

**Andreas E. Buss**

# **The Economic Ethics of World Religions and their Laws**

**An Introduction to Max Weber's Comparative Sociology**

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*To my grandsons Jona and Mika*



## PREFACE

Max Weber is today perhaps the classic author in the cultural and social sciences, recognized by scientists in many subject areas and on all continents. But his widely felt intellectual presence has not eliminated wide-ranging discussions about his intentions and the foundations of his work. Many use his œuvre only as a quarry for concepts and ideas, unaware that only a coherent and systematic reading will penetrate to the foundations of his thought, open up its possibilities, but also its inner tensions.

This is particularly true with regard to his essays on «The Economic Ethics of World Religions» and to his much shorter writings on the laws of these religions, for they appear to be based on an inner contradiction. On the one hand, Weber insisted that only by specialization, by putting on blinders, so to speak, the scientist can achieve something that will endure. But, on the other hand, he wrote about religions and cultures and their legal systems – in India, China, Buddhism, ancient Judaism –, and he commented on other cultures - Islam, Orthodox Christianity, and occidental Christianity - about which he certainly could not claim much specialized knowledge. What characterizes his œuvre, however, is his approach: he proposed a refined and coherent method of comparative social study with a largely historical dimension which was intended to contribute to the understanding of the characteristics of Western culture even when he wrote about Asian cultures. At the same time he asked which attitude towards the world remains for Western man, and what kind of conduct and which price and sacrifices it requires.

Weber's questions are not self-evident for sinologists, indologists, semitists or historians of Christianity, and they are also new for scholars and students of comparative religions and of the comparative history of law. For Westerners they provide a wider than usual perspective. At the same time, Weber did not want to teach the people of Asia anything about how their cultures should develop. His approach allows people of all cultures to turn the mirror around and, while adapting Weber's approach to their perspective, to look at their own roots. May this book contribute to the dissemination of Weber's comparative macrosociological analysis and of his understanding of the peculiarities of Occidental rationalism.





## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS	13
CHAPTER I INTRODUCTORY REMARKS	15
<i>The Texts (15); What were Weber's intentions? (18); The Critiques (21); Scientific Concepts and Points of View (25); Rationality and Rationalisation (27); The Method of Analysis (29); A Short Outline of the Material (31)</i>	
CHAPTER II THE PROTESTANT ETHIC STUDIES	34
1. <i>The Protestant Ethic and the «Spirit» of Capitalism of 1904/05</i>	34
2. <i>The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism</i>	40
3. <i>The Anti-Critiques</i>	42
4. <i>The 1920 Version of the «Protestant Ethic»</i>	44
CHAPTER III THE WORLD RELIGIONS AND THEIR ETHICS	48
1. <i>Max Weber's Introduction</i>	48
2. <i>Confucianism and Taoism</i>	57
<i>The Patrimonial Domination (58); The Spirit of Confucianism (60); Heterodoxies (61); Conclusion (63); The Result: Puritanism versus Confucianism (65)</i>	
3. <i>Intermediate Reflection: Religious Rejections of the World and their Levels and Directions</i>	67

TABLE OF CONTENTS

4.	<i>Hinduism and Buddhism</i>	75
	<i>The Hindu Social System (76); The Hindu Spirit (78); Orthodox and Heterodox Salvation Teachings (79); Ancient Buddhism (82); Buddhism elsewhere in Asia (85); Excursus: Japan (87); Later Indian Developments (88); A Retrospective View on the Asian Cultural World (90)</i>	
5.	<i>Ancient Judaism</i>	92
	<i>The Transcendent God, the berith, and the Prophets (93); Pariah People, Pariah Ethics, and Pariah Capitalism (95); Supplement: The Pharisees (98)</i>	
6.	<i>Islam</i>	101
	<i>Islamic Patrimonial Domination (102); The «Spirit» of Islam (106); Sufism and Conclusion (108)</i>	
7.	<i>Christianity</i>	110
	a. <i>Ancient Christianity</i>	110
	<i>The Roman Monarchic-Bureaucratic Empire (110); The Spirit of Ancient Christianity (111)</i>	
	b. <i>Eastern Orthodox Christianity</i>	115
	<i>The Patrimonial State (116); The Orthodox Church (118); The «Spirit» of the Orthodox Church (119); Russian Old Believers (121); The Russian Sects (124); Result (126)</i>	
	c. <i>Occidental Christianity</i>	127
	<i>The Institutional and Legal Transformations (127); The «Spirit» of Traditionalism and the Puritan Sects (133); The Characteristics of Modern Western Capitalism (136)</i>	
	CHAPTER IV THE WORLD RELIGIONS IN CONTROL TESTS	137
	1. <i>Elective Affinity and Causal Adequacy</i>	137
	2. <i>Adequate Causation according to v. Kries</i>	141
	3. <i>Weber's Use of the Concept of Adequate Causation</i>	146
	4. <i>Adequate Causation and «The Economic Ethics of World Religions»</i>	147

