Beyond capitalism: A critique of Max Weber's general understanding of the Islamic discourse

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Abstract: This article evaluates Max Weber's overall analysis of Islam. Despite his efforts to be objective, Weber's analysis was entrenched within a similar Orientalist discursive framework present among other Western scholars who studied non-Western traditions during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. After a review of the existing literature on Weber's understanding of Islam and its relation to capitalism, this article critically explores other aspects of Weber's conclusions about Islam that are equally problematic. Weber glosses over many centuries of variegated Islamic cultural history to provide a universalist account of the Islamic civilisation that reduces it to a general meta-discourse. He regularly ignores many of the more localised, regional Islamic cultural traditions altogether. As a result, Weber fails to meaningfully account for the many nuances and idiosyncrasies constitutive of the broader Islamic tradition. This article argues that Weber's account of Islam shows a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding on his part.

Keywords: Capitalism; interpretive sociology; Islamic culture; Max Weber; Orientalism.

Abstrak: Artikel ini menilai Max Weber dalam analisis keseluruhannya terhadap Islam. Walaupun beliau berusaha untuk melakukan analisisnya secara objektif, namun analisis Weber tenggelam dengan corak yang sama dengan perbincangan rangka sarjana-sarjana Barat lain yang terdahulu. Sarjana-sarjana tersebut telah mengkaji tradisi-tradisi bukan Barat pada akhir abad ke-19 hingga awal abad ke-20. Setelah melakukan sorotan kajian sedia ada mengenai pemahaman Weber tentang Islam dan kaitannya

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dengan kapitalisme, artikel ini mengkaji secara kritis aspek-aspek lain yang juga bermasalah dalam kesimpulan Weber terhadap Islam. Weber menggilap beberapa abad sejarah budaya Islam yang begitu berwarna-warni sekali untuk memberikan satu akaun secara universal tamadun Islam untuk mengurangkannya kepada meta-wacana umum. Namun, ia sering kali mengabaikan sama sekali keseluhan tradisi Islam yang lebih setempat, dan tradisi budaya Islam serantau. Akhirnya, Weber gagal memberikan penerangan yang bermakna kepada banyak nuansa dan idiosinkrasi tradisi Islam yang lebih luas itu. Artikel ini membincangkan bahawa penerangan Weber terhadap Islam menunjukkan terdapat banyak kekeliruan dan salah faham daripada pihak Weber itu sendiri.

Kata Kunci: Kapitalisme; sosiologi tafsiran; budaya Islam; Max Weber; Orientalisme.

Wolf-Gazo (2005) observed that "Islam was somewhat neglected until the latter part of the twentieth century and that is the reason why the topic "Weber and Islam" is of greatest urgency and relevance considering the re-emergence of Islam as a political and ideological force" (p. 45). Max Weber's works are generally rigorous and detailed. His understanding of the world was steeped in complex multilevel analyses of capitalism, social orders, and power systems. According to one of Weber's translators, Wolf Heydebrand, "Weber's categorical framework has an inherently dualistic structure, that is, it exhibits a series of nested distinctions between logically or empirically opposed concepts that are not reducible to each other. The overriding binary oppositions are those between tradition and rationality" (Cited in Weber, 1994, p. ix).

Weber is a leading figure of "interpretive sociology", a field which evaluates the different meanings attached to behaviour and views reality as being constructed by people, i.e. it uses a subjective analytic framework. At the core of interpretive sociology is the notion of *verstehen. Verstehen* is a methodological framework in which the observer tries to analyse a discourse from within its parameters. Dilthey (1991) developed *verstehen* within the context of interpretative hermeneutics and contrasted inward looking *verstehen* to objectivating third-person perspective explanations of human agency and output that explain social realities in the same way that natural forces are explained in the physical sciences. He concluded that the social sciences cannot be understood in the same manner as the physical sciences.

At the other end of the sociological spectrum was Durkheim's positivism. For Durkheim, like scientific facts, social facts could be understood in an objective manner. It is "any way of acting, whether fixed or not, capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint; or which is general over the whole of a given society, whilst having an existence of its own, independent of its individual manifestations" (Durkheim, 1982, p. 59). Objectivity was at the heart of Durkheim's positivism. The philosopher Thomas Nagel called the objective perspective "the view from nowhere"—a view that posits that the most valuable ideas are generally those derived independently—or as independently as possible—from subjective biases. This view "allows us to transcend our particular viewpoint and develop an expanded consciousness that takes in the world more fully" (Nagel, 1986, p. 5). However, Nagel remained sceptical about the possibility of achieving total objectivity since we are all subjective beings with unavoidable worldly attachments, perspectives, and biases that shape our worldview. According to him, "appearance and perspective are essential parts of what there is, and in some respects they are best understood from a less detached standpoint" (1986, p. 5).

Weber tried to understand Islam as a generalised meta-discourse from "the view from nowhere" methodological framework while aiming to uphold his interpretive sociology. To provide a "universalist" or total explanation of a particular cultural tradition was one of the hallmarks of earlier Orientalist scholarship (Said, 1978; Salvatore, 1996; Thomas, 2010). Said (1978) insisted that "Orientalism is absolutely anatomical and enumerative: to use its vocabulary is to engage in the particularizing and dividing of things *Oriental* into manageable parts" (p. 72). This article examines how Weber sought to compartmentalise a very complex cultural and religious tradition into manageable parts.

