

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

Unlike Marx, Weber believed that ideas can have an important effect upon society.

“Not ideas, but material and ideal interests, directly govern men’s conduct. Yet very frequently the ‘world images’ that have been created by ‘ideas’ have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest.”

Calvinism: Branch of the Reformation, founded by John Calvin, that emphasizes the sovereignty of God. (Current Calvinist denominations include Presbyterians and Reformed.)

Predestination: Before Creation God designated some people as “elect.” People can’t do anything to bring about their salvation.

Main argument: The spirit of capitalism was born from the spirit of Calvinism. The spirit of capitalism is not just greed. It is a moral system that stresses economic success.

Asceticism restricted consumption. Since they believed that wealth is a gift from God and must be spent only for his glory, the Calvinists didn’t waste their money on amusements or luxuries.

Instead, the Calvinists attempted to increase their money. Pursuing money as an end was condemned, but earning money pursuing a “calling” was a sign of God’s blessing.

Calvinists developed work ethic not to earn salvation (which was impossible), but because they were searching for signs that they were among the elect. Success at the calling is the best means of attaining “certainty of grace.”

Limiting consumption and increasing acquisitive activity resulted in the accumulation of capital.

Capitalism is part of the larger process of rationalization, e.g., science, bureaucracy, that in some ways is hostile to the religious ideas from which it arose.

The Calvinist wanted to work in a calling. The result has been a capitalist world where all of us are forced to work. The pursuit of wealth has been stripped of its religious meaning.