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## Weber's Masterly Work: "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism"

His concept of religion is more ethical than theological. Religion is a vital influence in everyday life. Weber wanted to examine its influence on the life of people. In his studies in the sociology of religion, Weber was trying to answer one fundamental question: "To what extent the religious conceptions of the world and of existence have influenced the economic behaviour of various societies?" Weber's Purpose was not to Attack "The Economic Deterministic Theory" of Karl Marx: It is often said that Weber wanted to test the basic contention of Karl Marx according to whom, "all cultural phenomena, including religion, are fundamentally determined by the evolution of economic forces." It is further argued that instead of explaining religious and other cultural behaviour in terms of economic forces as Marx did, Weber wanted to explain economic behaviour in terms of religion. It is wrong to say that Weber undertook the study of religion with the sole intention of disproving or attacking the economic deterministic theory of Marx.

Max Weber partially disagreed with the Marxian view. He, however, accepted that Marx's approach was useful and might be correct in many instances, but he maintained that under certain circumstances religious or other ideas could influence social change. Like Marx, he never developed single factor theory. For him, economic factor is not the only factor which influences religion. On the other hand, religion itself gets influenced by social system, ethics of a community and the economic system. : Weber was very much fascinated by the growth of modern capitalism of the West which was rapidly transforming the European and American societies of his time.

But why had capitalism first emerged in Europe rather than in, say, China or India, was a question for which Weber wanted to find a suitable answer.

Weber undertook a massive study of the major world religions and the societies in which they were found and concluded that the answer lay in specific religious beliefs – say, Calvinism and other forms of Puritanism. In other words, Weber's studies helped him to establish a correlation between the Protestant Ethic and the development of modern Capitalism in Europe. According to Raymond Aron, Weber wanted to establish two main propositions in this work. (i) The behaviour of men in various societies could be understood only in the context of their general conception of existence or world view.

Religious dogmas and their explanations also form a part of the world view. Hence, the religious outlook of the people can help one to understand the behaviour of individuals and groups, including their economic behaviour. (ii) Religious conceptions are actually a determinant of economic behaviour and hence one of the causes of economic changes.

: Weber pointed out that modern capitalism is not like traditional commercial activity. Previously consumption of wealth was regarded as a thing of the higher value than the earning of it. Modern capitalism, on the other hand, requires rational, calculated procedures (such as accounting) in a methodical attempt to accumulate money. Hard work and making money are regarded as high values in themselves, but the spending of money in luxurious living is disreputable.

Instead, the capital must be reinvested to earn yet more capital. Weber felt that some new approach towards wealth must have been the source of inspiration for the rapid growth of capitalism in modern Europe. Hard work: Weber argued that this approach stemmed from the Protestant Ethic of hard work and deferred gratification. Weber made two observations: (i) Great material achievements have resulted from the work of monastic orders, and (ii) Specifically, ascetic Protestant sects were noted for their economic success. Therefore, Weber projected a hypothesis: “ There appeared to (be) a paradoxically positive relationship between ascetic religious belief and economic enterprise. The “ religious belief refers to Protestant Ethic and “ economic enterprise” denotes capitalism. On the basis of his historical study Weber asserted that modern capitalism emerged not simply by inner economic necessity, but by the religious ethic of Protestantism, and particularly of Calvinism. The early Calvinists believed that they had been predestined by God to salvation in heaven or damnation in hell.

No one could do anything to change his or her fate, and only a small minority was among the elect who would go to heaven. The duty of the believers was to abstain from pleasure and to spend their lives working for the glory of God. Thus, the Calvinists looked for “ signs” that they were among the elect – and found these signs in their worldly success. The more successful a person was at work, the more likely he or she was to be among the elect. Since profits could not be spent on pleasure, they had to be reinvested. Modern capitalism was born, thus, argued Weber.

