



DORISEA WORKING PAPER

ISSUE 10, 2014, ISSN: 2196-6893

BOIKE REHBEIN

**RELIGION, SCIENCE
AND CAPITALISM**



10

DORISEA WORKING PAPER SERIES

EDITORS

Peter J. Bräunlein
Michael Dickhardt
Karin Klenke
Andrea Lauser

BMBF Competence Network “Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia” (DORISEA)

The research network “Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia” (DORISEA) is funded by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) and coordinated by the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the Georg-August-University of Göttingen. Scholars from the Universities of Göttingen, Hamburg, Münster, Heidelberg and Berlin (Humboldt University) are involved in several projects that investigate the relationship between religion and modernity in Southeast Asia.

How to cite this paper: Boike Rehbein (2014): Religion, Science and Capitalism. In: DORISEA Working Paper Series, No. 8.

Research Network DORISEA
Dynamics of Religion in Southeast Asia

Project Office
Georg-August-University Göttingen
Institut für Ethnologie
Berliner Str. 28
D - 37073 Göttingen
Germany
+49 (0)551 39 20153

dorisea@uni-goettingen.de
www.dorisea.net

DORISEA
Dynamics of Religion
in Southeast Asia 

FUNDED BY



Federal Ministry
of Education
and Research

BOIKE REHBEIN

RELIGION, SCIENCE AND CAPITALISM

This paper enquires into the relation between capitalism, religion and the philosophy of science. We would tend to suppose that there are only superficial and accidental links between them. A closer analysis reveals, however, that the epistemology of contemporary science is still based on a certain interpretation of Christianity and linked to a particular type of capitalism. Science developed after Galileo and Descartes aims at universal truth but was founded on the notion of the Christian God and associated with a technological perspective on the world, which was most effectively exploited by Western capitalist societies. This gave rise to a particular concept of religion as opposed to the technological perspective, even though the latter was founded on the former. While other types of science and capitalism have existed, all forms of the religious have been subsumed under the concept of religion developed by Western science. This paper argues that it is impossible to understand any other form of the religious than recent Christianity from this perspective.

Our scientific interpretation of religion is heavily influenced by sociological accounts, especially Max Weber. According to Weber (1978), recent history is characterized by a process of modernization, which gives rise to capitalism, secularism and science. Weber defines the process of modernization as an all-encompassing rationalization. This interpretation implies that religion becomes less relevant or even disappears with time. Capitalism would decrease the social relevance of religion as it is based on or at least comprises a scientific world-view, which is rational in contrast to religion's irrational features. It has been observed that recent history does not comply with Weber's interpretation and that religion does not become socially irrelevant (Asad 2003; Hefner 1998; Riesebrodt 2000). Weber must have missed something – or we must have missed something in Weber's interpretation.

Various explanations have been offered both in support of and in opposition to Weber. This paper

offers another one. It argues that rationalization in Western science and capitalism has been based on Christian religion. In their historical genesis, the political organization of capitalism in the West, the theory of capitalism, the natural sciences and the incorporated ethos of capitalist action have all been rooted in Christianity. Christian religion remains a systematic component of contemporary science and capitalism because both claim to be entirely rational but they cannot offer a rational explanation for themselves. Historically, this explanation has been offered by Christianity, whose position remains vacant if the irrational foundation of science and capitalism is denied. Weber (1965) acknowledged this and claimed that no rational explanation for doing science can be given but it has to be based on an (irrational) decision. Therefore, the systematic position for Christian religion remains in place. This does not mean that science and capitalism as well as individuals will necessarily have recourse to Christianity or something else that is interpreted as religion but this particular science and the type of capitalism based on it make it likely.

The aim of the paper is to open the path for a re-interpretation of phenomena that have been subsumed under the Western scientific concept of religion by showing that this concept is linked to the specific configuration of capitalist society, technologically oriented science and Christianity. None of the elements of this configuration is universally valid. The paper rather argues that the very notion of universalism and the concept of religion developed against its background only make sense within this very configuration. It is a *particular* configuration, not the perspective of God or the end of history. I have explained this concept of configuration elsewhere and will draw on it in this paper (Rehbein 2014).

The first section of the paper reviews the interpretation of the relation between religion and capitalism advanced by Weber as well as its critique. The second section proposes an alternative

framework for the interpretation of religion, which does not, like Weber and his critics, presuppose the European nation state and its scriptural religion. From this perspective, the third section looks at the foundation of European science, while the fourth section deals with the incorporation of a capitalist ethos. Both are based on Christianity, which therefore continues to play an important role in contemporary science and capitalism. This is the object of the final section. The conclusion briefly outlines an alternative concept of science and the study of the religious.

