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Ideal Types in Max Weber's Sociology of Religion: Some Theoretical Inspirations for a Study of the Religious Field

Abstract: Max Weber is widely known as the author of ideal types of power. However, he also developed ideal types of religious attitudes. The article presents his original three ideal types and shows how they can be complemented by a fourth one. The fourth ideal type is based on analysis of magic as religious practice.

Keywords: ideal types; mysticism; asceticism; religion; magic; psychoanalysis.

> "The most varied transitions and combinations are found between the polar opposites (…). Neither religions nor men are open books. (…) In religious matters consistency has been the exception and not the rule. (…) These presentations do not claim to offer a well-rounded picture of world religions. Those features peculiar to the individual religions, in contrast to other religions, but which at the same time are important for our interest, must be brought out strongly. (…) The author has always underscored those features in the total picture of a religion which have been decisive for the fashioning of the practical way of life, as well as those which distinguish one religion from another"
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> H. H. Gerth, W. C. Mills (eds.), 1946: 291–294

In times of the progressing diversification of the religious field[1] and its increasing global dynamics, studies on new religious movements call for application of multiple research instruments. My attention was drawn to the fact that sociology textbooks as well as sociology of religion literature tend to omit the religious typology developed by Max Weber. In the available publications, religion, as an object of Weber's analysis, is present mostly in connection with his description of the role of Protestantism in European history. However, Weber's sociology of religion brings a classification with clear-cut categorisations that allow us to analyse religious behaviour (or, perhaps, human behaviour in general) with reference to the proposed ideal types. Those include *inner-worldly asceticism, world-rejecting asceticism* and *world-flying mysticism*.

According to Weber's definition, "an ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view" according to which "concrete individual phenomena … are arranged into a unified analytical construct" (*Gedankenbild*, Weber 1949: 90). In its purely abstractive formulation it is a methodological "utopia [that] cannot be

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[1] The notion of 'religious field' is credited to Pierre Bourdieu and his relativistic criticism of Weber's concept of charisma, as in P. Bourdieu (1991).

found empirically anywhere in reality."(ibidem). Ideal types are abstractive interpretative schemes comprehending substantial features of a given phenomena. An ideal type may be compared to the concept of absolute vacuum used in physics to calculate real physical reactions as a point of reference, a model that does not exist in nature.

Below, I have presented weberian typology, indicating a possibility of complementing it with a type which he himself did not treat as religious at all.

Reconstructing the Original Model

Inner-worldly asceticism (*innerweltliche Askese*) plays a crucial role in Weber's thought and represents a point of departure for his religious typology. Its importance is related to Weber's deliberations on the spirit of capitalism and Protestant ethic. Inner-worldly asceticism is represented by some sections of Protestantism, notably Puritanism but also by "Zwinglians, Calvinists, Baptists, Mennonites, Quakers, Methodists and Pietists (both of the Reformed, and, to a lesser degree, Lutheran varieties); as well as by Russian schismatic, heretical and rational pietistic sects, especially the Shtundists and Skoptsy" (Weber 1978: 479).

The religiousness of those groups comes true within "institutional structure of the world" and towards them. In this case, the world is seen as a duty to transform the reality in accordance with the ideals of asceticism and strive to make the world fulfil religious demands. Only in this way can individuals demonstrate and prove their religious status (Weber 1978: 543).
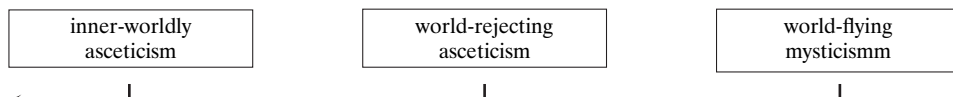
Associated with this type of asceticism is the notion of vocation, which is crucial in Weber's concept of the role of inner-worldly asceticism for the development of capitalism. Vocation stands for rational economic management where success indicates a blessing.

