

# Exploring the Influence of Islam on Islamic Economies based on Weber's Theories of the Sociology of Religion

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**Abstract.** As a third way between capitalism and socialism, the Islamic economy has become a distinct presence all over the world. Then reviewing its formation has an essential role to investigate its future, especially for the Islamic economy, which is closely associated with religious ethics. Based on the method of case analysis, this paper explores the Impact of Islam on Islamic Economy with historical evidence based on Weber's sociology of religion on Islam. In the context of the Qur'an and Islamic religious life, provide insight into the contrasts in Islam and Islamic states versus Protestant and Western capitalist countries, which proves Islam has had a significant influence on the Islamic economy in terms of its contribution to the early commodity economy, while its impeding effect of the subsequent birth of capitalism.

**Keywords:** Islam; Islamic Economy; Max Weber; Capitalism; The Sociology of Religion.

## 1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, Islam seems to evolve forward on two contrasting paths. On the one hand, the Islamic revival movement has risen; on the other hand, the rationalization and secularization of Islam are deepening as society evolves [1]. Such two inherently contradictory developments make the future of Islamic countries full of uncertainties. Therefore, interpreting the spirit of Islam and further exploring how the underlying logic of its operation helps the Islamic economy grow has far-reaching implications for the development of Islamic countries and even all over the world.

As one of the founders of the sociology of religion, Max Weber first established the content and theoretical framework of this discipline, namely, the impact of different religious ethics on the economic development of society. And being one of the few social theorists of the classical era who had directly studied Islam, Weber listed the study of Islam in his project "The Economic Ethics of the World's Religions". But unfortunately, due to his sudden death in 1920, Weber did not complete his work, resulting in the theory of Islam being only scattered in his treatises [2]. Thus, organizing and restoring Weber's study on Islam will contribute to future research on Weber and the sociology of religion.

## 2. Literature Review

Weber's discussion of Islam is scattered across the sociology of religion, sociology of authority, and his study on law and urban types, lacking a generalized and conceptualized account, which makes it difficult to recapture Weber's general view of Islam [3]. Among few scholars who have conducted studies in this area, Clifford Geertz conducted comparative studies of Islam in different regions in 1971; Charles Tripp has focused on analyzing the response of Islamic traditions to the challenges posed by modern capitalism over the past decades, to explore the compatibility of Islamic ethics with modern capitalism in 2006; in 2014 Heydarian have analyzed the reasons for the failure of the capitalist economy liberalization in the contemporary Arab world, focusing on the political and economic structure to reveal the underlying causes of its instability in the Middle East. These studies examine Islam and the Islamic economy in different ways, yet most of them only indirectly cover some aspects of Weber's theory of Islam, and almost none of them analyze Islamic ethics in conjunction with capitalism in a comprehensive manner.

In 1974 Maxime Rodinson first attempted to demonstrate the presence of capitalist modes of production in Islamic societies by contrasting an examination of Islamic doctrine with the actual performance of Islamic economies. However, Rodinson's concept of capitalism as a sector of a particular socio-economic system is quite different from the perspective of Weber's cross-cultural comparative study [4]. Therefore, his arguments do not constitute a robust refutation of Weber's view. Besides, concerning Maxime Rodinson's critique of Weber's theory as cultural determinism, it should be noted that Weber's thoughts and approaches to social dynamics are multifaceted, and he also opposes economic determinism and cultural determinism. That he emphasized the cultural significance of social dynamics is intended to correct and compensate for the inadequacy of existing perspectives in sociology, which does not mean that he was consciously biased in cultural determinism [5].

Bryan S. Turner's *Weber and Islam* is the first treatise that tried to reconstruct and analyze Weber's arguments on Islam: One-part deals with the Islamic doctrine and ethics, and the other with the political and economic structure of Islamic dynasties [6]. He pointed out that the reason why Islam did not develop rational capitalism was mainly due to the dominance of the family system. Moreover, he intends to argue that religious ethics has only a subordinate status and significance compared to social structures. Nevertheless, throughout the cross-cultural comparative studies, Weber never presupposes that religious ethics is necessarily the primary factor [5].

Wolfgang Schluchter provides a systematic and comprehensive reconstruction of Weber's account of Islam and Islamic society. He begins with a general analysis of Islamic doctrine and points out that Islam is compatible with all forms of traditional economic activity, but seems unable to provide an incentive to change the previous economic model [3].

### **3. Paper Structure**

The first section of this paper will examine the historical conditions and social background of the establishment of Islam and organize the economic ethics contained in the Quran and hadiths, to demonstrate the promotion of Islam for the commodity economy.

