

John Milton on Ecclesiastical Free Markets and Weber's Protestant Ethic

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In politics and religion John Milton was ahead of his time, advocating modern developments such as freedom of the press and religious toleration (within limits). His opposition to state-mandated tithes anticipates the separation of church and state in America and elsewhere. Almost no one in England was happy with the tithing system during Milton's lifetime, and disputes were common. Ministers complained that parishioners avoided their legal obligations, land-owners protested against a system with obvious inequities, and Puritans opposed a tax that went against their conscience.[1] Adding to the controversy was the fact that England alone among European countries required individuals by law to give 10% of income to the established Church.[2] And because of idiosyncrasies in the laws governing tithe collection in England, some groups were hit much harder by this tax than others.[3] Furthermore, tithes did not always benefit the Anglican clergy and Church. Since King Henry VIII's dissolution of the monasteries, the tithes for particular parishes were sometimes made over to laypeople, often rich landholders, in exchange for political favors, or even sold to the highest bidder. The ownership of tithes amounted to the right to collect a 10% income tax every year on the people in a parish. Shakespeare scholars will recall that in 1605 Shakespeare purchased a share of the Stratford tithes. It was as a tithe-holder that he was entitled to be buried in Holy Trinity Church. During the English Civil War and Interregnum, landowners tended to perceive attacks on compulsory tithes as equivalent to, or as the prelude to, an attack on private property. Tithe holders were a powerful faction, and when their interests appeared threatened in the late 1550's, many supported the restoration of King Charles II in 1560.[4]

When the time seemed ripe for reform in 1559, Milton published his pamphlet, *The Likeliest Means to Remove Hirelings Out of the Church*, a fierce and uncompromising assault on forced tithes. The title suggests what Milton believed was the main problem with tithes, that they enabled clerical corruption. Milton shows how free market forces were the solution for the problems caused by forced tithes. By, in effect, mandating wage-controls for ministers, the government created a special-interest faction that distorted the labor market. Milton proposed that by doing away with State force, the normal reciprocity between congregation

and minister would be restored, eliminating corruption. Milton's proposal participates in the shift to a market economy in England during this time and anticipates the work of Adam Smith.

Abolishing the State enforcement of tithes in effect desacralizes them, making them a voluntary payment for a voluntary service, not identical to other payments for services but similar. There would be no legal imperative for tithes, and the government freed from religious responsibility. Such desacralization is a process central for the development of Modernity. From the perspective of my methodology, Generative Anthropology, the sacred is not just a contingent element of culture but rather a necessary feature of our origin. How is desacralization even possible? I argue that the sacred is an ethical issue involving social order. Understanding secularization is key for understanding the new forms of social order that emerge in Modernity. There is considerable controversy about the definition and meaning of secularization.[\[5\]](#) But any definition must recognize the separation of church and state, advocated by Milton, as of crucial importance.[\[6\]](#)

The irony of Early Modern desacralization is that it was often justified by religious considerations. Milton opposed tithes on biblical grounds, as did many English Protestants of the day. So his tract also raises the question of what role, if any, Christianity and especially Protestantism play in the development of Modernity and capitalism, a question that has been addressed by Max Weber and many others.[\[7\]](#) The second half of my essay will discuss the connection between the Judeo-Christian tradition and the rise of capitalism.

Milton characterizes the ministers of the established Church as "hirelings," "a word," he claims, "always of evil signification" (*Likeliest Means* 279).[\[8\]](#) We may recall his sharp denunciation of priests in his poem *Lycidas* as "Blind mouths," a catachresis describing those who "for their bellies' sake, / Creep and intrude, and climb into the fold / . . . [while] The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed, / But swoll'n with wind, and the rank mist they draw / Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread" (lines 114-127). Milton identifies the source of clerical corruption as England's forced tithing system, giving ministers a sinecure with minimal responsibility to their parishioners for biblical preaching and teaching. Anglican ministers were appointed by the clerical hierarchy, not elected by congregations.

But Milton makes an important qualification in his condemnation of "hirelings." He writes, "Hire of it self is neither a thing unlawful, nor a word of any evil note, signifying no more than a due recompense or reward" (278). Milton does not condemn wage labor as such, the performing of a service for money, even for ministers, as one Marxist critic has claimed (more on this below). Milton notes that Jesus said plainly to the Apostles, if people give you food, drink, and shelter, you may accept it without any qualms, "for the laborer is worthy of his hire" (Luke 10.7). "[T]he very light of reason and of equity hath declar'd," Milton writes, the justice of hire (280). But he claims, "That which makes [hire] so dangerous in the church . . . is either the excess thereof, or the undue manner of giving and taking it" (278-9).

“Excess” hire presumably refers to situations in which a minister or tithe holder is paid “too much” (more than he could earn by his service and merits), and “the undue manner of giving and taking” hire can only refer to the mandatory tithing system and the abuses following in its train (more on this issue below).

The key issue for Milton, as always, is liberty, which he identifies with New Testament Christianity, freeing humans from the power of sin and any requirement for empty religious ceremonies. As we see in *Paradise Lost*, Milton’s God gives his creatures, angels and humans, free choice, even though he foresees the catastrophic results, with the fall of Satan first, and then humankind.^[9] Freedom is the necessary condition for virtue, faith, happiness, and true religion. Even reason is a function of liberty, in Milton’s formulation: “When God gave [Adam] reason, he gave him freedom to choose, for reason is but choosing” (*Areopagitica* 944). Milton’s God can no more limit our freedom than he can stop being God.

