
books in REVIEW

THOMAS STORCK

THE CATHOLIC ETHIC MADE POLITICALLY CORRECT

The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Community. By John E. Tropman. *Georgetown University Press.* 290 pages. \$24.95.

Catholics and Protestants have different theological doctrines. Does it follow that they have different ways of living, different "ethics"? According to the well-known maxim (and book) of Richard Weaver, "ideas have consequences." Thus we should not be surprised if theological differences have consequences at the level of everyday life. Actually, this concept of differing cultures caused by different theological systems has been around for a long time. After the Protestant Revolt a number of observers noticed differences between Catholic and Protestant countries, and after capitalism linked up with

the nascent industrial revolution, many noted that it was chiefly the Protestant countries that took advantage of the new and inhuman way of life that these two baneful forces fostered. In the early part of the 20th century Max Weber wrote his famous book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904). As part of his concern with the origins of capitalism, he necessarily included much material on how differing attitudes toward wealth and economic success affected everyday life.

John Tropman, a professor of social welfare and business at the University of Michigan, claims that he (Tropman) was the first to discuss a *Catholic ethic* as opposed to Weber's Protestant ethic: "Weber wrote his book about 100 years ago. Amazingly, over almost a century, no one introduced the idea of another ethic.... My 1986 article "The "Catholic Ethic" versus the "Protestant Ethic" was the first specifically to introduce the concept of a Catholic ethic." Tropman, however, is misinformed. Although the term

Catholic ethic may not have been used, the term *Catholic culture* has been used since at least the 1930s, and with pretty much the same meaning. Such writers as Jaime Balmes (back in the 19th century), Hilaire Belloc, the Jesuit George Bull, Amintore Fanfani, Michael Novak (in *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*), and many others (including this reviewer) have written extensively about the ways that Protestant and Catholic theological beliefs work themselves out in daily life.

Although some of these earlier authors were more concerned with how the Faith formed entire nations and cultures, Tropman is concerned principally with the U.S. — that is, with the Catholic subculture and its particular beliefs.

And there *are* differences in the everyday attitudes of Catholics and Protestants. Tropman focuses his discussion on the following: attitudes toward work, money, family, "fault-forgiveness," and helping others. He begins by pointing out the pervasiveness of the Protestant

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ethic in American culture: "Generally the concept of the Protestant ethic refers to a set of beliefs that support work — particularly, hard work — and give it a sort of transcendental and omnibus meaning and purpose. The Protestant ethic supports material and financial acquisition as opposed to sufficiency. In the Protestant ethic tradition, a person can never have too much money. Even people who are doing well should continue to persevere and acquire more.... The Protestant ethic tends to regard money as a symbol of and validation of success and achievement and thus transforms money from a tool to meet material needs into a symbol of fundamental character.... *Ipsa facto*, having money is good."

On the other hand, "the Catholic ethic is a community-centered pattern of values. The community of individuals is at least as important as — and perhaps more important than — any one individual. The Catholic ethic emphasizes connectivity, loyalty, and involvement. It will offer you direct assistance, may not push you as much, and, in some cases, may remember if someone or some group has offended your community, even in times past. It is people oriented, so it supports work because people do it, not because of the results it produces. Money is fine, but having it does not make you a good, or better, person...."

One interesting point Tropman makes is that in Europe the Catholic ethic had been in place for over a thousand

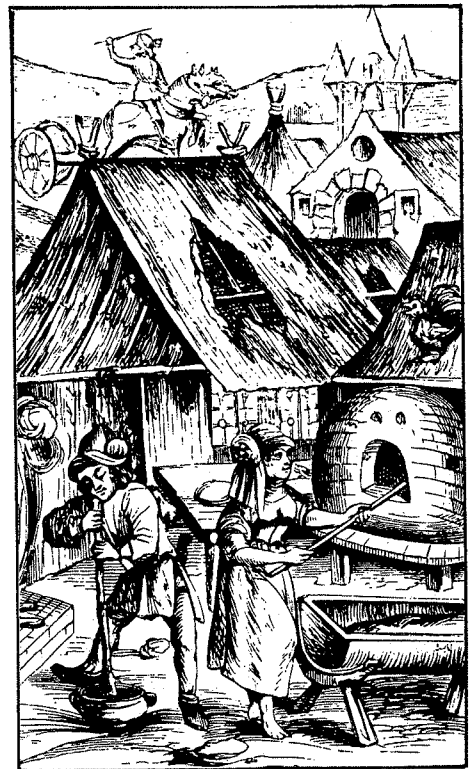
years before Protestantism came along. Thus, Protestantism and its culture have never achieved the same power as in the U.S., where the Protestant ethic came first and has ruled largely unopposed. (This is doubtless why capitalism tends to be more ruthless in the U.S. than in Europe, for example.) Thus, "In many ways, the Protestant ethic — and Protestantism itself — seemed to embody American values toward work and achievement."

Tropman points out that in a Catholic culture, work, though obviously important, "does not have sacred personal and transcendental meaning, nor does it become the *sine qua non* of social acceptance." For a Catholic, one's vocation is his calling to the priesthood or religious life or marriage, not his job.