RATIONALIZATION AND CAPITALISM

The prevailing concept of religion in the social sciences is rooted in the sociology of religion advanced by the classics. Marx, Weber and Durkheim developed their concept of religion in a world dominated by Western colonialism and within the framework of modernization theory. To them, it was evident that European civilization constituted the apex of historical evolution. In their lifetime, it was a matter of simple observation that within this civilization, the relevance of Christian religion decreased in favour of science. The classics interpreted religion against the background of the history of Christianity. Against this background, they regarded any religion as a trait of underdeveloped societies.

For Marx (MEW 9, 132), the main reason for the “underdevelopment” of societies like India consisted in the overwhelming importance of religion, which influenced all spheres of life. He designated all Indians as “Hindus” and classified them as “tools of superstition”, “slaves of traditional rules” and “passive” (MEW 9, 131). Religion, in his view, is part of an oppressive and underdeveloped type of society. It is both the expression of real misery and the “opium” that covers and mystifies the misery (MEW 1, 378). According to Marx, history has to spread Christianity on a global scale in order for capitalist competition in the bourgeois society to render it obsolete by demonstrating its mystifying and superstitious character. Colonialism serves the purpose of spreading Christianity and capitalism at the same time, thereby enabling societies like India to get rid of their superstitions. Marx considered this development as inevitable, as he believed in the same type of historical evolution as Hegel before him and “modernization theory” after Weber (cf. Heller 1999, 31).

While Marx developed a sophisticated analysis of European society, he portrayed “Asian society” as a homogeneous, timeless and largely undifferentiated unity. This was due to the fact that colonial rule actually treated the dominated societies in this way and to the interpretation of Asian sources in the West. Marx had to base his view of Asia on the armchair science conducted by Orientalists,

whose interpretation of Asian societies arose out of the reading of religious and other texts written by Asian elites. In this regard, the texts that Durkheim and Weber had at their disposal did not differ much from the material available to Marx.

Max Weber used a similar framework of modernization theory and a similar interpretation of European society as Marx. Even though his assessment of religion differed significantly from Marx’s, the final outcome of their analysis was almost identical. Both relegated religion to less developed societies and to earlier historical stages. Christianity was supposed to be one of the preconditions of modern European society, in which it would be superseded by capitalism and science. Weber’s interpretation of this precondition differed from Marx’s as he focused on the constructive rather than the inhibiting function of Christianity. While for Marx, Christianity’s only positive role consisted in the expression of misery, Weber argued that Catholicism had produced a sense of the inner self and Protestantism a specific ethos necessary for rational capitalist action (Weber 1978, I: 37).

According to Weber, history involves a process of modernization, which is characterized by rationalization (Schluchter 1979). Rationalization in turn involves secularization, the decrease of religion’s relevance in favour of science and technology. In contrast to Marx, Weber considered this process as highly problematic and singular rather than teleological and universal. Instead of taking European domination and the global spread of capitalism for granted, his main focus was the explanation of how they had been possible (1978, II: 378). Christianity played an important role in this explanation. The global domination of European capitalism and science had only been possible on the basis of the “protestant ethic”, the sacralization of work and thriftiness as components of a religious life (Weber 1978, I: 12).

Almost all of Weber’s empirical statements have been proven wrong (Schluchter 1984). At the same time, his general idea has not been discarded. In fact, it remains the most influential interpretation of the relation between religion, capitalism and science. It seems evident that pre-capitalist “religions” have an influence on the concrete functioning of capitalism in a particular society. It is also evident that science and “religion” are contrary forces to some degree and that capitalism owes more to science and technology than to “religion” in its everyday functioning. It is less evident, however, if “religion” actually disappears due to capitalism. Weber’s position on this issue was ambivalent. The strong interpretation of Weber’s thesis actually claims that “religion” as an instrument of rationalization has to give way to more efficient instruments in “modern” societies, especially science. A weaker interpretation suggests that “religion” cedes to permeate all aspects of society and becomes one realm or system

next to a host of others (Hefner 1998). According to the weakest interpretation, “religion” becomes a matter of private faith in a highly differentiated society, which does not have a common stock of meaning any more (Berger 1980). All three interpretations can be supported by empirical material.

Another interpretation of “modern society” sees a stronger continuity between Christianity and capitalism than Marx or Weber had done. In an unpublished but posthumously very influential fragment, Walter Benjamin suggests to interpret capitalism as a new form of religion: “Capitalism has to be regarded as a religion, i.e. capitalism serves to satisfy the same worries, pains and uneasiness to which in former times the so-called religions used to give answers.” (Benjamin 1991, 100; my translation) It is not, as Max Weber claimed, founded on a religious ethos but it is a religious entity in itself. Protestantism was not the condition for the development of capitalism but it was transformed into capitalism itself (Benjamin 1991, 102). More specifically, Benjamin regards capitalism as a religion of permanent cult and distinguishes it from earlier forms of religion by its creation of guilt (which in German is the same term as “debt”) instead of salvation. Capitalism’s goal and endpoint is not the transcendence toward God but the complete humanization of God, not the improvement of being but its utter destruction.

