

WEBER : Religious ethics and Economy

Religion being a pervasive and universal institution is deeply rooted in human beings. It is not just a strict institution but also exerts a tremendous influence upon all other institutions.

What Weber was concerned within the sociology of religion was not religion on everyday life, on political, administrative, economic and moral behavior in different historical situations that he tried to understand and reduces to order. His study depicts that religion which is based on cultural needs of man has now added new dimensions to human life and human development.

Weber suggested that the protestant institution and its ethics have played an important role in the development of their economy. This idea has been depicted in his book “Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism”(1905)

His study promulgates that how far a particular sect of religion can influence the economic behavior of its followers. Weber’s major concern was to emphasize to the extent to which the religious conception of the world of existence have influenced the economic behavior of various societies and specially the western society. Weber says that the Calvinist sect of protestant Christian religion has strongest influences on the development of Capitalism.

The theory also captures several significant socio-economic influences which distinguish western from the eastern characteristics.

He was less concerned with the ethical doctrines as expounded by theologians than with these doctrines in their popular form as they guide group behavior.

Superficially, religion and society seem poles apart. Religion concerns itself with the “beyond”, whereas economy deals with the practical business of working, producing and consuming.

Are these two seemingly diverse systems related? Weber thought so.

According to him, it was the ideas, beliefs, values and world views of human societies that guided the way their members acted, even in the economic sphere.

Religion prescribes certain guidelines of behavior. It is in accordance with these guidelines the followers direct or orient their activities. These guidelines are incorporated in the body of religious ethics of each religious system.

Weber tries to establish relation between religious ethics on the one hand and the economic behavior on the other. He tries to validate his ideas on this issue with the help of comparative studies of various world religions. He studies Confucianism in ancient China, Hinduism in ancient India and Judaism in ancient Palestine.

Neither of three religions have the conducive ethics for flourishing capitalism. Judaism could have achieved the development, but for historically the population had to scatter throughout the world. Weber has negative view for the scope of development of rational capitalism in India as he finds the religious ethos upheld a caste-based society. Ancient India was economically advanced and made valuable contribution towards development of science. Trade links were established in various parts of the world, but Hinduism did not provide a suitable ethic for the development of capitalism. The dictums of “dharma”, “karma” and “punarjanma” are major hindrances in the direction towards capitalist economy.