

## Capitalism as religion: a bolstered defense<sup>1</sup>

### *Capitalismo como religião: uma defesa fortalecida*

#### Abstract

*Under the influence of Max Weber, Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben argue for (CiR): the claim that capitalism is identical to a religion. Yet, these defenses of (CiR) seem quite easily refutable. This is insofar as it is not clear whether they: (i) rely on a plausible use of the terms “capitalism” and “religion”; (ii) spell out the justificatory resource that backs up belief in (CiR); and (iii) show the pertinence of revising ordinary use of language in calling “religious people”, apparently non-religious people who supposedly would follow the religion of capitalism. It is this essay’s aim, then, to bolster Benjamin’s and Agamben’s defense of (CiR) by articulating a new defense of this claim that accomplishes (i) to (iii) and reads Donald Trump as a “reverend” of the religion of capitalism.*

**Keywords:** Capitalism; Religion; Weber; Benjamin; Agamben

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I dedicate this essay to my father, Abilio de Souza Moreira, who passed away from Covid-19 on January 17th of 2021 and whose financial support facilitated my career in philosophy. Although my father described himself as a Catholic, his way of being, at least in my view, had a quite Protestant vein that inspired the view articulated in this essay. I also would like to thank Amanda Moreira and Irene Olivero for valuable comments on previous versions of this essay, which was mainly written during the first months of the Covid-19 pandemic when Donald Trump was still president of the USA. Let me also underline that I tend to endorse a claim that due to space constraints was not supported here: some representatives of the American democratic party, such as Joe Biden, are likewise believers of the religion of capitalism, even though they implicitly follow a sect distinct from Trump’s.

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## Resumo

*Sob a influência de Max Weber, Walter Benjamin e Giorgio Agamben defendem (CêR): a alegação que o capitalismo é idêntico a uma religião. No entanto, essas defesas de (CêR) parecem facilmente refutáveis. Isso se dá porque não é claro se elas: (i) adotam um uso plausível dos termos “capitalismo” e “religião”; (ii) explicitam o recurso justificatório que fundamenta a crença em (CêR); e (iii) mostram a pertinência de revisar a linguagem ordinária, ao chamar de “pessoas religiosas”, pessoas aparentemente não religiosas que pretensamente seguiriam a religião do capitalismo. A pretensão desse artigo, por conseguinte, é fortalecer as defesas de Benjamin e de Agamben de (CêR) por meio da articulação de uma nova defesa dessa alegação que satisfaz (i) a (iii) e lê Donald Trump como um “reverendo” da religião do capitalismo.*

**Palavras-chave:** Capitalismo; Religião; Weber; Benjamin; Agamben.

Influenced by Max Weber, Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben defend that:

*(CiR): Capitalism is identical to a religion.<sup>2</sup>*

Yet, their defenses seem quite easily refutable in that it is not clear whether they explicitly fulfill a semantic, an epistemic and a revisionist condition. The semantic condition is that a plausible use of the terms “capitalism” and “religion” must be 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 spelled out. Otherwise, it may be argued that (CiR) is an unpersuasive, false or even upfront false claim. The

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2 See Weber, M. *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. NY: Routledge: 1992; Benjamin, W. “Capitalism as Religion”, in *Selected Writings: Volume 1 1913-1926*, ed. Bullock, M., and Jennings, M. W. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996; and Agamben, G. *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*. California: Stanford University Press, 2019.

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, (CiR) may lead to an absurdity insofar as, say, supposedly “believers of capitalism” would be more plausibly described as atheists.

If none of the stated conditions are met, (CiR) seems to be some sort of metaphorical, provocative or even shocking claim that mainly serves one’s libertarian tendencies of spelling one’s own uniqueness in causing dissensus with a majority that rejects (CiR).<sup>3</sup> A majority, let us assume, 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 power than a minority that violates these norms. 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 in causing some consensus, especially, among “heretics” vis-à-vis the religion of capitalism who may be more willing to discuss (CiR).

### The Semantic Condition

#### “Capitalism”

Benjamin and Agamben do not provide definitions 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.”<sup>4</sup> 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*.”<sup>5</sup>

3 For a defense of the claim that continental philosophers influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche have often throughout the twentieth century up to our times defended such claims, see my own Moreira, F. G. A. “The Will to Synthesis: Nietzsche, Carnap and the Continental-Analytic Gap”, in *Nietzsche-Studien* Volume 49: Issue 1, pp. 150–170, 2020.

4 Weber, *Ethic*, p. 13.

5 *Ibid.*, xxxi-ii, *our emphasis*.

