

## **The Social Teaching of Max Weber\***

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## **Introduction:**

It seems as though we critically analyzed Weber's writing style as much as we do the content of his writings and there is some validity to these concerns. Weber did tend to write so much on topics that it becomes difficult to follow his line of thought at times. In this paper I attempt to summarize Weberian Sociology of Religion for use as a reference and instruction tool. In doing so I rely solely on Weber's own writings.

The heart of Weber's writings on religion can be found in its relation to social change or the lack thereof. His elucidates on a wide variety of issues including religious history and its effect on society (1978: 399-473), religions role in systems of domination (1978: 500-601), religions relationship to economic and social development (1951); (1958), and an analysis of religion as it relates to class structure (1946: 282-288).

This article portrays important aspects of Weberian theory of religion. By focusing on ways religion is a determinant in social stratification, the discussion will involve all the issues listed above. A major purpose of the paper is to suggest a means of portraying Weber's sometimes confusing religious concepts in a more concise manner that the reader may use for didactic purposes or reference.

## **Content:**

Weber's work on early religions concentrates on how religion attempts to explain and control natural phenomenon, having a role similar to science today. He states, "... (R)eligiously, or magically motivated behavior is

relatively rational behavior, especially in its earliest manifestations. It follows rules of experience, though it is not necessarily action in accordance with a means-ends schema” (1978: 400). Note that from the outset Weber rejects the assertion of many of his contemporaries who proposed that science evolved over time as a means of explanation because it was experientially based while religion offered only philosophical or magical explanations largely devoid of experience as a contributor. Instead of proposing that religious dogma was originally irrational, he states that it was “*relatively rational*” and differentiates it from science in its relation to “*a means-end schema.*” Weber writes of little or no lifestyle or ethical systems attached to such early religion. It is merely an attempt to explain what is not otherwise understood.

Very soon, however, spiritual abstractions become essential elements of religious belief systems (1978: 401).

A process of abstractions, which only appear to be simple, has appeared to be carried out in the most primitive instances of religious behavior, which we examine. Already crystallized is the notion that certain beings are concealed “*behind*” and responsible for the activity of charismatically endowed natural objects, artifacts, animals or persons. This is the belief in spirits.

The importance of this stage to Weber is the schism these beliefs encourage the development of a more complex social system (1978: 40).

But the belief in spirits, like all abstractions, is most advanced in those societies within which certain persons possess charismatic magical powers that inhere only in those with special qualifications. Indeed, it is this circumstance that lays the foundation for the oldest of all “*vocations*”, that of the professional necromancer. It contrasts to the ordinary person, the

“*layman*”. In a magical sense, the magician is permanently endowed with charisma.

The magician therefore becomes among the first leadership roles in primitive society. This person validates the role’s authority by means of charisma, which Weber describes as “ ... resting on devotion to exceptional sanctity, heroism, or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or ordained by him ” (1978: 215). At this stage “religious behavior is not the worship of a god, but the coercion of the god ...” (1978: 422).

Weber proposed that over time magical acts and some secular actions become traditional. Patriarchs become leaders of the secular sphere, while magicians take a leadership role in religion. Many times these roles are both held by the same person (1978: 37) or the patriarch may be worshipped as a god himself. Weber (1978: 411) states, “To begin with, household and kinship groups need a god of their own, and they naturally turn to the spirits of their dead ancestors, actual or imaginary ... Indeed, if an association is to be permanently guaranteed, it must have such a god ... A high degree of development in the domestic cult of ancestors generally runs parallel to a patriarchal structure ... ” Religion, therefore, early in history becomes an important part of the legitimization of authority. This authority is for the particular clan involved and, at this time, other gods are recognized as legitimate to other clans. The patriarchal god is not considered omniscient (1978: 413).

