# Part I

## The Foundations

# 1

# The Sociology of Religion

## The Foundations

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The classics have long played an important role in sociological theory and research, perhaps particularly about religion. While there are some who have deplored the ongoing conversation with classical sociological writers like Durkheim, Weber, Marx, and Simmel, as mere "ancestor worship" (Stark 2004), most other sociologists of religion have seen this heritage as an invaluable resource. What texts and which authors have counted as "classics" has admittedly changed – before the 1980s, few sociologists of religion would have included Marx, for example. In fact, one of the ways in which theory in the sociology of religion appears to change is when classic texts get reinterpreted, when some end up relegated to the dustbin, or when new classics are added to the established pantheon. So, even if Rodney Stark doesn't approve of the established classics, he still wants to make Adam Smith a classic sociologist of religion (Stark 2006), and most critics of the predominance of the classics have still found themselves having to position their arguments in debates with reference to these same classics (O'Toole 2001).

It is perhaps regrettable that more attention is not given to contemporary theory and debates in sociology of religion, but it is probably also understandable given the centrality of the "religion question" in the classics and its comparative marginality in contemporary theory. The classics are important in sociology of religion, in their own right, however, for two reasons. First, because a discipline's classic texts form the context of all subsequent sociological conversations (Alexander 1987); they provide a great deal of our most important vocabulary, the inspiration for many of our methods, and the starting point for most of our conversations about the social world – even if their world is occasionally very different from ours. An understanding of their texts is a cost of admission into the field of sociological research on religion (Bourdieu 1990: 30).

Second, classics are works that contemporary communities continue to find important and useful, and – somewhat paradoxically – sources of innovation. Classic texts are not simply collections of sociological rules to be mastered, nor compilations of hypotheses to be tested. Rather they "inspire imitation, invite

elaboration and provoke discussion … [A] surplus of sociological signification … is the most indelible mark of a genuine disciplinary or sub-disciplinary classic. From this point of view, classics are not terminal destinations but rather points of embarkation for departure on future intellectual journeys" (O'Toole 2001: 140–1). For this reason, every generation will read and interpret the classics in new ways – posing its own questions and challenges to the ancestors. The classics have important challenges for us, as well. Marx and Weber set the bar for scholarship very high with their innovative ways of understanding religion, but also with the breadth and depth of their historical, comparative, and philosophical knowledge – not to mention the scope of their research questions.

This chapter will introduce the work of Marx and of Weber on religion; in this volume, Durkheim is grouped with the anthropological foundations, and thus will be discussed at length in the following chapter. My aim is to introduce Weber and Marx as classic thinkers in the sociology of religion, and thus it does not touch on the many other topics with which Marx and Weber concerned themselves. While I make every effort to provide a good place to start for readers new to these classics, this is my own interpretation of Marx and Weber, and it will inevitably differ from that of other readers. I am particularly interested in the historical and literary dimensions of their work, and my interpretations reflect that concern. Since all elucidation is necessarily partial, there is no substitute for reading and re-reading these classic works for oneself. I hope I will have provided both a solid starting point for doing so, and some sense of the rewards of engaging with the work of both Marx and Weber firsthand.

## Marx

Although Marx is now usually (and quite appropriately) included as one of the key "classic" writers for sociologists of religion, his work has a more problematic status within the sub-discipline compared with the work of Durkheim and Weber, whose positions are much more secure. There are, I suggest, two reasons for this. The first is that Marx never devoted much of his formidable intellect to the study of religion: he simply left us a small number of works dealing with religion (and even there religion is a secondary concern), and these are mostly from his early writings. Second, it is easy to construe Marx as fundamentally antagonistic towards (or dismissive of) religion. Often Marx is introduced in sociological texts on religion, only to be dismissed again as an example of economic reductionism. That is to say, many writers unsympathetic to Marx will argue that for Marx religion and religious change are entirely derived from changes in the economy (construed as a reflection of class interests or the mode of production itself) – a view which has never found very many supporters. A related problem stems from the fact that Marx is well known to have described religion as the "opium of the people," though few have stopped to take a second thought about what that phrase could have meant in the 1840s when Marx wrote it (McKinnon 2005). Unlike Weber and Durkheim, Marx has never really had a significant following within sociology of religion – partly for intellectual, but also for political reasons. This does not mean that Marx has been wholly without influence, nor does it mean that his work

does not provide important points of departure, some of which remain only partially explored to this day.

Marx was born in the city of Trier in 1818, three years after it had become part of the Kingdom of Prussia (later part of Germany). He came from a long line of rabbis on both sides of his family, but his family was Protestant, his father having converted for a career in the civil service. He studied law at the University of Bonn before moving to the University of Berlin where he encountered the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel, who had taught at Berlin and died only a few years before Marx arrived. In 1841 he submitted his doctoral dissertation (on Greek Philosophy) at the University of Jena, where Hegel had written his early (and arguably his greatest) work, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* ([1807] 1994).

Marx's radical politics made an academic career (where the state had enormous power over academic appointments) unlikely, and he managed to quickly get himself into trouble in journalism as well. In 1843 the newspaper Marx edited, *Die Rheinische Zeitung*, was closed by the Prussian authorities and Marx, fearing jail (not unreasonably) fled to Paris, Brussels then to Cologne. Each of these moves brought with it further political problems before Marx and his family settled in London (ironically the capital of the most powerful empire in the world), which in those days had a large community of political refugees, in 1849. It is in the period after leaving Germany, but before arriving in London, that Marx begins to identify his radical democratic politics as *Communist*, an emerging political tradition which Marx (and his collaborator Friedrich Engels) would try to shape with their famous *Communist Manifesto* ([1848] 1967). While living in London, Marx continued to write for newspapers and to be involved in radical politics; it was here that he began his major research, still unfinished at the time of his death in 1883, entitled *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (1967). In this period Marx's writing becomes more focused on what we would now call "economics": it is an attempt to understand the basic dynamics of a capitalist society.

