

Capitalism as Religion: A Bolstered Defense

Felipe G. A. Moreira

felipegustavomoreira@yahoo.com

Introduction

Influenced by Max Weber, Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben articulated distinct defenses of the following claim that Weber himself never defended:

(CiR): Capitalism is identical to a religion.¹

However, such defenses may seem (and arguably, are, indeed) quite easily refutable. This occurs in that they do not explicitly, and it is hard to see if and how any defense could fulfill a semantic, an epistemic as well as a revisionist condition. The semantic condition is that a plausible use of the terms ‘capitalism’ and ‘religion’ must be explicitly proposed. Failure to satisfy this condition (e.g., in using the term ‘religion’ in an undefined or excessively broad way that, say, suggests that the activity of cheering for a soccer team is also a religion) may render (CiR) into a vague or uninteresting claim, e.g., an analytic or somehow trivially true by definition claim. The epistemic condition is that a justificatory resource that backs up belief in (CiR) must be explicitly spelled out. Otherwise, it may be argued that (CiR) is an unpersuasive, a false or, perhaps, even an obviously unpersuasive and false claim. The revisionist condition is that it must be shown the pertinence of revising ordinary use of language in calling *prima facie* non-religious people who follow the religion of capitalism, religious people. If this condition is not met, it may be claimed that (CiR) leads to an absurdity, say, insofar as supposedly ‘believers of capitalism’ would be more plausibly described as being atheists.

If none of the three stated conditions are met, (CiR) may seem some sort of metaphorical, provocative or even shocking claim that mainly serves one’s libertarian tendencies of spelling one’s own and/or other’s uniqueness in causing dissensus with a majority that rejects (CiR) —assuming that a majority is a group of people that: at a given context seeks to satisfy certain norms (e.g., that one is to ignore (CiR) and discuss supposedly more pressing issues); and has more members and/or power than a minority that violates these norms.² It seems, then, motivated to bolster Benjamin’s and Agamben’s defense of (CiR) by articulating a new defense of this claim that fulfills the stated conditions while showing that (CiR) is to be read as a literal claim that, albeit, indeed, provocative and perhaps even shocking, is to serve, not only one’s libertarian tendencies, but also egalitarian ones: those of contributing to a community of all things or at least persons in causing some consensus, especially, among a minority constituted by ‘heretics’ vis-à-vis the religion of capitalism who may be more willing to discuss (CiR). This is why this essay aims to articulate the stated new bolstered defense of this claim.

¹ See Max Weber, *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, Routledge, 1992); Walter Benjamin ‘Capitalism as Religion’, in *Selected Writings: Volume 1 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock, and Michael W Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); and Giorgio Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism* (California: Stanford University Press, 2019).

² As I argued elsewhere, continental philosophers influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche have often done so throughout the twentieth century up to our times. See Felipe G. A. Moreira, ‘The Will to Synthesis: Nietzsche, Carnap and the Continental-Analytic Gap’, *Nietzsche-Studien* Volume 49: Issue 1 (2020), 150–170.

The Semantic Condition

‘Capitalism’

To begin with, Benjamin and Agamben simply do not explicitly provide a definition of ‘capitalism’. On his part, Weber argues that the concept of capitalism: ‘must be gradually put together out of the individual parts which are taken from historical reality to make it up. Thus the final and definitive concept cannot stand at the beginning of the investigation, but must come at the end’.³ Weber puts together one part of his processual definition of capitalism by stating that: “capitalism is identical with the pursuit of *profit* (...) by means of *continuous, rational, capitalistic enterprise*”.⁴ Let us address these italicized terms sequentially.

By ‘capitalist enterprise’, Weber means a business-activity that can be ostensibly defined, for instance, by real estate. With the term ‘profit’, Weber refers to a process that takes place when a person (e.g., Donald J. Trump) sequentially performs three actions. First, the person invests a certain amount of money into a business-activity. Second, the person freely or (arguably, more often) somehow freely opts to engages oneself in this activity. An option is somehow free, let us assume, when one might have experienced a ‘subtle’ form of violence or coercion into joining it, say, in being afraid to be: extremely financially poor; dependent on others; financially independent, but isolated from the rest of the community; etc. This kind of violence or coercion may be called ‘subtle’ because it is not as often criticized or recognized as more upfront or physical forms of oppression, e.g., that of enslaving persons while forcing them to work in a sugar mill and flagging their backs whenever they resist doing so.⁵ The third action that characterizes profit is to gain an amount of money superior to the invested at first.

In qualifying the capitalist enterprise as ‘rational’, Weber rejects a stereotypical take on capitalism according to which capitalism is an emotional or irrational urge to acquire money.⁶ Weber states that ‘unlimited greed for gain is not in the least identical with capitalism’.⁷ Trump himself points to a similar direction. In the very first page of his first book, the 1987 *The Art of the Deal*, he states that: ‘I don’t do it for the money’.⁸ In Trump’s last book, his 2015 *Great Again: How to Fix Our Crippled America*, he also makes a similar point: that ‘it’s not about money’.⁹ It follows that, in Weber’s view, a business-activity is a ‘rational acquisition’.¹⁰ This acquisition involves mathematical considerations. “Everything is done in terms of balances”, Weber emphasizes in this sense, “at the beginning of the enterprise an initial balance, before every individual decision a calculation to ascertain its probable profitableness, and at the end a final balance to ascertain how much profit has been made’.¹¹

³ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 13.

⁴ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, xxxi-ii, *our emphasis*.

⁵ For a more detailed take on ‘subtle’ violence (especially, vis-à-vis philosophers’ use of it), see my own Felipe G.A. Moreira, ‘Deleuze’s Left-Wing Approach to Metaphysics’, *Revue philosophique de la France et de l’étranger*, tome 144(4) (2019), 455-472.