Milton’s opposition to tithes is not just a natural reluctance to pay taxes. He notes, “it concerns every mans conscience to what religion he contributes” (308). Giving tithes to the English church meant supporting a church and ministry that Milton considered corrupt at best and anti-Christian at worst. He describes forced-tithes as “violence and extortion: . . . to pay for what he . . . approves not” (309). Protestants had a high concept of conscience as the voice of God within humans, one to be obeyed before the magistrate or minister. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton’s God states,

I will place within them [humans] as a guide,
My umpire Conscience, whom if they will hear,
Light after light well used they shall attain,
And to the end persisting, safe arrive. (3.194-197).

For Milton, religion was a private matter between the individual and God. For this reason, he placed no value on conformity or uniformity in religion, much less a national church. He had no fears about the splintering of Christianity, since Christianity was meant to take the form of individual congregations. He writes,

the Christian church is not national, but consisting of many particular congregations, subject to many changes, as well through civil accidents as through schisms and various opinions, not to be decided by any outward judge, being matters of conscience . . . (308)

For Milton, the state’s authority in matters of religion—tithes, attendance, church membership—constitutes a dangerous overreach of its power.^[10] He writes,

the civil magistrate is intrusted with civil rights only, not with conscience, which can have no deputy or representer of it self, but one of the same minde . . . that what each man gives to the minister, he gives either as to God or as to his teacher; if as to God, no civil power can justly consecrate to religious uses any part. (308-9)

Milton views "Mammon," the greed for wealth, as a continual danger to Christianity from its very beginnings. The first "hireling," Milton writes, was Judas and he was soon followed by Simon Magus (279). Milton had an idealistic conception of Christianity as antithetical to the pursuit of wealth. Ministers, he believed, should not be motivated by any monetary or material desires in their work.

Milton's argument against tithes rests on his interpretation of the Bible, especially the key distinction between Old Testament Law and New Testament Gospel. His opponents defended tithes by appeal to Old Testament law. Milton, however, argues that tithes belong to the Jewish ceremonial laws that have been superseded by Christianity (281-297). Christ's sacrifice on the cross made those ritual prescriptions unnecessary, as various New Testament authors agreed. Milton considers at length a number of Bible passages that might seem to justify tithes. He argues, for example, that the Levitical priesthood, the original recipients of tithes, simply cannot be compared to Christian ministers.

But how then are ministers to be supported? Milton argues they should live on what their parishioners freely donate to the church, citing several New Testament passages in support (300-1). The minister offers his flock biblical instruction, and they recompense him, through the church, according to their conscience. Both minister and church member are free to enter into or withdraw from this relationship, so it can be characterized as a free "market" transaction that benefits both participants.

For Milton, the solution to the tithing controversy was clear and simple: abolish forced tithes, abandon any attempt to impose a national church, allow for freedom of religion (within limits), and let the members of individual congregations elect their ministers and support them with donations (307).

Such a relationship between minister and congregation can only be viewed as free in a literal sense, free of any state or external control. Milton approves Christ's command to the apostles: "Freely ye have received, freely give" (309). Nevertheless, David Hawkes argues that Milton saw free market principles as incompatible with religion, and that he opposed "wage-labour" for ministers. Using a Marxist vocabulary to describe Milton's position, Hawkes implies that Milton was, in effect, a kind of proto-Marxist. Yet Hawkes recognizes that Milton approves the justice of "hire," and that Milton further argues that what makes "hire" evil is "the undue manner of giving and taking it" (*Likeliest Means* 279); or, in another place, "the undue and vitious taking or giving it" (280). Hawkes writes, "My purpose here is to determine what Milton understands by this 'undue and vitious . . . hire'" (64). To answer this question, we should note, it is necessary to distinguish the "undue and vitious . . . hire" condemned by Milton from the legitimate hire approved by Christ.

Hawkes claims, "By the term 'hireling,' Milton intends a clergyman who receives compulsory tithes" (71). According to Hawkes, in the context of the tithing controversy,

“Compulsory tithes” actually meant wage labor, for Milton and his audience. Hawkes concludes,

Clerical wage labor is “the undue manner of giving and taking” payment, the “undue and vitious taking or giving” of money, which Milton distinguishes from his objections to luxury and monopoly. (73)

This is Hawkes’ thesis, the answer to the question with which he began his article. But it doesn’t answer the question of how the approved biblical “hire” is different from the supposedly evil wage labour. Obviously, everything depends how we define key terms. Hawkes claims, “according to the contemporary terms of debate [in Milton’s time], voluntary tithes were not legally owed wages but charitable ‘alms’” (73). So, according to Hawkes, for Milton, tithes are wage labor *only* when they are legally forced, but when freely given, they are not wages, but rather alms.