Some writers, following the French Marxist theorist Louis Althusser (1965), have seen a strict separation between the "early" and the "late" Marx (the latter being understood as more "scientific"). While most scholars would not accept this as a rigid divide, it is clear that while certain themes carry through the whole of Marx's writing life, his vocabulary does undergo some significant change, and his work becomes much more clearly focused on "economic" issues, as opposed to the more "philosophical" debates in which he was engaged with Hegel's descendents known as the "Young Hegelians." Although Marx had sharp differences with this group of philosophers, at an early stage in his work Marx is very much one of them.

When Marx began his studies, Hegel was the dominant philosophical figure, and although he had died before Marx arrived in Berlin, his work continued to be the starting point for all German philosophical debates. For Hegel, history was the progress of consciousness about human freedom, but what this meant continued to be a hotly contested question. The "Old" (or more accurately the "Right") Hegelians took this philosophy as a means of justifying the Prussian State and its constitutional monarchy as the highest instantiation of the idea of human freedom. This was further supplemented by a defense of orthodox (Lutheran) Christianity, which was the official state religion, and which Hegel had seen as the highest point in

religious evolution. This view was challenged by those Hegelians who were united primarily by their shared opposition to these two positions, the radical supporters of enlightenment and democracy who are referred to as the "Young" or "Left" Hegelians. There is a good case to be made that the two groups in fact correspond roughly to the work of the Young and Old Hegel – as a young man Hegel had been an enthusiast of the French Revolution, even seeing Napoleon's invasion of Prussia as rational progress (Hegel 1807; Hyppolite 1969); he later became the official philosopher of the Prussian state, and it is not difficult to read his late masterpiece, *The Philosophy of Right* (1821), in support of a Right Hegelian position, though many contemporary Hegel scholars would dispute this view (for an overview see Houlgate 2005: 181ff.).

The Left Hegelians, among whom Bruno Bauer and Ludwig Feuerbach exercised the greatest influence on the young Marx, were primarily interested in questions of religion – or at least, that was what they wrote most about. This may be in part due to the fact that there was greater freedom to write controversially on questions of religion than would have been permitted to write about politics in like manner – religion became politics by other means. Nonetheless, their published views on religion (both were avowed atheists) were sufficient to block Feuerbach from an academic appointment, and for Bauer to lose his. In both cases, the state recognized that (in a situation where there is a state religion) there were political implications to their critiques. While Marx later turned critical of his erstwhile colleagues, both were very influential in the development of his thought. Bauer, from whom Marx took a course on the prophet Isaiah in 1839 (McLellan 1973: 34), argued that religion was part of the process of developing self-consciousness, but that the final stage of human self-consciousness must entail the exit from religion: if we recognize that God is a human creation we will come to the point of being able to see ourselves clearly (without needing the mediating idea of God). Feuerbach mostly sang from the same hymn book as Bauer did, but he differed from Bauer on two points. First, while Bauer was primarily preoccupied with Biblical studies and theology, Feuerbach was more interested in religion as a "secret anthropology" that – properly interpreted – would disclose the human *essence*. Second, while Bauer focused on religion as distorted cognition, Feuerbach was much more concerned with the emotional aspects of religious projection onto God or the gods (God as love, as jealous, as compassionate, and so forth) and with the way such attributions to God take *away from* humankind in equal measure – for Feuerbach, this is how humans alienate themselves from their own essence (Harvey 1995).

This is where Marx enters the debate, with his "Towards a critique of Hegel's philosophy of right: introduction," his most substantial engagement with the question of religion ([1844] 1977), and also the locus of his famous metaphor of religion as the "opium of the people." Marx had been exiled from Prussia and taken up residence in Paris, where he had come into contact with working-class socialism. In Paris he had begun to develop a dialectical understanding of social change in which the property-less classes are the ones who have the capacity to bring about a society without property (and hence classes). The proletariat begins to assume a much greater role in his thinking about social change, and his social criticism begins to develop a sociological analysis accordingly, but the logic of his thinking is still largely consonant with his Left Hegelian colleagues.

Despite its title, *Towards a Critique* actually has very little to say about Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*; rather, it is an "*Aufhebung*" of Feuerbach's critique of religion. This Hegelian keyword is notoriously hard to translate, and can mean quite opposite things: taken-up or kept, canceled, or abolished. In Hegelian and post-Hegelian philosophy it means both – it points to a contradiction between two countervailing tendencies or forces that must be resolved by a synthesis of the two. Marx never defined this term, but we get a good definition of it from Engels, who did. Engels writes that "*Aufhebung*" means "'Overcome and Preserved'; overcome as regards form, and preserved as real content" (Engels 1969: 166).