CHAPTER V THE WORLD RELIGIONS AND THE LAW	152
SECTION 1: MAX WEBER'S SOCIOLOGY OF LAW	152
<i>Jurisprudence and the Sociology of Law (153); The Rationalisation of the Societal Spheres (155); Excursus on Eigengesetzlichkeit (159); The Rationalisation of the Law (160); The Carriers of the Rationalization of Law (166); The «England Problem» (168); Retrospective Considerations (171)</i>	
SECTION 2: LAW IN THE WORLD RELIGIONS	172
1. The Laws in Non-Occidental Cultures	174
<i>China (174); India (176); Buddhist Countries and Japan (177); Islam (179); Jewish Law (181); The Law within Russian Orthodoxy (183)</i>	
2. Canon Law	185
3. European Secular Law	187
<i>Roman Law (187); Natural Law (188); Continental European Law (190); English Common Law (193); A Retrospective View of European Secular Law (194); 4. Coda on Modern Comparative Law (195)</i>	
CONCLUSION	197
1. The «Author's Introduction» as a Conclusion	197
2. Commentary	200
<i>Science (201); Architecture, Art, and Music (202); Formally Rational Law and the Puritan Conduct of Life (204); The Contemporary Relevance of Weber's Comparative Sociology (206)</i>	
APPENDIX	208
BIBLIOGRAPHY	209
INDEX OF AUTHORS	216
INDEX OF SUBJECTS	218



## ABBREVIATIONS

AC	<i>The Protestant Ethic Debate. Max Weber's Replies to his Critics 1907-1910.</i> Edited and translated by D. Chalcraft, A. Harrington & M. Shields. Liverpool University Press 2001
AJ	Max Weber <i>Ancient Judaism</i> New York : The Free Press 1967
ASS	Max Weber <i>Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik</i> Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck) 1924 (1988)
ASW	Max Weber <i>Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte</i> Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck) 1924 (1988)
CMW	<i>Max Weber. Collected Methodological Writings.</i> Edited by H. H. Bruun & S. Whimster, translated by H. H. Bruun, London : Routledge 2012
ES	Max Weber <i>Economy and Society</i> New York : Bedminster Press 1968
FMW	<i>From Max Weber : Essays in Sociology</i> Translated and edited by H.H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills New York : Oxford University Press 1958
GARS	Max Weber <i>Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie</i> vol. 1 (1920); vol. 2 (Hinduismus und Buddhismus) 1921; vol. 3 (Das antike Judentum) 1920 Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck)
GEH	Max Weber <i>General Economic History</i> New Brunswick : Transaction 1981
HCP	Max Weber <i>The History of Commercial Partnerships in the Middle Ages</i> Lanham : Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2003
MWG	<i>Max Weber Gesamtausgabe</i> Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck) since 1984
PE	Max Weber <i>The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.</i> Translated by T. Parsons; London & New York : Routledge 2001
PE 1	Max Weber <i>The Protestant Ethic and the «Spirit» of Capitalism and Other Writings.</i> Edited and translated by P. Baehr & G. Wells. London : Penguin 2002
PE 2	Max Weber <i>Kritiken und Antikritiken. Die protestantische Ethik II</i> Gütersloh: Mohn 1978
PW	Max Weber <i>Political Writings</i> (ed. By P. Lassman & R. Speirs) Cambridge U. Press 1994
RC	Max Weber <i>The Religion of China</i> New York/London : MacMillan 1951
RI	Max Weber <i>The Religion of India</i> New York : The Free Press 1958
RSM	Max Weber <i>The Rational and Social Foundations of Music,</i> Southern Illinois U. Press 1958
SAC	Max Weber <i>The Agrarian Sociology of Ancient Civilizations</i> (transl. by R. I. Frank) London : New Left Books 1976
WG	Max Weber <i>Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft</i> Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck) 1972



## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

The German scholar Max Weber (1864-1920) left a wide-ranging oeuvre, including political and methodological essays as well as essays in the field of political sociology, the sociology of law, of economics, of religion and of music. Although some of his major publications remained fragments, the new German edition of his collected writings (MWG), including letters, contains more than forty volumes. Weber's work stands out by its combination of empirical research and systematic thought. What characterizes most of it is his comparative approach which includes his views of Western Antiquity and the Middle Ages as well as of the major Asian cultures. His studies of what he called the «world religions» are probably the most obvious and important example. In this introductory chapter the necessary foundations will be laid for the understanding and interpretation of Weber's comparative studies.

