

on the origins of Christianity and the peasant revolts is clearly a materialistic one for it relates religious phenomena to a class structure – to socioeconomic relationships. It is thus very different from the materialistic analyses of religion by Bryan Turner, who, although claiming an allegiance to Engels, links religious beliefs and practices to the “corporality” of the body and to human “corporations” and “populations” (1983: 12–13). It is even further from the “cultural materialist” perspective of Marvin Harris (1980), for Harris postulates a direct causal link between cultural institutions and environmental or biological factors. (For a useful critique of Harris’s materialism, see Bloch 1983: 130–5.)

Marx and Engels’s theory of religion implies, as we have noted, that to attack religion without also attacking the social order within which it grows (Marx was fond of organic metaphors) is to engage in ideological shadowboxing. This was the essence of their critique in both Stirner and Feuerbach. A consequence of this view of religion, however, is the suggestion that religion will disappear when social conditions that give rise to it have ceased to exist – that is, when communism has come into being. The issue is complicated by the fact that when Engels – and also Lenin in his various writings on religion (see Acton 1958) – wrote about religion in precapitalist or at least prefeudal societies, he explained it not in terms of social structure or the “economic base” but rather as a response to fear or as the result of ignorance of the natural causes of the many adversities of life. This explanation, as I have noted, is psychological, and ahistorical, and it gives religion an existential function. But as Bloch has suggested in discussing Marxist theories of historical change, once the notion of a classless society is postulated, Marxist theory has ipso facto no way of theoretically handling this context in terms of class contradictions (1983: 54). The same applies to the Marxist theory of religion, whether the latter is approached in terms of a class analysis or as an ideological form that cloaks structures of exploitation. If the social ideal of a “free association of producers” in harmony with nature expressed by Marx in *Capital*, comes into being, relationships would no longer be clouded in mystery, and religion would become extinct. Marxist analysis itself, therefore, would also become superfluous.

2 Religion as theodicy

Weberian sociology

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Hegelian philosophy, outside a limited number of academic preserves, fell into disrepute. Except within the Marxist tradition, Hegel’s influence declined, and his writings became unfashionable. There arose in its stead three currents of thought that we may initially consider, since all had an important influence on the sociology of Max Weber.

The first is *positivism*, a term derived from the writings of Auguste Comte, who, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, made the first programmatic statements regarding the new discipline of sociology. He saw this subject as the culmination of his “positive” philosophy. Comte saw scientific knowledge as forming a hierarchy and its development as constituting both a historical and a logical order, sociology standing at its apex. Broadly considered, positivism is a current of social thought that has adopted most or all of the following premises.

(1) It expresses a fundamental aversion to metaphysical thinking, the latter being repudiated as either sophistry or illusion. With logical positivism, a mode of thought lucidly expressed by A. J. Ayer (1936), only logical and scientific propositions (that is, statements subject to empirical verification) are considered valid; all other forms of understanding, such as art and religion, are seen as meaningless.

(2) Science is considered to deal with empirical facts that are independent of the human subject, and scientific knowledge to consist of analytical-inductive generalizations based on sense impressions. Science therefore takes the empiricist approach that Hegel criticized in his *Phenomenology*.

(3) Arising from this, positivism stresses a fundamental distinction between fact and value statements. Judgments of value or morality have no empirical content of the sort that renders them accessible to tests of validity. Thus it follows that not only is scientific understanding, includ-

ing sociology, seen as a value-free activity, but positivism repudiates any obvious sociopolitical commitment on the part of the researcher. In this context Marxism is seen as having a normative conception of sociology (see Freund 1979). "Positive" sociology, on the other hand, is seen, like the natural sciences, as neutral with respect to values. Scientific knowledge thus comes to have an instrumental value.

(4) Positivism suggests that the natural and social sciences have an essential unity and share a common logical and methodological foundation. The procedures of the natural sciences are therefore applicable to all spheres of life and culture, and positivism holds that science is the only true form of knowledge. Sociological analysis therefore is involved in making causal or lawlike generalizations, in ways that parallel those of the natural sciences. Although there is the suggestion that this involves adopting a mechanistic paradigm, Comte's own theory was functional and organicist (and his outlook, as many have noted, basically conservative). Such a positivistic approach tends to have a behavioristic slant and to exclude meaning and human subjectivity from the analysis. (For useful accounts of positivism from which these points have been extracted, see Giddens 1974, 1979; Bleicher 1982: 37–51.)

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, positivist approaches became dominant in both anthropology and sociology, and at the turn of the century they became dominant even within Marxism itself, as the writings of Kautsky and Plekhanov (1908) indicate. Sociology was conceived as the "natural science of society," and, with qualifications, as materialistic and mechanistic in its essential perspective. This kind of approach, as Stuart Hughes has shown in his admirable survey of European social thought (1958), largely dominated the Anglo-French tradition. And, as he suggests, in both Britain and France utilitarianism and positivism, democracy and natural science became natural partners. In Britain the high priest of positivism was Herbert Spencer, who welded positivism to social Darwinism. An articulate defender and advocate of laissez-faire capitalism, Spencer had an important influence on both anthropology and sociology. I will discuss his theory of religion in the next chapter, along with that of Emile Durkheim. Durkheim, considered by many as a true heir of Comte, was, Giddens suggests, more influential than any other academic social scientist in disseminating a "positivistic sociology" (1979: 245). All the key sociologists at the turn of the century – Durkheim, Pareto, and, as we shall see, Weber – regarded their work as directly challenging historical materialism, largely on the grounds that the latter was empirically invalid (Hughes 1958: 78–9; Llobera 1981). Hence the antithesis between sociology and Marxism to which I have referred.

In contrast, in Germany positivism never took a firm hold, for, as Hughes writes, the predominant philosophical tradition was idealist, and in an important sense this tradition was historical and deeply influenced by the Romantic Movement. Anthropological studies in Germany largely followed the anthropogeographical school, and although Ratzel had an important influence on Franz Boas, the theoretical influence of this school had a minimal effect on the development of anthropology.

Hughes describes the second current of thought as the "recovery of the unconscious." This refers to the writings of a number of scholars – Nietzsche, Bergson, and Freud are important – who stressed the central role of unconscious motivation in human conduct. This was not simply a part of the Romantic reaction against rationalism and science, for both Nietzsche and Freud were critical thinkers who were unwilling, like Marx, to completely repudiate the intellectual insights of the Enlightenment. Although Bergson, like Freud, expressed a humanistic and psychological standpoint, his own philosophy was altogether different: He was more mystical and religious than either Freud or Nietzsche. To suggest, however, that the late nineteenth century was the age of the discovery of the irrational is somewhat misleading, for two reasons. First, as Donald MacRae has noted (1974: 47), the issue of unconscious motivation has a long history and was a central concern of earlier literary figures and philosophers. Second, the stress on the unconscious and, with Bergson, intuition, was only one current of thought, and by no means the dominant one, at the end of the nineteenth century. A crucial figure in this second current of thought was Friedrich Nietzsche.

Nietzsche is a strange, paradoxical figure, a literary philosopher who expressed his ideas in aphorisms. His thought was visionary and prophetic, yet at the same time reactionary. Bertrand Russell (1946) described him as an "aristocratic anarchist," and that perhaps best describes his contradictory personality. Many writers have linked him with Marx and Freud as one of the three key thinkers who have influenced twentieth-century thought. All three were German speakers and lovers of classical Greek thought. All were passionate thinkers who deeply sensed the need for radical change and in various ways were profoundly critical of the temper and culture of their own age. All three had a profound distrust of moral discourse and everyday consciousness, and they collectively represented what Ricoeur has called the "school of suspicion." But in the present context, what is important and what united them was a "common opposition to the phenomenology of the sacred" (Ricoeur 1970: 32), for all three scholars were professed atheists and looked upon the belief in God as a historically determined symptom of human weakness and subordination (Stern 1978: 13–17).

