

REVIEWS

Bożenna Chylińska. *The Gospel of Work and Wealth in the Puritan Ethic: From John Calvin to Benjamin Franklin*. Warsaw: Warsaw University Press, 2012. 336 pages.

Although it has been a fact in human life since time out of mind, work became a subject of detailed and specialized studies only in the past two centuries. In her book Bożenna Chylińska applies a large variety of nineteenth- and twentieth-century theories and conceptualizations of work to the lives and careers of English and especially American Puritans. The opening Chapter I traces the evolution from ancient times to the present, from theology to ethics, from the focus on work to the focus on workers, and from the concept of work as degradation to the concept of work as ennoblement. The awareness of the fact that the word “work” has its origin in the Greek word for sorrow (*ponos*) and the feeling that labor amounts to servility and freedom from it is synonymous with nobility, have colored attitude to work for centuries. Although it seems that Chylińska’s book poses questions which are important to students of American literature and culture, it addresses in fact major philosophical dilemmas which are significant to a much larger audience. Self-reflexive (after all academic activity also qualifies as work), the book invites the reader to progress intellectually through several centuries (and two centuries in greater detail) of work motivated by religious dogmatism. What is particularly valuable in this account is the perspective of Catholic Christianity which is a point of reference throughout this study of Puritanism.

Chapter II focuses on the European origins of the Puritan mind and spirit. It outlines the history of various attempts to reform the Roman Catholic Church before and after Martin Luther. Although Luther’s *Ninety-Five Theses* has been recognized as a landmark, it was “not a revolutionary document” (59). However, the debate that flared up in response to it attracted public attention and had wide-ranging social and political consequences. Luther himself opposed the Peasants’ Revolt, which shows that his major concern was theological, and not political (62). Since “his theology did not constitute the only facet of the Reformation” (64), Chylińska discusses also the contribution of such reformers as

Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin, the latter in particular. Calvinism, which had a lot in common with Lutheranism (68) is discussed in greater detail as “the greatest religious force in the development of the Protestant Reformation in Europe and, ultimately, in North America,” the one that “gave rise to the Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Baptist denominations” (71). Chylińska notes the moral discipline and the strict hierarchical church structure devised by Calvin, who also considered the way church and state should relate. She devotes much attention to the situation in England, which differed considerably from the developments in Germany and Switzerland. She argues that the English Reformation may in fact have been rooted in the Lollards movement, rather than in the doctrines of Luther (72). Anti-clerical sentiments were in addition “radicalized by the Humanistic movement” (74). However, even though the Act of Supremacy officially put an end to Catholicism in England “in no sense could the ‘new’ religion be called ‘reformed’” (77), at least during Henry VIII’s reign. Motivated by political rather than theological considerations, the Reformation in England resulted in (rather than being a consequence of) the expansion of Protestantism. In the sixteenth century, Calvinism was promoted by a group of radical theologians who were later labeled as Puritans, a word which came into usage c. 1564 (81). Bożenna Chylińska discusses the activities of several Puritan theologians affiliated with Cambridge University, stressing in particular the contribution of William Perkins, a prolific writer whose fame reached far beyond England and shaped Puritan thinking in America, and exerted an impact on seventeenth-century literature and visual art. His notion that religious devotion was linked to economic prosperity attracted the rising English middle class in that it justified their entrepreneurial approach (85–87). The story of opposition to the Puritans, their persecution and exile first to the Netherlands and then to the New World is narrated in detail and with recourse to historic documents on the remaining pages of Chapter II (91–101). The narrative culminates in the symbolic act of obliterating local names and filling America with new meanings (97).

Chapter III explores the concept of “Calling” in American Puritanism. It opens with an attempt at a definition of Puritanism, which proves to be a major challenge. Chylińska considers a variety of definitions formulated recently and in the past, in prose and in verse, by proponents and opponents. What emerges out of such juxtapositions is a multifaceted definition, which is then in addition illustrated by vignettes of several prominent American Puritans. The discussion of “Calling” is indebted to Max Weber’s concepts of protestant ethic and capitalism, and results in an illuminating comparative analysis of Calvinism and Catholic Christianity. “Calvinism” argues Chylińska, “extended and spiritualized work and wealth, and

