CHAPTER THREE

INDIVIDUALISM, RELIGION AND SCIENCE

The power relations underpinning capitalist market societies helped give rise to styles of moral thinking consistent with practices essential to capitalist accumulation. At a particular stage in the development of capitalist relations, people embraced the religious beliefs appropriate to these relations.¹ It is certainly the case that some of the religious ethics that emerged after the reformation were fitting with the interests of the owners of moveable capital. There are definite links between later Calvinism, for example, and the acquisitive behavior of capitalists, and to the set of values attendant to such behavior.

To acknowledge the existence of links between religious doctrine and acquisitive behavior does not mean accepting the argument that the latter was the offspring of the former, as Max Weber (1976) suggested in his famous work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. This conclusion was drawn from the Calvinist disapproval of instant gratification and their glorification of hard work. Weber thought that these principles created an environment in which wealth was no longer produced for immediate enjoyment but for the sake of reinvestment. Insofar as this was the case Weber (1976:53) thought that religious practice and doctrine had given shape to the ‘capitalist spirit’, and, by extension, the system of relations referred to as capitalism.

Though the explanation appears to make sense, the notion that Calvinism was the parent of capitalism cannot be taken for granted (Tawney 1948:212). Since the capitalist spirit involved little other than acquisitive behavior, an individualist morality and rationally planned accumulation, it was certainly older than any of the Puritan expressions. It was towards the end of the medieval period, that is to say, from the 15th century onwards, when it became apparent that new technologies and new relations of production could not be exploited in full under the

¹ Individualists do not deny that the perceived legitimacy of market system depends as much on values as it does on scientific arguments in its favor. Authors such as John Gray freely admit that the ‘liberal’ order has at times sought the support of religion (Gray 1986:x).
legal and moral restrictions of the old order, that such a spirit took hold. By the beginning of the 16th century, the body of moral rules limiting acquisitive behavior slowly began to unravel. With further development of bourgeois relations came a sophisticated bourgeois morality and a growing perception that prevailing church dogmas required refutation. The early reformers found that the best way to challenge church doctrine and authority was to suggest that all individuals were capable of interpreting the Bible for themselves.

The interpretation of God’s will provided by established religious authorities was treated with greater and greater scepticism as the decades of the 16th century passed. This interpretation was no longer unanimously accepted as a guide on morality and immorality. By the second half of the 16th century, Calvinist thinkers, such as John Robinson, made sure of this by insisting that the evils of the church had in the past sprung from the governors, not the people. Robinson claimed that nothing “hath more in former days advanced, nor doth at this day uphold the throne of the Antichrist, than the people’s discharging themselves of the care of public affairs in the church, on the one side: and the priests, and prelates arrogating all to themselves on the other side” (Ashton 1851:213).

The shift to Protestantism and the rise of capitalism were connected, according to Max Weber (1976:56), but not in the order that ‘naive historical materialism’ suggested. Weber insisted that the “origin and history of such ideas is much more complex than the theorists of the superstructure suppose”. The approach offered by Weber, which was offered as an alternative to Marxism, presented particular religious ideas as the root of the modern spirit of capitalism. However, Weber’s ‘spiritual’ reductionism served to obscure the simple fact that religion and society are interconnected. Instead, religion (Calvinism in particular) was treated as something that was almost independent of society, influencing people and altering their values, desires and behavior.

The idea that Puritanism produced the changes in thought and behavior that led to the emergence of the capitalist system has little foundation. There is more reason to believe that Puritanism was something fashioned by the existing social system. In the first place, Puritans were very diverse in their teachings. They were not all so concerned with religious democracy. They did not all hold to the notion of predestined salvation. Not all of them were completely preoccupied with hard work and frugality. But even if Puritans were as coherent and consistent as they appear in Weber’s work, there is still no reason to believe that