⁶ It is not surprising that Weber depicts capitalism as being ‘rational’, given that, in his view, even ‘religiously or magically motivated behavior is relatively rational behavior’. Indeed, as Raymond Boudon emphasizes, ‘one of the most striking features of Weber’s writings on religion is the frequency with which he uses the word “rationality” and its derivatives (*Rationalisierung, Durchrationalisierung*, etc.)’ See Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 400; and Raymond Boudon, ‘La rationalité du religieux selon Max Weber’, *L’Année sociologique* Vol. 51 (2001/1), 10.

⁷ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, xxxi.

⁸ Donald J. Trump, *The Art of the Deal* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1987), 1.

⁹ Donald J. Trump, *Great Again: How to Fix Our Crippled America* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2015), 128.

¹⁰ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 115.

¹¹ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, xxxiii.

Weber also uses the term ‘continuous’ to qualify the capitalist enterprise. He indicates that to achieve profit, one must be engaged in a business-activity during a significant amount of time. This is the message that Weber derives from an excerpt from Benjamin Franklin’s 1748 *Advice to a Young Tradesman*: ‘Remember, that time is money’. ‘He’, Franklin continues, ‘that can earn ten shillings a day by his labour, and goes abroad, or sits idle, one half of that day, though he spends but sixpence during his diversion or idleness, ought not to reckon that the only expense; he has really spent, or rather thrown away, five shillings besides’.¹² Indeed, ‘Weber’, as Sam Whimster interprets, ‘takes Franklin to be what we would today perceive as the style of an earnest and evangelical business guru’.¹³ However, as Alastair Hamilton indicates, it has been objected that Weber misread Franklin insofar as the view of the quoted passage by Franklin would have to be read ironically and not identified with Franklin’s.¹⁴ This objection, yet, can be answered on Weber’s behalf by claiming that it is secondary whether Franklin embraced the view of the passage at stake here. What is crucial, for Weber’s purposes, is that this passage spells out a properly capitalist mentality or *ethos* which Weber names the ‘spirit [*Geist*] of capitalism’. If not by Franklin, this spirit is embodied by others, such as businessmen who have aimed to be capitalist gurus in indicating how one can achieve financial success. Consider the first chapter of Trump’s *The Art of the Deal*, where a typical week of Trump’s in the 1980s is described. This chapter indicates what Trump states, aims to make others believe and summarizes in a single phrase in his last book: ‘I’m working all the time’.¹⁵

From the quoted passage by Franklin, Weber also derives the view that capitalism is connected to the thesis that to engage oneself freely or somehow freely in a profit-seeking business during a significant amount of time is a morally good action. Indeed, this action as opposed to that of acquiring money would be an end in itself. In Weber’s words: ‘labour must (...) be performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling’.¹⁶ Trump personifies this view when he states: ‘I do it [that is, engage oneself in a business-activity] to do it’.¹⁷ This is why capitalism is connected to the view that there is ‘a duty of the individual toward the increase of his capital, which is assumed as an end in itself’.¹⁸ ‘Truly’, Weber claims, ‘what is here preached is not simply a means of making one’s way in the world, but a peculiar ethic. The infraction of its rules is treated not as foolishness but as forgetfulness of duty’.¹⁹

So, failure to fulfill this duty by, say, spending pleasurable time with beloved ones in having a drink or two without ascetically seeking profit would be a morally wrong action. Trump, indeed, indicates that the fact that he does not drink has made him a better dealmaker than those who drink: ‘I remember wondering if every successful person in Manhattan was a big drinker. I figured it that was the case, I was going to have a big advantage’.²⁰ More importantly, it is read, then, that Weber embraces the following plausible use of the term ‘capitalism’ likewise endorsed here:

(C_d): Capitalism is identical to the pursuit of profit through a continuous, rational and purportedly morally good business-activity that is supposed to be an end in itself.

¹² Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 14.

¹³ Sam Whimster, *Understanding Weber* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 55.

¹⁴ Alastair Hamilton, ‘Max Weber’s Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Weber*, ed. Stephen Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 165.

¹⁵ Trump, *Great Again*, 128.

¹⁶ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 25.

¹⁷ Trump, *Art of Deal*, 1.

¹⁸ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 17.

¹⁹ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 17.

²⁰ Trump, *Art of Deal*, 86.

‘Religion’

Weber indicates that he also supports a processual definition of religion in his 1921 posthumous work *Economy and Society*. He states: ‘to define “religion,” to say what it is, is not possible at the start of a presentation such as this. Definition can be attempted, if at all, only at the conclusion of the study’.²¹ Nevertheless, Weber’s procedure regarding the term ‘religion’ is considerably distinct from his procedure regarding the term ‘capitalism’. As indicated above, there are several passages by Weber that point to a definition or at least plausible use of the latter. The same is not the case regarding the term ‘religion’. This is why Peter L. Berger persuasively concludes that Weber never provided such a definition of religion ‘so that the reader of Weber’s opus waits in vain for the promised definitional payoff’.²²

By his turn, Benjamin points toward a definition of religion. He states that: ‘a religion may be discerned in capitalism — that is to say, capitalism serves essentially to allay the same anxieties, torments, and disturbances to which the so-called religions offered answers’.²³ This is evidence that Benjamin embraces what has been called (e.g., by the likes of Berger as well as Kevin Schilbrack) a functional definition of religion.²⁴ This kind of definition is one that defines religion in terms of what it does for its adherents, that is, it defines religion in terms of a function it performs. Émile Durkheim may have been the first to embrace a functional definition. According to him, religion has the function of uniting believers into a single community.²⁵ Benjamin’s suggested functional definition of religion is that religion is an activity that has the clinical function of alleviating negative psychological states, e.g., ‘anxieties’, ‘torments’ and ‘disturbances’. Yet, as Berger and Schilbrack indicate, functional definitions have been traditionally challenged under the basis that they are excessively broad.²⁶

