

Max Weber's Sociology of Islam A Critique

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Sociology is a rich, stimulating, innovative, and even fast-expanding discipline with multidimensional empirical ramifications. But in the field of religion its contributions still appear inadequate and leave a great deal to be desired; and this is so even with the path breaking leads by Marx (1867), Weber (1904) and Durkheim (1912). But the overall state of the discipline is poorer when it comes to the specific question of Islam. Even as late as 1974, therefore, the British Sociologist Bryan S. Turner¹ was found lamenting as well as fuming: "... sociologists are either not interested in Islam or have nothing to contribute to Islamic scholarship" (Turner, 1974: 1-2). Even when they did focus on Islam, western sociologists were often inconsistent and misleading. This is true of no less a sociologist than Max Weber. But Max Weber is not alone in being inconsistent. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) points out inadequacies and preconceived tunnel visions that mark the vast majority of western scholarly output when it comes to the question of non-western cultures in general, and Islam and Muslims in particular. Max Weber, in particular, was not interested in Islam as a religion as such; his focus was on the Islam that was antithetical to capitalism.

Max Weber did not produce full-blown research outputs on Islam; and his notes on Islam seem to be a sort of sociological companion for his analysis of the 'Protestant Ethic'. He left his work on Islam incomplete.

Nevertheless, Islam appears to be intrinsically important to his total endeavour vis-à-vis the sociology of religion. Whatever study he made of Islam drew entirely upon the research of Carl Heinrich Becker who had himself emphasized the differences between European and Muslim feudalism (Turner, 1974: 16).

The present exercise is concerned with understanding and analysing the Weberian construct of Islam and critiquing the same. Divided into three main sections the opening one draws attention to the basic postulates of Weber. The second section seeks to offer a critical appreciation. The third section situates the Weberian construct of Islam vis-à-vis contemporary Islam. This is, however, not a full discussion of all that Weber had to say on Islam; its thrust is on Islam and capitalism interrelationship.

Main Postulates of Weberian Islam

In Max Weber's view the character of a society's religion and religious institutions is historically one of the most important factors in determining its political outlook, in particular whether it develops a liberal tradition or not (Beetham, 1974: 185-86). In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1930) he extends the same argument into the economic realm by suggesting a causal nexus between the 'Protestant Ethic', especially of the Calvinistic variant, and rational capitalism. In Weber's view asceticism is a necessary and sufficient condition of rational capitalism, but asceticism has to be placed alongside a number of variables. These variables are identified by him in his *General Economic History* "as characteristics and pre-requisites of capitalistic enterprise the following: appropriation of the physical means of production by the entrepreneur, freedom of the market, rational technology, rational law, free labour and finally the commercialization of economic life" (cited in Turner, 1974: 12). It is argued that, given these necessary conditions, a rational thesis – worldly ascetic ethic is crucial in the emergence of modern capitalism. To test this thesis Weber went about an experimental cross-cultural comparison of civilizations to discover whether these factors were present and whether a causally dominant ethic was absent. From this exercise he emerged with the finding that, in India, China and the Islamic lands of the Middle East many of the prerequisites of capitalism were absent. In the specific case of Islam the focus was on the political military and economic nature of Islamic society as a patrimonial form of domination with prebendal feudalism as its core. In attitudinal terms Islam appeared to Weber in a purely hedonistic spirit, especially towards women, luxuries and property.¹ Consequently, he reached the ineluctable conclusion that Islam represented a polar opposite to Puritanism.

A description of the Weberian construct of Islam may be attempted from two broad perspectives: Islamic ethic; and patrimonialism of later Islam.

II

Islamic Ethic

Weber shows that rational law, autonomous cities, an independent burgher class and political stability were totally absent in Islam. But, as it is, he does not seem to link the absence of capitalism in Islam to the nonexistence of the prerequisites identified by him. On the contrary, he lists at least two factors responsible for preventing Islam from evolving naturally. The monotheistic Islam of Makkah failed to develop into an ascetic this-worldly religion because its main carrier was a warrior group. The content of the religious message was transformed into a set of values compatible with the mundane needs of this warrior group. The spiritual element of Islam as a belief system with emphasis on salvation was transformed into the secular quest for mundane gains. The result was that Islam became a religion of accommodation rather than of transformation. Second, the original message of monotheism was subjected to change under the impact of Sufism which catered for the emotional and orgiastic needs of the masses. In consequence, Islam was pulled in two opposite directions by these two groups. The warrior group pulled Islam in the direction of a militaristic ethic; and the Sufis in that of mystical flight. Both the directions of Islam, representing, as it were, a bifurcated Islamic ethic failed to produce, as Weber will have us believe, the prerequisites congruent with the rise of rational capitalism.

