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Religion and the Economic Development of Britain and Japan

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Religion and the Economic Development of Britain and Japan

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Max Weber looked at development as a process of rationalization leading from traditionalism to modernity. We can think of this as a race course sloping upward and intersected at various points by a number of hurdles which each society must overcome as it becomes "modern"—hurdles such as magic, family-ism, substantive (rather than formal) legal system, "sultanism" (political interference in the economy), etc.

It is important to bear in mind that for Weber modern civilization and the marvels of science and technology come at great cost. Basically, he felt that development is a dehumanizing process causing the breakdown of the traditional family, community, and values. Looked at as a spiritual outcome, the rationalization of life was therefore an irrational process leading to a repression of natural emotions and energies. Some powerful, irrational force (Weber: "mighty enthusiasm") was therefore necessary if society was to surmount its hurdles and become "rationalized." In the West, he found this motivating force in the Puritans's anxiety over salvation (*certitudo salutis*). Thus Weber regarded the *irrational* religious values of the past as a necessary condition (cause) of the initial rise of a *rational* economy.

Today, Weber's reconstruction of the role of religion in the development of modern societies is securely enshrined in the mythology of sociology, but is seldom taken seriously by historians. Weber did not foresee the modern development of Japan for several reasons:

1. Cultural and theoretical bias seems to have derailed some of his cross-cultural comparisons. For example, he assumes that the religions of the West were characterized by miracles, those of the East by magic, and that miracles are "more rational" than magic [WEBER 1952: 222; see also WEBER 1958: 335–6].¹⁾ For similar reasons, he refused to believe that a society dominated by a warrior code (i.e., *bushido*²⁾) could develop a rational business ethic [WEBER 1958: 275].
2. He regarded the family as an impediment to the rationalization and growth of

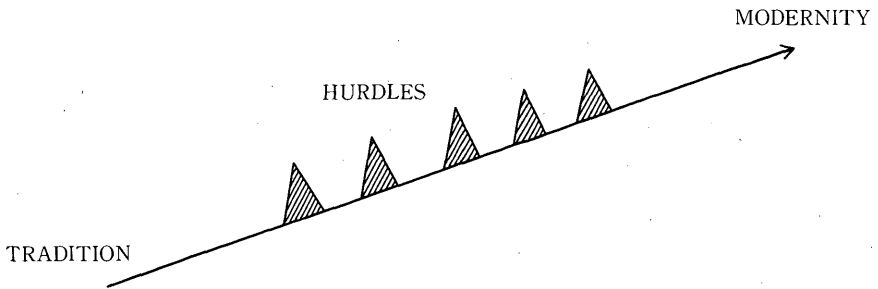


Fig. 1 Weber's Theory of Development—Overcoming Hurdles on a Race Track

impersonal economic systems and therefore did not see the potential of family-ism as an organizing ideology.

3. His stress on universalism made him blind to the economic potential of particularistic values (e.g., loyalty).

4. The emphasis Weber and other orthodox economists placed on the individual and competition encouraged them to overlook the importance of groups and cooperation.

5. He failed to see that subjective, religious other-worldliness could contribute to a ruthless transformation of the economies of this world. Above all, he did not see that an other-worldliness which dampens ethical concern can prepare the way for the exploitation and injustice which generally characterize rapid, unbalanced growth.

6. His negative attitude toward bureaucracy blinded him to the creative role an intelligent bureaucracy can have in development. He failed to see that there could be more than one kind of "rational capitalism," and that there are "developmental" as well as "regulatory" forms of bureaucracy.

7. He associated meritocracies with stagnation, and yet all of the dynamic economies of the Far East today are based on hierarchies of merit demonstrated by examination systems.

8. His negative attitude toward social welfare and social security (which he thought created an aversion to risk) would have made him critical of the permanent employment system (*shūshin koyō*) that characterizes the upper, modern tier of the Japanese economy.

9. He did not seem to realize that asceticism can be compartmentalized. A nation can be traditional or hedonistic in its pleasures and mores and yet ascetic in its work schedule.

10. Weber focused most of his attention on the values in place *before* the "rise" of

1) I would argue that the difference between religion East and West (assuming such a division of the world makes sense) rests not on the contrast between magic and miracles, but on a distinction between karmic and providential forms of magic.