This would be the case because the functions that those who embrace functional definitions of religion associate with religion would have also been played by several other activities that are not usually considered to be religions. Consider the activity of cheering for a soccer team, e.g., the Brazilian soccer team from Rio de Janeiro, Vasco da Gama. In Vasco’s stadium, *São Januário*, this team’s fans usually sing a song called ‘Vasco, my passion!’. This song concludes with the verse, ‘Vasco da Gama, religion’. Indeed, the activity of cheering for Vasco da Gama seems to have the stated functions associated with religion by Durkheim and Benjamin. However, to call this activity a religion is a considerably disputable move.²⁷ This is so even if there seems to be no ordinary meaning of the term ‘religion’ universally shared.²⁸ The problem is that given the apparent absence of such meaning, it is not easy to articulate a use of the term ‘religion’ that is neither excessively broad, nor excessively narrow.

There have also been substantial definitions that seek to define religion in terms of a distinctive commitment. Edward Burnett Tylor may have been the first to provide a substantive

²¹ Weber, *Economy and Society*, 399.

²² Berger, Peter L., *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967), 175.

²³ Benjamin, ‘Capitalism as Religion’, 288.

²⁴ See Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 175; and Kevin Schilbrack, “What Isn’t Religion?”, *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 93, No. 3 (July 2013), 293.

²⁵ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1995).

²⁶ Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, 175; and Schilbrack, “What Isn’t Religion?”, 291.

²⁷ This move, nonetheless, is suggested by Paul J. Griffiths who claims that ‘it is perfectly possible (if a bit odd) for someone to have a religious form of life whose central object is a sports team (the true fan)’. See Paul J. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity*, (Maden: Blackwell, 2011), 15. For a more detailed discussion of soccer in Brazil, see the texts gathered at eds. Roberto DaMatta, Luiz Felipe Neves, Simoni Lahud Guedes and Arno Vogel, *Universo do futebol: esporte e sociedade brasileira* (Rio de Janeiro: Edições Pinakotheke, 1982).

²⁸ For a detailed case for this claim, see Craig Martin, *Masking Hegemony: A Genealogy of Liberalism, Religion and the Private Sphere* (London: Equinox, 2010).

definition of religion in arguing that religion is a commitment to spiritual beings.²⁹ It is not obvious, though, whether Tylor precisely spells out, or whether conditions for a being to be called a spiritual one have been or could have been precisely spelled out. For the essay's purposes, it suffices to underline that Tylor's stated substantive definition might be excessively narrow. Arguably, this is so if the conditions for a being to be spiritual are too restrict in implying, say, that: given that Buddhists are not committed to spiritual beings, Buddhism is not a religion.³⁰ There are several other substantial definitions in the literature, such as one that Agamben believes to be a 'good definition', even though he never explicitly embraces it or spells out what activities would fall into its referential domain. This substantial definition is that religion is an 'attempt to construct an entire universe on the basis of a command'.³¹ This definition may also be too narrow. This is because it seems to exclude from its referential domain activities that have been called religions, such as Buddhism.

Under the influence of Schilbrack, it is claimed here, then, that a plausible use of the term 'religion' is one that is both functional and substantive in seeking to be neither excessively broad nor excessively narrow. Such use can be provided if the stated functional definition by Benjamin is combined with another substantive definition: that religion involves commitment to at least one highly controversial claim. This kind of claim is one: whose truth-value cannot be determinable through means widely shared among religious and non-religious people; and inclines critics of religion (e.g., David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche or Rudolf Carnap) to take it to be a false, cognitively meaningless, or politically dangerous claim.³² To put it in Agamben's terms, a 'command' (e.g., 'one must act in accordance with God's will') is an example of a highly controversial claim. Note that a claim can be called so even if it does not resort to a concept of God. For instance, the following claim is also a highly controversial one: 'one is to maximize one's egalitarian tendencies in detriment of one's libertarian ones while seeking to propagate one's biological features by reproducing oneself, e.g., by only having sexual intercourse with this intent and pressuring those who do otherwise to change their behavior'. More importantly, this essay, proposes the following use of the term 'religion':

(R_d): Religion is identical to an activity that has the clinical function of alleviating negative psychological states by more or less explicitly or implicitly showing commitment to at least one highly controversial claim.

This definition does not purport to be exhaustive or more accurate than other definitions of religion present in the literature. (R_d) merely purports to be a plausible use of the term 'religion' insofar as it is neither excessively broad nor excessively narrow. This use excludes the activity of cheering for Vasco da Gama from the domain of religion insofar as, in doing so, one might, but does not usually seem to show commitment to any highly controversial claim. Given that Buddhism has this commitment and plays the stated clinical function, (R_d) includes Buddhism in the domain of religion. Thus, this definition is also not an excessively narrow one. Granted (C_d) and (R_d), the stated semantic condition is met. This is insofar as the proposed uses

²⁹ Edward Burnett Tylor, *Religion in Primitive Culture* (MA: Peter Smith, 1970).

³⁰ For a more detailed take on this issue, see Robin Horton, *Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West: Essays on Magic, Religion and Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

³¹ Agamben, *Creation*, 59.