World-rejecting asceticism (*weltablehnende Askese*) is, according to Weber, peculiar antithesis to inner-worldly asceticism. Among practising it one may find early Christian ascetics and anchorites, medieval begging orders, pilgrims and living in celibacy. Members of those categories of religious communities perceive the world as religiously worthless and, in consequence, reject it as secondary creation and a "vessel of sin" (Gerth, Mills 1946: 291). As consequence of this approach is both submission of natural impulses through systematized way of living, and attitude towards social life whereby "the world is full of temptations, not only because it is the site of sensual pleasures which are ethically irrational and completely diverting from things divine, but even more because it fosters the religiously average person complacent self-sufficiency and self-righteousness in the fulfilment of common obligations, at the expense of the uniquely necessary concentration on active achievements leading to salvation." (Weber 1978: 542).

An escape from the world within this and the following category may be a flight into "absolute loneliness or, in its more modern form, e.g. in the case of Rousseau, to a nature unspoiled by human institutions" or "the flight to the 'people,' untouched by social conventions, characteristic of the Russian *narodnichestvo*" (Weber 1978: 506).

World-flying mysticism in Weber's typology (Weber 1978: 545) is religiousness that is different from the inner-worldly asceticism and from asceticism in general, religiousness associated mostly with Oriental mysticism in opposition to the dominance of asceticism in the West (Weber 1978: 234–236). Above all, Buddhism and Brahmanism should be mentioned in this context. According to Weber, their followers use meditation as a means to achieve a special mystic enlightenment, that is perfect cognition, to which a way leads through ever higher states of consciousness. This requires a separation from everyday affairs, as in the case of "communities of contemplative, orgiastic or apathetic ecstatics in Asia" giving an outlet "for the yearning to escape from the meaninglesness of inner-worldly work." (Weber/Whimster 2004: 79) Thus, a Buddhist monk focuses his actions on achievement of a state of perfection, liberating himself from the vicious cycle of the karmic birth and death—a transgression of reality (Gerth, Mills 1946: 292). Ultimately, Buddhist saints are a category of people who achieved nirvana directly, during their lives. Accordingly, the aim of a Brahma believer is to get to know God directly and become united with Brahman.

Let me propose the following reconstruction of Weber's typology-oriented thinking. *Inner-worldly asceticism*, representing an important element of his analysis, is a point of departure, with *world-rejecting asceticism* as its *alter ego* (on the European ground) which, in turn, is distinguished from *world-flying mysticism* as another step (also in the geographic sense) in the analysis of religious types. From the perspective of Weber's project, if we reconstruct the chronological order from *world-flying mysticism* to *inner-worldly asceticism*, it would outline peculiar progress in religious rationalism, an evolution of behaviour and thinking. In this sense, a Puritan would be one of the ultimate stages on this continuum—free from any mysticism or disturbing deliberations on life after death, which should be accepted in a form that will be offered in a proper time. The above can be depicted on the following scale:

inner-worldly asceticism	world-rejecting asceticism	world-flying mysticismm

Deconstruction of the Theory

The above interpretation does not provide, I consider, a satisfactory description of the religious field. Therefore, it may be worth to take a closer look at the criteria of distinguishing weberian types. Those criteria are already contained within the names of those types and define the constitutive strategies towards 'this world' and 'the other world,' towards immanence and transcendence, or the *profanum* and *sacrum*.

With regard to the attitude towards reality (immanence), we can identify religiousness which has either an accepting or a critical stance towards the real world. In other words, religiousness may be engaged in this world's affairs or based on alienation from the reality. This is clearly noticeable in the opposition between inner-worldly and world-rejecting or world-escaping strategies, the former signifying engagement while the latter demonstrating an avoidance of the world.