If we think of critical theory since Marx or of capitalism’s contemporary institutions, several parallels between Christianity and capitalism are obvious. Money can be regarded as the equivalent of God, financial capitalists are its priests, consumption is its body of rituals, economics is its theology and getting rich is the meaning of life. However, if we recall Marx’s and Weber’s arguments a bit more precisely, the parallel becomes less convincing. Both argued that capitalism will do away with religion, it will demystify the world, replace belief by rationality and render religious institutions superfluous. Capitalism’s main characteristic, viewed from this perspective, is precisely that it is not religion.

For the classics, it was evident and confirmed by everyday observation that capitalism diminishes the role and status of religion in society. Prominent examples of “modernization” in the past decades have, however, cast doubt on the claim itself that religion and modernization are opposed to each other. Neither in the US nor in Southeast Asia can we observe the all-encompassing process of “rationalization” or devaluation of “religion”. We are witnessing a “return of religions” (Riesebrodt 2000) that contradicts any interpretation based on Marx and Weber. Many of the returning “religions” are neither very rational nor constricted to a social sub-system nor very private nor a component of capitalism. This observation has led Talal Asad (2003, 1) to claim that there is only one certainty concerning the relation between modernization and “religion”: The

relevance of “religion” does not decrease. If this is true, we have to revisit the relation between rationalization, capitalism and religion.

RELIGION AS SYMBOLICALLY MEDIATED PRACTICE

The relation between religion and capitalism has been misconceived by the social sciences in at least two ways. The classics considered religion in the framework of the nation state as a book religion and they analyzed it in the framework of a modernization theory, which interprets European (and later, North American) societies as developed and complex and the other societies as underdeveloped, timeless and uniform. Before we revisit the relation between rationalization, capitalism and religion, we have to deal with these two flaws. The result of this discussion is an alternative framework for the interpretation of religion, which will be outlined at the end of this section.

The simple opposition of tradition and religion on the one hand and modernity and rationality on the other has to be replaced by a more ambivalent and complex interpretation. We can observe a mosaic of differing and sometimes contradictory tendencies. Certainly, we can distinguish between capitalist and pre-capitalist societies, between modernity and traditional societies, between folk beliefs and book religions as well as between science and religion – but these distinctions are blurred and do not fit the scheme of a unilinear evolution. Religion has never disappeared entirely, there is no pure modernity and there is no entirely secular and rational society. What is more, religion seems to be a component of “modernity” itself.

In contemporary society, religion is less and less a book religion constructed and supervised by the state but increasingly a transnational community. There are Brazilians living in England, who have converted to Islam, while some British have moved to the American Southwest in order to be initiated into Indian-American magic. What is tradition, what is modernity, what is book religion, what is folk belief and whose religion is it in these cases? These examples allow us to see that the classics’ concept of religion refers only to a very brief historical period in the restricted social setting of modern Europe (Knoblauch 2009). Beyond that, the idea of a clearly defined religion is just as misleading as the concept of the nation state. Phenomena like religion do not have geographical borders and binding scriptural definitions. Any religion, just like any culture, is a hybrid (Nederveen Pieterse 2004). There is constant interaction, intermingling, exchange and transformation instead of timeless unities.

If we detach the concept of religion from the bias of recent Western history, it clearly emerges as an important element of the symbolic universe. All so-

cieties use symbols to convey and create meaning. The symbols do not live in books or the mind detached from the world but are part of human practice. In fact, there is no human practice without the implication of symbols and there is no use of symbols, which is not practice. I reject the distinctions between being and consciousness, mind and body, economy and ideology and functional system and life-world. Instead, I interpret society entirely as *meaningful, symbolically mediated practice*. Symbol is understood as comprising all perceivable forms of meaning (Cassirer 1997), from signs to art to language. Human practice is always symbolically mediated and that the understanding of this process is the key to understanding society.

What is true with regard to “religion” is also true for capitalism. I agree with those interpretations of capitalism that regard it as a largely unconscious practice but deny that it is “material” or guided by natural laws. It is not even about material things but about symbolically mediated things. Machines, capital, money, exchange value and labour are something completely different without symbolic mediation. Socially, they would be nothing in this case. A bank note that is not recognized as money is a sheet of paper and a stock exchange that is not understood in its meaning ceases to exist. According to the symbolic universe of contemporary Western capitalism, society consists of entirely equal individuals, inequality results from regulated competition between them and any type of privilege is therefore based on individual merit. This meritocratic discourse ignores on a theoretical level that the truth about society and its foundations is not yet known and on a practical level that any capitalist society inherits structures of inequality from earlier periods of society and that individuals are therefore never equal.