Existing criticisms/analysis of Weber's work on Islam

In 1966, Rodinson published, *Islam et le Capitalisme,* in French which was republished in English as *Islam and Capitalism*. His conclusion on capitalism and Islam stood in stark contrast with Weber's. Rodinson's (1974) staunchly Marxist analysis argued that Islam was not responsible for retarding the development of capitalism, rather it was various external political and economic struggles that ultimately left the Muslim world outside the fold of capitalist development. His work showed that Islam was not an exceptional case. Islamic civilisation was always in

flux, constantly shifting within its own discursive framework. Just as other religious value systems and ideologies, it was never a fixed set of values or unchanging laws. Each specific Islamic community was largely a reflection of the socio-economic circumstances of its time.

Bryan Turner's *Weber and Islam: A Critical Study* (1974a), which was later reprinted in a series on Max Weber under the title, *Max Weber Classic Monographs Volume VII: Weber and Islam* (1998), also explored the connections between Weberian thought, Islam, and capitalism. Unlike Durkheim, Weber was not interested in defining religion. His aim "was not to analyse religion in terms of "what it is", but to explore the "conditions and effects" of different theodicies in different cultures" (Turner, 1998, p. 45). Weber's main concern throughout his writings on Islam was whether or not it was compatible with capitalism. Turner argued that Weber came to the overall conclusion that capitalism was generally not compatible with Islam due to its patrimonial nature. As a result, Islamic society developed into a type of feudalism and was not suitable for modern capitalism. The Protestant ethic, on the other hand, was much more conducive to capitalism according to the earlier Weber. However, he challenged this proposition in his later writings. Turner notes that later sociologists reject the Protestant ethic argument, and focused upon Weber's later argument that capitalism requires certain prerequisites such as capitalist modes of ownership, free labour, rational law, and free market movement. He concluded that Weber's analysis of capitalism and Islam "was not particularly successful" (1974b, 231).

Toby Huff and Wolfgang Schlucter's edited volume, *Max Weber and Islam,* offers a series of short essays by well-known scholars of Islam and Weberian thought that focused on different aspects of Islam within Weber's writings. The essays range from a historiography of his own studies of Islam to how his framework can explain political movements throughout various parts of the Muslim world, such as the development of secular legal frameworks in the Indian subcontinent and throughout South Asia. The various essays in this volume appear on the surface to be critical of Weber's writings on Islam. For instance, Schlucter showed that Weber did not begin to look at Islam until the very end of his life and that his ideas on the topic were never fully developed. These essays, however, do not directly critically address many of Weber's more spurious claims about Islam. Crone's essay in this volume suggests that Islam is irrational within the Weberian model

because it is unchanging. However, Crone did not take into account that Weber's writings on what defines "rationality" are not entirely clear.

Lane and Redissi's (2009) *Religion and Politics: Islam and Muslim Civilisation* explored Weber's writings on topics related to Islam beyond capitalism but was not overly critical. The authors argued that, despite its shortcomings, Weber's view of Islam can still be used as a good starting point for understanding political development and instability in the Muslim world. They also noted that Weber's understanding of Islam was based on Orientalist sources, and went on to note that "many of the negative features of Islam that Weber focused upon stem from Arab legacies, which need not be combined with Islam as a system of beliefs" (Lane & Redissi, 2009, p. xvii). Weber did not make this distinction between Arab culture and Islamic culture in his writings. He sought to offer a general analysis of the phenomenon of Islam*,* and as Lane and Redissi noted, viewed Islam as a monolithic entity and did not account for civilisational differences in any meaningful way.

More recently, Djedi (2011) examined in detail the relationship between Weber's understandings of Islam, capitalism, and modernity. He argued that for Weber, while Islam (except *Ibadism*) was incompatible with the Protestant ethic for many of the same reasons mentioned by previous scholars, it still had the capacity to enter into the capitalist fold. Djedi argued that for Weber, Islam was not *de facto* opposed to capitalism or economic modernity. In Weber's eyes, Islam's lack of an inner-worldly path to salvation (i.e. the Protestant work ethic) made it an ideal candidate for capitalist integration; there was no moral objection within Islam to the potential material excesses of capitalism that characterise what it has become today. For Weber, the "warlike" mentality of Islam largely accounted for why Islam failed to enter into the capitalist global discourse unlike other Christian nations.

As can be seen, there exists a body of literature that exclusively explores Weber's writings on Islam. However, most of this literature focuses on Weber's superficial understanding of the relationship between Islam and capitalism. Much of the existing literature on Weber and Islam offers little critical analysis of his understandings of the core ideas within Islam. This article differs in that it offers a more critical analysis of Weber's understandings of Islam's core ideas. It engages Weber's interpretation of Islam and compares it with the accounts of Islam provided by Islam's primary sources and scholarly figures.

Weber's discursive framework for the study of Islam

Salvatore (1996) argued that Weber's work on Islam "epitomizes the centrality of Western essentialism in the intellectual construction of the modern world" (p. 483). Weber's writings on Islam are emblematic of the tensions that still exist today when trying to conceptualise the "West" and the "East" as meta-discourses. Weber tried to understand Islam primarily in terms of social, political, and economic structures in a very detached manner without a serious understanding of Islam's primary sources. His eclectic approach to Oriental societies was also a major methodological problem. Sunar (2014) noted that Weber "selects the premises according to the model he wants to form, particularly when forming ideal types related to Oriental societies. As a result, it is questionable whether these ideal types represent the social fact he is actually analysing or not" (p. 159).