In the second section, the discussion on the promotion of the commodity economy by Islam will be expanded, combining Weber's study of Islam, to reconsider its failure to develop capitalism based on previous favorable growth of its commodity economy. Specifically, in terms of four aspects of religious thought, city types, law, and the composition of the administrative class and the military, which are the four angles proposed by Weber, respectively contrasts Islam and Islamic states with Protestant and Western capitalist countries, showing the elements that are deficient in Islam and the Islamic state to form capitalism.

## **4. The Contribution of Islam to the Islamic Commodity Economy**

### **4.1. The Founding of Islam**

It is recorded that before the birth of Islam, Mecca was already a center of commerce and financial speculation [7], "It is the center of the combination of financiers and businessmen, and they, the future Quraysh, are good at calculating and doing business" [8]. The development of commerce led to the gradual exchange of goods between the Quraysh and the nomadic Bedouin tribes around Mecca. However, this exchange was not sustainable for several reasons: First, the widely established tribal isolation based on blood ties always hindered the expansion of commodity exchange; Second, conflicts and wars between tribes also severely hampered the smooth flow of trade at times [9]; Third, the prevalence of collective worship of tribal deities and the dictatorship by chiefs, impeding liberal thought, so it's hard to promote the commodity economy, which requires the exclusion of certain social identities, professions, and geographical restrictions to achieve free trade [10]. Therefore, it was necessary for the Arabian society to break down tribal boundaries, and set up a liberal value system to form a unified economic system.

Following this historical trend, Muhammad founded Islam. And during the creation and spread of Islam, various Arab tribes were aligned based on one belief in Allah, which brought several positive changes to the economy throughout the Arabian Peninsula:

The first is that tribal boundaries vanished, whether merchant or herdsman, noble or commoner, all were equal before Allah--the unified identity of the Muslims weakened the original disparity in social status between sides in the commodity exchange. Both sides engaged in a fair and equitable trade, which contributed to the further development of the commercial economy.

The second is that the Arabs used to be polytheistic, worshiping trees, springs, stones, and other forms of God [7]. Whereas the emergence of Islam established a new and advanced belief system for the Arabs: It had no monks, no clerical organization, and no central churches; As long as one had faith in Allah, then one could be admitted to Islam without any sacramental rituals [8]. With the simplicity of the religious structure, Islam provided a loose cultural atmosphere, which means Muslim merchants could engage in commercial trade freely.

The third is that Muhammad, the founder of Islam, was born in the Quraysh tribe engaged in commerce. According to legend, he had worked in the commercial business since he was 12 years old, such an experience influenced Muhammad to contribute to the subsequent construction of a favorable trading environment for Muslims [9].

#### **4.2. Islamic Doctrine and Religious Life**

The promotion of commercial activities by Islamic religious life is embodied in the following aspects. Firstly, Islam fully approves of business as a noble enterprise. Muhammad once said in a sermon: "Merchants are the trusted servants of Allah on the earth." and "honest merchants will sit under the shadow of Allah on the Day of Recompense." Besides, Umar II, who was the second caliph also had a respect for trading as he said, "There is no place where I would like to die more than in the bazaar where I do business for my family." [8] It can be concluded that Islam regards business as a blessed activity, resulting in attracting lots of Muslims to start doing business.

Secondly, the Qur'an and Hadith have a wide range of discussions on business norms. For instance, first of all, Muslim merchants are required to be fair when buying and selling, which can be seen in chapters such as "Al-Mutaffifin", "Al-Hijr", and "Hud" of the Qur'an. moreover, there exist many regulations for registering debts, as written in the Qur'an: "...when you contract a debt for a specified term, write it down. And let a scribe write it between you in justice.", "That is more just in the sight of Allah and stronger as evidence and more likely to prevent doubt between you." 3rd, "...But Allah has permitted trade and has forbidden interest. " "And for their taking of usury while they had been forbidden from it, and their consuming of the people's wealth unjustly." To sum up, in the Arabian society, which has an intensely religious atmosphere, these commercial ethics did have a restrictive effect on the devout Muslim merchants, which is beneficial for the healthy expansion of the Islamic economy [9].

Third, in addition to expanding the sphere of political domination, another direct purpose of Islamic outward expansion was to carry out business activities in a wider geographical area [8]. Along with this was the larger-scale trade throughout the world in the 7th century. As the leading American medievalist Thompson recounts: "With the rise of Islam came a new class of explorers...who sought new commercial routes...peoples were never again so pervasive as those of the Arabs in the field of geographical exploration. The world was the world they explored. Their ships sailed far and wide to find new voyages, even as their caliphs blazed new trails on land...There is no more astonishing event in the world than the rapid unfolding of Arab conquests in Asia, Africa, and Europe [9]" (see Table 1).