But “wage labour” is defined by the mutual understanding of employer and employee, the terms of employment; not the source of the wages. We can understand why tithes given voluntarily could be called “alms” and why Milton opposed involuntary tithes, but there is no apparent reason why Milton should oppose “clerical wage labour,” a clerical job with a salary, whether backed by a printed contract or an implied contract renewed on a daily basis, by the actions of the parties. Here is where Hawkes imposes a Marxist framework alien to Milton and the seventeenth century. Hawkes argues that Milton’s deep objection was to the practice of spiritual labor being “commodified” and thus reified—reification being a form of idolatry, a category error by which one treats the idea or sign as the thing (Hawkes 70-71). It’s true, of course, that Milton saw individuals as souls, which cannot be bought and sold like horses or sheep. Whether such a recognition would prevent one individual from selling his labor to another for an agreed-upon price is another question. Hawkes finds correctly a deep-seated fear of the profit motive (greed, or “mammon”) in the New Testament as received by Protestants; and it’s well known that Marx drew upon religious vocabulary to describe capitalism. But can we accurately characterize Reformation Christianity as proto-Marxist? The superficial similarity of some terminology is weak evidence to support the strong connection Hawkes claims between Milton’s anti-clericalism and Marx’s hostility to wage labor. In the “Vanity Fair” episode of his allegory *Pilgrim’s Progress*, a classic passage which epitomizes Protestant fears of the market, John Bunyan satirizes what he considers the logic of the marketplace, in which, literally, *everything* is for sale:

houses, lands, trades, places, honours, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures, and delights of all sorts, as whores, bawds, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not. (§ 216)

But to assimilate Reformation fears of the marketplace to Marx's critique of capitalism is anti-historical and reductive, doing a disservice to both.

Even granting Marx his premises, Hawkes' argument doesn't really work. According to Marx, capitalists exploit workers by treating them as machines; whereas in Milton's England, ministers exploited taxpayers by receiving an inflated salary. There is also the question of state compulsion: whereas Marx saw the "free market" as simply the justification for exploitation, and state force as the remedy; for Milton it is just the opposite. As we've seen, state force, the reverse of political freedom, is the key issue for Milton, and on which his position places him in diametrical opposition to Marx.

Hawkes doesn't give any evidence to support his claim that "alms" and "wages" were mutually exclusive terms "according to the contemporary terms of the debate" (Hawkes 73). We must remember that the English Bible, accepted as authoritative by all sides of the debate, explicitly approves "hire" on the authority of Jesus himself. Hawkes is claiming, then, that for Milton and his audience, "hire" in the Bible actually meant alms, not wages; and furthermore, that Milton distinguishes the approved biblical "hire" from supposedly evil wage labor.

What Hawkes ignores is that "hire" and "wages" were synonymous terms in Milton's England and, indeed, continuing until today. In the Geneva Bible (both 1560 and 1599 editions), the relevant passage is translated, "the laborer is worthy of his *wages*" (my emphasis). In the King James Version of 1611, given by Milton in his tract, we find, "the laborer is worthy of his *hire*" (my emphasis). And in succeeding versions down through the centuries, translators continue using one or the other term, "wages" or "hire," interchangeably. If Milton was claiming that ministers could not legitimately receive "wages," or perform "wage labor," he would have been contradicting Christ's direct command. But Milton explicitly approves Christ's command. Milton writes, "God hath given to ministers under the gospel, that only which is justly given them, that is to say, a due and moderat livelihood, *the hire of thir labor*" (300, my emphasis). I don't see how Milton could have made his position more plain: Ministers justly receive wages for their labor, and what makes such wages "just" is simply that they are exchanged freely. By characterizing all clerical wages or hire as "undue and vitious," Hawkes elides Milton's key distinction between freedom and force.

The question remains, then, what exactly Milton meant by "the undue and vitious taking or giving it," and how such hire is distinguished from biblically-sanctioned hire. As we've seen, the key distinction, first, is whether the wages are given freely, independent of any state law. Milton had no problem with wages from tithes given freely; only the forced tithes are unbiblical. On the part of the congregation, the givers of the tithe, state force is what distinguishes the "undue and vitious . . . giving" of tithes from the biblical hire.

But the distinction also concerns the minister, the “taking” of the hire. Milton makes clear that ministers must not be motivated by mercenary considerations. Compulsory tithes—a steady cash flow with minimal responsibilities—lure the avaricious into the clerical profession, and the minister’s greed is the second consideration that distinguishes “the undue and vitious *taking* or giving” of tithes that Milton abhorred (my emphasis). The two criteria are related of course: forced tithes attract the covetous; they go together. For Milton, then, “undue and vitious . . . hire” refers to forced tithes combined with mercenary ministers.

The forced tithe is obvious to all, a feature of English law; but the motivation of the minister, the second problem, is not always so clear. As Milton says in *Paradise Lost*:

. . . neither Man nor Angel can discern
Hypocrisy, the only evil that walks
invisible, except to God alone. (3.682)

This passage refers to Satan’s success, on his way to Earth, in deceiving the Archangel Uriel. But we should note that this deception is successful only temporarily, and before the day is through, Uriel sees through Satan’s disguise and warns the angels guarding Earth. By the same token, Milton considered himself able to identify corrupt ministers, and he assumed that congregations are also able to discern such ministers.

This is where the free-market nature of the relationship between the minister and his congregation becomes so important. If the parishioners find that the minister is covetous, or if he fails to provide biblical instruction, they are free to withhold tithes. And in the Church organization favored by Milton, they are free to fire him and hire someone else (or rather “dismiss” him and “elect” someone else, to use the terms favored by such congregations). Such are the free market principles Milton wanted applied to the church, as the best possible remedy for the corruption fostered by forced tithes. The free market can be efficient in rooting out at least some forms of corruption. State interventions, on the other hand, enable corruption, by creating what modern economists call “rent seekers,” factions that seek out and rely on special treatment from the government. Milton sought to eliminate any government interference in the economics of religion.

