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Spiritual Basis of Worldly Success

- Max Weber and the teachings of Islam

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Point of Departure

Pakistan is built not on a long national history, not on a common language or the like. The common bond of Pakistanis is the Islam. The whole country is soaked with religion. For a Western visitor it is both impressive and intriguing to see as to what great extent everybody seems to keep the fasts and does his prayers. It is impressive as we in the West have almost lost this religious fervour. It makes me ask where are we Europeans bound to go if we lose our Christian religion. On the other hand it is intriguing to see Muslim practising their religion as they do. Now in the holy month of Ramadan, overall speaking, people work less than they normally do, offices are closing by midday and tens of thousand small businessmen, restaurant owners and the like are virtually laid off during the day and have to make good for their lost turnover in the hours after sun set. So this brings us to the question: Is there a relationship between religion and economic success or failure?

Pakistan has done very well in some aspects of economy, but fares behind international standards in other fields. The same is true in other Islamic countries. Dubai is a glittering example for economic success – and still we are left with some misgivings about how it has been done there. Economic progress has lately been made in Malaysia, but we see very little of it in e.g. Syria or Morocco. Is there a common trait in the development of Muslim countries? If so, does Islam as religion play a role in this? Are there any links at all between economic worldly success and religious beliefs?

Max Weber (1864 – 1920) raised this question with respect to the conspicuous differences between the progressive protestant and the somehow backward catholic regions of the West. MW is today mainly known for his treatise on exactly this question: *Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus – Ethics of Protestantism and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The essence of this treatise can shortly be put as follows:

- Protestants are economically more successful than Catholics and followers of other religions
- Worldly success *may* (MW never says: *is*) therefore be somehow connected with being a protestant.

If we apply this theory to Islam we ask: Is worldly success or failure somehow related to being a Muslim?

1. Protestantism

Protestant is the name for Christian groups and sects which split from the Roman Catholic Church as a consequence of Luther`s reformation 1517.¹ The reformation is a religious and thereby also a cultural revolution. It was based on a variety of causes:

- Political: The middle ages were over. The traditional concept of *one* Emperor holding the secular, and *one* Pope, wielding the spiritual power over all peoples of the world had outlived itself and was openly disproved, i.a. by the sheer existence of Islam and the Turkish empire.
- Technical: Gutenberg`s invention of printing around 1450 had put books in the hands of the hitherto completely unlearned and these started to ask questions.
- Cultural: The advancement of learning lead people to ask questions and to seek answers not only with the priest, the bible and the church.
- Theological: Luther stood up against blatant misuse of the spiritual powers of the church and thereby sparked off the reformation. Gutenberg`s new technique helped to quickly spread this insurrection to all parts of Germany, France, England and elsewhere.

2. Protestant Ethics

a. Salvation through Grace

From its beginning it was Christian teaching that man, being tainted with original sin, is unfit for the Kingdom of Heaven. Unless saved by operation of religion, i.e. redemption through Christ which is administered by baptism, he inevitably will end up in hell. This dogma, although never given up in principle, was somewhat mollified during the ages and by the time of reformation had almost lost its spiritual clout. The church, or rather the Pope, so the official doctrine went, had been entrusted by God to administer God`s grace at the Pope`s discretion. The official church even went that far to formally sell eternal bliss or respite from hellish pains

¹ Originally it is a political term: Protestants were those dignitaries in the German Empire of the time, who formally *protested* against certain articles of creed, which the Emperor tried to enjoin upon them.

for money. The Catholic Church therefore had developed a doctrine which all but promised man heaven, if only he stayed with the teachings of the church.²

Luther's reformation started at this point. He emphasized the words of St Paul, Romans 3, 28: *Now we know, that man will be saved only through faith, not through religious rules and rites.* God's grace is his free gift and cannot be earned, let alone be bought. Unless Christ the Saviour stands up for us, we all, irrespective of how many good deeds we may have done in our lifetime, will inevitably go to hell. Maw's line of argument follows this and can be summed up as follows. Faith is the first step to salvation. But faith is no guarantee. Salvation cannot be earned. It is a grace of God. Grace by definition is given to or taken from the worthy and unworthy alike. Rituals and formalities, not even prayers and fasting, not pilgrimages nor doing good works, faithful obedience to all religious rites and rules cannot earn the grace of the Almighty. Ultimately we are therefore led to the conclusion, that it is quite irrelevant, whether we pray or not, whether we do good, fast or not. God's majesty will not be forced to grant us pardon for our original sin. So the individual is left to find out by himself, what God wishes him to do and not to do. Most probably God wants him to stay in the place and profession where God had put him and to be as good in it as possible. On this basis MW contends that Protestants are for religious reasons constantly busy; thereby they produce worth beyond immediate needs. i. e. capital. That is why they are more prosperous than non – protestants.

