



PREDESTINATION AND CERTITUDE: A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE ARGUMENTATION OF “WEBER THESIS”

Yudong Wang

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details: Postgraduate Students, School of Humanities, Shenzhen University, Shenzhen, China

Corresponding Author: Yudong Wang

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Abstract

This essay re-examines Max Weber’s argument in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, focusing on his employ of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. While Weber identifies predestination as a key psychological drive behind Puritans’ worldly asceticism, his argument introduces non-predestinarian elements, leading to latent contradictions. Through engagement with scholarly critiques and Weber’s methodology of ideal types, this essay explores how Weber reconciles contradictions between predestination and the need for salvation certitude. It also argues that Weber’s argument sacrifices historical nuance for conceptual clarity, necessitating further study of religious practice and the dynamics of religious belief.

Keywords: *Weber Thesis, Predestination, Certitude of salvation, Ideal Types, Worldly Asceticism*

Introduction

In his work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber (1864-1920) posits an “elective affinity” between the religious ethic of “worldly asceticism” in Calvinism and the development of capitalism – a thesis commonly referred to as the “Weber Thesis.” While Weber’s identification of worldly asceticism as a catalyst for capitalist rationalization remains influential, his central argument that the psychological anxiety induced by the doctrine of predestination paradoxically contributed to active economic practices has latent internal inconsistencies: if predestination irrevocably predetermined salvation, how could believers actively seek certitude of salvation through systematic worldly labour?

This essay argues the Weber’s paradox not as a theological error but as a methodological necessity, proceeding in three stages. First, it deconstructs Weber’s treatment of predestination and salvation certitude, highlighting points where non-predestinarian elements enter his framework. Second, it evaluates scholarly critiques through the prism of Weber’s methodological commitments, arguing that disputes over theological accuracy misunderstand his ideal-typical approach. Finally, it demonstrates how Weber’s “contradictions” transcend narrow historical debates to offer a model for analysing belief-driven rationalisation processes.

I. Weber’s Argumentative Process

1. The Spirit of Capitalism and Luther’s Concept of “Calling”

At the outset of his work, Weber cites statistical data to demonstrate that Protestants participated in modern economic activities at a significantly higher rate than Catholics, suggesting a potential affinity between Protestantism and capitalism. He then identifies a distinct “ethos” in Benjamin Franklin’s writings – one that treats profit-making as an end in itself while rejecting all forms of indulgence. This “worldly asceticism” constitutes the “spirit of capitalism,” a conduct of life with “the character of an ethically coloured maxim.”¹ The capitalist spirit regards secular work and labour as a “calling” (*Beruf*), which inherently contains non-rational elements. Weber seeks to trace its religious origins.

Weber examines Luther’s concept of “calling.” Luther’s Reformation erased the Catholic distinction between commandments (*praecepta*) for priests and counsels (*consilia*) for laypeople, transforming the ascetic demands previously imposed on Catholic monks into obligations for ordinary believers in secular life: individuals should steadfastly adhere to their specific vocations and labour, as these are divinely ordained. However, Luther’s notion of “calling” retained traditionalist undertones, emphasizing submission to divine will rather than valuing the ascetic-meritorious practices of Catholic tradition. Consequently, it carried a certain passivity and could not directly give rise to the worldly asceticism of the capitalist spirit.

2. The Doctrine of Predestination

Weber's subsequent analysis begins with Calvinism. He emphasizes the need to study theological doctrines to clarify the "psychological drives" that religious ideas provide for individuals to adhere to specific conduct of life.² The goal is not to portray the capitalist spirit as the lifelong aim of certain Puritans; rather, their worldly objective was salvation of the soul, and the pursuit of wealth was vehemently condemned – a stance fundamentally at odds with the capitalist spirit. Weber resolves this paradox by introducing the concept of "unintendedness":³

We shall thus have to admit that the cultural consequences of the Reformation were to a great extent, perhaps in the particular aspects with which we are dealing predominantly, unforeseen and even unwished-for results of the labours of the reformers.⁴

Weber then cites excerpts from the *Westminster Confession of Faith* to illustrate Calvinism's central doctrine of predestination, namely, God has eternally predestined some to salvation and others to damnation, a decree entirely independent of human merit or will. Traditional Catholic means of salvation – confession and sacraments – were rendered obsolete. No human effort could ascertain or assist in election, for those who attempt to fathom this divine mystery "engulf themselves in a deadly abyss".⁵ The unknowability of one's salvific status generated intense psychological anxiety among Puritans, leading them to reject sensory pleasures as irrelevant to salvation.

