MAX WEBER, CAPITALISM AND THE RELIGION OF INDIA

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Abstract This paper examines Max Weber's 'The Religion of India' and places it in the wider context of his work. It tries to show in detail how Weber's study of India formed part of the comparative analysis of world civilizations which was the natural result of his interest in the causal antecedents of the rise of industrial capitalism in the West. With this background correctly understood, it is possible to appreciate why Weber approached Indian religion in the way that he did, and to avoid some common mistakes. Weber is summarized on the most important aspects of Indian religion and a brief attempt is made to state how valid his remarks still are.

Introduction

MAX WEBER'S book 'The Religion of India' (henceforth ROI) has suffered a strange and undeserved fate. Unlike 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism' (henceforth PESC) it has not given rise to any discussion of the numerous stimulating theories it puts forward among the specialists most competent to judge them. Part of the reason for this must lie in the fact that Indian studies, to their great detriment, are divided between Sanskritists and historians on one side, and social scientists, either anthropologists or sociologists, on the other, with neither side showing much concern for the methods or problems of the other (this seems to be less true in France than elsewhere).

Sanskritists frequently dismiss Weber's book out of hand, on the ground that nobody who had to rely on secondary sources can have anything to contribute to the study of Indian religion. Historians, even when they have passed the scissors-and-paste stage of collecting uncritically the statements of documents, do not appear to have begun building their work around interesting sociological or historical hypotheses. Anthropologists, on the other hand, are not in a position, in the nature of their study, to address the more specific historical theses which Weber advanced; any speculation on the past which they might have produced has often been proscribed by their fieldwork methodology. Thus, Weber's book has remained largely unread by those Indianists most competent to tackle it. As for sociologists in the west, it is probably the only book on India they ever read. That this is certainly the case with Weber's translators, Gerth and Martindale, is shown by the frequent obscurity of the translation, the incredible number of misprints in the transliteration of Sanskrit and Pali words (for which part of the time they use the German transliteration) and by the fact that they translate vajnopavita simplifiesedly from the German as 'holy girdle' instead of the normal 'sacred thread'.

Three Fallacies in the Interpretation of the Weber Thesis

Insofar as Weber's work has been taken up at all by social scientists dealing with India, the discussion has centred on the connection between Hinduism and capitalism, a debate sparked off by post-Independence economic development or the lack of it. This debate however, inasmuch as it deals with Weber, has been almost wholly vitiated by...
misunderstandings of his central concerns. Weber's books on India and China, and the projected work on Islamic civilization, were of course the counterpositives to PESC: that is, the latter explained, or began to explain, why capitalism originated only in the West, the other works why it failed to originate elsewhere. Thus in order to understand ROI, and why the above-mentioned interpretations of it are invalid, it will be necessary to deal with PESC at the same time.

The debate over Weber's 'Protestantism' thesis, both in the western and in the Indian context, has been dominated by 3 fallacies. These fallacies, though they can be held separately, are related and when held together reinforce each other, as I hope will become clear in the ensuing discussion. In decreasing order of vulgarity, they are:

(i) Weber was an idealist in the sense that he believed economic behaviour to be straightforwardly determined by religious beliefs, either of individuals or collectively or both.
(ii) There is only one problem of development, or the origin of capitalism, which is the same in essentials in Medieval China, 18th century Europe and 20th century Peru.
(iii) Weber held a whenever-A-then-B Humean view of social causality; in other words, he thought that if A was the cause of B, it was a necessary and sufficient, or at least a necessary, condition of B.

The truth is that Weber was certainly not an idealist in this sense. Though vulgar Marxists and vulgar Weberians may be diametrically opposed, it is quite wrong to suppose that Weber represents historical materialism stood on its head. Protestantism for Weber was an exception to the general rule that ideas do not have an independent power to produce social change.

As far as fallacy (ii) goes, there are three separate problems of development requiring different answers:

(A) Why did one pre-industrial society develop faster than another (say, China than Christian Europe)?
(B) Why did one civilization only (Europe) develop industrial capitalism 'from within itself'?
(C) Why are some societies better at (deliberate, imitative) development in the modern industrial and industrializing world than others (say, Japan and Singapore than China and Indonesia)?

Weber himself was above all concerned with (B) and very little with (C) which was not then the burning issue it was to become.

The truth corresponding to fallacy (iii) is harder to state briefly. But it should at least be clear from his methodological writings, if not from the consideration of social reality itself, that for Weber society is causally complex. B may be a necessary pre-condition for C only under certain circumstances. In another situation C may be possible without B. Thus talk of causes, rather than conditions, is misleading, as we may be led to expect a single cause to be 'constantly conjoined', in Hume's phrase, with a given effect. Much misguided criticism of Weber has been based on the assumption that he claimed Protestantism and capitalism to be 'constantly conjoined'.

\[\textit{Examples of the Fallacies}\]

Fallacy (i) has not normally been committed by those who have read PESC closely. Weber's statement that 'it is not, of course, my aim to substitute for a one-sided materialistic
an equally one-sided spiritualistic causal interpretation of culture and of history’ (PESC: 183) is too prominently placed for that. This has not prevented it from entering the Indianists’ discussion. Mandelbaum, for example, aligns Weber with William Kapp and Gunnar Myrdal as explaining India’s backwardness by citing the attitudes inculcated by Hinduism (Mandelbaum 1970: 638).

Fallacy (ii) is more interesting and it is more important to be clear about it. A concise formulation of it (a confusion of (B) and (C) above) is to be found in the preface of Gerth and Martindale to ROI: ‘the central concern of this and other of Weber’s studies of countries we today describe as “developing” was with the obstacles to industrialization and modernization. Weber anticipated by several decades a problem that has come to occupy the post–World War II world’ (ibid.: v). Similarly Surajit Sinha takes the Weber thesis with reference to India to be that Hinduism is a ‘major stumbling block for modernization’ (Sinha 1974: 519). In fact, Weber’s principal theme was an answer to problem (B): ‘no community dominated by powers of this sort [viz. religious anthropolatry on the part of the laity and a strong, traditionalistic charismatic clergy] could out of its own substance arrive at the “spirit of capitalism”’ (ROI: 325). The sentences which follow this in ROI state two corollaries which are indeed relevant to problem (C): that India could not take over capitalism developed elsewhere as easily as the Japanese; and that, though capitalism had already been introduced to India, only the Pax Britannica, according to some, prevented an outbreak of the ‘old feudal robber romanticism of the Middle Ages’. But these are only asides, and not the theme of the book as a whole.

