

Borders of Belief

Protestantism and Social Mobility

Bas Machielsen and Amaury De Vicq

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Introduction

Religion and Economic Development

- Since Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 2004), scholars have debated whether Protestantism caused lasting economic advantages
- Two dominant explanations in the literature:
 - **Thrift and work ethic:** Protestant anxiety over predestination fostered disciplined saving and capital accumulation (Kersting, Wohnsiedler, and Wolf 2020; Cantoni 2015)
 - **Human capital formation:** Protestantism promoted Bible-reading literacy that spilled over into secular skills (S. O. Becker and Woessmann 2009)
- Both accounts share a premise: Protestantism raised performance by changing what individuals *had* — savings or skills
- This paper argues what mattered was the degree to which individuals could *act upon* their endowments

This Paper: Social Mobility as the Missing Channel

- We show that Protestantism causally promoted **intergenerational occupational mobility**, weakening the role of inherited status in determining economic position
- Setting: the Netherlands during industrialization (1879–1930), where basic literacy was already near-universal (95% by 1890)
- When literacy is near-universal, the binding constraint on development shifts from skill accumulation to **allocation of existing talent**
- Advantages of the Dutch setting:
 - Calvinism (not Lutheranism) — Weber’s “restless striving” denomination
 - Ethnically and linguistically homogeneous population, minimizing confounding
 - 1,121 fine-grained municipalities (vs. 452 Prussian counties in S. O. Becker and Woessmann (2009))
 - Very rich historical micro-data

Surnames Reveal Religion

- Individual-level religious affiliation is measured from civil marriage records (1830–1910) via *OpenArchieven*
- Dutch given names and surnames historically correlated unambiguously with confessional identity: Catholic families typically baptized children with saints' names (Maria, Hendrikus, Cornelius), while Protestant families favored biblical or Germanic names (Jan, Pieter, Willem)
- This makes it possible to classify each groom and his father as Protestant or Catholic from name patterns alone, using a GPT-4o classifier validated against census data ($R^2 = 0.95$)
- Over 250,000 linked father–son occupational pairs across 500+ municipalities are constructed this way
- This identification insight is unique to the Dutch context and a core data contribution of the paper

Approach and Findings Preview

- Exploit the 1559 archdiocese boundary (Mechelen vs. Utrecht) as a quasi-natural experiment
 - Mechelen: strong Counter-Reformation enforcement under Cardinal Granvelle → predominantly Catholic municipalities
 - Utrecht: weak enforcement, vacancy, Protestant capture (1580) → predominantly Protestant municipalities
 - Near the border, confessional alignment was shaped by local contingencies, not by economic fundamentals
- Instrument: 1[municipality inside Mechelen Archdiocese] for Protestant share in 1879
- Main findings:
 - Protestantism significantly increased intergenerational occupational mobility (municipal and individual level)
 - Protestant municipalities show higher fiscal capacity and household affluence
 - In a horse-race of three channels, **social mobility consistently dominates** human capital and savings

Historical Setting

The Archdiocese Division of 1559

- After the Reformation spread, the Catholic Church responded with the Council of Trent (1545–1563)
- On May 12, 1559, the papal bull *Super Universas* established two new archdioceses: **Utrecht** (north) and **Mechelen** (south)
- The archdioceses followed sharply divergent paths almost immediately

Utrecht vs. Mechelen: Divergent Enforcement

- **Utrecht:** Archbishop Schenk van Toutenburg ineffective; faced resistance from local elites and clergy; died 1580 during the Dutch Revolt
 - After his death, Utrecht was captured by Protestants; organized Counter-Reformation collapsed entirely
 - Calvinism embedded deeply in urban centers and civic institutions (Kooi 2022)
- **Mechelen:** Cardinal Granvelle, a “cunning, cruel supporter of Spanish tyranny,” actively backed Counter-Reformation with Habsburg support
 - Used the Inquisition, censorship, and persecution; empowered Jesuits, Capuchins, Franciscans
 - Catholicism entrenched in everyday society through Marian shrines, confraternities, and sacramental life
- The Peace of Westphalia (1648) formalized the Protestant character of the north

The Border of Belief

- Near the boundary, a community's final religion turned on **local accidents**, not economic fundamentals (Ten Boom 1970; Verseput 1965):
 - Presence of a sympathetic priest or an obstructionist schoolmaster
 - Catholic nobles hosting clandestine masses; poor road access preserving isolation
 - In Velddriel, a single schoolmaster's activism preserved Catholic identity
 - In Raamsdonk, ministers blended Catholic and Protestant rites — villagers preferred continuity over confessional purity (Herben and Peele 2017)
- This historical evidence supports our identifying assumption: near the border, confessional assignment was effectively random with respect to economic outcomes
- We corroborate this empirically: no discontinuities in geographic, institutional, or pre-Reformation characteristics at the boundary