2) Weber's general attitude toward the warrior's status-ethic also caused him to misunderstand Islam [WEBER 1978, Vol. I: 623–627]

capitalism, assuming that (as Parsons or Bellah would put it) "the central value-system" of the past had a positive or negative impact on subsequent development. Thus Weberians tend to overlook, or underestimate, the importance of the relationship between values and development *at the time of industrialization*.³⁾

Clearly, an alternative to Weber must be found if we are to understand the relationship between religion and the development of modern Japan. Attention needs to be focused specifically on the period of industrialization itself. We need to concentrate not just on religious ideas in the abstract, but on the values embodied in religious institutions and movements. For this purpose, I have suggested a "barricades" model as an alternative model to Weber's race track and hurdles.⁴⁾

A hurdle is simply an inert object standing in the way of a runner. It is an obstacle which one does not "defend." On the other side of the hurdle is simply empty space leading to a goal, the *terminus ad quem*. A barricade, on the other hand is something people hide behind and defend. It is a wall or barrier which must be "manned." Weber's model suggests a peaceful athletic contest; my approach implies conflict between at least two contending teams, the developers and the traditionalists. The barricade model would also suggest that both sides are free to adopt a wide range of strategies.

Let me now explain my parable—I hardly dare call it a model. In traditional societies, the market is often viewed with great suspicion. Because of its proven ability to disrupt the hierarchy and general order of society, it is sequestered and

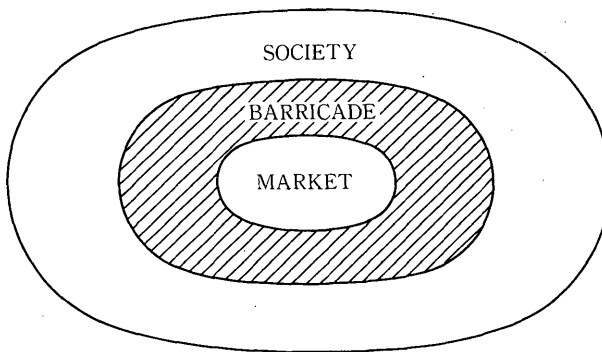


Fig. 2 An Alternative to Weber: Development as an Attack on the Barricades Protecting Tradition

- 3) This easily opens the Weberians to the charge of committing the logical fallacy of *post hoc ergo propter hoc*. For this reason otherwise excellent studies of the values of pre-modern Japan (e.g., Bellah, 1957 or Najita, 1987) should not be regarded as explanations of the industrial development that took place in the Meiji period.
- 4) For a more detailed statement, see Davis, 1987. My model is simply a picturesque way of bringing together insights previously set forth in the works of Karl Polanyi (1957), Tawney (1980), Elie Halevy (1971), Jacob Viner (1978: 165-175), Karl Marx (1954), Liston Pope (1970) and other historians and sociologists of religion.

trammelled with various protective devices. Markets can be located only in such-and-such a place. They can be open only at such-and-such times. Only such-and-such people (pariahs, castes, or estates) can assume the roles of merchants, money changers or "usurers." A set of important social values evolves limiting greed, deceit and bad faith. Folktales and legends such-as the story of king Midas's touch or the "pauper's curse" warn the avaricious of the divine or karmic punishment awaiting them. If the developer is to succeed, he must deal with the priests, prophets, saints, magicians, and wizards defending this barricade protecting the traditional community.

As development advances, the barricade becomes weak and the forces of the market begin to spill over into society itself. Sometimes the defenders of society fall back and build their defensive ramparts on new ground. More often, they count their losses and compromise with the enemy. As the army of developers moves on to victory, the erstwhile defenders fall silent. When they speak they seem strangely ambiguous about what is happening around them. Under the pressure of events, compromise gives way to co-optation. Finally, the traditionalists begin to preach the gospel of development themselves.

1. BRITAIN

In England, Puritanism was not on the side of development of free, unfettered markets, but a force opposing them. Early Calvinist divines used the traditional idea of Christian stewardship to denounce the "enclosing and engrossing of land, depopulation, and usury, which they thought were among the chief causes of social unrest" [ZARET 1985: 188]. To understand the relationship between religion and development, we must turn from the Puritanism of the seventeenth century and look at the Protestantism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It was only after Puritanism turned into Dissent and Non-Conformity that one can speak of a spirit of Protestant capitalism. Although the Methodists and Dissenters inherited the ascetic worldview of the Puritans, what inclined them to capitalism—and a disproportionate number of capitalists *were* Dissenters—was not any "anxiety" over salvation, but the social and political discrimination they suffered at the hands of the Establishment. Excluded from the universities, politics and other professions, ambitious Baptists, Quakers, Congregationalists, and Unitarians naturally turned to trade and manufacturing. Because they had been the victims of state power themselves, intellectuals among them were naturally attracted to the doctrine of classical economics which sought to limit the role of the state in development. The so-called Non-Conformist conscience tended to be restricted to the sins of the individual, i.e., to the criticism of sex, gambling, drinking and divorce, and was largely indifferent to more abstract social problems [HELMSTADTER 1979]. Although many were from families with humble origins and modest means, they saw poverty neither as the product of capitalism nor as a problem to be solved by the state. Rather, they blamed poverty on the oppression of society by the