There are three senses in which the form of Feuerbach's work needed to be overcome in order to preserve the real content. First, Marx observes that Feuerbach's religious anthropology is essentially asocial: "Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations" (Marx 1977: 157). Second, the form of Feuerbach's inquiries is essentially theological, even if his conclusions are atheistic. The question of the existence of God is essentially theological, and Marx thinks that the political questions themselves are far more important than the question of whether God exists or not (though he clearly thought not). What matters are not religious questions, but social and political examinations. Finally, Marx argues that Feuerbach's work is speculative, and in the end, fundamentally idealist (even though Feuerbach claimed to be materialist): if people come to the right intellectual conclusions about God – that he is a projection of our own human powers – we will inevitably re-appropriate those powers for ourselves. Marx may not be right in his understanding of Feuerbach, but it is clear that Marx is convinced that thought is not sufficient to change the world: it will take a revolution.

For Marx, the criticism of religion, although "essentially finished" (Marx 1977: 64) is not an end in itself; it is rather simply a means for addressing other questions. Marx takes the latest developments of post-Hegelian philosophy, and he turns them into an action-oriented critique of the social world. If the conclusion of the Young Hegelians is that "man is the highest being for man" (p. 69), then "categorical imperative" as far as Marx is concerned, is "to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being" (p. 69). The point of Marx's essay is not that "Man makes religion, religion does not make man" (this was Feuerbach's thesis and claim to infamy) but rather the point is to overcome the situation in which human beings are "debased, enslaved and forsaken." Feuerbach's philosophical point is here but a premise or an "assumption" (*Voraussetzung*) from which Marx proceeds. It does not, however, make atheism in and of itself the more progressive position, since Marx wants to move beyond these theological questions altogether; by the end of his life Bauer was still an avowed atheist, but he had abandoned his radical democratic politics altogether and become an influential advisor to the Kaiser.

For stylistic reasons, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish quotations, summary and ironic responses to another author from Marx's own analysis, a problem which has often led readers of *On the Jewish Question* to conclude that Marx was an anti-Semite. As David McLellan (1969: 75–7) has shown, this conclusion is only tenable if we read Marx's essay in isolation from Bauer's argument to which Marx

is responding – and Bauer was an anti-Semite. Readers have often come up against similar problems separating Marx's social and political analysis of religion from Feuerbach's psychological and theological argument to which Marx is responding critically.

Marx's summary of Feuerbach takes up the first three paragraphs of the essay and Marx's own analysis of religion begins in the fourth. There Marx writes:

> Religious suffering is at the same time an *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the *opium* of the people.
>
> The [Aufhebung] of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions of their condition is a demand to give up a condition that requires illusion. The criticism of religion is therefore the germ of the criticism of the valley of tears whose halo is religion.
>
> Criticism has plucked the imaginary flowers from the chains not so that man may throw away the chains without any imagination or comfort, but so that he may throw away the chains and pluck living flowers. The criticism of religion disillusions man so that he may think, act, and fashion his own reality as a disillusioned man comes to his sense; so that he may revolve around himself as his real sun. Religion is only the illusory sun which revolves around man as long as he does not revolve around himself. (1977: 64, translation amended, emphasis original)

These passages begin with an essentially dialectical logic. Religious suffering, is both "expression of" and "protest against" real suffering, both of which Marx highlights by underlining. Sergio Rojo writes,

> The characteristic of the definition which Marx gives to the two terms "expression of real suffering and protest and against real suffering" constitutes a dialectical relation, an unstable equilibrium, which mutually influence each other, even if, historically, one aspect has prevailed over the other. (1988: 210, my translation)

Unlike in Feuerbach's analysis, religion is not an "abstract" expression of the human essence. Rather, expanding on the "expression," he highlights the social dimension by writing that religion is the spirit and heart of a spiritless, heartless social situation; religion is a sigh that bears witness to oppression. While religion was an "expression" of suffering for Feuerbach (though not social and political suffering, poverty and oppression), it is by no means a "protest" against that suffering (especially in its socio-political forms).

Marx underlines *expression*, *protest*, and *opium*, suggesting that "opium" embodies the contradiction between expression and protest. Opium, then, is the moment of *Aufheben* "in which negation and preservation (affirmation) are brought together" (Marx 2002: 87). The "traditional" readings of religion as "opium of the people" neglect both this context and dialectical movement, in which opium, as a condensed signifier, brings together both expression and protest in one moment. Marx's use of this metaphor forces us to look at it dialectically: opium/religion as expression and protest.

Readers seldom stop to think about what Marx means when he writes that religion is "opium of the people" because it seems quite obvious: religion is an addictive

pain-killer that distorts our perception of reality. Such an understanding would have been quite foreign in Marx's context. Opium was an important medicine (one Marx used himself (Regnault 1933; McLellan 1973: 337)), but it was also used as a means of infant-doping. It was the source of wild visions of another world (Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* [1813] and De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* [1821]), but also a major commodity and an important source of tax revenue for the British Empire. It was sometimes used for inducing sleep, but it was the cause of two international conflicts referred to as the "Opium wars," the first of which had just ended (in 1842). The irony was not lost on Marx when he wrote that "the occasion of [the second] outbreak has unquestionably been afforded by the English canon forcing upon China that soporific drug called opium." (Marx and Engels 1975: vol. 12, 93). Far from being a simple metaphor about the role of religion in society, it embodies the contradictions that Marx sees at the heart of religion, as *expression of*, and *protest against* real misery.

