

Protestant Ethic and the Not-So-Sociology of World Religions

- Nazrul Islam*

Probably the most talked about sociologist, definitely the most influential of them all, Max Weber, is known for many great works. He is known most for his analysis of the Protestant ethic, as for his theory of action, for his political sociology, sociology of music and his sociology of religion. But his lifetime work seems to be in the area of what has come to be known as the “world religions”. He undertook the colossal project of making sense of the major religions of the world but left it incomplete as his life was, unfortunately, shortened. Yet, what he achieved in that short life is the envy of most scholars, definitely of all sociologists. Like most sociologists I have unbounded appreciation for the amount he achieved but unlike most sociologists I fail to see much sociology in his work, particularly in his study of the world religions. In this paper I shall focus on his seminal work on the Protestant ethic and the other world religions and try to show why these are *not so sociological*.

The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (2003a) seems to have launched Weber into a life long quest for unraveling the secret that religions held in terms of their hitherto unheard of influence on economics. For much of history and for most religions economics or the mundane pursuit of life is beyond the sphere of godly virtues. Poverty and asceticism are the most virtuous quality for the faithful and the key to unending happiness in the world beyond. However, that certain amount of economics was mixed with religion, especially for the priestly class, has been known for millennia and is attested by the huge amount of gold and jewelry stashed away in the temples from antiquity to the present day all over the world. Thus religion has often been a “good business”, but never so good as it has been for the Protestants. Or so Weber would have us believe.

The Protestants by the very virtues of asceticism seems to have unlocked the secrets of capitalist enterprise and have made it good in the modern world. Indeed, no other people, nor religion, succeeded in bringing forth capitalism of the “modern” variety, whatever that might mean. And it were the Protestants again who single handedly rationalized the world and paved the way for the growth and development of science and technology, art and music, politics and administration and what not, all most all things good and rid the world of all things bad such as the traditional, the magical, the mystical and all forms of the irrational and so on. Sounds preposterous? But that’s exactly what Weber tried to show in this book and in the rest of his “sociology of world religions”.

A few years ago *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (PE) was voted one of ten most significant books in sociology (of the twentieth century) by members of the International Sociological Association and listed among the New York Public Library’s *Books of the Century (1895–1995)* (Lutz Kaelber 2002). Since the English translation appeared in 1930, PE has been a must reading for generations of sociologists. So it is never easy to pick a quarrel with Weber and find faults with PE. Yet, this is where Weber is most vulnerable and most of the criticisms that have ever been launched against him have PE as the starting point. I too shall begin with PE and move over to the other studies of world religions and try to show why logically and methodologically these are not so good sociologies, if sociologies at all.

The content of the book, I am sure, is quite well known and I need not go into any greater detail than to summarize the gist of the presentation in about a couple of paragraphs, definitely not an easy task. What Weber seeks to show in this book is how a religious ethic can influence an

* Professor of Sociology, University of Dhaka. Email: nislamphd@gononet.com

economic system or at least give rise to an attitude that can influence the economy, that “superstructure” can be more powerful than the economic base of Marx’s claim. He goes about this first by identifying what he likes to call, in want of a better term, the “spirit of capitalism”, which corresponds to a rational attitude towards life but more simply put it is an ethical direction for the conduct of whole life. It can be summed up as a) the devotion to amassing wealth beyond the personal needs of the individual; b) the commitment to unrelieved toil and work coupled with self denial; and c) the avoidance of the use of wealth for the purpose of personal enjoyment (Morrison 1998). To demonstrate the working of this ethic he uses Benjamin Franklin’s advice to young Americans on how to become rich. Weber suggests that “ 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” (PE 2003a, Ch. 2).

This “peculiar ethic” cannot be found anywhere else in the world but only in the West and he believes that the origins of this ethic can be located in the lives of the Puritans who follow the teachings of Calvin. Calvinist doctrines of “predestination” and of the “elect” is argued by Weber to instill in the individual a sense of self denial as the individual’s fate is predetermined and is never sure of salvation or to be among the elect. These lead the Protestant to an intense asceticism which was to be pursued as an end in itself and secondly to toil and hard work, which become associated with a method of eliminating doubt about being an elect. (Morrison 1998). The concept of asceticism and hard work transform into a sense of duty and obligation in the day-to-day work situation and thus, for the Protestants, the idea of a “Calling” connects worldly activity, asceticism and religious justification to action. The idea of calling, inherited from Catholicism, where it referred to a “life task” of serving God in a vocation through ethical devotion, turns into one of worldly duties. This Weber claimed separated the two ethical domains, the worldly and the otherworldly and one could be called to worldly commercial pursuits and give everyday worldly activity a religious significance. This, to point out the obvious, is the link between Protestant ethic and the “spirit of Capitalism”.