b. Literacy - Equality – Rule of Law – Democracy

Unlike Islam where every Muslim is encouraged to read the Holy Quran again and again the catholic church was of opinion that the Holy Scriptures were too difficult to be understood by laymen. At times it was formally forbidden for laymen to read the bible. This changed with the reformation. If man is directly responsible to God, he must be able to find out, what God wants him to do. He must be able to read the holy scriptures. Protestantism therefore insisted right from Luther's first writings on building municipal schools everywhere for everybody; boys and girls. Germany prides itself for being the by far the first country in the world, where compulsory schooling was introduced. It is in protestant free imperial cities that we first find such laws, as early as 1598 (Strasburg/ Alsace), at that time part of Germany). This led to a new curiosity. People, who now could read, wanted to know and judge by themselves, what was going on in the world. The first regular newspaper was published also in protestant Germany, again Strasburg, 1610, and then in Holland, England. He who knows, will stop thinking of himself as inferior to others. Knowledge breeds equality. Nobility step by step lost its monopoly on political power. The rise of the self reliant bourgeois ensued. All this started and was developed in the protestant regions of Europe, mainly in the big cities which became bulwarks of Protestantism and the nest of new technical inventions (Nuremberg, Frankfurt etc). Thus reformation led to the age of enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), which therefore basically was a protestant affair. Protestant countries such as England, Netherlands took the lead. In as far born Catholics took part in the movement, e.g. Diderot (1713- 84), they in a way ceased to be such. *Aufklärung* culminated in

² Although this doctrine was the "practice", it is fair to emphasize that leading catholic theologians never subscribed to it in full.

Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804), who being from East Prussia cannot even be thought of anything than a protestant, although he was far from being an orthodox Lutheran. *Aufklärung* – so Kant said - is the freedom to openly make use of one's reason (*Vernunft*) in all areas of live. As this freedom directly leads to what we understand as self determination of the individual and also of peoples it follows that there is a direct line from reformation over enlightenment to modern ideas of democracy and human rights.

A further consequence of reformation was the following: If everybody from peasant to King is equally (un-) worthy in the eyes of God, if we are all equal in His eyes – what difference should there be among fellow creatures on earth? If there are to be any differences, these must be justified by objective criteria. This led to a new concept of the rule of law. The law is the foe of discrimination and corruption. It may therefore not be a coincidence that protestant countries are considered as widely corruption free.

c. **Predestination - Predetermination**

God is all knowing. He knows the past and the future. The Almighty therefore has knowledge on my state of salvation before I even make my first breath. If this is so – what can I do? God's grace will be bestowed on me or not, just as he wills. This situation, so Maw's argument goes on, would make a man anxious and to continuously tremble, whether or not he belongs to the chosen flock. This leads him to a state of mind, where he tries to dampen his anxiousness by being constantly busy. If he tries by his own industriousness to help himself, God also may help him, and this then could be a sign that God has chosen him.

Man therefore is like a student who has written a test. It is now beyond his reach to influence the result, he can only hope that he did it right. For some time, until the result is there, he may be very uneasy. To overcome this uneasiness, he can put himself again to working, so hard that he forgets about his anxiousness and while doing so he may gain further insight into the topic of his test, and by and by he may feel that he in fact did it right. The test the Christian has to pass is his life, and the test result will be presented to him in the final judgment.