### The Texts

«The Economic Ethics of World Religions» is the title of a part of Max Weber's *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* (Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion), Vol. 1-3, Tübingen 1920/21, a three volume publication which also contains his revised essays on the Protestant ethic and the Protestant sects. The essays on the world religions (mainly Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism and ancient Judaism) were originally published between 1915 and 1919 in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften und Sozialpolitik*, a journal of which Weber was one of the editors. A year before his death in 1920 Weber revised and extended these earlier publications and started to publish them as a whole under the title *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*.

Volume I contains a Preceding or Preliminary Remark ( *Vorbemerkung*, translated, not quite correctly, by T. Parsons as «Author's Introduction»), the extended essay on «The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism» (originally published in 1904/05), and a revised version of an article entitled «The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism». This is followed by the revised «Introduction» to the section on «The Economic Ethics of



World Religions», then the substantially extended essay on «Confucianism and Taoism» and finally an «Intermediary Reflection». Volume II contains the slightly revised essay on «Hinduism and Buddhism», and Volume III contains «Ancient Judaism» and a short text entitled «The Pharisees».

Weber's early death prevented him from doing more, but readers of his letters, now published in the *Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* (MWG), will come to realize that his ambitions had gone further. He had also wanted to add studies on Islam and on Christianity (MWG II/9: 69-70) and, as an announcement of his publisher Siebeck in the fall of 1919 indicated, the depiction of Christianity was to be divided into ancient Christianity, oriental Christianity and occidental Christianity.<sup>1</sup> In fact, after his tour of Asia Weber wanted to return to the Occident with a widened perspective and, as he also pointed out in the announcement, the object of all these completed and planned essays would be the question of the particular characteristics of the Occident and of the development of the European citizen. Today we can only draw some indications of what he might have written on the economic ethics of Islam and Christianity from some parts of his work which is traditionally known as *Economy and Society* (ES), particularly the sections on the sociology of religion, the sociology of domination and the sociology of law. These sections in *Economy and Society* were considered by Weber as complementary and explanatory to the collection of essays on the «Economic Ethics of World Religions». In particular the section on «The Sociology of Law» (Chapter VIII in ES) contains short paragraphs on the laws of all major world religions, including Islam).<sup>2</sup>

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1 This announcement, prepared by Weber himself, has been quoted in Johannes Winckelmann: *Max Weber's hinterlassenes Hauptwerk*, Tübingen: Mohr (Siebeck) 1986, p. 45/46; now also in MWG I. 19, p. 28

2 According to F. Tenbruck (in his article of 1980 on the thematic unity in the works of Max Weber) the continuing insights of Weber's sociology cannot be found in *Economy and Society*, but in the systematic chapters of the *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion*, namely the «Preliminary Remark», the «Introduction», and the «Intermediate Reflection», where the realization of the inner logic of religious ideas came to him. But it should not be forgotten that Weber himself saw the relationship between *Economy and Society* and the *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion* as complementary and explanatory, as clearly stated in the first footnote of the «Introduction» to the «Economic Ethics of World Religions» which, regrettably, has not been translated by Gerth and Mills in their volume *From Max Weber*. The editorial history of *Economy and Society* contains a number of disputes. A new controversy has flared up since its publication in five volumes in the *Max Weber*

The *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion* have never been translated into English as a whole. Instead, separate translations which leave the reader unaware of the interrelations have been published of the various parts. The «Prefatory Note» or «Author's Introduction» which introduces the whole three-volume series and which at the same time sums up the results, has been included by Talcott Parsons with his translation of «The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism» in a separate volume. The «Introduction» and the «Intermediate Reflection» which are of major importance for the understanding of the theoretical structure of the argument, have also been published separately under partially new and misleading titles («The Social Psychology of World Religions» and «Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions» respectively) by Gerth and Mills in their *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (FMW). The essay on «Confucianism and Taoism» has been translated and published separately by H. Gerth under the misleading title *The Religion of China* and the essay on «Hinduism and Buddhism» has been translated and published separately by H. Gerth and D. Martindale under the equally misleading title *The Religion of India. The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*. No wonder, then, that the interrelations between these works which must be interpreted in each other's light, are often misunderstood in the English-speaking scholarly community.