Anglican aristocracy and on various "working class vices," above all sloth and a fondness for strong drink. Poverty could therefore be cured only as individuals were converted to faith in Christ and hard work. As the Non-Conformists became more affluent and respectable, many pulpits became silent on pressing social issues. Many became open advocates of the industrial system. After all, there was a natural, or "elective affinity" between the spiritual individualism of Non-Conformity and the acquisitive individualism of capitalism itself. The unskilled working-class ("sweated labour"), squeezed out of the Anglican churches by class friction and demographic pressures, became alienated from the middle class chapels of the Non-Conformists by dress-codes and a system of pew-renting. The result was a religious and cultural *disenfranchisement* of a large segment of population which besets British society and industry to this day.

As long as Methodists and other Non-Conformists of the "labour aristocracy" were in charge of the trades-union movement, radical confrontations with capital could be avoided [MOORE 1974]. If Methodism and Non-Conformity cannot be given full credit for saving England from revolution (cf. [HALEVY 1971]) at least they helped to "gentle" the working class [THOMPSON 1966]. Protestants who had earlier defended the community turned their attention to the spiritual comfort of individuals from their own "station in life." As time went by, they moved from a Covenant model of society to the model of a race course.⁵⁾ Insofar as Protestantism was silent about the great costs of industrialization (poverty, pollution, and the polarization of society), it acted as a "passive enablement" of development—i.e., it simply got out of its way.⁶⁾ Thus, the "barricades" which the Puritans had erected to protect society were allowed to fall into disrepair. Protestantism compromised with development and attacked the "immorality" not of the economic system, but of its impoverished victims. Some clergymen even became ardent supporters of the theory of the "survival of the fittest."

5) In the words of Thomas Walker, a Manchester cotton manufacturer, "The rule is not let all mankind be perpetually equal. God and nature have forbidden it. But let all mankind start fair in the race of life" [Kramnick 1977: 515].

6) Although Weber qualified his causal analysis of the relationship between religion and economics by treating it in the context of comprehensive socio-cultural structures, in much of his work he focuses directly on the ways in which religion promoted or prevented economic rationalization. His work therefore often amounts to an analysis of the (positive) causes of development and the (negative) causes of stagnation. In light of the attacks on such simple causal analysis in recent historiography, I prefer to set aside questions of direct causation and speak in terms of the passive and positive *enablements* of growth provided by culture (or religion). In this paper, I am particularly interested in what I call the passive enablements of development. That is to say, I am interested not in the way religious ethics "cause" rational economic development, but in the way religion simply gets out of its way. I shall also disregard Weber's preoccupation with "origins" of capitalism and the ethical "motives" behind it and focus on the enabling influence religion had on the *shape* the economy took in various societies.

2. JAPAN

While the industrialization of both Britain and Japan was spearheaded by textiles, the development of Japan as a "late comer" took place in a very different way. Robert Bellah (1957) has stressed the role of "the central value-system" in Japan's development, a claim which is probably as difficult to deny as it is to falsify. There are many religious figures in pre-modern Japan who stand forth as proponents of a this-worldly asceticism, among them Suzuki Shosan, Hakuin Zenji, Ninomiya Sontoku, and Ishida Baigan. The problem is: did their teachings actually *motivate* Japanese entrepreneurs? Or were their words—and the teachings of the sages and saints of the past—simply cited to *legitimate* newly acquired wealth? I shall limit my discussion to the Meiji period itself when industrialization actually began and, for reasons of space, I shall discuss only Buddhism. Furthermore, I shall concentrate on the actions of religious institutions rather than on the teachings of individual holy men.

The condition of Buddhism in the early Meiji period was probably worse than that of the Dissenters during England's Industrial Revolution. Buddhism at that time was actually being persecuted (*haibutsu-kishaku*), not by the government itself, but by anti-Buddhist fanatics. The religion was criticized for being other-worldly and for encouraging an attitude of pessimism and resignation. Its doctrine of non-ego seemed to be antithetical to the needs of the new economy which allegedly was based on the appetites of the individual ego. Its superstitions ran against the spirit of "civilization and enlightenment" (*bunmei-kaika*).