3. **Predestination in Islam**

Islam also knows predetermined destiny (*qada*). If predetermination has such effects on protestants as described, why not on Muslims? Maw's arguments should be as applicable to the one as for the other. Actually Maw's theory seems to be applicable at least partly to the early Islamic period. Why then did Muslim countries develop so differently from the protestant? The holy book, the Quran, had been written down by Zaid Ibn Thabit. A good Muslim was expected to read it, because he should understand it by himself. Illiteracy therefore is not a Quranic virtue! So everything was set to let the Muslim countries develop in almost in the same way as later on did the protestant countries.

There are in whole history only few, if any, examples of men so courageous, active and self reliant as where the prophet and his first followers. Out of nothing they built within few decades one of the biggest empires ever. These men were everything, but not fatalistic dreamers. The Prophet and his companions put their faith in God, who

had spoken to them in the Quran. They were men of action. They wanted to prove to themselves and to the world that they were worthy tools of Allah. They believed in man's responsibility for his deeds. They did not engage in religious speculations. Rules and rites, regular prayers, fasting etc to them were ways to internalise religion, not the essence of religion. Then under the guidance of the Quran the Muslim world developed one of the most splendid periods of world culture. Fatalism, which in the West is often seen as one of the main characteristics of Islam, was not a part of this.

Nevertheless somehow *fatalistic ideas became an essential part of the creed of the masses.. ..Mysticism bred fatalistic tendencies it also encouraged indifference to social morality. ..The neglect of social and practical ethics cancelled all programs of humanitarian activity...science disappeared.*³ This neglect and fatalistic state of mind apparently has led to leaving the masses illiterate.

There are many reasons for the decline of the Muslim world. Arguably the Mongolian conquest of Central Asia and the annihilation of the caliphate (1258) was the single most important of them all. This gave the same type of blow to the pride of the Muslim world as was administered to the Christian world 1453 by the fall of Constantinople, when the oldest and worthiest Christian Church, the Hagia Sophia, was turned into a Turkish mosque.

The teachings of the Quran, however, are not among these reasons for decline. Islam, so it is said, is the very negation of fatalism.⁴ But apparently *qada* did not remain the driving force in Islam. To the contrary. *It was misunderstood as passive acquiescence and surrender to the flow of events which is neither knowable nor predictable. Thus, the attitude requisite for technology .. is absent in popular Islam.*⁵

4. New Understanding of New Testament under Protestantism

Jesus tells the following parable (Matthew 25, 14 ff):

For the kingdom of heaven is as man travelling into a far country.... He called his servants A, B and C. He entrusted, A received 5 pounds of gold; B 2, and C was left with 1. to every man according to his several ability . When he master came back, A returned 5 pounds plus a profit of 5; B returned 2 and in addition 2 profit. C, who had received the least, returned 1 pound and said: Lord I knew thee that thou art an hard man ... and I was afraid and hid the talent in the earth: lo, there thou hast that is thine (V. 24). The master answered: Thou wicked and slothful servant, thou knewest (me)... thou oughtest therefore to have put my money to the exchangers... and I should have received mine own with usury (V. 26 f).⁶ Then the master ordered to take everything from C and to give it to A.

For Protestants this parable has become kind of a “leading case”. The Lord gave to each of us certain qualities. If we simply return these to him, if we refrain from

³ C.A. Qadir *Decline of the Muslim World*, in : M.M. Sharif, l.c. p. 1417 ss

⁴ Sharif – Mohammed Abduh, l.c. S. 1498

⁵ Muhammad Ata al – Sid *Contemporary Attempts at Overcoming Decadence and Revitalizing Quranic Thought*, IBA -Business Review , , 2007, Vol.2. Nr 1, p. 57/8

⁶ Cf. King James Bible

using them, because we are afraid to “loose” them in the course of our life through sins and trespasses, we deceive the Lord for the profit, we could have earned with the talents bestowed upon us. St. Luke 12, 48 reports a saying of Jesus: *For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required.* It is just not enough not to commit open sins, like theft or adultery; leading a life without doing harm to anybody is not what the Lord expects from us. He wants us to be active. We would behave like C in the parable, if we just restore to him what we have received. The Lord will take everything from us and we will be left with empty hands on the day of judgment.