As society develops, a patriarch may gain control over several kinship groups or other segments of society. Then there are changes in both the secular and religious sphere. Secularly, the patriarch depends on relatives and personal loyalty from his people as the source of his power until this

becomes too difficult and a patrimonial authority is established whose power is based on "... administrative and a military force which are purely personal instruments of the master. Only then are the group members treated as subjects. Previously the master's authority appeared as a pre-eminent group right, now it turns into his personal right, which he appropriates in the same way as he would any ordinary object of possession" (1978: 232)

Priests rise as leaders in the religious sphere. "The ascension of celestial or astral gods in the pantheon is advanced by a priesthood's propagation of systematized sacred ordinances, as in India, Iran, or Babylon, as is assisted by a rationalized system of regulated subordination of subjects to their overlords ..." (1978: 417). While the magician claimed authority on personal charisma and successes (1978: 427), the priests claim authority on systemically rationalized religious conduct (1978: 417). Patriarchal gods were thought to be reachable by anyone, although the magician claimed the ability to manipulate the gods (1978: 401), while priestly gods were thought to be unreachable except through the priesthood or their rituals (1946: 282). An important change in the gods' position to people occurs at this juncture. Magicians claimed coercive powers over the gods (1978: 422), while priests were supplicants and could only ask favor of gods (1978: 418), who may or may not choose to grant their requests.

Despite the differences in power vis-à-vis the gods between magician and priests, it is the priests who become more powerful in the new society. Failure by magicians often costs them their lives (1978: 427), or at least a substantial loss of authority, while "the priests have enjoyed the contrasting advantage of being able to deflect the blame for failure away from themselves and onto their gods" (1978: 427). Perhaps further power is gained by priesthood when they prohibit magicians, etc. from working their

craft. Eventually the patrimony, especially the priesthood, controls the military (1978: 231), the educational and recording systems (1978: 229-230), and formulates a rationalization for their system of domination. This new hierarchical authority may have been the most effective system of control in ancient societies. They proved capable of resisting challenges from within and of mobilizing the population to resist outside threats.

These societies develop stratification based on wealth, prestige, and power that rationalizations are only partially able to legitimate. The question of theodicy becomes important as the religious and ethical reflections upon the world were increasingly rationalized and primitive and magical notions were eliminated, the theodicy of suffering encountered increasing difficulties. Individually “*undeserved*” woe was all too frequent; not “*good*” but “*bad*” men succeeded – even when “*good*” and “*bad*” were measured by the yardstick of the master stratum and not by that of a “*slave morality*” (1946: 275).

The question of theodicy becomes a catalyst to a more modern form of religion. Weber recognized two avenues taken in an effort to answer this question. One he labels “*mysticism*” which ... “intends a state of possession, not action, and the individual is not a tool, but a vessel of the divine” (1946: 325). The other he calls “*asceticism*” which can be either “... the active asceticism that is a God-willed action of the devout who are God’s tools ... (1946: 325) or a “*formal withdrawal from the world*”, which Weber labeled “*world-rejecting asceticism*” (1978: 542).

To demonstrate how these different avenues affect different social strata, we will focus on four major status groups: the upper strata, the warrior strata, the civic strata, and the depressed strata. A fifth stratum, the intelligentsia, will be mentioned in relation to some of these primary strata. First, we will

examine how mysticism is said to affect these strata. Generally, it is not necessary for the upper strata to religiously rationalize their position because mystical religion provides no rationale to actively challenge and overthrow it. An example is found in Hinduism, about which Weber states, “ Some castes do contest the authority of the Brahmin, but, practically, this means merely that the Brahmin is disdainfully rejected as a priest, that his judgment in controversial questions of ritual is not recognized as authoritative, and that his advice is never sought ” (1946: 396). This withdrawal seldom led to anything resembling active resistance or challenge. Priestly intellectuals may assist in rationalizing the strata, as they become “the primary protagonist and representatives of these norms ” (1978: 417).

The warrior strata in mystical societies tends to develop somewhat unique religious beliefs or at least focuses on particular aspects of that belief system. Weber writes, “ As a rule, warrior nobles ... have not readily become carriers of a rational religious ethic ” (1978: 472). In fact, because warriors tend to focus on more mundane issues, warriors in mystical societies may be much like their ascetic society counterparts in that they as a stratum tend to remain religiously non-dogmatic unless called to religious action by other parts of the society. Their focus on religion is limited:

It is an everyday psychological event for the warriors to face death and the irrationalities of human destiny. Indeed, the chances and adventures of mundane existence fill his life to such an extent that he does not require of his religion (and accepts only reluctantly) anything beyond protection against evil magic or ceremonial rites congruent with his sense of status ... (Weber, 1978: 472).

