

Robert H. Nelson

Lutheranism
and the Nordic
Spirit
of Social
Democracy

A Different
Protestant Ethic

Aarhus University Press

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Lutheranism and the Nordic Spirit of Social Democracy

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For Jill, Who Made It All Possible

Foreword

I met Bob Nelson in person for the first time in September 2016, when he came to give a keynote address at the University of Helsinki symposium ‘Holy money? Economy as Religion’, which I had helped to organize. I had read his work before, including a manuscript of this book, and was eager to meet the person behind it. Sitting in Café Engel by the Senate Square in Helsinki, Bob told me he was at a stage of his career where he had the privilege of choosing the topics he writes about based on his interests, including topics which may seem unconventional given his scientific background.

Nelson has an impressive career in and outside academia, and considering the topic of this book perhaps surprisingly in economics and public policy. However, in the 1990s he was already combining his background in economics with religious studies in his works on economics as a secular (or implicit or functional) religion, and has since continued to write broadly on this and other religious themes. In addition to the fact that Nelson is a ‘non-theologian’ writing about religion, he is also an American (although with Nordic roots) writing about the Nordic countries. Both of these facts make Nelson’s book a bold endeavor, but boldness is needed for thinking beyond the ordinary boundaries.

And it seems sometimes things can be viewed better from a distance. The topic of this book, the influence of Lutheranism on the Nordic countries, is fundamental from the viewpoints of at least the social sciences, history, and religious studies. Yet it is far from common in Nordic literature. The influence of religion is often overlooked in many western contexts, at least partially because of the secularization assumptions of the 20th century. Furthermore, an approach such

as Nelson's requires bold syntheses of viewpoints. Such multi-disciplinary work is challenged by the increasingly narrow specializations of academia today.

Indeed, Nelson's opportunity to write about what interests him has led to an ambitious project and a compelling book. It is rare in its comprehensive, multi-disciplinary approach to the role of Lutheranism in the history of Nordic countries, its perceptive analysis of the Lutheran version of the protestant ethic, and its ability to show how religion continues to be a penetrating cultural influence even in substantively secularized contexts.

From my viewpoint as a Finnish theologian, Nelson convincingly and perceptively analyzes the ways in which Lutheranism intertwines with a range of phenomena in Finnish culture and society. I read the manuscript of this book during the summer of 2016, when I was at Boston University as a visiting scholar. In Boston I had the privilege of discussing protestant ethics broadly with the renowned Weber scholar, Stephen Kalberg, who had recently applied it to American politics. These discussions, together with spending time in the US (amidst the early part of the presidential campaign that would later end in the election of Donald Trump), yielded a fruitful interaction with the manuscript of this book. The interaction was extremely stimulating for my own thinking and analysis, and indeed developed my research.

I believe a similar interaction between these contexts, American and Nordic, has been a key influence for Nelson too. He has Nordic ancestry, and has spent time in the Nordic countries, especially in Finland. This book was inspired by and at least partially emerged out of the activities of the Protestant Roots of Finnish National Identities (ProFini) network, which was established in 2014 when Nelson was visiting the Helsinki Collegium of Advanced Studies. This multi-disciplinary network aims at examining the long-term effects of the Reformation, and especially those of Lutheranism, on the formation of Finnish society, culture, and national identity.

Strengthening such research approaches in Finland and other specific contexts is extremely important. But we also need further opportunities to illuminate our contexts by comparison with those of others. To understand multi-dimensional phenomena deeply, we need multi-disciplinary, international interaction – and bold thinking and writing. Nelson's book well demonstrates the indisputable benefits of such an approach.

Bob Nelson's book will be beneficial and, I believe, an enjoyable read for scholars and students in an array of disciplines. I hope it will reach a wide audience in the Nordic countries but also more widely, as its analysis of the Nordic case broadens understanding of the influences of (implicit) religion in general. Anyone interested in the historical and societal influence of religion should read this book, whether in Nordic countries or elsewhere.