Marx wrote very little about religion after this essay, and these are generally occasional comments or even asides and footnotes in other works. It is therefore questionable whether it is even possible (or desirable) to reconstruct a systematic sociology of religion from these fragments. Alternately, one could argue that religion is best treated under the general umbrella of "ideology" or "alienation," concepts which derive from his thinking about religion and about which he did write considerably more. This would mean treating religion as if it were not a specific phenomenon with its own analytic demands, as if it were any other element of culture. Regardless of how one were to develop Marx's sociology of religion into a more systematic program, it is clear that it needs to be treated as a contradictory phenomenon, and not simply as an "expression" of class suffering (or interests) but as both an expression and a protest.

The Marxian tradition as it developed later has tended to emphasize rather one-sidedly the role of religion as the expression of interests rather than of suffering, but also its role in social control as an extension of that "expression." While this is a helpful corrective to the Durkheimian notions where religion appears as an expression of the group (without any reference to power), it tends to minimize the role of religion in social protest. Thus, Marx's collaborator, Friedrich Engels (1966) and Karl Kautsky both tended to see religion as a direct expression of class interests and as a form of social control. On the whole Kautsky tended to be much more simplistic than Engels in reducing religion to class interests.

Unlike Marx, Engels did engage in the empirical study of religion and society; *The Peasant War in Germany* (1966) is his study of sixteenth century "religious" conflict. Engels argues that while the war between the radical, communist peasants and the nobility was framed in terms of religious language, religion was the "clothing" that covered class interests. In the late Middle Ages, religion provided the language by which power was justified, but it was also (and partly because it was the hegemonic language) the only medium in which dissatisfactions could be expressed (see Turner 1991: 71–80). Ernst Bloch, another Marxist thinker, takes Engels work as a starting point, but Bloch argues that Engels overstates the primacy of economic forces. In Bloch's historical study of Thomas Münzer, the leading figure of the rebellion ([1921] 1964), Bloch contends that Münzer is both a theologian *and* a revolutionary, and not simply a revolutionary dressed up as a theologian. In like vain, he argues that religion does not simply hide the "real" (political, class)

interests, but that (particularly in the sixteenth century) neither religion nor economics can be readily reduced to the other – rather, they exist as a complicated whole. How we are to understand the relation between the two remains somewhat unclear, though Bloch's study provides a seriously under utilized resource for Marxian sociology of religion. This book is the most sociological of all of Bloch's books, and bears the marks of Bloch's engagement with the thought of his teacher, Max Weber, whom I will discuss below.

In many respects, Bloch exemplifies the challenge for all Marxian sociology of religion: to critically analyze the relationship between religion and the relations of production, domination, and exploitation without ending up with Kautsky's economic reductionism. How to accomplish this without becoming a Weberian has long been the challenge, and it has been taken up with greater or lesser success not only by Ernst Bloch (Dianteill and Löwy 2005), but also by Antonio Gramsci (Gramsci 1971; Billings 1990), several members of the Frankfurt School (Mendieta 2005; Brittain 2005) and Lucien Goldman ([1956] 1964).

## Max Weber

Max Weber was a generation younger than Karl Marx, born in Erfurt, Thuringia, then part of the Kingdom of Prussia in 1864. Weber's father, with whom he had personal difficulties, was a lawyer in the Prussian Civil service, and it was his career trajectory that Weber seemed to be following when he left home to study law and history at the universities in Heidelberg, Göttingen, and Berlin. Weber's early studies were marked more by drinking and dueling (a passion he inherited from his father, and from which he bore a scar on his cheek for the rest of his life) than by great studiousness. Weber's father was a hard working bureaucrat, but not particularly pious; it was on his mother's side of the family that Weber could see the confluence of the Protestant Ethic with the Spirit of Capitalism. His mother came from a long line of Huguenot (originally French) Calvinists, including both academics and industrialists (Marianne Weber 1975).

Weber earned his doctoral degree in 1889 with a dissertation on medieval firms, and his *Habilitationschrift* (a second dissertation that gave him the license to teach in a German university) two years later on the topic of Roman agricultural history and its implications for Western law. After teaching for a short period of time at the universities of Berlin, Freiburg and Heidelberg, Weber had a nervous breakdown. It is often suggested that this breakdown resulted from the guilt he suffered when he threw his father out of the house shortly before he died. Whatever the cause of the illness, it left Weber incapacitated and unable to teach, or, initially, to write. Revived by a trip to the St Louis World's Fair in 1904, on his return Weber wrote two essays which together would comprise his most famous work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* ([1905–6] 2002). While Weber worked prodigiously in the following years, he only went back to teaching at the end of the First World War (in Vienna and Munich). He died of complications from influenza in 1920.

If sociologists the world over were asked to elect a single-most important classic text in the discipline, the odds are very good that *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit*

*of Capitalism* would come out on top. Although it is common to speak of Weber's "thesis," the meaning of the book and the truth of its claims (which depend on how one interprets the "thesis" of the book) continue to be debated. There is considerable ambiguity about Weber's essays, and it is not unfair to say that this is one of the reasons it has remained a classic text (Baehr and Wells 2002): it is open to interpretation and re-interpretation as each new generation of sociologists encounters the text bringing its own questions and concerns to the reading of it.

Weber begins with the observation that the most economically developed areas in turn of the century Europe tended to be Protestant, rather than Catholic, and that the histories of the Protestant Reformation (particularly in its Calvinist form) and modern capitalism seem to have been intertwined in particularly intense ways. Some of the data Weber used to make his claims about the contemporary predominance of Protestants in industry have subsequently been questioned (cf. Samuelsson, 1957) but he is by no means the first to have noticed the "elective affinity" of the capitalists for Protestantism.