It may be that “ magical or ceremonial rites ” indicate that religion of warriors have initiation and ceremonial rites that differ from other strata as is

the case of Mithrism, but this is not necessarily true of all warrior religion. It is important to note that, while religious fervor may not begin in the warrior stratum, it may become a central theme once they are directed into it by another stratum (e.g. early Islam).

In contrast to the indifference of the warrior stratum, mysticism profoundly affects the civic stratum. Weber (1978: 284) elucidates on the effect of mystical religion on this stratum:

Their whole existence has been based upon technological and economic calculations and of mastery of nature and of man, however primitive the means at their disposal. The technique of living handed down among them may, of course, be frozen in traditionalism as has occurred repeatedly and everywhere.

In the case of China development of this stratum was frozen in the sib (see Weber, 1951: 88) and the political bureaucracy (Weber, 1951: 142), while in India the caste system as well as other religious ideology prevented development of the civic stratum (Weber, 1946: 411). In India, prohibitions against handling items of this class by lower classes (Weber, 1946: 404) prevented the civic strata from hiring lower strata workers and prevented upper strata from purchasing many items made by the civic stratum. The caste system prohibited the “*fraternization with other classes*” (Weber, 1946: 402) necessary for the development of guilds and other economic organizations. Even the initiators of religious change in these societies are characterized by the “*exemplary prophet ... who by his personal example demonstrates to others the way to personal salvation ...*” (1978: 447), thus turning them to other worldly pursuits. These factors have an important effect on the economic sphere. Weber (1946: 289) writes:

Whenever the sacred values and the redemptory means of a virtuoso religion bore a contemplative or orgiastic-ecstatic character, there has been no bridge between religion and the practical action of the work a - day world. In such cases the economy and all other action in the world has been considered religiously inferior and no psychological motives for worldly action could be derived from the attitude cherished as the supreme value. In their innermost beings contemplative and ecstatic religions have been rather specifically hostile to economic life. Mystic, orgiastic, and ecstatic experiences are extraordinary psychic states; they lead away from everyday life and from all expedient conduct.

Finally, a discussion on the depressed stratum reveals that religious orientations of this class often evolve into cults of suffering or merely accept their lot on the faith of Karma. Weber (1946: 289) writes, “ With such religions, a deep abyss separates the way of life of the layman from that of the community of virtuosos. The rule of the status groups of religious virtuosos over the religious community readily shifts into a magical anthropolatry; the virtuoso is worshipped directly as a Saint. ”

To summarize the effect of mystical religion on social strata, it seems that mysticism perpetuates the social order per se. Cults may evolve around particular exemplary prophets, but these persons either support the system or advocate withdrawal from it. The religion and the strata (often castes) support each other. Weber (1946: 396) concludes, “ There are also castes among the Mohammedans of India, taken over from the Hindus. And, castes are also found among the Buddhists. Even Indian Christians have not been able to withhold themselves from practical recognition of the castes. ”

Of course, societies do not perpetuate themselves as they are forever and there are at least two ways that change may occur in mystical societies. One is an assault on the ideology from without, such as the rumors and incidents surrounding taboo meats that led to the Sepoy Rebellion. The Sikhs demonstrate that direct military action may change ideology as Weber (1978: 475) indicates, “...a combination of Islamic ideas and persecution drove the Sikhs into the ideal of uncompromising warfare.” A second method may be extrapolated from Weberian theory. A prophet may mobilize part of the population from the very castes ideology they profess and produce change. Gandhi, for example, mobilized the Untouchables on the basis of non-violence, which they professed as a caste. Buddha may be another example, who, with mixed success challenged to caste system on the basis of otherworldly ideology.

