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Max Weber's *The Economic Ethic of the World
Religions*

A Neglected Social Science Classic?

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Over the past two decades, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, epoch-making changes have utterly transformed the world in which we live. The collapse of the Soviet Empire and the freeing of its former satellites in the East have brought the European Union and its model of the social market economy and parliamentary democracy to the borders of the Ukraine and Russia. At the same time, the ideological vacuum created by the end of the Cold War confrontation between communism and its opponents has created a space for the resurgence of religion as a political and social force not only in the form of various incarnations of Islam, but also of evangelical Christianity and Hindu nationalism. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, sustained pro-market reforms in India and especially China have permitted the integration into the global economy of two countries with internal markets that account for 2.5 billion of the planet's 7 billion inhabitants. Taken together, these changes have not only challenged the centuries-old dominance of Europe and the United States in the economic and cultural sphere. They have also called into question the meaning and attractiveness of core Western values like freedom and individualism, long taken for granted.

If we turn to social theory to help us understand this globalized, more culturally diverse and religiously charged world, Max Weber would seem to offer the ideal starting point. Explaining the origins and future direction of what he terms "modern capitalism" was a central task throughout much of his scholarly work, and he is one of the founding figures in the sociology of religion. Furthermore, he devoted a substantial portion of the last decade of his life to the study of the great civilizations of the

Near East and South and East Asia, producing two substantial studies (on China and India) on this subject and researching a third (on Islam) that was never completed. Yet despite Weber's truly global intellectual concerns and insights, his writings hardly figure in current English-language discussions of the dynamics of the emerging, non-Western-centered world. Why is this so?

Two reasons, I would argue, account for this: the unsatisfactory state, especially in English, of key Weberian texts; and the supposedly outdated nature of the sources upon which Weber based his arguments. As concerns the textual situation, both Hartmann Tyrell and Wolfgang Schluchter have stressed in their pieces in this volume and elsewhere that the broad contours of Weber's *oeuvre* is difficult to grasp because of the fragmentary and unfinished state in which it was left at the time of his sudden death in 1920 at the age of only 56. Over the last decade of his life, Weber was engaged in two massive projects, both with a central non-Western component, neither of which he was able to complete. One of these was his contribution to the *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik* (*Outline of Social Economy*), issued posthumously in 1921 by his widow Marianne Weber under the title *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (*Economy and Society*). The first complete English translation of the fourth German edition of 1956 edited by Johannes Winckelmann appeared in hardcover in 1968 and in paperback in 1978 as *Economy and Society*.

Since that time, however, first Friedrich Tenbruck and then Wolfgang Schluchter have raised serious doubts about whether the material presented in both the older German and the English versions of *Economy and Society* indeed constitute a single work as conceived by Weber.¹ Rather, they have argued convincingly that the older portion of the text (pp. 311ff. in the English-language edition) represents a first version of Weber's contribution, the completion of which was interrupted by the outbreak of World War I in 1914 and the author's subsequent military service. When, in 1919, Weber returned to this material he was clearly

¹ Friedrich Tenbruck, "Abschied von Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft," *Zeitschrift für die gesamte Staatswissenschaft*, 133 (1977), pp. 703–736; Wolfgang Schluchter, "'Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft': Das Ende eines Mythos," in *Religion und Lebensführung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), vol. 2, pp. 597–634. Johannes Winckelmann, the editor of the fourth and fifth German editions, has argued the contrary position in his monograph *Max Webers hinterlassenes Hauptwerk* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1986). See also Friedrich Tenbruck's article, very significant for the English-speaking reception of Weber: "The Problem of the Thematic Unity in the Work of Max Weber," *British Journal of Sociology*, 31(3) (1980), pp. 316–351.

dissatisfied with it and, rather than completing the existing manuscript, in effect started over from the beginning. He then was able to finish the first few chapters of this second version of his contribution (pp. 3–301 in the English-language edition) and prepare them for publication prior to his death in June 1920. Several chapters remained to be written, however, and there is no strong evidence that Weber intended simply to append his older manuscript material to the beginning of his new draft, as Marianne Weber did in 1921, to create the *Economy and Society* we know today. It is for this reason that the editors of the ongoing Max Weber complete works edition (*Max Weber Gesamtausgabe* – henceforth MWG) have chosen to issue the pre-1915 and 1919–1920 versions of Weber's contribution to the *Grundriss* separately, as volumes 22 and 23 respectively.²

