Three Problematic Issues in the Calvinistic Ethos as Pointed out by Max Weber

Michihiro Yokota

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Abstract

It has become well known that Max Weber paid attention not only to the positive but also to the negative aspects of the modern Occident. The problematic aspects of the modern Occidental culture have been pointed out especially through the connection between Weber and Nietzsche. However, this article will approach these aspects through Weber’s comparison of cultures. While Max Weber studied various cultures different from the modern Occident, he discovered ideas of positive significance, and acquired the perspective from which he considered and compared the modern Occidental ethos. This article deals with three aspects of the Calvinistic and Puritanical ethos, namely, the tendencies toward discrimination, action and specialization. These three aspects are contrasted respectively with the universal brotherhood in primitive Christianity, the thorough contemplation on the meaning of the world in primitive Buddhism and the “all-around” cultivation in Confucianism.

Keywords: Max Weber’s sociology of religion, comparison of cultures, Calvinism, universal brotherhood, meaning of the world, all-around cultivation

1. Introduction

According to Max Weber’s sociology of religion, the ethos which Calvinism and Puritanism had brought about in the modern Occident was the way of life called “inner-worldly asceticism [innerweltliche Askese]”. There, under the idea of transcendent God, man should reform the world toward such a society as expected by God. This ethos functioned to promote the development of modern capitalism. In contrast to this, such an ethos of modern capitalism didn’t appear in China and India. This is because the Chinese ethos was a mixture of Confucianism, which was not so transcendent as Puritanism, and Taoism, which fell into a “magical garden [Zaubergarten]”. Whereas in India, any Hindu would solely obey his given caste’s traditional duty in order to make his own fate in the next world better. Buddhists sought enlightenment through contemplation paying no attention to the real world.

Formerly the undeveloped countries, including Japan, would try to find in Weber’s work the reasons of the modern Occident’s success in order to attain modernization as rapidly as possible in their own countries. Then “the modern Occident” was admired as a model.

Today, however, this “modernistic” sense of values is no longer realistic. Nowadays, many Asian countries have already attained modernization to a certain degree and there has been the appearance of negative effects caused by modernization such as environmental pollution and the destruction of a sense of solidarity or morals among traditional communities, whereas the problematic aspects of that modern Occident such as
self-righteousness and discrimination, represented by imperialistic colonialism, have gotten a great deal of attention lately. Furthermore, the prejudiced view of the Orient by the Occident has been criticized. Considering this present situation, as long as we inherit the modernistic interpretation of Weber, his work will no longer appeal to us today.

However, such an interpretation can be considered to be only a one-sided interpretation that was brought under a certain bias of the interpreter. Weber himself recognized clearly the problematic aspects of the direction of modern Occident. After he considered various cultures around the world and compared the modern Occidental culture with various attractive ways of life found there, Weber recognized clearly a certain kind of tendency and negative aspects of his own culture. He tried to clarify the quality of this tendency and to find what historically caused it. Therefore, this article’s aim is to argue that Max Weber obtained a relative approach to the modern Occidental culture on the basis of study of various foreign cultures.

Actually, one would easily notice that Max Weber didn’t have only esteem for the modern Occidental culture when one reads the end of his The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (RSⅠ:203-204=Ethic:123-124). There, he says that although the ethos, which promoted modern capitalism, had been brought about by beliefs in Calvinism and Puritanism, these religious beliefs themselves faded away gradually. The system of modern capitalism which was created through the ethos became “a steel-hard casing” which confined and bound human beings. In this casing, they might become “narrow specialists without spirit, pleasure-seekers without heart” who were full of conceit but ultimately powerless. This expression is Weber’s paraphrase of the “last humans” by Nietzsche. In consideration of this vision of Weber, one cannot think that Weber had esteem for this culture.

In this way, from the standpoint of the consequences of Calvinism and Puritanism, these religious beliefs themselves faded away gradually. The system of modern capitalism which was created through the ethos became “a steel-hard casing” which confined and bound human beings. In this casing, they might become “narrow specialists without spirit, pleasure-seekers without heart” who were full of conceit but ultimately powerless. This expression is Weber’s paraphrase of the “last humans” by Nietzsche. In consideration of this vision of Weber, one cannot think that Weber had esteem for this culture.

