

Recent quantitative work

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

Since the 2000s, economists have taken up the question again with the tools of historical econometrics. Two contributions deserve mention.

Sascha O. Becker and Ludger Wössmann studied nineteenth-century Prussia. They find that the Protestant regions there were indeed more prosperous, but they attribute this advantage to a higher level of education. The Reformation, by encouraging every believer to read the Bible, is said to have promoted literacy, and it is this human capital that would explain the prosperity of the Protestant regions. Once education is taken into account, the independent effect of religion becomes weak.¹

Davide Cantoni studied the growth of cities in the German-speaking lands over several centuries, comparing the cities that became Protestant with those that remained Catholic. He finds no significant effect of the Reformation on urban growth, measured by population.²

This work does not close the debate. Other research has explored the effects of the Reformation on the education of girls, on political institutions, on the allocation of resources between the Church and the secular economy, or on social trust. The picture that emerges is more nuanced than Weber's thesis, and it places the emphasis on institutional and educational mechanisms.

Explanation	Principal mechanism	Relevance for Geneva
Protestant ethic (Weber)	vocation, discipline, refusal of enjoyment, accumulation	sobriety and work culture of the Genevan elites
Human capital (Becker and Wössmann)	literacy linked to Bible reading	Collège and Académie, high level of education

Recent quantitative work

Explanation	Principal mechanism	Relevance for Geneva
Minorities and networks (Lüthy and others)	exclusion, dispersion, solidarity, trust	Huguenot diaspora and Protestant banking
Institutions	secularisation, government by councils, rule of law	independent Republic, organised justice
No independent effect (Cantoni)	religion does not explain urban growth	caution towards cultural explanations

Caution. The quantitative studies deal mainly with the German-speaking lands. Their conclusions cannot be transposed automatically to Geneva, a French-speaking Reformed city-state whose trajectory also depends on its geographical position, its alliances and the influx of refugees.

1 Notes

1. Sascha O. Becker and Ludger Wößmann, “Was Weber Wrong? A Human Capital Theory of Protestant Economic History”, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, vol. 124, no. 2, May 2009, pp. 531-596 (ideas.repec.org): on nineteenth-century Prussian data, “Protestants’ higher literacy can account for the whole gap in economic prosperity”, with distance from Wittenberg serving as an instrument. ↩
2. Davide Cantoni, “The Economic Effects of the Protestant Reformation: Testing the Weber Hypothesis in the German Lands”, *Journal of the European Economic Association*, vol. 13, no. 4, August 2015, pp. 561-598 (doi: 10.1111/jeea.12117): test of Weber’s hypothesis on the growth of cities in the German lands from 1300 to 1900. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/geneva-recent-quantitative-work