By “capitalist enterprise”, Weber means a business-activity that can be ostensibly defined, e.g., by real estate. With the term “profit”, Weber refers to a process that takes place when a person performs three actions. First, the person invests money into a business-activity. Second, the person freely or somehow freely opts to engage oneself in this activity. An option is somehow free, suppose, 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 someone. The third action that characterizes profit is to gain an amount of money superior to the invested one.

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.<sup>6</sup> Weber states that “unlimited greed for gain is not in the least identical with capitalism.”<sup>7</sup> Donald Trump points to a similar direction. In the first page of his first book, the 1987 *The Art of the Deal*, he states that: “I don’t do it for the money.”<sup>8</sup> In Weber’s view, then, a business-activity is a “rational acquisition” that involves mathematical considerations.<sup>9</sup> 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.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, “Weber”, as Sam Whimster interprets,

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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.” See Weber, M. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, p. 400. For a more detailed take on Weber’s view on rationality, see Boudon, R. “La rationalité du religieux selon Max Weber”, in: *L’Année sociologique*, Vol. 51, p. 10, 2001.

7 Weber, *Ethic*, p. Xxxi.

8 Trump, D., *The Art of the Deal*. NY: Ballentine Books, 1987, p. 1.

9 Weber, *Ethic*, p. 115.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

“takes Franklin to be what we would today perceive as the style of an earnest and evangelical business guru.”<sup>11</sup> However, as Alastair Hamilton indicates, it has been objected that Weber misread Franklin insofar as the view of the quoted passage by Franklin is not to be identified with Franklin’s.<sup>12</sup> 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. What is crucial 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 summarizes in a single sentence in his last book: “I’m working all the time.”<sup>13</sup>

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-activity 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.”<sup>14</sup> Trump personifies this view when he states: “I do it [that is, engage oneself in a business-activity] to do it.”<sup>15</sup> Thus 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.”<sup>16</sup> “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.”<sup>17</sup>

So, failure to fulfill this duty by, say, spending pleasurable time with beloved ones in having a drink without ascetically seeking profit would be a

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11 Whimster, S. *Understanding Weber*. NY: Routledge, 2007, p. 55.

12 Hamilton, A. “Max Weber’s Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Weber*, ed. Turner, S. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 165.

13 Trump, D. *Great Again: How to Fix Our Crippled America*. NY: Threshold Editions, 2015, p. 128.

14 Weber, *Ethic*, p. 25.

15 Trump, *Art*, p. 1.

16 Weber, *Ethic*, p. 17.

17 *Id.*

morally wrong action. Trump indicates that the fact that he does not drink has made him a better dealmaker: “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.”<sup>18</sup> Weber, then, embraces the following plausible use of the term “capitalism” likewise endorsed here:

*(C<sub>d</sub>): 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.*

### “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.”<sup>19</sup> Yet, Weber’s procedure regarding the term “religion” is distinct from his procedure regarding the term “capitalism.” As indicated above, there are several passages by Weber that point to a plausible use of the latter. The same is not the case regarding the term “religion.” This is why Peter L. Berger 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.”<sup>20</sup>

By his turn, Benjamin points to 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.”<sup>21</sup> This is evidence that Benjamin embraces what has been called a functional definition of religion.<sup>22</sup> This kind of definition defines religion in terms of what it does for its adherents. Émile Durkheim

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18 Trump, *Art*, p. 86.

19 Weber, *Economy and Society*, p. 399.

20 Berger, P. L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. NY: Anchor Books, 1967, p. 175.

21 Benjamin, “Capitalism”, p. 288.

22 See Berger, *Sacred*, p. 175; and Schilbrack, K. “What Isn’t Religion?”, in: *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 93, No. 3, p. 293, July. 2013

may have been the first to embrace a functional definition. According to him, religion has the function of uniting believers into a single community.<sup>23</sup> 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". Yet, as Berger and Kevin Schilbrack indicate, functional definitions have been challenged under the basis that they are too broad.<sup>24</sup>

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 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. This team's fans usually sing a song called "Vasco, minha paixão!", that is, "Vasco, my passion!"<sup>25</sup> This song concludes with the verse, "Vasco da Gama, religion." Indeed, the activity of cheering for Vasco seems to have the stated functions associated with religion by Durkheim and Benjamin. However, to call this activity a religion is a disputable move.<sup>26</sup> This is so even if there seems to be no ordinary meaning of the term "religion" universally shared.<sup>27</sup> 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 definition of religion in arguing that religion is a commitment to spiritual beings.<sup>28</sup> 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

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23 Durkheim, É. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, NY: Free Press, 1995.