However, although Nietzsche is important as a critical thinker and his polemical writings on what he referred to as the malaise and "decadence" of Western culture are important and poignant, his suggestions for spiritual renewal are banal and reactionary. I find it quite strange that contemporary radicals like Foucault should pay homage to a writer like Nietzsche as supposedly the great liberator from the Hegelian (Marxist) dialectic (see Sheridan 1980). Nietzsche was a tortured soul who suffered ill health for most of his life and finally lapsed into complete insanity in 1889, when he was forty-five years old. And, as Lavrin writes, his quest for philosophical truths was to some extent a surrogate quest for physical and mental health by an isolated and much-suffering man. The philosophy of power that Nietzsche came to espouse was largely, as Russell suggests, delivered from the fantasies of an invalid and the outcome of his fears and pain. His paeans to life and his criticisms of Schopenhauer's oriental ethic of escape and renunciation are laudable, but the misogyny that Nietzsche expresses in his classic study *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1884) and his doctrine of the superman are hardly worthy of emulation. His theory of the "will to power" seems to combine, as Lavrin suggests (1971: 84), the notion of the philosopher as the aristocratic ruler and lawgiver with the Darwinian principle of the "survival of the fittest," the latter being the cornerstone of his sociology. Nietzsche was a passionate individualist who had little but disdain for ordinary people; unlike Hegel and Marx he entertained no vision of the future beyond this martial, aristocratic ethic. But he is close to these writers as a critical thinker who attempted to remain true to the rationalist tradition. As Walter Kaufmann put it, "He tried to strengthen the heritage of the Enlightenment with a more profound understanding of the irrational – something Hegel had attempted three-quarters of a century earlier, but metaphysically and rather esoterically. Nietzsche was determined to be empirical, and he approached his subject – as it surely should be – with psychology" (1971: 16). It is not surprising, therefore, that Nietzsche's ideas should closely resemble the main tenets of psychoanalysis (see Sulloway 1979: 467–8).

But with respect to the present study what is significant about Nietzsche is that he had an acute historical sense (like Hegel, he much admired Heraclitus) and that he wrote some of the most devastating criticisms of religion ever penned. This too is something of a paradox, for on both sides of his family Nietzsche came from a long line of Lutheran pastors, and Lavrin even suggests (1971: 63) that he was by nature gentle and a potential founder of a religion. Nevertheless Nietzsche, in various writings, particularly in one of his last studies, *The Anti-Christ* (1888), developed a bitter and hostile critique of Christianity. He was in fact violently

anti-Christian, arguing that Christianity is a "slave-morality," which, by teaching submission to the will of God, both denigrates human earthly life and restricts human freedom. He is equally critical of the dogmas and hypocrisy of the Christian church. A short extract will illustrate the nature of his rebellion against historical Christianity, in which he is clearly unable to see anything but weakness, mendacity, and utilitarian cant (Lavrin 1971: 67).

In Christianity the instincts of the subjugated and oppressed came into the foreground; it is the lowest classes which seek their salvation in it... A certain sense of cruelty towards oneself and others is Christian... Hatred of mind, of pride, courage, freedom, *liberality* of mind is Christian; hatred of the senses, of the joy of the senses, of joy in general is Christian. (Nietzsche 1968: 131)

As Stern remarks, embedded among the vituperation and incongruities there are some profound insights to be gleaned from Nietzsche's writings, but he offers no theoretical understanding of religion. Like Stirner, he is dogmatic and negative, denying any relevance to religious beliefs. Nor does Nietzsche interest himself in the truth content of religion. As Russell put it, "Nietzsche is not interested in the metaphysical truth of either Christianity or any other religion; being convinced that no religion is really true, he judges all religions entirely by their social effects" (1946: 293) – and these he adjudges to be entirely negative.

When one reflects on the contrast between this critique of Christianity and Nietzsche's own religious background, it comes as no surprise to learn that he felt an acute sense of moral crisis in his own life and period. This is well expressed in the oft-quoted prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

Zarathustra went down the mountain alone... But when he entered the forest, an old man, who had left his holy hut to look for roots in the forest, suddenly stood before him...

"And what does the saint do in the forest?" asked Zarathustra.

The saint answered: "I make songs and sing them, and when I make songs, I laugh, weep, and mutter; thus I promise God... But what do you bring us as a gift?"...

When Zarathustra heard these words, he saluted the saint and said, "What should I have to give you: But let me go quickly, that I may take nothing from you." And thus they parted from one another...

But when Zarathustra was alone, he spoke thus to his heart: "Could it be possible! This old saint has not yet heard in his forest that *God is dead!*" (Nietzsche 1961: 40–1)

The theme "God is dead" is a recurrent one in Nietzsche's writings, and it expresses his sense of a cultural crisis. Critical of the notions of

progress espoused by evolutionary theorists and positivistic thinkers, and – given his heroic individualism – equally critical of both socialism and nationalism, this loss of religious belief left Nietzsche with an “unbearable loneliness.” The “death of god” seemed to him to imply a loss of purpose and meaning both for himself and for European culture. He had a feeling that a spiritual and moral vacuum had begun to overtake the world once religion had lost its validity. The most significant event of the modern world, he felt, was the realization that it was chaotic, meaningless, and disenchanting. It is hardly surprising, then, that Nietzsche, though combining Dionysian nihilism with an aristocratic warrior ethic, became one of the founders of existentialism (see Blackham 1952: 23–42; MacQuarrie 1973).

The third current of thought, the German idealist tradition, essentially involved a return to Kant's dualistic metaphysics, a philosophy that Hegel had attempted to go beyond. Kant had made a fundamental distinction between “scientific” reason, which understood the phenomena of the natural world through the categories of understanding (space, time, causality), and “practical” reason, which grasped ethical reality through intuition. Toward the end of the nineteenth century a group of scholars, conventionally known as the Heidelberg or neo-Kantian school, sought to develop Kant's insights in establishing a science of culture. The more important scholars of this school were the philosophers Windelband, Rickert, and Dilthey and the formal sociologist Georg Simmel. All were critical of the kind of positivistic sociology developed by Comte. The basic tenet of this idealist social thought, especially as formulated by Wilhelm Dilthey, was to suggest a radical distinction between the natural sciences (*Naturwissenschaften*) and the cultural sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*). The distinction is cogently summarized by Don Martindale as follows:

The physical sciences deal with *facts*; the cultural sciences with *meanings*. In the physical sciences, thought takes the form of *explanation*; in the cultural sciences it takes the form of *understanding*. Explanation establishes causal laws and approaches its object from the outside, or externally; understanding links meaning with meaning and grasps its object immediately in facts of intuition . . . The method of explanation in natural science is experiment; the method of understanding in the cultural sciences consists in interpretation by means of ideal types or configurations of meaning. (1961: 378)

Bergson's recourse to the faculty of intuition therefore had much in common, as Hughes notes, with the German idealist school. But Dilthey, that “lonely and neglected genius,” as Collingwood described him (1946: 171), accepted certain elements of positivism in attempting to make the

human sciences as precise and as empirical as natural sciences. Indeed Rickman suggests that Dilthey was a committed empiricist, critical of Hegelian metaphysics (1976: 21). In developing a hermeneutical approach to culture, Dilthey essentially accepted as valid a mechanistic paradigm in the explanation of natural phenomena. But with respect to sociocultural phenomena he advocated a philosophy of life stressing the significance of lived experience and the need for the intuitive understanding of specific cultures or world views. Such understanding, he stressed, could not come through introspection alone but only through a detailed study of history. In a discussion, for example, of philosophical world views (*Weltanschauungen*) Dilthey described three basic varieties: naturalism, reflected in the materialist theories of Hobbes and Democritus; transcendental idealism, exemplified by the dualistic philosophies of Plato, Kant, Schiller, and William James; and objective idealism. The third type Dilthey saw reflected in the speculative philosophies of Heraclitus, Spinoza, Bruno, and Hegel. The implication of Dilthey's approach is, of course, to stress the historical specificity of different types of cultures or world views, and, though highlighting their specific value systems or Geist (spirit), it leaves such values unexplained. It does not account for the “life forms,” and as John Lewis has argued, implies a “total relativism” (1975: 28–33).

Dilthey has had an important influence on contemporary social thought. The distinction between the natural and cultural sciences still remains important to critical theorists of the Frankfurt school, and existentialist and phenomenological writers – Husserl, Heidegger, and Jaspers – have acknowledged their debt to him. Ruth Benedict's classic introduction to anthropology, *Patterns of Culture* (1934), was written from the standpoint of the German idealist tradition, and Hans Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960) is a more recent exposition of this kind of hermeneutics (see Hodges 1974 for a useful exposition of Dilthey's philosophy, and R. H. Brown 1978a for a good, brief assessment of the interpretative method).