**Table1.** Development of the commodity economy in the Arab region during the 7th-10th centuries.

Stage	Country or region	performance	results
Late 7th century A.D.	West Africa	Arab Muslim traders established the Sahara trade.	Most of local people believed in Islam and some large mercantile empires thrived, such as Mali.
8th century A.D.	East Africa	Arab merchants reached as far into Cape Goddard (24.4 degrees S), stretching from Libya to Kenya.	Formed the Muslim merchant community along the coastline.
Mid-8th century A.D.	Asia	Muslim merchants came to China through the Silk Road. And began trading very early in India.	Islam spread rapidly in southwestern China; by the 12th century, Indian Muslims became powerful and established Muslim states.
9th-10th century A.D.	Towards the Caspian Sea	Arab Muslim merchants departed from Baghdad to the Bulgarian state via Iran, Caucasus. And even reached Black Sea ports such as Sari and Kyiv.	Arab trade in Eastern Europe and the Baltic Coast region expanded further.
Arab commodity trade grew exponentially, which reached its heyday at the 10th century AD: many commercial centers were set up throughout the Abbasid dynasty, including Baghdad [1, 8].			

## 5. The Obstruction to the Emergence of Capitalism

The Muslim commercial economy in the middle Ages was indeed remarkable for a while. However, under the guidance of Islam and the previous prosperous development, Islamic economies could not eventually convert into the capitalist economy in the modern sense. Based on Weber's sociology of religion on Islam, this section will mainly look at factors proposed in Weber's Islamic work to investigate the problems in Islam economic pattern to explore why Islamic economy failed to produce capitalism.

### 5.1. Islamic Religious Thought

Weber points out that "various mystical and religious forces, and the ethical ideas about responsibility based on them, have always in the past exerted a vital and decisive influence on people's behavior [2]". Religious ethics intervene in the social order to different degrees, as the more systematic the religion is, the more ethics are internalized in the mentality of people. In his view, the non-existent concept of original sin in Islamic doctrine, predestination but not universal salvationism, and the non-arguable relationship of obedience to Allah make Islam unable to generate sufficient driving forces to create wealth in reality.

Indeed, as discussed in the first section, Islam did promote the commodity economy. But the Qur'an considers all this wealth as transient and illusory putting Muslims in a dilemma: on the one hand, Islam believes in predestination, which means that what one does in the present life is related to the afterlife, rather than directly determining how the present life will be [11]. Even if a Muslim gains wealth to improve his living conditions, it is not a genuine and lasting pleasure. Instead, one can only enjoy endless pleasures in the afterlife. "Beautified for people are the love of that which they desire--of women and sons, heaped-up sums of gold and silver, fine branded horses, and cattle and tilled land. That is the enjoyment of worldly life, but Allah has with Him the best return" from chapter Aal-i-Imraan in Qur'an; on the other hand, efforts to obtain wealth in this world cannot save a Muslim from the judgment of Allah [9] (although there is no original sin in Islam, the idea that Allah will ultimately judge the believer according to one's faults exists). The strive of one who strives for Allah and one

who is preoccupied with his lusts may succeed in the present world, but the two will be treated differently in the Hereafter because the actions of the latter do not carry eternal significance and salvation value". Compared to the universal salvation of Protestantism, Muslims do not have to undertake an overburdened mission of saving in the present world, which renders people much less motivated to create wealth than Christianity.

By contrast, in terms of doctrine, Weber argues that a reasonable asceticism in the Protestant ethic creates a plausible cultural value base for capitalism." This largely fosters the distinctive pious ascetic character of believers and allows them to live a thoroughly rationalized life in this world." And Calvinism advocates the doctrine of original sin and salvation: human beings are born with original sin, and working hard is the most effective way to obtain salvation [12]. The more wealth an individual makes in one's life, the more that person will contribute to the glory of God and will be saved from the eternal punishment in hell at the Last Judgment. In Weber's view, such a Protestant "vocation" gradually evolved into a "capitalist spirit," namely a strong spirit of enterprise and innovation, motivating the emerging bourgeoisie to continually exploit trading opportunities to pursue profit, which means they need to constantly break through old conventions, improve technology, reform the system, and push the growth of production [2].