For this reason, any capitalism has to be regarded firstly as symbolically mediated and secondly as incomplete, never totally homogeneous and universal. Capitalism increasingly dominates the symbolic universe today but at the same time, parts of symbolic universes which emerged in earlier historical times persist. Merit is only partly based on economic success and money makes the world go round only on the surface, however relevant and dominant it may be. While the game of competition rules the visible world, privileges are passed on from generation to generation invisibly. These privileges include not only all kinds of capital but also the symbolic distinctions between classes and their evaluation. All classes share the symbolic universe of contemporary capitalism characterized by meritocracy and the hierarchy of social classification, which makes some classes virtuous on the basis of their inherited symbolic characteristics (Rehbein and Souza 2014).

As the value of these characteristics cannot be justified within the symbolic universe of contemporary capitalism, it has to be based on a belief or on an external justification, such as “religion”. In the

first case, Benjamin would be right with his interpretation of capitalism as “religion”. There would be no real difference between capitalism and religion. Even the specific definition used by Riesebrodt (2000, 40) to differentiate “religion” from other phenomena pointing to the role of superhuman powers could be extended to the superhuman powers of the markets. In the second case, Weber’s genealogy of capitalism out of Protestantism would still be valid today. We would still need the belief in the divine value of making money to justify our capitalist actions. Both interpretations are partly correct but too imprecise. It has been remarked by both Benjamin and Weber that Western capitalism as a symbolic system is founded on science and not on “religion”. Even if contemporary capitalism has structural and functional similarities with “religion” and even if a religious ethic was necessary for society to adopt capitalism, the relevance of science cannot be neglected.

In order to avoid the universalizing of characteristics that only apply to Christianity and Western capitalism, I will no longer speak of religion and capitalism but qualify them by locating them in their historical context, which is Western Enlightenment. There have been many capitalisms and religions. I will also cease to use the abstract term “religion” – or put it in quotation marks – and replace it with the notion “the religious”, which is supposed to express that the phenomenon is a heterogenous, diverse and symbolically mediated practice. There may not be a single trait that all practices subsumed under the term “religion” share, not even family resemblances (Wittgenstein 1984). We fail to see this if we use an abstract, universal term, which is based entirely on the European historical experience.

CAPITALISM AND SCIENCE

The core argument of this paper concerns the relation of religion, science and capitalism. All of these terms have to be contextualized in recent European and perhaps Western history. Western science is the foundation of Western capitalism – in everyday practice, as legitimation and theoretically. Even historically, the philosophy of Enlightenment was a crucial factor in the development and spread of capitalism. However, and this is my main point, Christian religion has been the foundation of both science and capitalist social order. Even if some people and some societies (especially those calling themselves socialist) claim to believe only in science and deny any relevance of “religion”, this type of science remains systematically incomplete without the religious. And even if protagonists of this type of science are trying to turn it into a complete and all-encompassing world-view, there remains an outside because of the way this science has been structured from the outset. The same is true for

capitalism. Neither has been designed to encompass everything.

This type of science, which could be called affirmative science, is based on a number of assumptions which to this day remain explicitly or implicitly valid (cf. Rehbein 2014). The uncritical approach to these assumptions can be attributed partly to the phase of European domination of the world and partly to the necessarily circular character of science. The assumptions of affirmative science reach back to the days of Europe's rise to hegemony. Enlightenment was developed from Cartesian philosophy. Descartes developed the principles of modern science and used the Christian God as their foundation. For Descartes, there can only be one truth. The form that this truth takes is known before any research begins. It is composed of propositions which can be formulated mathematically and are then compared and contrasted by means of deduction. The axioms and propositions which have been derived from them can then be known with certainty. The scientific objective consists of using the axioms to deduce the entirety of the propositions and with that to underscore its omniscience of a field of research, which in this case is nature.

In his *Meditations*, Descartes introduced his idea of science. He recommended that all scientific traditions to that point be questioned and all notions of truth be doubted (1986, 12). He could not fully put this radical program into practice, because he had to rely on the very science he contested in order to formulate these new truths. For Descartes, it is self-evident that there is an Archimedean point at which the world can be unhinged. He endeavours to locate such a point for a foundation of knowledge that is "certain and indubitable" (1986, 12). This point is not to be found in empiricism, because senses can be deceived and unclear thoughts produced. Truth can only be derived from that which is perceived "clearly and distinctly" (Descartes 1986, 24). One can be deceived by everything and can fail to clearly and indubitably grasp empirical phenomena, but knowledge of arithmetic and geometry is constant and certain whether one is asleep or awake. Arithmetic and geometry are systems of knowledge in themselves but at the same time serve as models for the construction of a genuine system of knowledge. More precisely, we are proceeding from sure and indubitable propositions to the realm of the unknown. Knowledge is deduction from genuine principles.