Model

Theoretical Framework

- We formalize the argument in a two-generation dynastic model in the spirit of G. S. Becker and Tomes (1986) and Doepke and Zilibotti (2008)
- Each dynasty chooses between a **traditional** or **mobile** occupation and invests in transmitting a disposition for mobility
- Two religion-specific parameters:
 1. **Societal channel** (Arruñada 2010; Glaeser and Glendon 1998): Protestant communities sustain higher collective religiosity, raising expected returns to mobile occupations and lowering the threshold to enter them
 2. **Personal channel** (Nunziata and Rocco 2016): Protestant theology cultivates autonomy and an internal locus of control; Protestant parents face lower costs of transmitting mobile dispositions

Upward Mobility Is Higher in Protestant Communities

- The model yields three propositions:
 - **P1:** The fraction choosing mobile occupations is strictly higher in Protestant communities
 - **P2:** Expected wages conditional on mobile-sector entry are strictly higher in Protestant communities
 - **P3:** Upward occupational mobility is strictly higher in Protestant communities:

$$\Pr(s_{t+1} = 1 \mid s_t = 0, D = P) > \Pr(s_{t+1} = 1 \mid s_t = 0, D = C)$$

- **P3** combines both channels: the religiosity externality lowers the occupational threshold; higher transmission investment shifts children's dispositions rightward
- The two forces are mutually reinforcing: higher expected returns to mobility raise the value of transmitting a mobile disposition, which — given lower Protestant transmission costs — further widens the investment gap

Downward Mobility Is Theoretically Ambiguous

- The model delivers a clear prediction for **upward** mobility (Proposition 3), but makes **no unambiguous prediction for downward mobility**
- The societal channel (lower threshold, higher returns) pushes toward upward, not downward, movement
- The personal channel (stronger autonomy, ambition) also operates asymmetrically: it raises the probability of moving up from low-status origins, not necessarily of falling from high-status ones
- This asymmetry is testable — and confirmed empirically: IV estimates show a significant Protestant premium in upward mobility but **statistically insignificant** effects on downward mobility

Data & Methods

Data Sources and Key Variables

- **Religious composition:** Dutch censuses (*Volkstellingen*) 1809, 1879, 1899, 1920, 1930; Protestant share of municipal population in 1879 is main endogenous variable
- **Social mobility:** Marriage records 1830–1910 from *OpenArchieven*; father–groom occupational pairs coded via HISCO → HISCLASS (12 ordinal classes) and HISCAM (continuous 0–99 prestige score) (Van Leeuwen et al. 2002)
- **Development outcomes:** Income tax per capita 1910, total taxes per capita 1889, car ownership per capita 1920 (*Provinciale Verslagen*)
- **Mechanism variables:** Savings banks per capita 1920, savings per capita 1920 (De Vicq 2024); primary education spending 1910; upper-tail human capital (biographical dictionary entries per capita); literacy rate 1890
- **Controls:** Caloric suitability pre-1500 (Galor and Özak 2015), distance to rivers/coast, elevation, ruggedness, medieval city status, urban potential 1590 (Bosker, Buringh, and Van Zanden 2013), battles in 80 Years' War, province fixed effects