III

Patrimonialism of Later Islam

The second perspective of the Weberian construct of Islam is gained by observing the emphasis put on the political and economic structure of such later dynasties as the Abbasid, Mamluk and Ottoman, and this structure falls under Weber's general consideration of patrimonial bureaucracies. This type of financial and political structure depended on the conquest of new lands, which were then exploited to maintain central bureaucracy. The political structure hinged on a complex balance of social forces represented by the Sultan, the military, the ulama and the mass. Frequent dynastic coups rendered political balance precarious, but surprisingly the basic structure of society was left intact. The central political contradiction of the political structure of 'Sultanism' in Weber's view was the sultan's total dependence on the military, which all too frequently proved unreliable. The sultan used to hold on the power and retain his monopoly of power by curbing the growth of autonomous institutions and groups within the patrimonial society. On the other hand, potentially independent social groups were co-opted or assimilated into the military. The lawyers, the ulama generally, the merchants, they were all state officials and emerged out of the imperial household. Thus a society structured and organised as such failed to develop the autonomous institutions, which Weber saw in Europe facilitating the growth of capitalism.

Weber also noted that this political structure failed to develop a rational and formal law because the ideal sacred law was subservient to the state and to political expediency. Similarly, city in Islamic society never developed beyond a military camp and a place of government business. This city also did not provide an environment suitable for the development of independent burghers and merchants. On the whole, the political system stressed such values as imitation and rejection of innovation. Thus it was not attitude or ethic of Islam that militated against the creation of prerequisites for capitalism; the inhibiting factor was the political position of the merchant class vis-à-vis the dominant military-bureaucratic classes in Islamic societies (Zubaida, 1972: P. 324).

IV

Weberian Islam: A Critique

The first point for critiquing the Weberian construct of Islam is that he did not make any real attempt to show the intermeshing between these two perspectives. The Islamic ethic is constructed from a study of seventh-century Islam in Makkah and Madina. The analysis of patrimonialism was linked with the emergence of a military bureaucracy under the Umayyads and its perfection under the Ottomans. One plausible explanation for the failure to connect these two individually strong perspectives is that, as Turner suggests, "... Weber thought that a religion was indelibly stamped by its early history, particularly by its original carriers" (Turner, 1914: 176). But evidentially this is a fallacy. All religions of the world underwent changes as carrier and time changed.

Second, the construct of Islamic ethic is factually wrong on two counts. In the first place, for reasons of his perfunctory approach Weber glossed over urban and commercial aspects of the early as well as later Islamic society. As Professor Montgomery Watt has shown Islam emerged in an essentially commercial and urban

environment of Makkah and flourished in the oasis settlement of Madina (Watt, 1962). Much of the theological basis of the teachings of Islam is taken up with the problems of commercialism and the very terminology of the Quran is rich with commercial concepts. Most Islamicists would agree with G. E. Von Grunebaum's judgment that the prophet's "piety is entirely tailored to urban life" (Grunebaum, 1970:33). An overview of Islamic economy suggests at least three objectives: respect for private property, promotion of a free market of exchange of goods and services, and minimizing the rich-poor gap. There appears to be three strategies for progressively achieving these objectives. First, Islam emphasizes the work ethic, dedication to one's calling and enjoying the fruits of one's labour. Like Weber's 'Protestant ethic' (1904) Islam calls for hard work in order to earn a living and take care of one's family, rather than forsaking the world or surviving on handouts, donations and charity. But unlike the Protestant ethic, Islam does not necessarily take material success in this world as a sign of God's approval of what one is doing. Moreover, much as Islam emphasizes hard work, it is averse to materialism, opportunistic profiteering and seemingly unending pursuit of wealth and an obsession with this – worldly pleasures. As is called upon in the Quran, "Ye prefer the life of this world" (87:16). Second, while favouring acquisition of property and free market economy Islam prohibits the process of 'making a fast buck' or excessive accumulation such as gambling, hoarding and dealing in interest. Islamic banks deal in profit and loss sharing rather than interest, something thought to be quite feasible (Andersen et. al., 1990), and in which there is an growing interest among Muslim and non-Muslim economists alike. Third, inasmuch as sources of excessive accumulation of wealth are denied by Quranic prohibition, dispersion of wealth is facilitated by Islamic folkways (such as voluntary acts of charity, generosity and hospitality), as well as through explicit Quranic commandments of inheritance (4:7, 11) and the poor tax or *jakat* (Benthal, 2002: 149-166; and Ilyas Ba-Yunus, 2002: 101-102). Thus juxtaposed against relevant facts of Islamic economic life it appears that the Islamic society clearly fulfilled at least one of the Weberian prerequisites, that is, "commercialization of economic life".