Fallacy (iii) has not directly and openly been espoused, so far as I know, but it lurks in the claim that Weber’s project with regard to PESC and the studies of the world religions was an application of Mill’s method of agreement and difference. Of course the cases in which Protestantism did not produce capitalism are too well known for such a position to be tenable by present day Weberians. Consequently, Weberians claim, not that Protestantism invariably produces capitalism, but that it has a potential to do so. However this does not seem to get us very far in the task of explaining why capitalism appeared in one place rather than another, unless it is analysed in turn in a way similar to that attempted below.

Most commonly, fallacy (iii) is committed tacitly along with (ii). It is assumed that Weber asserted the existence of a necessary and sufficient link between Protestantism and rational capitalist activity, or at least that the former is a necessary condition of the latter, so that even if all Protestants are not capitalists, no Catholic can be one. Put like this it may sound absurd, but much of the debate has been carried on at this sort of level. As H. Luethy remarked, ‘it was as though the essential thread had suddenly been discovered which would lead dialectically from the nailing of Luther’s ninety-five theses on the Wittenberg church door to the assembly lines of Detroit and the ramifications of Standard Oil’ (Wrong ed., 1970: 128).

In the Indian context Weber’s claim that non-European civilizations could not have developed capitalism endogenously because they lacked the ideological resources to produce a capitalist spirit, i.e. an active rational thisworldly asceticism, is misinterpreted as the ‘theory’ that Chinese, Hindus or whatever make bad capitalists. In other words, Weber’s answer to problem (B) above is taken as an answer to problem (C), and the causal connection asserted is presumed to be an invariable one. In this way it is possible to attempt to refute his characterization of the Hindu ‘spirit’ by citing ‘the evidence today before us of politically independent Asian states actively planning their social, economic and scientific
and technical development' (Singer 1961: 150). This is of course to miss the crucial point that Weber was concerned with the first unplanned, endogenous appearance of industrial capitalism, and with India's potential or lack of it for the production of a capitalist spirit which was its necessary condition. Capitalist economic organization according to Weber is not at all the same thing; the latter may exist, carried on in a traditionalistic spirit, in pre-industrial societies without having any potential to transform its environment.

In an approach similar to Singer's, Tambiah seems to assume that because Buddhism and Hinduism can be adapted to modernization, because they can, ex post, provide analogues of the Protestant Ethic, Weber's theory is disproved (Tambiah 1973: 13–16). But since Weber is addressing problem (B), in order to refute him in this way, one must show that Buddhism and Hinduism had this potential before the impact of modernization. It is quite wrong to attribute to him the thesis that there is an innate hostility between Hinduism or other eastern religions and capitalism. In his book on China he explicitly repudiates such a claim:

'It is obviously not a question of deeming the Chinese 'naturally ungifted' for the demands of capitalism. But compared to the Occident, the varied conditions which externally favored the origin of capitalism in China did not suffice to create it. Likewise capitalism did not originate in occidental or oriental Antiquity, or in India, or where Islamism held sway. Yet in each of these areas different and favorable circumstances seemed to facilitate its rise (Weber 1951: 248).

What then was Weber's position? It was that the spirit of capitalism was a necessary precondition of the first appearance, or origination of capitalism. It was not of course a sufficient condition, as the case of Jainism shows. Nor was it a necessary condition of capitalism as such: once capitalism stands on 'mechanical foundations' it is capitalism which tends to produce a capitalist spirit, or aspects of it, rather than the other way round. The importance of Protestantism lay in the fact that it produced and legitimated a capitalist spirit; but there was no necessary and/or sufficient link between Protestantism and the capitalist spirit (see PESC: 91 & 85). It is therefore quite beside the point to cite against Weber examples of non-Protestant capitalists or of Protestant non-capitalists. Protestantism was one element of a situation which, taken as a whole, was sufficient to produce a capitalist spirit, which in turn was, as stated, necessary for the first unplanned appearance of industrial society.

Weber's studies of India, China and Islam were designed to show that, although other elements necessary for the production of capitalism existed (such as those discussed in his 'General Economic History'), a capitalist spirit did not and indeed could not. Without a Protestant ethic or some equivalent no traditional (i.e. agrarian) civilization could develop capitalism 'from within itself'. Only religious sanctions, Weber assumed, could induce men permanently to defer satisfaction in the way required to produce the capitalist spirit. No this-worldly aim could produce an active rational this-worldly asceticism: only a particular type of religion could do so. In fact the studies revealed, in at least one case, an analogous ethic (Jainism) and the burden of explanation shifted, as we shall see, to the absence of other conditions.

Probable reasons for the prevalence of the fallacies

The three fallacies listed above are by no means always made, but even when they are rejected, the way in which they go together does not seem to have been grasped. Thus Giddens rejects fallacy (ii): 'Weber's concerns were with the first origins of modern
capitalism in Europe, not with its subsequent adoption elsewhere' (Giddens 1976: 6). He also seems to reject fallacy (iii) when he says that it is quite valueless to take Weber to task for suggesting that 'Calvinism was “the” cause of the development of modern capitalism' (ibid.: 10). But then he goes on to cite 'the supposed lack of “affinity” between Catholicism and regularized entrepreneurial activity' as one of the 'elements of Weber’s analysis that are most definitely called into question' (ibid.: 12).

Why then is it so easy to make the three mistakes listed above? Two reasons leap to the eye: Weber’s order of exposition, which makes it possible to mistake his initial problem, viz. that ceteris paribus Protestants are more likely to be entrepreneurs than Catholics, for his theory; and secondly, the different meanings which attach to Weber’s use of the word ‘capitalism’.