Therefore, it can be concluded that the Islamic religion thought of Islam and reality can hardly form a robust and long-lasting tension, leaving the believers fundamentally devoid of the impetus to create wealth and naturally unable to provide the ideological basis for attempting to liberate the productive forces to generate capitalism.

## 5.2. City Defects and Politics Homogenization

According to Weber, Islamic cities are typically "Eastern cities" that are not traditional Western cities that can provide the conditions for capitalism to be born [13]. Weber argues that the Islamic city was more a loose combination of many sub-communities than a unified one [2]. Indeed, the regional structures within these major cities, such as Cairo, Damascus, Aleppo, and Baghdad, are split into several areas into smaller communities. All of which lack a unified system, a coherent civic culture, and social cohesion. Except for the prestige clans, there remained several professional associations, military associations, religious organizations of the ulema, and merchant's guilds.

However, the core issue might not be that the city structure was loose, but that the various forces within cities did not generate political institutions and ethical orientations inconsistent with the central authority so that no opposing forces were challenging the hereditary governing class, making the Islamic politics remained internally homogeneous. By contrast, taking medieval Western European cities as examples, heterogeneity and pluralism within a political center are what would promote the creation of genuine civil cities and capitalism:

Initially, within a regime, both feudal secular and religious forces often try to dominate the promotion of citizen empowerment to counteract the other side. In the process of this contest, the city itself receives some kinds of commitment and compromise from both sides, usually in the form of charters, namely more freedoms and rights for the citizens. "City charters were mainly concerned with recognizing the city's autonomy and industrial and commercial privileges, and with defining the rights and duties of the citizens." "...and gave it the right to fight against kings and lords. In both senses, the charter was a social contract [14]". On the other hand, it is the diversity of the political composition that somehow changes people's perception of politics: it weakens the notion of the supremacy and sanctity of power, promotes the realization of the separation of powers, and at the same time leads people to seek a new political entity to meet the urgent need for renewing the political mindset. At that point, the city came to the fore in a new way. As a result, about 5,000 new cities or towns emerged in Europe in the 11th century. "New industrial and commercial cities sprang up first from Italy and southern France, such as Venice, Genoa, Naples, and Marseilles, and then in northern France, the Netherland, England, and southern Germany. [13]" This boom in urban development flourished in the 12th century and continued into the 13th and 15th centuries, which promoted the formation of secular values and universalism in society and was conducive to capitalism.

Therefore, from the perspective provided by Weber, instead of saying that the lack of unity in the Islamic city made it difficult for a "civil city" to be born there, it is better to say that due to the political homogenization and religious rigidity under the surface of urban division.

### 5.3. Shariah: Theology in essence

The laws of Islam are often viewed as divinely given and cannot be changed in any way. Only when specific provisions were not made in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, or when the regulations were incomplete were they ruled upon by authoritative jurists (gadi) through subjective verdicts [2]. According to Weber, firstly due to the constraints placed by the Islamic scriptures, it was difficult for the caliphs, jurists, and judges to codify the early Islamic law; secondly, the Islamic law rejected the method of empirical analysis and often resorted to analogy and citation, which reduced its rationality and rigor to a great extent and made the interpretation of the law sometimes sophomoric.

Same as Islamic law, customary law also remained dominant in Western Europe until the 12th century, when Thomas Aquinas argued that law is indeed a predetermined order of God that can be obtained through human rationality [15]; From this, he concludes that laws can be changed and that God gave man rationality to realize the natural law and apply it to the relevant facts to create the authentic law. It broke the taboo that customary law could not be changed in the middle Ages, provided the theoretical basis for the establishment of the modern legislative system, and played a significant role in the formation of modern jurisprudence in Western Europe.

Besides, in the medieval countries of Western Europe, the struggle between theocracy and secularism, kings and lords, lords and peasants, making Western Europe a long-term chaotic situation, contributed to the formation of a pluralistic pattern of Western European law [15]. In more detail, the struggle between ecclesiastical and secular powers triggered the papal revolution, which gave birth to a new system of church law and various new systems of secular law; the economic status of the peasants improved from the late 11th century, which enhanced their Class consciousness. To ease the conflicts, the lords had to reach a compromise with the peasants, which led to the establishment of a new system of manorial law; the Church considered commercial activities to be contrary to the basic requirements of Asceticism, while businessmen considered them to be justified [14]. In the process of contradiction eruption and settlement, the system of commercial law was formed.