The attitude towards transcendence allows to recognize asceticism or mysticism. This attitude is based on a way in which the concept of transcendence is used, what in Weber's terminology is reflected in the notion of 'individual procedure of salvation' (1978: 554). Mysticism makes an active use of the concept of transcendence. Direct contact with transcendence 'here and now' is the aim of an individual's actions through which a person can influence the reality or the oneself. For instance, it is through "contemplative surrender to the All-oneness" (Weber 2004: 67), religious ecstasy, revelation or nirvana that an individual can attain true understanding and ultimate cognition, embark on a new and better path but also give advices and prophecies through possession in a trance, or unite with the Unknowable through ritual suicide. In asceticism on the contrary—achievement of the transcendence is postponed and possible only as a result of the person's earthly activities, such as mortification or martyrdom as a way to afterward salvation. Ascetics consciously constrain their encounters with transcendence, being wary even of not using image or name of God (this interpretation clearly deviates from the popular understanding of asceticism which connects it with techniques of the body). Weber claimed that in case of asceticism a lack of reflection about the sense of God-given reality is especially evident, what contradicts with mystic strive to mediate divine knowledge and reveal the sense of the world (Weber 1978: 546–548). Hence, mysticism is characterised by a strategy of engagement into transcendence whereas asceticism tries to avoid it.

Instead of the single-axis typology of Weber presented above, there may be proposed a binary structure based on oppositions, in a manner of categorisation which became popular among sociologists thanks to structuralism. Such classification is placed in a two-dimensional plane outlined by the axes of immanence and transcendence. Such a construction creates however the fourth, empty category which would satisfy the criterion of engagement both into reality and transcendence. In an attempt to apply Weber's terminological approach, I suggest calling it *world-active mysticism*.

		immanence	
		engagement	**avoidance**
transcendence	**avoidance**	*inner-worldly asceticism*	*world-rejecting asceticism*
	engagement	*world-active mysticism*	*world-flying mysticism*

Magic as World-Active Mysticism

In the light of weberian deliberations, *world-active mysticism* might seem to be a fairly artificial category given that Weber did not include it in his own typology. Nevertheless, this type of religiousness is a very common phenomenon, of which the best equivalent is degraded in theology magical thinking, which Weber himself described as the primeval form of religiousness (Gerth, Mills 1946: 283). While one may include

the great and complex religions of ancient Greece and Rome into this type, Weber associated it mostly with strata of peasantry "primarily involved with weather magic and animistic magic or ritualism" and "manipulation of spirits" (Weber 1978: 470). Weber pointed out also that the medieval church doctrinally treated peasants as lower-rank Christians or at least ranked peasants lowly (Weber 1978: 1178). Presumably, those were the reasons why the magical strategy, representing *world-active* mysticism, remained on the fringes of Weber's classification.

In the case of *world-active mysticism*, the contact with transcendence and magical, supernatural powers is aimed at attaining by individual special qualities or at influencing reality or fate. Common examples include prayer and offering which contain requests or guidelines to divine plan of operations towards the person concerned and the surrounding world. However, following Weber's footsteps, we should also mention magical powers, "incarnation of a new soul with one's own body, the possession of one's soul by a powerful demon or the removal of one's soul to a realm of spirits" (Weber 1978: 534). Through contact with transcendence, a human being is endowed with special qualities which are essential for living in the real world. According to Weber, overflow with God is a source of a particular *habitus*, essential for a warrior or a sorcerer who want to pursue their occupations (Weber 1978: 536). Within this type of religiousness, people get actively engaged in transcendence as a tool or the subject of intervention, and in immanence as an object of such an intervention. A person's actions and their outcomes depend on how well that person can employ transcendent powers to serve the required purpose. In this case, mystical contact is intended towards very real outcomes. Voodoo rituals are among the most vivid examples of this. Individual actively co-shape reality, utilising mystic encounters and acting as intermediary between this and the other world.

Inclusion of the aforementioned category in our analysis of the religious field demands more precise definition of the meaning structure of a word 'transcendence'. Previous analysis have shown, and in everyday experience it is obvious, that transcendence is a sphere outside, perhaps wrapping the inner sphere of immanence. This rigid distinction takes no account of numerous cases where transcendence is present within immanence and interferes with it. The statement 'God is everywhere' is perhaps the starkest example of this view. I would like to include to the sphere of transcendence all the constructs without empirical confirmation nevertheless present in discourse, representing its significant hermeneutic repository. Accordingly, transcendence will encompass spirits, demons, gods, saints, angels or even dwarves and, in more recent times, aliens (extraterrestrials)—characters "not from this world"—which are employed in explications as the tools or the subjects of interventions into the very real events, and which are the addressees of human requests, endeavours and prayers.