Sin, so it turns out, in its essence is not *doing* wrong things, but *omitting* to do, what is expected from us. MW rightfully sees a new understanding of professional life, evolving with the reformation. If all men, irrespective of who they are and what they are, depend on the grace of God, they sure are equal before God. If so, whatever a man does, be he pope or peasant, is a service to God, which he owes to the Lord in his respective profession. The King must do kingly things, the worker is bound to work in his craft. The size or importance of the work is not, what the Almighty is looking for. The only thing that counts is: Did this individual man perform well in his respective profession? Did he do, what he could do? We sing a hymn Lutheran services: *Oh Lord, give that I do diligently the work you ordered me to do in my profession, give that I do it without delay, and when I do it, let it be successful.*⁷

5. Islam

a. Islam and Christianity

The core problem of every religion is the question: What can /should man do, to become befriended with the Almighty? In the Christian and Islam religions this question is asked more specifically: What must we do or not do, in order to be admitted to paradise?

It is well known that Islam and Christian religions have many things in common. The concept of original sin is known to both. The same is true with man`s free will. In Islam the problem of man`s free will (i.e. whether at all he is able to choose between good and bad) has been discussed with almost the same arguments as in Christianity: If God is good, how come, that his creature is bad and needs salvation? If man sins, why should he be punishable, if he follows the path of truth why should he be rewarded? God created him exactly as he happens to be. And after all – what is a sin? The concept of man`s punishment and reward would then lead to the heretic assumption, that there is within man`s nature something beyond the Almighty`s reach, something what he did not create and still it is there.⁸ This type of rationalistic thinking came up very soon after the emergence of Christianity and Islam respectively.

The Islamic sect of Mutazilism (8th century)⁹ seems to ask the same questions and apparently comes up with about the same answers as the Christian Pelagius and his

⁷ *Gib dass ich tu mit Fleiß, was mir zu tun gebühret, wozu mich dein Befehl in einem Stande führet. Gib, dass ich`s tue bald, zu der Zeit, da ich soll, und wenn ich`s tu, so gib, dass es gerate wohl.* (Johann Hermann, 1630).

⁸ Sharif, - Ibn Rushd, . p. 550

⁹ M.M. Sharif, Vol. 1, p. 199 ss (Mutazilism)

sect did in the 5th century. Both sects have been refuted by their respective orthodox theologians, who for the Christians are personified in St. Augustine. The orthodox and until today prevailing answers in both religions, Christianity and Islam, to these question also seem to be very similar. St. Augustine says: God created everything and what he created, was good. God cannot do any evil. The Bad as such does not really exist, it is only the negation of the Good, *privatio boni*.

Bad is what is left over, when we take away the Good. This comes rather close to the Quran. There it is said that God created man with a bias towards the good (Sura 82, 7). The good, which is found in man's soul, is implanted by God, it is his gift. If we subtract this gift from man's soul, then his pure nature lies before us, and this nature has a tendency to be bad. So whatever evil a man does, this comes from his own soul (Sura 4, 79).¹⁰ So also under Islam man is saved only by grace of God. In a hadith the Prophet is cited as having said in a way which could not be more Lutheran : *You must know that none of you will earn salvation by virtue his works. And one asked him: And what about you, o messenger of God? The Prophet answered: Not even I (will get salvation) unless He will envelope me by his grace and his favours.*¹¹

For the Christian God's grace has been bestowed on us through Jesus Christ. The traditional view of the Catholic Church says: This Grace of God is administered by us, the church, you as an individual must not worry. If you follow the teachings of the holy Catholic Church you will not be lost in the final judgement. For the Muslim this grace of God has been given by sending down the Quran. If man follows the teachings of Quran in good faith he can be all but certain that he will be allowed to enter paradise. It could therefore be said, that the Quran in its entirety for the Muslim has the same function as the church has for the catholic Christian.

b. Islam and Protestants

Drawing the line between Catholics and Protestants is not easy. Bar one big point: The catholic "believes" in the church as an institution, said to have been founded by Christ himself. The church has the exclusive authority to, as has been said, administer God's grace and thereby to guide man to God and paradise.

