

Fat Cats, Calvin, and the Poor

BY RALPH R. REILAND

I DIDN'T KNOW ANYTHING about religion when I went off to college. In fact, I didn't know anything about college when I went off to college. The curriculum didn't matter to me, nor did the teachers in the summer after high school. I was going steady with someone I'd met in ninth grade (now my wife) and the big thing in picking a school was drive time, so that I could get back home on Friday night.

I asked my high school guidance counselor for a stack of catalogs for colleges within a two-hundred-mile radius. I picked the school with a lake on the cover. There were swans in the lake.

That was 1960, the beginning of the decade when things started to come apart in the United States, or got more free, depending on whether you think Billy Graham or Allen Ginsberg got it right.

The downside of that era of free thinking could often be seen in those "Neediest Cases" stories the *New York Times* used to run right before Christmas, tales of misery intended to encourage people to help the less fortunate during the holidays. I recall one about a promising young guy from the Bronx who started out in the Boys Club of America and ended up behind bars.

"It was the whole hippie thing," explained the man, referring to how he got sidetracked by the '60s. "I remember going through the Village barefoot with a joint in my hand." There was Jimi Hendrix and wine in the schoolyard, then Rikers Island after he was picked up with seventy-five bags of heroin stuffed in his pockets.

Along the way, he was homeless for thirteen years, had three kids by three different women, and was diagnosed HIV-positive from sharing too many needles.

The story ended with the good news. He was clean, thanks in part to rehab money from the *New York Times* Neediest Cases Fund. "He now lives in a studio apartment on the Upper West Side paid for by the HIV/AIDS Services Administration. Medicaid pays for his healthcare, and he

receives food stamps," the paper reported. "He no longer drinks or uses drugs; he has even stopped smoking cigarettes. He has, though, picked up one of his old habits: Every Sunday, he attends church."

It's easy not to feel sorry for this guy. The poor are seldom perfect. And mostly, they don't have good lawyers or good family coaches to get them through the rough patches.

■ In this fellow's case, he was arrested at fifteen for carrying a roach clip for marijuana in his pocket. It might sound like a convenient excuse, but he thought then that the arrest meant he'd never be able to get a job or enlist in the Army. For a dumb kid doing drugs in the Bronx, a job peddling a little marijuana and then some heroin looked like a step up from a life of anticipated joblessness.

If one is into the theological blame game, none of the calamities in this man's life come as a surprise, or as anything approaching real injustice. It's all scriptural, in full accordance with the Bible and God's will. Damnation deservedly comes to those who do bad things—damnation first in the Bronx, and then by way of disease, and then in the eternal sense. And on the other side of the coin, those who aren't bad will inherit the Earth, including the best cars and houses, and then eternal bliss.

In his most famous book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber took things a step further, past individual rewards and punishments, and argued that capitalism, the most bountiful economic system, was the direct result of the Protestant movement, specifically Calvinism. Good people—God's people—got good cars.

As luck would have it, I didn't know people were running barefoot through the Village in the '60s with a joint in their hands, or I may have been there. Instead, I ended up in mandatory college chapel three mornings a week in the middle of an Ohio cornfield at Muskingum College, a school with some deep, everlasting Calvinist roots and no Hendrix. A few years before I got there, students weren't

permitted to dance at the prom. Too erotic. They just sat at card tables and listened to Guy Lombardo.

I didn't know it when I paid my first tuition check, but cars were forbidden for freshmen, so the first year was one of much unforeseen hitchhiking. Until after my check cleared, I also didn't know we could be expelled for having a glass of wine with our parents during Thanksgiving or Christmas.

As a white male, it was during my first day on campus that I felt for the first time in my life like a minority. Some kid pointed me out as a "papist." I'd never heard of the word. It meant that I supported "Romanism," supported the Vatican instead of the United States. It was like I'd stepped into the Thirty Years War, but I'd never heard of that either.

Aside from astronaut John Glenn, Muskingum's most famous former student was Agnes Moorehead, Endora on the *Bewitched* television series. She died of lung cancer twenty years after making *The Conqueror*, the ill-fated movie shot in 1954 in the Nevada desert near where the government was doing nuclear testing. Those tests are suspected to have caused the cancer deaths of several of the film's stars, including John Wayne, Susan Hayward, and Dick Powell. Said Ms. Moorehead shortly before her death, "I wish I'd never done that damn movie."


Anyway, what I learned in those mandatory chapel sermons was Calvin's doctrine of predestination, the idea that God decreed, beforehand, the salvation of some and the damnation of others. It's the kind of doctrine that makes people anxious about whether they're stuck from day one in the bad crowd or the good one. To get some reassurance, this led people who believed this stuff to go full blast in achieving economic success, thinking that God signifies his favor by giving the best cars and top knickknacks to the elect. In short, the fat cats are God's people, hence "the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism."

Somehow, I think the whole thing might be more complicated than that. As I'm writing this I remember another *New York Times* story about two sisters, one seventy-three-years old and the other seventy, who were out in below-zero winter winds in Brooklyn begging from strangers in their cars. "The money was for their bilious nephew and his crack habit, their own blood who was smoking up their lives," explained the *Times*. "He had already cost them their house, their savings, their dignity." If they didn't deliver the cash, the nephew would fly into crazed tirades, bruising their ribs and blackening their eyes. It had been going on for years.

And then there was the article by Somini Sengupta about the "beggar boys" of Senegal. Like the aforementioned sisters, they too faced a beating if they didn't deliver the cash.

Dispatched to the streets by religious leaders, called marabouts, their daily collection quota ranged from fifty cents to \$1.30, plus whatever nuts or sugar cubes happened to be dropped into their tin cans as they chanted verses from the Koran.

"From Bombay to Mexico City to Bangkok, child beggars are a banal fact of life," explained Sengupta. "UNICEF reported last week that half the world's children, a billion people, face extreme deprivation." Across Africa, they're orphaned by AIDS, sold as cheap labor, or turned into ten-year-old soldiers by warlords.

The *Times* ran an accompanying photo of a skinny young child panning for diamonds in Sierra Leone to earn perhaps one bowl of rice per day. I was uncomfortably reminded of the reassurance I'd gotten in that college religion class: that all this had been choreographed for all of us beforehand, predestined, so that God's favorites get the diamonds and the kid doing the panning dies at age twelve. Choreographed by what kind of God? 

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