This is, perhaps, the worst summarization of the seminal work but will serve the purpose here. What can be pointed out without much ado is that this connection has not been accepted by many, particularly when it is claimed that other religions/societies failed to produce such an ethic and generate capitalism or even the rationalism originating in the ethic of his claim. Beginning with Tawny, who claimed as early as in 1926, that capitalism existed before reformation, many have criticized the numerous lapses in Weber’s formulation, including some who have found the Weber thesis to be wrong in every respect (Noble 2000). I shall not dwell on these much as many an excellent critique of Weber is available. One good summary of a representative sample is provided by Sandra Pierotti (2003), who quotes various authors showing that capitalism has existed in North Europe and in Italy (Amintore Fanfani, an economic historian) before Reformation, that Weber misinterpreted the idea of “calling” (Mac Kinnon) and even the Franklin example of the “spirit of capitalism” (Dickson and McLachlan) and that the part of Protestant ethic chosen by Weber to illustrate his point not only fails to support his thesis *but actually undermines it*. There are also evidences that Protestant leaders in fact taught the opposite of the Weber thesis, like Calvin condemned unlawful gains, and the amassing of wealth etc. The Huguenots and Dutch Reformers also preached against various aspects of capitalism. Also that the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Churches stressed the same precepts in the 16th and 17th centuries and that there seems to be no essential difference between the doctrine of the Catholics and the Puritans on the concept of calling (Robertson). Fanfani (quoted by Pierotti) argues that the creation of new mentality was not the work of Protestantism or any religion, it was the manifestation the general revolution after the Renaissance and Reformation in which the individual liberated itself from the bonds of the middle ages. Pierotti (2003), therefore, concludes that

“There is no doubt that capitalism in various forms existed in Europe prior to the Reformation. The Italian merchants and the Dutch clothiers operated under a rational economic system. Double-entry bookkeeping was invented in Italy and adopted by other merchants throughout Europe. I think it is obvious that several factors were at work in Europe during the long sixteenth century, which led to the growth and dominance of capitalism”.

Such criticisms of Weber's thesis are not my focus and I shall leave these with just two comments. My first problem is with the very concept of capitalism. Much of the confusion regarding the protestant ethic/capitalism thesis arises from the fact that Weber uses the term capitalism without any periodization. When did this capitalism begin? Even to settle the question of whether it began in England, Holland or Italy or when it began in New England we need a date. If Franklin was still advising the young men in the middle of 18th century then it must have started later than that date in New England, assuming that "ethic" is followed by "spirit" which is followed by capitalism. Weber, however, notes that "in the country of Benjamin Franklin's birth (Massachusetts), the spirit of capitalism (in the sense we have attached to it) was present before the capitalistic order" and refers to a date as early as 1632 (PE, Ch. 2). If so, then why did it require Franklin to reformulate the "spirit" one hundred years later. Couldn't the "spirit" have caught on in one hundred years? Weber also refers to the spirit even in the mid 19th century; did capitalism follow after that date? Weber has a very clear definition of the concept of "capitalism" one can also locate the preconditions of the same in his works (Zetterburg 1993) but he never sets a date and this lack of a date or a period when we may locate capitalism fails him completely and gives rise to all kinds of confusions, including throwing his comparisons of world religions to the winds.

Second, I take a look at the Ben Franklin example of the "spirit of capitalism" as this is at the root of the Weberian capitalism and the sociology of world religions. Weber in Chapter 2 of the PE quotes Franklin from two sources with the titles *Necessary Hints to those that would be Rich* (published in 1736) and *Advice to a Young Tradesman* (published in 1748). What I fail to see is that if the "spirit of capitalism" originated from or was contained within the Protestant ethic then why should Franklin have to make these explicit in the form of an advice to the young men. The young men should have been overflowing with the "spirit" since childhood in a Protestant family. Dickson and McLachlan (quoted by Pierotti), thus, conclude that Franklin's writings are in fact proof *against* the existence of such a spirit (my italics). All Franklin was doing was offering prudent advice and not insisting on any moral imperative.