24 Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, p. 175; and Schilbrack, "What Isn't Religion?", p. 291.

25 This song's original lyrics in Portuguese can be found in the following website (accessed in September of 2021): <https://www.letras.mus.br/vasco-da-gama/1254370/>

26 This move yet is suggested by Griffiths, P. J. *Problems of Religious Diversity*. Malden: Blackwell, 2011, p. 15. For a more detailed discussion of soccer in Brazil, see the texts gathered in Damatta, R., Neves, L. F. B., Guedes, S. L. and Vogel, A. *Universo do futebol: esporte e sociedade brasileira*, Rio de Janeiro: Edições Pinakothkeke, 1982.

27 For a case for this claim, see Martin, C. *Masking Hegemony: A Genealogy of Liberalism, Religion and the Private Sphere*, London: Equinox, 2010.

28 Tylor, E. B. *Religion in Primitive Culture*. MA: Peter Smith, 1970.

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.<sup>29</sup> 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.”<sup>30</sup> This definition may also be too narrow 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. 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 while only engaging oneself in sexual practices with the intent of reproduction”. This essay proposes, then, the following use of the term “religion”:

*(R<sub>d</sub>): 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 essay does not take this definition to be exhaustive or more accurate than other definitions of religion present in the literature. What is supported

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

30 Agamben, *Creation*, p. 59.

here is that  $(R_d)$  is 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 from the domain of religion in that, 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 because the proposed uses 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

There is another reason for not considering  $(R_d)$  to be an excessively narrow definition of religion: 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, e.g., to promote a poll in asking Protestants if they 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.<sup>31</sup> What is crucial is to underline that Weber's reading of core Protestant writings is an upfront empirical justification that 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.

The first feature is that Protestants have experienced at least one negative psychological state: a particular state of doubt. This is the 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. "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."<sup>32</sup> The second core feature is that Protestants have tried to alleviate the state of doubt by means of an ascetic behavior in seeking to control emotions and bodily urges while engaging themselves 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."<sup>33</sup> "The end of this asceticism", Weber continues, "was to be able to lead an alert, intelligent life:

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31 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 16<sup>th</sup> century German Protestants influenced by Martin Luther's reformation had behaviors and defended claims quite distinct from those of British 17<sup>th</sup> 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 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> 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.

32 Weber, *Ethic*, p. 65.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

the most urgent task the destruction of spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment.”<sup>34</sup> 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. Indeed, the importance of properly religious institutions is considerably attenuated by Protestants. This is because the attitude of self-control is to be pursued in performing “mundane occupations”, that is, a “worldly [business] activity” of everyday life.<sup>35</sup> To do so would be a legitimate “technical means (...) of getting rid of the fear of damnation.”<sup>36</sup> 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 and bodily urges in pursuing profit through a continuous, rational and purportedly morally good business-activity.*

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.<sup>37</sup> Benjamin suggests so in claiming that Weber believes that capitalism was “a formation conditioned by religion”, that

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34 *Id.*

35 *Ibid.*, p. 74.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 69.

37 See Hamilton, “Weber”, p. 162; and Whimster, *Understanding*, p. 119.

is, by Protestantism.<sup>38</sup> 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, e.g., “geographical discoveries, technological progress, the operations of the great trading companies.”<sup>39</sup> 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.”<sup>40</sup> “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.”<sup>41</sup> 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: 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.”<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup> 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

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38 Benjamin, “Capitalism”, p. 288.

39 Hamilton, “Weber”, p. 162.

40 Weber, *Ethic*, p. 49.

41 *Id.*

42 Agamben, *Creation*, p. 67.

43 See Weber, *Ethic*, p. 7 and p. 173.

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: 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 do so more “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.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, it seems that an upfront empirical justificatory resource implicitly applied by Benjamin and Agamben is sufficient to spell out 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. This observation 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 skeptic 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 have yet experienced negative psychological states, such as the states of wanting, but feeling guilt or fear of being unable to: achieve financial success by one’s own means and merits; acquire material goods; become famous; be well-liked and popular among one’s peers, friends and family; afford the college tuition of one’s kids; 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.<sup>45</sup> What is more crucial is to claim that basic observation of culture also shows

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44 Agamben, *Creation*, p. 67.