This concept (*extra ecclesiam non est salus = outside of the church there can be no salvation*) was of fundamental importance. It still is, albeit slightly adapted to the facts of the world.¹² The good traditional catholic Christian is expected to content himself with what the Church teaches. It seems that this comes rather close to the Islamic doctrine of *taqlid*, by which the Muslim passively accepts the teaching of authorities without asking questions.¹³

¹⁰ Sharif, l. c., p. 150

¹¹ Riyad Es – Salihine – Les Jardins de la vertu Nr. 86. (Translated from French by author)

¹² It would lead us too far off, to discuss this concept in detail. The church of today behaves as if this dogma is not valid any more; but it has never been repealed. Luther and reformation remained with this dogma only in so far as they maintained that salvation can only come through Jesus Christ, who can be known only through the Christian Church. In a technical sense therefore the protestant churches still today teach that a non – Christian cannot enter paradise. Cf. Aden

¹³ Sharif – Mohammed Abdhu, p. 1496

According to Luther man is direct to God. Priest and church may help him to understand the Holy Scriptures, but they are no mediators between him and God. It is the privilege and duty of everybody to understand the Holy Scriptures by himself. In this Protestantism is very similar to Islam.¹⁴ But there remains a difference. Between both. Protestantism did overcome *taqlid*, Islam not yet. True, there are Islamic writers fighting the doctrine of *taqlid*, but it is still dominant in Islam. It would be tantamount to an Islamic “Reformation”, if the doctrine of *taqlid* came to an end. This would open the door to apply MW`s theory directly to Islam.

6. Negative and Positive Ethics

Muslim ethics like those of the Catholic Church may be called positive: It is about God`s rewards. Man in principle will be saved, but he can forfeit his salvation. Protestant thinking may be called negative: It is about avoiding punishment. Man in principle is doomed, but he can be saved. The protestant must therefore be active, and even then he is not certain that he will avoid damnation.

Now, there is a big danger for the Protestant. The more we do, the more active we are, the more possibilities are there to fail and thus to commit sins. And on top of this: sin may also lie in not doing the right thing at the right time. To omit the Good is just as sinful as committing the Bad.¹⁵

In view of the other world the life of a Protestant therefore is obviously more dangerous than that of a catholic or a Muslim.

7. Spirit of Capitalism - Asceticism

Wealth and riches may follow from our endeavours and from our being busy, but these are not the real aim. The bliss of working lies in the accomplishment of the well done work itself. Work is to the praise and honour of God not for my own gratification. The profit we earn with our master`s gold is not ours. Lust and luxury is not what the servant should aspire to. The master will pay me what has been agreed whether I worked less or more than my fellow servant, viz. Matth. 2, 1 f. Endeavour means to do more than is usually done, more than is absolutely necessary. Endeavour is work and labour at the expense of leisure and fun. So capital is *geronnener Lustverzicht*, the aggregate of forgone leisure & fun or overtime turned into tangible worth. As bad breeds bad and good breeds good – as the proverbial saying goes – it follows that capital breeds capital, new capital breeds ever more of it. The more it grows the less we want to spend it. We want to invest it to increase it ever more. Under the protestant ethics, in MW view, the investor does not want to become rich, he wants to show his master, that he has been a good servant.

It may therefore not be a just a coincidence that the first Savings Banks, *Sparkassen*, were established in protestant regions of Germany. The idea behind *Sparkassen* was very protestant: Small earners, labourers, farm hands should be given a safe, i.e.

¹⁴ Muhammad Ata al – Sid *Contemporary Attempts at Overcoming Decadence and Revitalizing Quranic Thought* Business Review , IBA, 2007, Vol.2. Nr 1, p.69

¹⁵ From the legal point of view the following may be interesting. Torts or, more generally, illegal acts, giving acclaim for damages are traditionally understood as positive acts. Tort are committed by *doing*, e.g. A throes stone at B. – Modern concepts go far beyond. Torts are not only caused by *done*, but caused by omitting to do, what should be done. The theoretical concept of *tort by omitting* (*Unterlassungsdelikt*) has been developed by protestant German legal scholars.

state guaranteed, opportunity to put aside an extra penny, that is, to invest their pennies and have them grow into capital instead of spending it.¹⁶ It was the same idea that led protestant Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen (1818 – 88) to found the cooperative movement and credit unions (*Genossenschaften*): saving breeds capital, pennies as single coins buy almost nothing, put together they make a dollar and more.