It has been argued that Weber takes the West and the Orient as a single phenomenon and that his understanding of Islam relied on the writings of other European Orientalist scholars of the time such as Carl L. Becker, Julius Wellhausen, Theodor Noeldeke, and Ignác Goldziher (Sunar, 2014; Wolf-Gazo, 2005). Sunar (2014) pointed out that Weber "often bases his central argument on a single source and defends himself by saying that he is not an expert in the field, and therefore, his contributions should be considered to be sociological observations" (p. 158). Ultimately, Weber's explanations of Islam and the Islamic civilisation provide many broad generalisations that are confusing, misleading, and often simply inaccurate.

Today's most prominent social scientists who study race and religion espouse an informed existential hermeneutics and a return to *verstehen* to help avoid evaluating non-Western traditions via Western discursive analytic frameworks (Godrej, 2009; March, 2009; Thomas, 2010). Godrej (2009) noted,

> An existential hermeneutic makes no claim about the necessary privileging of an "insider's" perspective. It does claim however, that any attempt to detach the texts or ideas from the social and cultural setting out of which they have come is a recipe for misunderstanding. An existential hermeneutic draws heavily on verstehen, a method that famously focuses on the intentional ferreting-out of the material from which individuals craft their meaning-making (p. 147).

Weber's writings on Islam fall well outside today's commonly accepted standards of comparative political analysis or theory. His detachment of the texts or ideas from the social and cultural setting out of which they have come has resulted in the type of misunderstandings Godrej warns of. According to Thomas (2010), the emerging subfield of comparative political theory thus far "has often aimed to correct what it sees as European and North American chauvinism, by highlighting commonalities between that "Western" world and those outside of it" (p. 665). One of the primary functions of contemporary comparative political analysis or theory is to lift the veil of infallibility from European socio-political discourses (Godrej, 2009; March, 2009; Thomas, 2010). Weber sought to keep that veil of infallibility firmly attached to Western socio-political discourses. The main purpose of his analysis of Oriental societies, as Sunar suggests, "is not to explain or understand Oriental societies, but to prove his analyses on Western societies." His goal in his study of Oriental societies was "to demonstrate the uniqueness of the West" and offer "a counter-Oriental model" (Sunar, 2014, p. 160). Much of Weber's culturally comparative writings were dedicated to showing why the West was ultimately "successful" while the Orient was mired in backwardness and poverty.

Weber mimicked much of the style and many of the themes of 19th century Orientalist scholarship in his analysis of Islam. Salvatore (1996, p. 471) argued that "Weber inherited from 19th century Orientalism a selective historical focus, along with a predetermination of cultural units in religious terms that in the case of the Oriental units, and in particular of Islam, was too strictly dependent on the Western historical point of observation". Weber was hardly the only thinker of his time to do this— his scholarship on Islam is part of a long tradition of Western Orientalist scholarship. Even Goldziher, one of Weber's primary sources who had a deep admiration and intimate understanding of Islam, attempted to understand it in a typical Orientalist totalising manner. Goldziher largely denied Islam of its own source of agency; he argued that the entire Prophecy of Muhammad (S.A.W.) was built upon a concoction of earlier religious traditions.

> Thus it was with borrowed blocks that Muhammad built his eschatological message. He made use of Old Testament history (mostly in haggadic form), citing from it admonitory examples of the fate of ancient peoples who opposed and

> scoffed at the warners sent to them. Muhammad now placed himself at the end of this chain of prophets; he was its final link (Goldziher, 1981, p. 8).

Goldziher went on to speculate, with no supporting evidence, that Muhammad's (S.A.W.) interactions with various merchants along the Meccan trade route ultimately shaped his views prior to the Qur'ān being revealed. Such tidy explanations of the Qur'ān as being merely a collection of older stories was much more palatable to the Western mindset of the time than having to seriously consider the Islamic version of events. It offered both a rational explanation of Islam's sacred text while still subtly demonstrating the superiority of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Tibawi (1965) argued that in order to properly engage in comparative religious scholarship, one must, at the least, first engage with the terms that are considered acceptable with that religious tradition, and then juxtapose those terms with the new terms introduced by the writer. Otherwise readers will be subjected to some indoctrination or confusion, "unable to distinguish between native tradition and the opinion of the writer" (p. 16). He further observed that such juxtapositions rarely actually happen, however, and in the end, the reader is usually only left with the opinion of the writer. Such was the case with Goldziher's assessment of Islam. The same can be said of Weber's.

Islam as the warrior religion

Weber asserted that Islam was transformed into a "national Arabic warrior religion" shortly after the death of the Prophet (S.A.W.). In his analysis, this transformation led to a deeply class-based system:

> In the first Meccan period of Islam, the eschatological religion of Mohammed developed in pietistic urban conventicles which displayed a tendency to withdrawal from the world. But in subsequent developments in Medina and in the evolution of the early Islamic communities, the religion was transformed from its pristine form into a national Arabic warrior religion, and even later into a religion with a very strong class emphasis (Weber, 1994, p. 193).