For our purposes, what is most significant here is that all of the disparate texts published under the title *Economy and Society* share a common methodological feature: namely, they make use of vast amounts of data drawn not only from the ancient, medieval and modern West but also from the entire history of the Near East, the Indian subcontinent, China and Japan in order to generate analytic concepts such as traditional, rational-legal and charismatic authority; patrimonialism; religions of salvation; and formal and substantive justice. However, the fragmentary and composite nature of *Economy and Society*, explained by the textual background outlined above, renders it extremely difficult to construct coherent models of non-Western civilizations from this material, although several scholars have attempted to do so with respect to Weber's views of Islam, for example. Luckily, Weber was engaged on another, more explicitly comparative project at the same time as he prepared his contributions for the *Grundriss*: a series of studies collectively entitled *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen: Vergleichende religionssoziologische Versuche* (*The Economic Ethic of the World Religions: Comparative Experiments in the Sociology of Religion*—henceforth EEWR). Yet here again the textual situation is far from satisfying since Weber also could not complete this work prior to his death and, to make matters worse, no single complete edition exists in English of the materials he left behind.

The origins of this project lie in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* and the shorter article “The Protestant Sects and the Spirit of Capitalism,” first published between 1904 and 1906 (new

² MWG I, Band 22: *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Die Wirtschaft und die gesellschaftlichen Ordnungen und Mächte. Nachlaß*, Teil 2: Hans G. Kippenberg (ed.), *Religiöse Gemeinschaften* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 2001), pp. vii–xvii.

English edition ed. Kalberg 2010—henceforth PESCE). In these pieces, as is well-known, Weber sought to show that a key component of the distinctively modern capitalism found in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century West—the ethos of sober professionalism—had its origins in behavior patterns motivated by religious doctrines found in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ascetic Protestantism. At the same time, he stressed that he had intentionally limited his analysis in these studies to only one side of a two-sided causal complex, namely that flowing from religion to socio-economic structures. He implied, however, that he might explore the other side of this complex—the impact of socio-economic structures on ideas in general and religion more specifically—at a future time. Wolfgang Schluchter argues below that several years after completing these works, in 1910/1911, Weber came to realize, through a new interest in cultural history, that it was not only the endogenous birth of modern capitalism that distinguished the Occident of his today from other great civilizations like those of China, India and the Islamic world. Experimental science, professional bureaucracy, elected parliaments, written constitutions and even a certain kind of rational harmonic music all made their first appearance in the West despite the fact that conditions more favorable to their development existed elsewhere. In the coming years, Weber would seek both to delineate more completely how the path of development taken by the West differed from that of other cultural areas and to account for this divergence through a series of large-scale studies later christened *The Economic Ethic of the World Religions* that were both comparative and historical in nature and that he carried out parallel to his work on the *Grundriss*.

The first components of the *Economic Ethic* project—a general introduction, the study *Confucianism and Taoism* and a linking essay entitled “Intermediate Observation: Theory of the Stages and Directions of Religious Rejections of the World” (“Zwischenbetrachtung: Theorie der Stufen und Richtungen religiöser Weltablehnung”)—were published in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft* in late 1915. *Hinduism and Buddhism* followed in 1916–1917 and the first two sections of *Ancient Judaism* appeared in the *Archiv* between October 1917 and January 1920. Meanwhile Weber had decided to bring out the entire *Economic Ethic* study in a series of four volumes to be entitled *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion* (*Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*—henceforth GARS). In a publisher’s newsletter announcing forthcoming books dated October 25, 1919 he laid out his plan for the four volumes

of the *Collected Essays*, reprinted as Table 2.2 in Wolfgang Schluchter's contribution to this book.

Volume I was to contain a new general preface to all four volumes (the *Vorbemerkung*), then the *Protestant Ethic* and “Protestant Sects” pieces, after which the first, Asian portion of the *Economic Ethic*—the general introduction (*Einleitung*), *Confucianism and Taoism*, the *Intermediate Observation* (*Zwischenbetrachtung*) and *Hinduism and Buddhism*—was to follow. Volume II, with which the comparative analysis of the Near Eastern-Western cultural sphere was to begin, was to open with a section on the “General Foundations of the West’s Distinctive Development,” after which discussions of Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia and Persia, then the already published portions of *Ancient Judaism* and an excursus on the Book of Job and the Psalms would appear. Volume III would conclude the presentation of Jewish society and religion with a discussion of Talmudic Judaism before moving on to the events surrounding the birth and consolidation of Christianity, the emergence of a distinctive Eastern Church, and the rise and spread of Islam. Finally, Volume IV would be devoted entirely to a study entitled *Das Christentum des Okzidents* (*The Christianity of the West*), in which Weber intended to focus on the development of Western Christianity and its interaction with the economy, society and emergent state structures from late Antiquity through the post-Reformation period, with special emphasis on both forerunners of ascetic Protestantism during the Middle Ages and the Pre- and Counter-Reformation Catholic Church. A discussion of the economic ethos and social position of Jewish communities in the medieval and early modern West would also have been integrated into this volume.³