The importance of the sociology of Max Weber is that he attempted to combine elements from all three currents of thought. On the one hand he was critical of positivists like Comte who attempted to assimilate the social sciences to the natural sciences. Weber, like Dilthey, stressed the importance of subjective meanings and denied that human culture could be adequately understood without value interpretations. Yet he insisted that valid generalizations could be derived from historical studies. On the other hand he was critical of those like Dilthey who made a radical distinction between the natural and cultural sciences. What Weber attempted, as Talcott Parsons and others have noted, was to bridge the

gap between the two approaches to culture represented by positivism and the Geisteswissenschaften approach. As Dennis Wrong put it, "Weber was attempting to bridge a chasm between two extreme viewpoints representing rival intellectual traditions: the positivism of the natural sciences and German idealism and historicism" (1970: 8). American sociologists like Parsons have always stressed the positivist side of Weber's work, as Wrong suggests, and have ignored his historicism and his stress on meaning-structures.

Max Weber was born in Thuringia in 1864 and was of Lutheran background. His father came from a successful merchant family and was a trained lawyer and a member of the Reichstag. He was authoritarian and conventional, and a staunch nationalist. Weber's mother, on the other hand, was religious and high-minded, and devoted to projects of social welfare. Their marriage, as MacRae describes it, was "one of unhappiness, pietism, and complaint" (1974: 20). Weber's wife Marianne, who wrote an important biography of Weber (1975), also came from a leading industrialist family, so that Weber lived all his life in relative comfort, with ample opportunity for travel, leisure, and study. After studying law at the University of Heidelberg and completing a doctoral thesis on medieval trading companies (1889), Weber became a professor of economics at Freiburg in 1895. But his academic career was cut short due to a "nervous breakdown" that followed a serious quarrel with his father in 1898. The quarrel had all the elements of an oedipal situation, and his father's death shortly afterward left Weber with an acute and crippling depression. After some four years of anxiety he eventually recovered his intellectual powers, and in 1903 he became an associate editor, with Werner Sombart, of a social science journal. It was in the pages of this journal – *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* – that he published his famous essays entitled *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–5). During the next decade Weber lived as a private scholar, engaged in intense and wide-ranging scientific research. During that period he produced a series of studies on political economy, religious sociology, and legal institutions that, in their scope and documentation, have never been surpassed. Weber was something of a polymath, and his erudition was quite remarkable and forbidding. MacRae described him as a "magus." Most of his studies were published after he died, in June 1920, at the early age of fifty-six. During the last two years of his life Weber had become a professor of sociology at Vienna and Munich and was working on a major study, *Economy and Society*, also published posthumously.

Although, owing to his personal disabilities, he was hardly able to cope even with the duties of an academic career, Weber all his life had a

craving to be politically active. A dedicated German nationalist, he had a fascination with power, and John Lewis describes his creed as the "first unambiguous appearance of Social Darwinism as a political philosophy" (1975: 15). Weber and Nietzsche, in fact, had a lot in common; both were "neurotics of genius," obsessed with the pursuit of power yet unable, owing to psychic incapacity, to engage in active political life, although, of course, Weber's militant nationalism and his puritanical personal life would have been anathema to Nietzsche.

Reinhard Bendix described Weber's political position succinctly when he said that Weber was "a lone wolf born into a liberal, middle-class family in late nineteenth-century Germany [who] saw both the decline of liberalism in an emerging power-state and the threat to the individual in the bureaucratization of modern society" (1959: 7).

Weber associated socialism with this increasing bureaucratic tendency, and thus both politically and in his intellectual work his career has been seen as one "long epic campaign" against Marxism (J. Lewis 1975: 13). I will return to the relationship between Marx and Weber later in the study, but it is important to stress here what Weber himself took pains to admit: namely, that his researches reflected the values and aspirations of the German bourgeoisie. (For interesting studies of Weber's life and career, see Gerth & Mills 1948: 3–31; Hughes 1958: 278–335; and Mitzman 1970.)

Weber's conception of sociology is best described by an extract from *Economy and Society*. Sociology, he wrote,

is a science which attempts the interpretative understanding of social action in order thereby to arrive at a causal explanation of its cause and effects. In "action" is included all human behaviour when and in so far as the acting individual attaches subjective meaning to it... Action is social in so far as, by virtue of the subjective meaning attached to it by the acting individual(s), it takes account of the behavior of others and is thereby oriented in its course. (1947: 88)

A number of points may be made about Weber's conception of social science and the methodology this implied. First, Weber's emphasis is on social action, not on social structure. The fundamental unit of analysis for Weber is always the individual, at least in his programmatic statements, for in his sociological analyses of religion the emphasis tends to be on interest groups. Weber thus took what Cohen (1968: 14) described as an "atomistic" approach to social reality, an approach that is mechanistic rather than functional. Weber continually recommends treating collectivities – states, groups, associations, corporations – as "particular acts of individual persons" and appears to eschew functional analysis (1947:

101-4). This approach is often described as "methodological individualism." Weber regarded the reification of collectivities as organisms or as cultural totalities as illegitimate. His approach therefore is quite dissimilar to Durkheim's "holistic" approach to social reality. Both Parsons and MacRae view Weber's rejection of functionalism, with its concepts of social structure, function, and institution, as having limited the development of his sociological theory. On the other hand, although Weber's stress on causality would imply a mechanistic model, Weber, unlike Durkheim, was fundamentally a historical thinker. As Hughes suggests, although Weber never formally studied or taught history, "his whole intellectual life was suffused with historical thinking," and his type of sociology was "firmly lodged within the framework of history" (1958: 325). In this regard, Weber was much closer to Hegel and Marx than he was to Pareto and Durkheim, although Parsons invariably categorizes Weber with these latter theorists. When Wrong describes Weber's intellectual development as being shaped by a "profound historical consciousness" and links him to such nineteenth-century thinkers as Hegel, Comte, Marx, and Spencer, who were concerned with universal interpretations of human history and with understanding the emergent capitalist system, he is, I think, closer to the essential Weber. Weber was a historical sociologist, not a systems analyst (Wrong 1970: 2-3).

Second, in putting an emphasis on meaning Weber suggested a specific method of inquiry, *Verstehen*, best described as comprehending social action through an empathetic understanding of another person's values or culture. But the understanding of subjective meanings or motives did not merely imply ascertaining a particular person's account of his or her own conduct or beliefs; rather, Weber saw *Verstehen* as a "method that could be applied to the understanding of historical events, [even] when there was no one left around to interview" (Parkin 1982: 19). Weber clearly saw this need for interpretative understanding as problematic and suggested that the ability to understand certain mystical states or the feelings and thoughts of preliterate people might be limited (1947: 90-104). Yet in his writings on methodology Weber appears to reject the notion of any "objective meaning," and thus, unlike Marx and Freud, would seem to be unaware of any disjunction between subjective meanings and an "objective" social reality. But as Gerth and Mills suggest (1948: 58), his actual analyses are not consistent with his doctrinal statements on *Verstehen*, and he paradoxically adopts a view that is close to Marx's theory of ideology (cf. Parkin 1982: 26).

It is important, however, to note that Weber is centrally concerned also with explaining social facts; social life must be understood not only subjectively but objectively. Thus interpretative understanding has to be

supplemented by causal analysis. As Weber put it, interpretations that are "meaningfully adequate" must be complemented by a consideration of their "causal adequacy." For Weber this was seen essentially in historical rather than in mechanistic terms and involved determining the role of various antecedent factors underlying a particular social phenomenon or event. Such a causal analysis could only be hypothetical, he felt, involving an imaginative attempt to locate the specific factor that would have a decisive influence in a given sequence of events (Hughes 1958: 306). Weber's mode of analysis is therefore concerned not with function but with meaning and cause, and given his stress on individual motivations he never, as J. Lewis suggests, lapsed into mechanistic materialism (1975: 49).

