

from a “systematic and rationalized ‘image of the world’ that determines “[f]rom what’ and ‘for what’ one wished to be redeemed and . . . ‘could be’ redeemed” (ibid.:280). Religion declares that the world is not a playground for chance; instead, it is ruled by reasons and fates that can be “known.” Knowing how to redeem oneself and how to obtain salvation requires that one knows how the world “works.” In devising answers for such concerns, religions have developed along two primary paths: “exemplary” prophecy and “emissary” prophecy.

Exemplary prophecy is rooted in the conception of a supreme, impersonal being accessible only through contemplation, while emissary prophecy conceives of a personal God who is vengeful and loving, forgiving and punishing, and who demands of the faithful active, ethical conduct in order to serve His commandments. Though the masses may be religiously “unmusical,” the religiosity of the devout (monks, prophets, shamans, ascetics) nevertheless “has been of decisive importance for the development of the way of life of the masses,” particularly with regard to regulating practical, economic activity (Weber 1958:289). Thus, religions grounded in an exemplary prophecy (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism) lead adherents away from workaday life by seeking salvation through extraordinary psychic states attained through mystical, orgiastic, or ecstatic experiences. The virtuoso’s hostility toward economic activity discourages this-worldly practical conduct by viewing it as “religiously inferior,” a distraction from communing with the divine. Absent from the contemplative, mystical “flight from the world” is any psychological motivation to engage in worldly action as a path for redemption. As a result, a rationalized economic ethic remains underdeveloped.

Conversely, religions based on an emissary prophecy (e.g., Judaism, Christianity, Islam) require the devout to actively fashion the world according to the will of their god. Not contemplative “flight from,” but, rather, ascetic “work in” this world is the path for redemption according to this prophecy. Seeking mystical union with the cosmos is understood here as an irrational act of hedonism that devalues the God-created world. The virtuoso is instead compelled to “prove” himself as a worthy instrument of God through the ethical quality of his everyday activity. This psychological imperative leads to the development of rational, economic ethic that transforms work into a “holy,” worldly calling. Everyday life is here the setting for the “methodical and rationalized routine-activities of workaday life in the service of the Lord” (Weber 1958:289). Yet, as Weber argued in *The Protestant Ethic*, this worldview, while faithful to God’s commandments and devoted to creating His Kingdom on earth, leads to a thoroughgoing “disenchantment of the world.”

From “The Social Psychology of the World Religions” (1915)

Max Weber

By “world religions,” we understand the five religions or religiously determined systems of life-regulation which have known how to gather multitudes of confessors around them. The term is used here in a completely value-neutral sense. The Confucian, Hinduist, Buddhist, Christian, and Islamist religious ethics all belong to the category of world religion. A sixth religion, Judaism, will also be dealt with. It is included because it contains historical preconditions

decisive for understanding Christianity and Islamism, and because of its historic and autonomous significance for the development of the modern economic ethic of the Occident—a significance, partly real and partly alleged, which has been discussed several times recently. . . .

What is meant by the “economic ethic” of a religion will become increasingly clear during the course of our presentation. . . . The term

SOURCE: Translation of the Introduction to *The Economic Ethic of the World Religions* by Max Weber, 1915.