45 Benjamin, “Capitalism”, p. 288. For a more detailed view on Benjamin’s take on guilt, see Silva, J.C. “O capitalismo como religião: a culpa”. In: *Cadernos Walter Benjamin*, v. 23, pp. 162-192, 2019.

a second core feature of capitalists: that they have aimed to alleviate their negative psychological states by freely or somehow freely 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.”<sup>46</sup> 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: stockbrokers' offices in Wall Street; banks; headquarters of multinational companies (e.g., Microsoft, Amazon or Facebook) ran by multibillionaires; etc. These competitive places may be depicted as the “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.”<sup>47</sup> 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.”<sup>48</sup>

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

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46 *Id.* and Agamben, *Creation*, p. 67. For a more detailed reading of this passage by Benjamin, consider Löwy, M. “Capitalism as Religion: Walter Benjamin and Max Weber”, in: *Historical Materialism* 17, pp. 60–73, 2009.

47 Agamben, *Creation*, p. 69.

48 *Id.*

win.”<sup>49</sup> 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.”<sup>50</sup> 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.”<sup>51</sup> 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.”<sup>52</sup>

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 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.*

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49 Trump, *Art*, p. 108.

50 Trump, *Art*, p. 59.

51 Trump, *Great*, p. 9.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

*(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 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 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). So, it is read that (CiR) is likewise an *a-posteriori* claim 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: 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 to reply by emphasizing that not all, but only several or perhaps even merely some capitalists are *prima facie* non-religious people. Trump states:

“people who have God in their lives receive a tremendous amount of joy and satisfaction from their faith.”<sup>53</sup> He also states that he has belonged to Protestant churches throughout his life.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Trump explicitly acknowledges that he has been influenced by Reverend Norman Vincent Peale who “would instill a very positive feeling about God that also made me feel positive about myself.”<sup>55</sup> “I go to church, I love God, and I love having a relationship with Him,” Trump states.<sup>56</sup> 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.”<sup>57</sup>

So, a feature of Trump’s politics that has not yet been much considered even by Jason Stanley’s careful analysis deserves attention: 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.<sup>58</sup> 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 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”.<sup>59</sup> In his *Speech at the Boy Scout Jamboree* from 24 July 2017, Trump states that “the words ‘duty,’ ‘country’ and ‘God’ are beautiful

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53 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

54 See *ibid.*, p. 129.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

57 *Id.*

58 Stanley, J. *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them*. NY: Random House, 2018.

59 Trump, D. *Inaugural Address* (20 January 2017), accessed on March of 2021, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/january-20-2017-inaugural-address>

words”.<sup>60</sup> “Above all else”, Trump states in his *Remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference* on 23 February 2018, that in “America, we don’t worship government, we worship God.”<sup>61</sup>

These passages are sufficient evidence that Trump is a sort of a “reverend” of the religion of capitalism who champions what might be called a process of re-religionization; 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. Let us yet grant the aforementioned objector that some if not several capitalists are, indeed, *prima facie* non-religious people who 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 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.

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. It is yet granted to the objector that 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 negative psychological states of guilt and fear; they have aimed to alleviate these states by freely or somehow freely engaging themselves in business-activities for a significant amount of time; they have admired and aimed to be multibillionaires; they have bought self-help books that give advice on how to become financially successful; etc. Normatively speaking, 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. This move allows one to make sense of these behaviors

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60 Trump, D. *Speech at the Boy Scout Jamboree* (July 24th, 2017), accessed on March of 2021, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/july-24-2017-speech-boy-scout-jamboree>

61 Trump, D. *Remarks at the Conservative Political Action Conference* ( 23 February 2018), accessed on March of 2021, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/february-23-2018-remarks-conservative-political-action>

by claiming that those who endorse them have done so 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.

Another reason for revising the ordinary notion of religious person is that this allows 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: that this term qualifies that which has "no *archē*, no beginning or foundation."<sup>62</sup> 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):

*(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, nonetheless, are religious people in the sense that they believe in 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). The religion of capitalism also "subtly" coerces practically all of us into joining it insofar as this religion's "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."<sup>63</sup> This occurs amid societies, such as wealthy-English speaking ones, that value freedom from standard

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62 Agamben, *Creation*, p. 75.

63 Weber, *Ethic*, p. 123.

religions but do not recognize that capitalism itself is a religion that over-constrains people's freedom of being atheists or of believing in other religions.

So, the revisionist condition was also met by the defense of (CiR) articulated here. Given that this defense also satisfies the semantic condition and the epistemic one, this essay bolstered Benjamin's and Agamben's previous cases for (CiR) in reading this claim as a synthetic, *a-posteriori* and literal claim that serves, not only one's libertarian tendencies, but also egalitarian ones. This is so in that it has been showed that this claim is to cause some consensus, especially, among "heretics" who may be unwilling to act as if (Cap-Ont), (Cap-Mod), (Cap-Pra) and/or (Cap-Ana) were religious dogmas.

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