Despite these incidents and examples of change within mystical societies, there remains a strong tendency in them to perpetuate the system. They have not developed the countervailing ideology or technology to truly challenge either the warrior or upper strata and their assistance to the lower strata has been limited. Violent, abrupt change occurs (e.g. Maoist China), but seldom from ideology within mystical religion. Weber (1978: 551) bespoke of this type of religion as being primary Asiatic. Important difference in Occidental religion led to change. He writes, “The decisive historical difference between the predominately oriental and Asiatic types of salvation religion and those found primarily in the Occident is that the former usually culminate in contemplation and the latter in asceticism.”

Ascetic religion has within it an element of rejecting the world and occasionally leads to groups that withdrawal much like their mystical

counterparts. This “ *other-worldly asceticism* ” often leads to monasticism and / or utopian communities that rarely deeply affect the social structure. It is the other type of asceticism that Weber sees as an element of change. He labels this “ *inner-worldly asceticism* ” which proposes salvation may occur through changes in the system. The four different strata focus on different elements of asceticism. First, the upper strata must develop an ideology that protects their status from ideological assaults. Weber (1946: 271) writes,

In treating suffering as a symptom of odiousness in the eyes of the gods and as a sign of secret guilt, religion has psychologically met a very general need. The fortunate is seldom satisfied with the fact of being fortunate. Beyond this he needs to know that he has a right to his good fortune. He wants to be convinced also that he “*deserves*” it, and above all, that he deserves it in comparison with others. He wishes to be allowed the belief that the less fortunate experiences his due. Good fortune thus wants to be “*legitimate*” fortune. If the general term “*fortune*” covers all the “*good*” of honor, power, possession and pleasure, it is the most general formula for the service of legitimation, which religion has to accomplish for the external and inner interests of all ruling men, the propertied, the victorious, and the healthy. In short, religion provides the theodicy of good fortune for those who are fortunate. This theodicy is anchored in highly robust (“*pharisaical*”) needs if insufficient attention is paid its effects.

Often this rationalization for their stratum position becomes a myth of natural superiority. Weber (1946: 276) explains, “ Strata in solid possession of social honor and power usually tend to fashion their status-legend as to

claim a special and intrinsic quality of their own; usually a quality of blood; their sense of dignity feeds on their actual or alleged being. ”

The warrior stratum finds a place in ascetic religion’s propensity to seek social change. As with their mystical counterparts, this seldom arises from within, but they become agents of the movement. As Weber (1978: 473) writes, “ As a rule, prophetic religion is naturally compatible with the status feeling of the nobility when it directs its promises to the warrior in the cause of religion. This conception assumes the exclusiveness of a universal god and the moral depravity of unbelievers who are adversaries and whose untroubled existence arouses his righteous indication. ” The crusades or one of the many jihads may be examples of this process. Weber (1946: 335) listed other reasons for warriors to become actively involved as well.

... war does something to the warrior which, in its concrete meaning is unique: It makes him experience a consecrated meaning of death which is characteristic only of death in war.

The community of the army stand-ing in the field today feels itself – as in the time of the great warlords “fol-lowing” – to be a community unto death, and the greatest of its kind. Death in the field of battle differs from death that is only man’s common lot. Since death is a fate that comes to everyone, nobody can ever say precise-ly why it comes to him and why it comes sublimated to immeasurable heights. Such ordinary death marks an end where only a beginning seems to make sense. Death on the field of battle differs from this merely unavoidable dying in that war, and in this massiveness only war, the individual can believe that he knows he is dying for something.

Note that such rationalization could be effective to the warrior classes in mystical societies (when linked to the concept of transmigration of souls) or ascetic societies (the “*just war thesis*”) as well as societies with strong characteristics of each (e.g. Zoroastrian dualism and the on – going struggle between the light and the dark). Therefore, despite Weber’s claim that religious dogma seldom arises within the warrior class, we may look for exceptions because the rationalization is very strong. Shinto’s concept of Bushido may be an example of religious dogma arising within a warrior class as may be the Nordic concepts surrounding Valhalla. While it seems there may be exceptions (and Weber certainly wrote nothing to say there were none), it also seems true that religion among warriors tends to arise from other strata and is highly ritualistic.