In order to structure his analyses in a meaningful fashion, Weber devised the concept of "ideal-type." This was merely an analytical construct that refined what social scientists and historians had long been doing in using such terms as *capitalism*, *feudalism*, and *economic man*. For Weber it implied no evaluation or ethical standard; it simply referred to the construction of certain elements of social reality into a logically precise conception. As such it was a "one-sided" abstraction that served as a device for understanding and analysis.

Third, in his essay entitled "Objectivity in Social Science" (1904), Weber not only made a distinction between empirical knowledge and value judgments but suggested that science could never "provide binding norms and ideals from which directives for immediate practical activity can be derived" (1949: 52). From these and similar statement it has been inferred that Weber advocated a "value-free" sociology, a social science that is ethically and politically neutral. Yet it is clear, as Wrong and others have suggested, that what Weber objected to was the practice of his academic contemporaries of preaching in a partisan way to a "captive audience." He neither thought that value judgments should be withdrawn from scientific discussion, nor believed that in fact they could be, for in the last analysis all scientific analysis rests, he argued, on certain subjective ideals. "An attitude of moral indifference," he wrote, "has no connection with 'scientific objectivity'" (1949: 60).

The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism

Weber's essays on the "Protestant ethic" and its relationship to capitalism are widely known and have been the subject of numerous critical studies. It is not my intention to review this extensive literature here but merely to outline Weber's basic thesis. His study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, and its underlying argument fall into three parts. In the

first part Weber defines what he means by the spirit of capitalism; in the second he outlines the Protestant ethic and the distinctive character of the ascetic sects; and finally he explores the relationship between the religious ethic and capitalism.

Capitalism, for Weber, was virtually a universal phenomenon found throughout history, or at least since the rise of city-states. Capitalism, in the sense of enterprises or entrepreneurs utilizing capital (money, or goods with a money value) to make a profit, purchasing the means of production and selling the product, have, like trading activities, a long history and have been found throughout the world. Weber recognized several types of capitalism: booty capitalism, the acquisition of wealth by plunder and speculative adventures; the money-lending activities undertaken by marginal communities; and traditional capitalism, characteristic of earlier enterprises with limited aims, which were not, because of its ethos, geared specifically to profit making. And finally, what he described as rational capitalism; Weber clearly saw this as a recent phenomenon. As he wrote in *The Theory of Economic and Social Organization*, "It is only in the modern Western world that rational capitalistic enterprises with fixed capital, free labour, the rational specialization and combination of functions, and the allocations of productive functions on the basis of capitalistic enterprises, bound together in a market economy, are to be found . . . This difference [between rational capitalism and the earlier forms] calls for an explanation, and the explanation cannot be given on economic grounds alone" (Weber 1947: 279–80).

For Weber, therefore, capitalism, as an economic system involving the rational organization of legally free wage-laborers by the owners of capital, for the sole purpose of pecuniary profit, was a modern phenomenon. Moreover, since this system was seen to affect all aspects of life, Weber saw modern capitalism not simply as an economic system but as a culture or world view (*Weltanschauung*). He was also conscious of the fact that the rise of capitalism was intrinsically linked with the growing power of the modern state (1930: 72). But it is significant that what is distinctive about modern capitalism for Weber is not simply the rational organization of free labor and the conversion of labor (and land) into commodities, but rather its "ethos" or "spirit." The spirit of capitalism is not the essence of capitalism as an economic system, but rather an attitude of mind, the psychological motivation that he felt made modern capitalism possible. It is "that attitude which seeks profit rationally and systematically," that performs labor "as if it were an absolute end in itself." It is a "social ethic" devoted to "the earning of more and more money, combined with the strict avoidance of all spontaneous enjoyment of life" (53). Such an attitude is by no means restricted to the capitalist: For

modern capitalism to function, the workers themselves, Weber felt, must adopt this ethic. He discusses what he describes as "traditionalism," whereby workers respond to higher wages by doing less work, noting that a person does not "by nature" wish to earn more and more money. The necessary "work ethic" has to be induced. Weber considers Benjamin Franklin, in his writings, to exemplify all the "virtues" that constitute the spirit of capitalism: honesty, punctuality, industry, frugality, and restraint. He describes Franklin as a "colourless deist." He was clearly the first Boy Scout. Yet Weber makes the point that there is no one-to-one relationship between this "attitude of mind" and the capitalist enterprise. The latter may be run on purely traditionalist lines, he suggests, and Franklin, though filled with the spirit of capitalism, lived in the Pennsylvania backwoods of the eighteenth century, where capitalism was barely in evidence. Weber also stresses that the impulse to acquisition of goods and pursuit of gain is not in the least identical with the capitalist spirit.

Weber then moves on, in his second essay, to explore the Protestant ethic, for his basic purpose is to investigate "the influence of certain religious ideas on the development of an economic spirit, or the *ethos* of an economic system" (27) — in this instance modern capitalism. Frank Parkin suggests that there is both a weak and strong thesis regarding this relationship within Weber's study. The weak thesis is that there is simply a degree of congruence between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, whereas the strong thesis implies a direct causal link between the ethic and the capitalist mentality (1982: 43). The title of the essay — "The Religious Foundations of Worldly Asceticism" — and the general trend of Weber's thought would suggest that the latter thesis was more fundamental.

A concept that Weber suggests was perhaps unique to Protestant communities, being unknown in classical antiquity or among Catholic peoples, was that of "calling" (*Beruf*), the conception of a task for the individual set by god. Weber argues that Luther cannot be linked with the spirit of capitalism, for his own conception of calling was "traditionalistic": He preached "obedience to authority and the acceptance of things as they were" (86). The key notion for Weber therefore was that of predestination, and the starting point of his analysis was not Luther but the works of Calvin, of Calvinism, and of the other Puritan sects. Weber saw Calvinism as the logical culmination of that great historical process in the development of religions, namely the elimination of magic from the world. This process had begun, he suggests, with the old Hebrew prophets, and, in conjunction with Greek scientific thought, the Calvinists had repudiated all magical means to salvation as superstition

and sin. Such a doctrine implied the absolute transcendence of god and the inner isolation of the individual (105). For the Calvinist, god alone is free, and with his quite incomprehensible decrees has decided the fate of every individual. Only a few are chosen to receive eternal grace. The consequence of this doctrine, Weber suggests, was "a feeling of unprecedented inner loneliness of the single individual" (104).

The doctrine of predestination could, of course, have led to an attitude of fatalism, of complete resignation to one's worldly situation. But Weber felt that this was not what had happened; rather, the doctrine created a feeling of "religious anxiety." In order to counteract this and to induce a feeling of self-confidence, intense worldly activity was recommended. In practice, Weber writes, "this means that God helps those who help themselves. Thus the Calvinist, as it is sometimes put, himself creates his own salvation, or, as would be more correct, the conviction of it" (115).

This mode of salvation was not mystical or emotional, for the believer was a "tool," not a "vessel," of the deity. Weber suggests also that the Puritan sects gave an ethical interpretation to Cartesian rationalism and that this produced a faith unique in its ascetic tendency. Thus Weber concludes that Calvinism added something positive to the ascetic ideal, "the idea of the necessity of proving one's faith in worldly activity... By founding its ethic in the doctrine of predestination it substituted for the spiritual aristocracy of monks outside of and above the world the spiritual aristocracy of the predestined saints of God within the world" (121). In their devaluation of sacraments as a means to salvation, in their repudiation of worldly enjoyments, and in their stress on finding salvation through the everyday routines of life, Weber suggests that Methodism, pietism, and the various Baptist sects, in varying degrees, also advocated a "worldly asceticism." As he put it, Christian asceticism slammed the door of the monastery behind it and "strode into the market-place of life" (154).

In the final essay Weber examines the writings of the Puritan divine Richard Baxter and notes that his objection is not to wealth or property per se but rather to the enjoyment of wealth, with the consequences of idleness and the temptations of the flesh. Particularly important was the preaching of the work ethic. "Work hard in your calling" is a recurrent theme, Weber observes, in Baxter's writings. This implied, of course, disapproval of the spontaneous enjoyment of life or of possessions. An inevitable consequence of this limitation on consumption, combined with acquisitive activity, was, Weber argues, the accumulation of capital. Restrictions on the consumption of wealth made possible the productive investment of capital. The Puritan outlook therefore favored the de-

velopment of a rational bourgeois economic life. As a "psychological sanction" it was equally important to sustain the exploitation of the propertyless worker, including a "specific willingness to work." Thus Weber writes, "The treatment of labour as a calling became a characteristic of the modern worker as the corresponding attitude toward acquisition of the business man" (179).

