

Weber and Islam

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2005 is the year we celebrate the 100th anniversary of Einstein's relativity theory, the commemoration of Jean-Paul Sartre's birthday and, not least, Max Weber's famous and controversial monograph, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Weber's thesis, groundbreaking and controversial ever since its publication in 1905, states that a specific protestant puritan Christian ethos provided the basis for a modern rational lifestyle. The "Spirit of Capitalism" provided an essential attitude that promoted the disenchantment of the ancient world. The world of fairytales, myths, and saga had to give way to scientific realism. Of course, the specifics are more subtle but the controversy around the Protestant Ethic centred on the issue of whether Weber's claim that a modern rationalist lifestyle was possible only in north-western Europe could be plausibly defended. Despite many disclaimers, the idea of a specific religious ethos and attitude relating to rationalist economic activity remains alive in the social sciences and philosophy.

Max Weber (1864-1920), a lawyer and economic history professor at Freiburg, Berlin, Heidelberg, and Munich was a prolific thinker, lecturer, writer, and public speaker on contemporary political matters. Weber was highly innovative and accomplished an extremely sophisticated methodology that enmeshed historical studies—specifically economics and religious beliefs and attitudes—in a systematic framework. Weber, however, was not only interested in the specifics of economic history of western Europe and its relationship to religious belief, especially puritan protestant Christianity, but also in world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, and, lastly, Islam. Unfortunately Weber did not live long enough to complete his studies on Islam. What we have are fragments, unpublished manuscripts, letters commenting on the subject matter, and the great biography by his wife and fighter for women's rights in early twentieth century Europe, Marianne Weber.

Influence of German *Orientalistik* literature

Max Weber's sources on Islam were based on the contemporary writings of central and eastern European scholars who wrote in German such as Carl H. Becker, Julius Wellhausen, Theodor Noldeke, and the great Hungarian, Ignaz Goldziher. These scholars whose body of work fit under the rubric of Islam and Near Eastern civilizations, or *Orientalistik*, concentrated mainly on original religious and literary texts, translating, commenting, and interpreting their contents. For many, the original interest was drawn by the Holy Land, Christianity, and Hebrew literature. Yet, they quickly realized that they had to deal with Islam as an important element in the formation of the Near East, as it was known in those days. These German-speaking scholars of Islam do not qualify simply as Orientalists in the ideological sense used by Edward Said. In fact Said, in the second edition of his well known book, *Orientalism*, points out the great achievements of German-speaking Islam scholars and apologizes for leaving them out of the original manuscript since their inclusion would lead to a tripling of the book's size. A more plausible explanation is that the German Orientalists would not have fit well into Said's original scheme of a Eurocentric Islam scholarship by the British and French. Since Germany did not maintain colonies with a Muslim population, the German situation was quite different. More important, the origin of German Oriental studies can be traced to the romanticism of the early nineteenth century as a critical movement of industrialization and modernization of central Europe. Here we see the appearance of the Grimm brothers and Friedrich Rueckert, one of the first great German Orientalists translating Persian poetry used by Goethe. From Rueckert we can trace a direct line to the late Annemarie Schimmel via Becker and Goldziher. This is the tradition within which Max Weber moved and derived his sources and information.

On the occasion of the centennial of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, philosopher Ernest Wolf-Gazo examines the possible contributions of Weber to a sociology of Islam.

Towards a sociology of religion

Weber treated the world religions as cultural phenomena or cultural entities that emerged under certain historical conditions and developed into certain

types of formations that included respective dogma, law, attitudes, and traditions. Religious doctrine took on a rationalist form that was to put an end to idolatry, myth, and legend. Weber was not of the opinion that religion was merely a type of opium for the masses, but regarded it as something that helped to discipline the masses from sheer savagery, lawlessness, and chaos. Religion gave the people a sense of meaning. For Weber there is a rationality in the form of religion in contrast to magic, shamanism, and mythology. It is a rationality no better or worse than the one emerging out of western Europe, it is just different. Protestantism in its Calvinist, pietistic or puritan form provided an inner-worldly asceticism that promoted the salvation of humankind on earth through hard work deferring instantaneous gratification. Weber sees Islam as transforming itself more and more into a legalistic religion oriented towards feudal property. Yet, Weber's specific concentration was not simply on rationality, or a rational lifestyle, but a modern lifestyle that encompasses politics, economics, aesthetics, social life, and the military and bureaucracy, as well as professional attitudes in scientific research and ethos.

