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Editor's Note

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Editor's Note

During this Presidential cycle in the United States, a number of prominent politicians have consistently injected religion into politics. Michelle Bachmann may have been the first to do so, but she has been followed by Rick Santorum, Rick Perry, Newt Gingrich, and others.

According to the great theoretician Max Weber, the scientist and the politician are separated by a very wide gulf, yet they are inextricably dependent upon each other. The politician, Weber wrote, must have passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion, "values."¹ The scientist, on the other hand, seeks to clarify and determine knowledge of interrelated facts. He or she must put on blinders and be intoxicated with making the correct conjecture on a passage in a document.

Weber then goes on to assert that the separation between value and fact is

aimed not only at clearly defining the logical essence of the two types of activity, their respective spheres and, consequently, the kind of problems each is capable of solving with the means peculiar to it, but also at enabling them to collaborate more successfully, because their very separateness will have eliminated confusions that would only have hampered them both.²

Some world leaders from various civilizations have been able to bridge this gap, crossing in their lives between the two zones. Shortly after David Ben Gurion became Prime Minister of Israel, he expressed a great interest in Asia and in the Asian philosophies. Ben Gurion said that "to get to know the moods and patterns of thought of the people of Asia, I sought to acquaint myself more intimately with the works of the man who had left the greatest imprint upon their minds. And so I began studying the writing of the Buddha, and I was quickly impressed with the extraordinary greatness of the man, a man of immense wisdom and immense courage."³

His teachings were all on the rational and moral plane: what path should a man choose in life, for the good of himself and of all living creatures?⁴

The Prime Minister then compared Buddhism to Judaism. He said that even though Buddha denied the existence of God, his doctrine on moral behavior was similar to that of the Hebrew prophets. "The preaching of love of fellow man, for example, was very much the doctrine of the Hebrew Sages of old and of the prophets who lived in the ninth and eighth centuries B.C.

‘Love thy neighbor as thyself,’ indeed, appears in Leviticus (19:18). The Prophets Elijah and Elisha lived in the ninth century, B.C., Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah in the eighth – before the Buddha . . . But I made the special point that the utterances of the Buddha were made five centuries before Jesus, because of the popular belief that the doctrine of love had been launched upon the world by Jesus, and because the form in which the Buddha said it was so like the form which appears in the New Testament.⁵

Unlike many leaders who seek to point out the differences between religions, and thus incite hostility amongst the public, here was a politician who brought out the similarity between religions. Could it be done again, and was he right?

Max Weber taught us that although there are impediments to comparing civilizations and religions outright, we should try to systematically compare and classify them. He believed that research is unending and that scientific data is constantly liable to correction. Moreover, the scientist has to make clear that he is hypothesizing with due regard both for the possibility of other interpretations and for the development of scientific knowledge.

Weber asserted in his famous essay, *The Social Psychology of the World Religions*, that “Neither religions nor men are open books. They have been historical rather than logical or even psychological constructions without contradiction. Often they have borne within themselves a series of motives, each of which, if separately and consistently followed through, would have stood in the way of the others or run against them head on. In religious matters ‘consistency’ has been the exception and not the rule.”⁶ Further, he stated that:

“In no respect can one simply integrate various world religions into a chain of types, each of them signifying a new ‘stage.’ All the great religions are historical individualities of a highly complex nature. Taken all together, they exhaust only a few of the possible combinations that could conceivably be formed from the very numerous individual factors to be considered in such historical combinations.”⁷

Moreover, comparing foundational religions is not easy, Weber would maintain. In an impressive opening footnote to his book *Ancient Judaism*, a great masterpiece, Weber writes that it would require more than a lifetime of study “to acquire a true mastery of the literature concerning the religion of Israel and Jewry, especially since this literature is of exceptionally high quality.”⁸

Weber warned against allowing value judgments to interfere with detached analysis. He sought to compare relationships between economic ethics and religions, for instance, and not to compare entire civilizations outright.⁹ Further, we must take care to restrict ourselves to objective investigation; any attempt to weigh the moral precepts or practices of Judaism in the balance with Buddhism, for example, and say which is better must be avoided at all costs by the social scientist.