It is indeed misleading that Weber begins PESC with a consideration of the fact that in nineteenth century Germany Protestants showed a greater proclivity for entrepreneurial activity than Catholics, even where one would expect the opposite (i.e. in areas where Catholics are a minority among Protestants). But proper attention to the text makes it quite clear that this is merely the problem, namely the evidence that at any earlier period there was a special connection between Protestantism and the origin of capitalism (cf. Stern 1971: 82–3). That is to say, Weber was not making the quasi-tautological claim that more Protestants are entrepreneurs because they have an innate disposition to be so; rather he claimed that the preponderance of Protestant entrepreneurs in late nineteenth century Germany was a consequence of the fact that 200 years previously it was the Protestant ethic which had produced the spirit of capitalism and therefore above all among Protestants that modern bourgeois capitalists emerged.

In Weber and in the debate over PESC ‘capitalism’ seems to have at least 3 shades of meaning. In the first place it refers to a type of economic activity to be found in all civilizations: ‘the important fact is always that a calculation of capital in terms of money is made . . . at the beginning of the enterprise an initial balance, before every individual decision a calculation to ascertain its probable profitableness, and at the end a final balance to ascertain how much profit has been made’ (PESC: 18). The ‘capitalistic adventurer’ is of this type. Then there is what Weber called modern, rational or bourgeois capitalism: in addition to the above criterion this is based on formally free labour and double-entry book-keeping; it is separate from the household and ‘attuned to a regular market’. Finally there is ‘capitalism’ as a name for industrial society, or one kind of industrial society, a usage which perhaps owes more to Marx than to Weber, but which Weber certainly encouraged because in looking for the origin of modern capitalism in the second sense, he clearly believed he was also explaining the origin of capitalism in the third sense. Thus in the first two senses ‘capitalism’ denotes types of economic organization, the latter a distinct type of the former; the third sense denotes a type or subtype of society. The capitalist spirit on the other hand comprises an historically unusual set of attitudes based on the pursuit of profit for its own sake, which Weber illustrated with the maxims of Benjamin Franklin (PESC: ch. 2).

The connection between the three senses of ‘capitalism’ for Weber is this: capitalist society (sense 3) results, not from the gradual development of capitalist economic organizations (sense 1), but from the latter’s infusion with the spirit of capitalism, which turns it into rational or bourgeois capitalism (sense 2). Weber’s central insight was that there was nothing inevitable or ‘natural’ about this (the appearance of industrial society) as
evolutionist perspectives suggest: it was the result of a certain set of unique and unusual conditions. Thus he states in the final sentence of ROI: 'The appearance of [a rationally formed missionary prophecy] in the Occident . . . with the extensive consequences borne with it, was conditioned by highly particular historical circumstances without which, despite differences of natural conditions, development there could easily have taken the course typical of Asia, particularly of India' (ROI: 343).

Confusion has no doubt been increased by failing to notice that the capitalist spirit as defined by Weber is only invariably associated with capitalism in the second of these senses, and then only before it stands on 'mechanical foundations'. Of course, all institutions require certain attitudes on the part of the individuals within them, but what Weber has called the capitalist spirit was not necessarily required by capitalist economic organization. Thus 'the management, for instance, of a bank, a wholesale export business, a large retail establishment, or of a large putting-out enterprise dealing with goods produced in homes, is certainly only possible in the form of capitalistic enterprise. Nevertheless, they may all be carried on in a traditionalistic spirit' (PESC: 65). This is indeed the way they always, or nearly always, have been carried on, and Weber made it clear that this type of economic behaviour has no power to transform society. Protestantism, by contrast, produced individuals imbued with the capitalist spirit; and as an unforseen consequence produced a new type of society based on its own attitude to work. In reply to the initial publication of PESC Sombart had cited the case of Alberti, a Renaissance man, in both senses, who wrote a treatise on household management which displayed a thoroughgoing moneymindedness. Weber replied:

The essential point of the difference [between Alberti and Franklin] is . . . that an ethic based on religion places certain psychological sanctions (not of an economic kind) on the maintenance of the attitude prescribed by it, sanctions which, so long as the religious belief remains alive, are highly effective, and which mere wordly wisdom like that of Alberti does not have at its disposal. Only in so far as these sanctions work, and, above all, in the direction in which they work, which is often very different from the doctrine of the theologians, does such an ethic gain an independent influence on the conduct of life and thus on the economic order. This is, to speak frankly, the point of this whole essay, which I had not expected to find so completely overlooked (PESC: 197).

The Challenge to the Weber Thesis

The real question which Weber's approach has to face has been missed by most of the literature. It is: why was the development which occurred within pre-industrial societies (see problem (A) above) not sufficient to produce modern capitalism? From an evolutionist perspective such as that of Luethy, development within agrarian civilizations ought to be sufficient to produce industrial capitalism. The emphasis that Weber placed on Protestantism 'creating' capitalism is therefore misplaced: 'In the period of the Reformation all the bases of the modern world - capital, wealth, the highest technological and artistic level of development, global power, world trade - all these were almost exclusively present in countries that were and remained Catholic. . . . One century later all this was petrification and decay'. The real problem, which according to Luethy is missed by Weber and the Weberians, is to explain 'the sudden breaking of an ascendant curve of development' in the Catholic countries, not its continuance in the Protestant ones (Wrong ed. 1970: 133).

A viewpoint very similar to Luethy's has been advanced by Hugh Trevor-Roper in a very stimulating article, 'Religion, the Reformation and Social Change':

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It was not that Calvinism created a new type of man, who in turn created capitalism; it was rather that the old economic elite of Europe were driven into heresy because the attitude of mind which had been theirs for generations, and had been tolerated for generations, was suddenly, and in some places, declared heretical and intolerable (Trevor-Roper 1967: 27).

Consequently Europe was divided into Catholic states with a "bureaucratic" system of the princes which may encourage state capitalism, but squeezes out free enterprise' and Protestant ones which were the inheritors of 'the mercantile system of the free cities' (ibid.: 38). Thus 'it was the Counter-Reformation which extruded [economic enterprise] from society, not Calvinist doctrine which created it, or Catholic doctrine which stifled it, in individuals' (ibid.: 42).