2. Discrimination / Universal Brotherhood

Weber directed his attention to one way of life called “universal brotherhood [universalistische Brüderlichkeit]”, which was found in primitive Christianity. It is well-known that his thesis Zwischenbetrachtung contrasted the standpoint of religious universal brotherhood with such worldly standpoints as the economy, politics, art, eros and science. However, a contrast was pointed out not only between universal brotherhood and these worldly spheres, but actually also between universal brotherhood and the Calvinistic and Puritanical ethos, in which Weber found “barriers which resist the obligation of brotherliness in the interest of God’s ‘cause’” (RSⅠ:549=From:336). He judges that “in truth, this standpoint of unbrotherliness was no longer a genuine ‘religion of salvation’” (RSⅠ:546=From:333).

Why did the idea of “unbrotherliness” appear in Calvinism?

Calvinism raised the transcendency of God and so Almighty God was thought to be “a transcendent Being totally inaccessible to human understanding” (RSⅠ:93=Ethic:59). As a result every means, which had been in Catholicism guaranteed to cause a person’s salvation, became doubtful and “the elimination of magic from the world’s occurrences [Entzauberung der Welt]” was accomplished (RSⅠ:93-95=Ethic:60). Each person was supposed to be either one of those whom God planned to save or one of those whom God planned not to (“double decree”). God’s plan was unchangeable and man could not be even aware of which group he belonged to. In consequence, believers got such emotions as “a feeling of unimaginable inner loneliness of the solitary individual” (RSⅠ:93=Ethic:59) and a “tormenting fear of death and of the next life” (RSⅠ:98=Ethic:62). They were eager to know what kind of criterion existed for distinguishing between the people who would get salvation and those who wouldn’t. Although originally such a criterion didn’t exist, later the criterion became understood as whether a person was consistently practicing an ethical and methodical way of life.
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Thus, in Calvinism there was not any “cause of salvation [Realgrund]” but there was a “means of recognizing it [Erkenntnisgrund]” (Cf. RS I:140=Ethic: 215, WG:344,178-179=Economy:570,1199-1201, WL:436=Categories:156). An ethical and methodical way of life was a “symptom” of salvation. In fact, however, one was able to accomplish this symptom through his own efforts. Therefore, in consequence, people began to make efforts to produce this symptom. The means of recognizing salvation actually came to be regarded as close to the cause of salvation, namely, a practice of ethical deeds as a means for the purpose of salvation.4

In Catholicism, which guaranteed the cause of salvation, there was a sacrament of penance, which would make atonement for a misdeed if a person committed a sin. In Calvinism, however, any misdeed would not be atoned. Even one misdeed was thought to be a symptom of a planned fall into “everlasting death”. A person, if judged to have such a symptom, was already beyond salvation. Therefore, Calvinists had to keep all their lives out of such symptoms, namely, misdeeds.

It was necessary for each Calvinist to think of himself as one who would get salvation. This state of mind was supposed to be created by an intense rejection against any symptom of sin which may possibly be latent in himself. In fact, it was much more difficult to be convinced that he did not have any such symptom than to continue consciously rejecting such symptoms. Because this conscious rejection itself suggested the imperfectness, the rejection against symptoms had to be kept unconsciously.

If a believer, consistently obsessed with the idea of having to reject and avoid any symptom of sin, found some symptom in another person, one would probably have a tendency to extremely despise and attack the sinner. This is because one’s attack against the sinner would overlap psychologically, whether consciously or unconsciously, with one’s inner rejection against one’s own possible symptoms. The more desperate one was to reject and avoid such symptoms of sin, the more extremely one would despise and attack any person who seemed to have such symptoms.

