

Weber at His Weakest

The Sociology of Religion. By MAX WEBER. Translated by Ephraim Fischhoff. Introduction by Talcott Parsons. *Methuen*, 30s.

SOCIOLOGICAL achievement may be diminished by yielding to either of two opposed temptations: that of generalising away the substance of particular social relationships into a series of theoretical abstractions, or that of eschewing the general and embracing the particular that all that is left is a catalogue of unrelated facts. It is one of the marks of a great sociologist to exhibit the tensions and the ambiguities that result from resistance to both these temptations. Nowhere is this tension more evident than Max Weber's work. For Weber is always concerned with the particular, whether in Reformation Germany or on the Junker farms, in China or in India; and yet he moves continually towards the boldest of generalisations.

It would be futile to pretend that the result is not often exasperating rather than stimulating. There are sometimes too many ways in which Weber's thought might be construed for it to be clear what a true understanding of Weber's intentions would consist in. This might be less often the case if Weber had lived to complete the massive *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* from which various dismembered parts have now appeared in translation. The latest is the section on the sociology of religion, representing Weber's final thoughts upon his studies of individual religions. In it Weber was concerned to erect a typology of religious communities by means of which different kinds of theological outlook might be systematically related to different kinds of impact upon and relationship to social and economic forms.

Throughout Weber is primarily concerned with the role of religion in bringing about social change. But while it is quite clear what Weber denies, it is not so clear what he asserts. He denies the thesis both of those who have held that religion can be an agency for change independent of social and economic forces and of those who have treated religion as a mere epiphenomenal reflection of those forces. But in Weber's attempt to avoid both these errors he hovers uneasily both between using a religious and using a sociological vocabulary, and between making large generalisations and then even in the act of making them qualifying them. Consider a typical formulation (pp. 131-2):

If one wishes to characterise succinctly, in a formula so to speak, the types representative of the various classes that were the primary carriers or propagators of the so-called world-religions,

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they would be the following: in Confucianism the world-organising bureaucrat; in Hinduism, the world-ordering magician; in Buddhism, the mendicant monk wandering through the world; in Islam, the warrior seeking to conquer the world; in Judaism, the wandering trader; and in Christianity, the itinerant journeyman. To be sure, all these types must not be taken as exponents of their own occupational or material class interests, but rather as the ideological carriers of the kind of ethical or salvation doctrine which most readily conformed to their social position.

About this passage two comments must be made. The first is that while "bureaucrat," "warrior," "trader" and "journeyman" are independent social and occupational categories, so that to remark that a world-religion was initially propagated by members of one of these classes would be a starting-point for enquiry, both "magician" and "monk" are concepts which already presuppose a religious frame of reference. Does Weber mean that there is at least some sense in which the propagation of Confucianism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity can be explained in non-religious terms, while this is not true of either Hinduism or Buddhism? I am certain that this is not what Weber intends to say, but what then becomes of his typology?

The second difficulty is that expressions such as "conformed to their social position" leave it quite unclear how strong a causal connection, or rather what type of causal connection Weber believes to hold between social position and religious belief. Is it a purely contingent coincidence of certain types of theology and certain types of occupation? Or is there an internal, conceptual connection of some kind? On this crucial issue Weber is silent.

The root of the trouble lies in his lack of sensitivity to conceptual issues. He never enquires straightforwardly what is distinctive about religious concepts and so he is always liable to confusion when he enquires into the empirical relations which hold between religious and social and economic affairs. A striking example is his mishandling of the concept of magic. Weber begins by arguing that because magic has practical technical and economic ends in view, it therefore cannot be "set apart from the range of everyday purposive conduct." It is we who "designate the fallacious attributes of causality as irrational, and the corresponding acts as 'magic.'" So magic is merely incompetent technology. But Weber at once switches to the standpoint of the magician, who allegedly distinguishes magic by the extraordinary character of his acts. And two pages later "the magician is the person who is permanently endowed with charisma." This is a hotch-potch

of an account. Weber could never have given it if he had seriously considered in detail one particular society in whose life magic played a major role. For commonly the magician and his clients both understand perfectly well the nature of technique, and the distinction between magic and ordinary technique. It is not that magic is *not* a set of devices for producing practical effects, but that the kind of device which is magical can be understood only against a background of belief in highly specific and particular types of power. Weber's use of the blanket word "charisma," let alone his use of such terms as "spirit," are quite unhelpful here.