³² David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007); Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, ed. Giorgio Colli, and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin, de Gruyter, 1967-1977); Rudolf Carnap, "Von Gott und Seele: Scheinfragen in Metaphysik und Theologie (1929)", in *Scheinprobleme in der Philosophie und andere metaphysikkritische Schriften*, ed. Thomas Mormann (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2004). For a more detailed reading that makes all sorts of connections between the latter two authors, see my own: Felipe G. A. Moreira, 'Overcoming Metametaphysics: Nietzsche and Carnap', *Nietzsche-Studien*, Volume 47, Issue 1 (2018), 240–271.

of ‘capitalism’ and ‘religion’ neither: rely on confusing vague terms; nor imply that the predicate ‘religion’ is somehow ‘contained’ in the subject, ‘capitalism’ so that (CiR) would be an analytic or somehow trivially true by definition claim. Instead, once (C_d) and (R_d) are embraced, (CiR) is to be interpreted as an interesting synthetic claim translatable into:

(CiR): The pursuit of profit through a continuous, rational and purportedly morally good business-activity that is supposed to be an end in itself has the clinical function of alleviating negative psychological states by more or less explicitly or implicitly showing commitment to at least one highly controversial claim.

The Epistemic Condition

The Protestant Religion

There is another reason for not considering (R_d) to be an excessively narrow definition of religion. The reason is that this definition also includes within the domain of religion activities that have been traditionally called so. Consider the claim that:

(PiR): Protestantism is identical to a religion in the sense of (R_d) insofar as it has the clinical function of alleviating negative psychological states by more or less explicitly showing commitment to at least one highly controversial claim.

(PiR) is a considerably uncontroversial claim. The reason is that to show that this claim is a persuasive or true claim, one only needs to rely on upfront empirical justificatory resources. Examples of such resources are: to promote a poll in asking Protestants if they consciously attribute to Protestantism the features (PiR) attributes to this religion; to observe the behavior of Protestants so that it can be determined whether Protestantism has had the stated clinical function and its followers have committed themselves to at least one highly controversial claim; and/or to determine whether this is the case by interpreting core Protestant writings, e.g., those of Martin Luther, John Calvin, Richard Baxter, John Bunyan, August Hermann Francke, the 1646 Westminster Confession of Faith, etc. The latter justificatory resource is adopted by Weber. In doing so, he describes differences between sub-sects of Protestantism, such as Calvinism, Pietism, Methodism and the Baptist sects. This essay does not aim to describe these differences in addressing all kinds of noticeable historical factors approached by Weber.³³ What is crucial, for this essay’s purposes, is to underline that Weber’s reading of core Protestant writings is an upfront empirical justification. This justification provides sufficient evidence to back up (PiR) in indicating three core features that most, several or at least some Protestants share, regardless of their contextual peculiarities or idiosyncrasies.

The first core feature is that, like all Christians, they have experienced at least one negative psychological state: a particular state of doubt. This is the state of being uncertain on

³³ Examples of such factors that show that Protestantism is not a (so to speak) “homogenous” religion immune to historical change or to cultural context are: late 16th century German Protestants influenced by Martin Luther’s reformation had behaviors and defended claims quite distinct from those of British 17th century Calvinists; the latter’s behaviors and claims were also considerably different from those of the Puritans who establish the New England colonies in North America; the 17th and 18th century Dutch Quakers did not read Christian scriptures exactly like such Puritans; etc. Examples of other noticeable but more recent historical factors that took place after Weber’s time that will also not be addressed here are: the behaviors and claims of contemporary wealthy white-skinned North American Protestants who have supported Trump’s government are significantly distinct from those of contemporary more impoverish black-skinned North American Protestants who have opposed such government; both of these believers are also quite dissimilar from, say, contemporary Brazilian neo-evangelicals who have lived in the so-called *favelas* and supported the government of Brazil’s current President, Jair Messias Bolsonaro, etc.

whether one is part of God's chosen people who will be rewarded for their behaviors in this world by being allowed into paradise. 'The question, Am I one of the elect?', Weber argues in this direction, 'must sooner or later have arisen for every believer and have forced all other interests into the background'.³⁴

The second core feature is that Protestants have tried to alleviate the aforementioned state of doubt by means of a particular behavior: the ascetic one of seeking to control one's emotions and bodily urges (e.g., sexual urges) while engaging oneself in a business-activity for a significant time. 'The Puritan', Weber claims, 'like every rational type of asceticism, tried to enable a man to maintain and act upon his constant motives, especially those which it taught him itself, against the emotions'.³⁵ 'The end of this asceticism', Weber continues, 'was to be able to lead an alert, intelligent life: the most urgent task the destruction of spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment'.³⁶ For Protestants, this attitude of self-control is to be adopted not by isolating oneself from the rest of the community, e.g., in living in a monastery, such as Catholic monk from the Medieval era. Indeed, the importance of properly religious institutions, such as Churches and monasteries, is considerably attenuated by Protestants. This is because the stated attitude of self-control is to be mainly pursued in performing 'mundane occupations', that is, a 'worldly [business] activity' of everyday life.³⁷ To do so would be a legitimate 'technical means (...) of getting rid of the fear of damnation'.³⁸ Hence, "worldly labor in one's calling", as Sung Ho Kim emphasizes, 'yields the sign of salvation, in other words, rather than salvation itself. It constitutes merely the means by which to escape from the existential fear and trembling'.³⁹

'In practice', Weber also argues, 'this means that God helps those who help themselves. Thus the Calvinist, as it is sometimes put, himself creates his own salvation, or, as would be more correct, the conviction of it'.⁴⁰ 'Labour in a calling', Weber likewise underlines, 'was also the ascetic activity par excellence for A. H. Francke; that God Himself blessed His chosen ones through the success of their labours was as undeniable to him as we shall find it to have been to the Puritans'.⁴¹ Also note that Weber claims that, for Protestants, 'not leisure and enjoyment, but only activity serves to increase the glory of God, according to the definite manifestations of His will'.⁴² These passages indicate that Protestants have a third core feature: in seeking to alleviate the aforementioned state of doubt through the stated behavior, they have more or less consciously committed themselves to highly controversial claims, such as:

(Pro-Ont): There is a God who privileges those who seek to control their emotions and bodily urges by pursuing profit through a continuous, rational and purportedly morally good business-activity.