Thus, according to Weber, when a believer who was convinced of one’s own salvation found any sin of one’s neighbour, “a hatred and contempt for the sinner as an enemy of God, one who carried with him the marks of the eternally condemned” would take place instead of “an attitude of compassionate helpfulness towards one’s neighbor (coming from an awareness of one’s own weakness)” (RS I:120=Ethic:74). This can be said to be an extremely merciless “spiritual aristocracy”. This means that a new form of spiritual aristocracy was reorganized in Calvinism after an old form of spiritual aristocracy in Catholicism was destroyed. Namely “a spiritual aristocracy of saints predestined from eternity, in the world” substituted for “the spiritual aristocracy of the monk outside of and above the world” (RS I:120=Ethic:74).

In this way Calvinism includes “the doctrine of predestination” that each person’s fate is already determined and cannot be changed and “the particularism of grace” that some people would be saved and others wouldn’t, instead of “the universalism of grace” that everyone could be saved. Although a serious desire for salvation was, through this doctrine, strongly led toward a certain expected way of life, there was a sense of pride which was always kept on the grounds of a discriminatory emotion that “we, the chosen people, are different from them, the abandoned people.”

By the way, contrasting the Calvinistic discrimination called “spiritual aristocracy” with the “universal brotherhood” advocated in primitive Christianity, as above mentioned is for Weber only a one-sided viewpoint. In truth, Weber noticed that the doctrine of primitive Christianity included universalism on the one hand and discrimination on the other hand.

Generally speaking, what is called “brotherhood” originally took place in local groups. There were two principles: shutting out the outsiders and regulation of the insiders. For example, in a community of ancient Israel a person who had committed any sin against God’s commandments was never treated kindly because the members in this community had to take joint responsibility for any violation of God’s commandments according to the contract concluded between man and God. If a community allowed one person to disobey God, all members of the community would be supposed disobedient and then punished by God. As a result “in Israel people reacted against sin by means of casting out the unreconciled sinner, by banning and by stoning him” (RS III:280=Judaism:263). In this way, a person who had only once disobeyed God was mercilessly rejected as a result of a combination of a firm belief in a unique contract, concluded between man and an absolute God, and the idea of joint responsibility.
Jesus denied shutting out outsiders and advocated leniency in regulation of insiders. In other words, brotherhood became “universalized”. One can say, however, that Jesus’s doctrine itself actually includes the potential of reproducing once more the two principles; external shutting out and internal regulation; that is to say, a certain sort of discrimination.

Certainly, according to Jesus, one should be kind to anyone. This doctrine is against discrimination. Also, Jesus advocated a form of equalitarianism where anyone would catch God’s grace if one practiced as Jesus commanded. However, it was too difficult for normal human beings to practice as Jesus commanded and those who would and could dare to practice that way could be clearly discriminated from those who could not. Weber says,

“In truth, Jesus set up the most tremendous requirements for salvation; his doctrine has real aristocratic qualities. Nothing was further from Jesus’s mind than the notion of the universalism of divine grace.” (WG:380=Economy:632)

Only “few are chosen to pass through the narrow gate”, if they decide to make a “complete emancipation from all ties of the world, from family as well as possessions” (WG:380=Economy:632). In this way, in Jesus’s doctrine there coexist equalitarianism as human beings and a discriminative viewpoint depending on the degree of how much a person fulfills an expected way of life. When one attached greater importance to the latter than to the former, the principles of external shutting out and internal regulation were easily reorganized. These principles would be strictly pursued under circumstances when one appealed for returning back to the spirit of Jesus. The Puritan communion of the Lord’s Supper was responsible for “removing the obvious reprobate from the table of the Lord”. This is, according to Weber, “analogous” to the mercilessness to sinners in the internal morality of ancient Judaism (RS III:280=Judaism:263). Thus the clear discrimination between the holy people and others and the exclusion of the latter can be said to be common to both Puritanism and ancient Judaism. Actually, a common point to both is not only this peculiarity.

3. Action / Contemplation

Weber’s sociology of religion attaches central importance to the human pursuit of the “meaning [Sinn]” of the world, life and the self. The “meaning” in his use is not only sought from human intellectual and theoretical desire but it also forms the basis for a practical way of life. Weber generally calls the pursuit of such a meaning “intellectualism [Intellectualismus]”. In Asia, especially in India, noble intellectuals earnestly pursued the meaning of the world and life. These people didn’t seek any knowledge about laws of nature and society, but they sought a view of the world [Weltanschauung] (RS II : 365=India:330-331). Weber says although contemplation on meaning of world and self was strongly performed in India, such contemplation was strongly prevented in ancient Israel and also in Puritanism.

