

## **Religion and Commerce in Early Modern Europe**

Kristi L. Keuhn  
Social Studies Department  
Notre Dame de Sion College Preparatory School  
Kansas City, MO

NEH Seminar 2005

Class discussions about religious history inevitably turn to the question of whether religious ideals throughout history remain absolute or are relative to the social, political and economic trends of the time. For example, students are sometimes disturbed to learn that in early Christian history, conversion was often in response to economic or political benefits rather than religious fervor. Naturally, at the Catholic prep school where I teach, students want to believe religious ideals and rhetoric are absolute. Yet, when studying the role of religion in shaping societies, one cannot help but be struck by the fluidity of religious rhetoric. Although such a discovery may be obvious to some, it is important for students to understand that we still live in a world where people make important social and political decisions based on moral absolutes, with an insistence on traditional and unchangeable religious values. It is essential, therefore, that teachers of religious history promote discussion on the possible flexibility of religious ideologies: is religious rhetoric part of an unwavering, scriptural tradition, or do those who practice religion create the rhetoric? Moreover, do human self-interest and socio-economic change always trump religion? Are social ideologies always stronger than religious tradition? After studying the creation of a modern industrial economy in Europe for these five weeks, I am convinced that analyzing the evolution of religious rhetoric in early modern Europe, which is such a transitional phase of history, can illuminate how social, political, economic and cultural change can guide or completely alter the morals and ideologies of a society.

Eric Hobsbawm and Keith Wrightson both argue that the Industrial Revolution radically changed the social lives of Europeans beyond recognition: "It destroyed their old ways of living and left them free to discover or make for themselves new ones, if they could and knew how" (Hobsbawm, 58). Yet, there were few guidelines on how to adapt to this new way of life, and the response of many intellectuals from as early as the sixteenth century was to question the morality of early capitalism. As economic forces proved unwavering and proto-industrialization rapidly changed the society of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, intellectuals gradually

changed their tune, postulating that capitalism, private ownership and overseas trade were part of God's plan. Thus, observers of social change manipulated religious rhetoric to justify the new market society, which had become necessary for people's economic well-being. Indeed, numerous factors drove industrialization, including competition between leading commercial empires, new manufacturing technology, as well as increased government control of overseas trade and commerce. But religion, too, played a subtle role in changing the mindset of those who may have at first rejected the lifestyle that commercialization threatened to force upon society.

Moreover, changing religious rhetoric of the early modern era cannot be differentiated as strictly Protestant or Catholic, which I will address in full later in this essay. For now, it is clear from both the secondary and primary sources of this seminar that arguments for or against capitalism and trade were just as much based on humanism, mercantilism, and an early sense of nationalism, as they were on differing religious beliefs. While historians cannot deny that the Protestant Reformation had a hand in this change in beliefs about economic organization, there is no clear evidence to suggest that Protestants were more enlightened about participation in market society than Catholics. Also, Protestants were not the only ones to embrace individualism; rather, the move for Europeans to think more as individuals had been developing since the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when laymen and theologians alike began to seek more personal relationships with Christ. When the Protestant Reformation took hold and severely weakened the power of the papacy, Christians further explored and interpreted scripture for themselves, something that radical Catholics and Protestants would not have appreciated, but the path had nonetheless been opened. Without any clear state or church control, Christians in general felt free to adapt, manipulate and even reinterpret scripture to justify their new socio-economic lifestyles. Moreover, it is clear that early modern society began to recognize that the medieval aversion to making profit in a market society was no longer valid. Thus, while some Christians still claimed that the will of God was the "trump card in the determination of economic claims" (Wrightson, 334), most began to adjust their ideologies to fit human self-interest while also using religion to justify their new beliefs.

Thomas More's *Utopia* is a clear example of the medieval belief that capitalism was immoral and could not coexist with a Christian society. More saw the move towards enclosure in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as destroying the very foundation of medieval society—the self-sufficient peasant, who rarely had to look outside of his community for work. Enclosure,

private property and the increase in wage work would only, according to More, add to poverty and thievery. More claims it was the government's job to institute welfare and abolish private property in order to create a utopian society that would place work and spirituality first.

However, it is naïve to see More as a traditional, medieval Catholic. More was a Humanist, disillusioned with the corruption of the late medieval Church. His promotion of a communal society and religious toleration is most certainly not a medieval Catholic argument. Rather, More saw the possible problems that could result from capitalism and responded to these changes with some scriptural, but mostly Humanist, solutions. The *Utopian* prayer at the end of his treatise best shows More's manipulation of religious rhetoric to promote his own ideals about a communal and tolerant social organization: "Oh God, I acknowledge Thee to be my creator, my governor, and the source of all good things. I thank Thee for all Thy blessings, but especially for letting me live in the happiest possible society...if I am wrong, and if some other religion or social system would be better and more acceptable to Thee, I pray Thee in Thy goodness to let me know it...but if our system is indeed the best, and my religion the truest, then keep me faithful to both of them..."(More, 108). This prayer is a far cry from medieval Catholicism. More instead articulates his vision in terms that other Humanist Christians could understand and to which they could relate, and hopefully convince them of their Christian duty to protect society from detrimental economic change.