(Pro-Mod): This God defines and distinguishes the domain of possibilities from that of impossibilities in including, for instance, a particular possibility in the former domain and a particular impossibility in the latter domain: respectively, the possibility of a financially successful businessperson being allowed into paradise; and the impossibility of this occurring with a non-ascetic financially unsuccessful person who is not engaged in any business-activity.

(Pro-Pra): One must act in accordance with this God's will by seeking to control one's emotions

³⁴ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 65.

³⁵ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 73.

³⁶ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 73.

³⁷ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 74.

³⁸ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 69.

³⁹ Sung Ho Kim, *Max Weber's Politics of Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 44.

⁴⁰ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 69.

⁴¹ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 84.

⁴² Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 104.

and bodily urges in pursuing profit through a continuous, rational and purportedly morally good business-activity.

The Religion of Capitalism

From the considerably uncontroversial claim, (PiR), it does not follow that Protestantism caused or at least partially caused capitalism (in the sense stated in C_d). As Alastair Hamilton and Sam Whimster indicate, this claim has often been attributed to Weber.⁴³ Benjamin suggests so in claiming that Weber believes that capitalism was “a formation conditioned by religion”, that is, by Protestantism.⁴⁴ Moreover, Weber has often been criticized under the basis that the stated causal-explanatory claim lacks persuasion, say, insofar capitalism existed before Protestantism or was caused by other factors, such as ‘geographical discoveries, technological progress, the operations of the great trading companies’.⁴⁵ On his part, Weber explicitly states that he ‘has no intention whatever of maintaining such a foolish and doctrinaire thesis as that the spirit of capitalism (...) could only have arisen as the result of certain effects of the Reformation, or even that capitalism as an economic system is a creation of the Reformation’.⁴⁶ ‘In itself’, Weber continues, ‘the fact that certain important forms of capitalistic business organization are known to be considerably older than the Reformation is a sufficient refutation of such a claim’.⁴⁷ This essay, accordingly, neither defends nor attributes to Weber the stated causal-explanatory claim.

Another claim traditionally attributed to Weber is what may be called a vague secularization claim. This is the claim that a secularization occurred from Protestantism to capitalism. This is what Agamben suggests in stating that, for Weber, capitalism represents a ‘secularization of the Protestant faith’.⁴⁸ The vague secularization claim deserves to be called so because it is not obvious what exactly a secularization (“*Säkularisation*”) is. It is also not obvious how Weber understands this term, which he only uses twice in the *Protestant Ethic*, without ever explicitly committing himself to the vague secularization claim.⁴⁹ Indeed, whether Weber is committed to this claim is not an issue that matters here.

What is important is to emphasize that there is a plausible way of applying the term ‘secularization’ in a more precise way that is closely connected to the definition of religion (that is, R_d) proposed in section 1. This way assumes that secularization is identical to a process whereby: people of a certain region (e.g., the former New England colonies) who once aimed to alleviate their negative psychological states by committing themselves to at least one highly controversial claim more or less directly give rise to people (e.g., contemporary New Yorkers) who seek to alleviate their negative psychological states without committing themselves to these claims. By the expression ‘more or less indirectly give rise to’, let us understand the action of influencing and/or giving birth to people who, on their part, influence and/or give birth to other people and so on in the course of several years. Granted the stated view on the term ‘secularization’, it does not seem that a secularization occurred from Protestantism to capitalism. Instead, what seems to have taken place may be called a process of pseudo-secularization. This is a process whereby people of a certain region who once aimed to alleviate their negative psychological states by consciously or explicitly committing themselves to at least one highly controversial claim more or less indirectly give rise to people who continue to

⁴³ See Hamilton, ‘Max Weber’, 162; and Whimster, *Understanding Weber*, 119.

⁴⁴ Benjamin, ‘Capitalism as Religion’, 288.

⁴⁵ Hamilton, ‘Max Weber’, 162.

⁴⁶ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 49.

⁴⁷ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 49.

⁴⁸ Agamben, *Creation*, 67.

⁴⁹ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 7 and 173.

do so more (so to speak) ‘subtly’ by unconsciously or implicitly committing themselves to these claims.

The process of pseudo-secularization from Protestantism to capitalism will be more precisely described in what follows. First, let us underline that capitalism is, as Agamben puts it, “the religion of modernity” insofar as the current majority (at least in the West) seems to believe it.⁵⁰ Moreover, it seems that an upfront empirical justificatory resource implicitly applied by Benjamin and Agamben is sufficient to spell the core features of capitalists. The resource is that of making a basic observation of culture, especially of contemporary culture in wealthy English-speaking countries, such as the USA or the UK. This basic observation of culture shows that: distinct from several (if not most) Protestants, there have been capitalists who have not experienced the mental state of being uncertain on whether one is part of God’s chosen people who will be rewarded for their behaviors in this world by being allowed into paradise. In fact, basic observation shows that there are, indeed, capitalists who are consciously sceptic about the existence of a paradise or any kind of God. This observation also indicates that the first core feature of capitalists is that they, like all people, have yet experienced negative psychological states, such as the states of wanting, but feeling guilt or feeling fear of being unable to: achieve financial success by one’s own means and merits (e.g., by working instead of receiving a heritage); acquire material goods (e.g., an expensive house, a sports car or a boat); become famous (e.g., in writing best seller books or presenting a TV show); be well-liked and popular among one’s peers, friends and family; afford the private college tuition of one’s kids; afford to pay for one’s healthcare; be more financially successful than foreigners and immigrants; etc.