Furthermore, Milton suggests that tithes be given to the church or rather congregation (*Likeliest Means* 300), who would then distribute a portion of them to the minister, and reserve a portion of the tithes for other needs, such as poor relief or building maintenance. There is nothing in Milton’s tract that would prevent an independent church from giving a minister a regular salary, exactly as is done in churches today. As long as the source of the salary is freely given tithes, and the minister is not mercenary in his motives, Milton’s proposal would not prevent a standard salary arrangement for ministers (i.e., “wage labour”). Another situation in which a minister might draw a regular salary is when a well-

off congregation sponsors him as a missionary. Milton suggests the sponsorship of missionaries as a way to bring preaching to poor areas that cannot support a minister by themselves.

In his article, Hawkes gives a brief history of the tithing controversy, showing that Milton's opponents, the defenders of compulsory tithes, found themselves required to defend tithes as wages, and legitimate on this basis. Milton indeed attacks this position, but only the forced collection of such wages, not wages as such, which were commanded by Christ. He writes,

It remanes lastly to consider, in what manner God hath ordained that recompense be given to ministers of the gospel: and by all scripture it will appeer, that he hath given it them not by civil law and freehold [legal tenure], as they claim, but by the benevolence and free gratitude of such as receive them. (309)

The problem with tithes was simply that they were forced by the state; all the abuses followed from this, not the fact that tithes recompensed ministers for their labor.

According to Marx, we should remember, wage labour does not corrupt the workers but rather exploits them. In general, labour teaches discipline and makes a person stronger, leading to self-knowledge. It's the owners or masters who are corrupted by wealth and become decadent. All the workers need, as per Marx, is some consciousness-raising; they are already stronger than the capitalists. For Milton, in contrast, ministers are corrupted by the money offered by the existing tithing system. Milton's point has no necessary or logical connection to Marx's critique of wage labor. Anyone can be corrupted by the prospect of wealth, in a great variety of situations; ministerial "hire" just happens to be the route offered by the compulsory tithes. Hawkes confuses the general point (common to all times and ages) that wealth corrupts the greedy with the Marxist claim that wage-labor is the "original sin" of capitalism.

As we observed above, Milton's tract argues that the then current tithe system forces Christians to go against their conscience, to support a ministry and church they found unbiblical, even if just by the mere fact that it included forced tithes, not to mention other departures from biblical practice. Hawkes and others have noted, however, that Milton does not, in contrast to other contemporary writers on the subject, emphasize the "violence" against conscience mandated by the tithing system. Rather, Milton spends more time on the "corruption of teachers [which is] most commonly the effect of hire" (Milton 277). Milton's emphasis on clerical corruption distinguishes his tract from other tracts of the time period opposing the tithe system. Hawkes suggests that Milton's stress on corruption supports Hawkes's point that Milton was opposing not just the forcing of conscience but rather the whole tithing system, which Hawkes characterizes as "wage labor." But as we have seen, Milton did not oppose the whole tithing system, only compulsory tithes. Furthermore,

Milton's claim that "hire" was "corrupting the teachers [ministers]" (*Likeliest Means* 279) is something of a red herring, even by the terms of Milton's own argument. When Milton discusses ministers throughout his tract, he makes clear that they are already greedy; compulsory tithes merely attracted them to the profession and provided an opportunity for corruption. For example, in reference to the apostles of Christ's time, Milton writes,

religion brought forth wealth, and the daughter devoured the mother. But long ere wealth came into the church, so soone as any gain appeered in religion, hirelings were apparent; drawn in long before by the very scent thereof. Judas therefore, the first hireling, for want of present hire answerable to his coveting, from the small number or the meanness of such as then were the religious, sold the religion it self with the founder thereof, his master. Simon Magus the next . . . (279 emphasis by Milton)

In the above example, Judas is already covetous, and he is drawn to the apostolic group by the "scent" of wealth. In reference to forced tithes, Milton writes,

the undue and vicious taking or giving it [hire] , though but small or mean, as in the primitive times, gave to hirelings occasion, though not intended, yet sufficient to creep at first into the church. (*Likeliest Means* 289)

In no case does Milton give an example of a just minister becoming corrupt through the temptation of tithes. Compulsory tithes merely provide corrupt men an opportunity for gaining wealth. Milton's unusual (within the tithing controversy literature) emphasis on the corruption of the ministers is rather an example of his pointed anti-clericalism.^[11] It seems that what offended Milton about compulsory tithes most of all was that they enabled the hypocrisy and greed of ministers. Free market forces, according to Milton, would best restrain the corruption of ministers and discourage them from "creeping" into the pulpit.

Milton notes the likelihood that ministers will "frame themselves to that interest and those opinions which they see best pleasing to thir paymasters" (318). Furthermore, Milton recognizes that those in charge of distributing forced tithes might hire none but those "they find conformable to their interest and opinions" (318). Milton clearly recognized that the desire for money may corrupt a person who is so inclined. But this raises the question, why didn't Milton consider the possibility in his tract that ministers might be corrupted by the *freely-given* tithes from their congregation, and preach only what their listeners found easy and pleasant, like Chaucer's Friar? (A few of Milton's contemporaries thought that *only* tax-supported ministers would retain theological and moral independence.) Remember that the Catholic Church claimed a monopoly on salvation, which was exploited by unscrupulous clergy, such as we find in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. But the Protestant church never claimed to hold a monopoly on salvation, and Milton advocated doing away with all compulsion in religion. Free access to the Bible would free Christians from servitude to the Church and its ministers.

Furthermore, in Milton's time, before the age of mass media, freely-given tithes did not appear to be an attractive proposition for those seeking wealth. In fact, the central concern for Milton's contemporaries (the main reason why even a Puritan-dominated Parliament refused to reform the tithing system) was that without State tithes, there would be no one to preach the gospel at all. Milton refutes this claim first by recourse to the Biblical promises that the gospel would be preached; second, he gives the counter-example of Continental countries with active preachers but no forced tithes (*Likeliest Means* 318).