One can only investigate how rational the development of a religion is from its given premises, what options were available on the basis of the premises, and, perhaps, what options are the most rational. As he notes in his beautiful intellectual swan song, *Science As A Vocation*, “I do not know how one might wish to decide ‘scientifically’ the value of French and German culture; for here, too, different gods struggle with one another, now and for all times to come.”¹⁰

Weber proposed the construction of historical “ideal typical” models. As he writes in the beginning of his article entitled *Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions*, “the constructed scheme, of course, only serves the purpose of offering an ideal typical means of orientation. It does not teach a philosophy of its own.”

The theoretically constructed types of conflicting ‘life orders’ are merely intended to show that at certain points such and such internal conflicts are possible and ‘adequate.’ They are not intended to show that there is no standpoint from which the conflicts would not be held to be resolved in a higher synthesis. As will readily be seen, the individual spheres of values are prepared with a rational consistency which is rarely found in reality. But they *can* appear thus in reality and in historically important ways, and they have.

Such constructions make it possible to determine the typological locus of a historical phenomenon. They enable us to see if, in particular traits or in their total character, the phenomena approximate one of our constructions: to determine the degree of approximation of the historical phenomenon to the theoretically constructed type.¹¹

Thus, as the late Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons would maintain, the ideal type is used as a device for differentiating the cultural variances from a model for the purpose of comparison.¹²

I believe that there are considerable intellectual impedimenta to providing a complete parallel between Judaism and Buddhism. One is obvious: Judaism is a rationalistic, legalistic, inner world religion, perhaps something like Chinese Confucianism. This is clearly the attitude that Werner Sombart takes in his book *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*. It is the anthropological character of the Jewish people which has remained consistent over thousands of years, Sombart says. The Jewish native rationalism is the characteristic trait of capitalism, he says, and hence, Jews have been successful carriers of capitalism.¹³

Buddhism, on the other hand, is the opposite sort of religion. It is a religion of conviction oriented to salvation and generally hostile to the world. Life is viewed by the followers of Theravada Buddhism as having little significance in its own right; they seek inner repose, not “good deeds.” Weber would find that Buddhism is based on ritual ceremonies of mysticism with an aim of seeking salvation through “incarnating the supra-sensible being.”¹⁴

He would add that Buddhism is the archetype of a religion of other-worldly mysticism, while Judaism is inner-worldly and ascetic. Western man seeks to justify himself before God. Eastern man, on the other hand, looks to understand the “meaning” of the world. And unlike Judaism and Protestantism, Buddhism has “had to reintroduce cults of saints, heroes, or functional gods in order to accommodate itself to the needs of the masses.” That is, while Buddhism has its Bodhisattvas, Judaism has no little Moseses. What is more, we might note, there is no supernatural being, no God, in Buddhism.

Finally, in India, the parallel to Jewish civilization might be found among merchants who are of the Parsi community or who are Jains, but not the Buddhists.

So must Ben Gurion's comparison and finding of similarity falter? I think not. A more refined glance into Judaism and Buddhism could begin by observing that parallels ought to be drawn between Buddhism and Judaism from a civilizational perspective, as what Weber called "leagues with a common cult," rather than as simply religions. These are not religions such as Calvinism and Lutheranism, sprouting from the same general garden, now growing on their own. They are instead constituent elements of separate civilizations.

Hinduism, as we know, developed as early as Mohenjo-Daro and the Harappan culture. We believe that Shiva, followed by Agni, Indra and Varuna, may have been worshipped as far back as 2500 B.C. As a report by the Indologist John Grayzel indicates elsewhere in this issue, the Indo-European Aryans took control of the subcontinent, suppressing the Dravidians, who had a superior culture. It was during this process that they wrote the Vedas, the sacred works of the Hindu faith. There followed the Brahmanas, the Upanishads, the *Mahabharata*, and the *Ramayana*.

Buddhism began as a revolt, a breakthrough, against the priests and the rituals which the Hindu culture had developed. As one author has put it:

...it is too often not understood that the distinction between Buddhism and Hinduism was, fundamentally, in India at least, only sectarian. Some of the basic ideas of Hinduism were accepted by this reform movement, such as *maya* (illusion), rebirth, etc., and the Buddha was regarded as a Hindu saint.¹⁵

Although Weber saw Buddhism as one of the world's great civilization-religions, the Buddhism of East and Southeast Asia is not the Buddhism of Gautama, the Buddha. Buddhism became, over the centuries and across wide geographic regions, in Weber's terms, both a heterodox "sect" and a "church." One could maintain that it was a sect which, especially with its establishment under Asoka, became a church.