Whether capitalism is a way of dealing with guilt or ‘makes guilt pervasive’, as Benjamin claims, is a matter on which this essay suspends judgment.⁵¹ What is more crucial here is to claim that basic observation of culture also shows a second core feature of capitalists: that they have aimed to alleviate their negative psychological states, such as the aforementioned guilt and fear, by freely or somehow freely (in the sense stated above) engaging themselves in business-activities for a significant amount of time. This is how this essay interprets a view by Benjamin likewise endorsed by Agamben: that ‘capitalism is a purely cultic religion’ for which there are ‘no weekdays’ and ‘no day that is not a feast’.⁵² This is to state that whereas Protestantism attenuates the importance of properly religious institutions, the religion of capitalism does not need them.

The reason is that one can practice the religion of capitalism by engaging oneself in a business-activity in places which are not usually described as being religious, such as: Wall Street’s stockbrokers’ offices; banks; headquarters of multinational companies (e.g., Microsoft, Amazon or Facebook) ran by multibillionaires (e.g., Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos or Mark Zuckerberg); etc. These competitive places may be depicted as the (so to speak) ‘holy places of cult’ of the religion of capitalism where capitalists ultimately put their faith in money. As Agamben underlines, in Hebrews 11: 1, Paul states that ‘faith is the substance of things hoped for’.⁵³ Money, then, may be described as something whose substance is hoped for by capitalists. This is especially because money was emancipated from any concrete referent, since ‘August 15, 1971, when the American government, under the presidency of Richard Nixon, declared that the convertibility of the dollar into gold was suspended’.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Agamben, *Creation*, 67.

⁵¹ Benjamin, ‘Capitalism as Religion’, 288.

⁵² Benjamin, ‘Capitalism as Religion’, 288; and Agamben, *Creation*, 67.

⁵³ Agamben, *Creation*, 69.

⁵⁴ Agamben, *Creation*, 69. For a detailed take on the relation between credit and faith, see Philip Goodchild, *Credit and Faith* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2020).

This essay is also neutral on whether capitalists have mainly engaged themselves in business-activities in an ascetic way in controlling their emotions and bodily urges, or in a more contradictory way, say, in seeking to control such emotions and urges in workplaces, while expressing them even excessively after working hours by: hiring prostitutes; consuming pornography; drinking disproportionately; taking drugs; etc. What is apparent is that capitalists have employed all kinds of means in seeking to pursue profit through a continuous, rational and purportedly morally good business-activity. Note that Trump states: ‘I’ll do nearly anything within legal bounds to win’.⁵⁵ The way Trump applies terms, such as ‘winner’ and ‘loser’, varies with context and is not very precise. It is plausible to interpret, though, that, for him, a ‘winner’ is someone who by all kinds of means actively pursues profit through a continuous, rational and purportedly morally good business-activity. A loser is someone who has a more reactive attitude in not engaging oneself in this pursuit, and ultimately resenting those who do so. In Trump’s words, ‘there are people — I categorize them as life’s losers — who get their sense of accomplishment and achievement from trying to stop others’.⁵⁶ Given that Trump has pursued and guided others into the stated profit pursuit, he describes himself as a winner. ‘I’m not bragging’, he states, ‘when I say that I’m a winner. I have experience in winning. That’s what we call leadership. That means that people will follow me and be inspired by what I do’.⁵⁷ This would have occurred, Trump underlines, due to Trump’s own merits. ‘Fred Trump [Trump’s father] was a rich man’, Trump states, ‘but he made sure his kids worked hard. (...) We had to work for what we got’.⁵⁸

A third core feature of capitalists backed up by basic observation of culture is that: while seeking to alleviate their negative psychological states by engaging themselves in business-activities, capitalists have also more or less unconsciously or implicitly committed themselves to at least one highly controversial claim. Reasons for attributing this commitment to people who may not be consciously or explicitly committed to at least one highly controversial claim will be spelled out in the next section. First, let us emphasize that a reason for taking capitalists to be hardly distinguishable from Protestants is that they have more or less unconsciously or implicitly committed themselves to at least one of the following highly controversial claims, which are not easily distinguishable from (Pro-Ont), (Pro-Mod) and (Pro-Pra):

(Cap-Ont): There is a God who privileges those who by all kinds of means pursue profit through a continuous, rational and purportedly morally good business-activity.

(Cap-Mod): This God defines and distinguishes the domain of possibilities from that of impossibilities in including, for instance, a particular possibility in the former domain and a particular impossibility in the latter domain: respectively, the possibility of a financially successful businessperson (that is, a ‘winner’) being allowed into paradise; and the impossibility of this occurring with a financially unsuccessful person (that is, a ‘loser’).

(Cap-Pra): One must act in accordance with this God’s will by using all kinds of means in pursuing profit through a continuous, rational and purportedly morally good business-activity.

The process of pseudo-secularization from Protestantism to capitalism can, then, be more precisely described as being one whereby: Protestants who aimed to alleviate their negative psychological states by more or less consciously or explicitly committing themselves to (Pro-Ont), (Pro-Mod) and (Pro-Pra) more or less indirectly have given rise to capitalists who

⁵⁵ Trump, *Art of Deal*, 108.

⁵⁶ Trump, *Art of Deal*, 59.

⁵⁷ Trump, *Great Again*, 9.

⁵⁸ Trump, *Great Again*, 128.

more or less unconsciously or implicitly commit themselves to (Cap-Ont), (Cap-Mod) and (Cap-Pra). In fact, it is ultimately hard to differentiate Protestants from capitalists. This section's conclusion, then, is that the defense of (CiR) articulated here meets the epistemic condition. This is insofar as the described basic observation of culture (that is, a quite unproblematic and empirical justificatory resource that may be embraced by religious and non-religious people) justifies belief in (CiR). Therefore, besides being a synthetic claim, it is read that that (CiR) is likewise an *a-posteriori* one whose truth or at least persuasiveness or plausibility was indicated throughout this section.