Weber concludes the study by suggesting that the spirit of capitalism was "born," paradoxically, from the spirit of Christian asceticism, but once having established itself, modern capitalism no longer needed the support of religion. It had now become an economic order bound to the conditions of machine production and deeply influencing every aspect of modern life. Material goods had come to have an "inexorable power over the lives of men," and the order had become a kind of "iron cage." Weber viewed the future with some disquiet. If the capitalist system and its development did not come to an end through the rise of new prophetic movements or the depletion of fossilized fuel, then the future was bleak indeed, a "mechanized petrification."

It is important to realize that Weber, in these essays, was not offering an explanation for the rise of capitalism as an economic system or even suggesting that the spirit of capitalism was derived solely from religious sources. As he explicitly stated:

We have no intention whatever of maintaining such a foolish and doctrinaire thesis as that the spirit of capitalism could only have arisen as the result of certain effects of the Reformation, or even that Capitalism as an economic system is a creation of the Reformation. In itself, the fact that certain forms of capitalist business organization are known to be considerably older than the Reformation is a sufficient refutation of such a claim. (91)

In his *General Economic History* (1923), Weber discussed in some detail the genesis of modern capitalism, and among the necessary preconditions he lists the free market for labor and commodities, rational capital accounting, calculable law, formally free labor, and a rational technology, but the role of religion in the rise of capitalism as an economic institution appears to be seen as minimal. Clearly Weber saw the worldly asceticism of certain Protestant sects as having had an important influence on the development of the capitalist spirit. And he saw the psychological dispositions that this spirit involved — the disciplined, vocational attitude to human activity — as being an important prerequisite for the functioning of modern capitalism. But in no sense is the Protestant ethic the "cause" of capitalism. Yet, as Moore remarks, Protestant religion is important for Weber not only because of its significance at the level of individual

motivation but also because it constitutes a "radical cultural break with tradition" (1971: 85). I will return to this issue later in discussing Weber's sociology of religion. (For useful general outlines of Weber's Protestant ethic thesis, see Bendix 1959: 49-69, and Poggi 1983: 40-78.)

Perhaps no work within the social science tradition has generated as much discussion and controversy as Weber's Protestant ethic thesis. Although I cannot review this literature here, some of the main criticisms leveled at Weber's work may be noted.

The most common criticism directed at Weber's thesis is to deny on empirical grounds, any correlation or affinity between Protestantism and capitalism. The suggestion is that capitalism existed prior to and independently of the Protestant ethic in such countries as Italy, France, Spain, and Portugal. Conversely, in countries like Switzerland and Scotland, where ascetic Protestantism flourished, no capitalist development took place. Samuelson concluded his well-known critique by suggesting that "whether we start from the doctrines of Puritanism and 'capitalism' or from the actual concept of a correlation between religion and economic action, we can find no support of Weber's theories. Almost all the evidence contradicts them" (1961: 154). Along similar lines, H. M. Robertson (1933) argued that the development of capitalism in both Holland and England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was due not to its Protestant ethos but to wider economic factors, particularly mercantile trade. More recently both Trevor-Roper (1963) and Luethy (1970) have stressed that in the Reformation period all the bases of the modern world - high technological development, capital, world trade, and global power - were almost exclusively present in countries that were and remained Catholic (Italy, Spain). Thus they emphasize the crucial importance of the Counter/Reformation in the creation of immigrant business communities in the Netherlands.

The problem with all these various critiques by historians of Weber's thesis is that they are in a sense misplaced, for as Tawney (1938) long ago pointed out, in these early essays on the Protestant ethic Weber made no attempt to advance a comprehensive theory of the genesis and development of capitalism. His aim, as I have noted earlier, was more limited. Moreover, Weber's conception of causation is complex and pluralistic, and he specifically disclaimed attempting to provide the "foolish and doctrinaire thesis" that the spirit of capitalism - let alone capitalism itself - was derived from religion. Weber's primary concern in these essays was only with the origins of the modern capitalist mentality. In an important recent discussion of these issues Gordon Marshall concludes,

As Weber is well aware, a huge number of diverse factors are responsible for the precise nature of the modern economic order: it cannot be derived entirely from ascetic Protestantism. In other words, the world view engendered by the Protestant Churches and sects in question can only have the influence on the direction of economic developments and change that Weber claims, where the various other preconditions for such change are also present. "The Spirit of Capitalism" will be associated with modern, rational, capitalistic forms of enterprise only where the objective possibility for the development of such enterprises exists. (1982:138)

Thus the fact that Calvinism in Scotland was not associated with any marked capitalistic development of the economy is no refutation of Weber's thesis, for he never claimed that the Protestant ethic was the causal factor in the origin of capitalism (see Eldridge 1972: 40; Marshall 1980).

A second line of criticism focuses on Weber's depiction of the Protestant ethic. Many writers have suggested that Weber did not accurately represent the original teachings of Calvin, that neither Calvin nor Baxter preached a "free for all capitalism" (Samuelson 1961: 31), and that there was no marked difference between Catholic and Calvinist theology with respect to their condemnation of wealth and their stress on the desirability of orderly and disciplined work. Yet as Marshall indicates in defending Weber against these criticisms, these critiques are also in a sense misplaced (1982: 83-8). Weber did not suggest that Calvinist preachers consciously advocated capitalism, but rather that their stress on "calling," coupled with the Puritan ethic (together comprising a worldly asceticism), had the unintentional consequences of capital accumulation. With regard to Robertson's suggestions of a similarity between Catholic and Calvinist doctrines in their tendency to foster a capitalistic spirit by stressing thrift, work, and calling, both Talcott Parsons (1935) and Marshall point out that he does not seriously engage himself in Weber's argument, particularly with respect to the "psychological sanction" that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination entailed.

A final series of criticisms has recently been put forward by Gordon Marshall (1982: 97-131). Although fully recognizing the specific nature of Weber's thesis and suggesting that much of the criticism against it has been "ill-informed," Marshall argues that Weber's thesis is not fully substantiated by empirical evidence and that at times Weber defines Puritanism and the spirit of capitalism almost in terms of each other, thus rendering his argument somewhat tautologous. (For further discussions of the Protestant ethic thesis, see Green 1961, Eisenstadt 1968, and Nelson 1973.)

Weber's sociology of religion

A unifying theme of Weber's sociology is the notion of the progressive rationalization of life as the main directional trend of Western society. Like Marx, Spencer, and Durkheim, Weber was essentially an evolutionary thinker and was preoccupied with the dissolution of "traditional" European culture and society, the rise of modern science and industrial capitalism, and the increasing bureaucratization and political centralization. By "rationalization" Weber implied a process whereby explicit, intellectually calculable rules and procedures are systematized and specified, and increasingly substituted for sentiment and tradition, and implied a form of normative control, a kind of legitimized power that Weber called "legal-rational authority." Weber defined the latter mode of legitimacy as "resting on a belief in the 'legality' of patterns of normative rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands" (1947: 328). Weber contrasted this kind of legitimate domination with traditional and charismatic authority. Significantly, however, he saw this form of domination as the result of a gradual process of social development. As Bendix and others have suggested, Weber followed Hegel in having a teleological conception of history. Like Hegel, Weber insisted that nature comprises of cyclical and repetitive events, whereas history is made up of nonrepetitive acts (Bendix 1959: 387). Yet although Weber was preoccupied throughout his career and writings with the development of rationalism in Western culture and indeed saw rationalization as a central historical trend, he was filled with foreboding about its eventual outcome. Rationalization essentially demystified life and implied a purely instrumental relationship toward the natural world and toward people. He therefore, as Bendix notes, saw both reason and freedom as being in jeopardy in the modern world. The modern bureaucracy epitomized this functional rationality. Weber, therefore, like Freud, is, paradoxically, a pessimistic rationalist. The opening words of Herbert Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* could well be applied to Weber's sociology. Marcuse writes, "The concept of man that emerges from Freudian theory is the most irrefutable indictment of Western civilization – and at the same time the most unshakable defence of this civilization" (1969: 29). Weber was an articulate spokesperson for bourgeois values and interests, and yet at the same time he was a leading critic of industrial capitalism, not blinded, as John Lewis wrote (1975: 88), by either complacency or optimism. Weber nowhere expressed this better than in quoting a phrase of Schiller's: "The fate of our times," Weber remarked, "is characterised by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment' of the

world. Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life" (Gerth & Mills 1948: 155). Like Nietzsche and Freud, but unlike Durkheim, Weber was, as Hughes cogently expressed it, a "hesitant, self-divided and enormously troubled" individual (1958: 288). "Not summer's bloom lies ahead of us," Weber wrote, "but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardness" (Gerth & Mills 1948: 128). Not surprisingly, Hughes concluded that although Weber's politics were potentially dangerous, he was, as a diagnostician of contemporary society, "without a peer" (333).