He also argued that elites living during the time of the Prophet (S.A.W.) were the ones who made Islam successful. According to Weber (1994), "those followers whose conversion to Islam made possible the decisive

success of the Prophet were consistently members of powerful families" (p. 193). It is true that elites living during the life of the Prophet (S.A.W.), and shortly after his death, would play an undeniable role in expanding the religion. As Djedi (2011) explained, "Islam had had its "bourgeois" moments, during which the figure of the rich merchant could rise to the level of the warrior and the religious scholar, who had, since the start, ensured themselves unwavering soteriological promises" (p. 53). Çizakça reminded us that many of early Islam's leading figures were merchants: "let us remember particularly that Prophet Muhammed (S.A.W.) himself was a merchant. Moreover, Abu Bakr was a cloth merchant and Uthman was an importer of cereals" (Çizakça, 2007, p. 110). Despite this fact, the role played by the less powerful masses in spreading Islam is undeniable. The Qur'ān directly castigates those pagan elites who criticised the Prophet (S.A.W.) for not being one of the power bearers of his city:

> And they say: If only this Qur'an had been revealed to some great man of the two towns? Is it they who apportion thy Lord's mercy? We have apportioned among them their livelihood in the life of the world, and raised some of them above others in rank that some of them may take labour from others; and the mercy of thy Lord is better than (the wealth) that they amass (43:31–32).

Weber failed to take this into account in his analysis which focuses on the merchant class and elites within early Islamic societies.

According to Levtzion (1999), after the first three centuries of Islam, Arab warriors actually played a limited role in Islam's development and that "Islam as we know it is a religion developed by scholars, jurists, theologians, and mystics, without virtually any input of those in political authority or those who held military power" (p. 158). Islam flourished and spread fastest in places where political power and stability were the weakest. The iconic 20th century Pakistani intellectual, Iqbal (1908) observed that "Islam has gained its greatest and most lasting missionary triumphs in times and places in which its political power has been weakest, as in south India and in Eastern Bengal [modern Pakistan]" (p. 88). Iqbal's explanation is further bolstered by the rapid spread of Islam throughout Africa in the early to middle parts of the 20th century. According to Mazrui (1986), the Muslim population in Africa rose from 40 million in 1931 to 80 million in 1951 in comparison with a

Roman Catholic rise from 5 million to 15 million. Figure 1 illustrates the contemporary dominance of Islam in Northern Africa, which within this chart includes Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Western Sahara, the Sudan, Spanish North Africa, and Libya.
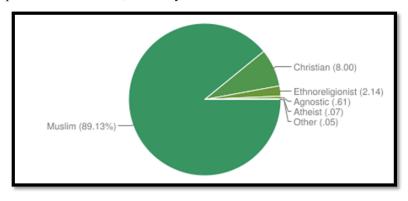

Figure 1: Religious breakdown of Northern Africa in 2010

Source: Association of Religious Data Archives, http://www.thearda.com/internationalData/regions/profiles/Region_11_1.asp

By the beginning of the 20th century, Africa was the only continent with more followers of Islam than any other religion (Kaba, 2005). It is hard to deny that Africa would fit within Iqbal's rubric of places where political stability has been quite weak. According to the 2010 United Nations Human Development Reports, the average 2010 Gross Regional Income Per Capita (PPP 2008 US $) for people living in this region was only 5,738 USD per year (UNHDR, 2010). Islam was not meant to be a religion of the elites; its principles were meant to be grasped by all, regardless of their educational background or social standing. The one who is best in his faith is he who is kind and avoids being harsh in words or actions. The Prophet (S.A.W.) is reported to have said, "The best among you are those who have the best manners and the best character" (al-Bukhārī, 8:6029). This is an expectation that any individual, regardless of their class or social prestige can comprehend.

Weber went on to argue that "the ideal personality type in Islam is not the scholarly scribe, rather it is the warrior" (1994, p. 197). While Weber did not clearly define the warrior archetype, he did give some obvious clues about it in his sociology of religion:

> The life pattern of a warrior has very little affinity with the notion of beneficent providence, or with the systematic ethical demands of a transcendental god. Concepts like sin, salvation, a religious humility have not only seemed remote from all ruling strata, particularly the warrior nobles, but have indeed appeared reprehensible to its sense of honor (1978, p. 472).

Weber's conception of *the warrior* is of someone who is brutish and aggressive, driven by a purely egotistical sense of honour more than anything else. This fits well within more traditional Anglo-European conceptualisations of the warrior. One can look back at the medieval English epic poem *Beowulf* for further insight on this.

There was no room for philosophical musings or political intrigue in *Beowulf's* portrayal of the warrior. There was no time for mourning—vengeance and aggression were the true warrior's response: "Sorrow not, sage! It beseems us better friends to avenge than fruitlessly mourn them" (Beowulf, 2016, part xxi). This general conception of the warrior in the European context carried throughout the Middle Ages and into Weber's lifetime. For an example, more local and contemporary to Weber, one can look to Nietzsche's writings on the warrior in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, "You", Nietzsche (1999) commands, "I advise not to work, but to fight. You I advise not to peace, but to victory. Let your work be a fight, let your peace be a victory" (p. 29). Nietzsche's *Übermensch* was in many ways the idealised version of masculinity at the end of the 19th century in European literature and writings. Weber's portrayal of *the warrior* is unmistakably Western; it is masculine and aggressive much like that of his European literary predecessors who wrote on the topic.