At the time of his death in June 1920, Weber had personally prepared the first volume of the *Collected Essays* for publication. He had written the general preface (*Vorbemerkung*) to the whole collection—one of his very last pieces—had revised *The Protestant Ethic*, “The Protestant Sects,” the Introduction (*Einleitung*) and Intermediate Observation (*Zwischenbetrachtung*) of *The Economic Ethic* and, most significantly, nearly doubled the length of *Confucianism and Taoism* to include extensive analyses of Chinese state development, urban life and law. The purpose of this expansion was to render the breadth of focus of *Confucianism and*

³ Wolfgang Schluchter, “Religion, politische Herrschaft, Wirtschaft und bürgerliche Lebensführung: Die okzidentale Sonderentwicklung,” in Wolfgang Schluchter (ed.), *Max Webers Sicht des okzidentalen Christentums* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), pp. 11–128, here at p. 22.

Taoism, the first version of which was already finished in 1913, compatible with those of *Hinduism and Buddhism* and the beginning of *Ancient Judaism*, which had themselves only received their final form between 1915 and 1919. This first volume of the *Collected Essays* could thus be published in October 1920, just a few months after Weber's passing. He had already noted in September 1919 that *Hinduism and Buddhism* required only proofreading before it could be sent to the publisher and could hence be launched on the market as volume II of the *Collected Essays* on January 6, 1921. Volume III, entitled *Ancient Judaism*, made its appearance on the same day. It contained the text of the first two sections of this work as printed in the *Archiv* between 1917 and 1920 with the exception of about a dozen short insertions made by Weber before his death, plus the addition of a 42-page section entitled "The Pharisees" found by Marianne Weber among her husband's manuscripts. This section, which apparently was meant to come after Weber's planned discussion of the Book of Job and the Psalms, was clearly intended as a bridge to his analysis of the origins of Christianity since it concerns itself mainly with the state of Judaism just prior to and just after Jesus' ministry.

Unfortunately, as mentioned above, no single edition exists in English that replicates the contents of Weber's three-volume *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion*, or even of *The Economic Ethic of the World Religions* which takes up about 85 percent of those volumes. Furthermore, as with the *Grundriss*, the *Economic Ethic*—as Hartmann Tyrell and Wolfgang Schluchter stress in their contributions—remains a torso. While the extant text contains Weber's full comparative-historical analysis of religion, society and the state in East and South Asia, his parallel attempt to account for the three divergent paths of development found in the near eastern-western cultural sphere—those followed by western Christianity, eastern Christianity and Islam—breaks off after his extensive analysis of ancient Judaism, which he sees as the common starting point for all three of these paths. Nevertheless, unlike in the case of *Economy and Society*, it is possible to read the full, extant text of EEWR in English in the form and in the order sanctioned by Weber himself, even if the component parts of that text need to be assembled from different sources.⁴

A second reason, in our experience, that undergraduates, graduate students and faculty are loath to engage with Weber's texts on China, India

⁴ References to the English-language versions of EEWR are included in Table 2.2 of Wolfgang Schluchter's contribution in Chapter 2 of this volume.

