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978-0-521-12808-7 - Rationalities in History: A Weberian Essay in Comparison

D. L. d'Avray

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## Rationalities in History

In *Rationalities in History* the distinguished historian David d'Avray writes a new comparative history in the spirit of Max Weber. D'Avray provides a strikingly original reassessment of seminal Weberian ideas, applying a theory of social theory to the comparative history of religion and the philosophy of law. Integrating theories of rational choice, anthropological reflections on relativism, and recent philosophy of rationality with Weber's conceptual framework, d'Avray seeks to disengage the idea of 'rationalisation' from its enduring association with Western 'Modernity'. To demonstrate the ways in which concepts of rationality can be utilised by historians, d'Avray takes the examples of Buddhism, Imperial China and early-modern Catholicism – in the latter case building upon hitherto unpublished archival research. This ambitious synthesis of social theory and comparative history will engage both social scientists and historians from advanced undergraduate level upwards, stimulating interdisciplinary discourse, and making a significant contribution to the methodology of history. D'Avray explores the potential of this new Weberian analysis further in his companion volume, *Medieval Religious Rationalities*.

D. L. D'AVRAY is Professor of History at University College London. A fellow of the British Academy since 2005, d'Avray has published widely on his research interests in medieval history.

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## Preface and acknowledgements

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A series of courses at UCL lie behind this book: a course consisting mostly of social theory which kind colleagues allowed me to teach to MA students in the mid-nineties, during which I became convinced by Max Weber's approach, another on 'Weber for historians', and above all the 'History and Sociology of Rationality', for undergraduates. The capacity of the latter to understand and criticise constructively suggests that a book that came out of that course could be comprehensible even to students and scholars normally allergic to social theory. More theoretically inclined colleagues may actually find the book harder, if they try to force it into familiar schemata. The best way to read *Rationalities in History* would in fact be to approach it with a clever undergraduate's open-mindedness.

For anyone who ends up in sympathy with the approach, a natural sequel is the sister volume, *Medieval Religious Rationalities*, in which the sociology of rationality is applied in a more concentrated form to a particular field. The two books are closely linked. The present volume outlines the general social forms explored for a specific period in *Medieval Religious Rationalities*. Astute readers will observe that the books have parallel structures.

The present, more general, volume is even more indebted than usual to the kindness of colleagues because it ranges so far from the author's research base. The following list surely omits some of the many who have helped. I must thank Martin Daunton and John North for trusting me to teach MA Modern History students. A British Academy Research Readership gave me time to work my way into new fields while continuing work in my old areas of expertise. Ken Binmore coached me in Rational Choice Theory. John Bell, Julian Hoppit, Charles Stewart and Rebecca Spang gave me bibliographical leads. Caroline Humfress read and commented on passages about Roman law, and argued with me, as did Werner Menski, Lynn Welchman, Andrew Lewis, Effa Okupa, Sami Zubaida and Yossi Rapaport, through meetings of the Bloomsbury Sacred Law Group. The archival work on the body that had the task

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of implementing the Council of Trent was assisted by Benedetta Albani and Marc Smith. Diarmaid McCullough read a section on the Protestant Reformation. Richard Gombrich gave advice on Buddhist monasticism. The Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung funded crucial research visits to Munich through its programme for former fellows. Richard Kieckhefer, Bonnie Blackburn and Julia Walworth helped with the whole project. The students on the 'History and Sociology of Rationality Course' made the book what it is: I wish I could list the many individuals who gave me ideas. John Sabapathy taught some of them with me and read the whole book, to its great profit. The publishers' anonymous readers were nearly always right. The staff of Cambridge University Press were more than helpful throughout.