
A WEBERIAN PERSPECTIVE ON RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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(Received 27 February 2012)

Abstract

In order to understand sociological reality of religion, Max Weber focuses on the importance of religious idea, which cannot be reduced to the component of material interests or to the social nexus and function. The sociologist draws our attention on the fact that it is not ideas, but material and ideological interests that directly influence men's conduct. Yet, the world images that have been created by ideas have often determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest. Weber's thinking focuses almost entirely on religion, yet not to discuss the concept itself, but to find solutions for the main problem of sociology which is: why is it that only Europe experiences modernity? Max Weber sees modernity as a huge rationalization process, which may be defined as the progressive occurrence of lawful autonomy in each sphere of human action. The broadest rationality influenced economy by capitalism. Yet, there were also non-economic rationalization phenomena that contributed to economic rationalization.

Keywords: rationalization, sociology of religion, religious experience, theodicy

1. Introduction

Max Weber's sociology is the foundation of scientific sociology of religion, which is essential for typological and objective understanding. While rejecting both Karl Marx's evolutionary law of class society [1] and Emile Durkheim's sustained law of moral society [2], Max Weber managed to develop the understanding sociology of the subjective meaning of religious action or inaction, respectively.

In order to reach such knowledge of the object of understanding, the sociologist laid the grounds of the methodology of the ideal type and the elective affinity of causal relationships. He elaborated a set of categories, such as types of prophecy and the idea of spiritual power, as well as other categories, which became tools to deal with the comparative material.

Among all Max Weber's major works on religion, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is the only notorious one. Nevertheless, this famous essay is only a very small part of Max Weber's three works.

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Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion include, in this order, *Confucianism and Taoism* and *Hinduism and Buddhism*, and *Ancient Judaism*. Also, in *Economy and Society*, the *Sociology of Religion* makes up about one third of his unfinished work [3-6].

The goal of Max Weber's sociology of religion is to understand religious action from the subjective perspective of the actor rationally and also emphatically. It is not to establish the laws of religion and society, or to abstract the essence of religious action. From a sociological viewpoint, religious experience in itself is not important, but what matters is the meaning it bears for the religious value and its relation to the social action. In other words, religious experience is not the purpose itself, but just a means providing the concept of religious idea and vision over the world.

2. Weber's analysis of religious particularity

If one studies the documents and sources of religious evolution, discovers an interpretation model proper to Weber, which is different from any literary, philosophical or theological hermeneutics. This interpretation model relies on the idea of social causality. Thus, one is enabled to understand the conformation and practical-social orientation of an ethic and to discover the inner structure of a religious organization, by relating for instance to the concept of God.

Unlike Durkheim, who thought that it was possible to account for complex systems starting from elementary forms, Weber prefers a direct approach of several over elaborated configurations, namely the major world religions. Although not familiar with reflections of the nature of religious phenomena, the German sociologist perceives them as ideologies, the effects and then the flaws of which he tries to detect. As he is not an anthropologist, he sees religions mainly as sequences of historical facts.

Although it is extremely well known, Marx's opinion, according to which religion is the 'opium of the people', has often triggered inaccurate interpretations. The famous expression reveals its full meaning when one grounds one's reasoning on the ineluctability of progress. Religion, as the projection of man's condition in society, is a super structure that vindicates dominant order and makes it bearable by its being both a plea against social destitution and a consolation for man's misfortune. Therefore, it cannot be seen as a reality. Religion should be suppressed as long as it provides a delusive happiness to the people. Here is what the people's actual happiness requires. The need to suppress man's delusions related to his own state is the need to suppress a state that requires delusions.

In Max Weber's opinion, although the interpretation of social facts originating in production relationships is an extremely productive method, it cannot fully account for a complex reality where economy is merely an instance, undoubtedly vital, yet on no account unique or ultimate. Therefore, without denying Marx's standpoint, which, in our author's opinion, is an

ideal type among many others, he starts by approaching religious facts as intellectual facts able to influence reality and especially economic conditions. Moreover, whereas Marx sees the abolition of religion as an undeniable must for progress, which guides history as a whole and which equally condemns all societies seen as primitive, to Weber, on the contrary, the growing rationalization of the world accompanied by the loss of illusion and the belief in magical ways of deliverance, is a source of longing. The purpose of his most accessible work, called *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* is to underline the existing affinities between an economic way of life, the modern Western capitalism and Calvin's doctrine. Being simultaneously defined by the existence of companies focused solely on achieving the highest rates of return and by the rational organization of free work and production means, in other words, just like a sort of capitalism characterized by both the pursuit of profit and rational discipline, this economic practice fully acquires its meaning in Calvin's ethic, according to which redemption can only be a divine free gift.