The Revisionist Condition

It may be objected that the last section's conclusion does not follow. The reason would be that basic observation of culture is not sufficient to spell out the third feature attributed to capitalists. The feature is that they are more or less unconsciously or implicitly committed to at least one highly controversial claim, such as (Cap-Ont), (Cap-Mod) and (Cap-Pra). Capitalists, the objector emphasizes, are *prima facie* non-religious people who follow critics of religion in taking these claims to be: false; cognitively meaningless; or politically dangerous.

Let us start by replying to this objection by emphasizing that not all, but only several or even perhaps merely some capitalists are *prima facie* non-religious people. Trump himself states: 'people who have God in their lives receive a tremendous amount of joy and satisfaction from their faith'.⁵⁹ He also states that he has belonged to Protestant churches throughout his life: first, the 'First Presbyterian Church in Jamaica'; then, 'Reverend Norman Vincent Peale's Marble Collegiate Church' in New York; and, finally, the church of 'Bethesda-by-the Sea in Palm Beach, Florida'.⁶⁰ Indeed, Trump explicitly acknowledges that he has been influenced by Reverend Peale. The latter, Trump states, 'would instill a very positive feeling about God that also made me feel positive about myself. (...) I learned a lot from Norman Vincent Peale, who wrote the classic *The Power of Positive Thinking*'.⁶¹

'I think', Trump also states, 'that people are shocked when they find out that I am Christian, that I am religious person. They see me with all the surroundings of wealth so they sometimes don't associate that with being religious'.⁶² 'That's not accurate', Trump emphasizes, 'I go to church, I love God, and I love having a relationship with Him'.⁶³ Trump, then, is living evidence that it is not easy to distinguish Protestants who read the bible from capitalists who write and/or follow self-help books on how to be financially successful. 'I think the Bible is the most important book ever written', Trump states. 'Perhaps', Trump jokes while at the same time spelling out in all seriousness his capitalist spirit, '*The Art of the Deal* is second. (Just kidding!)'. In short, Trump concludes: 'God is in my life every day'.⁶⁴

Therefore, a feature of Trump's politics that has not yet been much considered even by Jason Stanley's careful analysis deserves attention.⁶⁵ The feature is that Trump constantly resorts to a notion of God in his political speeches, while suggesting that this God sanctions his policies that seek to allow winners to keep winning while giving no 'charity' to losers who ultimately are to be held responsible for their poor financial situation. Examples of such policies are those of seeking: to increase patriotism while passing more restrict rules for accepting immigrants into the USA and intensifying the deportation of illegal immigrants; and to diminish or abolish the healthcare subsidies of Obamacare in aiming to reduce so-called 'big

⁵⁹ Trump, *Great Again*, 128.

⁶⁰ Trump, *Great Again*, 129.

⁶¹ Trump, *Great Again*, 129.

⁶² Trump, *Great Again*, 30.

⁶³ Trump, *Great Again*, 130.

⁶⁴ Trump, *Great Again*, 130.

⁶⁵ Jason Stanley, *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (New York, Random House, 2018).

state'. In his *Inaugural Address* from 20 January 2017, Trump states: 'when you open your heart to patriotism, there is no room for prejudice. The Bible tells us, "how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity"'.⁶⁶ In his *Speech at the Boy Scout Jamboree* from 24 July 2017, Trump states the following: 'the words "duty," "country" and "God" are beautiful words. In other words, basically what you're doing is you're pledging to be a great American patriot'; 'if you do what we say, I promise you that you (...) will win, win, win'; and 'I just want to end by saying, very importantly, God bless you. God bless the Boy Scouts. God Bless the United States of America'.⁶⁷ 'Above all else', Trump states in his *Remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference* on 23 February 2018, 'we know that faith and family, not government and bureaucracy, are at the center of American life. We know that. Because in America, we don't worship government, we worship God'.⁶⁸

These passages by Trump are sufficient evidence that he is a sort of a 'reverend' of the religion of capitalism who champions what might be called a process of re-religionization. This is a process whereby: capitalists who aimed to alleviate their negative psychological states by more or less unconsciously or implicitly committing themselves to (Cap-Ont), (Cap-Mod) and/or (Cap-Pra) more or less indirectly have given rise to capitalists, such as Trump, who more or less consciously or explicitly do so. Nonetheless, let us grant the aforementioned objector that some if not several capitalists are, indeed, *prima facie* non-religious people. Contrary to Trump, they follow critics of religion in taking claims, such as (Cap-Ont), (Cap-Mod), and (Cap-Pra), to be: false; cognitively meaningless; or politically dangerous. Given that this essay attributes to these people an unconscious or implicit commitment to at least one of these claims, a last condition must be met: the aforementioned revisionist condition of providing a justification for revising ordinary use of language in calling *prima facie* non-religious people who embrace the purportedly religion of capitalism, religious people.

This essay's way of showing that (CiR) also satisfies the revisionist condition is influenced by authors, such as David Plunkett and Amie L. Thomasson.⁶⁹ Under the influence of Carnap and/or Nietzsche, these philosophers have argued that philosophers are to be engaged in 'descriptive conceptual work' as well as in 'normative conceptual work'.⁷⁰ The former work is that of describing how concepts have been used. The latter work is that of indicating how concepts are to be used. Descriptively speaking, it is hard to determine how exactly the concept of 'religious person' has been used. Indeed, like the concepts of 'capitalism' and 'religion', this concept may be one that lacks a precise ordinary meaning.