Equally important, however, for the understanding of many reactions to Weber's writings among specialists of Asian studies is the poor quality of some of the translations. Some of them are a disgrace.<sup>3</sup> Not only have most English translations been given new titles which do not reflect Weber's intentions, but passages of major importance have been subjected to major changes. One example should suffice here:

Indian scholars, especially if they were interested in modern development, have often taken exception to the following statement:

«It is quite evident that no community dominated by inner powers of this sort (caste order and karma theory - A.B.) could out of its substance arrive at the

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*Gesamtausgabe*. What was known as Weber's sociology of law is now called «Die Entwicklungsbedingungen des Rechts» in MWG I, 22-3. (The developmental conditions of the law). *Vide* H. Orihara «From a torso with a wrong head to five disjointed body parts without a head» in *Max Weber Studies* 3,2 (2003).

3 A revealing article on the subject of the English translations of Weber's studies on world religions has been Kantowsky's Max Weber on India and Indian interpretations of Weber» in: *Contributions to Indian Sociology* (NS) vol. 16, no. 2 (1982)

«spirit» of capitalism. It was also unable to take over the economically and technically finished form as an artifact, as occurred in Japan. There appeared here clearly and undoubtedly greater difficulties than in Japan.» (RI: 325).

If we compare this translation with the German original, we find that the statement «It was also unable to take over the economic and technically finished form as an artifact» simply does not appear in the German text. Therefore, a more correct translation would be:

«It is quite evident that no community dominated by inner powers of this sort could out of its substance arrive at the «spirit» of capitalism. Even the take-over of the economically and technically finished form as an artifact, as occurred in Japan, encountered clearly and undoubtedly greater difficulties than in Japan...» (GARS II: 359)

Clearly, this passage expresses a very different idea from what the English reader, interested in modern development, is led to believe. In fact, the breakup of the closely interrelated essays into seemingly unrelated monographs and the plethora of incorrect or misleading translations of passages in Weber's essays have produced a certain lack of interest in Weber's general intentions, and it is therefore not surprising that many misunderstandings have arisen. For the moment we may leave aside the fact that an appropriate understanding of these essays is possible only on the basis of some knowledge of Weber's methodological writings and of his sociology of domination and of law.

What were Weber's intentions?

It was not Weber's intention to provide us with a well-rounded picture of major world religions, or with a series of monographs.

«The studies do not claim to be complete analyses of cultures, however brief. On the contrary, in every culture they quite deliberately emphasize elements in which it differs from Western civilization. They are, hence, definitely oriented to the problems which seem important for the understanding of Western culture from this view-point.» (PE: XL).

Weber knew that a more balanced presentation would have to add other features, but he was interested in certain features of religions from a definite point of view, namely how they related to economic rationalism of the type which has developed in the modern Occident. In other words, he studied Asian cultures only to the extent that he deemed necessary to find points of comparison with Occidental characteristics as all his questioning

turned around the uniqueness of the West. Moreover, Weber was well aware of the sketchy character of these studies and of his inability to read the sources in their original language. If he published them nevertheless, it was because he thought that they might perhaps be useful as a supplement to the problems raised in the sociology of religion and in the sociology of economics. That studies of this kind or, in fact, of any kind, can never be «final», was obvious to him.

Before considering Weber's intentions in «The Economic Ethics of World Religions», it is necessary to remember his purpose in the essay on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. There he had analysed the economic impact and relevance of the Protestant ethic for the spirit of capitalism (as opposed to its economic determinedness), and he had not been concerned with the exact extent or degree of its cultural significance but only with a general elective affinity or perhaps with its causal adequacy (more on this in chapter IV).

But then he wrote at the end of his revised essay in 1920, that he wanted to correct the isolation of his study on Protestantism which, as has been mentioned, originally appeared in 1904/05, and to place it in relation to the whole of cultural development (PE: 262). This may have meant that