Two separate issues are raised by Trevor-Roper's criticism of Weber. First, he takes Weber's thesis to be that there is a necessary and sufficient causal connection between Calvinism and the capitalist spirit, i.e. that all Calvinists must be ascetic capitalists. I need not repeat the reasons for rejecting this. Trevor-Roper's proof that the capitalist spirit predates Protestantism, and his examples of the unascetic behaviour of the most successful Calvinist entrepreneurs (unlikely to be typical for that very reason), do not therefore attack the Weber thesis. The importance of Protestantism lay in the fact that it brought active rational asceticism into the everyday world and provided it with religious sanctions; asceticism was no longer confined, as in Medieval Catholicism or in Asia, to virtuosos. Trevor-Roper ably documents the hostility of Catholic Europe to the capitalist spirit when it threatened the former's political dominance. It was only much later, when the political advantages of Protestant economic attitudes became overwhelmingly clear (and it is important to remember that they were anything but clear ex ante), that Catholic writers began to urge the adoption of Protestant virtues.

Trevor-Roper's second point is the same as Luethy's: it was the Counter-Reformation which prevented the emergence of industrial capitalism in Catholic Europe, not Protestantism which produced it in northern Europe. But if we put the evidence cited by Luethy and Trevor-Roper in a larger comparative framework, as Weber tried to do, we can perhaps see that Weber was justified in concentrating on the creative role of Protestantism rather than the destructive one of Catholicism. In his books on India and China he tried to show that in spite of the 'ascendant curve of development' apparent in both civilizations, neither could have led to a breakthrough to industrial society. The frustration of urban economic growth by ruling but non-productive strata is the norm, not the exception, in agrarian society. Hence the stress that Weber laid on the necessity for the development of capitalism of the existence of rational law and a rational bureaucratic state. Thus it seems to have been evident to Weber that mere technological growth and population increase are not enough to produce capitalism, and he therefore concentrated on the potential these civilizations had for the production of a capitalist spirit. This is why he says that he was 'necessarily dealing with the religious ethics of the classes which were the culture-bearers of their respective countries' (PESC: 30). The implication is that, but for Protestantism, or some equivalent, producing a capitalist spirit, Europe would have gone the way of India or China.

The Chinese case

The Chinese case is particularly important for the Weberian approach because here many of the conditions for the development of modern capitalism seem to have been satisfied, but...
there was no capitalist spirit. 'Rational entrepreneurial capitalism, which in the Occident found its specific locus in industry, has been handicapped not only by the lack of a formally guaranteed law, a rational administration and judiciary, and by the ramifications of a system of prebends, but also, basically, by the lack of a particular mentality' (Weber 1951: 104). This crucial lack, which Weber calls his 'central theme', is tackled in part 2 of 'The Religion of China', which attempts to show why a capitalist spirit did not, and indeed could not, given its cultural resources, develop in China.

Clearly Weber's explanation is a negative one: the absence of a capitalist spirit meant that China could not develop modern capitalism, even though in the early Medieval period it was the most advanced society in the world, in terms of agricultural, economic, commercial and technological development. Weber does not provide a detailed answer to the question why this development should not be self-sustaining, i.e. sufficient to produce modern capitalism, though he gives a couple of hints in 'Economy and Society':

It would be a mistake to assume that the development of capitalistic enterprises must occur proportionally to the growth of want satisfaction in the monetary economy, and an even larger mistake to believe that this development must take the form it has assumed in the Western world. In fact, the contrary is true. The extension of money economy might well go hand in hand with the increasing monopolization of the larger sources of profit by the oikos economy of the prince. . . . It is also possible that with the extension of a money economy could go a process of 'feudalization' of fiscal advantages resulting in a traditionalistic stabilization of the economic system. This happened in China . . . (Weber 1968: 113).

As always in the area of 'techniques' – we find that the advance proceeded most slowly wherever older structural forms were in their own way technically highly developed and functionally particularly well adapted to the requirements at hand (ibid.: 987).

A detailed theory of what happens under these conditions has been elaborated by Mark Elvin for the Chinese case, which he calls the high-level equilibrium trap. I shall quote his summary:

In China, demand and the supply of materials were increasingly constrained by a special combination of circumstances that gradually spread across the country until, by about 1820, they held all of the eighteen provinces within the Wall in their grip. These circumstances were: (1) The rapidly falling quality, and hence rapidly falling returns to labour and other inputs, of the small remaining quantity of new land not yet opened to cultivation and capable of being opened under the existing technology; (2) The continuing increase of the population, reducing the surplus per head available above subsistence for the creation of concentrated mass markets for new goods, and also (though less significantly) for investment; (3) The impossibility of improving productivity per hectare in agriculture under a pre-modern technology that was the most refined in the world in terms of manuring, rotations, etc., without the modern inputs such as chemical fertilizers and petrol or diesel pumps that presuppose a scientific and industrial revolution for their production; and (4) The great size of China (close to twice the population of Europe), and its relatively good commercial integration, which made it impossible for pre-modern foreign trade to substitute for internal inadequacies, either by providing the stimulus of a large volume of new demand or the support of large quantities of cheap raw materials. The trap could only be broken by the introduction of new technology exogenous to the Chinese world (Elvin, forthcoming, English version). Rational strategy [therefore] for peasant and merchant alike tended in the direction not so much of labour-saving machinery as of economizing on resources and fixed capital. . . . When temporary shortages arose, mercantile versatility, based on cheap transport, was a faster and surer remedy than the contrivance of machines (Elvin 1973: 314).
It is clearly a weakness in Weber that he provided no such analysis. But his principal interest lay in European history and therefore merely in showing that China could not have produced a capitalist spirit: the consequences of this for Chinese history he was less interested in, and of course less capable of dealing with in detail, as he himself acknowledged. Nevertheless the explanation in terms of the high-level equilibrium trap and Weber’s explanation do not necessarily compete (as Elvin assumes they do in the above cited article). Indeed one might even say that they imply each other or some equivalent: because China had no capitalist spirit, it was caught in the high-level equilibrium trap; because Europe produced a capitalist spirit it avoided the high-level equilibrium trap to which its ‘ascendant curve of development’ would otherwise have led it.