Little more than a century later, religious rhetoric concerning the economy took on less of an idealistic, Humanist tone and more of a mercantilist argument, with an emphasis on regional interests. Hugo Grotius' *Mare Liberum* draws on Roman philosophy and the Church fathers to assert freedom of the seas for trade; if the Dutch or any other nation were denied freedom to trade, it was appropriate to wage a "just war," a concept based upon the writings of St. Augustine. Although Grotius was Protestant and argued in religious terms, his personal spirituality has little to do with his argument. Instead, religious rhetoric is used as a tool in his defense of free seas and is rather haphazardly applied. For example, Grotius alters the Humanist perspective on private property, arguing that while God created the world in common for all humanity, private property could nonetheless be acquired through persistence and hard work. Yet, Grotius clearly does not believe that property should be too private. He claims since God placed different products in different regions of the world, nations should be open to sharing these products—in other words, trade was natural and part of the Divine plan and would lead to

the creation of friendships “engendered by mutual needs and resources” (*Free Seas*, 150, ed. Rowen). If a group of merchants or a nation dared to limit free trade, they would “destroy this most praiseworthy bond of human fellowship, remove the opportunities for doing mutual service, in a word to do violence to Nature herself” (151). The very fact that Grotius appeals to morality, ethics and faith demonstrates that religion remained a uniting factor in early modern society. Indeed, it is essential that we see the interdependence of economic aims and religious ideologies—unity can come from promoting both. Grotius appeals to this viewpoint—a good ruler and a good Christian should share the seas because God’s will ordains it. The Portuguese, who had committed “evil deeds” against the Dutch, were acting against God. The Dutch were in the same position as Moses and the Israelites when they fought the Amorites for a harmless passage—they had no choice but to engage in a just war, which in the case of the Dutch, was against the Portuguese (*Free Seas*, xii-xiv, trans. Hakluyt). Was Grotius a theologian like More? He certainly was not. But he was a master at propagandizing trade and the commercial enterprises of the Dutch by turning his defense into a religious matter.

One could certainly argue, as did Max Weber, that the differences in rhetoric between More and Grotius have a simple explanation—one writer was Catholic while the other was Protestant. The Catholic Church certainly condemned usury, private property and other “evils” of capitalism during the commercial revolution of the High and Later Middle Ages, which could explain More’s disapproval of these economic changes. Conversely, Nicholas Canny claims it was propagandists for militant Protestantism who “perceived the promotion of trade and colonization as one necessary means both to enhance the position of Protestant rulers in the world and to check the Catholic monarchs of Spain” (Canny, 4). This argument suggests that a major goal of influential Protestant writers was to ensure economic growth, an unlikely goal of “militant” Catholics. However, it would be too simplistic to see Catholicism as stifling economic growth while Protestantism encouraged it. Even the Catholic Church eventually came to see the thirteenth and fourteenth-century commercial revolution as beneficial to their various religious institutions. Monks, for example, could profit greatly from allowing fairs to be held on their land for a toll—as long as they were using the money for God, how could the Pope complain? Moreover, the Papacy, Christian kings and the Holy Roman Emperor took advantage of money-lending and also granted charters and freedoms for merchants who could bring money into their cities. Such actions only would have encouraged the growth of a new, middling class that dealt

not in terms of land, but in terms of trade and profit. Note also that Spain and Portugal were among the first European nations to invest in overseas exploration. These expeditions were strongly Catholic, led by a Catholic monarchy that enforced strict Catholicism in their regions to ensure unity, not to mention they desired to see Catholicism spread to new lands. Catholicism was a driving force behind overseas trade in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, not a road-block. Therefore, religious rhetoric did not change in the early modern period strictly because of the rise of Protestantism and the weakening of the Catholic Church. Instead, the rhetoric of the Christian faith in general altered with the new economic and social order.

If anything, religion became a tool of the state to create a national, or at least a monarchical, identity, in which propagandists employed rhetoric of morals and ethics to convince society of a particular region's aims. The Dutch are a prime example of this point, in which they "forged, retained and reinforced a Protestant identity and became aggressively competitive towards their Catholic foes..." (Patrick O'Brien, "Mercantilism and Imperialism in the Rise and Decline of the Dutch and British Economies 1585-1815," 482). And, as I have already argued, these "Catholic foes", too, had used religion to unite their people in regional and economic goals. The British also justified trade and capitalism as a "moral force," through which extensive free trade could civilize the peoples with whom they came into contact (Martin Lynn, 103). Such intellectuals as Cobden and John Bright went so far as to call free trade "God's diplomacy," suggesting that trade had the potential of spreading peace throughout the world (104). Finally, Lord Palmerston, who was Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister of Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, appealed to the "moral principles of free trade ideas" in order to expand British influence overseas (106). Clearly, by the nineteenth century, propagandists had manipulated religious rhetoric to create moral economic principles, something that Thomas More never would have dreamed of, not because he was Catholic, but because he was medieval and had no sense of economic expansion overseas.