IT MAY BE OBJECTED that I am trying to press Weber back towards the particularity of his earlier studies, whereas here he is explicitly moving at a higher level of generality. In a long introduction Talcott Parsons extracts from Weber's book an even more highly generalised account of the total development of religion in society. Or it may be objected that I am attacking Weber on grounds that would only be relevant if he had had access to the large number of detailed ethnographic and historical studies which are now available to us. But my criticism is not simply that Weber generalises, nor even that his generalisations were premature, but that in this book at least he is searching for the wrong kind of generalisation.

In the history of religion there are various transformations in the concept of the divine. We want to know under what conditions in general such transformations occur; and a necessary precondition is to discover for a number of cases under what conditions they have occurred. But all this is masked by Weber's bland utterance:

The possible combinations of the various principles involved in the construction of a pantheon or in the achievement of a position of primacy by one or another god are almost infinite in number. Indeed, the jurisdictions of the divine figures are as fluid as those of the officials of patrimonial régimes. Moreover, the differentiation between jurisdictions of the various gods is intersected by the practice of religious attachment or courtesy to a particular god who is especially cultivated or directly invoked and who is treated as fundamentally universal. Thus all possible functions are attributed to the universal god. . . .

Nothing is explained by this at all. Indeed the references to patrimonial jurisdiction leave us more puzzled than we would otherwise be about the transition to the universal god. The force of the word "Thus" is absolutely unclear.

This is a book by a great sociologist; but it is not a great book. It contains many brilliant paragraphs, and it is a quarry of suggestions

for future work, some good, some bad. It is certainly not the book to be read by those who wish to understand and appreciate Weber's significance. Nor is it the book to be read by those who wish to understand religion. It is notable that there has been no systematic development of Weber's approach to religion, while Durkheim's influence, by contrast has been the basis of a series of brilliant enquiries, ranging from those of his pupils Mauss and Hertz to the studies of Evans-Pritchard and of Lévi-Strauss. Indeed the best advice to be given to those who wish to read Weber on religion would perhaps be "Read Durkheim instead!"

Alasdair MacIntyre

My Kerlonial Oath!

The Penguin Book of Australian Ballads.
Edited by RUSSEL WARD. 66s.

THE TERM BALLAD seems impossible of definition. Mr. Russel Ward in his introduction to the *Penguin Book of Australian Ballads* (first published in Australia in 1964 and now issued in Britain) admits his book might be better called *The Penguin Book of Australian Popular Verse*. But this would lead him into trouble with the word "popular." Certainly, I wouldn't, and he doesn't, call every poem in his book a ballad. And ballads can be of widely different sorts.

Perhaps the only essential common characteristic is that they are written for the voice—to be sung or recited (not just spoken). Otherwise they can be simple or complex, romantic or sardonic, metrically direct or rhythmically subtle. Since the days of the border ballads, however, the form has lost most of its power and grandeur. Ballads have become satirical, rollicking and descriptive—popular art unlike the serious poetry of their time. When the first Australian ballads were written all vestige of tragedy had gone from the form. Mr. Ward's collection does not contain a single poem of tragic cast; even those written by convicts tend to be lightweight and facetious. What is surprising however is the number of highly successful poems in the book. In fact, it is the most enjoyable collection of Australian verse I have read—much more so than its companion *Penguin Book of Australian Verse* or the *Oxford Book*.

The earlier poems are the most interesting, though Mr. Ward's careful selection presents the nationalistic bush balladists, who wrote just before Federation, in the most favourable light.

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