From this point of view Elvin’s term ‘trap’ is a misnomer, which only makes sense from the distinctive perspective of the modern world: the ‘high-level equilibrium trap’ describes the normal relationship between population, resources and development in pre-industrial agrarian society. It is the development of the West, in spite of the fact that it is widely taken for granted, which is abnormal and in particular need of explanation. It is the development of the West which Weber was particularly concerned to explain.

The Indian case

The Indian case is different from the Chinese. For one thing, among the multifarious religious doctrines to be found in India, one, Jainism, showed great potential for the production of a capitalist spirit. Thus the explanation for India’s failure to produce industrial capitalism rests on other factors, to do with the general Hindu caste context and the way that it overrode any particular ethic. It is to be presumed on this Weberian perspective that, if Indian civilization had taken its course uninterrupted by the introduction of industrialism, it would have encountered some equivalent of Elvin’s high-level equilibrium trap, though probably at a technically lower level. Thus, in short, Indian society could develop a minority capitalism as with the Jains, or an emulative capitalism, as in the modern world, but not, Weber claimed, an endogenous capitalism capable of transforming India from an agrarian to an industrial society.

For the sake of clarity in the following discussion of Indian religions, it is worth making a distinction, due to Schluchter, of 3 senses which rationality had for Weber: (i) scientific-technological rationalism: control of the world on the basis of empirical laws, or means-end rationality; (ii) metaphysical-ethical rationalism: systematization of an ethos, or the application of logic to a world-view; (iii) practical rationalism: a methodical way of life, or rational asceticism (Roth & Schluchter 1979: 14–15). Although India was advanced in mathematics and grammar, it failed to develop (i). (ii) it certainly had: Weber was very impressed by the karma-doctrine as a solution to theodicy. (iii) developed in the West thanks first to the monasteries, and then to the Protestant sects. Its failure to develop in India was what Weber wished to explain.

Jainism

Weber was struck by the similarities between Jainism and Protestantism:

As with Protestantism, ‘joy in possessions’ (parigraha) was the objectional thing, but not possession or gain in itself. . . . The Jains believed in absolute honesty in business life . . . [which] excluded the sect, on one side, from typical oriental participation in ‘political capitalism’ (accumulation of wealth
by officials, tax farmers, state purveyors) and, on the other, it worked among them and among the Parsees, just as for the Quakers in the Occident, in terms of the dictum (of early capitalism) 'honesty is the best policy' (ROI: 200).

This was so even though Jainism was based on a quite different theology, in which God, insofar as he is admitted to exist, is irrelevant to the concerns of man. The Jaina community was led by monks, and the laity, as was not the case in Buddhism, were integrated into the ascetic values, and to a certain extent the practices, of their monasticism. However the Jains remained a minority within Hindu society to which they increasingly accommodated themselves. They became in effect a caste or several castes, and could not escape the general consequences of caste society. 'That they remained confined to commercial capitalism and failed to create an industrial organization was again due to their ritualistically determined exclusion from industry and as with the Jews their ritualistic isolation in general. This must have been added to by the now familiar barriers which their Hindu surroundings with its traditionalism put in their way besides the patrimonial character of kingship' (ibid.).

_Caste and Status Group_

Weber explains the different types of religion to be found in India principally with reference to two strata: 'the social world was divided into the strata of the wise and educated and the uncultivated plebeian masses' (ROI: 343). As we approach the present he also posits the category of the 'aliterate middle classes'. He does not discuss what he thinks is the relation between these strata and caste; the very use of the word 'stratum' is perhaps a sign of vagueness. Caste on the other hand Weber takes to be a 'closed status group':

What is a 'status group'? 'Classes' are groups of people who, from the standpoint of specific interests, have the same economic position. . . . 'Status', however, is a quality of social honor or lack of it, and is in the main conditioned as well as expressed through a specific style of life. . . . All the obligations and barriers that membership in a status group entails also exist in a caste, in which they are intensified to the utmost degree (ROI: 39-40).

Louis Dumont takes Weber to task for this definition of caste: to understand caste as a form of something found in the West (a) is ethnocentric and (b) necessarily makes the religious aspect of caste secondary (Dumont 1972: 62–3). Weber is aware of the importance of the religious aspect and that it is this which makes a crucial difference between caste among Hindus and caste among Muslims or Buddhists, but he does not see caste as radically different from the kind of status groups found in other societies, which if Dumont is right it is necessary to do.

Without going further into theories of caste, 3 it is clear that Weber's approach seems to have blinded him to an important fact, viz. that although all Brahmans to be considered as such had, in the traditional situation, to maintain a certain way of life (like the members of a status group), it was by no means the case that all Brahmans could be said to belong to the class of cultured intellectuals. The same applies pari passu to Ksatriyas. 'In India' Weber says, 'the Brahmans represent a status group of litterati partly comprising princely chaplains, partly counsellors, theological teachers, and jurists, priests and pastors', though he immediately concedes: 'in both cases [i.e. Indian and China] only a portion of the status group occupied the characteristic positions' (ROI: 139–40). In fact, although many of the twice-born would comply with Brahmanical customs, and even learn Sanskrit, and thus
maintain ‘the specific style of life’ of a Brahman or Ksatriya, the extent and the manner of this compliance would vary enormously; consequently the meaning of this allegiance cannot be explained in terms of their all belonging to a stratum of cultured intellectuals, but only in caste terms – which is presumably Dumont’s point. There was therefore no contradiction in Brahmans combining this with extremely uncultured forms of saviour religion or tantric orgiasticism, to use Weber’s term. Hence the Medieval formula: a Vaidika for samskaras (life-crisis rituals), a Saiva in the market place, a Kaula in secret. Thus, in short, the questions of status groups and the types of religion which grew from them, and of the relation of orthodox Brahmanism to Tantric forms of religion, were considerably more complex than Weber realized. Weber’s crucial mistake was to argue back from religious texts to the motivations of those who gave allegiance to them; there is a long tradition of this in Indology to which he merely gave sociological formulation. Nevertheless Weber was acquainted with all the types of religion to be found in India. The fact that they could be combined in this way, in disregard of their ‘original meaning’, does not of itself invalidate his conclusions about the ‘spirit’ of Hinduism and its consequences for economic activity.