The modern rationalist ethos, which had developed in Europe, was Weber's central concern in developing his political sociology, his economic history, his sociology of law, and exclusively, his sociology of religion. It is within that framework of the religious ethos of specific religions and their promotion of a certain kind of rationality within the context of their respective tradition, that other religions, be it Hinduism or Islam, became part of Weber's research project in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He did not live to complete his ambitious project, but Weberian themes, issues, and topics abound everywhere in the social sciences. Weber lived to see the fruition of his publications on Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Judaism, but not so his studies in Islam. Accordingly, the literature and secondary studies on Weber and Islam are scarce and wanting. Some have initiated the respective topic yet comprehensive and more specialized studies are needed to

highlight aspects of Islamic civilization in the spirit of Weber.

In the 1970s and 1980s isolated publications on Weber and Islam have appeared, especially in Anglo-American sociological literature, to draw attention to the relevance for Weber studies. In the meantime it is not only Weber studies, but also Islam studies that are badly needed in terms of a dialogue of civilization. In the process we can incorporate the work of one of the great western sociological minds of the twentieth century into studies of Islam and Muslim societies.

What is needed is to go beyond Weber in terms of the methodology of the social sciences and relate new methods to old, but unsolved problems, such as political authority in Islam in the modern context, legitimacy and human rights in Islam in the modern context, and not to mention individual rights within the community of believers in modern terms.

Rationality in a comparative perspective

It is an open secret that serious problems confront Muslim societies worldwide. Some of the issues these societies grapple with are: Is modern capitalism possible within an Islamic framework? Are commercial laws, freedom of supply and demand and other corporate economic activities of the private sector, possible in a modern version of Islam (if such a term is applicable)? Capitalism is not unique to the western world, but a specific type of commercial activity that controls the natural resources of

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our planet is very much a rationality of domination that did not appear in the Near East or Asian Civilizations. Weber was Eurocentric, but only in the sense that he felt that a certain type of rationality, a certain type of rational law, a certain type of corporation such as the medieval city, appeared in Medieval European civilization. The rational understanding of citizenship, obligations, rights and responsibility in the context of rational normative mandates, rules, imperatives, and laws, was specific to western European culture. Indeed, the difference between the private and the public, the separation between religious institutions and institutions of the state, are considered very specific formations of the western world.

Rationalism based upon a puritan spirit that calculated quantitatively in the name of Descartes and praised nature as in the glory of a mighty *Pantokrator* in the name of Newton was specific to the ascetic puritan calculative mind. Deity was integrated into the laws of nature and the natural philosopher of the scientific revolution accommodated the spiritual in the name of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. The respective economic rationale of Adam Smith followed. It was this unique combination of a technology of domination over nature and a puritan Christian mindset that promoted professional work ethos that promoted the airplane, solar cell, the laser, and not to mention the computer, and lastly, cloning. Of course, Weber did not live to see these developments but his insights and spirit of research into crucial issues concerning social activities of humankind is very much at the forefront in our century. For Weber it is the human being above all else, his needs and values, that stands as paramount. To be more specific, the interrelations between needs and values, under certain historical conditions, provide insights and valuable knowledge for application to the study of contemporary and future societies. Weber, following Kant, asked about specific condition under which societies are formed and what sort of structures these societies generate?

Weber maintains that rationalism was prevalent in Confucian as well as Islamic civilization, but it was of a different kind or type of rationality than the one emerging out of the puritan ascetic Christian lifestyle (the German *Lebensfuehrung* is more descriptive and apt at this point). It was the type of rationality that confronted the cosmos and transformed it into the laws of nature by the transcendental subject as scientific researcher. Hindu and Islamic civilizations found deistic powers in form of monotheism and godly spirits, but left nature to its natural processes and works. There was not an attempt at usurping a higher power in the figure of Dr. Faustus. Could we imagine an Islamic Faust? No, it was a specific puritan ethos of Calvinist Christian denomination that laid the foundation for a systematic rationalist approach to social, political, economic, and religious life emerging from western Europe. In that sense we can say, it was not a better rationality, but very different in intention and nature from the rest of emerging civilizations.

The outstanding tradition of the systematic study of religions, magic, and mythology which started in the mid-nineteenth century with the voluminous works of Max Mueller, Sir James Frazer, E.B. Tylor and moving into the twentieth century, Emile Durkheim, Wilhelm Schmidt, Rudolf Otto, Joachim Wach, then Freud, Dumezil and Mircea Eliade, continues in works by contemporary scholars such as Werner Stark, Thomas Luckman, Peter Berger or S.N. Eisenstadt. Here we see a development treating religion systematically in its historical form, in its ethnological development, as a phenomenological human occurrence, towards a science of sociology of religion. It was Max Weber who realized a rigorous methodological framework in which to sort out the concrete elements of a religion that make up its society, its politics, and its economics. With and after Weber's publication of his *Collected Essays on Sociology of Religion* in 1920-1, religious studies took on a scientific dimension in the German sense of *Wissenschaft* (i.e. a systematic body of knowledge about a specific type and form of social phenomenon). Islam was somewhat neglected until the latter part of the twentieth century and that is the reason why the topic "Weber and Islam" is of greatest urgency and relevance, considering the re-emergence of Islam as a political and ideological force. Weber and Islam is at present an open-ended theme that needs to be explored carefully with professionalism and, if possible, non-ideological finesse.