The notion of the warrior in non-Western cultures is more complex and nuanced than it is commonly understood in the West; it goes beyond self-interest and aggression. *Sūrah* 2:216 stipulates that in certain cases Muslims must fight; however, this *āyah* also makes an important distinction on the existential burden that comes with fighting. The *āyah* reads, "*Jihād* is ordained for you, though you dislike it, and it may be that you dislike a thing that is good for you, and like a thing which is bad for you. Allah knows, but you do not know". It recognises the contemplative nature of man. One might not like war, but nonetheless, he/she is obliged to fight in certain cases. This verse recognises the limited knowledge of *the good* that the warrior possesses—it recognises

that man is limited in their understanding of what is ultimately in their best interests.

Nowhere in his writings of the warrior personality does Weber mention the multiple Qur'ānic injunctions against wanton violence and barbarism. The Qur'ān directly states that *jihād* has limitations, "Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress the limits" (2:190). *Sūrah* 2:193 further explains, "And fight them until there is no more persecution and the religion becomes for Allah. But if they cease, let there be no hostility except to those who practice oppression". A Muslim warrior is not to act as a hellion or a sadistic murderer when engaging in battle; restraint is incumbent upon him. Bassiouni (2014) observed,

> It is absolutely clear, however, that *jihād* is subject to *jus in bello* limits. […] Assuming that *jihād* is the legitimate basis for what is referred to as the *jus ad bellum*, it is still subject to the *jus in bello*. The latter is a clear component of the *sharī'a* and has been so since the very beginning [of Islam]. As said previously, nothing in the *sharī'a* or in *jihād* allows a breach of certain limits on the use of force (p. 210).

It was forbidden during the time of the Prophet (S.A.W.) to violate the *jus in bello* limitations mentioned by Bassiouni. Even while in an actual state of war, the Prophet (S.A.W.) made it clear to his followers that unnecessary killing was strictly forbidden, as he did during the Battle of Badr (Hamidullah, 2003). There are numerous examples throughout Islamic history of clemency in war. Following the Muslim victory at The Battle of Hittīn, Salahuddin Ayubi (Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī) defeated the Frankish king and then "seated beside him and as he was half-dead with thirst and gave him iced water to drink" (Ibn al-Athīr, cited in Gabrieli, 2010, p. 74). Salahuddin also ordered that all barons and other high-ranking persons who did not break their oaths were to have their lives spared. Weber's account of the warrior in Islam takes none of these important incidents into account. He ignores these realities and instead offers "the warrior" as the ideal person in Islam. His account is nothing more than a Western construction, which does a great disservice to the richness surrounding the transcendental ideas of obligation and duty in Islam.

The "warrior" and the "scholar" are in diametric opposition to each other in Weber's analysis that posits the warrior as the ideal type

in Islam. He even claimed that Islam "lacked the requirement of a comprehensive knowledge of the law" (Weber, 1994, p. 196). This claim is quite misleading considering the thousands of Islamic legal scholars who have emerged over the past 1400 years. Islam clearly stipulates that Muslims are expected to pursue knowledge. Knowledge is something that not only all humans have a right to, but rather have an obligation to seek, "Whoever takes a path upon which to obtain knowledge, Allah makes the path to Paradise easy for him" (Al-Tirmidhī, 39:2646). The ideal type of person in Islam is the one who most closely resembles the Prophet (S.A.W.) who was ascribed the honorific title of "*al-Insān al-Kāmil*" (the person who has reached perfection). As Albayrak (2006) explains, *al-Insān al-Kāmil* means a wise person who has acquired qualities of high virtue. In the Islamic context, *al-Insān al-Kāmil* refers to Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) and those who carry on his spiritual heritage. The bearers of the Prophet's spiritual heritage today possess both the physical warrior qualities Weber alludes to and the rational qualities to which he does not allude.

Islam as a feudal religion

Weber suggested that a feudal hierarchical class structure was inherent within Islam. Lane and Redissi (2009) argued that socio-economic conditions led to feudalism rather than anything inherent within the religion itself and that "the alliance between the social strata and the economic ethic pushed Islam decisively in the direction of Arab traditionalism, including feudalism" (p. 58). Within the faith itself, there is no hierarchy. As Iqbal (1908) indicated, there is no privileged class, no priesthood, and no caste system. The unity Islam preaches is secured by making men believe in the two simple presuppositions: 1) the Unity of God and 2) the authenticity of Prophetic mission.

The individual can directly access God without the need for priests or intermediaries if he or she chooses. Weber's own Western situated disposition deeply affected the way he interpreted and understood Islam. Weber imposed a system on Islam to secure his own understanding of it rather than evaluating and understanding it within its own discursive parameters. At the very least, Weber seems to be confusing cultural aspects of the early Islamic dynasties with the core religious aspects. The cultures of the early Islamic dynasties may have been more warrior-like or feudal as Weber repeatedly claims, but the religion itself is not, nor ever was. Weber does not differentiate between how the religion

was practised and the religion itself in his writings; he believed that Islam was feudal at its core (Husain, 2004; Sunar, 2014). Weber (1994) noted,

> Islam displays other characteristics of a distinctly feudal spirit: The obvious unquestioned acceptance of slavery, serfdom, and polygamy, the disesteem for and subjugation of women; the essentially ritualistic character of religious obligations; and finally the great simplicity of religious requirements and even greater simplicity of the ethical requirements (p. 196).

