

# Marketplace Monks and Nuns:

## Christian entrepreneurs as agents of reform

*Peter Heslam takes the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation as an opportunity to be inspired for social reform today. In doing so, he offers an alternative to conventional interpretations of Puritans and Pentecostals based on the idea of 'earthy holiness'.*

In 1517 an unknown monk, Martin Luther, became one of the greatest whistle-blowers in history by nailing his 95 theses (or objections) to a German church door. In England, the movement he instigated gave rise to the Puritans, who sought to orientate their lives around scripture, rather than the dogmas of the established church.

While in their own day they were persecuted for such anti-establishment sentiment, today they are criticized for having produced the

'me-first' attitude that has produced the morally and socially bankrupt economic system that is capitalism.

While caricatures are misleading, they often contain a grain of truth. The doctrine of vocation, which was central to the Reformers' worldview, did indeed provide a basis for individualism in the economic sphere, not least because responsibility for fulfilling one's vocation lay with each human being.

But to claim that in this sense of moral obligation lies capitalism's

purported dog-eat-dog ethic is to rely on social Darwinism for an understanding of the Puritans, rather than on historical evidence. That evidence shows that leading Puritans insisted on the social implications of individual vocation.

Such Puritans include those who profoundly influenced the founders of the USA, the country most widely associated with individualism. These Puritans regarded self-centredness as the core human sin and as destructive of community, as



John Ehninger  
*Thanksgiving - A Thanksgiving Dinner Among the Puritans (1867)*