It is interesting to note that the very people who rejected material comforts unwittingly created industrial capitalism. By a further supreme irony,

industrialism encouraged the development of modern, rational, scientific world view. In this world view, religion has virtually no place. Modern capitalists, however, have retained the “Protestant Ethic” on which their success is largely found. : As it is made clear Weber observed that capitalism was growing very fast in the West. He felt that capitalism of the Western type was growing more in Protestant societies than in others. This observation made him advance the hypothesis that – “a certain interpretation of Protestantism has created some of the motivations favourable to the formation of the capitalistic regime.

” As Raymond Aron has pointed out Weber set out to establish this hypothesis or thesis in three stages: 1. Collection of Statistics in Support of his Idea: Weber collected statistics to support the following observation: In regions of mixed religions in Germany, Protestants and particularly Calvinists occupied economically dominant positions. This did raise the question whether the religious ideas influence the economic activity. 2. Establishment of a Correlation between the Spirit of Protestantism and the Spirit of Capitalism: Weber made an analytical study of Protestantism to establish an intellectual or spiritual affinity between the spirit of the Protestant Ethic and the spirit of capitalism. It means, he established a correlation between “a religious way of thinking in the world and an attitude towards economic activity.” 3. Study of other Religions to find out the Relevance of the Religious Variable Used: Finally, Weber tried “to discover whether, or to what degree, in other civilisations – in China, in India, in primitive Judaism, and in Islam – social conditions were favourable or unfavourable to the development of capitalism of the Western type.

" The religious variable which Weber used could explain why capitalism of the Western type could not develop anywhere outside the Western civilisation. Other religions, Weber argued, did not provide the same incentive for this kind of social and economic change. Catholicism stresses rewards in heaven and encourages people to be satisfied with their lot on earth. Hinduism threatens a lower form of life after reincarnation to anyone who tries to leave his or her caste status. It glorifies spiritualism and not materialism.

Buddhism stresses mysticism, far removed from earthly goals. Taoism requires the believer to withdraw from worldly temptations. Confucianism emphasises a static social structure as a part of the natural order. Islam, though an activist religion, lacks the emphasis on thrift and hard work. All these religions, according to Weber, served to discourage the growth of capitalist industrialism. Ian Robertson is of the opinion that Weber's thesis is often misunderstood and misinterpreted. Weber never tried to disprove Marx's view that society usually shapes belief systems rather than vice versa. Nor did he mean to prove that the " Protestant Ethic" was the " cause" of capitalism.

He only said that it exerted an important influence. Weber did not believe that he had proved this hypothesis. He offered it only as a tentative hypothesis. It is certainly possible that Weber was wrong about the origin of capitalism. Capitalism did not occur in some Calvinist societies, and it sometimes occurred in non-Calvinist societies.

England, the birthplace of the Industrial Revolution, was not Calvinist; Scotland, which was Calvinist, failed to develop early capitalism. There is no way of proving that the “salvation panic” of the Calvinists led them to become capitalists. They may have done so for other reasons, such as the fact that they were more likely than Catholics to live in urban areas, or that their religion encouraged hard work, or even that they were not as wedded to tradition as were Catholics of the time.

“Weber’s hypothesis is one of the most provocative in all sociology, but its subject is so vast and complex that his argument is probably unverifiable. Weber simply bit off more than he or anyone else could chew.” According to Raymond Aron, the study of Weber has its own merits, among which the following may be noted, (i) Weber never attempted to establish any kind of causality as such. In his study nowhere had he claimed that the Protestant Ethic (i.

e., the Calvinist Ethic) was the sole cause of the rise of capitalism? Weber interpreted Protestantism in one way but he did not rule out other kinds of interpretations. He required only the totality of interpretations. (ii) Weber could make “the affinity between a religious attitude and an economic commandment credible.

” (iii) “He has raised a sociological problem of considerable importance: the influence of world views upon social organisation or individual organisations.” (iv) It is not right to say that Weber maintained a thesis exactly opposite to Marx’s. It means, Weber never explained “the economy in terms of religion instead of religion in terms of the economy.”