It is difficult to see why Weber makes a connection between polygamy and feudalism—while most certainly there were incidences of polygamy during feudal times, it was hardly an established institution like serfdom or slavery. In his research on economic development in feudal societies, Posner noted (1988), "the generally low incidence of polygyny even where it is freely permitted" (p. 170). Christianity still dominated feudal Europe even though its influence waned as the Middle Ages progressed. Roiz (2013) claimed that within Ashkenazic Jewish theology during the 11th century, Rabbi Gershom ben Judah issued a decree abolishing polygamy due to Christian influences that also deemed the practice immoral. According to Roiz, "polygamy, a practice historically accepted in Judaism, would be rejected by the Ashkenazim due to Christian influences" (p. 183). This claim about "the obvious unquestioned acceptance of slavery" is also misleading. Islam has a long tradition of freeing slaves. One of the rudimentary stories of the companions of the Prophet (S.A.W.) taught in any *madrasah* is that of Bilāl (R.A.). Bilāl (R.A.) was an Abyssinian slave whom the Prophet (S.A.W.) freed and who eventually became a major figure among the *Ṣaḥābah* (companions of the Prophet).

Those in positions of power who act unjustly will be punished for their actions. If one follows the logic, it is clear that slavery is not meant to be a permanent institution, and eventually it is to be phased out. Freamon (2014) argued that "[Muslim] jurists around the world acknowledge that there is now a universal consensus recognizing an irrefutable human right to be free from slavery and slave-trading". Freamon went on to argue that even conservative Islamic scholars like Sayyid Quṭb openly denounce slavery as being unIslamic. If we look to the present, the type of forced slavery that Weber claims Islam

unquestionably accepts has all but disappeared in the modern Muslim world. Today such slavery, as a formal institution, primarily exists only in places dominated by extremist groups like *Boko Haram* in Nigeria and ISIS.

Within Weber's monolithic understanding of Islam, his writings contained only a few passages relating the socio-religious concept of "sect" within Islam. Djedi (2011) argued that "in all of Weber's writings there are but very few passages relating the socio-religious concept of "sect" in Islam—a critical ideal type that interweaves the religious and the professional" (p. 66). Not only did Weber generally ignore the idea of sects within Islam, he also ignored the differences between Islamic cultures. Lane and Redissi (2009) pointed out that "Weber moves quickly several times from the origins of Islam to the Ottoman Empire by means of an overview within one phase without any form of explanation of an evolution that is stretched over almost six centuries" (p. 48). In his writings on Islam, he does not make serious distinctions between the religion and the various regions of the world in which it is practised.

On Islam in India, Schlucter (1999) mentioned how "his comments remain scanty here, which, at least in regard to Indian Islam, is surprising given his thorough analysis of Hinduism and Buddhism" (p. 54). Islam has a long and rich tradition in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. For example, the modern Indian legal system is a blend of both Western and non-Western elements. "By the 1870's", Robinson (1999, p. 233) writes, "the Muslims of British India found that their Islamic law, the *Sharī'ah*, accounted for no more than personal law; that is law relating to matters such as Islamic marriage, divorce, and inheritance". The impact of British colonialism played a major role in the development of Indian common law. One can quickly see that there are numerous cultural elements that have an impact upon the implementation and interpretation of the *Sharī'ah*. Each individual society that has embraced Islam used its own cultural lenses to see how their respective legal systems operate. For this reason, the legal systems in Malaysia differ significantly from those in Afghanistan. There is no uniform standard of *Sharī'ah* law that is utilised by all Muslim nation states.

Islam as the religion of lustful misogynists and "distinctive clothing"

Weber argued that Islam promoted "the disesteem for and subjugation of women". There has been a wide body of literature that supports the idea

that women in Islam have enjoyed much more freedom than in other societies historically (Hassan, 1999; Watt, 2008). The Qur'ān states,

> O ye who believe! It is not lawful for you forcibly to inherit the women (of your deceased kinsmen), nor (that) ye should put constraint upon them that ye may take away a part of that which ye have given them, unless they be guilty of flagrant lewdness. But consort with them in kindness, for if ye hate them it may happen that ye hate a thing wherein Allah hath placed much good (4:19).

Laws of inheritance and divorce articulated in Islam's primary sources are structured in ways that give women benefits they never had prior to the Qur'ān. While within the larger Islamic tradition over the past 1400 years things have been less clear, within the Qur'ān itself, the rights of women are consistently reaffirmed. Hassan (1999) observes,

> Within the Islamic tradition both negative and positive attitudes are found toward women and women's issues. However, the Qur'an, which is the primary source on which Islam is founded, consistently affirms women's equality with men and their fundamental right to actualise the human potential that they possess equally with men (p. 275).

