Replacing the work ethic

by Mark U. Edwards in the April 11, 2001 issue

The Hacker Ethic and the Spirit of the Information Age by Pekka Himanen

The term "hacker" originally referred to a programmer who is passionate, even obsessive, about programming and good at it. As a part-time programmer since the mid-1960s and author of *For Comment* (chosen by *PC Magazine* as one of the "Best of 1987"), I called myself a hacker until the media bestowed the label on folks who break into computer networks. Hackers call these miscreants "crackers," but the distinction, and the positive meaning of "hacker," seems now to be lost on the larger society.

The "hacker ethic" as I knew it was the willingness of hackers to share software, computer resources and neat coding tricks called "hacks"--a term also applied to quick and dirty but functional codes. Pekka Himanen expands the ethic to encompass seven values: passion, freedom, social worth, openness, activity, caring and creativity. This seems reasonable: hackers follow their passions, are often politically libertarian, value open systems and sharing, like to network and are remarkably creative folks. They helped make the Internet and the personal computer what they are today.

In a brief prologue Linus Torvalds, the initiator of the community-built operating system Linux, describes as his approach to life an attractive variant on Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. In the epilogue Berkeley sociologist Manuel Castells offers a reasonable but elliptic précis of his three- volume opus on *Informationalism and the Network Society*. Between these bookends, Himanen defines the "hacker ethic" as a replacement for Max Weber's "Protestant work ethic" and the ethic of the "pre-Protestant monastery."

If we followed the hacker ethic, he argues, we'd work on what we found intrinsically interesting, favor recognition over monetary reward, prefer horizontal networks to hierarchical arrangements and share all information except information about ourselves. Himanen does not explore the societal arrangements that allow a handful of hackers to follow such an ethic while the rest of us labor under more onerous

conditions. He offers no suggestion on how we get from here to there.

Regrettably, Himanen may know hackers but he is religiously tone-deaf and sadly ignorant of either monks or historic Protestants and what made them tick. This might not matter for his constructive proposal had he not decided to build his whole argument on the basis of this opposition. Despite Weber's clear brilliance as a sociologist, his ideal type strikes historians as a bit of a caricature, especially of historic Protestantism. Himanen offers a caricature of the caricature. And when Himanen turns to monasticism . . . Well, let's let him speak for himself.

He offers, for example, a series of parallels between Anthony Robbins's advice in *Awaken the Giant Within: How to Take Immediate Control of Your Mental, Emotional, Physical, and Financial Destiny!* (1992) and what the Desert Fathers and monastic rules taught about spiritual discipline. Of course, Robbins is trying to get a person in fighting shape to maximize income, while the Fathers were advising ascetics on how to be "'prizefighters' against the devil," to use Peter Brown's apt phrase. No matter to Himanen, who is sure that at a deeper level they are really after the same thing.

In a characteristically multiple misunderstanding he claims that "it is not just an accident that the word economy, based on the Greek work *oikonomia*, is used in theological parlance in reference to the doctrine of salvation. In both capitalism and the monastery, life is subordinated to the striving for 'salvation' or 'heaven'--that is, to the economic end." A theological dictionary might have helped, but against such animus and ignorance probably not much.

Another choice example from many possibilities: having first delivered himself of a tasteless (but I'm sure he thought funny) "thought experiment" on how the "typical creations" of the "Protestant ethic," namely "the government agency and the monastery-like business enterprise," would have handled the creation of the world, complete with committee meetings with God as chair, Himanen offers this howler:

> The Protestant ethic celebrates Friday; the pre-Protestant one sanctifies Sunday. . . . While the Protestant ethic is work-centered, one might see the pre-Protestant ethic, then, as leisure-centered. This leisure-centeredness does not encourage creativity any more than work-centeredness, however, as it is defined negatively, as not-work, rather than in terms of some positive use. The effect of this attitude can be seen in the relative absence of creativity during the first millennium and a half after Christ, most

> remarkably in the field of science. Quite typically, the question that most engaged pre-Protestant Church Fathers, in the wake of Augustine, was, Why did God create the world? From a pre-Protestant viewpoint, this was a genuine problem: logically, the pre-Protestant God would have valued leisure so highly that he would not have bothered to create anything.

One might wish that despite the "creativity," "passion" and "freedom" of the hacker ethic, its "openness" had inclined Himanen to seek out the help of a knowledgeable historian.