part of religious beliefs, but also lived experience of such Puritan thinkers as John Calvin, Cotton Mather, and Benjamin Franklin.
- 2 Chapter I offers a brief discussion of the historical development of the concept of work in religion and philosophy. Starting with a short and informative presentation of the Biblical teachings about work and their early interpretations, the author passes on to the contemporary theology of the Catholic Church, as well as the studies of such writers as Sigmund Freud, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx, and Max Weber, tracing the most significant discourses of work and wealth in the Western world. The Marxist theories of work seem to have had a profound impact on both the formulation of the study's research question and on the choice of analytical categories, as the author, in the following chapters, draws a good deal from Max Weber's interpretations of the rise of capitalism and the relationship between the Puritan ethics and the morality of capitalism. The analytical perspective adopted in the work positions the relationship between work and wealth as one of the chief ethical principles concerning human life, but, importantly, assumes that

“work is also a historical fact” (46), which calls for its investigation as an aspect of historical materialism.

- 3 In Chapter II the author deals with the European beginnings of Puritanism. The discussion does not focus narrowly on the idea of work, but has a much wider range: it touches upon the history of the reforms of the Church, also those preceding the sixteenth century. Furthermore, it outlines the most significant events and processes in the development of Protestantism, understood as a theological doctrine and as a body of churches. In the following sections the focus is on the English Reformation, the emergence of Puritanism, its persecution by the Tudors, and the Puritan exile in the Netherlands and in America. Chylińska points to the significance of Calvinism in the reconstruction of the Church in England and in America and in the emergence of English Puritanism. Among the early Puritan theologians, Thomas Cartwright and William Perkins were most influential in shaping the theology of the new radical movement. The author points to Perkins as one of the first Puritans to link the idea of predestination with that of “Effectual Calling” (87) and voice the view that spiritual devotion requires diligence in the secular life, an attractive idea for the emerging entrepreneurial class.
- 4 In the following chapter, the development of the Puritan work ethic in America is discussed at length. The author adopts a wide definition of Puritanism as a religious, social, and political movement in both England and America, with its roots in Calvinism, and with the congregational church structure. Chylińska points to the writings of Richard Mather, John Cotton, and Cotton Mather as the most sophisticated formulations of the seventeenth-century Puritan beliefs about work and wealth. Exploring the meaning of the idea of “Calling,” the author shows how Puritanism redefined labor, providing a spiritual recognition of such economic virtues as frugality, diligence, and thrift. Wealth, obtained through work, was a sign of the possibility of salvation (117). Thus, Puritans were ‘called’ to show excellence in any sphere of productive activity. Controversial as it may seem at first glance, the use of the perspective of Catholicism for comparative analysis of Puritan ideas of work (151-155) offers a chance to better identify the most striking aspects of Puritanism as a revolutionary Christian doctrine and marks Chylińska’s book as original in the field. Regrettably, the narrative of the third chapter abandons the European context, and American Puritanism is studied in isolation from the work of those Puritan theologians who, as John Owen and Richard Baxter, lived and published in England.
- 5 In Chapter 4 Bożenna Chylińska explores the significance of work in the lives of Puritan women. It is striking that the choice of primary sources in this part of the study differs from that in other chapters; female diaries, memoirs, and poems are added to the theological treatises and sermons. Arguably, this chapter offers the most remarkable part of Chylińska’s investigation of Puritanism, assessing the impact of the cultural constructions of gender on the application of the Puritan work ethic in women’s domestic life. The author studies the diary of an English Puritan noblewoman, Lady Margaret Hoby, and the poetry of Anne Bradstreet, a gentlewoman from New England, and discovers striking similarities in which they constructed their subjectivities in terms of the daily, conscientious engagement in family and domestic duties and the literary self-analysis they both practiced. Even though both women came from the higher strata of their societies, it was the repetitive, fairly monotonous pattern of housework and nurturing of children, marked by constant worry and occasional family problems that was to manifest the religiosity of Puritan female lives. Chylińska, quoting profusely from the work of Hoby and Bradstreet, reconstructs the reality of lives of women in Puritan communities.

The analyses of the accounts of the two female authors are supplemented with an extended discussion of the impact of theology on the setting of the standards for gender relations in the patriarchal world of Puritan communities.

- 6 In the final chapter Bożenna Chylińska presents a compelling assessment of Benjamin Franklin's reinterpretation of the Puritan ethic of work. In a long and detailed discussion of Franklin's life and writing, the author argues that the great Philadelphian's dream of material success was the product of his belief in the secularized version of the Puritan doctrine of "Calling." Franklin's extension of the veneration of the virtues of hard work, prudence, and self-sufficiency to the call for civic engagement and social compassion initiated changes in the American concept of work. Private work and wealth was to be used to give assistance to the needy and to finance civil institutions which would help others gain prosperity. Franklin's reconstruction of the Puritan work ethics in the more secular terms is presented in the chapter in the context of the ideas of the Enlightenment and in juxtaposition to the works of Cotton Mather. While recognizing the novelty of Franklin's affirmation of the economic - and not spiritual - well-being as the purpose of human work, the author stresses the similarities between his texts and those of Mather and outlines the Puritan origins of Franklin's doctrine of work. Moreover, Chylińska discusses the impact of Franklin's deism and pragmatism on his secularized version of Puritan ethics of work in an extended discussion of *Autobiography* and *Poor Richard's Almanack*. The author makes use of a strategy similarly applied in other sections of the book: the close reading of the primary texts is accompanied and supplemented with lengthy references to the biography of the writer, which shows that the work ethics was not just a set of abstract beliefs, but also an ideological practice.
- 7 The conclusion of Chylińska's study invites the reader to consider the impact of the Puritan ethos of work on the later American discourses of labour and wealth. The book offers a well-structured and logical argument about the evolution of the interpretations of work and wealth in Puritan thinking. It is well documented, containing numerous quotations from a variety of relevant printed primary sources. The author uses literary and historical analysis in the study of the Puritan texts devoted to the subject of work, displaying a superb knowledge of Puritanism as a religious doctrine and a social formation. *The Gospel of Work and Wealth in the Puritan Ethic* may also be used as a reference source for any reader interested in Puritan theology in general, from its European beginnings at the time of the Reformation until the Enlightenment. It should be noted as well that the book, in its material form, is a beautiful example of what diligent work of the author, the editors and the printer may bring about: it is very well documented, has an imposing layout, and is skillfully illustrated with a variety of reprographic material.

AUTHOR

ZBIGNIEW MAZUR

Dr hab. Zbigniew Mazur teaches at the Institute of English Studies, Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin, Poland