Caste did not prevent the division of labour in the workshop, but the existence of caste ritualism made it inherently unlikely that capitalism could develop. It was ‘as if none but different guest peoples, like the Jews, ritually exclusive towards one another and toward third parties, were to follow their trades in one economic area’ (ROI: 112). Further, it was the increasing strength of caste, encouraged by Hindu kings, which undermined independent guilds and independent cities. Thus ‘individual acceptance for apprenticeship, participation in market deals, or citizenship – all these phenomena of the West either failed to develop in the first place or were crushed under the weight of ethnic, later of caste fetters’ (ROI: 131).

Weber emphasizes the ‘religious promise’ of the caste system:

All Hindus accept two basic principles: the samsara belief in the transmigration of souls and the related karman doctrine of compensation. These alone are the truly ‘dogmatic’ doctrines of all Hinduism, and in their very interrelatedness they represent the unique Hindu theodicy of the existing social, that is to say caste system (ROI: 118).

But these views reveal Weber’s textual bias, as does his remark that in consequence of these beliefs the untouchables had most to gain from ritual correctness, which, he thinks, explains their hostility to innovation (ROI: 123). The work of anthropologists shows that considerations of purity and impurity/sin, which impose themselves or are imposed on the individual, are far more pervasive, ‘dogmatic’ and built into the social structure than beliefs about karma or samsara. The evidence is that these beliefs are invoked in an ad hoc and retrospective way and do not guide the lives of caste Hindus (e.g., Srinivas 1976: 317).

Weber was on much firmer ground when he deduced this consequence of the caste order: universalist humanism and individualism similar to that of the West is only to be found outside it:

In this eternal caste world, the very gods in truth constituted a mere caste. . . . Anyone who wished to emancipate himself from this world and the inescapable cycle of recurrent births and deaths had to leave it altogether – to set out for that unreal realm to which Hindu ‘salvation’ leads (ROI: 123).

Such literature of India as one can pose as parallel with the philosophical ethic of the West [i.e. in its universalism] was – or better, became – something quite different, namely, a metaphysically and cosmologically substructured technology of the means to achieve salvation from this world. . . .
religious eschatology of the world was as little possible here as in Confucianism. Only a (practical)
eschatology of single individuals could develop. . . . (ROI: 147).

Here in essence is the theory later elaborated by Louis Dumont in his famous essay on
world renunciation in Indian religion (Dumont 1950).

Brahmanical Religion

Weber's remarks on Brahmanical religion were extremely perceptive. Even if today they
would have to be supplemented, his conclusions as to the social implications of the most
orthodox part of Hinduism remain valid:
The fact that the Brahmanical priestly stratum was a distinguished and cultivated nobility, later a
class of genteel literati determined its religiosity . . . orgiastic and emotional elements of ancient
magic rites . . . for long periods were either completely suppressed or were permitted only as
unofficial folk magic (ROI: 137).

As we have observed, this may be taken as correct if read as referring to Brahmanical
religion, above all what is known as Smarta Brahmanism; Brahmans themselves by no
means always kept to genteel religiosity. The similarities and differences with Confucian
intellectuals are extremely enlightening:
In both we find a status group of status literati whose magical charisma rests on 'knowledge'. Such
knowledge was magical and ritualistic in character, deposited in a holy literature, written in a holy
language remote from that of everyday speech. In both appears the same pride in education and
unshakable trust in this special knowledge as the cardinal virtue determining all good. Ignorance of
this knowledge was the cardinal vice and the source of all evil. They developed a similar 'rationalism'
– concerned with the rejection of all irrational forms of holy seeking (ROI: 139).

However whereas the Confucian literati were paradigmatically office-holders and
guardians of a universalistic ethic, the Brahmans were 'by background and nature priests'
(ROI: 148) and the guardians of a relativistic ethic.

The view that Brahmans are paradigmatically priests has been contested recently by
Heesterman (Heesterman 1964 & 1971, passim). Certainly the evidence is unambiguous
that the Brahman who can avoid priestly activity and devote himself to knowledge and
teaching, has higher status than the priest (see e.g., Parry 1980). Nevertheless Brahmans
remained guardians of a relativistic caste ethic, whatever their occupation, so long as they
gave allegiance to the Vedas (i.e. did not become Buddhists or Jains). Weber quite rightly
noted that though 'contemplative mysticism as a type of gnosis remains the crown of the
classical Brahmanical style of life, the goal of every well-educated Brahman . . . the number
of those who actually pursue it was as small in the medieval past as today' (ROI: 148).

Weber is equally good when he deduces the aim of Brahmanical religion from the social
position of its adherents:
The status pride of cultured men resisted undignified demands of ecstatic therapeutic practices and
the exhibition of neuropathic states . . . [but] could take a quite different stand toward the forms of
apathetic ecstasy . . . and all ascetic practices capable of rationalization (ROI: 149). [Thus] the
development of such salvation doctrines signified essentially, as is to be expected of intellectuals, a
rationalization and sublimation of the magical holy states. This proceeded in three directions: first,
one strove increasingly for personal holy status, for 'bliss' in this sense of the word, instead of for
magical secret power useful for professional sorcery. Secondly, this state acquired a definitely
formal character, and indeed, as was to be expected, that of a gnosis. . . . All religious holy seeking
on such a foundation had to take the form of mystical seeking of god, mystical possession of god, or
finally, mystical communion with the godhead. All three forms, pre-eminently however, the last named, actually appeared. . . . The rational interpretation of the world with respect to its natural, social and ritual orders then was the third aspect of the rationalization process, which the Brahmanical intellectual stratum consummated in reworking the religio-magical material. . . . (ROI: 152–3).

