

Paper Proposal
CONSERVATIVE PROTESTANTISM?
A COMPARATIVE AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [1904-5], the German sociologist, Max Weber, argued that a certain kind of Protestantism, what he called “ascetic Protestantism”, had played a catalytic role in the economic takeoffs of the Netherlands, England and America and, indeed, in the rise of the West *tout court*. Writing two decades later, the English social historian, R.H. Tawney, added that Reformed Protestantism and its sectarian offspring also helped to transform popular attitudes and social policies towards the poor, portraying the indigent as undeserving ne’er-dowells whose ills could be better treated through workhouses than handouts. In 1938, Robert K. Merton published his landmark study of *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England*, arguing that Protestant scholars and the Protestant worldview more generally had played a pivotal role in the scientific revolution. In the 1960s, Michael Walzer extended this claim to the political realm, arguing that Calvinism forged the men who made the English Revolution. In my own book, *The Disciplinary Revolution*, I trace out the multiple impacts of Reformed Protestantism on the core institutions of the modern state – on the rationalization of military organization, political administration, and poor relief. Similar things could be, and have been, said about the revolutionary influence of ascetic Protestantism on early American society and thus on America’s historical trajectory. After all, Colonial New England was the last refuge of the religious radical. Within this interpretive tradition, ascetic Protestantism appears as a revolutionary force, an unwitting midwife to modernity.

Seen against this comparative and historical backdrop, the claim that there is an American tradition of conservative Protestantism appears problematic. This is not to deny the existence of a tradition of conservative Protestantism. Such a tradition can indeed be found – in High-Church Anglicanism, for example, or in the Lutheran state churches of Scandinavia and Germany. These traditions were indeed conservative in the conventional sense of that term: they were unwavering supporters of the established social and political order, and they provided cosmological and theological writs for that order. Nor is it to deny the existence of an American tradition of Protestantism. However, the movements that are usually seen as constitutive of this tradition, Congregationalism and Presbyteranism, later Methodism and Baptism, more recently Mormonism and Pentecostalism – were hardly conservative in their inceptions. On the contrary, they were the faiths of rebels and upstarts, at least initially. Thus, the claim that the contemporary religio-political movement known as “conservative Protestantism” is part of a clean and unbroken tradition that stretches back to colonial times and from there across the Atlantic is more than a little problematic.

If conservative Protestantism is in fact the modern scion of a radical lineage, a number of intriguing and important issues arise. One set of questions concerns political

categories and coalitions. One might begin by asking whether “conservative Protestantism” is really “conservative” in the traditional sense first articulated by Burke, Metternich and others in the wake of the French Revolution. Is conservative Protestantism a reaction against the political reforms and cultural revolutions of the 1930s and 1960s? Does it arise out of the same revulsion against revolution that sparked the eighteenth century reaction? Or is it actually a revolutionary creed disguised in conservative garb? Or is it nothing more than a hyphenated name that sanctifies the union between two ill-matched allies – corporate conservatives and Protestant radicals? The second set of questions concerns the ideological and organizational continuities and discontinuities between the original patriarchs and their contemporary progeny. Is the “conservative” agenda of today, the same as the radical agenda of yesteryear? Are the diagnoses and remedies offered by conservative Protestants just an updated version of those articulated two, three or four centuries ago? Or has there been a shift in the underlying premises of the Protestant worldview that is more than a mere reaction to changing circumstances? These are some of the questions that will be at the heart of the proposed essay.