This model of knowledge has an innocuous and banal function, because in the natural and social sciences we are entirely used to it. For us, this mathematical formalization and its incorporation into a deductive system represent the paradigmatic scientific form. Ideas of its seeming eternalness and irrefutability draw us to this mode of mathematical deduction. Like Descartes, we are inclined to think that knowledge is based on indubitable principles

and that the unknown must be subject to these principles, as well. I will argue that these notions, these principles, are by no means self-evident.

Descartes found it necessary to establish the validity of arithmetic and geometry. He did that using the notion of causality. Just as from nothing comes nothing, nothing imperfect can emerge from something more imperfect (Descartes 1986, 29). Because arithmetic and geometry are pursued by the human spirit and are therefore ideas, they either lack certain principles (and are like dreams) or have a cause. Accordingly, Descartes does not pursue this causal chain of ideas infinitely. There must be an idea, which is caused by something original and more perfect (Descartes 1986, 31). For Descartes, the only thing that remains is the idea of God, arising from clarity, not constitutive of its own spirit. Recognizing that this idea could be illusory, Descartes was at least able to preserve his principles of arithmetic and geometry as a result of his famous teleological argument. Lies can only emerge from blemishes, which implies that God is not a deceiver. With that, the natural light is revealed (Descartes 1986, 29). So firstly, God is not a deceiver, because he is not imperfect; secondly, God, in his discernment, did not provide humans with an instrument which, when used properly, leads to falsity and error. "Now, however, I have perceived that God exists, and at the same time I have understood that everything else depends on him, and that he is no deceiver; and I have drawn the conclusion that everything which I clearly and distinctly perceive is true." (Descartes 1986, 48)

For Descartes, science was to discover the complete truth and to establish incontrovertible axioms. He enunciated the basic principles of this demand clearly and explicitly: the Christian God had revealed himself. In my judgment, a more convincing principle for the claim to universal truth has yet to be found. Only the monotheistic religions seem to be predicated on the idea that human beings are able to recognize an absolutely true basis to their knowledge, namely the singular God, and that based on this principle, there can be only one reality.

In today's natural and social sciences, we still explicitly rely to some extent on Descartes and we implicitly use some Cartesian ideas. The philosophy of science at least partly strives to generate an exhaustive and true knowledge and believes it is bound to achieve just that if only it sticks to an incontrovertible basic principle. Even if it has, in fact, abandoned this pretension, its orientation remains firmly rooted in the norm of omniscience. Since Descartes, the scientist has been tempted to begin any inquiry with indubitable propositions, thereby attempting to explain the unknown by making reference to the known. What should these indubitable propositions look like? If we were to find an incontrovertible principle as a basis for our knowledge, it would not only be empty but would also not allow us to de-

duce any meaningful insights about the world. That is what Descartes demonstrated when he wrote, “I think, therefore I am”. These words would perhaps be even more prescient if he had connected them to the sentence, “God is not a deceiver”.

THE INCORPORATION OF A CAPITALIST ETHOS

Christianity has been the explicit foundation of science well into the nineteenth century, finding its most sophisticated expression in Hegel’s philosophical system. Kant was the first philosopher, who tried to develop an alternative foundation. This was “practical reason”, as expressed in the “golden rule”, which again is an idea taken from the Bible. However, Kant also attempted constructing science as a critical endeavour rather than the affirmative science outlined above. This is a type of science that neither is based on Christianity nor claims to gain absolute, universal knowledge. I will get back to this at the end of the paper.

For affirmative science, a foundation is systematically necessary. Weber (1965) has acknowledged this fact. Instead of having recourse to the Cartesian solution of calling on God, he was ready to accept the missing foundation of science. There is no legitimation or ultimate foundation of science but to opt for science is nothing more than a personal “decision”. This argument illustrates the systematically incomplete character of science. The easiest and most acceptable solution would be to complete science by having recourse to “religion”, just like Descartes had done. Even Einstein believed in God in spite of trying to find the “world formula” that would explain everything – except itself.

Of course, the systematically incomplete character of science is only evident to a few scientists and philosophers. It does not prove that contemporary capitalism is incomplete without “religion” merely because it is based on science itself. However, this is not only a theoretical issue, as science is a core component of everyday *practice* in capitalist societies. There is virtually no practical problem – from building a house to constructing a school curriculum to regulating the stock exchange – which is solved without massive scientific intervention, without the voice of an “expert”. It is clear in each and every case that science has the last word. And it is equally clear that science has nothing to say on the most important practical problems, which Kant defined as rules for action, boundaries of knowledge and hope. Most people still turn to the religious in dealing with these problems.