Let us take, under this perspective, a glance at the very rich. Who is there in Monte Carlo or other glitzy places? The Onassis type of people, tennis stars and the like. You will not find Bill Gates there or Warren Buffet. Both are in the process of setting up one of the biggest foundations ever for the benefit of underdeveloped countries. Both are obviously behaving like protestants, be they believers and churchgoers or not. The same is true with Mrs. Quandt, who owns BMW, the Albrecht brothers, arguably the richest people in Europe, living in Essen, Dr. D., a professed protestant, who owns one of the biggest shoe retail chains in Europe. These and many others are known not for their big yachts, if they have any, broken marriages or extravagancies. These people may not be protestants in the strict religious meaning, some of them are indeed. In the sense as understood here also Catholics can be very good Protestants, and HH Aga Khan, who spends his money i.a. on hospitals, could be considered as one as well. On the other hand. The really very huge fund, which has been set up by the protestant Norwegian government¹⁷ in order to store the billions of windfall profits from the North Sea oil may not be too much in line with protestant ethics, as its purpose is a rather egoistic one - to finance the pensions of 4 million Norwegians.

8. Protestantism or what?

Like all big ideas MW's theory has its critics. Be it enough to cite MW himself: It would be stupid, he says, to infer that Protestantism was the *only* cause of capitalism or, even more stupid, to say that capitalism as an economic concept originates in the reformation. There are many reasons to stimulate economic activity. Is it really so that endeavours have something to do with religion or Protestantism? Times of war and duress can be seen as a stimulator to industrial progress. Malaysia has done rather well in many areas – are Malaysians protestants? Well, yes maybe, in a way. Not in the religious understanding of this word, but in the sense which underlies protestant ethics and which ultimately is also the spirit of the Quran.

The Quran teaches that God created the world not for sports. The Almighty intended to achieve with this world something, what is still hidden to us. God wanted men to contribute to this aim.¹⁸ Quran says that man should try to emulate God in his attributes. *The sole aim of man is a progressive achievement of all divine attributes.*¹⁹ The first and pre-eminent attribute of God is his being Creator of the world and of all what is within and without. This leads us to the conclusion that man according to the Quran may be destined to become a creator himself. There is an Islamic myth saying that God originally offered to the angels the divine trust, *amanah*, by which the world

¹⁶ The oldest Sparkasse of the world, which is still doing business, and quite successfully so, is the Landessparkasse zu Oldenburg/ in protestant northern Germany, founded in 1789.

¹⁷ In Norway protestantism is still the official religion of the realm.

¹⁸ Sharif l.c. p. 142

¹⁹ see Sharif loc. cit. p. 146

would have been transformed into the likeness of the divine purpose. But the angels shied away in panic and terror. Then God entrusted this to man. Did we not also shy away from this? It is so comfortable to let God do it all by himself and then praise ourselves for being so humble. What if God wants us to become angels and co-operators on a par basis with Himself? The practical ethic of a common Muslim, still based on *qada*. Modern Muslims feel that this is said quite the opposite of what Islamic ethics really ask for.²⁰ Thus we would infer that also according to the Quran man is under an obligation to actively emulate God in his “creational spirit”. Man should try to improve the world and what is in it in order conform it to the Almighty’s aims as evidenced in the Holy Scriptures. Under this perspective Islam would come very close to or would even coincide with what has here been described as protestant ethics. Maybe this ethic is neither protestant nor Islamic – it may be just the common ground on which irrespective of our professed religion mankind stands, as soon as we feel responsibility for ourselves and the world as a whole.

9. Conclusion

I wanted to show that religion, be it Christianity, Islam or other, is not a bed, in which we passively lie until we are led by the angels into paradise. Religion is a state of mind in which we, out of responsibility towards God, we make our own wings grow so that we may fly to heaven, albeit with His help.

What can we do to make our wings grow and spread? Muslims give much preference to having a son over a daughter. The Prophet did not have a son. He had a daughter, Fatima, the mother of the descendents of the prophet. Under a Muslim’s perspective we could ask: Why did God deny a son to his prophet? If I venture an answer it is the following: God *blessed* the prophet with a daughter! He wanted to show by this, that not masculine prowess but caring love, which is associated with women, is the ultimate clue to worldly success and godly wisdom.

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