The third strata, that of the civic class has within its lifestyle “ a tendency towards practical rationalism in conduct ” (Weber, 1946: 284). He (1946: 284) continues:

... it is conditioned by the nature of its way of life, which is detached by economic bonds from nature. Their existence has been based upon technological or economic calculations and upon the mastery of nature and of man, however primitive the means at their disposal ... But precisely for these, there has always existed the possibility – even though in greatly varying measure – of letting an ethic of rational regulation of life arise. This may occur by the linkage of such an ethic to the tendency of technological and economic rationalism.

Note the importance of the mastery of nature by this stratum when compared to others. The upper stratum assumes its own mastery, the warrior stratum

ritualizes in the hope of survival and perhaps glory, and the lower stratum develops a transvalued system of religious thought that makes suffering sublime. All of these ideologies differ significantly from the type of rationality embraced by the civic strata. Weber (1958: 24) explains, “ Its rationality today is essentially dependent on the calculability of the most important technical factors. But, this means fundamentally that it is dependent on the peculiarities of modern science, especially the natural sciences based on mathematics and exact and rational experiment. ”

From this stratum another intelligentsia arises whose concern is development, while the intelligentsia of the upper stratum whose major concern appears to be legitimation of the existing social order (see Weber, 1978: 417). Weber (1981: 275) lists accounting and bookkeeping when he gives a meaning to the concept of capitalism. These grow in importance as the needs of the civic stratum dictate.

It would be difficult to overemphasize the importance of the rise of the new intelligentsia, but another important role may rise from this class in ascetic societies as well. This is the “*ethical prophet*” who Weber (1949: 439) describes as “ ... a purely individual carrier of charisma who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or divine mission ” The civic stratum tends to view their god as all knowing, punishing and rewarding (see Weber, 1946: 285). The quality of the “*purely individual*” ethical prophet developing a religious ideology that conforms with a god actively involved in “*rewarding and punishing*” creates a situation open to change. These religious precepts, combined with the propensity of the civic strata to focus on manipulating nature, weaken traditionalism. Weber (1958: 58) proposes

that traditionalism is one of the major obstacles to the development of modern capitalism.

Examples of ethical prophets are available. Jesus the carpenter is one example as well as Mohammed the tradesperson. These prophets weakened the bonds of traditionalism and their movements led to radical changes in the society. However, these prophets are only part of a process that eventually led to the development of capitalism. Luther's personalization of salvation weakened the traditionalism bound in the medieval church and was important as well (see Weber, 1958: 126). However, perhaps the most central figure to the development of modern capitalism is Calvin and the concept of predestination (Weber, 1958: 98). Before this concept religion continued to have means available to followers to obtain salvation. Calvin's proposal that certain people are predestined to salvation and the rest are lost placed his followers in a quandary because Calvin " ... has at bottom only the answer that God has chosen ..." (Weber, 1958: 110). No longer could people rely on ritualism and/or a priesthood to obtain salvation. Weber (1958: 105) sees this as paramount in the growth of secular rationalism. "The great historic process in the development of religions, the elimination of magic of the world which had begun with the old Hebrew prophets and, in conjunction with Hellenistic scientific thought, had repudiated all magical means to salvation as superstition and sin, came here to its logical conclusion ". In answer to the question of who is the chosen, Calvinist leaders suggested that the chosen would be blessed in this life materially. An ideology, perhaps even a transvaluation of Christian philosophy occurs at this time. To be materially wealthy was evidence of being one of the chosen.

Wesley's doctrine of sanctification assists in the development of a new ethic that evolved into capitalism. Weber (1958: 141) proposes that Wesley's belief in good works led to a new asceticism, which, when combined with the already established ethic of being materially blessed led to an accumulation of wealth necessary to development of capitalism. Within the civic stratum it seems a group arose with the dual need of procuring wealth with a belief that conspicuous consumption was sinful.

The new wealthy group would not have developed capitalism without workers that it drew from the lower class. Despite many differences in religious ideology there are enough similarities to provide the means of cooperation between the two classes. Weber (1946: 283) writes:

Peasants have been inclined towards magic. Their whole economic existence has been specifically bound to nature and has made them dependent upon elemental forces. They readily believe in a compelling sorcery directed against spirits who rule over or through natural forces, or they believe in simply buy-divine benevolence. Only tremendous transformations of life orientation have succeeded in tearing them away from this universal and primeval form of religiosity. Such transformations have been derived either from other strata or from mighty prophets, who through the power of miracles legitimize themselves as sorcerers.