It is also interesting to note the reaction to such advice from among the German public as quoted by Weber himself. After citing the precepts from Franklin, "the true representations of the capitalist spirit", Weber notes that Ferdinand Kürnberger "satirizes" this spirit "in his clever and malicious *Picture of American Culture*" (PE, Ch.2). A few paragraphs later Weber painfully notes "the impression of many Germans that the virtues professed by Americanism are pure hypocrisy seems to have been confirmed by this striking case" (of utilitarianism in Franklin). Moreover, he himself calls the "spirit of capitalism" as a "peculiar ethic" in several places. If the "spirit of capitalism" was the obvious product of Protestant ethic than why should the Germans, who were equally devout Protestants, react in the manner quoted by Weber and why should Weber find the ethic "peculiar"? These merely go to show the lack of logical consistency and methodological rigor as they point to the shaky grounds on which the theory was built. Dickson and McLachlan (quoted by Pierotti 2003) also concludes that such misuse of Franklin suggests a "rather cavalier attitude towards evidence, particularly as the writings of Franklin are the *only 'evidence'* that he presents" to support the "spirit of capitalism" thesis. With the thesis gone, the tenuous link between Protestant ethic and capitalism is also gone.

II

The negative criticisms following its publication in 1904 irritated Weber so much that he set his mind to the general study of the relation between religion and economy (Kaesler 1988). What he needed to do at this stage was to offer confirmation of the logical connections he had drawn between Protestant ethic and capitalism. One option for him was to show that the same happened in other societies as well. He argued that verification is often very difficult to achieve, even in cases of mass

phenomena, which can be statistically described. For the rest there “remains only the possibility of comparing the largest number of historical or contemporary processes, which while otherwise similar, differ in the one decisive point of their relation to the peculiar motive or factor the role of which is being investigated. *This is the fundamental task of comparative sociology*” (Weber 1964). Therefore, all he had to do was to demonstrate that in other cultures/societies where Protestantism did not flourish, capitalism also did not flourish.

Unfortunately this did not turn out to be as simple as that for the simple reason that Weber could not grow out of his love affair with the Protestant ethic. Weber, in the process, worked out excellent sociological generalizations regarding religion (Weber 2003c) but his studies of world religions ended up simply as studies of deviation from an ideal type each unique in its own ways, without offering much opportunities for generalizations.

But, first let's look at what he tried to achieve in his PE. In simple terms of logic his argument is that Protestant ethic (X) creates the spirit of capitalism (W), which leads to the growth of capitalism (Y).

$$X \longrightarrow W \longrightarrow Y \quad (1)$$

Since W is the necessary out come of X and a sufficient precondition of Y, we can omit W and write the following:

$$X \longrightarrow Y \quad (2)$$

Although it might appear so in the PE, this does not happen in isolation and various other social structural factors (p.q.r.s.t.) are also present. Thus we can have the following model:

$$(p.q.r.s.t.) + X \longrightarrow Y \quad (3)$$

or

$$(p.q.r.s.t.) + X = Y \quad (4)$$

Weber could establish the causal connection between X and Y by demonstrating that absence of X also meant the absence of Y. That may have been the motive behind taking up the studies of the world religions. Unfortunately other religions represented other societies so that p.q.r.s.t. became a.b.c.d.e. or f.g.h.i.j.etc. Moreover, Weber went to great lengths to show that these other societies were very different from the West.

Thus, where he ought to have showed that:

$$(p.q.r.s.t.) - X \neq Y \quad (5)$$

He ended up showing that:

$$((a.b.c.d.e.) - X \neq Y \quad (6)$$

Where a.b.c.d.and e are the structural factors of other societies and \neq means not equal to. The structural factors are all different from the structural factors of the West. So that in reality what Weber ends up saying is that other societies did not have anything like the protestant ethic in their religion, *also that they did not have the same structural conditions as the West*, as a result they did not produce capitalism!

Weber often conceded the possibility of these societies having a kind of capitalism but they always turned out to be something different from the “modern capitalism”. Thus these societies, although unable to generate modern capitalism did generate various other kinds of capitalisms like adventurous capitalism, usurious capitalism, speculative capitalism etc. (Y_1, Y_2, Y_3, Y_n) so that his arguments may be read like the followings:

$$\begin{aligned} (a.b.c.d.e.) - X &= Y_1 \\ (f.g.h.i.j.) - X &= Y_2 \\ (m.n.o.p.) - X &= Y_n \end{aligned} \quad (7)$$

Thus, as may be seen easily, equations (6) or (7) does not prove his Protestantism / capitalism thesis (2 and 4) in any way. The only way to prove the thesis was (eq. 5), which he could not attempt for the simple reason that *both the growth of capitalism and the conditions (with or without Protestantism) leading to it in the West were actual historical cases and unique to the West.*

Given these, **could the following be ever possible?**

$$(a.b.c.d.e.) +/- X = Y ? \quad (8)$$

Could China or India plus/minus Protestant ethic ever have brought about the growth of modern capitalisms? Like it or not this remains the tacit expectation is in Weber's studies of the world religions. Capitalism occurred once in history and in the West alone, in all other cases it was grafted, *so that equation (8) is an impossibility.*

I, therefore, fail to see the purpose of his studies of world religions in relation to the growth of modern capitalism. However, to go into some details on the above let us delve a little further in his studies of the world religions.