Judaism has to be seen in a similar light. Given its religious unity by Moses after the flight from Egyptian slavery, Judaism was for centuries a priestly-run religion of the Hebrew people in Palestine. Weber, in *Ancient Judaism*, chronicles the development of the tribes into a nation; originally a tribal confederacy following the commands of a war god, the Jewish nation gradually developed cities, aristocratic and intellectual elites, social classes and social problems, Weber writes. But, he notes, they did not develop what we would call today Oriental Despotism.

Prophets arose, claiming to communicate directly with God, in solitude, challenging the authorities. Unlike the religious, "church" specialists, the Levites, the prophets were freewheeling. The resulting demystified, rationalized civilization of the Jews saw the proliferation of sects.

So, from a Weberian perspective, I believe, Judaism and Buddhism were not parallel civilizations at their respective inception periods. Judaism in ancient days more closely paralleled Hinduism. With the rise of sects centering on the later prophets, the Essenes and others whose writings we know of from the Dead Sea scrolls, with the Pharisees (as opposed to the Sadducees), we see parallels emerging to the Buddhism of Theravada days. And Buddhism of the popular acceptance becomes parallel to Judaism because it, too, becomes a consciousness, a civilization of its own.

Further, even though clearly Judaism and Hinduism do provide the most obvious civilizational parallels, yet “sect” Judaism is to Theravada Buddhism as ancient “church” Judaism is to Mahayana “church” Buddhism. Of course, this is a non-historic comparison, since Theravada arose first, while Jewish sects did not. To arrive at our conclusion, we must break down Buddhism into pre-Asoka “cult” Theravada; post-Asoka “church” Theravada; and “exilic” “church” Mahayana, now “church” Buddhism. Then the parallels become more obvious.

Now we can find emerging and enormous parallels between Buddhism and Judaism. The social settings of the two faiths are clearly similar. Heterodoxy flourished as Buddhism appeared, as the Upanishad sages were teaching Vedic values and while there was a revolt underway by non-Vedic teachers. The old tribal structure was disintegrating, small regional kingdoms were appearing and there arose other types of small units which preserved some of the tribal structures and are generally referred to as “republics.”¹⁶

This setting is analogous to developments in what Weber called the “Syrian-Palestinian mountainland,” exposed as it was by turns to Mesopotamian and to Egyptian influences.¹⁷ As Weber writes, “because the nature of military and administrative technology of the time precluded it, before the seventeenth century, B.C., a lasting political conquest was impossible for either of the great cultural centers.”¹⁸ Diplomatic and commercial relations occurred with neighbors, the intellectual influence from the cultures affected the region, and the ties with Mesopotamia remained even during periods of Egyptian domination.

To Weber new religious conceptions rarely originate in the respective centers of rational culture.¹⁹ Perry Anderson, the English Marxist, pointed out that England never developed a vibrant sociology because there was no interlacing of civilizations, no cross-cultural fertilization, while the reverse was true for the Western European continent. So, too, I believe that it can be shown that the civilizations of Buddhism and Ancient Judaism both sprang from fertile, cross-cultural bases. Both grew out of areas seething in inter-civilizational conflicts in Uttar Pradesh and Palestine, unlike Confucianism of the later Chou period, which had developed only after internal wars ceased, or Zoroastrianism.²⁰ It can clearly be argued that the increasing formation of “sects” in ancient Israel and in the land of Buddhism’s origins relates to the continuous cross-cultural fertilization of Palestine and Southeast Asia.