The religious thought in ancient Israel had the assumption that it was God that decided how the world would go and God’s will could be understood by human beings. It was, therefore, very important to understand and perform what God commanded. Metaphysical questions, such as whether any principle of the world beyond God might exist or why man should generally bear suffering, were not argued. The following quotations show such a situation:

“This principled understandability of the divine counsels precluded any question as to the meaning of the world possibly going beyond Yahwe.” (RS III : 329=Judaism:314)

“mystic possession of otherworldly godliness was rejected in favor of active service to the supernatural but, in principle understandable, god. Likewise, the speculation concerning the why of the world was rejected in favor of plain devotion to the positive godly commandment.” (RS III:330=Judaism:315)

“Conduct according to the commandment of God, not knowledge of the meaning of the world behoved man.” (RS III:332=Judaism:317)

In this way speculation about the world’s meaning was excluded in ancient Israel. This is because the existence of God was regarded as self-evident and then it would be much more important to perform the conduct commanded by God than to speculate. Speculation about the meaning of the world and life, which was in India constantly asked for, was left out of consideration in ancient Israel. This situation was described by Weber as “economy of psychic resources [seelische Kräteökonomie]” (RS III :332=Judaism:317).

It is a generally accepted idea among many cultures that good people would come to happiness and wicked people
would come to unhappiness, in other words, virture triumphs over vice. Actually, however, there existed good but unhappy people and wicked but happy people. When this gap became commonly recognized, humans often tried earnestly to give any kind of convincing explanation. More generally speaking, this problem is how to bridge the gap between an existing religious doctrine and the actuality. Weber often directed his attention to this situation and studied widely on such a situation under the name of “theodicy [Theodizee].” How theodicy problems were treated in various religions were investigated. Examples were theodicies in ancient Israel, Indian theodicies and Chinese theodicies. Concerning the theodicy problem in ancient Israel, Weber mentions as follows:

“No need was felt for a philosophic theodicy and where the problem which the Indians elaborated ever anew, still arose, it was settled with the simplest means conceivable.” (RSⅢ:330=Judaism:315)

“God was simply always right and there were no problems for a theodicy.” (RSⅢ:331=Judaism:316)

These don’t show that there wasn’t any kind of theodicy in ancient Israel, but there existed so markedly a basic form of theodicy that any doubt of this form could hardly be presented. In this basic form the existence of God and God’s commandments were self-evident and if people obeyed the commandments, they or their descendants would be later rewarded but if they were disobedient, they would suffer misfortune.

In just the same way as in ancient Israel, Weber points out the exclusion of any theodicy problem and “Kraftsökonomie” also in Puritanism (RS I :101=Ethic:64). Weber also describes this renunciation of independently questioning the ultimate meaning of the world as “blissful bigotry (happy closure of the mind) [glückliche Borniertheit]” (RS I :539=From:326, WG:332=Economy:548). This description contains Weber’s irony. Certainly, the incomparable attainment of modernization in human history was nothing but the result of a way of life where any waste trial to question the meaning of the world and life was renounced on the one hand, and acting positively in the world following God’s commandments was exclusively demanded on the other hand. This result itself may be positively valued, but this was accomplished just at the cost of sacrificing questioning the meaning of the world and life. It was, so to speak, a result of a reckless running with a blinker on. From the viewpoint of ancient Buddhism, where the meaning of the world was fundamentally pursued, the way of life in Calvinism and Puritanism, where people were only toiling and moiling as if they were possessed by something that was taboo to question, could not help seeming quite strange.

4. Speciality / Culture

In his thesis on China Weber pays his attention to a social stratum called “literati”.

“For twelve centuries social rank in China has been determined more by qualification for office than by wealth. This qualification, in turn, has been determined by education, and especially by examinations. China has made literary education the yardstick of social prestige in the most exclusive fashion” (RS I :395=China:107).