Religious change, Weber (1978: 468) believes arises from outside for this class. The lot of the peasants is so strongly attached to nature, so dependent on the organic processes and economically so little oriented to rational systemization that in general the peasantry will become a carrier of religion only when it is threatened with enslavement or proletarianization, either by

domestic (financial or seigniorial) or by some external political power. Other groups that comprise the lower classes exist. One Weber (1978: 493) labels “*pariah people*” which he describes as,

... a distinctive hereditary social group lacking autonomous political organization and characterized by internal prohibitions against commensality and inter-marriage originally founded upon magical, tabooistic, and ritual injunctions. Two additional traits of pariah people are political and social disprivilege and a far – reaching distinctiveness in economic functioning. ...the more depressed the position in which the members of a pariah people found themselves, the more closely did religion cause them to cling to their pariah position and the more powerful became the salvation hopes which were connected with the divinely ordained fulfillment of their religious obligations.

Either peasants or pariah (evidently people could belong to both groups at the same time) make them amenable to affiliating with the newly rising civic stratum. They are poor, economically dependent on nature or have a distinct economic niche, and have few, if any injunctions against work in a rational economic system.

In ancient and medieval times the upper stratum, with its priestly intelligentsia, combined with the warrior stratum to produce an effective system of domination (e.g. Rome or Persia). The civic stratum was largely left out of such systems with wealth being based in landholdings or booty and have little in common with any superiority ideology from the upper classes or ritualism from the warrior stratum. Their substance is based on the manipulation of nature and on rational calculation. The lower stratum

have little affinity for such a system as well. Materially, they are enslaved or otherwise economically violated and their religious ideology is largely magical, dependent upon the use of sorcerers, magicians, etc. which places their religion in opposition to the status quo (see Weber, 1978: 437). Weber does not write that the process was so simple, but we are discussing casual factors and therefore demonstrating them with adequacy (see Weber, 1949: 188) and not absolutely.

Ascetic religions give ideological legitimation to the material and status needs of the civic and lower strata that are unmet within such a system. Belonging to the new faiths (or denominations) are at first important. Weber (1946: 305) writes: “ Admission to the congregation is recognized as an absolute guarantee of the moral qualities required in business matters ”. Other ascetic sects provide the emotionality often required of religion among the lower classes (e.g. see Weber, 1958: 159). More common ground is found beyond mere ideology. Materially, the funds available from the accumulation of wealth that evolves over time, the civic stratum is able to hire the lower stratum and the mode of production changes rather quickly. Religious ideology, while still important, begins to wane as an absolutist system of conduct. Weber (1946: 305) explains,

The expectation of the creditors that his sect, for the sake of their prestige, would not allow creditors to suffer losses on behalf of a sect member was not, however, decisive for his opportunities. What was decisive was the fact that a fairly reputable sect would only accept for membership one whose “conduct” made him appear to be morally qualified beyond doubt.

Wealthy landowners, protected by warrior knights, find themselves faced by wealthy entrepreneurs who are protected by new military styles (e.g. Cromwell's Model Army) and a growing labor force who is prone to side with the entrepreneurs. Eventually, by the nineteenth century revolutionary changes have occurred in the west and new or reformed political systems are supporting the civic strata.

Over time, religious legitimation becomes less and less necessary. As Weber (1958: 182) writes, "For the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be said: Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved."

In modern capitalism, as in any system, are left over ideologies from past dialectic struggles. Weber (1958: 182) prosaically admits this, "The rosy blush of its laughing heir, The Enlightenment, seems also to be irretrievably fading, and the idea of one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs." He (1958: 162) clearly sees these as relics, destined to decline even further in importance. "In its field of its highest development in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions which often actually give it the character of sport."

Weber (1958: 181) appears pessimistic about the possibility of new economic systems in the near future. He refers to modern capitalism in terms such as "*an irresistible force*" and "*an iron cage*". Religion's importance as a support of the system is no longer necessary.

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