In addition, both Buddhism and Judaism developed in a clan, “sib” setting. Again, Weber notes that in India “not only the formation of castes, but the heightened significance of the sib belongs to the fundamental traits of Indian society; the Hindu social order, to a larger extent than anywhere else in the world, is organized in terms of clan charisma.”²¹

Meanwhile, amidst the confederacy of ancient Israel, which had no really permanent political institution, social life centered on the interrelationships of the tribes and the lack of even religious cohesion. Thus, quoting Stade, Weber says that “the tribal tattoo of the Kenites was no mere tribal badge but rather a primary sign of the cult community. The Indian badges of sect would represent the analogous phenomena.”²²

During the period of Buddhist ascendancy in India, interestingly, merchants prospered. The republics existed across northern India. Whatever the real importance of these republics, it is clear that Buddhist periods and areas of rule in India saw far less of what Wittfogel would call “hydraulic” Oriental Despotism -- overweening governmental, bureaucratic interference with daily life -- than was the case under early Hinduism. Clearly, the social import of the republics parallels that of the clan arrangements of Jewish-occupied Palestine.²³

Additionally, both Judaism and Buddhism began in a foreign religious setting. Both arose at one moment with a “personal call” being felt by a prophet, not a priest. Both founders began religions in which the focus was to be on their doctrine, not on their person, as would be the case with religions founded by Jesus, Mohammed and Zoroaster. Moreover, both Moses, the prince of Egypt, and Buddha, noble son of a Kshatriya chief of a hill tribe, the Shakyas, were from privileged backgrounds. Yet both called for a break with the established order, giving the opportunity for a religious and cultural breakthrough. Both exerted power simply by virtue of personal gifts. Unlike the magician, the prophet claims definite revelation, and the core of both of these men’s doctrines was non-magical.

Furthermore, both Buddha and Moses got inspiration by retreating into solitary meditation, away from their people. Both men left permanently the background in which they had grown up. Both received their mission from no human agency, but rather seized it. Both were to use Weberian terms, *aisymnetes*, which is to say, personages who, in the given case, were assigned the responsibility of systematically codifying or reconstituting the law. Buddha, unlike Hindu reformers of religion like Shankar or Ramanuja, was a genuine prophet; the others did not claim to be offering substantively new revelations or speaking in the name of a special divine injunction.

Another religious parallel can be found in the attitude toward death. There is no eternal life in either faith nor is there compensation in the hereafter, which is found in both Egyptian and Zoroastrian religions. And, as Weber points out, “the conflict between the social claims based on God’s promises and the actual conditions of dishonor among which Jews lived precluded any possibility for finding ease in this life.”²⁴ What could

be closer to Buddhism? One can argue that Nirvana, the “blowing out” of the Buddhists, and the “dust to dust, ashes to ashes” of the Jewish belief are, in practical terms, similar. And you can compare the Buddhist theodicy of life as “meaning” over the long haul, becoming part of Nirvana, with the Jewish theodicy of a messianic age for all men. In general, we can argue that the consciousnesses of Buddhism and Judaism were both more rationalistic and liberal than would have been expected from the environments that nurtured them.

There are many other points which could be examined and argued. For example, consider the constitution of the Buddhist order, in which each monastery is virtually a law unto itself, deciding major issues after free discussion amongst assembled monks; this implies a democracy. That does not differ greatly from Judaism, which has no religious hierarchy; anyone may be called to the Torah to read. Both stand for equality and both reject both religious and secular structures of inequality. Intellectuals and teachers, writers and thinkers, artists and those who create or advance high culture are valued in Judaism and in Buddhism. Both religions early on did away with the magical forces predominant in their mother cultures.

But I would like to conclude by asking whether or not the Jews and the Buddhists share the special distinction of being “pariah” civilizations. To Weber, a pariah people are “a distinctive hereditary social group lacking autonomous political organization and characterized by prohibitions against commensality and intermarriage originally founded upon magic, tabooistic, and ritual injunctions.” Two additional traits are political and social disprivilege and a far-reaching distinctiveness in economic functioning.²⁵

For Weber the Jews are the pariah people par excellence. Buddhism, particularly in its Theravada form, would appear to meet few of the conditions Weber set forth. Nevertheless, if we refine the definition a bit, we will see that both religions are cosmopolitan, international and for the most part they have been wandering for centuries from their homeland. A few Jews lived on in Palestine, and some Buddhists held on in India.