Clearly, my reflection and analysis up to this point are in their early stages and will require further research. It is still useful, however, to consider all sides of my previous questions: do social, political and economic change trump religious ideals? Is there anything absolute about morals or ethics? My argument so far has been that socio-economic change most certainly alters and creates new religious trends. Religious institutions can only go so far in either squelching or promoting social innovations—it is up to the people to decide whether or not it is useful to

follow these ideals. But at the same time, one cannot explore a village or city in Britain and the Netherlands without feeling the presence of the immense faith that once dominated the medieval and early modern periods. The artwork of the seventeenth century, for example, is often described as portraying secular rather than religious themes. Yet, if one looks closely, there remain subtle religious messages in early modern art. In particular, still-life paintings of flowers include the iris, symbolizing the Trinity; the fly or pocket-watch, symbolizing the shortness of life; or the dragonfly, symbolizing the ascension of the soul to heaven. These paintings reveal that continuity and change parallel one another; in other words, religion remained important to early modern society, even as it changed with the economy. Moreover, if our day trips throughout Britain and the Netherlands have shown us anything, it would be the omnipresence of churches and cathedrals, both Protestant and Catholic, dotting the countryside and dominating cities. I was particularly struck by the continuing presence of faith when I was walking through a medieval city on one of my weekend trips. I had finally come to the conclusion, as a result of my explorations for this reflection, that there is nothing absolute about religious rhetoric and ideals. Yet, after hearing the cathedral bells ringing throughout the day and observing the tourists clamoring to climb the bell towers and explore ancient religious relics, I realized: early modern society may have changed its religious language to articulate new economic organization, but they still needed faith. Nor has this need for religious justification of economic or political actions changed much today. The need for religious, moral or ethical explanations will most likely never change—only the rhetoric evolves. Granted, this distinction may not comfort my students who need religious absolutism, but it will certainly add an interesting dimension to our discussions and debates.

Nonetheless, by the seventeenth century, More's arguments against capitalism were obsolete. Patrick O'Brien claims "traditional religious and deferential predispositions, common to most British people, supported and in effect promoted the foreign, commercial and Imperial policies pursued after 1688. Such preconditions operated, however, to reinforce actions taken and not taken by governments, widely, and correctly, perceived to be in the interests of British trade, which furthered the accumulation of many forms of wealth" ("Inseparable Connections: Trade, Economy, Fiscal State, and the Expansion of Empire, 1688-1815," 70). Also, Martin Lynn demonstrates that by the nineteenth-century, society viewed capitalism as compatible with religious ideals, leading to the creation of new rhetoric that combined "moral commitment with

material self-interest” (Lynn, 103). Religious rhetoric, therefore, was (and still is) flexible when it came to explaining major changes in social, economic and political organization. Moreover, while these conclusions are tentative and will require further research, I plan to use the same questions that guide this reflection in my classroom to highlight the effects of socio-economic change on the religion and faith of any society. Ideally, such analysis will encourage my students to listen more closely to religious rhetoric in political speeches and debates, and to consider how modern propagandists use the same religious references as early modern writers to promote nationalist, economic and perhaps “imperial” goals. Whatever conclusions we come to, such questions and explorations should lead to some lively discussions and will assist my students in seeing the interconnectedness of economics and religion.

### Works Cited

- Canny, Nicholas. “The Origins of Empire: An Introduction.” In *The Oxford History of the British Empire, The Origins of Empire*, vol. I, edited by Nicholas Canny, 1-33. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Grotius, Hugo. “The Freedom of the Seas for People Who Trade.” In *The Low Countries in Early Modern Times*, edited by Herbert H. Rowen, 149-157. New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Free Seas*. Translated by Richard Hakluyt and edited by David Armitage. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, Inc., 2004.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. *Industry and Empire: The Birth of the Industrial Revolution*. New York: The New Press, 1999.
- Lynn, Martin. “British Policy, Trade, and Informal Empire in the Mid-Nineteenth Century.” In *The Oxford History of the British Empire, the Nineteenth Century*, vol III, edited by Andrew Porter, 101-121. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- More, Thomas. *Utopia*. Translated by Paul Turner. London: Penguin Books, 2003.
- O’Brien, Patrick. “Inseparable Connections: Trade, Economy, Fiscal State, and the Expansion of Empire, 1688-1815.” In *The Oxford History of the British Empire, The Eighteenth Century*, vol. II, edited by P.J. Marshall, 54-77. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “Mercantilism and Imperialism in the Rise and Decline of the Dutch and British Economies 1585-1815.” *De Economist* 148, no. 4 (2000): 469-501.
- Wrightson, Keith. *Earthly Necessities*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000.