The literati, as the leading stratum in Chinese society, were those who had satisfied necessary conditions of achievement in literary knowledge of history, literature and so on. According to Weber, the Confucian type of education oriented to examination is cultivating for a certain “way of life [Lebensführung]” which fits to a certain “status”. This is humanistic training, which lies midway between “the two polar opposites in the field of educational ends”: awakening of charisma (for example, warrior heroes, magicians and so on) and specialized expert training (for example, expert government officials) (RS I :408=China:119).

“During the time of the literati, the chün tsu, the “princely man,” and once the “hero,” was the man who had attained all-around self-perfection, who had become a “work of art” in the sense of a classical, eternally valid, canon of psychical beauty, which literary tradition implemented in the souls of disciples.” (RS I :420=China:131)

In this way, Weber considers that the ideal of “a cultured man” in China is “all-around self-perfection” and beautiful and artistic perfection besides. This ideal should be pursued “all around”, so man should not limit himself to his certain professional speciality. The Analects of Confucius says “a cultured man is not a tool”. That is to say, a cultured man should be “an end in himself and not just a means for a specified useful purpose”. Weber says, this ideal is in extreme contrast with Plato’s ideal of polis that “man can attain fulfillment by being good at only one task” and the “calling” ideal of ascetic Protestantism (RS I :449=China:160-161). There existed in China another way of life
different from the way idealized in the modern Occident.

Not only in Confucianism, but also in Goethe's Faust, Weber finds a way of life where one acquires culture from many sides instead of limiting oneself within only one specific field (RS I :203=Ethic:123). Weber recognizes that modern times is no longer the time of all-around culture but is already the time of specialization. He respects devoting oneself to one's specific field and criticizes frivolous dilettantes (WL:588-592=From:134-137). This, however, doesn't mean that Weber always only esteems a way of life where one shuts oneself in a specific field.

Incidentally it seems to be after Weber's experience of illness (around 1897-1903) that Weber came to reconsider the culture which esteemed exclusively specialization. In his thirties he became a professor at Heidelberg University and had a bright future before him, but he fell into such a serious mental illness that he couldn't work for several years. One can say that it could be under the influence of his experience of serious illness that he awakened to various cultures and came to compare the modern Occidental culture with these cultures.

In a letter addressed to his wife, he related his thoughts concerning an effect caused by his painful illness as follows:

"in past years my sickly disposition expressed itself in a convulsive clinging to scholarly work as to a talisman, without my being able to say what it was supposed to ward off." (LB:249=Biography:236)

This implies that his illness made a chance for him to reflect on his way of life in which he devoted himself solely to his work and he might have been anxious if he could not do so. He described his state of mind as "the need to feel myself succumbing to the load of work" (LB:249=Biography:236). This self-reflection seems to have also given him a chance to try to discover a more humane and happier life. One can say that he could make such a self-diagnosis because he could keep at some degree of distance his own way of life in which he had been driven to live until then as if he were obsessed.

Weber found in Calvinism and Puritanism the same obsessed and driven way of life as his own former way of life, although this doesn’t mean that he was a Calvinist or a Puritan. In Puritanism it was expected to push forward solely with social action for the sake of God and all unnecessary things were rejected. Any kind of "deification of human wants and desires" was thoroughly repudiated and anything emotional or sensuous was extremely suppressed (RS I :95,184-188=Ethic:60-61, 113-114). While reflecting on his former situation that he felt relieved only through clinging to his work, Weber seems to have found something similar to himself in the Puritanical way of life, in which man is devoted to an occupation as a calling. In this way a reconsideration of the Calvinistic and Puritanical way of life is inseparable from a reconsideration of Weber’s own way of life.

His wife Marianne Weber tells in Max Weber’s biography as follows:

“The years of illness had deflected him from his course and had opened secret chambers of his soul that had previously been closed. He was now receptive to these artistic creations, which gave an ever new depth to feeling.” (LB:463=Biography:455)

Thus after his experience of illness he met various views of life which had been until then suppressed in himself. Now he could understand the appeal of each view.