The doctrinal foundation of predestination raises a critical question: How could the anxiety or despair induced by predestination align with an inner-worldly orientation, motivating action of life? In other words, why did predestination not drive Puritans toward passive fatalism?

Weber does not address fatalism directly in the main text. Instead, he introduces the concept of "certitude of salvation" (*certitudo salutis*). He notes that Calvin's rejection of probing God's inscrutable will proved psychologically untenable for ordinary Puritans. For them, the certitude of salvation "became of absolutely dominant importance."⁶ In a note, Weber references Chapter XVIII of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which asserts that true believers may attain assurance of their election through prolonged wait and struggle.⁷

This raises a contradiction: If Puritans sought certitude of salvation, did this not contradict the doctrine of predestination? If Weber was aware of this tension, his argument implies that predestination was effectively modified or abandoned. However, he avoids stating this conclusion explicitly. Instead, he maintains the language of predestination while proposing two pastoral advices to alleviate believers' anxiety:

On the one hand it is held to be an absolute duty to consider oneself chosen, and to combat all doubts as temptations of the devil, since lack of self-confidence is the result of insufficient faith, hence of imperfect grace. The exhortation of the apostle to make fast one's own call is here interpreted as a duty to attain certainty of one's own election and justification in the daily struggle of life... On the other hand, in order to attain that self-confidence intense worldly activity is recommended as the most suitable means. It and it alone disperses religious doubts and gives the certainty of grace.⁸

The pastoral advices reveal that, in Weber's framework, the demand for certitude of grace had superseded the original doctrine of predestination. The strict doctrine of predestination faded, leaving only the Reformation's core tenet – *sola fide* (justification by faith alone), wherein salvation is marked by faith itself rather than human works.

3. Weber's Interpretation of the Problem of Salvation Certitude

Although Weber does not discuss the contradiction between predestination and the certitude of salvation in the main text, he expands on this in notes. He notes that some view predestination as merely a "theologian's doctrine" rather than a creed genuinely embraced by the populace. Those holding this view deduce through "purely deductive" reasoning that predestination inevitably leads to fatalism or "antinomianism." Historical materials, however, demonstrate that predestination profoundly influenced ordinary people, who were "thoroughly imbued with predestination." Thus, purely doctrinal inferences cannot adequately explain the phenomenon. Weber emphasizes that while predestination could theoretically lead to fatalism, theologians addressing fatalism often connect it to the emotional dimension of religious faith, whereas the certitude of salvation arises from a rational need.⁹

This explanation reveals Weber's attention to the relationship between doctrine and "practical religious interests,"¹⁰ though the precise distinction between the two remains somewhat obscure. In another note, Weber situates the problem of salvation certitude within a broader typological framework:

The question of *certitudo salutis* itself has, however, for every non-sacramental religion of salvation, whether Buddhism, Jainism, or anything else, been absolutely fundamental; that must not be forgotten. It has been the origin of all psychological drives of a purely religious character.¹¹

It becomes evident that the crux of Weber's discussion on predestination, as well as his search for the religious motives or

psychological drives behind the capitalist spirit mentioned from the outset of his work, ultimately rests on the problem of salvation certitude, which itself belongs to non-predestinarian doctrinal content. However, both of Weber's explanations remain limited to brief comparisons and conclusory statements, lacking detailed presentation of research materials or rigorous analytical elaboration.

4. Examination of State of Grace and the Creation of Salvation

Having established the need for certitude of salvation, the subsequent question concerns how Puritans examined their state of grace to attain self-assurance – i.e., the basis for salvation certitude.

Weber again contrasts Lutheranism and Calvinism regarding their modes of communion with God: the former achieves passive, emotional “mystical union” through resting in God where believers become “vessels of the Holy Spirit”, while the latter emphasizes the absolute separation between finite and infinite. Since God cannot directly enter human souls but only operate objectively through them, believers become “tool of the divine will.”¹² The former manifests as mystical religious sentiment; the latter finds expression in the ascetic conduct and vocational labour discussed later in the text. How, then, could one discern whether such objective effects stemmed from divine grace?