III

It is common knowledge that Weber probably wanted to study all major religions of the world under the heading of world religions, in which he included Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, ancient Judaism and perhaps medieval Catholicism and Islam. Let me point out at the outset that I do not understand why these religions are called world religions. As far as Confucianism and Taoism are concerned they are strictly Chinese and until modern times remained within the boundaries of China. The same is also true of Hinduism. If it is the sheer number of the Chinese who follow Confucianism or Taoism or the Indians who follow Hinduism that makes them world religions, then it would be difficult to use the term for ancient Judaism, which never had a very large following and was restricted to a small portion of the Middle East. Weber treats Buddhism in *The Religion of India* (Weber 1967) but says categorically that Buddhism became a “world religion”, *outside of India!* But where? In China? But he does not deal with Buddhism as a “world religion” in *The Religion of China* (1968) either. Therefore, to begin with, a “sociology of world religions” is a misnomer.

These religions have often been called salvation religions but salvation in the Western sense is also missing from the Chinese religions. Indeed, although Confucianism and Taoism are often termed as religions they are basically a set of rituals and some ethical precepts for going about in the day-to-day world. The rituals are organized in order to pacify the spirits, ghosts and demons and are fully magical in nature. Although there is certain amount of philosophy and even mysticism in them these would hardly qualify as religions like Christianity. Indeed, the title of the English translation as *The Religion of China* is not even correct. Hans Gerth, who, after the communist take over in China, probably felt uncomfortable with the "isms" in the original title of "Confucianism and Taoism" and decided on the misleading title for this publication in 1951 (Yang 1968). In fact, if one wants to examine the religions of China one would have to deal with a confusing array of philosophies, magic, rituals, schools of thought in an endless variety of succession over a period of more than 2500 years of recorded history, indeed a veritable mess.

Why Weber chose only two of these "religions" is also not clear, let alone being methodologically sound. Confucianism was the "religion" of the ruling elite and Taoism the "heterodox" popular religion. Taoism was so intertwined with Buddhism that it was difficult during different phases of history to separate the two. However, all of these so called religions, even Buddhism, as it developed in China, were practiced by the elites, namely the Confucian priests, scholars and rulers, when in public. They did so mainly to distance themselves from the masses. Other than that through all periods in history and for all classes of people "religion" was a curious mixture of ancestor worship, sacrifices to spirits of objects and places, belief in ghosts, exorcism, divination and spirit medium. (*Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). These were based in the family or clan and localized in the villages and associated with festivals and funerals. Popular or not, these practices in China would hardly qualify as religions even in the broad Durkheimian sense of having a clear distinction between the sacred and the profane. There was a very strong sense of "right" and "wrong" in Confucianism and the "magician's" conception of "clean" and "unclean" in Taoism but nothing like the idea of the sacred or the profane of other religions. There was, even in Weber's admission, no conception of the evil and piety was merely equated with honour in subordination to parents, teachers, superiors in the official hierarchy and the ruler (Kaesler 1988).

One could go on endlessly to point out the numerous flaws in Weber's reading of the religions in China, even if confined to only Confucianism and Taoism. I shall however stop here with the conclusion as reached by Weber himself that there was no idea of the sacred, salvation, prophet or even god while heaven was often equated with nature by the Taoists. So where is the religion? And what religious ethic are we talking about? Indeed, it is difficult to see what Weber was looking for. Was he really expecting Protestantism among all these, mostly magic even by his own admission? He seemed to be looking for the Protestant ethic without Protestantism, even in the millennium before Christ. He was definitely looking for some sort of religious ethic that could give rise to the "spirit of capitalism" in China, *but seemed to be sure of not finding it*. It often appears to me that he was almost looking for the proverbial black cat in a dark room. But what is more astonishing is that *he found it* and called it "rationalization", and from then on became obsessed with it.