1. he wanted to validate his PE thesis by means of comparisons or control tests (AC: 54) and thus to ascertain that only in the Occident modern rational capitalism could develop from indigenous sources. But, while this was probably one of Weber's intentions, it was not the only one;
2. while he had earlier investigated the significance of ascetic Protestantism for the development of the modern capitalistic mentality, he would now want to reverse the point of view which he had taken in the *Protestant Ethic* and to investigate how religious ethics were in turn influenced by the totality of social conditions (PE: 125), for he thought that both interpretations are equally possible. In fact, in the «Economic Ethics of World Religions» both sides of the relationship are considered.
3. But there is more: the essays on the economic ethics of world religions are not limited to an investigation of the religious influences on the economy and on the economic influences on religious ethics, but they also contain investigations about the relationship between religion, economics, political domination and law. Why was there this extension of the topic area? As Wolfgang Schluchter has suggested, Weber had begun to realize, perhaps as a result of his comparative study in the sociology of music (RSM) which also touched on Asian music, that a

particular kind of rationalism pervaded not only Western music but the whole of modern European culture.<sup>4</sup> The subject matter of capitalism or of the capitalistic spirit thus turned into the more general subject matter of the development of modern Western rationalism, and this in many areas of life: not only in economic ethics, but also in the politico-legal orders. And thus, even in his essays on Asian cultures Weber wanted to come to grips with the particular kinds of rationality which he found in all areas of occidental social life, and he realized that his essays turned out to be «contributions to a sociology and typology of rationalism» (FMW: 324). Rationalism, according to Weber, exists in all cultures, but cultures have rationalized different areas of life. Weber wanted to explain the peculiarity of Occidental rationalism as compared to the forms of rationalism elsewhere. He thought, for instance, that Protestantism had rationalized an attitude of world domination, Confucianism had rationalized world adaptation and the Indian soteriologies had rationalized world renunciation. But, as will be seen, there was not only a certain kind of rationalization of world domination in the Occident, but also a certain kind of legal rationalization. This would have become clearer, if Weber had been able to complete a study on Christianity.

There is, however, a certain tension in these essays to the extent that they permit two different interpretations of the view which Weber had of the place of Western civilization in relation to the cultures of Asia. On the one hand, it can be said that Weber produced a typological comparative universal history or that he conceived his essays on the ethics of world religions as «contributions to the sociology and typology of rationalism». Here, Western rationalism is considered as simply one among many, so that, for instance, Confucian rationalism can be opposed to Puritan rationalism. On the other hand, China and India are also viewed by Weber as impregnated by traditionalism, and this places Western civilization on a more advanced level of development. It is not easy to integrate these two views, even if it must be said that Weber looked towards the future of Western civilization with apprehension as he foresaw mechanized petrification and a lack of brotherliness. It cannot be stressed enough that We-

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4 Weber's wife Marianne wrote that according to her husband the process of rationalization in the Occident moved on several tracks; it penetrated the economy, the law, the sciences and art and combined both theoretical and practical rationality (*Max Weber. Ein Lebensbild*, 1984, p. 348). English version p. 333/4

ber's interest in rationality and in the typologies of rationalization did not imply a preference for the Western type of rationalization or a normative «ethnocentric» treatment of other cultures. Weber viewed Western civilization as diseased, a dead-end street or an iron-cage without escape which suffocates the individual and which certainly does not have anything to offer to other civilizations. To be convinced of this, one need only read the last pages of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*: «For the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved» (PE: 124).<sup>5</sup>

### The Critiques

Essentially three kinds of critiques have been formulated with regard to Weber's *œuvre* in the fields of Asian studies. The first kind is related to the so-called «Protestant Ethic thesis», supposedly contained in Weber's writings. Weber himself hoped that nobody would be so simplistic as to impute to him the thesis that «confessional membership alone would conjure up a specified economic development to a degree that Baptist inhabitants of Siberia would automatically become wholesale traders and Calvinistic inhabitants of the Sahara would turn into factory owners» (AC:34). In

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5 On occasion it has been claimed that Weber's comparative sociology is a classical statement of sociological orientalism (in the sense proposed by Edward Said), implying a) the opinion of the superiority of the West over the more or less homogeneous and immobile East, and b) the importance of internal factors and a disregard for the role of colonialism. The above quotation about «specialists without spirit» should take care of the first claim, and with regard to the second claim (the influence of colonialism) it can simply be stated that there is hardly any disagreement in the scholarly community about the distinctness of the European path prior to the advent of colonialism. A more detailed analysis of these arguments can be found in Mohammad Nafissi «Reframing Orientalism: Weber and Islam' in: Ralph Schroeder (ed.) *Max Weber, Democracy and Modernization*, London: MacMillan 1998. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that Said connected his concept of orientalism mainly to the practices of British colonialism whereas German orientalists (in the original sense of the term) on whom Weber mainly relied, were not tied to colonialism and were rather interested in religious ethics and world views. *Vide* Kippenberg (2005: 169) who mentions J. Wellhausen, a specialist of Judaism, I. Goldziher, an islamist, and H. Oldenberg, an indologist.