Beyond the important role of Western science and the religious in contemporary capitalist practice, the patterns of action incorporated by each of us have a religious foundation, as Weber has shown. Even the utterly non-religious values of contemporary capitalism like success, wealth and consump-

tion have a religious foundation. They developed out of Christianity. But the point here is not that they have their Weberian *origin* in Protestantism, the point rather is that they cannot be entirely *justified* within the symbolic universe of contemporary capitalism. The liberal tradition in economics from Smith to Friedman has tried to attribute them to a universal, timeless human nature but even if we believe in the notorious selfish beast, we would still lack a reason to unleash its nature. We need a hierarchy of values (cf. Rehbein and Souza 2014).

Contemporary capitalism presupposes a specific idea of the self and a specific hierarchy of values attached to it. The value of a person is no longer measured by a list of virtues but by procedural values. All of us incorporate the procedural values to different degrees and are therefore judged as different types of people as our actions symbolically reveal precisely this degree of incorporation. Charles Taylor (1989) has tried to reconstruct the moral origins of the practices of modern individuals. Two of these origins are the strife for “dignity” and the strife for “authenticity”. Taylor’s interpretation presupposes that human action is neither a blind functioning according to natural laws nor the intellectualist application of a rule. In contrast, practice is mainly the application of incorporated and socially meaningful patterns in specific contexts (Bourdieu 1977). Our practice is what we learn in our life-course within specific social environments.

Taylor (1989) has analyzed the history of the contemporary concept of the self as a conjuncture of Platonic Christianity, reformation and Enlightenment. Just as I have traced the foundation of Western science back to Descartes, Taylor views Descartes as the major inventor of the modern concept of the self, which he calls the “punctual self”. According to Taylor (1989, 117), Plato installed the rule of reason over the passions, which was integrated into Christianity. The Christian Church called for a taming of the passions and a rationalization of practice. Thereby, Plato’s concept of reason did not remain a philosophical idea but became part of everyday practice. It was complemented by Augustine’s focus on the inner world and his concept of virtue as something invisible. Descartes followed Plato and Augustine but changed the hierarchy of virtue and reason. While for the Christian tradition as well as for Greek antiquity, virtue (mediating the good) had been the highest value, Descartes argued for the precedence of reason (Taylor 1989, 177). Cartesian reason, however, is no longer characterized by specific contents but by a certain method, a rational procedure. This, for Taylor, is the main trait of the punctual self. The punctual self became the foundation of Hobbes’ theory of the state and was entirely strapped of all historical, religious and social constraints by John Locke.

This self is “punctual” because it is not embedded in particular contexts but virtually empty. It can

be shaped by methodic and disciplined action. Together with Locke's liberal concept of the self, a liberal science, administration and social organization was developed to ensure the disciplining of the self. According to Taylor, this was only possible because the protestant reforms established the rule of reason over the everyday practice and the inner self of the citizens (1989, 159). This is a similar argument that Max Weber proposed concerning the protestant ethic. The sociologically relevant innovation of protestantism according to Taylor and Weber was the denial of Plato's dominance of contemplation over practice, which was shared by Augustine and the catholic doctrine. For protestantism, labour is the highest value, not contemplation (cf. Arendt 1958). This reversal includes a denial of the entire hierarchy of the Catholic Church and its rationale. The feudal order was no longer justified and legitimized on the basis of virtue and God. Therefore, the way was paved for the concept of an egalitarian society consisting of punctual selves based on self-discipline, labour and rationalization. The new, liberal values remain mostly unconscious but are deeply incorporated and institutionalized. They become explicit only in their practical effects.

The social bond keeping the society of free individuals together is the contract. The contract is the main concept in the political theories of Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau as well as in economics from Smith to contemporary market ideas. It was globalized under the label of universal civil rights. Taylor subsumed all ideals linked to the liberal concept of society under the term "principle of dignity". It is based on the idea that all equals can potentially recognize each other as such (Taylor 1994). The principle of dignity according to Taylor is one of the sources of the contemporary self. It goes hand in hand with the punctual self and partly contradicts another root of the contemporary hierarchy of values, namely the "expressive self". The punctual self implies equality and reciprocity, while the idea of the expressive self points to the original and singular character of a person. The expressive self is about the voice of the individual, which cannot be mistaken for anyone else's. Dignity and expressivity contradict each other because they both originated in the subjective turn toward the inner being in Christianity but point to contradictory ideas of the moral good. Discipline and identity on the one hand are contrasted with originality and difference on the other (Taylor 1989, 375). The idea of the expressive self reinterprets affects as feelings by infusing them with meaning. Linked to this reinterpretation is the transformation of moral judgment into something where reason and feeling have to join forces in order to distinguish right and wrong. While the principle of dignity distinguishes the worthy members of society, the decent working classes, from the marginalized underclasses, the expressive self is reserved for the upper classes who are not only

hard workers but also possess an individuality that deserves expression. These principles guide our evaluation of classes as groups of people who are naturally equipped to be what they are.