The Buddhist response to persecution (and the challenges of modernity in general) can be divided into four sorts.

1. Some Buddhist stressed the need to revive the traditional discipline (*kairitsu*) of the religion. According to Fukuda Gyōkai and Shaku Unshō, Buddhism was being persecuted because of its failure to teach and practice its own moral and spiritual disciplines. These men and their followers sought to overcome persecution by re-establishing the symbiotic relationship between the sangha and the state in ancient Japan. Their argument (*gohō shisō*) was roughly, that Buddhism was valuable to the state because it produced loyal citizens (*buppō kokueki*). The state should therefore reciprocate by protecting the sangha.
2. The argument of the *praxis* masters was echoed by various figures of the Buddhist Enlightenment such as Inoue Enryō, Ōuchi Seiran and Hara Tanzan, men who were primarily interested in elaborating a new Buddhist hermeneutic based on Western thought.⁷⁾ Like the *praxis* masters, they argued that the situation of Buddhism could be remedied only by binding Buddhism to the state in a pact of mutual benefits and protection.
3. We turn now from individuals to the various Buddhist social movements of the

7) The notable exception was Shimaji Morukai who openly opposed the interference of the state in religious affairs.

Meiji period (e.g., Kiyozawa Manshi's *Seishinshugi*, Itō Shōshin's *Muga-En, Keikai*, and the *Bukkyō Seitō Dōshikai*) and to responses to modernity that were relatively "progressive." Buddhist movements called for freedom of religious scholarship, the purification of religion from meaningless rituals and superstitious practices of the past, and for attention to the social costs of growth. The *Bukkyō Seitō Dōshikai* was probably the most socially aware of all. Some of its members criticized the Russo-Japanese War and were on good terms with socialists and other radicals. The strength of these movements lay in their intellectual leadership and access to the media which enabled them to respond effectively to rapid change. Their weakness was their social make-up: they consisted largely of middle-class individual, critics, scholars and students. Their "reference group" was not the local community, but other alienated individuals and movements, e.g. the socialists and the *Jiyū Minken Undō*, from whom they took their cues.

4. While the sheer novelty of the first three responses to modernity understandably attracts the historian's attention, the fourth was by far the most important, and the most conservative or reactionary. I refer to institutional Buddhism itself, or what we might call temple-based Buddhism. This was the only response of any demographic or statistical significance. With the family-temple as its social base, institutional Buddhism was an integral part of the social and political *Gemeinschaft* structure of rural Japan. Its leading families included village headmen, landlords or the so-called gentry. Vertically, the local temple was at the lower end of a "parent-child" hierarchy of temples extending up to a head-temple which (at the prefectural and national levels) was generally well connected with secular, political elites. In keeping with its social base, institutional Buddhism had an "elective affinity" for the conservative, authoritarian foundations of Meiji society and the traditional *Gemeinschaft*-like ethic of "hierarchical complementarity" [DUMONT 1982]. This can be seen in the slogans used to express its social teachings, e.g., *sabetsu-soku-byōdō*, *shinzoku-nitai*, *obō ihon*, *chōwa yūgo*, *kokyō wago*, *hinpu sōgō izon*, *hō-on kansha* (or *shi-on*), *jihī*, *jita funi*, and *kanzen chōaku*.

Institutional Buddhism was concerned, above all, about its own prestige, comfort and security. It responded to persecution by loudly proclaiming its loyalty and devotion to the state and the emperor. It devised a "strategy of accommodation" which entailed support for capitalism, imperialism and, ultimately, war. It sought to demonstrate its "usefulness" to the state by giving rhetorical support to the ideology of the Meiji regime. Sectarian leaders pledged their support in spreading education, establishing charitable foundations, and encouraging industrial production. Buddhist intellectuals showed their patriotism by helping to elaborate a theory of "national morality" and by writing commentaries supporting the various imperial rescripts. Priests condemned labor strikes as disruptive of the "social harmony" taught by Buddhism and denounced socialism as a theory of "bad equality" which knew nothing of real (i.e., karmic) individual and social differences. Needless to say, they were utterly appalled by the *Taigyaku* affair (1910-1911), even though many of those arrested (e.g. Uchiyama Gudō and Takagi Kemmyō) were

devout Buddhists. Hundreds of patriotic Buddhist youth groups, charities, and devotional groups sprang up throughout the country. Missionaries were sent to the new colonies not only to work among Japanese, but to pacify the native populations. Evangelists were sent to work in prisons, schools and factories. In the factories, Buddhist preachers often found themselves trapped in violent labor disputes. Almost invariably they took the side of capital. Understandably, the workers began to look upon them as the toadies of the capitalists. In at least one factory, the cry of "*kōjō fukyō zettai hantai*" could be heard.⁸⁾