The repression of women in Islamic societies can be traced back to socio-economic conditions more than to any other factor. Moghadam (1993) argued that Islam as a discourse and religion is no more or less restrictive than other major world religions. The Qur'ān says that both sexes are created of a single soul, "O people, fear your Lord, Who created you of a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them scattered many men and women; and fear God by whom you claim [your rights] from one another and kinship ties. Surely God has been watchful over you" (4:1). Women in Islam have explicit social, economic, and political/legal rights. Examples of these rights include the right to work and earn money, the right to keep their earnings, the right to negotiate the terms of marriage, the right to divorce, the right to custody of her children following a divorce, the right to property, and the right to education.

At another point in Weber's writings on Islam, he attributes a reference to the Prophet (S.A.W.) and then gives a very simplistic interpretation of its meaning. Without conforming to the generally accepted protocols of attributing a quote to the Prophet (S.A.W.), Weber asserted,

> The Muslim tradition depicts with pleasure the luxurious raiment, perfume, and meticulous beard-coiffure of the pious. The saying, "when god blesses a man with prosperity he likes to see signs thereof visible upon him"—made by Muhammad, according to tradition, to well-circumstanced people who appeared before him in ragged attire—stands in extreme opposition to any Puritan economic ethic and thoroughly corresponds with feudal conceptions of status. (Weber, 1994, p. 194)

Before beginning to offer a rebuttal of Weber's assertion, an important point needs to be made related to the correct methodology for citing words from Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.). Abū al-Ḥusayn Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, the compiler of the highly regarded collection of *aḥādīth* known as *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* says,

> You should know, may Allah guide you, that it is obligatory for everyone who can distinguish between authentic and unsound reports, and between trustworthy and accused narrators, not to narrate any report unless he is sure of the correctness of the narration and honesty of their narrators, and to avoid those which are narrated by accused narrators and the stubborn among the people of Bidʿah (innovation) (Muslim, 2007, p. 43).

In his writings on Islam, Weber regularly referenced Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W.) or "tradition" but never does specifically reference any particular *ḥadīth* or compiler of *aḥādīth* (al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Ibn Mājah, etc.). Whether this statement Weber attributes to the Prophet (S.A.W.) is accurate or not is beside the point.

Weber offered a very one-sided interpretation of the idea that God likes to see the visible signs of wealth on a man he blesses with property. He suggested that this means that a man is supposed to show his wealth ostentatiously by wearing fancy clothing and luxurious jewellery. "In attitudinal terms", Hussain (2004, p. 48) notes, "Islam appeared to Weber in a purely hedonistic spirit, especially towards women, luxuries and property". Weber actually saw Islam as the opposite of Protestantism. Hellmut Ritter, whose understanding of Islam was entrenched within the Weberian point of view on this matter, saw asceticism in Islam as "other-worldly oriented, whereas the Protestant asceticism (especially in Calvinism) has always been inner-worldly" (cited in Djedi, 2011, p. 52). If this is true, then there is inherently nothing wrong with conspicuous

shows of wealth and material fortune. An alternative reading of this statement yields a different meaning.

Weber forgot to mention in his writings that Islam has equally binding warnings against vanity, deceit, and extravagance. Using a less materialistic and Western interpretation of this *ḥadīth*, one concludes that the idea that Allah likes to see the visible signs upon the person that he blessed, can also be understood in terms of seeing visible manifestations of goodness, compassion, and patience in that person who was blessed. God desires the rich man to show his wealth in terms of his actions of charity and compassion in a way that all men and women can recognise and appreciate. While Islam has no issue with people dressing nicely or wearing fancy jewellery, Weber did not consider the alternative, deeper interpretation of the *ḥadīth*. This interpretation actually fits far better within the general Islamic discourse than Weber's one-sided interpretation.

Weber's writings also allude to distinctive clothing that Muslims are expected to furnish themselves with. Weber states,

> Islam imposed such requirements for everyday living as the wearing of distinctive clothing (a requirement that even today has important economic consequences whenever savage tribes are converted to Islam) and the avoidance of certain unclean foods, of wine, and of gambling (Weber, 1994, p. 105).

The claim that Islam's clothing adornments are "distinctive" is a normative aesthetic judgement more than anything else. It is hardly a scientific or serious anthropological observation that merits any further discussion. What does merit further discussion, however, is the fact that Weber finds the idea of certain specific norms regarding dress unique to Islam. Weber sees such requirements as something foreign to the Western discourse, which of course is not a simple observation. Iranian Muslims living in Bandar Abbas where temperatures regularly reach 40 °C dress significantly different than those who reside in mountainous regions in the far north that regularly experience snowfall. This point, though obvious, should have made Weber realise that Islamic dress is influenced by geographic factors.

It is also obvious that clothing styles throughout the world are deeply influenced by larger social factors. Islamic clothing styles are

not unique in this regard at all. Do social norms not dictate how people dress in the corporate world in the EU and US? Many corporations have strict policies clearly defining not only what clothing styles are acceptable, but also what the acceptable length one's hair and/or beard are allowed to be for males, and what types of cosmetic products female employees are permitted to wear to work. The norms of dress in the corporate world that males and females are expected to adhere to in the West are just as much an "imposed requirement of dress" as anywhere else. By ascribing the moniker of "distinctive clothing" to Islam, Weber is implying that Muslims are expected to adhere to some type of divinely-mandated dress code. Indeed, within Islam there are recommendations on how one should dress, but in no way is there some type of check-list of acceptable clothing items. Styles of Islamic dress are culturally defined. The clothing men and women wear in Saudi Arabia varies greatly from that which is commonly worn in Malaysia or Indonesia.