Weber's essays are often seen as a riposte to Marx (or at least to the Marxism of Karl Kautsky who was at the time the intellectual spokesman of the Social Democrats), because Weber emphasizes the role of "ideal factors" in the historical shaping of social formations. The degree to which this is the case is easily exaggerated – to the gross distortion of Weber's text. In fact, while Weber was partially responding to the crudities of orthodox Marxism, his narrative is arguably influenced more by the work of Nietzsche (Kent 1983; Hennis 1988; Kemple 2001) and of Goethe (Albrow 1990; McKinnon forthcoming).

A key, but often inadequately understood, term in Weber's essays of 1905–6 on the Protestant Ethic is the notion of "elective affinity," an idea that serves (sometimes only implicitly) to connect the various forces and elements in Weber's argument. Weber took the term from a novel by J. W. von Goethe entitled *Elective Affinities* ([1807] 1994). This minor masterpiece is the story of a couple, Eduard and Charlotte, and the changes that follow when two new people are added to their household. The first to arrive is Eduard's best friend, Captain, and a little while later Charlotte's niece Ottilie. Eduard soon falls in love with Ottilie, and Charlotte develops an intense attraction for Captain. Goethe foreshadows these events with an extended conversation between Charlotte, Eduard, and the Captain about "elective affinity" (*Wahlverwandtschaften*). Substances with an elective affinity have a very strong attraction to one another, and in their interaction "modify one another and form…a new substance altogether." Through this conversation, Goethe develops a "chemistry" of social relations that applies both to intimate relations and to interactions between groups, including different "vocations" (*Berufbestimmingen*), classes, and status groups (*Stände*). "Imagine," Captain explains,

> an A closely bound to a B and by a variety of means and even by force not able to be separated from it; imagine a C with a similar relationship to a D; now bring the pairs into contact; A will go over to D, C to B without our being able to say who first left the other, who first with another was united again. (p. 35)

When Ottilie arrives, we will soon sense the attraction between her and Eduard, and the subsequent growing mutual affection of Charlotte and the Captain; the

arrival of D (Ottilie) sparks a chain of reactions. The old (marriage) bond between A and B is broken, and a new configuration of relations emerges: A "goes over to" D and B joins with C. As in a chemical equation, the bonds created between two elements create a substance that may be very different from either of the elements so united. But such merging of the two people (the "two joined as one" of a marriage bond) creates a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts: an alkali and acid join together to form a salt. Some elements sue for divorce to marry another.

In the *Protestant Ethic* essays, Weber contends that religious beliefs and practices made an important contribution to the breakdown of economic traditionalism, and the emergence of modern rational capitalism. Several Protestant beliefs and practices came together to form what would become the "Spirit of Capitalism," a spirit with a particular elective affinity with the capitalist practices of small-scale businesspeople. From Luther came the notion of the calling ("Beruf") – faithful Christians should serve God devotedly in their occupations, rather than fleeing the world to serve God behind the monastery walls. The Calvinists added an important ingredient. God, they believed, predestined souls to salvation or damnation; in the words of the Westminster confession: "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death" (Westminster Confession III: 3). This created an insatiable need for reassurance which they achieved through a disciplined life-conduct (*Lebensführung*): they worked hard and since they did not spend on luxuries, but reinvested their money in the work to which they were called, their enterprises flourished. The elect "may, from the certainty of their effectual vocation, be assured of their eternal election" (Westminster Confession III: 8).

In abbreviated or simplistic textbook versions of the tale, it often sounds as if Weber's "thesis" is that the Protestant Reformation "caused" capitalism. Although Weber does believe that Protestant beliefs and practices were important for the rise of *modern* capitalism, his argument is severely distorted by such cause and effect tales that are typically premised on metaphors from physics or statistics – Talcott Parsons accidentally promoted this by translating "elective affinity" as "correlation." Weber, however, is clear that this is not what he is arguing, and introduces the notion of "elective affinity" here to clarify what he does mean. Weber writes:

> we have no intention of defending any such foolishly doctrinaire thesis as that the "capitalist spirit"… let alone capitalism itself, *could only* arise as the result of certain influences of the Reformation. The very fact that certain important *forms* of capitalist business are considerably older than the Reformation would invalidate such a thesis. We intend … to establish to what extent religious influences *have in fact* been partially responsible for the qualitative shaping and the quantitative expansion of that "spirit" across the world, and that concrete aspects of capitalist culture originate from them.
>
> In view of the tremendous confusion of reciprocal influences emanating from the material base, the social and political forms of organization and the spiritual content of the cultural epochs of the Reformation, the only possible way to proceed is to first investigate whether and in what points particular "*elective affinities*" between certain forms of religious belief and the ethic of the calling can be identified. At the same time, the manner and general direction in which, as a result of such *elective affinities* the religious movement influenced the development of the material culture will be clarified

> as far as possible. Only then can the attempt be made to estimate the degree to which the historical origins of elements of modern culture should be attributed to those religious motives and to what extent to others. (2002: 36, emphases in original)

With these words, Weber concludes his first essay. He uses the notion of elective affinity both to sum up his first essay, and to introduce the themes with which he will be preoccupied in the second essay. Neither Luther nor Calvin's teachings fit very well with, let alone seek to promote, capitalist practices (on the after-image of Luther's theology of labor in Marx and Habermas, see Glenna 2008). In the first essay, however, Weber argues that certain forms of Protestant belief and the vocational ethic interacted, and together they formed a new whole which will become the "spirit of capitalism."