and ancient Israel, despite their heightened relevance to our own world, is that they remain uncertain about the extent to which the outdated character of many of Weber's sources has invalidated his conclusions. In order to address this issue, Wolfgang Schluchter convened a series of conferences beginning in 1979 to which he invited area specialists who were asked to assess Weber's claims based on the latest research in their fields and thus to determine "what was living and what was dead" in his *Economic Ethic of the World Religions*. Schluchter brought out the fruits of this effort between 1981 and 1984 in three edited volumes, all in German, devoted respectively to *Ancient Judaism* (1981), *The Religion of China* (1983) and *The Religion of India* (1984).⁵ He later followed up these collections with volumes on Weber's thinking on early Christianity (1985), Islam (1987) and medieval and early modern Christianity (1988) that would have been incorporated into a completed version of EEWR.⁶ He also advised a doctoral dissertation by a Chinese student devoted entirely to Weber's treatment of China in light of current scholarship that was published, again in German, in 1997.⁷ Two other edited volumes—one based on papers presented at an international meeting of historians in Stuttgart in 1985 and the other a collection of submissions to a conference at Göttingen in 2000—each contain significant contributions on the religious monographs.⁸ This extensive body of literature must form the starting point for any reassessment of Weber's analysis of China, India and the Jewish roots of Western culture. The remainder of this Introduction will summarize the results of this literature, previously little-known in the English-speaking world, beginning with the judgments on *The Religion of China*.

⁵ Wolfgang Schluchter (ed.), *Max Webers Studie über das antike Judentum* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981); Wolfgang Schluchter (ed.), *Max Webers Studie über Konfuzianismus und Taoismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1983); Wolfgang Schluchter (ed.), *Max Webers Studie über Hinduismus und Buddhismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984).

⁶ Wolfgang Schluchter (ed.), *Max Webers Sicht des antiken Christentums* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985); Wolfgang Schluchter (ed.), *Max Webers Sicht des Islams* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987); Wolfgang Schluchter (ed.), *Max Webers Sicht des okzidentalen Christentums* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988).

⁷ Duan Lin, *Konfuzianische Ethik und Legitimation der Herrschaft im alten China: Eine Auseinandersetzung mit der vergleichenden Soziologie Max Webers* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1997).

⁸ Jürgen Kocka (ed.), *Max Weber der Historiker* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986); Hartmut Lehmann and Jean Martin Ouedraogo (eds.), *Max Webers Religionssoziologie in interkultureller Perspektive* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2003).

1.1 China

While *The Religion of China* or, more properly, *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen: Konfuzianismus und Taoismus*, has been characterized as a “maze,”⁹ at its heart stands a relatively straightforward argument. For Weber imperial China, along with ancient Egypt and the Roman Empire, represented a prime example of what he terms a “patrimonial state.” This he defines as a polity in which a prince organizes his domination over his subjects “in the same manner as he does his private household.”¹⁰ This kind of polity is characterized by a constant struggle between a ruler and those with whose help he exercises that rule (his “staff”) over control of the means of administration, e.g., jurisdictional rights, military forces or revenue streams. When a warrior nobility successfully appropriates local political and military authority, as was the case in China—according to Weber—in the six centuries before unification in 221 BCE as well as during the second century BCE, he speaks of the *feudal* variant of patrimonialism.¹¹ When, in contrast, a monarch is able to reappropriate the means of administration and rule directly through a staff answerable only to him, as did the so-called First Emperor Qin Shi Huangti, Weber categorizes this as the *sultanist* form of patrimonialism.¹²

He further claims that following the unification and pacification of the empire, during the reign of first the Han, then later of the Tang, Sung and Ming dynasties, there emerged in China a unique form of *enlightened* (*aufgeklärten*) patrimonialism¹³ that lay midway between the extremes of either feudalism or sultanism. The staff in this case consisted of classically trained literati who possessed expert knowledge of both the rituals for which the emperor, in his role as a kind of high priest (*pontifex maximus* in Weber’s terms), was responsible and of the ideographic writing system that provided cultural unity to the empire. While such literati had

⁹ Stephen Molloy, “Max Weber and the religions of China: any way out of the maze?” *British Journal of Sociology*, 31(3) (1980), pp. 377–400.

¹⁰ Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (hereafter WG), 5., revidierte Auflage besorgt von Johannes Winckelmann, Studienausgabe (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1976), p. 585; Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (hereafter ES), ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 1013.

¹¹ MWG I, Band 19, ed. Helwig Schmidt-Glintzer (ed.) in collaboration with Petra Kolonko, *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen: Konfuzianismus und Taoismus. Schriften 1915–1920* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1989), pp. 186–188, 199–200; Max Weber, *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism* (hereafter RC), trans. and ed. Hans Gerth, intro. C.K. Yang (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 37–39, 46–47.

¹² MWG I/19, pp. 194–199; RC, pp. 42–45.