Finally, Weber completely ignored the main doctrinal points about dress within Islam—that of modesty and self-protection. The Qur'ān states, "O Prophet! Tell thy wives and thy daughters and the women of the believers to draw their cloaks close round them (when they go abroad). That will be better, that so they may be recognised and not annoyed. Allah is ever Forgiving, Merciful" (33:59). Nowhere does Weber reference any of the numerous primary Islamic sources that talk about why Muslims should dress in a certain way.

Weber's misunderstanding of *qadar*

The last point this article examines is Weber's misunderstanding of *qadar* (predestination). Weber argued that Islam was not a religion of salvation like Christianity. He denied Islam the ethical character of a typical "salvation religion". As Djedi (2011) indicated, Weber not only deprived Islam, since its emergence, of "any sort of rational economic asceticism, but sometimes disavowed it any ethical character of a strictly speaking salvation religion" (p. 45). For Weber, if one accepts the notion of predestination, then salvation is a moot point.

Weber was not familiar with the widely held Islamic understanding of predestination. In Islam, the idea is that Allah ultimately knows all, but people do not. Nobody can be certain as to whether they are predestined for Paradise or Hellfire. It is therefore incumbent upon each

individual to follow the correct path to the best of his ability. Like other recent mainstream Sunnite scholars, Shaykh Muhammad ibn Ṣāliḥ al-ʿUthaymīn, noted that the meaning of *qadar* is that "man has a choice but he does not perform any action except that it is decreed by Allah because there is an authority over his authority, but Allah does not force man. Man has a choice and he acts by his choice" (al-ʿUthaymīn, 2006, p. 54). He explained further that regardless of the metaphysical reality surrounding the question of fate or free will, based on our limited perceptions, we cannot know whether Allah has willed a thing for us or not. Therefore, according to this position, we can only do the best we can as individuals to please Allah. Islamic notions of predestination take on a deontological character; one still has a duty to follow the commands of Allah, even if he is among the chosen ones. One can think of a type of Divine Command Theory of ethics as comparable to the Islamic ethical system. While salvation in Islam may not be the same as that in Christianity, it still exists albeit in a different way. Both Islam and Christianity have a similar notion of what is commonly referred to in Christian parlance as "divine grace".

Contrary to Weber's claim that Islam lacked a notion of salvation, Turner (1992) maintains that Islam developed "a genuine salvation path with ultimately religious goals, but this quest was mystical and other-worldly" (p. 47). Iqbal (1908) further explicates what is meant by the Islamic path to salvation, "Man is a free responsible being; he is the maker of his own destiny; and his salvation is his own business" (p. 69). Each individual is responsible for his or her own salvation. Human beings are social animals, and the Qur'ān is meant to be as a source of guidance. Within the Islamic worldview, the Qur'ān establishes the proper discourse for our behaviour. Ultimately, it is up to the individual to follow it.

Conclusion

Despite his well-deserved iconic status within the social sciences, Max Weber's writings on Islam were limited and his framework of studying Islamic culture was inconsistent with his general methodological perspective that prioritised *verstehen*. His explanations and observations on Islam were more of an effort to utilise "the view from nowhere" methodological perspective which unconsciously ended up being more of "the view from somewhere", in other words, a conflation of 19th

century Orientalism and Weber's own *perception* of his objectivity. This resulted in Weber making many highly contestable claims about Islam and its general character. In his writings, Weber gave little attention to the more specific historical events that happened throughout the 1300+ years of Islamic history that had already existed during his lifetime. For example, there is a jump of more than a thousand years between the Prophethood of Muhammad (S.A.W.), and the advent of modern capitalism (Lane & Redissi, 2009). Weber did not give any detailed analysis of what happened in between these two stages of history. He made claims about Islam in the age of capitalism, while linking those claims to a pre-capitalist era: pagan Mecca. Along with Weber's lack of attention to historical detail, he often utilised his own Western categories when trying to analyse Islam and its culture. He was simply like many earlier Western scholars who ultimately ended up assessing non-Western discourses through the lens of the discourse they were most familiar with. Such scholarship often provided readers with an incomplete and often inaccurate portrayal of reality in non-Western discourses.

At the time of his death, Weber's writings on Islam "were little more than scattered comments sprinkled throughout his monographs on law, religion, and economic organization" (Huff, 1999, p. 2). His understanding of Islam relied almost entirely on the writings of other Orientalist scholars of his time and not on the primary sources of Islam. When writing on Islam, Weber was addressing a topic that was truly foreign to him, the intricacies of which he did not convincingly elaborate.

While I strongly agree that there needs to be more exploration of Weber's writings on Islam, I also believe that these future explorations of Weber's writings on Islam need to be critical of the Orientalism he espoused. A good hermeneutical analysis of a text or a larger discourse in general, requires a certain level of existential understanding and empathy with the subject being analysed—or *verstehen.* This article showed that Weber's writings on Islam fell woefully short of a well-informed hermeneutic. It is truly a shame that Weber did not get a chance to further explore Islam. He died when working on his sociologies of Eastern religions. Perhaps had he lived longer, his overall analysis and final conclusions might have been significantly different.

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