Milton did, however, witness the rise of numerous cult leaders during the Civil War and Interregnum, so he understood the dangers posed by charismatic preachers. Yet he defended the right of non-conformists to publish in *Areopagitica*, trusting the marketplace to sort out the wheat from the chaff. And he apparently trusted the freedom of the marketplace to distinguish true ministers from "hirelings." In *Paradise Lost*, Eve was corrupted by the desire for knowledge; yet God didn't change the conditions of creation to prevent such corruption; much less would Milton try to prevent the possibility of corruption by a government intervention that could only be tyranny. Such are the necessary conditions of freedom.

Milton's hostility to mammon in *The Likeliest Means* can be fully explained by his critique of clerical greed. Placing mammon before God was indeed a kind of idolatry, as Hawkes notes, one that was practiced by the clergy and enabled by the government. Greed was the problem, not "hire," the practice of rewarding a needed service with money or goods.

Far from finding the market hostile to Christianity, we have seen that for Milton a free market is the best way to reform the church: a free labor market for ministers is precisely "the likeliest means to remove hirelings from the church." Free the church from forced tithes, and the market will serve to expunge any "hirelings," ministers whose motivation is mercenary.

To his contemporaries, especially after the Restoration in 1660, Milton was clearly on the "wrong side of history," on tithes and every other political and religious issue of the day. But from our standpoint, he was ahead of his time, moving with the larger tide of history. Forced tithes were a relic of the sacred in English society, along with monarchy, aristocracy, and state-sponsored religion. What authorized these various structures in society was their connection to divine tradition; they were not well rationalized from a modern perspective. Milton's characterization of forced tithing as "violence" and "extortion" (309) recalls René Girard's famous thesis about the connection of violence to the sacred. The "violence" to conscience is metaphorical, of course, but the laws compelling tithes were administered with physical force.

Milton found support for desacralization in the New Testament:

And the tenth part, though once declar'd holy, is declared now to be no holier than the

other nine, by that command to Peter, Act. 10. 15. 28: whereby all distinction of holy and unholy is removed from all things (312)

Milton here refers to a New Testament passage that is usually interpreted to mean that Old Testament food restrictions, and Judaic ritual prescriptions in general, have been suspended for Christians, including, according to Milton, the tithe requirement. Milton's phrase, "all distinction of holy and unholy is removed from all things," is striking, since the concept of the holy is central to Judeo-Christian religion. When we remember Milton's assertion of the priesthood of all believers (312), however, it's clear that the holy remains but is not to be separated out as taboo as anymore. Milton anticipates William Blake's doctrine that "Everything that lives is holy." The everyday life of believers is to be holy; holiness is not to be a privilege of monks, priests, and nuns anymore. This is a radical revision of the concept of the holy. The sacred will be integrated into the fabric of everyday life.

How, then, is the danger of the sacred, in Girardian terms, the danger of mimetic competition leading to violence, to be alleviated? Milton, of course, did not think of the question in these terms. For Milton, the point was, first, to do away with all forms of priestly privilege. Second, while all ceremonial requirements were to be discarded, the corollary was his insistence upon the highest moral standards for Christians—the democratization of monastic discipline characteristic of Puritanism.[\[12\]](#)

Because of his idealistic conception of the minister's calling, Milton doesn't discuss any possibility of differential selection of and rewards for ministers. But without state controls, and according to the free market principles he advocates, merit would serve precisely this function. We know from his other writings that Milton considered merit as the primary qualification for public status, to the extent that Milton's God, in *Paradise Lost*, declares even Christ "By merit more than birthright the Son of God" (3.309).

In a free market, the inevitable result of rewarding merit is competition. Congregations will compete to attract the best ministers, and ministers will compete for the best congregations. There could well be a mimetic dimension to such competition, because of the effects of reputation; but essentially it is a rational process that rewards talent and discipline. To some extent, competition is a human, even biological, constant. On the ancient battlefield, in hand-to-hand combat, for example, status means little: only ability. But traditional societies limit competition by means of divinely-sanctioned hierarchy; and we should ask why, given that free market competition seems so innocuous.

As Ernest Gellner puts this point, traditional societies are governed by coercion and force, while modern societies are characterized by production and trade (176-80). The assertion of status in traditional societies was an expression of thinly-veiled force, with the aristocracy and the priesthood working sometimes in tension but mostly hand in hand. Émile Durkheim saw correctly that the power of the sacred is the power of the community, its potential for

collective violence. The representation (and ritual performance) of the sacred in traditional societies often serves (directly or indirectly) to govern the distribution of desirable goods, avoiding competition, and thus containing the threat of violence, the Hobbesian war of all against all. Destructive competition breaks out only occasionally in the form of raw power struggles. But somehow, in modern Western societies, competition is relatively unconstrained and serves to rationalize the distribution of power and resources within a state, according to the rule of law. Milton's proposal exemplifies the process by which the sacred, as per our anthropological definition, is rationalized and thus integrated into society. In economic terms, the resources, the capital, that formerly went to tithes would be redirected to more productive uses, both within and without the church.