Once again, this is an excellent characterization of Brahmanism, but misses the way in which even its adherents interpreted it in terms of magical powers. Crucial to the way in which anti-magical or anti-deistic doctrines would resurface in magical or deistic interpretations was the fact that texts were learned by heart in Sanskrit, not learned by reading, so that even many of those who could recite them needed explanations.* Also, Weber perhaps overestimates the importance of communion with a ‘depersonalized’ godhead: the other two forms of mysticism he mentions became increasingly important with the rise of the monotheistic sects.

Weber saw very clearly that the development of this mysticism posed certain problems for Brahmanical thought: how to reconcile the ideal of renunciation with caste duty?

For one thing, from such mysticism no ethic for life within the world could be deduced. The Upanishads contain nothing or almost nothing of what we call ethics. For another, salvation through gnostic wisdom alone came into sharpest tension with the traditional content of holy writing. The gnostic doctrines led to the devaluation not only of the world of the gods but, above all, of ritual. . . . Essentially the orthodox remedied the situation through ‘organic’ relativism (ROI: 172).

Thus although this ‘denial of the world’ was extremely ‘radical’, it ‘did not reject suffering or sin or the imperfection of the world, rather it rejected transitory nature’ (ROI: 167). So, as Dumont has also been at pains to stress, Brahmanical soteriology is accommodated to Brahmanical social teaching: the ideal of the renouncer is absorbed into Hinduism in such a way as to pose no threat to it, and in such a way that it excluded the possibility of a rational this-worldly asceticism. This was because on the one hand, the ideal was relativized and, on the other, because it was, in its dominant strains, conceptualized as opposed to all activity.

**Buddhism**

As with Brahmanism, Weber is not a good guide to the practice of Buddhists. Nevertheless he has some very perceptive remarks to make about the doctrine which are surely correct in their assessment of its effect on the action of its adherents. Weber’s well-known summary is particularly misleading:

Ancient Buddhism . . . is a specifically unpolitical and anti-political status religion, more precisely, a religious ‘technology’ of wandering and of intellectually-schooled mendicant monks. . . . Its salvation is a solely personal act of the single individual. There is no recourse to a deity or saviour. From Buddha himself we know no prayer. There is no religious grace. There is, moreover, no predestination either (ROI: 206).

This picture is based on the doctrinal texts of the Pali canon, and if it was ever true of Buddhism it can only have been so for a short period while the Buddha was alive. A similar picture of ‘true Buddhism’ was arrived at by nineteenth century commentators in Ceylon and elsewhere who then went on to condemn what they saw of Ceylonese or other Buddhism as corrupt, degenerate, animistic and so on. By paying no attention to the Vinayaka (monastic discipline) texts, Weber underestimated the all-important role of the Samgha.
(monastic community) in the life of the monk. He also underestimated the degree to which early Buddhism had already accommodated itself to lay religious interests and therefore included elements of prayer, deification of the Buddha and so on.  

The urban origin of Buddhism, its original appeal to the middle classes, its universalism, and sociological egalitarianism, its rejection of magical means to salvation, and its ethical stress on carefulness (Gombrich 1974) might make one think that Buddhism was an Indian Protestantism. Weber's conclusions on this count are quite valid:

All rational action ('goal directed action') . . . is expressly rejected. Thus, there is lacking an element which in occidental monkhood increasingly developed and signified so much, namely, the strain toward rational method in life conduct in all spheres, except that of the pure intellectual systemization of concentrated meditation and pure contemplation. This, on its side, has been increasingly developed to that level of sophistication, also otherwise characteristic of things Indian (ROI: 222).

Not only was Buddhism not rationalistic in Weber's sense, it was also not ascetic, as indeed the Jains charged:

In principle Buddhistic salvation is anti-ascetic if one conceptualizes, as we wish to do here, asceticism as a rational method of living. Certainly Buddhism prescribes a definite way. . . . However, this way is neither through rationalistic insight into the principles on which it metaphysically rests, in themselves, indeed, timeless simplicity, nor a gradual training for ever higher moral perfection. The liberation is . . . a sudden 'leap' into the psychic state of illumination, a leap which can only be prepared for through methodical contemplation. The nature of this leap is such that inner experience is set in harmony by theoretical insight, giving the holy seeker, thereby, the Buddhistic perseverantiae gratiae and certitudo salutis; . . . As all traditions indicate, this was the Buddha's own self-conscious state of grace (ROI: 220). [In short] just as every rational asceticism does not constitute flight from the world so not every flight from the world represents rational asceticism – as convincingly shown by this example (ROI: 219).

Buddhism was therefore a 'genteel soteriology':

Such a genteel soteriology was precisely the basis of all its differences with Christianity. Opposition to genteel soteriology was fundamentally important to the latter (ROI: 371).

For the layman Buddhism offered the Five Precepts 'as an insufficiency ethic of the weak who will not seek complete salvation (ROI: 215). This would seem to mean, not that Weber thinks these are 'paltry stuff as Gombrich interprets him (Gombrich 1971: 245), but that the ethic is necessarily inferior to the path of becoming a monk. Thus although

the later Buddhist suttas . . . deal more thoroughly with lay problems . . . they seek to treat lay morality as a preliminary step to the higher spiritual ethic. . . . This 'higher' morality does not lead – this is the decisive point – to increasingly rational asceticism (extra- or inner-worldly) or to a positive life method. Every satisfaction of work . . . is and remains heretical. Rather the opposite holds; active virtue in conduct recedes more and more into the background as against . . . the ethic of nonaction . . . in the interest of pure contemplation (ROI: 217).

This inability to produce a 'positive life method' was legitimizied by the Buddhist theological principle of 'skill in means', i.e. 'the Buddhist belief in meeting the audience on their own level' (Gombrich 1971: 247). Thus on the one hand Buddhist monasticism could not produce rational asceticism out of its conceptual inheritance, but nor could Buddhist lay ethics on the other, because they were tied in, as an inferior partner, to those same values.
The Religion of the Masses

The mass of the Indian people, and this included for the most part the Buddhist laity in its religious dealings with this world,

in no way bound itself to a confession. But, like the ancient Hellen adherent of Apollo and Dionysus, he worshipped according to the occasion (ROI: 327).