Mainly, however, the religions were practiced by ideological descendants of the founders, far afield from where the prophetic pronouncements had been made. Both were carried by essentially urban practitioners on their home territory, Palestine or India, during their heyday; it was therefore more likely that they could migrate. Both were religions in which intellectuals played the significant role. And both had been at one time official state religions, “churches,” with developed philosophies of moral meaning and theodicy, which subsequently lost their official status in their home territory. Today, Jews are considered pariahs by millions, if not billions, of people in this world; many Buddhists, especially the Tibetan Buddhists, are similarly pariahs.

Even given great differences between the two, it is remarkable that both, two great world religious civilizations, wandered. They were for a period of time integral parts of

and then were separated from their homelands – a place where they had gone from outsider status to establishment status and back to outsider status once again. After Bar Kokhba, the vast majority of Jews who lived resided outside of the Holy Land altogether; they were forbidden by law from entering large tracts of Judea and their capital city's name was changed completely, Judaism expurgated. After the Maurya Dynasty terminated, Buddhism developed elsewhere into a great world religion. But although it grew in many countries, its presence in India diminished and almost totally disappeared. While force of ejection was not overwhelming in Buddhism's case, as it was in the Jewish instance, the final result (until the recreation of Israel in 1948) was more or less the same.

Overall, I think that Ben Gurion was on to something. It is not surprising that trips to spiritual India have now replaced visits to America as a designation of choice for young Israelis who have completed their military obligations. Nor is it surprising that the Dalai Lama finds tremendous popularity today in Israel and Buddhism is filled with Jewish practitioners. One could predict safely that these two ancient religious civilizations, given their common origins in Prophetic leadership, will continue to find common cause in a world where evidently priests, and not ethics, "churches" and not "sects", law and not innovation, permanent and not mobile, seem to be relatively more popular among politicians and publics worldwide.

Joseph Drew

Endnotes

¹ Max Weber, "Politics As A Vocation", in a collection by Gerth and Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1946.

² Julien Freund, *The Sociology of Max Weber*, New York: Vintage Books, 1968, page 6.

³ Moshe Pearlman, *Ben Gurion Looks Back*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965. See Page 189.

⁴ Ibid. page 190.

⁵ Ibid. page 191.

⁶ Gerth and Mills, page 291. The entire essay is in Gerth and Mills on pages 267 to 301.

⁷ Ibid. page 292.

⁸ Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism*. New York: The Free Press, 1952. Paperback edition, 1967.

⁹ So why did Weber write all the comparative works he did? A partial explanation is given in Reinhard Bendix's work: *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1962), page 84. One of these is "the determination of what was distinctive for the West by a comparison of the causes and consequences of religious beliefs in different civilizations."

¹⁰ Gerth and Mills, page 148.

¹¹ Gerth and Mills, page 323.

¹² See, for example and especially, his introduction to Weber's *Sociology of Religion*.

¹³ See his work, *The Jews and Modern Capitalism*. New York: Collier Books, 1951. It discusses this argument extensively, in fact arguing that the Jewish ethos, like the Protestant Ethic, is one oriented to capitalism almost *ab initio*.

¹⁴ This is from Freund, *op cit*, page 178.

¹⁵ T. Walter Wallbank, *A Short History of India and Pakistan*. New York: New American Library, 1958. Page 39.

¹⁶ See, for example, William Theodore de Bary, ed., *The Sources of Indian Tradition*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1958. Page 31-39.

¹⁷ “The rise to political prominence of the Babylonian power at the end of the third millennium and the continuous ascendancy of Babylon and its commercial importance as the area where forms of early capitalist business originated constituted later aspects of Mesopotamian influence. Egyptian influences rested on trade relations between the Old Kingdom and the Phoenician coast, on Egyptian mining in the Sinai peninsula, and on geographic nearness.” See Weber’s *Ancient Judaism*, page 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* page 6.

¹⁹ See Page 206 of his *Ancient Judaism*.

²⁰ Weber deals extensively with the growth of Confucianism in his book *The Religion of China*.

²¹ See page 49 of *The Religion of India*.

²² *Ancient Judaism*, page 79.

²³ Karl Wittfogel never really discusses this intriguing possibility, but he gets to it on page 265. See Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957.

²⁴ See Weber’s *Sociology of Religion*, p. 113-114.

²⁵ Weber, *Sociology of Religion*, pages 108 - 109.