While Weber does not describe the relation of the spirit and form of capitalism as an elective affinity, when he goes to clarify the argument of his essays in response to Felix Rachfahl, one of his earliest critics, he does so precisely in these terms. If the elective affinities of certain religious beliefs and the vocational ethic contributed to the growth and development of the capitalist spirit, it remains to be seen how the capitalist "spirit" and the capitalist "form" are related. This, Weber clarifies with the notion of elective affinity. "What are we to understand by the "spirit" of capitalism in relation to "capitalism" itself?" Weber asks:

> As far as "capitalism" itself is concerned, we can only understand by this a particular "economic system," that is, a form of economic behavior toward people and goods that can be described as "utilization" of "capital"… A historically given form of "capitalism" can be filled with very different types of "spirit"; this form can, however, and usually will, have different levels of "*elective affinities*" to certain historical types of spirit: the "spirit" may be more or less adequate to the "form" (or not at all). There can be no doubt that *the degree of this adequacy* is not without influence on the course of historical development, that "form" and "spirit" (as I said previously) tend to adapt to each other, and finally, that where a system and a "spirit" of a particularly high "degree of adequacy" come up against each other, there ensues a development of (even inwardly) unbroken unity similar to that which I had begun to analyze. (2002: 263)

As Frank Parkin suggests, Weber presumes that the "spirit" and "form"[1] (1983: 42) exist independently historically – in some times and locations we will find neither a capitalist form nor capitalist spirit. In other periods and places we will find the capitalist form without the capitalist spirit (the "pariah capitalism" of Jewish merchants in medieval Europe); elsewhere we can find the capitalist spirit even though the capitalist form has not been fully developed (Benjamin Franklin). Where both were present (in particular Protestant centers of production) the result was of world-historical consequence: this was the unique situation which led to the development of Modern Capitalism.

Rather than looking for the presence or absence of both the capitalist spirit and form, we need to keep in mind Weber's contention that there are *numerous* economic forms and *numerous* economic spirits, all of which have varying degrees of adequacy to one another. Some of these have a "particularly high degree of adequacy" and will be drawn together by very strong mutual attraction. What those,

with such an elective affinity, produce is a phenomenon of "unbroken unity," like an acid and an alkali that together form a bond to produce a salt.

Goethe's elective affinity metaphor helps us to clarify Weber's argument in the *Protestant Ethic*. Weber describes two elective affinities: the first produces the spirit of capitalism, and the second produces modern capitalism. First, Weber argues that there is an elective affinity between the ethic of the calling and the asceticism of certain Protestant groups. This "chemical reaction" of these two elements produced something quite different from either of them: the spirit of modern capitalism, as it appears in Weber's example of Benjamin Franklin, whose ethic is different from either of the two elements, though it emerges from it. The second elective affinity Weber describes is the attraction of the "spirit" of capitalism (described above) and the "form" of capitalism that had long been found in small pockets of Bourgeois merchants. It is the "chemical reaction" of this spirit and this form that joined together to give us modern capitalism.

Elective affinities (as chemical reactions) cannot really be understood in the same terms of cause and effect drawn from physics or statistics. Rather, pursuing the chemical metaphor, the elements form bonds and together produce a new substance because of the characteristics of each element, and this is better understood as a kind of "emergence." As the noted Italian chemist Pier Luigi Luisi describes it, "emergence describes the onset of novel properties that arise when a certain level of structural complexity is formed from components of lower complexity" (2002: 183). The properties of water "are not present in hydrogen and oxygen, so that [water's] properties… can be considered as emergent ones" (p. 189). Water is formed from hydrogen and oxygen, but we would not normally say that it is "caused" by either of these elements. In other words, the debate about whether Weber's argument is best understood as a "strong" or a "weak" causal claim is largely irrelevant. Weber presupposes a metaphor that is not best understood in these terms. Modern capitalism is a phenomenon with emergent properties formed by the elective affinity of the form and spirit of capitalism, but not reducible to its component parts.

While *The Protestant Ethic* is undoubtedly Weber's best known and most carefully read book, it was by no means his last word about religion, nor, some would say, is it necessarily his most important (O'Toole 1984). In the period following the publication of the *Protestant Ethic* essays in 1905–6, Weber worked on a massive project on the comparative economic ethics of the world religions, completing volumes on the religions of China ([1915] 1951), India ([1916–17] 1958) and Ancient Judaism ([1917–20] 1952) before his death, leaving undone intended volumes on Medieval Christianity and Islam. He did nonetheless bring this project to a provisional close, publishing these volumes together with an introduction (*The Social Psychology of the World Religions*, [1915] 1946a, and *Intermediate Reflections* (*The Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions*, [1915] 1946b). Also important is the section on religion in Weber's posthumously published *Economy and Society* (1978: 399–634), though some (cf. Tenbruck 1980) have challenged the claim that this volume should be seen as what Roth claimed was "the sum of Max Weber's scholarly vision of society" (Weber 1978: xxxiii). Nonetheless, for anyone interested in Weber's incisive analysis into the sociological study of society, both of these sources will be important.