In contemporary Western culture the structure of magical thinking is reconstructed by psychoanalysis, which restitutes transcendence as unconsciousness inside of a human being, based on the assumption that exploration of unconscious (transcendent) content have influence on improvement of the functioning and behaviour of individuals. Unconscious impulses are revealed through slip-ups, connotations and dreams, all of which represent a hermeneutic repository in very much the same way as various

revelations or signs from God. From the depth of the unconsciousness, psychoanalysts can bring out facts that never occurred. Undeniably, psychoanalysis is not a science and it has not been proven to provide the treatment it purports to offer, what was analysed on strongly behavioural positions by Hans Eysenck as the first (Eysenck 1952; Frosh 1997).

The first parallel between psychoanalysis and magic can be found in the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1968), who showed the cross-effect of those practices. As analyzed by Alain Besançon (1968; 1974), probably the best example of psychoanalysis as a magico-mythical practice can be found in the works of Carl Gustav Jung, the early twentieth-century precursor of the New Age. Here, the unconscious became, indeed, an equivalent of what Weber called 'immanent sacrum,' characteristic of magical formations. Besançon objected to the 'sectarian' or even 'shamanistic' nature of psychoanalytic therapy and its institutions, and, most of all, to the Lacanian school which he witnessed developing in the 1960s in Paris. In sociology, Ernest Gellner (1985) conducted the most thorough analysis of psychoanalysis as a religious movement of magical quality.

Since the metaphysical structure is the main object of psychoanalytical practice, psychoanalysis can be classified as a religious discourse. Semantically and ontologically, believe in existence of God is no different from believe in existence of unconsciousness. It was no accident that Freud introduced psychoanalysis at the time when Nietzsche announced the death of God. Quite soon, like most schismatics, he got down in his works to criticism of the dominant religion that is Christianity. Therefore, in the historical perspective, psychoanalytical mysticism can be viewed as a practice which competes, first and foremost, with the Catholic and Protestant asceticism and as it can be easily noticed, which derives from Jewish, notably Hasidic, mysticism. This is also confirmed in the fact that adherents of psychoanalysis often get involved in Buddhist mysticism (particularly Zen), taking a sort of shortcut where, in the long history of India, the itinerary led from local forms of magic through Vedism and Brahmanism to Buddhism.

When Weber was professing the 'disenchantment' of the world, Freud established a 'reenchantment' project. One might think of Freud as someone who rationalised mysticism and incorporated it into the modern rational project. He did it by linking rationality of human real actions in the encompassing world with the mysticism of practice of discovering and revealing the 'real' meanings of those actions. Along this line of thinking, magic cannot be considered as an irrational practice. Rather, one should say that magic is a rational way of utilising irrational resources.

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On the one-dimensional evolutionist scale, magical religiousness should be placed far behind *world-flying mysticism*. The two-dimensional classification presented here seems to rid the analysis of such evaluative judgments and positions *world-active mysticism* within an objectivising order. I think that the proposed binary structuring of the religious field does not entail evolutionist or Eurocentric in its assumptions eval-

uation of types of religiousness as a stratifying element. No category identified in the proposed structure is privileged. The dynamics of modern religious movements shows that social actors fairly liberally switch between religious strategies without burdening their choices with any classifying evaluations. Engagement 'for some time' and 'until further notice,' resulting from the existence of a broad and varied range of religious options, increases the flexibility of those choices and enhances the opportunities for constant quest and personal self-improvement. Hence, this paper presents a structure which describes the field of religious strategies adopted by actors and which escapes normative stratifications. The discussion presented above is also an attempt to propose 'a change of language' in talking about magical thinking and to draw attention to the presence, stability and importance of this type of religiousness in the lives of our contemporaries.

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