An underlying theme, therefore, of Weber's sociology of religion is the notion of rationalization: the increasing systematization of religious ideas and concepts, the growth of ethical rationalism, and the progressive decline of ritual and "magical" elements in religion.

Weber's writings on the sociology of religion, leaving aside the essays on the Protestant ethic, fall into two categories. First there are the *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion* (*Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, 1920–1), which, besides an introductory essay entitled "The Social Psychology of the World Religions" (Gerth & Mills 1948: 268–301), includes Weber's important discussions of the religions of China (Confucianism and Taoism), India (Hinduism and Buddhism), and ancient Palestine (Weber 1951, 1952, 1958). Second, there is an important section, entitled *Religionssoziologie* (*The Sociology of Religion*), of monographic length, that forms a part of Weber's vast systematic treatise *Economy and Society* (*Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*), which was published posthumously in 1925 (Weber 1965). The two studies cover essentially the same issues. Detailed in scope, and indicating enormous historical erudition, I can outline only some of the more important themes here.

Unlike Durkheim, Weber refused to define religion. Definition of such a complex phenomenon as religion can be attempted, Weber suggests, only at the conclusion of a study. But he implies that a belief in the supernatural is universal and found in all early forms of society. Tribal religion, however, though "relatively rational," Weber considered to be essentially magical and ritualistic and oriented toward this world. "Elementary" forms of religion, he suggests, are focused on mundane, worldly concerns: health, rain making, prosperity. Thus, he writes, "religious or magical behaviour or thinking must not be set apart from the range of everyday purposive conduct, particularly since even the ends of religious and magical acts are predominantly economic" (1965: 1). The distinction, therefore, between natural causation and magic is a modern one that is not applicable to preliterate thought, which implies a different kind of distinction, namely the degree to which objects and persons are endowed with extraordinary powers. Weber used the term

charisma to refer to such powers. Folk concepts such as "orenda" and "mana" refer to this "natural endowment." Weber suggests, then, that preliterary thought is essentially naturalistic or preanimistic. The oldest of all "vocations," therefore, Weber suggests, is that of the diviner, the magician or shaman who is permanently endowed with "charisma" and who, through the induction of narcotics or other procedures, is able to experience ecstatic states. The concept of the soul, Weber argues, is by no means universal and is denied even by religions of salvation like Buddhism. Rather, ideas such as the soul and spiritual concepts like gods and demons develop as part of a process whereby "magic is transformed from a direct manipulation of forces into a symbolic activity." Weber therefore saw a "preanimistic naturalism" as being transformed into "mythological thinking," a pattern of thought that is "the basis of the fully developed circle of symbolic concepts." The importance of analogy is stressed in this substantive evolution of culture, which implies a trend toward formalism and toward the conception of the sacred as an unalterable cosmic order. "Analogical thinking originated in the region of magic, which is based completely on analogy, rationalized into symbolism" (1965: 10).

With the development of culture, this implied, as in Roman religion, that each spirit had a specialized function, although Weber did not see any simple relationship between religious concepts and social patterns. It could not be argued, he suggests, that the development of Mother Earth as a goddess simply reflects the development of a matriarchal (matrilineal) clan organization. But he notes that the belief that earth divinities are inferior to celestial personal gods often follows the development of feudalism and that there is a close relationship between ancestral cults and the patriarchal structure of the economy. Like Durkheim, Weber argues that religion acts as a cohesive force unifying members of a household, clan, or tribal confederation. The primary bond of the household or kin group in tribal societies "is the relationship to the spirits of the ancestors" (1965: 10). Likewise the Greek polis (city-state), as well as decentralized patrimonial states and such early theocratic states as Egypt and China were essentially religious or cult associations. In China, for example, the emperor was also the high priest who monopolized the cult of the spirits of nature.

With the development of religion, the primacy of local deities or even of a simple transcendental god becomes crystallized, but this in no way eliminated the ancient magical notions. Instead it produced a dual relationship between humans and the supernatural domain. Thus a dichotomy arises between the shaman/magician and the priest, and between magic and religion. The unity of the primitive image of the

world, in which everything was concrete magic, tends to split, Weber writes, "into rational cognition and mastery of nature, on the one hand, and into mystic experiences, on the other" (Gerth & Mills 1948: 282). Whereas magical rites have an essentially manipulative or coercive character, religious development implies an increasing predominance of non-magical motives. Weber uses the terms *magic* and *religion* as ideal types, noting that religion, practically everywhere, contains numerous magical components. Weber considered priests, in contradiction to magicians, to be religious functionaries who have specialized knowledge and vocational qualifications. They are intrinsically linked with a specific cult or association, though Weber acknowledges that a magician may be a member of an organized guild. In contrast to priests, however, the latter are self-employed and exert influence through personal gifts (charisma). But, significantly, Weber sees the priestly function as associated both with the development of religious doctrine as a rational system of religious concepts and with the systematization of a distinctively religious ethic. There is no priesthood without a cult and no cult without metaphysical doctrines and a religious ethic. With respect to this systematization of sacred ordinances, particularly as indicated in the religious systems of India, Egypt, China, and Babylonia, Weber writes,

The process of rationalization favoured the primacy of universal gods; and every consistent crystallization of a pantheon followed systematic rational principles to some degree, since it was always influenced by professional sacerdotal rationalism or by the rational striving for order on the part of secular individuals. Above all, it is the aforementioned relationship of a rational regularity of the stars in their heavenly courses, as regulated by divine order, to the inviolable sacred social order in terrestrial affairs, that makes the universal gods the responsible guardians of both these phenomena. (1965: 22)

Weber thus saw such rational cosmological systems as intrinsically linked with bureaucratic states and the stability of their social orders. The development of large empires and the need for orderly legislation is seen as parallel to the "increasing scope of a rational comprehension of an eternal, enduring, and orderly cosmos" (1965: 35). Taboos are also seen as the first and the most general instance of harnessing religion to extrareligious purposes — economic and social interests. It is of interest here to note that Weber denied the universality of totemism, suggesting that the derivation of all groups and all religion from totemism was an exaggeration (40).

Weber saw the priesthood as functioning as the "bearer" of the systematization and rationalization of religious culture, particularly of religious ethics. This was in the nature of a developmental process. The

prophet is also seen as a key agent in this process, but this rationalization is achieved through a kind of "breakthrough" to a higher, more integrated cultural order. The prophet, for Weber, is the prototypical charismatic leader. The concept of charisma is a fundamental one in Weber's sociology; it is, he writes, a term "applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities" (1947: 358). Weber saw charisma exemplified in many different types – the trance dancer, the shaman, heroes, certain intellectuals – as well as the prophet or savior. He linked charisma to a specific form of legitimate domination, noting that it was outside the realm of everyday routine and the profane sphere and "sharply opposed to both rational, and particularly bureaucratic, authority, and to traditional authority, whether in its patriarchal, patrimonial, or any other form" (1947: 361).