The idea of rationalization occurs in the earlier edition (1904-5) of the PE but is never the central focus as is the case in the later edition of (1919-20), by which time he was convinced of the importance of the concept. Beginning with his study of China (1910) and later of India (1916-17), rationalization replaces the "spirit of capitalism" as the connecting thread between religion and capitalism. Thus religion, Protestantism in this case, gives rise to rationalization and the formation of modern capitalism becomes one aspect of the process of rationalization of the whole world. Also religion itself becomes a means for attaining rationalization, by getting rid of magic from all walks of life. While on the other hand, the whole process of rationalization is seen as demystifying religion or getting rid of all magical aspect from religion itself. Thus while there is magical beliefs on the one end of the scale of rationality, being totally irrational, at the other end is the epitome of rationalization, itself a rationalized religion, Protestantism.

Therefore, in the garden of eternal magic, that was China, very little capitalism could ever be expected. Indeed, Weber makes it abundantly clear in almost every page that whatever happened in China, it could never lead to capitalism. Much of the volumes on China and on India are full of such assertions. In fact the two books read like a laundry list of how China and India are different from the West, even though they had almost everything like the West and could have brought about modern capitalism (?). But Alas! They did not have the kind of rationalization in their cultures and religion that the West had. And more interestingly, he has a valid argument, almost sickening by the end of the books, to show why each of these differences existed.

Although India and China are in sharp contrast to each other they are seen by Weber as having the same kind of lacking compared with the West, albeit placed somewhat differently. Thus they both had cities but not like the West; the cities in China were not walled like the West and did not have armies to defend these like in the West. There were guilds in India but not like the West, in India they were caste dominated. There were merchants in China but not a bourgeoisie. In India there were the bourgeoisie but not like in the West. India had the Jains, who had an ethic comparable to that of the Puritans but domination of the caste system failed them or India could have had a rational capitalism eons ago! So on and so forth. While the most important item missing in these societies was rationalization like the West, in economy, in science, technology, art and most importantly in religion.

Similarly the “whys” are also very interesting, if not entertaining. For example China could not develop capitalism because of centuries of peace, which gave rise to a pacific attitude, particularly among the literati, the elites of the society. Peace, centuries of it, which by any reasonable argument should be commendable and definitely preferable in any society, in the hands of Weber become almost shameful. “What a shame, because they had centuries of peace, the Chinese could not develop capitalism!”

So I shall stop here by pointing to a few obvious mistakes in *The Religion of India*, with which I am more familiar. First, here again the original title was changed from *Hinduism and Buddhism*, which now appear only in the sub-title, thus giving a false impression of including all religions, so that one may expect a chapter on Islam which was the religion of the rulers and a sizable percentage of the population for over six hundred years before the English took over and continues to be the second largest religious faith in demographic terms. The problem here like in the China book, is the expanse of time. Much of Weber's data are taken from the 1901 and some from the 1911 census, yet he works with more than 2500 years of history often oblivious of the time frame. For example he talks about the “anti-urban Bengal”, without referring to the period. The fact is that while he was writing Bengal had the largest of the Indian cities and one of the largest in the world, Calcutta (Kolkata). He refers to “several hundred years of English domination”, which in reality, even while he was writing, had hardly been fifty or sixty years in most parts of British India. He also talks about centralized government covering the whole of India for most of its history, which, without being cautious, can be termed as completely wrong. The *whole* of the Indian sub-continent was *never* under any centralized government. Closest would probably be during the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's rule. The British had a maximum possession of about two thirds of India. The rest were the quasi-independent “princely states”. Such mistakes abound in the volume, perhaps it is about the same in case of China, but I refrain from commenting on that for my lack of acquaintance with its history and geography.

In any case the more interesting part of the works on India and China are located in the last chapter of the India volume. Where much of what is said in the two volumes are summarized under the heading of “The General Character of Asiatic Religion”. Defining the religions as purely magical in character Weber seeks to establish the differences with the Occident and shows where they lack in rationality. In terms of economics with which he was mostly concerned, he concludes that this “most highly anti-rational world of universal magic also affected everyday economics. *There is no way from it to rational inner-worldly life conduct*”. There were “spells against enemies, erotic or economic competition, spells designed to win legal cases, ... spells for securing wealth, for the success of undertaking. These could be achieved through “compulsive magic” or through “gifts” to

the functional god or demon. Obviously enough, a “*rational, practical ethic and life methodology did not emerge from this magical garden*”. These however did not mean that the Asians were not interested in wealth. On the contrary, Weber thinks that the “unrestricted lust for gain of the Asiatics ... is notoriously unequalled in the rest of the world”. It is pursued through every possible means, “including magic”, but lacks “in precisely that which was decisive for the economics of the Occident ... e.g. the ‘inner-worldly asceticism’ of *Protestantism in the West*.” The “*Asiatic religions could not supply the presuppositions of inner-worldly asceticism*” (italics mine). With these lines, Weber effectively sealed the fate of the Asiatic societies from developing either capitalism or the required religious ethic. So that, at the end of the two volumes, we are back to square one. No Protestantism, no capitalism.