The psychosocial structure, which Taylor refers to as dignity, is a presupposition for the consolidation of market and state and the most important product of the combined effectiveness of these institutions. Without the effective incorporation of the social dispositions contained in the principle of dignity, such as discipline or rational calculation, success in capitalist institutions becomes impossible. The generalization of the presuppositions enables us to speak of citizenship, the supposedly universally shared rights and duties in a nation state of equal individuals. Participation and success in a capitalist society thereby depend on the incorporation of an arbitrary moral and emotional system. The case of the socially excluded shows that capitalist societies share much more than flows of capital and legal institutions. They also share a moral hierarchy, which defines who is regarded as worthy by institutions and individuals. It is the ignorance of the symbolic dimension of contemporary capitalism, which makes the hierarchy of values invisible and thereby efficient. The existence of an excluded class in all capitalist societies shows that there is a moral hierarchy in all capitalist societies today.

This moral hierarchy has its origins in the protestant and the scientific transformations of the Christian tradition. There is no "rational" justification of this hierarchy, just as there is no acknowledgement of an inherent inequality in capitalist societies. It remains invisible and irrational. Any personal "failure", such as poverty or a humiliating profession, could be rationalized by the individual but a recourse to "religion", even in combination with a rational explanation, is more likely. Any "success" in contemporary capitalism is justified on the basis of the meritocratic myth, which in turn cannot explain why "dignity" and "expressivity" should be higher values than others.

THE PERSISTENCE OF RELIGION

Capitalism and science are not religions and they are not functional equivalents of religion. However, they presuppose Christianity historically and systematically. This is not a logical necessity but it historically happened to be this way due to the specific form science took with Descartes and the way it became a foundation for capitalism. Science and capitalism could do without the religious today, as they could transform into structures that are not systematically dependent on a religious foundation or they could simply ignore any transcendence. Either of these possibilities may become reality but it is more likely that society and individuals continue

to need the religious for systematic, symbolic and psychosocial reasons.

Furthermore, the religious contributes to any existing regime of domination because it is its symbolic mediation. The religious is no “opium for the masses” (Marx, MEW 1: 378) nor merely a reflection of social structure (Bourdieu 1987). Above all, it is a symbolically mediated practice – not merely a symbolic system and not merely a mirror of practice. It is neither independent of social structures nor can it be reduced to them. It is hard to pin down because it includes both aspects. The religious is part of the symbolic universe, which mediates and sustains the existing social order. It expresses structures of oppression, covers them up by referring to transcendence and legitimizes them by giving reasons for the existing structures. This happens both through incorporation into an ethos of action and through institutionalization.

In the case of contemporary capitalism, Christianity gives way to science, which historically and systematically became the foundation of the capitalist economic system and democracy. The natural science created by Galileo and Descartes, the political science created by Hobbes and Rousseau as well as first capitalist democracies were explicitly founded on the notion of God and used Christian theology to link the notion of God with the most fundamental principles of their explanation of the world. It is not possible to cast doubt on these principles or argue beyond them from within the system. In a modern society, one cannot question the concepts of a natural law and causality or the ideas of freedom and citizenship. The foundations of contemporary capitalism, science and democracy remain opaque, while these systems are supposed to be entirely transparent and true.

In this type of society, the Protestant concept of religion is generalized – as individual belief. It is no longer a social practice for a larger community and tradition. The development from Augustine to Thomas to Descartes and Weber is completed in the concept of “religion” as the belief in transcendence as opposed to science, which deals with immanence, the world as we see it. The return of the religious has to do with the fact that it complements Western science and capitalism. Whatever remains unexplained and whatever is subjective, is delegated to the religious.

From the perspective of Western science and capitalism, anything that cannot be integrated into their logic has to be denied or delegated to the realm of “religion” (or superstition). However, this seems to be the case for some of the most pertinent questions human beings can ask. The interpretation proposed here reminds of the one advanced by Horkheimer and Adorno (1981). According to this interpretation, the historical tendency of rationalization discovered by Weber aims at integrating everything into a rational system and leaving nothing outside.

As it cannot rationally explain itself and keeps on creating new outsides, irrationality remains part of the ever more rational system (Horkheimer and Adorno 1981, 16). Apart from the modernization theory and Eurocentrism presupposed by this interpretation, I would deny the necessity implied in its teleology. The “irrational” is systematically and historically presupposed by Western science and capitalism but it can be overcome, it can be neglected and it can form an openly admitted foundation of both science and capitalism. Critical science, as suggested by Horkheimer and Adorno themselves, would exemplify the first option, most European democracies would embody the second option and the US would be an illustration of the third option.