Much of Weber's information on Islamic society is insufficient, incomplete and patchy; yet, the importance of Weber lies in his rigorous methodological approach to all the world religions, including Islam. Studying carefully the complete work of Weber, especially on China,

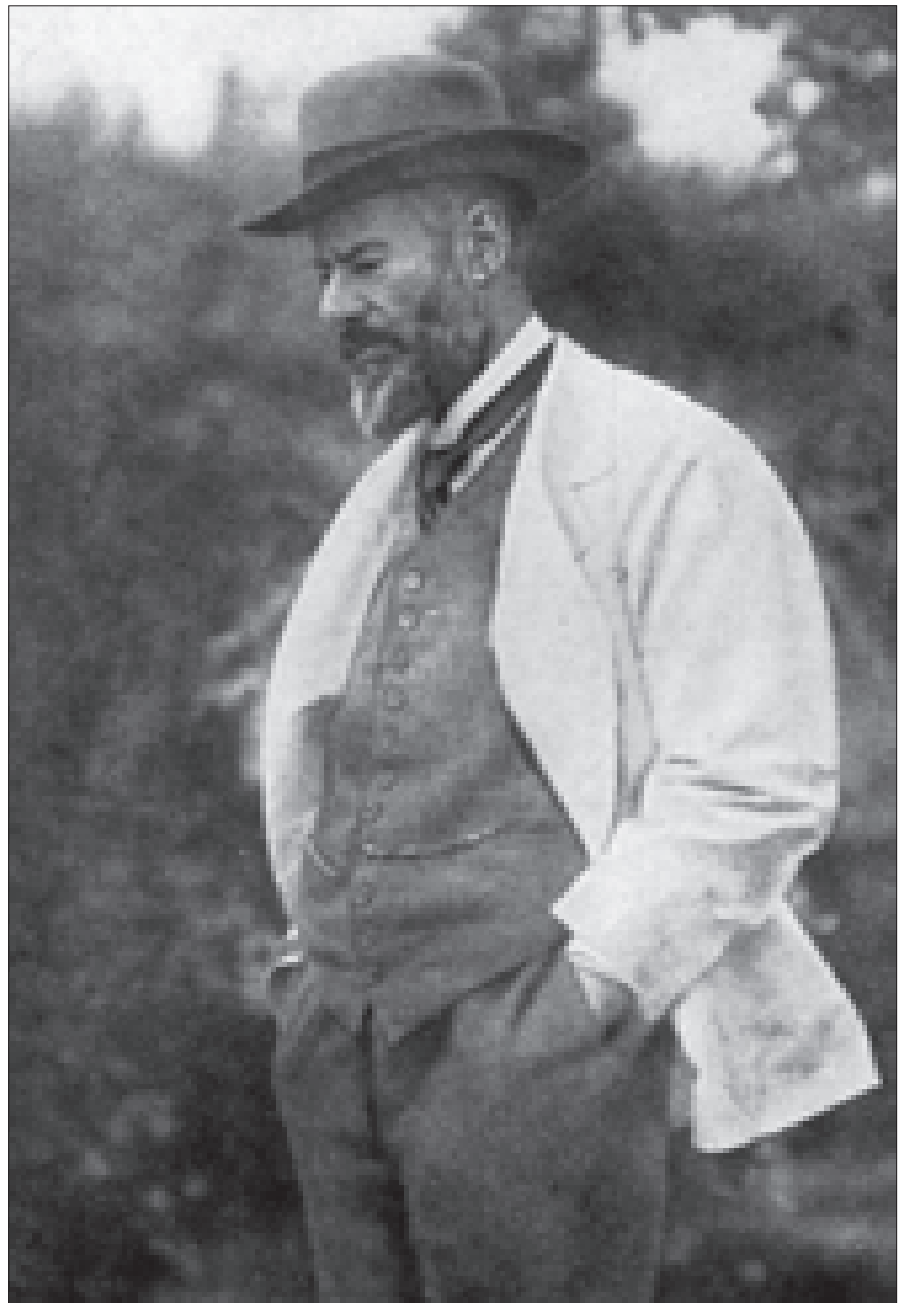


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India and Palestine, which he completed, we can sense a methodological frame of reference that can guide us in tackling our own Islamic research and studies, considering we are in a much more fortunate position than Weber was regarding our source material and living experience. Serious and provocative studies in Weber's spirit are needed, especially in Islamic studies, which would provide for a lively and critical platform contributing to the ongoing dialogue of civilizations and cultures. No doubt, if he were here today, Weber would have been at the forefront of such a dialogue.

Max Weber

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