3. CONCLUSIONS

I find in the *religious thought* of England and Japan no "mighty enthusiasm" for industrial development. When we examine the *institutional history* of these religions we find a somewhat similar story of discrimination, persecution and ultimate co-optation. In England, discrimination directed the energies of Dissenters and Non-Conformists into industrial and scientific professions; in Japan, *haibutsu-kishaku* and the loss of traditional prestige as an official religion (*goyō shūkyō*) inspired Buddhist leaders to devise a "strategy of accommodation" that would support economic and imperialistic development. In both countries, institutional religion supported development by remaining silent about its human costs and by collaborating in various ways with the developers (e.g., by giving "charity"). With the help of their religious collaborators, developers were able to surmount the "barricade" between the market and society. While I do not see much evidence of religion providing a motivation for industrialization in either country, the ascetic principles found in both traditions *did development no harm*. (It certainly would assist individual families in their "struggle for existence.") But this is different from the motivation that Weber thought he had found in the Puritans' anxiety.

If religion was not the cause of industrialization, it at least gives us clues about the *shape* industrialization takes. Four brief examples must suffice.

a) *Enfranchisement and alienation*. In Japan, the lower classes have been gradually incorporated into, or "enfranchised" by institutional religion. One thinks of the spread of Buddhism among the commoners after the Nara period, of the simplified, inclusive gospels of Kamakura Buddhism which appealed to the common man (*bonpu*) and even to women and outcasts, and of the rise of New Religions popular since the nineteenth century. In Kansai, the breakdown of monopolistic shrine guilds (*miyaza*) and the development of an inclusive *ujiko* system can be regarded as a similar enfranchisement at the micro-political level [DAVIS 1976]. In England, however, the process was reversed. We have seen that

8) This brief synopsis of Meiji Buddhism and industrial development is based primarily on the work of Yoshida Kyūichi (1970; 1972), Kashiwabara Yūsen (1969; 1972), Ikeda Eishun (1976), and Nakamura Hajime (1964; 1972)

in that country, the working class was informally *excluded* from both the aristocratic, established church and the middle-class chapels. Since religious enfranchisement is a major element in the creation of a national and secular ecumenism—a sense of “belonging”—one can only wonder what its relationship might be to the general “alienation” or “de-alienation” of labor, and to the disinvestment in (and de-industrialization of) northern Britain.

b) *The role of the state in development.* The religious histories I have sketched seem to correlate with the degree to which British Protestants and Japanese Buddhists were willing to accept the state’s “interference” or “guidance” not only in religion, but in their daily lives. This, in turn, has had an enormous impact on the shape of the industrial and military development of both countries.

c) *Rhetoric and ideology.* Religious traditions help to determine the shape taken by the rhetoric of development and the ideology of economic and imperial expansion. In England, the theology of spiritual individualism was basically congruent with the theory of economic individualism. In the nineteenth century, Protestants in England (and America) were even able to reconcile Christianity with imperialism and the Social Darwinist’s philosophy of the “survival of the fittest.” In Japan, where ancient religious ideals of cooperation and harmony remained strong (even if not always put into practice), it was impossible to weave such a blunt interpretation of capitalism into the rhetoric of development. Familial and communitarian symbols were used instead.

d) *Attitudes toward poverty.* Religion also helps to shape the way society looks at poverty and the other costs of industrialization. In both England and Japan, religion tended to blame poverty on the moral vices or bad *karma* of the poor themselves, and to offer moralistic nostrums to remedy “The Social Problem.” Ironically, since moralism of this sort helped to silence protest, it can be regarded as a “passive enablement” of rapid growth. Here too religion was “getting out of the way” of the developers.

I do not offer my parable of the barricades as the universal template of development. It is merely one way development takes place, one way to look at the relationship between its rhetoric and the history of religious institutions. I remain skeptical about the possibility of assigning to religion a crucial role in the *motivation* leading to industrialization. I am relatively optimistic about the possibility of correlating the history of religious institutions with the *shape* development takes, though this too is apt to lead one into a quagmire of speculation.

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