CONCLUSION

According to the type of science that is integrated into the foundations of contemporary capitalism, any critique of science, democracy and capitalism is unscientific. It is disqualified as irrational and ideological. The apparent alternative is science *or* critique. I would agree with this alternative insofar as science should aim at knowledge and should avoid the influence of non-scientific interests. Precisely for this reason, the alternative is misleading because a social science that is not influenced by non-scientific interests is inconceivable. Any science is part of a society, carried out by individuals who are influenced by society, who in turn exert an influence on it, who speak its language and have to be understood by other members of the same society, even in those cases where the members are merely other scientists. The influence cannot be obliterated, it can only be critically reflected. A critically reflective science casts doubt on its own foundation instead of, like Descartes, deriving it from God or, like Weber, refusing to deal with the problem of foundation at all. Critical science would always be incomplete and never purely deductive but it would be less totalitarian and more honest than affirmative science (Rehbein 2014). It would not be based on Christianity and it would not necessarily be the foundation of any specific social and political order but critically reflect on any order.

The critique of the concept “religion” reveals that it is relative to the configuration of Western capitalism in the past centuries. If we replace the concept, which contains all the presuppositions of Western science, Western capitalism and recent Christianity, with the term “the religious”, we might be able to come up with a more adequate theoretical perspective on phenomena associated with the term as well as more meaningful empirical results. The perspective has to remain on the level of the particular without precociously generalizing or universalizing clearly limited empirical observations and concepts related to them. We might eventually

develop a lot of different concepts instead of the abstract and misleading term “religion”. A good way to start would be to use indigenous concepts for the phenomena that we would have subsumed under the term. This may be difficult because many cultures have started to use a translation of the term “religion” for their own practices. We may be forced to create artificial terms or go back in time. But we should try.

BOIKE REHBEIN, Professor for the sociology of Asia and Africa at Humboldt University Berlin. He studied philosophy, sociology and history at Freiburg, Paris, Göttingen, Frankfurt and Berlin with professors

such as Pierre Bourdieu and Jürgen Habermas. He received his PhD in 1996 and “habilitation” in 2004 at the University of Freiburg. He was acting chair of sociology at Freiburg from 2004 to 2006, director of the Global Studies Programme from 2006 to 2009. Areas of specialization: social theory, globalization, social inequality and mainland Southeast Asia. Recent books in English: *Globalization, Culture and Society in Laos* (Routledge 2007; paperback 2010); *Globalization and Emerging Societies* (ed. with Jan Nederveen Pieterse; Palgrave Macmillan 2009; paperback 2011); *Globalization and Inequality in Emerging Societies* (Palgrave Macmillan 2011).

CONTACT rehbeinb@hu-berlin.de

REFERENCES

- Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Asad, Talal. 2003. *Formations of the Secular. Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1991. “Kapitalismus als Religion.” In *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 6, edited by Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser, 100–103. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Berger, Peter. 1980. *Der Zwang zur Häresie. Religion in der pluralistischen Gesellschaft*. Freiburg: Herder Verlag.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1987. “Legitimation and Structured Interests in Weber’s Sociology of Religion.” In *Max Weber. Rationality and Modernity*, edited by Sam Whimster and Scott Lash, 119–136. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Cassirer, Ernst. 1997. *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, Vol. 3, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Descartes, René. 1986. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hefner, Robert W. 1998. “Multiple Modernities: Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism – a Globalizing Age.” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27:83–104.
- Heller, Agnes. 1999. *A Theory of Modernity*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. 1981. *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Knoblauch, Hubert. 2009. *Populäre Religion*. Frankfurt, New York: Campus.
- Marx, Karl. 1953 et al. *Marx-Engels-Werke* (MEW). Berlin: Dietz.
- Nederveen Pieterse, Jan. 2004. *Globalization and Culture: Global Mélange*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Rehbein, Boike. 2014, in press. *Kaleidoscopic Dialectic*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Rehbein, Boike, and Jessé Souza. 2014. *Ungleichheit in kapitalistischen Gesellschaften*. Weinheim: Beltz Juventa.
- Riesebrodt, Martin. 2000. *Die Rückkehr der Religionen*. München: Beck.
- Schluchter, Wolfgang. 1979. *Die Entwicklung des okzidentalen Rationalismus*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr.
- Schluchter, Wolfgang, ed. 1984. *Max Webers Studie über Hinduismus und Buddhismus*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 1994. “The Politics of Recognition.” In *Multiculturalism*, edited by Amy Gutmann, 25–74. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Weber, Max. 1965. *Wissenschaft als Beruf*. Berlin: Duncker Humblot.
- Weber, Max. 1978. *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, Vol. I–III. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr.