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Reenchantment and Disenchantment

Reenchantment is the reemergence of the sacred in the world in the form of an omnipresent and diffuse life force that permeates and connects ‘everything’. The process is part and parcel of the spiritual turn since the 1960s, i.e., the shift from belief in a transcendent God to belief in an immanently present spirit or life force. Reenchantment as such entails a break with the process of disenchantment, defined by Max Weber (1854-1920) as the disappearance of the sacred from the world and the difficulties this entails in endowing the world with meaning.

Weber understands the disenchantment of the world as a long-term historical process, rooted in the rise of western monotheism in ancient Israel. Due to special historical circumstances Jahweh, the god of war, then and there remained as the one and only god of the Jewish people. He was understood as preceding the world that he had created, as residing in a separate realm all of his own, and as having revealed a binding system of ethical rules. A polytheism with a multitude of gods, seen as immanently present in the world and open to magical manipulation, thus gave way to the monotheist and dualist notion of a transcendent God. This effectively put an end to the possibility of magic and got the process of disenchantment underway.

Weber does not understand disenchantment as a smooth and linear process, but points out how after long centuries of Catholic dominance had sustained divine presence in the world, the process got another major impetus with the Protestant Reformation in sixteenth-century Europe. The Reformation did hence not just provide fertile ground for the development of modern capitalism, as Weber's best known theory has it, but also radicalized religious dualism. Dismissing the idea that God's will could be influenced by magical means as superstitious, a dismissal epitomized by the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, God was made more transcendent than he had been before. Protestantism in effect drove the sacred from the world, transforming the latter into a soulless 'thing', bereft of the divine; void of mystery, miracle and magic; and left without any intrinsic meaning. Protestantism played a major historical role in propagating a rationalist outlook and propelling modern science.

Balthasar Bekker (1634-1698), a Dutch Calvinist minister and theologian, but also a faithful disciple of René Descartes, for instance critiqued superstition and magic, while biologist Jan Swammerdam (1637-1680) embarked on the scientific study of God's creation, pointing out that God's finger could be discerned in the anatomy of a louse.

While modern science ultimately became a major driver of disenchantment, Weber hence underscores that the process had its earliest origins in the religious rather than the scientific realm. Indeed, his notion of disenchantment constitutes an oft-neglected bridge between his sociology of religion and his philosophy of science. For modern disenchanted science, he maintains, can only discover how the world 'is' and cannot say anything about its meaning, i.e., whether its manifestations are good or bad as seen from an ethical or moral point of view. This notion that the world has no 'objective' meaning to be scientifically 'discovered'

constitutes the keystone to Weber's influential doctrine of value neutrality, i.e., the intellectual taboo of moving from scientifically established facts to their moral evaluation.

With this doctrine of value neutrality Weber sets himself decidedly apart from Comtean-style positivist understandings of science as religion's superior successor. Relegating science to the narrowly circumscribed domain of logically and empirically justifiable knowledge, he rather underscores that science cannot succeed and replace religion and asserts the legitimacy of religious worldviews. He does so, because the latter, unlike science, are capable of providing meaning and purpose, understood by Weber as a quintessential need of human beings as cultural beings. This is also why according to Weber the ascendancy of science and the marginalization of religion that comes with it makes the modern order vulnerable to problems of meaning. For Weber, in short, the disenchantment of the world does not entail religion's succession by science, but merely a shift from magic to science-based technology as a modern means of solving practical problems like disease, infertility, or natural disaster.

Weber's notion of science as the great disenchanter of the modern world has been critiqued for being more normative than empirical. Indeed, chastising academics who failed to stick to logic and facts, Weber was acutely aware of the manifold initiatives to reenchant the modern world by spiritually inclined proto-hippies in his own intellectual circles in Heidelberg. He dismissed and condemned these activities in the crassest of terms ('weakness', 'humbug', 'self-deception'), because he understood them as incompatible with a disenchanted intellectual outlook. Arguably, then, Weber's account of modern science as a disenchanting force entails not so much an empirically accurate account of actually existing practices in academia as a deeply held personal intellectual ideal.

The spiritual discontents that Weber already witnessed in his own days did not go away, but gained momentum half a century later across the West, when the so-called ‘counter culture’ chastised modern society for standing in the way of personal liberty and authenticity. Critiquing Christian religion, religious authority and traditional morality as much as modernity’s rationalized orders, this counter culture embraced spirituality of the ‘New Age’ variety and oriental religions like Hinduism and Buddhism. The 1960s and 1970s did in effect not only spark a massive exodus from the Christian churches, but also the start of a marked shift towards post-Christian spirituality. In the process, many a westerner came to understand the divine as not so much a transcendent and person-like agent-creator residing in a realm of his own, but rather as a diffuse, non-personal life force, power, or spirit that permeates all of the world and the cosmos. What the West has been witnessing in the past half century, in short, is a massive reconstruction and relocation of the sacred, resulting in its renewed immanence in the world – a process of reenchancement.

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Cross-references

Esotericism

New Age Movement

Secularization (including secularism)

Science and religion

Spirituality

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Further readings

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