However, as noted above, Weber needed some fortification for the Protestant ethic itself and found it in the concept of rationalization. He now needed to show the relation between the two more emphatically. To do this he took up the study of the ancient Judaism in which, he argued, lay the roots of Protestant rationality. *Ancient Judaism* (Weber 1952) does not form an integral part of the study of the world religions in the sense that in this work Weber does not seek to bring about the marriage between “Judaic” ethic and capitalism. Perhaps, he did not want to push back his expectation of so far back into history, although 2500 years seemed fair enough for both China and India. He did the next best thing; to push back the origin of rationalism into the very beginning of Western civilization. It is a curious fact that, Israel, Syria, and even Mesopotamia are considered by Weber as belonging to the West, and not a part of Asia, because they form a part of the Biblical realms! For Weber, the elimination of magic can mainly be ascribed to the worldview of the Judaic religiosity. Ancient Judaism was the starting point of the process of ‘disenchantment’, which distinguishes the West from all others. It is the elimination of magic and the establishment of a rational path to salvation, which played the decisive role in the rise of Western rationalization (see Schroeder 1992). Through a curious process of growth, which for a while faltered under Catholicism in the middle ages, rationalism got firmly anchored in the West through Protestantism. Protestantism became its final abode and all ended happily for Weber.

IV

In these rather sketchy summarizations all I tried to do was to show that what ever may have been the context of his study of the world religions, Weber always got back to his main focus, if not the theme, of his work to show the unique relation between capitalism and Protestantism. This notion of the unique is not simply because of historical reasons, Weberian methodology dictated it so. The relation between Protestantism and capitalism has been treated by Weber as an *ideal typical* situation and was used as a yardstick to study other religions, to see how the latter deviated from the ideal type.

In the *Economy and Society* Weber presented his “sociology” of religion, where he defined his task as “to study the conditions and effects of a particular type of social action”. Under these very general conditions he set to study religion covering pretty much the same issues that he dealt with in his study of the world religions. He covered a whole range of subjects including the origin of religion, magic, priests, prophets, salvation, taboo and so on, most of what would be covered under any sociology of religion. In the *Economy and Society* the aim was “overwhelmingly” one of “*systematization and generalization*” (Kaesler 1988)

In the “Introduction” to his “Sociology of World Religions” (Weber 2003b) he similarly attempted some very generalized definitions of the same topics. But the aims of the two studies were very different as becomes clear after a few paragraphs of such definitions. Here he wants to consider each of the world religions separately and argues that “in no respect can one simply integrate

various world religions into a chain of types” He argues that “all the great religions are *historical individualities* of a highly complex nature” and even if taken all together they can only exhaust a few possible combinations that could be formed on the numerous individual factors in such historical combinations. Thus, they, do not constitute a “systematic ‘typology’ of religion”. However, they “are ‘typological’ in the sense that they consider what is *typically important* in the historical realizations of the religious ethics” and all “other aspects will be neglected.” Therefore, “these presentations *do not claim to offer a well-rounded picture of world religions.*” (Italics mine) Let me quote at length what he wants to achieve from the studies of world religions:

“Those features peculiar to the individual religions, in contrast to other religions, but which at the same time are important for our interest, must be brought out strongly. A presentation that disregards these special accents of importance would often have to tone down the special features in which we are interested. Such a balanced presentation would almost always have to add other features and occasionally would have to give greater emphasis to the fact that, of course, all qualitative contrasts in reality, in the last resort, can somehow be comprehended as purely quantitative differences in the combinations of single factors. However, it would be extremely unfruitful to emphasize and repeat here what goes without saying.

What “goes without saying” is that this is the same methodology that he had set forth earlier in 1904 in the essay on “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science” in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (Weber 1949), in which concrete individual phenomena are built into ideal types. Let me quote:

An ideal type is formed by the one sided *accentuation* of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present, occasionally absent *concrete individual* phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a *unified construct* (*Gedankenbild*). (p 90)

When we compare the two quotes it becomes abundantly clear that Weber was seeking to construct an ideal type of the world religions and their relations with economics

The features of religions that are important for economic ethics shall interest us primarily from a definite point of view: we shall be interested in the way in which they are related to economic rationalism. More precisely, we mean the economic rationalism of the type which, since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, has come to dominate the Occident as part of the particular rationalization of civic life, and which has become familiar in this part of the world.