If we now ask further, by what fruits the Calvinist thought himself able to identify true faith? the answer is: by a type of Christian conduct which served to increase the glory of God.¹³

Weber mentions that believers could examine their state of grace through God's natural law (*lex naturalis*), particularly by comparing themselves with the soul-states of biblical elects. This issue proves crucial, as it represents another breakthrough beyond predestinarian doctrine following the establishment of salvation certitude – implying that humans could actually discern God's inscrutable will. However, Weber neither specifies how such comparisons or discernments were conducted nor evaluates their validity. It appears that he considers his argument complete once establishing believers' self-conviction that their actions derive from divine operation.

Moreover, influenced by predestinarian doctrine, Puritans are rejected from all possibility of attaining salvation through good works. Thus, good works could not serve as means but only as signs of salvation. Yet Weber introduces a paradoxical formulation:

They [good works] are the technical means, not of purchasing salvation, but of getting rid of the fear of damnation. In this sense they are occasionally referred to as directly necessary for salvation or the possession of salvation (*possessio salutis*) is made conditional on them. In practice this means that God helps those who help themselves.¹⁴

The transformation of good works from anxiety-relieving signs to necessary conditions for salvation substantially deviates from predestination's original meaning. Weber essentially argues that the boundary between “certifying” and “purchasing” salvation became blurred for believers, who thereby “created” their own salvation. The cognitive process enabling this transformation, and the criteria by which such manufactured salvation was validated, remains unexplained.

In summary, through the above analysis we observe that Weber introduces multiple non-predestinarian concepts and practices of Puritans throughout his argumentation, resulting in some latent contradictions. These non-predestinarian elements and the cognitive transitions among believers are often crucial but only remain peripheral to the main argumentative thread and insufficiently accounted for. This raises the question: How should we understand and interpret the inadequacies in Weber's argumentation?

II. Critiques and Defences of the Weber Thesis

Scholars have raised critiques and defences from various perspectives regarding the issues in Weber's examination of the doctrine of predestination and certitude of salvation.

1. On the Doctrine of Predestination

Malcolm H. MacKinnon argues that Weber misread the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. According to MacKinnon, the Confession contains no crisis of evidential salvation but instead represents the covenant theology developed by Puritanism after Calvin himself. This theology abandoned the deterministic doctrines of predestination and *sola fide*, shifting toward a voluntarist theology that provided explicit assurance of salvation, thereby believers' anxiety derived from nowhere.¹⁵ As our earlier analysis shows, Weber relies heavily on non-predestinarian content as pivotal to his argument, and MacKinnon's critique supports this observation. Their divergence lies in MacKinnon's denial of any practical influence exerted by predestination, whereas Weber, through the lens of “unintendedness,” posits that the very role of these non-predestinarian elements stemmed from the original doctrine of predestination.¹⁶

David Zaret, however, contends that MacKinnon's critique of Weber is untenable. Zaret asserts that MacKinnon's argument presupposes an unrealistic coherence in the writings of religious elites or theologians, assuming they must maintain doctrinal consistency. Yet extensive textual evidence reveals flaws in MacKinnon's interpretation of covenant theology. Calvinism and Puritanism were not diametrically opposed but incorporated both deterministic and voluntarist elements. Their internal

contradictions demonstrate the absence of doctrinal uniformity. Instead, theologians wielded interpretive “flexibility,” which, Zaret argues, enabled the “initiatives to change a hostile, recalcitrant world” central to Weber’s concerns.¹⁷

2. The Relationship Between Doctrine and Practice

Guy Oakes maintains that MacKinnon’s focus on theological doctrine does not contribute to resolving the issue. Oakes’ defence of Weber clarifies some underdeveloped details in Weber’s work, aligning with Weber’s observation in the note that the beliefs genuinely held by the populace often diverged significantly from theologians’ doctrines.

Oakes distinguishes three roles – producers, distributors, and consumers of religious ideas, corresponding to theologians, clergy, and lay believers; correspondingly, each group generates distinct forms of religious knowledge, differing in ethos, context of production, and practical application. For Weber, Oakes argues, the spiritual ethos of religious consumers holds greater significance. Weber’s explanatory focus lies not in theological doctrines themselves but rather in the practical and ethical consequences these doctrines generated in daily life. Thus, even if Weber misinterpreted theological doctrines, his thesis retains certain explanatory power.¹⁸ In Weber’s framework, believers’ practices are ontologically more fundamental than doctrinal tenets.¹⁹

The scholarly debates surrounding Weber’s treatment of predestination and certitude reveal a tension between doctrinal coherence and practical religious psychology. While MacKinnon critiques Weber’s alleged misreading of Calvinist theology, Zaret and Oakes reframe the issue by emphasizing the fluidity of religious ideas and the unintended effects in practice. These critiques, however, risk mixing theological subtleties with Weber’s methodological priorities. Disputes over historical accuracy, though valid, often overlook Weber’s central aim: to trace how religious ideas, even contradictory or unstable ones, generate psychological drives that rationalise action.