Not the 'miracle' but the 'magical spell' remained . . . the core substance of mass religiosity. This was true above all for peasants and laborers, but also for the middle classes . . . . This was either in the gross form of compulsive magic or in the refined form of persuading a functional god or demon through gifts. With such means the great mass of the aliterary and even the literary Asiatics sought to master everyday life (ROI: 335–6).

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 (ROI: 336).

From the viewpoint of Weber's interests, these judgements are fair. He was not interested, as an anthropologist would be, in showing how these beliefs formed a system, and therefore possessed their own rationality. It should not be necessary to repeat that Weber was interested in the origins of a particular type of rationality, one which from other points of view might appear quite irrational.

Saviour religion (i.e. the Vaisnava sects) Weber interprets as being originally the preserve of the aliterary middle classes (ROI: 307, 309 & 335). In fact it was often the urban lower classes who turned to this form of religion. Its potential for creating a rational asceticism was negated by two facts: its nature which followed from the 'orgiastic, and indeed sexual-orgiastic origin of bhakti ecstasy' (ROI: 307). Secondly, there was the position of the guru: 'adoration of the living savior was the last word of Hindu religious development' (ROI: 324). The influence of the gurus was wholly traditionalistic and anti-rational:

Instead of a drive toward the rational accumulation of property and the evaluation of capital, Hinduism created irrational accumulation chances for magicians and soul shepherds, prebends for mystagogues and ritualistically or soteriologically oriented intellectual strata (ROI: 328).

It is worth mentioning here Weber's conclusions on the ethical consequences of the doctrine of the Bhagavad Gita that one should fulfill one's caste duty while remaining unattached to the 'fruit' or results of the action. Milton Singer has claimed that Weber's 'emphasis on its organismic relativistic character and on its "world indifference" led him, I think, to slight a major parallel with the "Protestant ethic" in Hindu thought' (Singer 1961: 147). But Weber was surely correct to say:

[The professional fulfilment which the Bhagavad Gita demands] was rigidly traditionalistic in character and thereby mystically oriented as an activity in the world but not yet of the world. At any rate, it would occur to no Hindu to see in the course of his economic professional integrity the signs of his state of grace – or what is more important – to evaluate and undertake the rational constitution of the world according to empirical principles as a realization of God's will (ROI: 326).

In any case, in spite of the Bhagavad Gita's universal popularity, no sect which has survived into modern India has based its ethical doctrine principally on that text. The inspiration of the Vaisnava sects has come rather from the Bhagavata Purana with its emphasis on the need for emotional abandonment in one's relationship to God. Thus even when Vaisnava sectarianism has represented values of hard work and self-improvement (see e.g., Pocock 1973: 141), it does not make those values imperative in the way which interested Weber.
Religion, as it developed in India, was incapable of imposing on the masses new sorts of social action, as Protestantism did in the West:

With very few exceptions Asiatic soteriology knew only an exemplary promise. Most of these were only accessible to those living monastically but some were valid for the laity. . . . Once and for all, the cleft between the literary 'cultivated' and aliterary masses of philistines rested on this. Hanging together with this was the fact that all philosophies and soteriologies of Asia finally had a common presupposition: that knowledge, be it literary knowledge or mystical gnosis, is the single absolute path to the highest holiness here and in the world beyond (ROI: 330). [The mystical character of this gnosis] had two important consequences. First was the formation by the soteriology a redemption aristocracy, for the capacity for mystical gnosis is a charisma not accessible to all. Then, however, and correlated therewith it acquired an asocial and apolitical character . . . (ROI: 331).

Asia's partly purely mystical, partly purely inner-worldly aesthetic [i.e. in China] goal of self-discipline could take no other form than an emptying of experience of the real forces of experience. As a consequence of the fact that this lay remote from the interests and practical behaviour of the 'masses' they were left in undisturbed magical bondage (ROI: 342).

It was this 'emptying' nature of the road to salvation which Weber thinks is the crucial 'spiritual' factor, to be placed alongside caste and the power of the guru, in prolonging the 'enchantment' of the Hindu, i.e. the prevalence of magic as opposed to rationality. It meant that holy means were always, in one way or another, irrational:

Either they were of an orgiastic character and linked quite immediately in anti-rational manner to the course of each alien life methodology, or they were indeed rational in method but irrational in goal (ROI: 326).

Conclusion

Weber's sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism is a marvel of condensation and, in spite of a superficial appearance to the contrary due to the mass of details, it displays an impressively unitary theme. In order to try and bring out that theme, I have presented and commented on only the most general and prominent points of ROI. To discuss and assess it in all its detail would require another book at least. To ignore Weber's book on India because many of the details are wrong is to ignore also three virtues it conspicuously displays, and which the study of Indian religion and society could well benefit from: (i) comparative range, from China, to Europe, to Ancient Greece, which no single scholar will probably ever again possess; (ii) a genuine historical depth to his study which is only approached even by the best sociologists; (iii) an impressive theoretical apparatus: (a) he treats society as a whole whose parts are interdependent, unlike even so distinguished a Sanskritist as A. L. Basham, whose otherwise excellent 'Wonder That Was India' has one chapter on politics, one on everyday life, one on religion and so on, with little indication of the extent to which they are interrelated; (b) Weber tries to understand and explain the functioning and development of Hinduism and Buddhism in terms of a few basic categories, which are the same as those used to explain other societies. In this, as in much else, the foremost disciple of Weber, in the study of India, is clearly Louis Dumont.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Nick Allen, Prof. Richard Gombrich, Julian Stanley, my father, Prof. Ernest Gellner, and Mark Elvin for comments on earlier versions of this article. None of them is responsible for, nor would they wholly agree with, what I have written.
2. For a recent discussion of the Scottish case, see Marshall, 1980.
3. For a longer discussion of Weber on caste, see Stern, 1971.
4. See Staal, 1979 and Heesterman, 1974, for attempts to grapple with the problem of the effects on Indian Great Traditions of the methods by which they were passed on.
5. On the issues raised by this paragraph, see Gombrich, 1971.

References

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