Such ideal types offers the researcher with a tool with which a real situation or action can be compared. The other religions were thus to be compared with the economic rationalism that came to dominate the Occident from the 16th and 17th centuries, obviously through Protestantism. As was noted above that was *all* he attempted to do with the religions of China and India (as well as Islam, which I did not deal with here).

Therefore, we have two different methodologies followed for two different of studies of religion by the same person. In one the attempt is made to systematize and generalize while in the other the unique and concrete individual cases are treated as typical and compared with others. The two methodologies followed by Weber were worked out at two different points in his career. And in my opinion represents two different, fields of study, if not independent disciplines.

That Weber’s work lacks consistency and even a unifying theme is well known (Morrison). He seemed not only to have worked with different topics and subjects, he actually developed different methodologies for these. John Rex (1971) argued that there were at least four methodologies based on the four different influences on him over a period of thirty years of academic work. These included the ones by Rickert, by Dilthey, by positivism and by Simmel. Rex thought that the influence of Simmel was most decisive. Others have seen the influence of Dilthey or Rickert or even of positivism as decisive. For example Tonnies (1974) quotes Troeltsch as saying that “Weber nearly out-positivists positivism” in his essay on “Science as a Vocation”. I do not wish to go into details of all the influences on Weber or focus on other methodologies. I shall merely refer to the methodologies worked out in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* and in the *Economy and Society*.

I feel that these two methodologies are the most important for us here because they were worked out for two different disciplines. In the first methodology (worked out in 1904) the influence of Rickert is very obvious and Weber seeks to distinguish the social sciences from the natural sciences. He makes it absolutely clear that generalization and use of abstract concepts is the province of the natural sciences while the social sciences seek to build causal explanations by focusing on the cultural significance of historical phenomena. Weber notes that the “type of social sciences he was interested in was “an *empirical science of concrete reality*”. The aim was “the understanding of characteristic uniqueness of the reality” that is to “understand on the one hand the relation and cultural significance of individual events in their contemporary manifestation and on the other of their being historically *so* and not *otherwise*.”(Weber 1949 p. 72) Weber further argues that the focus of attention on reality under the guidance of values and the selection and ordering of phenomena in the light of their cultural significance *is entirely different from the analysis of reality in terms of laws and general concepts*. (italics mine). And further on he says that “neither of these two types of analysis of reality has any necessary logical relationship with the other.” And that it would be “most disastrous” not to think of these as “distinct in *principle*”(p. 77). I have argued elsewhere that this methodology belongs to the realm of historical studies (Islam 1988). The study of the world religions done by Weber followed this method of looking at their cultural significance and treating each as separate individual, indeed, unique cases.

The other methodology is the one, worked out later around 1910, when Weber began his work on the *Economy and Society*. In the very first chapter of the book Weber tries to define the basic concepts of sociology and, according to Parsons, the methodology of sociology. I do not wish to go into details here either but shall point out a few striking differences between the *methodology of the social sciences* (often called the cultural sciences or historical sciences) and *the methodology of sociology*. In the later methodology, Weber likes to argue that “it is customary to designate various sociological generalizations as...‘laws’. (Weber 1964 p 107). And again, “It has continually been assumed as obvious that the science of sociology seeks to formulate type concepts (he calls these pure types and not ideal types as in the earlier essay) and generalized uniformities.” (see also Islam 1988) This, he claims, “distinguishes it (sociology) from history, which is oriented to *causal analysis and explanations of individual actions, structures and personalities possessing cultural significance* (italics mine). He further adds that like in the other generalizing sciences the concepts in sociology are also *abstract*.