¹³ MWG I/19, p. 201; RC, p. 47.

served as administrators during the warring states period prior to unification (221 BCE), it was only at the end of the seventh century CE that the Tang dynasty introduced a system of qualifying examinations based on knowledge of classical texts as a means, Weber argues, of preventing this non-noble staff from laying permanent claims to office as feudal lords had once done.¹⁴ This system was then consolidated and expanded by the Ming after 1370 and survived until the end of the empire in 1912. The members of the new, exam-based elite, who filled ministerial positions in the capital as well as those of provincial governor, district prefect and county magistrate, were not permitted to serve in their native region and were to be transferred every three years to avoid building up a personal power base in any one location. These mandarin administrators, who, Weber claims, remained the dominant force within the Chinese state and society more generally for more than 12 centuries, in turn championed Confucianism as an official ideology in the face of challenges from Taoism and Buddhism and at the same time prevented the emergence of any kind of prophetic religiosity.¹⁵

Undeniably this administrative infrastructure contained elements also found in modern bureaucracy: selection through examination, a certain hierarchy and separation of office from officeholder, the absence of hereditary claims. Yet Weber insists that this remained a *patrimonial* bureaucracy. He cites five reasons to support his argument. First, the vast majority of Chinese administrators were in fact not part of the official, examination-based bureaucratic hierarchy. In addition to the members of the central government's colleges or collective administrative bodies, this examination-based bureaucracy consisted only of the viceroy, a judge and a treasurer in each of the 18 provinces, a governor and two secretaries (for justice and finance) in each of the 1,470 counties and the prefects who acted to link these two levels of government. Since all of these "official" administrators were deployed far from their home provinces and transferred every three years, they were dependent on a local staff conversant with the region's language, laws and customs and power structure if they hoped to maintain order. This vast army of unofficial staff was hired and paid for entirely by the official bureaucrat—often from the pool of unemployed local diploma-holders but also from among his relatives and friends—and answerable only to him.¹⁶

¹⁴ MWG I/19, pp. 298–300; RC, pp. 115–117.

¹⁵ MWG I/19, pp. 204–209, 218, 285–286, 292, 420, 454; RC, pp. 48–50, 55, 107, 112, 209, 230.

¹⁶ MWG I/19, pp. 203–209; RC, pp. 48–50.

Second, as in medieval and early modern Western Europe, in times of financial need the state resorted to selling official offices, thereby undermining the examination-based recruitment system.¹⁷ Third, the Chinese field administration exhibited no specialization beyond a rudimentary distinction between officials mainly concerned with judicial and those responsible for financial matters, and mandarin education was exclusively literary, with no place for any type of legal or technical training. Fourth, in keeping with this education, tradition and a focus on substantive justice rather than rational-legal knowledge provided the basis for administrative and legal decisions.¹⁸ Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the private income of official officeholders was not separated from the revenue streams in the form of taxes and fees associated with his office. This, according to Weber, was “in keeping with the genuine character of all specifically patrimonial administrations.”¹⁹ In practice this meant that officials were obliged to pass on a fixed amount of revenue to the administrative level above them (county to province, province to central government) and were permitted to keep the rest, out of which, however, they were expected not only to cover all state expenditures in their district but also to pay for their large “unofficial” staff as well as to compensate family members for the money they had invested in the long and expensive education necessary to prepare the aspiring official for his extremely difficult qualifying examinations.²⁰

It is Weber's broader contention that this variant of patrimonialism, together with its specific ideological underpinnings (Confucianism), proved to be both extraordinarily stable and at the same time acted to constrain China's development in the direction of modern capitalism.²¹ In the first instance, this was so because the early emergence of a powerful central state following unification in 221 BCE hindered the development of autonomous cities of the kind that appeared in the West following the collapse of the Roman Empire and played a crucial role there as centers of both production for the market and legal rationalization.²² Furthermore, the overriding interest of the bureaucracy in maintaining the maximum number of taxpayers led to frequent interventions in the

¹⁷ MWG I/19, pp. 184, 195, 257, 301, 322, 327; RC, pp. 36, 43, 85, 118, 134, 138.

¹⁸ MWG I/19, pp. 223–224, 279–282, 285–286, 302–305, 310–313; RC, pp. 60, 100–102, 107–108, 119–121, 125–128.

¹⁹ MWG I/19, p. 219 (translation my own); RC, p. 56.

²⁰ MWG I/19, pp. 218–222, 265, 315; RC, pp. 55–59, 90, 129.

²¹ MWG I/19, pp. 218, 284; RC, pp. 55, 104.

²² MWG I/19, pp. 148–158, 256–257; RC, pp. 13–20, 84–85.