Closely connected with work is money. In contrast to Protestantism, "in the Catholic ethic, money never became symbolized as anything but a means to an end — namely, provision for human need. It did not signify anything except the ability to provide daily bread. Money used as a product to produce more money (usury) was frowned upon."

On the other hand, "In the Protestant ethic, money is good, but more than simply good — money is symbolically good. Having money means success, and success is a proxy for God's favor, evidence of being among the elect." Tropman notes that Catholics tend to see themselves as simply trustees of the money they hold, a point emphatically made by St. Thomas Aquinas himself.

Tropman devotes a section of his book to showing that opinion polls support his thesis of the existence of a Catholic ethic and of its particular contents that he sketched in earlier chapters, although sometimes the statistical differences do not seem very large. This doubtless reflects that fact that, as Cardinal George pointed out a few years ago, many American Catholics are cultural Protestants. For example, 78.9 percent of Catholics supported the statement: "The strength of the country today is mostly based on the success of American business," while 81.8 percent of Protestants agreed. On some responses, though, Protestants seem a wee bit closer to a true Catholic ethic, as when 72.4 percent of Protestants but only 71.8 percent of Catholics agreed that "Too many children are being raised in day care centers these



days." Surely if, as Tropman claims, Catholics are more family oriented and less individualistic, the results should be the reverse. Tropman admits the inconsistency here, but on other poll items he does not. For example, 55.4 percent of Protestants agreed with the statement, "Books that contain dangerous ideas should be banned from public school libraries," whereas only 50.3 percent of Catholics agreed. Although one must recognize the ambiguity of what is meant by "dangerous ideas," if Catholics are more attuned to the demands of the community than of the individual, then Tropman is wrong to regard opposition to censorship as an expression of the Catholic ethic. On the contrary, it has been in part the individualistic notion of free expression, without regard for the common good, which has done much to destroy communities and families. On the question, "School boards ought to have the right to fire teachers who are known homosexuals," only 44.5 percent of Catholics agreed, while 59.8 percent of Protestants did. Doubtless this has something to do with the confused state of Catholic opinion — while the Church rightly admonishes us to avoid "unjust discrimination" (*Catechism*, #2358) toward homosexuals, many Catholics seem to equate this with any sort of discrimination at all.

This brings up one of the chief faults of Tropman's book. It too readily identifies the Catholic ethic with the ideas and positions that we in the U.S. refer to as "liberal." While the Church has always been a tireless advocate of the poor and of social justice, this

does not mean that every politically-correct cause merits Catholic approval. Tropman speaks of how Catholics in their approach to the poor did not make the officious distinction between the "deserving poor" and the "undeserving poor" that Protestants often did. Catholic soup kitchens were open to all, for example. And of course this is as it should be. But this is not to say that we should never attempt to frame welfare laws so that those able to work actually do work. I am not here endorsing the current U.S. welfare laws which force single mothers of young children to resort to day care. But I simply point out that it was St. Paul himself, a Catholic bishop, who wrote, "If any one will not work, let him not eat" (2 Thess. 3:10). Tropman regards this as a Protestant sentiment, but it is not. Of course, society and the state have the corresponding duty to see that jobs that pay a living wage are available and that the poor are not simply used as low-wage fodder in the capitalist industrial army. But the Catholic ethic is more complicated on this point than Tropman seems to think.

Tropman is surely right in arguing that there is a Catholic ethic, and he correctly identifies many elements within it. But he is far from being a traditional or even orthodox Catholic. He writes of the authoritarianism of Rome, calling "the hierarchy's opposition to female priests and women's issues...one of the oppressive sides to a strong traditionalistic family orientation," and includes an appendix written by the dissenter Gregory Baum. All this indicates that Tropman

does not understand that it is precisely traditional Catholicism, as lived in union with the Holy See and as exemplified by the saints, that formed the Catholic ethic. And it is precisely those who wish to assert the independence of the Church in the U.S. from Rome and promote theological dissent who would eventually water down and destroy (wittingly or unwittingly) any distinctive Catholic approach to life. All the appealing aspects of Catholic culture — its communitarianism, its festivity, its recognition of the value of leisure, its devotion to family, its lack of obsession with work and money — flow from nothing else but doctrinal and moral orthodoxy. Take orthodoxy away and eventually you end up as some kind of Protestant or secularist, with beliefs no one can predict. Tropman thus suffers from the same confusion that afflicted Andrew Greeley in *The Catholic Imagination* (2000), namely, supposing that one can have all the nice aspects of Catholicism without its doctrinal and moral rigor. Such "Catholicism" would last for two generations at most!

The Catholic Ethic and the Spirit of Community, then, is a helpful reminder that we Catholics are different — or ought to be. In this age when we seem afraid to affirm that we are the one true Church and that true doctrine will result in a healthy and attractive way of life, Tropman's book clearly has its uses. But without the hierarchical Church, without the Magisterium, without the commandments of God and the precepts of the Church, Catholicism would no longer be Catholicism. ■