



Volume 5. Wilhelmine Germany and the First World War, 1890-1918  
Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905)

Trained as a lawyer, Max Weber (1864-1920) was a political economist and one of the founders of modern sociology. In *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* [*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*], Weber explored the meaning that people give to their actions in modern society. He argued that the emergence of modern capitalism was favored by an ascetic spirit of sacrifice, hard work, and self-deprivation that grew out of early Protestantism. In an effort to understand the implications of this dynamic, he examined the relationship between the religious and economic systems of many different civilizations.

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Two older essays have been placed at the beginning which attempt, at one important point, to approach the side of the problem which is generally most difficult to grasp: the influence of certain religious ideas on the development of an economic spirit, or the *ethos* of an economic system. In this case we are dealing with the connection of the spirit of modern economic life with the rational ethics of ascetic Protestantism. Thus we treat here only one side of the causal chain. The later studies on the Economic Ethics of the World Religions attempt, in the form of a survey of the relations of the most important religions to economic life and to the social stratification of their environment, to follow out both causal relationships, so far as it is necessary in order to find points of comparison with the Occidental development. For only in this way is it possible to attempt a causal evaluation of those elements of the economic ethics of the Western religions which differentiate them from others, with a hope of attaining even a tolerable degree of approximation. Hence these studies do not claim to be complete analyses of cultures, however brief. On the contrary, in every culture they quite deliberately emphasize the elements in which it differs from Western civilization. They are, hence, definitely oriented to the problems which seem important for the understanding of Western culture from *this* view-point. With our object in view, any other procedure did not seem possible. But to avoid misunderstanding we must here lay special emphasis on the limitation of our purpose.

In another respect the uninitiated at least must be warned against exaggerating the importance of these investigations. The Sinologist, the Indologist, the Semitist, or the Egyptologist, will of course find no facts unknown to him. We only hope that he will find nothing definitely wrong in points that are essential. How far it has been possible to come as near this ideal of a non-specialist is able to do, the author cannot know. It is quite evident that anyone who is forced to rely on translations and furthermore on the use and evaluation of monumental, documentary, or literary sources, has to rely himself on a specialist literature which is often highly controversial, and the merits of which he is unable to judge accurately. Such a writer must make modest claims for the value of his work. All the more so since the number of available translations of real sources (that is, inscriptions and documents) is, especially for China, still very small in comparison with what exists and is important. From all this follows the definitely provisional character of these studies, and especially of the parts dealing with Asia. Only the specialist is

entitled to a final judgment. And, naturally, it is only because expert studies with this special purpose and from this particular view-point have not been hitherto made, that the present ones have been written at all. They are destined to be superseded in a much more important sense than this can be said, as it can be, of all scientific work. [ . . . ]

Source of English translation: Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905). Translated by Talcott Parsons with a foreword by R.H. Tawney. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958, pp. 27-28.