III. The Method of Ideal Types

When revisiting Weber’s stated purpose before examining Calvinism clarifies his approach, we could see that his concern was not with “what was theoretically and officially taught in the ethical compendia of the time”, but with how predestinarian doctrine generated the psychological drives that anchored people to specific conduct of life, or how doctrine interacted with “practical religious interests.” By analysing Weber’s methodology, we may better grasp both his narrative style and the scholars’ critiques discussed earlier.

We can of course only proceed by presenting these religious ideas in the artificial simplicity of ideal types, as they could at best but seldom be found in history. For just because of the impossibility of drawing sharp boundaries in historical reality we can only hope to understand their specific importance from an investigation of them in their most consistent and logical forms.²⁰

Weber explicitly acknowledges the limitations of his approach. He employs the construction of *ideal types* to analyse religious doctrines and individual faith. Ideal types are not reproductions of historical or objective facts but “utopian” world-images or abstract thought-structures. Adopting a genetic perspective, they extract and emphasize certain core features of the subject deemed essential to the research question, while establishing connections between these selected traits.²¹ This methodological tool enables researchers to explain phenomena through clearer conceptual frameworks and causal relationships.

As Zaret’s critique cited earlier illustrates, religious doctrines often lack internal consistency and may harbour contradictions. Similarly, individual religious life is profoundly complex, concealing differences and conflicts between ideas and emotions. Without the abstraction and simplification inherent to ideal types, we could neither comprehend complicated structures nor establish meaningful connections between empirical reality and universal beliefs. In another work, Weber elaborates furthermore on ideal types:

The author must take the liberty of being “unhistorical,” in the sense that the ethics of individual religions are presented systematically and essentially in greater unity than has ever been the case in the flux of their actual development. Rich contrasts which have been alive in individual religions, as well as incipient developments and ramifications, must be left aside; and the features that to the author are important must often be presented in greater logical consistency and less historical development than was actually the case... The author has always underscored those features in the total picture of a religion which have been decisive for the fashioning of the practical way of life, as well as those which distinguish one religion from another.²²

Ideal types prioritize the quality of values over the quantity of causalities,²³ and logical coherence over empirical reproducibility. Thus, deeper relationships like “elective affinities” often emerge as “unintendedness.”

Regarding predestination, we may summarize Weber’s concerns into two points. First, compared to emotional religious influences, he prioritizes rational factors – doctrinal elements capable of generating systematic ethical practices. Second, rather than focusing on theological elites’ academic texts, he emphasizes the religious ethos and practices of lay Puritans (consumers of religious ideas). The ideal type’s demand for high abstraction and logical rigor explains Weber’s dismissal of predestination’s potential slide into fatalism, instead tracing its path toward the need for certitude of salvation. Similarly, MacKinnon and Zaret’s

debate over historical nuances in Calvinist doctrine represents precisely the “ramifications” Weber deems extraneous to ideal-typical analysis.

Yet while ideal types abstract from reality, the construction of them remains inseparable from the researcher’s interpretive framework and value-laden concerns. The method requires pre-conceiving potential causal explanations, which may take the risk of tautological reasoning.²⁴ The unresolved critical junctures in Weber’s argument—particularly regarding the criteria for salvation certitude—may reflect this pitfall. Addressing these gaps would likely require examining both formal and informal sources to further study the pedagogy of pastoral groups and the psychological state of believers, and to reconstruct the interplay between doctrine and lived experience.²⁵

Conclusion

Regardless of its limitations, Weber’s study remains undoubtedly seminal. His ideal types of “predestination” and “certitude” pierce like a blade through the labyrinthine complexity of human faith, revealing starkly the immense power of religious ideas—the total separation between humanity and God paradoxically shattered divine enchantment, enabling humans to rediscover their capacity to dominate the material world.²⁶

The method of ideal types has no terminus; it “resembles a walker who, in each momentary posture, observes the surrounding world, the self, and their interrelations to construct a selectively affinitive ‘basis.’”²⁷ As contemporary scholars note, many features Weber attributed to Calvinism were not unique to it but shared across early modern Christianity. From a broader perspective, the study of rationalizing forces transcending denominational boundaries has only just begun.²⁸

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