Identification Strategy

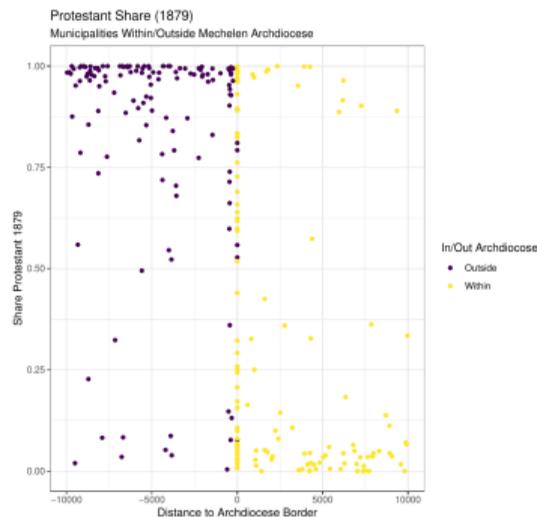
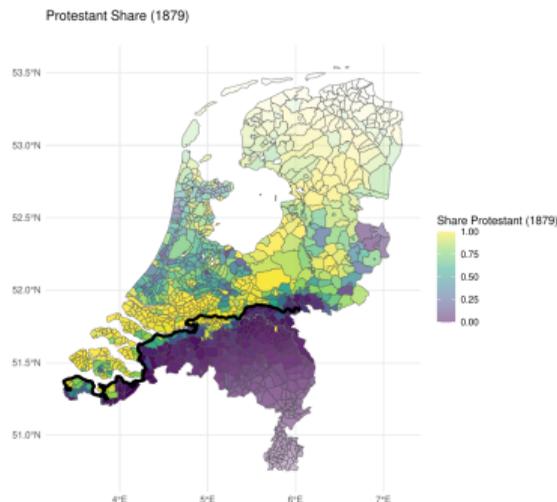
- **Instrument:** $\mathbf{1}$ [inside Mechelen Archdiocese], with distance-based weights prioritizing municipalities near the boundary
- Baseline model for municipality i :

$$Y_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Share Protestantism}_{1879,i} + X_i' \beta_2 + \varepsilon_i$$

- First stage: archdiocese assignment strongly predicts Protestant share (F-statistics 10–23 across specifications)
- Exclusion restriction validated by: (i) no discontinuities in geographic/institutional pre-treatment characteristics; (ii) alternative historical borders (Roman frontier, 1437 Brabant border, Dutch Republic border) display no significant first stage; (iii) no discontinuity in pre-Reformation population levels
- Spatial inference: Conley and Kelly (2025) procedure with data-driven cluster selection to correct for spatial autocorrelation

Geographic Evidence and First Stage

- Archdiocese boundary and Protestant share by distance (10 km bandwidth).
 - Protestant shares rise continuously from the Utrecht side and drop abruptly at distance zero, producing a discontinuity of ~ 30 percentage points.



Marriage Records

- Features names and professions of grooms and their fathers (almost always), brides and their fathers (sometimes).

<p>N^o 2 Januarij Johannes Claeys ou Jofina Jacoba Boogaard</p>	<p>Heden den <i>tienden</i> van de maand <i>Januarij</i> des jaars een duizend acht honderd zes en zestig, verschenen voor mij <i>Dieudonck</i> Ambtenaar van den Burgerlijken stand van de gemeente <i>Sluis</i>, provincie Zeeland, <i>Johannes Claeys</i>, <i>in het openbaar binnens het gemeentehuis</i> oud <i>acht en dertig</i> jaren, geboren te <i>Sluis</i>, van beroep <i>werkmans</i>, wonende te <i>Sluis, ongehuwd</i> ouderjarige zoon van <i>Karel Bernard Claeys</i> en van <i>Johanna Theresia van den Berge</i>, beide overleden te <i>Sluis</i> ter eene; en <i>Jofina Jacoba Boogaard</i>, oud <i>acht en dertig</i> jaren, geboren te <i>Sluis</i>, van beroep <i>diensbedes</i>, wonende te <i>Sluis laatst te Schie</i>, <i>dam, ongehuwd</i>, meerderejarige dochter van <i>Pieter Boogaard</i> en van <i>Jeannette</i> <i>Mayer</i> beide overleden in deze gemeente _____ ter andere zijde; welke mij verzocht hebben, tot de voltrekking van hun voorgenomen huwelijk over te gaan.</p>
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Results

Development Effects of Protestantism

- OLS: weak and sensitive correlations (negative endogeneity depresses estimates — historically wealthy areas were less likely to adopt Protestantism)
- IV estimates, exploiting archdiocesan variation, reveal **large, positive, and robust causal effects**:
 - Total taxes per capita 1889: standardized $\beta = 0.117$
 - Income tax per capita 1910: standardized $\beta = 0.345$
 - Car ownership per capita 1920: standardized $\beta = 0.250$
- Effects significant even after Conley and Kelly (2025) spatial corrections