Weber's interest in, and thoughts about, the comparative ethics of the world-religions were certainly stimulated by his ongoing conversations with his neighbor, friend and colleague, the liberal theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923). One can trace in the respective writings of Troeltsch and Weber the development of their ongoing discussions on the nature of religious ethics in history, particularly as these relate to the typology of different kinds of religious forms: the church, the sect and mysticism (Nelson 1975). In his magnum opus, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* ([1911] 1976), Troeltsch is particularly concerned with understanding the relationship between the social teaching of different Christian groups (from the beginning to 1800) and the social form of that group. Religious ideas, Troetsch argues, are only comprehensible within the context of the different religious forms that have prevailed historically. The church is a broad organization, which is able to receive the masses from the time of their birth. As an organization it adjusts itself to the world by ignoring the "need for subjective holiness" (at least of the masses) and it dispenses salvation by means of the sacraments. The sect, by contrast, will be a narrower group because it is a voluntary society into which you must choose to belong. Here the emphasis is on subjective holiness and adherence to moral laws. Mysticism is the least coherent of the social forms, emphasizing inward personal experience which tends to undo all forms of social organization (Troeltsch [1911] 1976: 993–1013). One can clearly see Weber's influence in this book, especially in Troeltsch's discussion of sects, but Troeltsch's project seems to have been one of Weber's inspirations for embarking on the comparative ethics of the world religions, which broadens the study of the relationship between ethics and social organization far beyond the Christian world.

Troeltsch, dealing exclusively with the Christian tradition, never has the problem of having to define religion in general. Weber has sometimes been criticized for having failed to do so, despite the breadth of his project, insisting instead that it is preferable to conclude one's studies with a definition (1978: 399), rather than beginning with one (as Durkheim did, for example). Unfortunately, since Weber did not live to see the conclusion of his research project, we can only guess as to what his conclusion might have entailed. There is good reason to infer that Weber presumed a modern, denotative and commonsense understanding of what counted as religion (O'Toole 1984: 135–7; McKinnon 2002): Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, as well as other phenomena that look like one of these, is a religion, and that these usually have a god or gods (Confucianism being a notable exception).

Whereas for Émile Durkheim religion and magic were completely different phenomena, Weber drew no sharp distinction; rather magic forms the core of his analysis of primitive religion, and an ongoing, important component of popular religion. Whereas in prayer, people beg the gods for something that they need, in magic, they compel the gods to act on their behalf (1978: 422ff.). In practice, the distinction between asking and compelling is a thin one, especially when set rituals for supplication or sacrifice are involved. For Durkheim, it was this practical purpose of magic, "the technical, utilitarian ends" he called it (2005: 58), as much as its purported non-collective nature, that made magic so different from religion. On the other hand, for Weber the most elementary religion is thoroughly practical, oriented not to the "hereafter," but to this world.

Formulating what he sees as the implicit definition of religion in Weber, Theodore Steeman argues:

> Religion is man's continuous effort to deal rationally with the irrationalities of life. Religion arises out of the *Not* [poverty, hardship] of existence, its ambiguities and conflicts, and gives the necessary *Begeisterung* [spirit, enthusiasm] to live. It makes life's precariousness acceptable, gives life preciousness and prescribes a way of life that makes living worthwhile. (1964: 56)

Whether this really amounts to a definition of religion may be questionable, but it does provide a good description of both the this-worldly nature of religious impulses, and the connection between these and the problem theodicy all of which are crucial in Weber's sociology of religion. Religion comes from the need to give meaning in the face of the difficulties of life, and the ubiquitous experience of hardship, suffering and death. Religion starts, for Weber, not with the experience of collective effervescence, but rather with the problems of embodied existence (Turner 1991).

Religion is thus "heavily concerned with the basic needs and routines of mundane existence while offering the opportunity of transcending them in the search for meaning and the good life" (O'Toole 1984: 140). Just as in Marx where we find a dialectical tension at the heart of religion, for Weber religion may "be the means by which human beings adjust to their natural, social, economic, political, and intellectual environments, it may also, *a fortiori,* be the means by which these are transcended or changed" (pp. 140–1). Some religions tend strongly towards adjustment to the world, like Confucianism which "reduced tension with the world to an absolute minimum … The world was the best of all possible worlds" (1951: 227). This was the phrase Leibniz used in his *Theodicy* ([1709] 1985), which both invented the term Weber uses to discuss the problem of evil, and provided a classic defense of the status quo (the book was devoted to Queen Sophie Charlotte of Prussia). Confucianism promoted an ethic for living a good life, on learning to adjust to the natural and social world, and this made Confucianism popular with many rulers in East Asia (including in Japan where state-Shinto is a form of neo-Confucianism), who promoted it for its contributions to social harmony and integration.

In similar fashion, Weber argues that Hinduism also adjusts people to the social world, harmonizing the religious beliefs and the experience of the social and natural world. Hinduism is first and foremost a series of prescribed ritual practices, and for historical reasons it is an amazingly broad canopy for diverse beliefs (Haan 2005). Significantly, for Weber, the belief in reincarnation provides a *theodicy* which justifies the existence of the caste system and an individual's place within it. In the *karma* theodicy, people's place in the social hierarchy is the result of their good or bad behavior during a previous lifetime. According to this view, promoted by the Brahmins (the highest caste), only by behaving appropriately to one's station can one hope to improve ones lot in the next life. For the lower orders, who do experience the need for salvation (conceived as being reborn higher in the eternal order of things) this is accomplished by proper ritual conduct appropriate for their station, and worldly needs met by means of magic (which is not far removed from such ritualism).

For Weber not all religion is concerned with salvation. Confucianism is a religion that is not, nor is the Hinduism of the Brahmins (the priestly elites), although the lower classes are concerned with their salvation. Salvation in Weber's sense is for those who feel the need to be saved – from economic deprivation, poor health, or psychological states such as guilt, shame, or fear of death. Generally speaking, Weber argues (following Nietzsche rather than Marx) that elite classes are much less likely to feel these needs (and hence recognize their need for salvation) than the lower orders (1946a: 274–6).