Therefore, it is clear that Weber is not dealing with the same kind of discipline or that, at the very least, the fields of the studies are different. The “Sociology of religion”, worked out on the basis of systemization and generalization is sociological by his definitions. But the study of the world religions with the focus on building ideal types and looking at the concrete individual cases and not offering generalizations is not in the realm of sociology at all. *They are not sociologies, definitely not so sociological, as those presented in the Sociology of Religion.*

Please note that Weber was not even a sociologist when he began his work on the Protestant ethic, and as Mommsen (1974) notes that it was not until 1913 that Weber eventually established himself as a sociologist. Also note that Weber was never comfortable with his rendition of sociology. Immediately after the introduction of the word “sociology” in the *Economy and Society*, he adds parenthetically “in the sense in which this *highly ambiguous word* is used here” (italics mine). He was also aware that his version of sociology may not be acceptable to others so that a few pages down he says that “there is no intention of attempting to impose on any one else” his version of sociology. (It was Talcot Parsons and his band of American sociologists who did that.) In any case, here I am not questioning his sociology, which has come to be accepted as legitimate, but what I argue is that *given his own definitions of the subject matter and the methodology, the study of world religions cannot be sociologies.*

Hence, to conclude, the studies of the world religions beginning with the Protestant ethic as the ideal typical case are not sociologies, even by his own definitions, although Weber likes to treat them as such. His obsession with Protestantism and later with the uniqueness of the West and its rationality betrays him. He could have built general theories, which he shows as possible in his

other study of religion and even in the short introduction he wrote to the study of world religions. Topics such as salvation, prophecy, intellectuals, the class differences among the followers of different religions, popular religions, were all excellent ideas that he throws in in his study of the world religions. But unfortunately because of his methodology, which dictates a comparison with an ideal typical situation, he is forced to treat all other religions as *deviations* from that ideal type. For example, intellectuals become the major factors of the Asiatic religions and one could have seen if it applies to Protestantism or Catholicism in a similar manner and build a generalization regarding that but the way in which Weber deals with this the intellectuals become a barrier in the promotion of Protestant like ethic, they become deviant cases. Indeed, the opposite may have been a better theory, that Protestantism is a deviation from the general trends of religions !

Weber's obsession with Protestantism and the biases colouring his studies have been amply demonstrated by Turner (1974) in his study of Weber and Islam. In fact Weber's study of Islam shows very clearly his bias against the Orient as a whole, many aspects of which have been treated by others. Indeed, even now some continue to refer to this bias as "genteel racism"(Yoshie 2003). But let me finish here with what else Weber could have done.

In going through his methodological studies an alternative way of dealing with causal analysis can be found. At about the time of the publication of the PE, Weber also published his work on *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (1949 [1904]), in which, in response to Eduard Meyer, he had worked out a way of proving causation where a what "would have been" if such an event did not take place kind of experimentation could lead to a confirmation of the causal sequence was explored. He picks up this technique again in the *Economy and Society*, where he argues that "often unfortunately there is available only the dangerous and uncertain procedure of the "imaginary experiment" which consists in thinking away "certain elements of a chain of motivation and working out the course of action which would then ensue, thus arriving at a causal judgment" (Weber 1964 p. 97). Recently I read a collection of essays where " what might have been" if Columbus did not discover America was explored (Benford and Greenberg 1992). The volume turned out to be quite exciting with the Chinese discovering America and establishing an empire there or the Native Americans developing a high technological culture and defending their shores with fighter jets were seen as among the possible outcomes. Weber may have undertaken such an exercise to see what if Protestantism did not flourish or even if Calvin were not born. Fortunately for us Weber did not delve into such an enterprise as the above noted volume on America minus Columbus is aptly listed in the genera called "science fiction" and not science. But, perhaps, they would have been more sociological by his own methodology.

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Notes

ⁱ "In the rich literature on the city we look in vain for a theory of urbanism presenting in a systematic fashion the available knowledge concerning the city as a social entity. ... But despite the multiplication of research and textbooks on the city, we do not as yet have a comprehensive body of competent hypotheses, which may be derived from a set of postulates implicitly contained in a sociological definition of the city, and from our general sociological knowledge, which may be substantiated through empirical research. ... The closest approximations to a systematic theory of urbanism that we have are to be found in a penetrating essay, "Die Stadt," by Max Weber, ..." (Wirth, 1938:8).

ⁱⁱ Influenced by Weber, one of the proponents of the Chicago School, Wirth made a sweeping condemnation of capitalist urbanization (Wirth, 1926; 1956; 1964).

ⁱⁱⁱ The essay was published posthumously by Marianne Weber in 1921 in the *Archiv* and in 1922 edition of *Economy and Society* which she oversaw. After the fourth edition in 1956, edited by Johannes Winckelmann, the text can still be found in *Economy and Society*, but now under the title 'Non-legitimate domination (typology of cities)'. Käsler (1988:42) considers the essay unfinished.

^{iv} Simmel and Weber were responding to the need for a more comprehensive theory of urbanism. Simmel's theory was couched in terms of neo-Kantian formalism, whereas Weber's theoretical point of view was a form of social behaviorism (Martindale, 1958:50-51)

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