By favouring a comprehensive sociology, Weber could not avoid the issue of self-comprehension in the study of religions. The sociologist tackles this issue as he hopes that through meditation he may be able to grasp human behaviour. In other words, in order to discover the meaning of the actions of the first Christian or, generally speaking, what gives sociological meaning in a religion to those that desert it, one must analyze the manner in which they think that this is necessary. The sociology that Weber tried to put into practice is a discipline the objective of which is to understand, by interpreting social action, and to account for its causes and effects. However, to the extent this is meant as a neutral axiological undertaking, this explanatory comprehension rules out any religious prerequisites. Max Weber's sociology sees itself as neutral by relating to values in general and to religious values in particular. Its initial reference to values, its separation from the research objective and conceptual construction, rules out neither axiological neutrality observance, nor the search for objectivity. We can call it "purely historical research, by introducing value judgments in strictly objective analysis" [7].

This principle means more than the mere prerequisite according to which all existing religions should be treated fairly and studied thoroughly. There is no such particular privilege that may be given to any religion, based on an inherent sociological criterion or principle. For instance, one may study Christianity in the same way as Judaism, Islamism, Hinduism or any other religion. This obviously excludes any religious hierarchy. Moreover, "all purely empirical analyses must study the documents and sources on the evolution of a particular religion by employing the same principles applied to any other religion" [7, p. 16]. Such analysis must rely on the assumption that the author wants to understand and explain the orientation of the religious actors that it refers to. Based on this consideration, Weber included in his analyses the concepts of miracle and revelation.

The sociologist reckons that if one wants to understand religious organization, one cannot ignore extraordinary facts and phenomena, in other words, miracles, as long as these facts are meaningful to the actors of such organization. This is an essential component of religious life as it is the place of materialization of the failure of a search for justification with no precise reference: it may take the form of a rule consecrated by tradition or lawfulness. From the standpoint of the charismatic leader and his disciples, the occurrence of miracles allows the justification of the domination relations established among them. Those that witness the miracles justify his domination, whereas those that believe in them, those that see these actions and facts as extraordinary, also have the justification of their being dominated in this relation, to the extent they accept, at that very moment, to be ruled by the charismatic leader.

Whereas the issue of miracles makes Weber to analyze the domination relations within a nascent religious structure, the issue of revelation leads him to another aspect of religious life. As he is very much interested in the way in which religious people relate to the world, Weber tries to understand their motivation. Religious ethic based on a religious motivation requires a theoretical perspective in this type of sociology, and social action is a meaningful behaviour. Yet, this meaning is more than an everyday one of those it refers to. This meaning is the expressions of a reason, which is at the same time its meaningful context. Revealing this meaningful context may lead one to the idea that religion is possible by the relation between God and the world, which deals with a particular conception of Him. Just like in Christianity, God may reveal Himself. One may look for a religious reason by trying to understand how He may influence everyday life, hence by exploring this particular conception of a God revealing Himself. From this point of view, this conception is a religious fact.

Weber does not necessarily see the world as synonymous to history. First and foremost, the world represents the idea of world. Weber reckons that this idea must be further explored in order to be able to understand one's relation to the historical world, in other words, one's relation to one's profession, family and especially state. The sociologist tries to find the connections between this idea and the components of the surrounding culture that might have influenced it one way or another. Any relation to the historical world may be understood by religious ethic. This establishes emotional ties with a particular social class or walk of life, which makes up its meaningful social grounds. This ethic is the work of an ethic prophecy. In order to help us understand how a prophet appears and makes himself heard the sociologist employs the concept of charismatic lawfulness. Weber's sociological approach also includes the relation to tradition, the idea of world, religious ethic defining the relation to the historical world, the social carriers of this religious ethic and organizational structure of the group formed around the charismatic leader, which will result in this religious ethic.

3. The problematic of theodicy

Weber's sociologic interest in the Bible and especially in the New Testament is not belated, as it could result from secondary sources. The respective interest exists, even from the beginning, in his sociology of religions. In fact, starting with the moment he attempted to explain Luther's relation to the calling and the significance of this relation from the viewpoint of Christianity, he deemed it necessary to consult the Bible. According to Weber, Luther sets forward a series of novelties from the perspective of religion and of Christianity in particular. These novelties are rediscovered in his idea of calling.

"The German word *Beruf* (*calling*), or more precisely the English term *calling*, already suggests at least a religious connotation, namely that of a mission imposed by God. This conception becomes more conspicuous, the more emphatically we utter the word in each particular case" [4, p. 63].