Henrietta Grönlund

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April 15, 2017

Preface

In February 2014, I arrived in Finland to spend seven months at the Collegium for Advanced Studies of the University of Helsinki, part of my 2013–2014 sabbatical year away from the School of Public Policy of the University of Maryland. Although I am by training an economist, I have long had a strong interest in the political and economic roles of religion in society, including the diverse forms religion has taken in the modern age.¹ I should say that this interest, moreover, is not driven by a longstanding traditional religious commitment of my own, but is more a matter of my intellectual curiosity, together with my view that the foundational role of religion has been much neglected in the twentieth-century scholarship of historians and social science professionals – much to their loss.²

Not long after I arrived at the Collegium, building on such previous thinking, I began exploring the hypothesis that social democracy in the Nordic countries is significantly a product of the secularization of their common Lutheran heritage. This book examines social democracy in all the Nordic countries but I make greater use of Finnish examples, reflecting the location of the book's origins. The intended audience includes economists, sociologists, cultural anthropologists,

1. My publications in this area include Nelson, *Reaching for Heaven on Earth*; Nelson, *Economics as Religion*; and Nelson, *The New Holy Wars*.

2. A recent book of mine, however, does represent an exploration of a more traditional and directly theological subject – what we can say rationally about whether a god exists. Following in the historic

tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas, the book does not necessarily address the existence of a Christian God specifically, but more abstractly of some god, an argument now based on contemporary resources in physics, evolutionary biology, the philosophy of human consciousness and other current areas of inquiry. See Nelson, *God? Very Probably*.

students of Nordic history, students of the history of religion, theologians and indeed anyone interested in the role of religion in its diverse forms in shaping modern societies. I hope that the book will attract readers in Nordic countries who may learn more about the large impact of Lutheranism on what is often taken to be a secular outcome – the rise of Nordic social democracy in the twentieth century.

As I will also be arguing in this book, and perhaps surprisingly for some readers, Lutheran values and beliefs have not only been a foundational influence on the development of Nordic social democracy but also Nordic social democracy can itself be seen as a modern form of religion – a “secular Lutheranism.” A number of theologians and other students of religion of the twentieth century have argued that “secular religion” (or some prefer the term “implicit religion”) is a particular subcategory that falls within the general category of all “religion.”³ Some people may prefer the term “ideology” but I find that “secular religion” is more accurate and illuminating. Recognizing that many modern ideologies are actual forms of religion provides a better basis for understanding modern political and economic history. Indeed, the immense historic influence of belief systems such as Marxism and Social Darwinism can be fully understood only in a context in which they are seen to be modernized bearers of the heritage of traditional Christianity, including in the case of social democracy a Nordic secularization of traditional Lutheran religion. In the United States, as the sociologist Robert Bellah famously argued, the unifying national religion over the course of its history has been a “civil religion” – another term for a secular religion.⁴

Thus, for readers with wider interests in the general workings of religious phenomena, I hope by examining the role of Lutheran re-

3. A leading theologian of the twentieth century, Paul Tillich, thus defined religion as a belief system that offered answers to matters of “ultimate concern,” thus extending the scope of religion well beyond the traditional Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, and other familiar faiths.

See Brown, ed., *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue*. A leading American legal philosopher wrote recently of the modern phenomenon of true religions that lacked any explicit mention of a god. See Dworkin, *Religion Without God*.

4. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”

ligion in the Nordic countries in the twentieth century to provide a case study that will further illuminate the general relationship between traditional Christian religion and modern political and economic beliefs and developments.⁵ Max Weber famously explored this subject about 100 years ago with respect to the impact of Calvinism – both in its early traditional and later secularized forms – in advancing the rise of capitalism and other modern developments.⁶ I argue similarly in this book that Lutheranism – again in its earlier and then in its later secularized forms – has been a major contributing factor to the rise of social democracy in the Nordic countries in the twentieth century. There are thus two Protestant ethics of large historic significance: a Calvinist ethic that was the subject of Weber’s investigations, and of many others who followed later in his path; and a Lutheran ethic that has been studied less, partly because the Nordic countries represent a much smaller part of the world than all the nations significantly influenced by Calvinism.⁷ By the time that Nordic social democracy had risen to a leading world political force in the mid twentieth century, the idea that religion could be a major driving influence on modern social and economic outcomes was no longer part of the routine research agenda of mainstream history and social science.

As an American most familiar with American history, I am impressed by the many connections between nineteenth- and twentieth-century political and economic developments in the United States and the Nordic world – usually with somewhat of a lag in the Nordic case. Indeed, they could be described as two particular illustrations of a possible range of responses of a modern society to a common set of

5. This book draws on analyses of contemporary economics and other social sciences as themselves modern religious adaptations from traditional Christian religion. On economics in this perspective, see Nelson, *Economics as Religion* and Cox, *The Market as God*; on psychology, see Vitz, *Psychology as Religion*; on politics, see Gentile, *Politics as Religion*; on sociology, see Smith, *The Sacred Project of American*

Sociology; and on American law, see Levinson, *Constitutional Faith*.

6. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*.

7. A Google search of “Lutheran Ethic” turns up few studies and little scholarly use of the term. One book titled *The Lutheran Ethic* turns out to be about the cultural attitudes of American Lutherans who had emigrated from Europe. See Kersten, *The Lutheran Ethic*.

scientific, economic and other fundamental challenges to the traditional western religious beliefs and institutions of the past. Both progressivism in the United States and social democracy in the Nordic countries were much influenced by the Protestant roots of these nations, but the former was shaped more by a Calvinist ethic, while the latter reflects a greater influence of a Lutheran ethic. American progressivism and Nordic social democracy thus might be described as Protestant theological, political and economic cousins.

In writing this book, I also had another very different type of motive. I was born and grew up in the United States; my mother (as of this writing 98) is the daughter of two Finnish immigrants who came to the United States and met there in the early twentieth century. My father, as a second-generation American, was the grandson of four Swedish immigrants who arrived in the late nineteenth century. Both of my parents were proud of their Scandinavian heritage, liked to talk about it and participated in the activities of the Finnish and Swedish communities that were still flourishing in the United States in their youth. I was baptized in what I recall was a Lutheran church. So this book is not only about the Lutheran roots of Nordic social democracy, but also about my own personal roots. I have discovered many fascinating things about this heritage in the course of writing this book.

Acknowledgments

During the seven months of my sabbatical year that I spent in 2014 at the Collegium for Advanced Studies of the University of Helsinki, I benefited greatly from the opportunity to explore Finnish and Nordic history – and the role of the Lutheran church in particular – in discussions with fellows of the Collegium. Kaius Sinnemäki was particularly generous with his time. I thank the Director of the Collegium Sami Pihlström who first extended an invitation to be a visiting fellow and then did much to make my stay both productive and enjoyable.

I also benefited that year from discussions with Anne Pessi and Risto Saarinen of the Faculty of Theology. Economics professor Esa Mangaloja of the University of Jyväskylä undertook research and provided background that I have adapted in parts of this book. University of Helsinki historian Henrik Stenius offered valuable extensive written comments. I am now co-editing a forthcoming book with Kaius Sinnemäki, Anneli Portman and Jouni Tilli of the University of Helsinki in which chapters by leading Finnish scholars explore further the role of Lutheranism in shaping modern Finland. I have learned much from the opportunity to read drafts of these chapters.

Thanks to an invitation from Professor Stefan Schwarzkopf, I presented some of the main themes from this book to a seminar at the Copenhagen Business School in September 2016. That same month I made a similar seminar presentation at the Collegium for Advanced Studies of the University of Helsinki. I thank the participants in both seminars – too numerous to mention here by name – for their valuable comments.

I wish also to thank Karina Bell Ottosen of Aarhus University Press who smoothly guided me through the publication process.

INTRODUCTION

Two Protestant Ethics

In 1904 and 1905 Max Weber published a two-part article in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* that would become *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. A revised version appeared in 1920, shortly after Weber's death; it was this version that was first translated into English by Talcott Parsons in 1930. Weber himself began his university career in Germany as an economist, and regarded *The Protestant Ethic* as in part an alternative interpretation of the rise of capitalism to supplement the strict economic determinism of Karl Marx. Reflecting trends toward quantitative and other formal styles of analysis within American professional economics of the twentieth century, however, *The Protestant Ethic* was largely ignored by professional economists until recently. This recent interest reflects a growing recognition of the large limitations of mainstream economics with its traditional assumptions of "rational" behavior directed by self-interest, analyzed abstractly with mathematical and other quantitative methods that it is hoped will put economics intellectually in the same scientific category as physics.¹

In a 2015 survey article in a leading American economic journal, however, Alberto Alesina of the Harvard economics department and Paola Giuliano of the UCLA management school define "culture" as that which "refers to those decision-making heuristics which typically manifest themselves as values, beliefs, or social norms." They then explain that "empirical investigation of the relevance of culture is fairly new in economics. So far, the goal of most cultural economics

1. The MIT economist Andrew W. Lo and MIT physicist Mark T. Mueller write that

"WARNING: Physics Envy May Be Hazardous To Your Wealth."