Development Effects Table

Table 1: Protestantism and Economic Development

	Income Tax PC 1910			Total Taxes PC 1889			Cars PC 1920		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Panel A: OLS									
Protestant Share 1879	0.246**	0.101**	0.017	0.038	0.074	0.079	0.544	1.394	3.125
	(0.076)	(0.012)	(0.122)	(0.062)	(0.060)	(0.035)	(2.039)	(2.806)	(3.913)
R2 Adj.	0.152	0.215	0.165	0.253	0.307	0.279	0.155	0.161	0.173
Num.Obs.	656	656	656	649	649	649	620	620	620
Controls	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Province FE	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Standardized β	0.069	0.028	0.005	0.024	0.048	0.051	0.012	0.031	0.069
Panel B: IV									
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Protestant Share 1879	1.47**	1.11*	1.23	0.02	0.03	0.18**	3.25***	5.09	11.21***
	(0.69)	(0.61)	(0.84)	(0.14)	(0.04)	(0.08)	(1.02)	(3.83)	(4.33)
Num.Obs.	656	656	656	649	649	649	620	620	620
First-Stage F-stat	65.613	29.697	19.186	34.795	61.493	17.830	30.856	95.766	12.204
Controls	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Province FE	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Standardized β	0.411	0.309	0.345	0.015	0.021	0.117	0.072	0.114	0.250

Social Mobility: Municipal Level

- Higher Protestant share associated with greater intergenerational occupational movement
- 1 SD increase in Protestant share \Rightarrow 0.6–1.3 SD increase in HISCLASS mobility
- HISCAM social distance results point in the same direction
- Province FE specification (preferred): coefficient 0.49, highly significant

Social Mobility: Municipal Table

Table 2: Estimates of Protestantism on Social Mobility

	Same profession				Social mobility			
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
Protestant Share 1879	- 0.09*** (0.03)	- 0.17*** (0.06)	0.00 (0.07)	-0.05 (0.15)	0.66*** (0.19)	1.15* (0.61)	0.49*** (0.12)	0.73* (0.44)
Num.Obs.	584	584	584	584	584	584	584	584
First-Stage F-stat	29.179	207.211	33.219	41.451	13.406	20.696	74.680	106.821
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Province FE	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Standardized β	-0.030	-0.060	0.001	-0.019	0.772	1.345	0.576	0.853

Effect Also Visible at Ind. Level

- Individual-level analysis: compare Protestant and Catholic father–son pairs **within the same municipality and year**
- Municipality-by-year fixed effects absorb all local shocks; HISCLASS-by-year FE ensure comparison at identical starting positions
- **OLS (Panel A)**: Protestant affiliation \Rightarrow more social mobility in both directions (weaker occupational inheritance overall), significant at 1% throughout
- **IV (Panel B)**: Protestant sons experience 0.77–0.91 HISCLASS points more mobility than Catholic sons with identical backgrounds
 - Upward mobility: positive and significant across all three IV specifications
 - Downward mobility: positive but **statistically insignificant** — consistent with Proposition 3 asymmetry
- OLS and IV tell a coherent story: Protestant norms weakened occupational inheritance (OLS); causal exposure operated primarily through upward advancement (IV)

Social Mobility: Individual Level Table

Table 3: Protestantism and Social Mobility

	Social Mobility			Upward Social Mobility			Downward Social Mobility		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Panel A: OLS									
Protestant	0.134*** (0.040)	0.117*** (0.044)	0.086** (0.036)	0.013* (0.007)	0.011*** (0.004)	0.006 (0.006)	0.020*** (0.005)	0.017* (0.009)	0.020** (0.010)
R2	0.125	0.298	0.199	0.123	0.432	0.339	0.118	0.302	0.219
Num.Obs.	89342	79509	89333	89342	79509	89333	89342	79509	89333
Municip. x Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Profession x Year FE	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
HISCLASS x Year FE	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Panel B: IV									
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Protestant	0.905*** (0.337)	0.893*** (0.326)	0.769** (0.326)	0.138** (0.057)	0.135** (0.054)	0.090*** (0.033)	0.043 (0.086)	0.042 (0.086)	0.064 (0.089)
R2	0.009	0.013	0.107	0.009	0.013	0.268	0.004	0.007	0.102
Num.Obs.	90225	90220	90211	90225	90220	90211	90225	90220	90211
Province + Year FE	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No
Province x Year FE	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
HISCLASS x Year FE	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
1st Stage F Stat.	8701	8732.6	8808.7	8701	8732.6	8808.7	8701	8732.6	8808.7

* $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$

Which Channel Best Explains Development?