Historians have long recognized the anomalous nature of what's called "the rise of the West," the shift to a free market, capitalism, and the modern state—characterized by individual rights and limited government—along with the decline of traditional hierarchies.[\[13\]](#) Max Weber's thesis about the connection of the Protestant ethic to the spirit of capitalism is generally dismissed today, on the grounds that the Protestant ethic actually condemned the pursuit of wealth, just as Milton condemned mammon among the clergy.[\[14\]](#) (Weber, of course, was well aware of this paradox.) In general, critics of the Weber thesis start with the commonsense observation that the actions characteristic of Protestantism and the actions characteristic of capitalism are quite distinct and bear no necessary connection. It's possible to discuss the historical development of capitalism in considerable detail without mentioning religion.[\[15\]](#) The psychological attitudes that Weber emphasizes are rather nebulous and, at this late date, there is no way to establish a correlation using the kind of empirical research that modern sociologists favor. Weber's critics have proposed, with considerable ingenuity, that the economic habits of Protestants were derived from England's mercantile culture, rather than the other way around;[\[16\]](#) or that capitalism thrived only when Protestantism declined.[\[17\]](#)

Critics of the Weber thesis tend to focus on narrow points. For example, they point out that Puritans were actually a minority in Early Modern England (the Church of England can be regarded as closer to Catholicism than Protestantism);[\[18\]](#) and that industrial development in England was sometimes more intensive in the areas that were less Puritan. It's also pointed out that we can find little evidence that Protestants regarded success in business as evidence of salvation, as Weber proposed. These critics tend to take a very narrow view of Protestantism, and they fasten on isolated claims of Weber without confronting the larger implications. It's very possible that Weber was mistaken about some of the specific psychological mechanisms that led to the association of Protestantism and capitalism.

I do not propose to defend the Weber thesis in detail but rather to explore the correlation of Protestantism and the rise of the West in terms of the unique features of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

We need to remember that Protestantism was a revival (or reinvention, if you prefer) of New Testament Christianity, with the critique of Jewish ceremonialism transferred to Catholicism. And Christ's critique of priestly hypocrisy was a continuation of the Jewish prophetic tradition and derived ultimately from the iconoclasm of the Mosaic revelation. It's widely recognized that the Jewish and Christian religions are unique in world history, and, as we'll see, they bear an indisputable connection to Modernity.

The ancient Hebrews founded their identity on a rejection of the ancient world's priestly, polytheistic hierarchies (See *Sacred Discontent* by Herbert Schneidau). Fully-developed Jewish monotheism was unique in rejecting all other gods as false and non-existent. Ancient gods tended to be partisan and tribal but not hostile to the concept of existence of others. Foreign gods were commonly appropriated and assimilated to a nation's pantheon after a military victory. As Jan Assmann has shown convincingly in a number of important articles and books, there is an identifiable trend towards monotheism even before the Mosaic revelation—but it tended toward a philosophical concept of “the God beyond god(s),” (i.e., a logical deduction of the underlying unitary basis for the sacred) and was in principle not hostile to polytheism or foreign gods.^[19] True, one's god could be “jealous” before Moses, but largely as an expression of national rivalry. Assmann argues persuasively that the ancient Hebrews were the first to make the move of rejecting foreign gods, as gods, and to assert an absolutely transcendent, singular God.

The Hebrews invented the idea of idolatry, which went hand in hand with a rejection of divine hierarchy. The one true God levels out the hierarchy of gods and divinized men; God is absolutely transcendent such that all humans are relatively equal.^[20] Assmann points out that the second commandment prohibition of “graven images” is essentially political, directed not at images as such, but rather the support images give to the political hierarchy:

Idolatry primarily means the legitimization of the state in terms of divine representation. The state presents itself in its images, symbols, and ceremonies as a representative of the divine. From the viewpoint of the Bible, this is idolatry. From the viewpoint of Egypt, however, it is precisely for this that the state was created. . . . the Egyptians believed the gods to be remote and hidden, having withdrawn from earth and made themselves invisible. In lieu of their corporal presence, they installed the state on earth to represent them in the form of kings, images, and sacred animals. . . . the king acts as representative of the creator, installed on earth “for ever and ever” in order to establish “Ma'at” [true order and justice] and to expel disorder. . . . The prohibition against images means, in the first place, that the “living God” (*Elohim hayim*) must not be represented. Images contradict the real presence of the divine implied by the idea of the covenant. The latter is a form both political and “living” reflecting God's turning toward the world. Images are media of a “magical” representation of an absent divine power and therefore imply or presuppose the idea of divine absence. The “living God” hides and reveals himself as he chooses and forbids any attempt at a magical

summoning of his presence. (Assmann 87)

The biblical critique of idolatry was fundamentally a critique of a political theology that united religion and state. Arguably, the most important innovation of the Axial period was this critique. The separation of religion and state was desirable and possible for the ancient Jews because of their peripheral position in the Babylonian and then the Roman empire. Theodore Dalrymple makes the valuable observation that Christianity, unlike Islam, tended toward separation of church and state from its beginning, because of the marginal status of Jews and then Christians within the Roman empire (288). This separation was never stable, however, and the medieval Church sometimes achieved hegemony in the political sphere. The seventeenth century in England saw political reforms which led to a large degree of religious freedom and the separation of church and state in Western Modernity. Milton's tract against compulsory tithes is essentially an argument for the separation of church and state.

Hebrew monotheism also rejects magic, a crucial move that bears fruit with the emergence of modern science in the 17th century. Max Weber recognized that the ancient Israeli rejection of magic was singular, a world-historical event that contributed to the eventual development of Modernity (see Swedberg 309).

The Jewish prophets continued the Mosaic critique of idolatry and applied it to Jewish legalism and "backsliding": the tendency to revert to polytheism. Jesus, in turn, radicalized the prophetic critique of ceremonialism and minimized the law, reducing the Law and the Prophets to two commandments: love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Protestants revived this iconoclastic strain and applied it widely to existing religious practices.