The prophet, therefore, was a "purely individual bearer of charisma, who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or divine commandment" (1965: 46). The person may be a reformer or a founder of a new religion. Because the prophet's claim is based on a personal revelation, his or her function, Weber suggests, is quite different from that of a priest, who dispenses salvation by virtue of his office and is a member of a corporate enterprise of salvation. Like the shaman/magician the prophet is endowed with charisma. Unlike the shaman, however, the prophet proclaims a definite revelation and is not remunerated. The distinction between a magician and a prophet, however, Weber felt to be a fluid one, for prophets very often practiced divination as well as magical healing and counseling. Weber suggests that it is likely that all forms of prophecy first arose in connection with the growth of the Asiatic world empires (48) and that prophecy therefore was not characteristic of early tribal societies. He notes also that prophets rarely emerged from the priestly class and that not all ecstatic cults were prophetic movements. He makes the distinction between religious reformers who were not prophets (Sankara, Ramanuja, Luther, Wesley), since they did not offer a substantively new revelation, and true prophets, suggesting that the prophecy of the latter is of two types. The first is the exemplary type of prophecy characteristic of Lao-tzu and the Buddha, in which salvation is a "way" suggested by personal example. This kind of prophecy is associated, Weber implies, with the kind of pantheistic, cosmological religious systems found in China and India. The second is the ethical type of prophecy, exemplified by the prophecy of Zoroaster, Moses, and Muhammad, in which the prophet is perceived as an instrument or messenger of a personal, transcendental, and ethical deity. Weber sees

this kind of prophecy as a Near Eastern phenomenon, and he goes on to suggest that the conception of a transcendental creator-spirit may have arisen out of the circumstances of the Near East. The absolute power of the monarchs of Mesopotamia and Egypt, coupled with irrigation agriculture, which did indeed "produce a harvest out of nothing," may have resulted in the notion of a "free-acting, transcendental and personal god" (1965: 57). But, significantly, Weber suggests that the earliest prophecy was "determined decisively" by the pressure put by state systems on less developed neighboring peoples – specifically, of course, the Hebrew peoples of Palestine, caught between these two powerful theocratic states. What is of crucial significance for Weber with regard to prophets, however, is that they provided for their followers a "conception of the world as a cosmos . . . a 'meaningful,' ordered totality" (59). Philosophy therefore emanated, he suggests, from these cosmological schemata of prophets and priests. Weber indeed implies that there is a metaphysical need or "inner compulsion" on the part of the human mind "to understand the world as a meaningful cosmos" (117). But unlike some contemporary anthropologists, Weber is aware of the distinction between these ordered conceptions of the world and our experience of "life in the empirical world," and he recognized the resultant tensions or conflict between them.

Every prophecy, Weber writes, by its very nature devalues the magical elements of the priestly enterprise, and he notes Buddha's scorn for the spirit cults and the attitude of the prophets of Israel toward magicians and soothsayers. He notes, too, the tensions that have everywhere existed between priests and prophets, though the nature of this relationship is variable. Weber expressed the contrast between these two functionaries as follows:

Prophets systematized religion with a view to simplifying the relationship of man to the world, by reference to an ultimate and integrated value position. On the other hand, priests systematized the content of prophecy or of the sacred traditions by supplying them with a casuistical, rationalistic framework of analysis, and by adopting them to the customs of life and thought of their own class and of the laity which they controlled. (69)

Weber thus saw the personal following of a prophet as inevitably developing, if the cult is to survive, into a religious "community" or congregation. As he put it, "A religious community arises in connection with a prophetic movement as a result of routinization [*Veralltäglichen*], . . . a process whereby either the prophet himself or his disciples secure the permanence of his preaching" (60). Weber therefore saw a complex interrelationship existing not only between priests and prophetic move-

ments but also between priests and the laity, whose needs and aspirations, he suggests, have influenced the content of all the world religions.

Weber's underlying concern in his writings on religion is to determine the historical preconditions that have given rise to specific "economic ethics," not only in western Europe but in India, China, and the Near East. Because he did not see an economic ethic as simply a function of the economic organization, in his essay "The Protestant Ethic" he explored, as we have seen, the relationship between ascetic Protestantism and the spirit of capitalism. But Weber felt that Western Protestantism a unique phenomenon, and he was concerned, therefore, to examine the economic ethic implied by the value systems of Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam — to see if, and to what extent, their religious ethics were conducive to capitalist development. In his studies of comparative religion Weber thus sought to indicate the manner in which the belief systems of the oriental religions acted as impediments to the growth of a "rational" economic outlook. As Wrong indicated, Weber was convinced that Christianity contained within itself the latent dynamism of the prophetic tradition of the Hebrews, a dynamism that was lacking in the religions of China and India. It is not surprising, therefore, that Weber's main concern in his sociology of religion is to indicate the social psychology of the world religions, their economic ethic, and to explore the interrelationship between religious culture and the economic interests of specific social groups. The way in which he related religious beliefs to the class or status position of believers has in fact led some writers to describe Weber as a crude materialist (Parkin 1982: 52–3).

As we have seen, Weber considered the religion of tribal communities to be essentially concerned with practical matters, and as primarily magical and this-worldly. The "sacred values" of preliterate people, he suggested, were the "solid goods of this world": health, long life, and wealth. He saw the folk religion of peasants as having a similar orientation. A lot of the peasants, Weber wrote, is so strongly tied to nature, so dependent on organic processes and natural events, that they have always "been inclined towards magic." They have been little oriented to the rational systematization of religion. "Only tremendous transformations of life-orientation have succeeded in tearing them away from this universal and primeval form of religiosity" (Gerth & Mills 1948: 283). Enslavement or proletarianization is linked by Weber to the prophetic movements that "break" this traditional order. And he suggests that the more agrarian the cultural pattern, the more likely that the peasant population will follow a "traditional" pattern and lack "ethical rationalism"; they remain involved in animism and ritual magic. Weber ques-

tions the popular notion of "peasant piety," suggesting that this idea stems from the romantic pastoral ideas of an urban literati.

On the other hand Weber suggests that the feudal nobility, the land-owning military aristocracy, had a general aversion to ethical or emotional religiosity. He writes, "Concepts like sin, salvation, and religious humility have not only seemed remote from all elite political classes, particularly the warrior nobles, but have indeed appeared reprehensible to its sense of honour" (1965: 85). Although prophetic religion is not incompatible with a warrior aristocracy, on the whole they have tended to exhibit a "thoroughly negative attitude toward salvation and congregational religion" (88). Thus neither the lords nor the peasants, under stable conditions, have a desire for salvation, and there is little tendency among these groups to develop a systematic theodicy. The distinctive attitude of a bureaucratic class toward religion also indicates a lack of feeling for salvation or for any transcendental anchorage for ethics. Confucianism, the religion of the Chinese literati, is an important example of this attitude. It expressed a hostility to all forms of ecstatic or emotional religion that went "beyond the traditional belief in spirits, and the maintenance of the ancestral cult and of filial piety as the universal basis for social subordination" (90). Merchant nobles of the medieval period also expressed in their religion a this-worldly orientation lacking any inclination for prophetic or ethical religion.

In contrast to these social strata, artisan classes throughout history, Weber suggests, have exhibited a variety of religious attitudes. These include religions of the sacramental and orgiastic types in the ancient cities and in India; animism and Taoist magic in China; orgiastic dervish religion and contemplative Sufism in Islam; and the enthusiastic and congregational religion of early Christianity. Like Kautsky, Weber argued that ancient Christianity was essentially a religion of urban artisans, its savior Jesus being a semirural artisan and its earliest communities centered in urban settings. From this Weber argues that there is no absolute determinism of religion by economic factors among artisans, but he does suggest that the lower middle class has a tendency toward a rational, ethical religion of the congregational type.

Although the modern proletariat, Weber suggests, are indifferent to or even reject religion, he does strongly indicate that the need for salvation has as its main foci the disprivileged classes. The charisma of the prophet is not confined to the membership of any particular class, but the prophet's doctrine derives essentially from the intellectual horizon of the depressed classes. Weber writes, "As a rule . . . the oppressed, or at least those threatened by distress, were in need of a redeemer and

prophet: the fortunate, the propertied, the ruling strata were not in such need. Therefore, in the great majority of cases, a prophetically announced religion of redemption has had its permanent locus among the less-favoured social strata" (Gerth & Mills 1948: 274).

In his well-known study of cargo cults in Melanesia, Peter Worsley makes some important criticisms of Weber's concept of charisma, noting that it is a datum rather than an explanatory concept (1957: 294), but Worsley's central thesis, namely that millennialism is best understood as a social response to deprivation and oppression, largely accords with Weber's own theory. As Weber wrote, "Since every need for salvation is an expression of some distress, social and economic oppression is an effective source of salvation beliefs," adding, in typical Weberian fashion, the qualification "though by no means the exclusive source." But, significantly, Weber continues, "Other things being equal, classes with high social and economic privilege will scarcely be prone to evolve the idea of salvation. Rather they assign to religion the primary function of legitimizing their own life pattern and situation in the world" (1965: 107).