- We condition on all three mechanisms simultaneously to assess relative predictive power for development

Table 4: Correlates of Development

	Total Income Tax PC 1910			Total Taxes 1889			Cars PC		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
Social Mobility	0.34*	0.27*	0.30*	0.03*	0.03*	0.03*	1.71	1.42*	2.76**
	(0.14)	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(1.79)	(0.41)	(0.45)
Human Capital		0.18**	0.18**		0.01*	0.01		0.27	0.53
		(0.06)	(0.07)		(0.00)	(0.00)		(0.87)	(0.90)
Financial Development		0.51	0.49		0.03**	0.03**		2.41	5.36
		(0.32)	(0.32)		(0.01)	(0.01)		(9.68)	(6.48)
Num.Obs.	230	230	230	230	230	230	230	230	230
R2 Adj.	0.178	0.207	0.241	0.388	0.400	0.396	0.277	0.272	0.432
Controls	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Province FE	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Standardized β_{SM}	0.296	0.233	0.262	0.357	0.310	0.312	0.070	0.058	0.113
Standardized β_{HC}		0.128	0.131		0.078	0.079		0.009	0.018
Standardized β_{FI}		0.145	0.140		0.113	0.115		0.032	0.071

Human Capital and Financial Development Channels

- Human capital** (S. O. Becker and Woessmann 2009): positive effects on education spending and upper-tail skills, but effects are smaller and more specification-sensitive than social mobility; no significant Protestant literacy premium (literacy already 95%+ across all municipalities)

Table 5: Protestantism and Human Capital

	Primary Educ. Exp. PC 1910			Total Educ. Exp. PC 1887			Upper-tail Human Capital			Literacy Rate 1890		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Protestant Share 1879	1.242**	1.148***	1.643***	0.868**	0.892***	0.536	0.149	0.108	0.367**	3.893*	4.365*	5.739
	(0.327)	(0.267)	(0.624)	(0.198)	(0.196)	(0.352)	(0.096)	(0.140)	(0.155)	(2.326)	(2.316)	(5.705)
Num.Obs.	548	548	548	548	548	548	548	548	548	548	548	548
Controls	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
Province FE	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
Standardized β	0.212	0.196	0.280	0.341	0.350	0.211	0.114	0.082	0.281	0.250	0.280	0.368

- Financial development** (Weber thrift hypothesis): no detectable causal effect on savings or bank density; negative savings correlations in some specifications dissolve with province FE; consistent with Kersting, Wohnsiedler, and Wolf (2020) for Prussia

Robustness Checks

Robustness and Sensitivity

- **Alternative bandwidths:** IV estimates positive and significant at 1% for all bandwidths 5–50 km
- **Alternative inference:** results hold with Conley (1999) spatial SEs and heteroskedasticity-robust SEs
- **Selective migration:** controlling for net municipal migration flows 1851–1890 leaves individual-level IV results unchanged
- **Alternative borders:** Roman frontier, 1437 Brabant border, and Dutch Republic–Habsburg border all display negligible first stages, ruling out these alternative instruments
- **Pre-treatment balance:** no discontinuities in caloric suitability, elevation, ruggedness, distance to rivers, medieval city status, or urban potential at the archdiocesan boundary

Robustness and Sensitivity II

- **Economic structure:** Protestant share has no significant effect on agricultural, industrial, or service employment shares in 1889 or 1930 — structural transformation is not the channel
- **Selection into marriage-record coverage:** municipalities with and without digitized marriage records are balanced on pre-treatment characteristics; results robust to this sample restriction
- **Persistence parameter:** instrument identifies long-run effects because persistence parameter $\delta \approx 1$ (religion at 1559 border \approx religion in 1879)

Conclusion

Conclusion

- Protestantism causally promoted **intergenerational occupational mobility** in the nineteenth-century Netherlands, weakening the grip of inherited status on economic position
- This allocation channel is the **primary transmission mechanism** linking Protestantism to local prosperity — it outperforms human capital and finance in a joint horse race across all development outcomes and specifications
- The human capital channel is real but secondary; the savings channel finds no empirical support
- **Qualification on scope**: when basic literacy is near-universal, the margin on which religion can still operate shifts from skill accumulation to occupational allocation; the relative importance of the two channels is context-dependent

Generalizability

- **Generalizability:** the archdiocese instrument may prove useful for studying other ecclesiastical boundaries across Europe; results speak to the role of social-structural flexibility — not just factor accumulation — in long-run growth
 - Insight that religious participation influences social mobility might generalize to other religions and parts of the world
- **Broader role of Protestantism globally:** evidence suggests Protestantism's legacy runs through social norms of impersonal exchange and individual agency (Arruñada 2010; Nunziata and Rocco 2016), not just thrift or literacy — mechanisms that may be operative wherever baseline literacy constraints have been relaxed
- Religion shapes social structures and labor markets in ways that persist for centuries; the fluidity of occupational hierarchies may be as consequential for growth as the stock of productive factors themselves

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