Protestant iconoclasm, however, could not be restricted to medieval traditions. The critique of idolatry, magic, and superstition was simply too powerful to be limited to Catholicism. It created a skepticism about the divine nature of political authority that contributed significantly to the English Revolution, the destruction of divine-right monarchy, as well as modern science and secularization. It is no exaggeration to say that iconoclasm is the essence of modern culture and criticism. Critics today continue to ferret out the last vestiges of the sacred in our cultural and philosophical traditions, and modern art is overtly iconoclastic.^[21] The detractors of Weber's thesis generally ignore the role of Protestant iconoclasm. Yet the destruction of a magical world-view and associated religious-political institutions is perhaps the most important condition for capitalism as well as modern science. Milton's condemnation of the tithing system is just one small example of such "creative destruction." Milton also denounced a political system based on divine right and inherited status, arguing instead for one based on merit.

Iconoclasm supports capitalism by freeing the West from inherited traditions that can inhibit innovation and efficiency. A necessary condition for Modernity is the freedom that

comes from the iconoclastic rejection of traditional, divinely-sanctioned institutions like aristocracy and established religion. Freedom is necessary for the belief in progress that fuels economic change and growth.

Iconoclasm, however, does not always lead to progress. No one was more iconoclastic than the Communists in Russia and China. Reformers are almost always iconoclasts in name, but revolution may lead simply to regime change. We know that traditional forms of the sacred function to enable social order, by repressing the possibilities for destructive conflict, but simultaneously repressing certain possibilities for progress. The loosening of sacred taboos releases these mimetic tensions for good and bad. How do modern societies prevent such competition from reverting back to what one may call “gangsterism,” by which entrenched factions prey upon the disenfranchised? We must constantly revise our laws to try and prevent gangsterism, to stay one step ahead of those who try to game the system, but we are never completely successful. As sacred taboos are loosened, we actually become more mimetic, culturally, because there is more freedom, more avenues and rewards for mimetic competition. Population growth, mass media, and now social media make Modernity into a mimetic hothouse of sorts. For these reasons, the question of social order remains; the threat of violence within modern societies is still real today (but see Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of our Nature: Why Violence has Declined*).

Modernity witnesses the rise of totalitarian states like Nazi Germany and Stalinist USSR, but the most economically successful modern states are not totalitarian. How is this possible? The minimizing of sacred and quasi-sacred taboos is important but not enough by itself. A necessary condition for the political freedoms of Modernity is a populace capable of internal moral discipline, a development that Weber, Gellner, and others have attributed to Protestantism and, by extension, the Judeo-Christian tradition. Among nominally-free countries today, widespread corruption, not the long-term effects of colonization, remains as the most significant barrier to economic prosperity. What we call corruption, of course, is really the more traditional way of doing business: the exchange of favors between tribe or group members, and bias against all outside the group. Such behavior is rational in a society dominated by factions, in which everyone is looking out only for their short-term interests. But such short-sightedness makes economic investment and development difficult or impossible. Capitalism does not thrive under a government with endemic corruption, which can sometimes take nominally legal forms, e.g., when special interest groups, in and out of the government, receive resources disproportionate to their contribution to society. Established ministers in Milton’s England are a minor example, and it’s significant that Milton condemned them on moral grounds as corrupt.

The remarkable moral and work discipline (work as a moral or spiritual duty) of Early Modern Protestants has been recognized by Weber, Gellner, and others as an important condition for the development of capitalism, making possible the trust that is essential between trade partners, investors, and producers. By “moral discipline,” I don’t mean to

suggest that Protestants in particular were morally superior to other groups of the period. Such discipline is both internal and cultural, a feature of a larger culture that respects law and limits the tendency of rulers to aggrandizement: what Alan Macfarlane has called “the culture of capitalism,” which, as he shows, was already well-established in England by the 16th century, and that has roots going back to the 14th century at least.[\[22\]](#)

We can understand such moral discipline better by examining its place in the larger Judeo-Christian tradition. The ancient Hebrews made the written law, which is partially ritual but largely moral, the center of their religious practice.[\[23\]](#) The place of morality, the establishment of justice, in the Hebrew religion was unusual in the ancient Middle East, which traditionally separated religion and morality (as concern with justice), with religion concerned mainly with ritual practice.[\[24\]](#) Moses and the Prophets realized, in effect, that the function of religion is essentially ethical. Integrating justice into religion allowed for the separation of religion and state. Making justice the focus of religion freed the Jews from servitude to the state, the traditional locus of justice. The focus on the law in Jewish religion serves to internalize the commandments as personal values. The prophets emphasized justice and faith over ritual sacrifice. As an iconoclastic religion, Judaism is minimalist; reducing the numbers of gods, the role of priests, and the whole ritual apparatus; while placing ethics at its core. But the Jewish religion still distinguished sharply between Jews and Gentiles. Christianity, on the other hand, deepens the emphasis on morality by discarding most Jewish ritual practices, and doing away with all distinction between Jew and Gentile in the new, Christian dispensation, which is embodied most effectively in the Sermon on the Mount, a masterpiece of ethical and religious reform.

Christ iconoclastically radicalized the Jewish emphasis on law as morality, rejecting ritual prescriptions as legalistic, and calling for no less than moral perfection, in anticipation of the Kingdom of God. He raised the bar for morality in the Sermon on the Mount, for example, by prohibiting not just the act of adultery but even the feeling of lust. Christian morality is by definition deeply internalized. The Protestants revived Christ’s teaching and tried, at least, to take it quite literally.