The meaning of this word originates from the Bible's translations, more precisely from Luther's translation, observing its spirit, rather than its letter. Moreover, the novelty does not refer only to the signified. This is symptomatic to a very clear religious idea. Furthermore, since the significance of the word is new, it is "a consequence of the Reformation" [4, p. 65].

The novelty lies in the judgement of fulfilment of the duty within the bosom of secular callings, as inheritance of the highest meaning with which the individual moral activity can be endowed. This was the inevitable consequence of the representation of the religious significance of secular daily work. Hence, in this respect, it created for the first time the notion of profession.

According to Luther, secular work as calling becomes the expression of the love for fellow man. This moral qualification of secular professional life is characterized by Weber as an important contribution to Reformation, and in particular Luther's. The new meaning Luther assigns to the word *calling* does not originate in the Bible. "The Bible could have been the source for Luther to derive the idea of calling, but it was more favourable for a return to traditional values" [4, p. 66]. Weber attempted to discover to what extent Luther's novelty is radical in religious life in relation to the calling. Furthermore, he desires to discover to what extent Biblical concepts are in contrast to this novelty.

We have to make two important remarks. Firstly, Weber analyses the calling in economy, and further on, he explores it in relation to the world (as for the world, he notices a rejection or indifference on behalf of the first Christians). The sociologist is more interested in the religious significance of economy, rather than in the religious significance of secular daily work. However, this aspect of religious culture highlights only a dimension of Weber's field of research. What initially and obliquely seemed a research interest pertaining to the relation between religion, profession or economy,

manifested more visible in time as a general interest in the relations between religion and the world. Therefore, the word represents the calling or economy, but the state or politics and family, as well. Hereinafter, the sociologist discusses about the order of the world and its values, including fine arts, music, sexuality and science.

Secondly, from the viewpoint of the general economy of the Sociology of religions, Weber's exploration of the Bible and of its heuristic function in particular, has the same status as the researches regarding Buddhism, Hinduism and Judaism. In other words, the study of non-Western religions permits, by comparison, both the observation of the singularity and the novelties of Protestantism and of its variants, as well. This fact is possible given the fact that religious culture relates, to a certain extent, to calling, state and family. The study of primitive Christianity and Judaism permits the discovery of this singularity and novelty, by relating to Protestantism.

To understand the sociologist's approach to these two issues, we have to begin with the theological issue of theodicy. In fact, the scholar starts analysing this issue from a sociological viewpoint. According to Weber, the research of the first Christians' relation to the action and their relation to the world leads to the exploration of the solution to this theological issue.

According to the formulation adopted in his intermediary considerations, this theological issue is an issue of the existential and universal experience of undeserved suffering, or, according to the version from *Economy and Society*, it is that of the world's imperfection. This is the issue of the world's meaning. The issue in itself refers to man's existence as a whole, acquiring a universal status as a result of this reason. Death, disease and other misfortunes, inequality of men pertaining to their welfare, all these are nothing but multiple sides of this issue. Everywhere on Earth, the solution to this issue determined religious evolution, as well as the grounds for the need of salvation. Many solutions were found to the problematic of theodicy, which were directly and intimately related to God's forms of conception and to the possessed character of the ideas of sin and salvation.

In an ideal-typical sense, forgiveness appeals to the idea of God and sin. Moreover, "the various ethical nuances of the idea of God and sin are correlated to the aspiration towards forgiveness, which may acquire extremely varied shades of meaning depending on questions such as why, for which reason do we want forgiveness to be granted" [3, p. 350].

The doctrine of salvation, promising forgiveness, equally appeals to central notion Weber defines as 'revival'. The sociologist chooses this term because, from this perspective, the individual can be forgiven only through revival. Revival means being endowed with a new soul. This change of mind takes the shape of the condition and of the foreshadowed manifestation of this forgiveness. The central issue related to this idea is the following "for what purpose" must he revive [5, p. 348]. Weber shall operate a distinction, based on this viewpoint and on the solution to the issue of theodicy.

According to the sociologist's belief, there are three typical solutions to the issue of theodicy: "the theory of predestination through Calvinism, dualism through Zoroastrianism and the Indian doctrine of karma" [5, p. 343].

Such is the nature of these solutions that they fail to influence man's actions. Nevertheless, they are inevitably transcribed as views over the world. They can offer material or ideal interests' to social actors, namely objectives to be attained or avoided, provided that salvation is desired. Consequently, a differentiation is made between the nonsense (the source of suffering) in the world and meaning the world might and should possess.