The "salvation religions" (*Erlösungsreligionen*), exist in (and promote) tension with "the world." In Weber's view, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Jainism are all religions of salvation, although within these traditions there are different ways of responding to this tension. Mystics, who exist in all of the major salvation religions, attempt to merge their soul with the divine reality, escaping all "worldly" distractions in order to do so (early Buddhism is the clearest type for Weber).

In contrast to mysticism, "other-worldly asceticism" involves self-mastery in the interests of devotion, but does not involve the mystical flight from the world, but a physical flight from the world into religious communities. Here Weber seems to have the medieval European monasticism foremost in his mind – monks could devote themselves to saying the mass and living in exclusive service to the divine, unencumbered by the demands of daily living outside the monastery. What Weber calls "inner-worldly asceticism" (*innerweltlich askese*) has been less common historically, but it plays a vital role in the development of Western rationalism. (Although it would have been better if the first generation of translators had opted for the less literal rendition "this-worldly" asceticism, "inner-worldly" has become the standard technical term). The Puritans, who are the heroes of Weber's *Protestant Ethic* are the archetype of inner-worldly ascetics. They have eschewed the mystic's union with God, and the other-worldly ascetic's escape from the world to the monastery. The remaining route for dealing with the tensions between the world of sin and the demands of God is to change the world in accordance with God's precepts. If the mystic tries to be the vessel of God, the ascetic, especially the ascetic of the inner-worldly type, tries to be God's tool for transforming the world. It is for this reason that he devotes himself to his calling in the world with such devotion. He is called upon to be God's tool in that occupation, doing God's work in the world.

Like Marx, Weber recognizes that some religious beliefs and practices will appeal to some groups and not to others. Weber has often been seen as responding to Marx in a more positive manner in these later writings, although the passages in question show more critical dialogue with Nietzsche, who (for reasons quite different from those of Marx) argued that traditional elites (especially the warrior nobles) have been quite indifferent to salvation religions ([1887] 1994). In both his comparative ethics on the world religions and in the posthumously edited sections on religion in *Economy and Society* (1978) Weber argues that certain classes and status groups (*Stände*) have tended to act as "carriers" of particular kinds of religion, and this is as important for the religious ideas and practices as for the groups that embody them. Thus, the "masses" (including working classes and peasants) will tend to be drawn to salvation religion, if one is available and successfully promoted, but will otherwise opt for more pragmatic religious practices such as magic.

Weber's claims were often more specific, as well, as a few examples will suffice. The non-salvation religious ethics for living a good life (such as Confucianism) have tended to have an elective affinity with literate elites, early Islam was carried by a conquering warrior class, Judaism by a "pariah people" and Christianity by itinerant and later urban artisans (1946a: 268–9). These religious beliefs were carried by these groups, but they were also shaped by them in the context of their religious and everyday needs. As Werner Stark puts it, the social world

> is no place for disembodied spirits; even ideas must have bodies if they are to last, and so they are on the lookout for appropriate social groupings who can take them in and carry them along. But human groupings, of whatever kind, will, for their part, always be on the lookout for appropriate ideas to give expression to their essence and their strivings, for, material as this life is, it nevertheless has a spiritual side to it. (1958: 257)

For Gerth and Mills (Weber 1946: 61–5) and those who have followed them, elective affinities involve the mutual attraction of ideas and interests, but this is not all that the elective affinities join, nor does an elective affinity join two forces which remain separate (ideas on the one hand, and interests on the other). In Weber's texts, we find examples of ideas having an elective affinity with other ideas, and structures with other structures (McKinnon forthcoming). Further, the relationship between carriers and the religious beliefs and practices are (at least in potential) mutually constitutive. The "practical rationalism" of urban commercial groups whose "whole existence has been based upon technological or economic calculations and upon the mastery of nature and of man…" made the teachings of the Protestant Reformation appealing to these groups, but such "practical rationalism" of the carrier group also profoundly shaped Protestant beliefs and practices. Weber's controversial notion of pariah peoples (Abraham 1992; Bodemann 1993), which he applied to both Jews in Europe and to lower Hindu castes, is another example whereby the *Stand* is the synthesis of particular sets of beliefs that articulate with a particular social location, here social marginality, to form something distinctive that cannot be reduced to one or other element. Thus, in Weber's later work as well, elective affinity is more than simply a connection, but rather a synthesis of the two forces in which the product is more than the sum of its parts.

## Conclusion

Along with Émile Durkheim, who will be discussed in the next chapter, Marx and Weber have not only bequeathed to us many of sociology's most important conceptual tools for the sociological study of religion, but they are writers that also continue to challenge us. Their work provides ongoing interpretive challenges, but their arguments constantly push us to ask bigger questions, to think more carefully, broadly and more imaginatively. Whereas contemporary sociology of religion, not uncommonly, seems preoccupied with angels on the head of the proverbial pin, Marx and Weber both guide us (and goad us) towards less parochial concerns. The legacies of Marx and Weber demand that we think about the relationships between

religion and other aspects and forces of social life (capitalism, domination and subordination, the state, the needs and suffering of the body), and to explore those relationships without becoming mere "specialists without spirit."

## Note

1 For reasons I have never understood, Parkin substitutes "substance" for Weber's "form"; I have replaced it here with Weber's original term.

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