Weber quite rightly linked the Protestant conception of calling to the capitalist work ethic. The concept of calling can be derived ultimately from the ancient Hebrew idea of national election, an original and influential model of identity. Election is intimately connected to the Judeo-Christian emphasis on morality. Monotheism, election, iconoclasm, and the Law form a tightly-bound complex of ideas that are governed by the same logic. The requirements of the Law in Judaism are linked to the covenant between God and Israel in the Torah. Israel’s status as a nation chosen by God for a special destiny in history is dependent upon their fulfilling the Law, which is both ritual and moral. Those who receive special favor from God must be prepared for special duties. They will be a “light to the gentiles,” bringing a new form of religion to the world. The Jews were able to interpret every defeat and failure as further evidence of God’s favor only by virtue of their chosen status. The idea that “whom

the Lord loves he chastens” (Hebrews 12.6) is implied in God’s election of Israel from the beginning. Christianity, as we know, does away with the ritual requirements of Judaism, the distinction between Jew and Gentile; and it makes election both universal and individual, through conversion, which is often experienced as a calling or election. Christian election in turn requires moral discipline. With Protestantism, the idea of calling is extended to one’s work in this world, a move that Weber recognizes as important. One’s job—whether a carpenter, farmer, merchant, or industrialist—becomes a spiritual calling to be pursued with monastic discipline. The idea that success in one’s calling could be interpreted as evidence of salvation is actually foreign, however, to any rigorous understanding of Christianity, and Weber placed too much emphasis on this particular hypothesis. Christian iconoclasm warns against placing too much emphasis on appearances such as worldly success.

We find three characteristics of the Judeo-Christian tradition that are crucial ingredients to the development of Capitalism and Modernity: iconoclasm, election, and internalized moral discipline. All three can be traced back to the Mosaic revelation, although their development in Christianity and Protestantism is equally important. Iconoclasm and moral discipline make possible greater political freedom, and freedom is a key condition for the development of a dynamic, capitalist economy. No one believes that the behaviors characteristic of capitalism are “natural,” but trade and exchange are as old as our species, and investment, understood in the widest sense, is also universal. For example, the early hominid shaping a stone ax invests his time and effort in the hope of a future reward. Political freedom makes possible the development of these characteristic human behaviors in new spheres.

Going back to Milton and the Tithing controversy, we can find all of the above three elements in Milton’s pamphlet and other works. First, his argument against state sponsorship of tithes is iconoclastic and supports a free market among ministers and congregations. Second, internalized moral discipline and rewarding merit are values found throughout his oeuvre. And third, Milton clearly saw himself as a member of the elect, and in *Areopagitica*, he suggests that England is a chosen nation. Milton’s biblical fundamentalism may appear reactionary today, but his ideas on politics and religion are actually quite progressive by any standard.

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Notes

[1] On the background and history of the tithing controversy, see Margaret James and Austin Woolrych in "Works Cited" below.

[2] Milton mentions that the English are "the only people of all Protestants left still undeliverd, from the oppressions of a Simonious decimating clergie" (*Likeliest Means* 275).

[3] Tithes were originally figured as a percentage of the yield of the land, but since England's economy had become more mercantile, the tax was figured in different ways for different kind of income, leading to various inequities. For examples of such inequities, see John Osborne, *An Indictment Against Tythes*, p. 12, published the same year as Milton's pamphlet.

[4] See Margaret James on the political importance of tithes.

[5] See Vincent Pecora for a good account of secularization and the controversies over its meaning.

[6] See also Milton's *A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes* advocating freedom of worship, published in 1659, the same year as his tract on tithing.

[7] See Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

[8] All Milton quotations are from *The Likeliest Means* unless otherwise noted.

[9] Milton's God, of course, claims that in the long run the catastrophe of the fall will bring about increased good. See *Paradise Lost*, bk. 1.209-220.

[10] Milton's *A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes*, published in 1659, argues for the complete separation of church and state.

[11] Compare John Osborne's *An Indictment Against Tythes*, which emphasizes the ignorance and incompetence of Anglican ministers under the forced tithing system.

[12] On Milton's emphasis on moral and spiritual purity in his self-concept and self-representation, see Stephen M. Fallon.

[13] See William H. McNeill's *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community*.

[14] For critical assessments of Weber's thesis, see Christine Eisenberg, Richard F. Hamilton, Jürgen Kocka, and Winthrop S. Hudson.

[15] For such an account, see Christine Eisenberg.

[16] See Eisenberg, p.81, who attributes this idea to Richard Henry Tawney in his *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*.

[17] See Hudson (67).

[18] See Eisenberg (80).

[19] Assmann is careful to acknowledge that, strictly speaking, we know nothing about the historical Moses; what is important for his argument, he notes, is the way that the name of Moses has become associated with monotheism and accompanying developments. In the same way, when I mention Moses, I refer to him as he has been received in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

[20] On the politics of the Mosaic revelation, see Assmann, *Of God and Gods*, 76-89; and Seth L. Sanders.

[21] Consider, for example, Picasso's deformation of images, especially in his Cubist phase, and the complete repudiation of representation in Abstract Expressionism.

[22] See Alan Macfarlane, *The Culture of Capitalism*.

[23] On the importance of writing and scripturalism for the developments of the Axial age, see Gellner 71-90; Assmann, 90-105; and Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew*.

[24] See Assmann, 11-12.