In the second place, Weber's argument that the warrior ethic had a negative transformative impact on the character of Islam is minimally tenable, and at the same time, factually an exaggeration. In fact, the warrior group was one of the segments of the converts to Islam; and, as H. A. R. Gibb identifies and distinguishes three such social groups in terms of their commitment of Islam (Gibb, 1962:5). The first is the genuine converts who accepted totally the spirit of Islam and who demonstrated pure duty to the Prophet. The second group comprised the merchants of Makkah for whom Islam did not curtail their economic freedom; and they showed commitment to the utilitarian objectives of Islam. The third group was represented by the bedouin warriors whose adherence to Islam was brought about either by the promise of booty or by military threat.

The second aspect of the Weberian construct of Islam is, as Professor Turner points out, open to criticism on a number of grounds (Turner, 1974:173). Weber failed to make allowance for the persistent conflict between the pious and their rulers. There was also deep resentment between the legal scholars and law officials. Weber was also unable to recognize the social solidarity of Islamic cities, which focussed on the law schools and criminal groups.

But such criticisms on matters of detail aside the core of the Weberian thesis that patrimonialism stunted the development of Islam along capitalist lines holds an unassailable ground, and which is also attested by contemporary research.

V

Is Weberian Sociology of Islam Relevant in the Contemporary Context?

The essence of Weberian sociology is to suggest a linkage between modern economy and its associated beliefs and culture. The modern economy is a process that is claimed to be 'rational'. It is orderly, cost-effective, much given to the division of labour and the use of a free market. This process is run and managed by people who are work-oriented, disciplined and not given to economic ally irrelevant pursuits. If these are indeed what a modern economy demands, then Islam in its true sense along with its modernised version (Husain, 2003) would, as Ernest Gellner rightly suggests, "be custom-made for the needs of the hour" (Gellner, 1992:21-22). But in the Muslim countries the ground-reality is otherwise. The economics of these countries are not catastrophic, but they are not satisfactory either. Moreover, there is also the distorting effect of oil wealth in the oil-rich Muslim countries. Given the intrinsic qualities of Islam this reality is some kind of a puzzle. Though long endowed with resources, commercial bourgeoisie and significant urbanization the

Muslim world has so far failed to engender industrialism. But available evidence indicates that at least some of the better-off Muslim countries are capable of running modernizing economy, reasonably permeated by appropriate technology.

But this has not happened, and there is little sign of happening either. To answer this puzzle the Weberian construct of Islam may not be of any assistance. A more comprehensive paradigm is needed for the purpose. Throughout the twentieth century both Islam and the Muslim world have undergone changes of many types with spill over impact on society, economy and polity of Muslims. Consequently, the Muslim world as it appears today is set off the one that Weber studied. But kept to its time and space specificities the Weberian construct has cogent reasons to hold ground insofar as patrimonialism is concerned.

Concluding Observations

This short discussion shows that Weberian sociology of Islam has five outstanding parameters. First, Weber's argument is not in terms of 'the religion of individuals'. Religion in Weberian construct is the determining factor, for society polity and economy. Second, it reflects all the ideological prejudices of the nineteenth century, and earlier. Third, there are factual problems in Weber's emphasis on the warrior group in Islam. Fourth, by ignoring the Quaranic and other Muslim accounts of early Islam Weber in effect ignored some basic principles of his own sociological approach. Fifth, on the whole, the Weberian thesis of Patrimonialism stands to empiric reason, albeit in the specific time and space context.

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