What the privileged classes require of religion, Weber concludes, if anything at all, is this psychological reassurance of legitimacy. Always trying to encompass the complexity of social life, Weber is hesitant to suggest any direct and simple relationship between religion and economic interests. Yet Parson's suggestion in his introduction to Weber's work (1965) that Weber is mainly concerned to show that prophetic movements are not movements of economic protest on the part of non-privileged classes is somewhat misleading. The tenor of Weber's discussion suggests otherwise. The lower the social class, he wrote, the more radical are the forms assumed by the need for a savior (102).

In his discussion of both prophetic movements and the development of intellectualism by the priesthood, Weber notes two phenomena of interest. One is the "great receptivity of women to all religious prophecy except that which is exclusively military or political in orientation" (104). Weber notes the tendency among ecstatic cults of the disprivileged classes for women to be accorded equal status and to be the primary devotees of such cults. The other is to suggest that beneath the official doctrines of the world religions, with their intellectual conceptions of an "imperial and ethical cosmic order" or an "absolutely transcendent god," there developed a "religion of the masses." Thus alongside the Confucian class ethic of the bureaucracy and literati, Taoist magic and animism survived; alongside the Buddhist salvation ethic of the monastic groups the magic and spirit cults of the laity continued to function; finally, "Islam and Catholicism were compelled to accept local, functional, and occu-

pational gods as saints, the veneration of which constituted the real religion of the masses in everyday life" (104).

A strong psychological tendency pervades Weber's work. He speaks of the psychological "need" of the ruling classes to legitimize their power and economic status, and he likewise postulates a "drive" towards meaning. But any conception of a meaningful cosmic order must, Weber suggested, come to terms with the world's imperfections. Some explanation for the suffering and injustice that are evident in the world is needed, particularly since with increasing rationalization the interpretation of meaning became, Weber implied, more problematic. The problem of theodicy, as Weber called it, had been resolved by the world religions in three distinct ways, he suggests, leaving aside the messianic eschatologies associated with prophetic movements.

The first solution is the notion of *predestination*, or providence, which Weber saw typified in the story of Job and which he considered was a consistent rationalization of divinatory magic. Such a theodicy is linked with a transcendental conception of a god who has unlimited power over his creation and whose motives are in principle inaccessible to human understanding. As we have seen, Calvinism, and to some extent Islam, represent this kind of solution to the problem of meaning.

The second solution is *dualism*, a theodicy that contrasts god's goodness and purity with its antithesis, the powers of darkness and evil, personified as the Demiurge. This theodicy is expressed by Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and gnosticism.

The final and the most complete formal solution to the problem of theodicy Weber saw expressed in the Indian doctrine of *karma*. This is the notion of the world as a self-contained cosmos in which the fate of the human soul depends on a system of ethical merit or demerit. It is a "universal mechanism of retribution," Weber writes, which supplants natural causality. The belief in the transmigration of souls also incorporates animistic beliefs and represents a "radical" solution to the theodicy of suffering. The doctrine of karma is central to both Hinduism and Buddhism and is associated with a nondualistic, immanent conception of divinity.

Weber is aware that the paths to salvation are many and various — through ritual, piety, and ecstasy — and he notes too that not all religions are concerned with salvation (tribal cults and Confucianism, for example). Yet his main concern is to stress the distinction between two primary forms of salvation, which he terms "inner-worldly asceticism" and "contemplative mysticism." The distinction is closely related to his earlier contrast between ethical and exemplary prophecy. The worldly ascetic,

for Weber, is a "rationalist" whose opposition to the world takes the form of "rejection" rather than of "flight." Although enjoyment of sensual experience and worldly wealth is deplored, for the ascetic this does not imply inactivity or disengagement from the world. To the contrary, it implies "struggle" and "control" over the world, the ascetic being the "instrument" of god's will. As expected, examples of this type of salvation were to be seen, Weber observes, among the various ascetic Protestant sects discussed in *The Protestant Ethic*. On the other hand, the mystic, exemplified again by Lao-tzu and the Buddha, is considered by Weber to be engaged in a contemplative "flight" from the world, stressing inactivity, cessation of thought, and a "mystical union" with the divine, or a psychological state of nonattachment. The mystic desires to be a "vessel" of god, not an "instrument," and to minimize his or her activity within the world. Weber contrasts the two types of salvation in the following passage, though again he stresses that the distinction between asceticism and mysticism is a "fluid" one:

Neither asceticism nor contemplation affirms the world as such. The ascetic rejects the world's empirical character of creatureliness and ethical temptations to sensual indulgence, to epicurean satisfaction and to reliance upon natural joys and gifts. But at the same time he affirms individual rational activity within the institutional framework of the world... On the other hand, the contemplative mystic living within the world regards action, particularly action performed within the world's institutional framework, as in its very nature a temptation against which he must maintain his state of grace. (1965: 173-4)

Thus the typical mystic is not a person actively involved in any rational transformation of the mundane world, although, as Weber stresses, he or she would be unable to stay alive if the world were not constantly engaged in that very labor that the mystic brands as sinful and as alienating from god or liberation. Weber emphasizes that the concept of a transcendental god, which he believes arose in Asia Minor and was later imposed upon the Occident, was important in undermining the mystical form of salvation and made the mystical union with god impermissible or possibly blasphemous. Not surprisingly, the Catholic church and orthodox Islam (and Confucianism in China), as well as the Hebrew prophets have consistently denounced ecstatic forms of religion. On the other hand Weber remarks on the association between contemplative mysticism and the Asiatic religions and stresses the importance of labor as the distinctive mark of Christian monasticism. Thus only in the European context did inner-worldly asceticism develop. This kind of religion, he argued, demanded not celibacy but the avoidance of erotic pleasure; not poverty but the elimination of all idle enjoyment from worldly income;

not the life of the cloister but a controlled pattern of life. Only in the ascetic Protestant sects did this kind of religious ethic flourish, and its consequences Weber considered crucial in the development of the spirit of capitalism.

Comparative studies

Although MacRae considers Weber's treatise *The Sociology of Religion*, which I have just summarized, a "very barren text" (1974: 90), in my view it is a wide-ranging survey full of seminal ideas. Talcott Parsons's suggestion in his introduction to the work that it is "the most important single segment of [Weber's] work" is not an exaggeration, for it crystallizes many of the themes and issues that Weber had earlier broached in his comparative studies. Weber, as Bendix and others have noted, was centrally concerned in his comparative work with a number of aims: to delineate the economic ethic and secular implications of the world's major religious beliefs; to determine the factors relevant for understanding the distinctive character of Western industrial capitalism; and to explore the relationship between religious ideas and specific interest groups or classes. With regard to the latter concern, Weber, as we have noted, examined the implications of a particular pattern of life (*habitus* is Weber's main term for this) in determining the style of its associated religion. Unlike Durkheim, therefore, Weber conceived of society not as an organic totality but as an arena of conflicting interest groups or strata. Unlike Marx and Engels, however, his emphasis is not on economic class per se but on status groups (*Stand*). He defines the status group, in contradiction to class, as consisting of a group of individuals who share a common culture or "style of life," an occupation or mode of living, and a specific prestige ranking. In his comparative studies of religion the status groups that are of particular interest to Weber are those that he describes as the "primary carriers" or propagators of the world religions. In Confucianism it is the "world-organizing bureaucrat; in Hinduism the world-ordering magician; in Buddhism, the mendicant monk wandering through the world; in Islam, the warrior seeking to conquer the world; in Judaism, the wandering trader; and in Christianity, the itinerant journeyman" (1965: 132). The influence of these various groups Weber did not consider an exclusive one, and he notes that the dominant strata may change through the course of history, but nonetheless it is these specific groups that, as "ideological carriers," have most strongly influenced the practical ethic of their respective religions. In his study *The Religion of China* (1951) Weber therefore puts a central focus on the Chinese literati, administrative officials who formed a bu-