The final point is the revelation of the world as it is, logically resulting in the renunciation to what is secular; it has to be pointed out that there are two opposite forms of renunciation. The first type is active ascetics, according to which the subject wishes to be God's instrument in the activity He desires. The second type is mystical renunciation, according to which the subject is a receiver of the divine for whom each worldly activity is a danger. These two opposite forms have profound affinities in the actual conception over the individual; the former with that of a personal God, transcendent and creator, whereas the latter with an impersonal, immanent divine, object of contemplation. The latter dominated Hindi and Chinese religiosity, whereas the former characterizes the Near East and the West.

In both cases, the final purpose is not accessible to all men. At this point, we have to operate a clear distinction between the strictness of the virtuous and that of the others, the distance between the two categories being greater or more reduced, depending on the virtuous' decision to make no concession to the others. Provided they do not make these concessions, the rupture appears, the masses being isolated in magical traditions, whereas the influence of the religion of salvation on profane activities is weakened. This is not a free choice, but rather one determined by the form of renunciation to what is secular.

The contemplative form triumphed in the East. Bounds with daily life were torn, economy was depreciated, and religion did not offer motivation from a psychological viewpoint.

On the contrary, the ascetic form tries to fulfil God's will in the world under two conditions: the saving gift should not be conceived as the object of a mystic union, fact imposing the total rejection of ascetics as an escape from the world, respectively each magical and sacramental character of the rites should be abandoned, that is a "complete desacralization of the world" [8], called today as secularization [9].

Analyzing Weber from this viewpoint, we can draw the conclusion that the sociologist tried to formulate the theoretical conditions of a Sociology belonging to the Gospels. The issue determining Weber to deem necessary an analysis of the Gospels originates in the evaluation of significance, in the history of Christianity, of Luther's contribution with regard to the calling. The sociologist found two central sociologic issues regarding the object of

the New Testament: the relation of this religious culture with the action and another one signifying, at the same time, family, state, fine arts, sexuality, and intellectualism.

From a sociological viewpoint, religious experience may be understood when it results in a social action or inaction. If a religious experience produces no alteration in the individual's social action, then we cannot understand it from a social perspective, as it would occur in the case of an individual pretending to have been exposed to a religious experience of reception of the soul, but without determining any alteration in his life or social action. In such a case, we have a limited access to the impact of the religious experience in question on that particular individual. We cannot understand his religious experience as such. Sociological understanding emerges from the combination of the social action or inaction with its subjective meaning or signification. On the other hand, there is a chance to understand religious experience when an individual reveals a shift in his social action. Weber names this shift 'metanoia', "complete shift of an individual's central attitude in relation to the value and meaning of life and of the world" [3, p. 1117]. The central focus of Comprehensive Sociology is the subjective meaning of the religious action, being intimately related to an individual's perspective on life and on the world. As for the religious experience, it can be understood only through the background of its exterior manifestation in the social action.

Religious experience may be defined as the subjective experience of the sacred. Such an experience must be subjective, since the experience of the sacred cannot be objectively accepted. Salvation (redemption) acquired a specific signification where it was considered the expression of a systematic and rational view on the world, and where it stood as an attitude against this world. This meaning and psychological quality of salvation depends on a certain view over the world and on a particular attitude towards it. „Why and for which reason would an individual want to be redeemed depends on his view over the world" [7, p. 280].

4. Conclusions

Religious experience is a subjective acceptance of the sacred value. Sociologically speaking, religious experience can be elucidated only together with its subjective meaning and social means of exterior manifestation. To understand the subjective meaning, we have to get accustomed to its empathic experiment and to the ideal-typical construction of the causal relations. In the Sociology of religion, Weber advocates that what is truly decisive is religious significance and not religious experience as such. Weber saw the need to give a meaning to benevolence distribution among men, in accordance with the growing rationality of their vision of the world, as the profound cause of religious elaboration. He calls this orientation theodicy, which, in addition to its usual meaning of divine justice, also has a much

broader sense, that of explaining suffering through the divine. The greatest task of religious legitimation is the issue of theodicy [10]. The three most rational answers to these problems may be found in the Hindu doctrine of karma, in Zoroastrian dualism and, to a much larger extent, in God's double predestination specific to Calvinist belief. Nonetheless, the rationalization effort represented by religious elaboration may lead to the rationalization of all spheres of life, especially scientific rationalization, which, in its turn, may push religious doctrines back into irrationality, which seems to be the case nowadays.

Acknowledgement

This paper was made within The Knowledge Based Society Project supported by the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed by the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract number POSDRU/89/1.5/S/56815.

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