To sum up, by combining Weber's theory and the two above-mentioned changes in the law that occurred in medieval Western Europe, this paper can further conclude that the reasons for the failure of Islamic law to promote the spirit of capitalist rationality are that: Firstly, Islamic law upholds Value Rationality rather than instrumental rationality, and the jurisprudential system has never been improved as Western Europe. Secondly, the overall domestication of society by Islamic law might be much deeper, with very few multidimensional and extreme internal contradictions in the implementation of the law, which has led to less opportunity for improvement so that the Islamic law has maintained the essence of divine law.

### 5.4. Slave Administration and Slave Armies

The ordinary administrative principle is to employ many people from the ruler's clan or free people in crucial positions in the country. Weber argues that Islamic countries, instead, are unique in that many captured slaves and those who have been freed can enter administrative ranks and even obtain senior positions. Also, Islamic countries employed these slaves to form armies [2]. For example, the Egyptian mercenary army of Mamelok was a slave army. Compared to slave armies, which were subject to strict discipline, Western archival armies tended to display aristocratic and personal heroism and maintain a high degree of unity in their beliefs. And the lack of the concept of contract and public institutions that are present in Western consciousness, plus its insufficient degree of decentralization, makes this particular composition of personnel unable to provide the ideological basis for the development of capitalism in Islam [16].

Contrast the features of Islamic personnel structures with those of the Frankish Empire in the 10th century, knights appeared as a particular class. Since the cost of training a knight was quite expensive,

the nobles offered land in exchange for the knight's service. At that time, the king and nobles considered land as a kind of capital to pay for military forces, rather than as a carrier of human rights (the right to live), namely, to buy soldiers rather than to train peasants [16,17]. Then, the contract between the ruling class and the knights was reached. In this process, both sides are relatively independent individuals (or relatively independent organizations and individuals) and have a comparatively equal status, which is a prerequisite for the formation of a contractual relationship and which encourages individuals to work hard and efficiently for their own greater interests.

In short, it can be concluded that a personnel structure composed of free people has the conditions for the creation of contracts, which is seen as the theoretical prerequisite for the bourgeois revolution and the value basis to establish its state. By contrast, the Islamic personnel structure, in which a substantial number of slaves are involved, could not provide such conditions and naturally could not contribute to the emergence of capitalism.

## 6. Conclusion

The founding of Islam was a historical trend in the Arab world during the 6th and 7th centuries, liberating the people in aspects of political, cultural, and belief systems, fostering an equitable and relaxed social atmosphere conducive to the commodity economy, plus the proper regulation of economic activities in the Qur'an, resulting in the heyday of Arab domestic and overseas trade in the 13th century. However, Islam's predestination and non-abstinence prevented believers from living in perpetual misery and stress, thus failing to maintain robust control over the real world as Protestantism, which means that wealth creation was not as urgent a mission for Muslims; Islamic law, which is essentially theological, has not been able to free itself from the complete control of religion and bring the spirit of rationality to the Islamic countries, as Western European jurisprudence did after the twelfth century; Homogeneous and monolithic Islamic politics has achieved only formal "pluralism" it is, therefore, impossible to provide Islamic civilization with the conditions for the construction of a genuine civic city, which is an indispensable factor for capitalism; The rigid subordination in the administration and the army prevented the spirit of the contract, a very crucial ideological foundation of the bourgeoisie, from being present in the Islamic states. So, from the above factors, a conclusion from Weber's perspective can be drawn: Islam is unable to develop capitalism based on the pre-existing well-developed commodity economy to further liberate the productive forces.

In contemporary sociology, Weber's theories of Islam have remained less and at a lower level compared to his studies of other world religions. Moreover, it should be noted that Weber's studies on Islam have triggered much debate: According to Weber, it is hard to keep economic behavior consistently rational, which requires certain motivating factors such as law. Therefore, the lack of rationalization in Islamic law is detrimental to the birth of capitalism. In this regard, Patricia Crone, a leading British Orientalist pointed out in "Weber, Islamic Law and the Rise of Capitalism" that British common law did not have the same rationalization in form as European civil law, but modern capitalism first emerged in England [2]. Rudolph Peters argues that Calvinists also believe in predestination, convinced that they are God's chosen people as a fact that cannot be changed, as the only thing for believers to do is to please God with their actions, namely, predestination does not prevent from pushing believers to change the world and create wealth [3]. Additionally, although Weber makes an overall study of Islam, he did not identify the different Islamic traditions that exist in Indonesia, Morocco, Egypt, and Pakistan, nor did he make a historical, dynamic study of the Islamic empire. These may be points that researchers of Weber need to reflect on thoroughly.

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