turned them into the virtual sacraments” (117). American Puritans constructed a social hierarchy based on the individual relation to work and the degree of social usefulness (119–120). The role of the state (acting through civil magistrates) was also precisely defined by American Puritans, who went to great lengths to regulate in particular church government (128). Work amounted to serving God and disciplining oneself at the same time. It meant “relief from forbidden passions and excessive energies, which were denied outlet and expression elsewhere by the Puritan moral code” (148). The concept of “Calling was extended by the Puritans to cover all honest human activities and some productive occupations” (149). The lives, careers, and Calvinist lessons of the Mather dynasty (carefully studied on pages 135–151), illustrate these principles. Their published works, also a form of “Calling”, served to promote Puritan ideology. A richly nuanced comparison of Puritan and Catholic conception of work and wealth (151–155) encourages the reader to ponder the role of Puritanism in the dismantling of medieval ideas and in forcing Catholic Christianity to redefine its stance on work in later centuries.

The phrase “from ... to ...” in the subtitles to Chapters II, III, and IV signals the intention of tracing the (r)evolutionary change that Calvinism underwent once it crossed the Atlantic Ocean, as well as the development of Puritan thought in the New World. Chapter IV offers a fascinating study of “Puritan wives” from Lady Margaret Hoby in Yorkshire to Mistress Anne Bradstreet in New England. Biblical proverbs set the standards for all Puritan women, though class and religious status accounted for fine distinctions within female community (162–163). Chylińska studies them in detail, exploring as an example the daily account of Lady Margaret Hoby, “virtually the first English woman-diarist” (164). Repetitive in its account of practical and devotional occupations, the diary speaks volumes about the life of a Puritan woman of high social status. Numerous quotations illustrate Chylińska’s thesis about the meaning of work in a Puritan woman’s life (164–176). Even though the community of American Puritans was strictly patriarchal, women were present and notable in their settlements from the very beginning. In this respect the Puritan colony was unlike non-Puritan ones, which consisted almost exclusively of men. The Bible and its reflection in countless conduct books and sermons both set the standards for gender relations and offered their justification (176–183). Each aspect of a woman’s life was considered and regulated. Chylińska discusses such crucial matters as a woman’s marital status (184–195) and appearance (196–202). Hannah Moody, Dorothy Dudley, and Anne Bradstreet come alive in this careful study as various types and generations of Puritan wives. Bradstreet’s poetry serves as a point of reference in an exploration of various aspects of a woman’s life. Although living half a century apart and on

two opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean, Bradstreet conceptualized her daily toil very much like Lady Margaret Hoby.

The mind of Benjamin Franklin is the final destination of the intellectual pilgrimage to the Puritan past. In Chapter V Bożenna Chylińska juxtaposes his life and works with those of Cotton Mather. Both were polymaths, but whereas Mather lamented the decline of Puritan faith, stressed the need for “doing good”, and looked back, Franklin insisted on the “well-being” aspect of economic rather than spiritual salvation, and looked ahead to the times which he expected to be different. Chylińska underlines, however, the similarities between the two Puritan thinkers. Franklin not only met Mather, who was his senior by nearly forty years, but he also acknowledged the influence of Mather on his own life and writing. He stayed in contact with Mather’s son and nephew (235–236). In her in-depth study of *Autobiography* and *Poor Richard’s Almanack*, Chylińska explores the deist and pragmatist (*avant la lettre*) side of Franklin. As in previous chapters, she looks at Franklin’s secularized Puritan ethics through the lens of Max Weber’s thoughts on the rise of capitalism, the relation between time and money, and the economic morality and salvation. Taking up a motif present in the previous chapter, Chylińska brings to the limelight the marginalized figures of women in Franklin’s life, especially his wife Deborah, who found a way of handling her “deputy husband” (280–298). Franklin has often been compared with Jonathan Edwards, and this is the way the chapter is concluded. However, as it was in the case of Cotton Mather, Chylińska stresses similarities rather than differences, which means that her aim is to reclaim Franklin as a Puritan thinker, albeit with a deist twist.

The study ends with a conclusion which sums up the project, but also—because of the global and universal significance of the problem—provokes new questions, for example, the one concerning Puritan heritage in American multiculturalism. The book is superbly documented: it contains an extensive bibliography and an index of names, as well as numerous and relevant quotations from original historic sources and an abundance of reprographic materials which allow the reader almost to touch history. Readers of this book will never again take work for granted, be it their own work or that of others.

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