However, it is granted to the objector that, descriptively speaking, basic observation of culture indicates that *prima facie* non-religious people with the following features have not been usually described as being religious people: they have experienced the aforementioned negative psychological states of guilt and fear; they have aimed to alleviate these states by freely or somehow freely (in the stated sense) engaging themselves in business-activities for a significant amount of time; they have admired and aimed to be multibillionaires; they have

⁶⁶ Donald Trump, *Inaugural Address* (20 January 2017), accessed 13 November 2020, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-20-2017-inaugural-address>

⁶⁷ Donald Trump, *Speech at the Boy Scout Jamboree* (24 July 2017), accessed 13 November 2020, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/july-24-2017-speech-boy-scout-jamboree>

⁶⁸ Donald Trump, *Remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference* (23 February 2018), accessed 13 November 2020, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/february-23-2018-remarks-conservative-political-action>

⁶⁹ See David Plunkett, "Conceptual History, Conceptual Ethics, and the Aims of Inquiry: A Framework for Thinking About the Relevance of the History / Genealogy of Concepts to Normative Inquiry", *Ergo*: Vol 3, no. 2 (2016), 27-64; and Amie L. Thomasson, "A Pragmatic Method for Conceptual Ethics", in Herman Capellen, David Plunkett, and Alexis Burgess, (eds.), *Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁷⁰ Thomasson, "A Pragmatic Method", 435.

bought self-help books that give advice on how to become financially successful; they have esteemed, watched the TV shows, supported the aforementioned policies and voted for Trump or other politicians who champion similar policies; etc.⁷¹ Normatively speaking, though, this essay's view is that the concept of 'religious person' is to be revised so that it includes in its referential domain *prima facie* non-religious people whose behaviors have these features. Three reasons justify this move.

The first reason is that this move allows one to make sense of *prima facie* non-religious people's behaviors described in the last paragraph. This can be done by claiming that these people have proceeded in such a way because they more or less unconsciously or implicitly have been committed to claims, such as (Cap-Ont), (Cap-Mod) or (Cap-Pra). This is so, regardless of whether these people more or less consciously or explicitly have taken these claims to be: false; cognitively meaningless; or politically dangerous. The second reason is that the move of revising the ordinary notion of religious person together with that of defining 'capitalism' and 'religion' in the stated senses (that is, C_d and R_d) allow one to pressure such *prima facie* non-religious people to become more self-aware of themselves. They can do so by: dropping their behaviors; justifying or at least aiming to justify them; or acknowledging that they are authoritarians whose behaviors have an ultimate *anarchic* character. One way to further justify such described behaviors is by consciously or explicitly acknowledging one's commitments, and making cases for (Cap-Ont), (Cap-Mod), or (Cap-Pra). The italicized term 'anarchic' is used here in a literal, yet not usually endorsed sense indicated by Agamben. The sense is that this term qualifies that which has 'no *archē*, no beginning or foundation'.⁷² Note that capitalists could acknowledge the anarchic character of their behaviors by explicitly embracing another claim that is just as highly controversial as (Cap-Ont), (Cap-Mod) or (Cap-Pra). The claim runs as follows:

(Cap-Ana): Regardless of whether (Cap-Ont), (Cap-Mod), or (Cap-Pra) are true, we must behave as we have done just because.

There is also a third reason for revising the concept of 'religious person' so that it includes within its referential domain *prima facie* non-religious people who, this essay argues, are religious people who believe in the religion of capitalism. The reason is that in endorsing C_d and R_d and identifying the believers of the religion of capitalism, this move also allows one to push for freedom from this religion. This religion, as Benjamin and Agamben argue, has been the dominant one endorsed by the majority (at least in Western societies, such as and especially those of the USA and the UK). The religion of capitalism also 'subtly' coerces practically all of us into joining it. This is so insofar as this religion's (so to speak) 'heretics' face the risk of being: excessively financially poor; financially dependent on others; financially independent but living isolated from the rest of the community; etc. As Weber puts it, 'the Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are ['subtly'] forced to do so'.⁷³ This occurs amid societies, such as wealthy-English speaking ones, that value freedom from standard religions (e.g., Islamism), but do not recognize that capitalism itself is a religion that over-constrains people's freedom of being atheists or of believing in religions that do not rely on (Cap-Ont), (Cap-Mod), (Cap-Pra) or (Cap-Ana).

⁷¹ Whether and, if so, to which extent the USA's democratic party also champions policies that run in agreement with the religion of capitalism are issues that cannot be addressed here. It is worthy to mention, though, that on 7 November 2020 in his first speech as president-elect of the USA, Joe Biden likewise often resorted to a concept of 'God'. Biden's speech was accessed on 13 November 2020 at: <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/read-full-text-joe-bidens-speech-historic-election/story?id=74084462>

⁷² Agamben, *Creation*, 75.

⁷³ Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, 123.

So, the revisionist condition was also met by the defense of (CiR) articulated here. This is insofar as it was showed the pertinence of revising ordinary use of language in calling *prima facie* non-religious people who follow the religion of capitalism, religious people. Given that the defense of (CiR) championed here also satisfies the semantic condition and the epistemic one, this essay aims to have bolstered Benjamin's and Agamben's previous defenses of such claim in making it considerably less easily refutable. Let us, then, conclude by underlining that (CiR) is to be read as a synthetic, *a-posteriori* and literal claim that, albeit, indeed, provocative and perhaps even shocking (especially, to the believers of capitalism who constitute the current majority at least in the West), is to serve, not only one's libertarian tendencies, but also egalitarian ones. This is so in that this claim is to cause some consensus, especially, among a minority of 'heretics' vis-à-vis the religion of capitalism who may be unwilling to act as if (Cap-Ont), (Cap-Mod), (Cap-Pra) and/or (Cap-Ana) were irrefutable religious dogmas.