**Abstract**

In Max Weber’s renowned essay *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the secular terminology applied to capitalism is examined as a phenomenon rooted in religion. Weber strives to trace the origins of modern capitalism as it developed in Western culture and arrives at its religious Protestant and Calvinist roots. Despite established critical responses to Weber’s thesis, it maintains canonical status and relevance for any analysis of capitalism in the framework of modern sociology. Many empirical analyses in the field of cultural studies are based on Weber’s work, such as McClelland’s study on the ways in which patterns, such as achievement and success motivation, are linked to Protestant ethics.[[1]](#footnote-1)

On the one hand, in this study, I analyze the relevance of Weber’s essay to understanding modern capitalism as it evolved in Western culture. I adopt the position, which Jung describes as well (1987), that when world views are deeply enrooted in a religious experience they possess a hidden capacity to function as forces and trends in culture, and through a constant state of change, are preserved in the secular experience as an identical construct with different forms of expression.[[2]](#footnote-2)

On the other hand, given that Weber emphasizes the affinity between material success and religious achievement in Calvin’s doctrine[[3]](#footnote-3) as an innovative concept, I will demonstrate that this linkage constituted a cultural foundation in the Bible, well before Calvin appeared on history’s stage. Judaism connects success in this world to moral religious conduct; success is God’s gift to his chosen people, his believers, and keepers of his Torah. Although in Judaism God does not act from a position of arbitrary decree, as presented by Calvin, Judaism commonly links success in this world to God’s choice. Therefore, the basis for Protestant ethics, which connect material success to chosen-ness can be found, in conceptual terms, in the Bible, albeit without the element of God’s arbitrariness.

Weber’s essay was first published as a two-part article in 1904-1905 in a German publication. It immediately provoked extraordinary interest and a critical debate which has yet to subside. Critical responses to Weber’s thesis focus on the direct causal linkage between Protestant-Calvinist ethics and the development of capitalism. Many stress, however, that the early Calvinist communities in the Low Countries did not exhibit novel economical orientations any more than the Catholics of the late middle ages and that capitalism was indeed far more developed in pre-reformation Catholic Europe than in the early Protestant countries.

Most criticisms reflected an ambivalent attitude toward Weber’s thesis, while the majority, excluding those who negated it outright, agreed that there was indeed something to it. Weber’s significant contribution in this still highly relevant essay, was not only its concrete conclusions but also its implementation of an innovative method—the idealistic approach—which is founded upon the assumption that a culture’s values mold its society and social construct.

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)