5. Conclusion

The views of life found in various cultures showed Weber how problematic the Calvinistic and Puritanical ethos was even though it had promoted Occidental modernization. This article has paid attention to its three aspects. First, compared with the ideal of universal brotherhood in primitive Christianity, Calvinism can be regarded as discriminative, because people are already before birth determined by God to be separated into two groups: one that would absolutely receive salvation and another that would by no means receive salvation. Secondly, in comparison with primitive Buddhism, where the meaning of the world and life was thoroughly contemplated, speculation about such meaning was suppressed in Calvinism, where carrying out actions commanded by God took priority over all other things. Thirdly, in Confucianism, cultivating oneself through history and literature for the purpose of character-building was considered to be a virtue. Calvinism didn’t allow such cultivation without direct contact with a specialized field of vocation. This was because contribution to society through one’s vocation for the glory of God was considered to be exclusively important. These three aspects can be illustrated as the figure below.
These three contrasting aspects show that various equally attractive viewpoints existed in many different cultures from the modern Occidental culture. Although we cannot say that these viewpoints brought about an ethos which promoted modern capitalism, they clearly highlight some problems of the Calvinistic ethos. While Weber studied various cultures different from the modern Occidental culture, he discovered some standpoints of positive significance, and acquired the perspective from which he reconsidered the modern Occidental ethos.² Today, when any monistic standpoint on cultures is criticized and dialogues among various cultures are seriously sought, I think we should follow such ideas of a kind of ethics, as Max Weber shows, based on the comparative study of cultures. One could understand the merits of foreign cultures and reconsider one's own culture from the standpoint of such merits.

Notes

1. Puritanism, the movement of religious reformation in England, was theoretically based on Calvinism. This article assumes that the modern Occidental ethos which comes from Calvinism and Puritanism is shared by Weber himself, but Weber sometimes refers to the ethos as outside of the Germans. He contrasts the German authoritarian ethos with the Puritanical “objective, impersonal” attitude which rejects the “deification of human wants and desires.” Cf. RS I :99.101,127-128=Ethic:63,79,196,209.

2. Japan was under a unique situation. On the one hand, when Hisao Ōtsuka soon after World War II advocated Japan’s modernization, emancipation from tradition (especially in the field of spirit, as well as in economy and politics), he used Max Weber’s theory of “elimination of magic” as his support. Cf. Ōtsuka 1968. On the other hand Japan had attained Occidental modernization more rapidly than other Asian countries and so it was tried to find out what kind of ethos had existed in Japan and had promoted the modernization. The “modernistic” elements were attributed to, for example, Sekimons-hisagaku (popular teachings in the Edo period taught by Baigan Ishida [1685-1744]), the Jōdo Shin sect (the most popular Buddhist group in Japan and which regards Shinran [1173-1262] as its founder) and so on.


4. Strictly speaking, “the elimination of magic [Entzauberung]” is supposed to have two sorts of processes. One process is that the content of means for salvation changes: from rites or magic to faith or moral. The other process is that any means that man could practice for his salvation comes to be rejected. The prophets in ancient Israel show the former case and the doctrine of predestination in Calvinism shows the latter case. When Erkenntnisgrund came close to Realgrund in Calvinism, the situation was returning back to a certain sort of “magic”, in other words, going in the opposite direction to “the elimination of magic” in the latter sense.
5. The importance of “theodicy” and “brotherhood” in Weber’s sociology of religion has been written of in my article (Yokota 2002).

6. The close connection between Weber’s design of _The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism_ and his experience of illness was pointed out in Orihara 2003:10-22.

7. The first and second aspects of three problematic aspects in Calvinistic ethos are both inherited from the thought of ancient Israel. The succession from ancient Judaism to Calvinism is one of the hidden themes in Weber’s sociology of religion.

8. An American anthropologist Ruth Benedict [1887-1948] tried to reconsider and criticize the Puritanical culture in her own country while she understood various ways of life, such as those of American Indians. In this sense Max Weber’s approach can be said to be comparable to Benedict’s approach. Cf. Benedict 1934.

### Bibliography


