Outline of Weber's
"Social Psychology of the World Religions"

This is a rather bad translation of the title, which is literally “The Economic Ethic of the World Religions” (Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen). It is also known to Germans as the “Zwischenbetrachtung”.

I. Key topic: the "economic ethic" of the world religions
   • "the practical impulses for action which are founded in the psychological and
     pragmatic contexts of religions"
     A. Preliminary points:
        1. similar institutional structures may have different ethics (with different
           consequences)
        2. religion is not the only determinant of any economic ethic
     B. Point of focus: key social strata, "which have most strongly influenced the
        practical ethic of their respective religions"
        • several preliminary examples

II. Economic ethics are not ideologies arising from the social circumstances of their key
    strata, but come from religious sources, esp. from the content of the religion's promise
     A. This promise has had great influence on the life-conduct of all strata influenced
        by the religion
     B. Theodicies—explanations of good and ill fortune—have been especially
        important
        1. suffering is explained as the result of sin
        2. however, suffering also comes to be regarded as a way to conquer sin
           a. voluntary suffering (asceticism) produces religious experiences,
              which come to be valued in themselves
           b. such experiences are interpreted as signs of "salvation"
           c. first the salvation was from ritual offenses
           d. later, with the rise of redeemer religions, it became tied to ethical
              offenses
              1. prophets are key figures here
              2. they are usually from privileged strata
              3. but their message must appeal to the less privileged
        3. The historical development just charted is a sign of increasing
           rationalization of religion: from experience to magic to a worldview based
           on ethical cause and effect
           • Asceticism became a way to establish ongoing relations with the
              deity
        4. Theodicies were also rationalized, so religious worldviews could
           comprehend undeserved suffering. Only 3 forms of such theodicy are
           completely coherent: karma, dualism and the notion of predestination
     C. the need for this ethical rationalism is strongest among the underprivileged, who
        are not favored by the world as it is
     D. But the salvation religions prophets presented to the underprivileged were not
        designed to take advantage of this need, nor did they arise out of this need
        • rather, they developed out of the rational contemplation of the logic of
          suffering
III. Religions are not typically oriented toward the beyond, but to the here & now
   A. Most practitioners seek health, wealth, and long life
   B. Even virtuosi seek experiences or states of consciousness in the here & now. Even though they believe these states connect them to the beyond, the focus (psychologically speaking) is in the present.
   C. But different key strata have sought different states, producing different religious tendencies.
   D. And in each religion, intellectuals have rationalized this search, bringing theological order to it, changing the center of religion from experience to a belief in redemption
      1. Intellectuals have moved each religion differently
      2. Yet in each case, they have separated worldview from experience, relegating the latter to mysticism; they have rationalized the first, and pushed the second into the irrational

IV. Different dominant strata have created different religious emphases
   A. Where genteel intellectuals had the freest hand, religion has become equated with mysticism, and the religious search has become passive and individual
   B. Priests were more concerned with corporate than with individual salvation
   C. Other social groups—politicians, warriors, peasants—leave distinctive marks on religion
   D. Most interesting, however, are those cases in which tradespeople have the upper hand
      1. Here, at first glance, many different kinds of religion result
      2. But the tendency of all is toward a practical rationalism in conduct: an emphasis on rationalized ethics
      3. Especially it has resulted in 2 forms of prophecy
         a. Exemplary prophecy (the mystic seeking God, either contemplative or ecstatic)
         b. Emissary prophecy (making ethical demands on the world)
            1. Active asceticism
            2. Notion of being God's tool
      4. Each of these develops its own image of God
         a. Exemp: impersonal, static God
         b. Emiss: God active in history
      5. But images of God also influence the psychological states of believers
         a. The causal forces go both ways
         b. This is especially so for the religious factors influencing conduct
   E. There has always been conflict between priests and prophets: the ordinary worshippers and the virtuosi. The exact shape of this struggle has been influenced by the basic images with which the religion works.
      1. Where religion is contemplative (exemplary prophets) virtuosity maintains no relationship to the practical world
      2. Emissary prophets and ascetics, however, influence the world. This is especially true where ascetics believe themselves to be working in the world as God's tools (inner-worldly ascetics)
         a. This is fully the case only with Western Protestantism (for complex historical/theological reasons)
         b. It involves the ascetic "proving himself" by his ethical conduct in his worldly "calling"
   F. In all this, the purely religious imagery has a decisive social impact on motivations, and through them on actions and events.
IV. The following studies [for which this article served as an introduction] are neither historical nor typological. They look at religions from the point of view of their relationship to ethical rationalism.

A. Rationalism has different meanings
   1. absence of metaphysics
   2. systematization of belief or conduct

B. Presentation will be "ideal-typical"

C. Religions will be connected to authority structures, & different ideal-types of legitimation
   1. legal authority, based on rules, offices and areas of jurisdiction
   2. charismatic authority, based on the real or presumed qualities of a particular person
   3. traditional authority, based on habitual deference

D. The latter 2 have been around a long time
   1. traditional developed out of charismatic, as the problem of succession to a charismatic leader arose
   2. first, a successor was granted the former leader's charisma; this was later routinized into a traditional bond
   3. officeholding grew out of this, as routinized charismatic authority became rationalized and organized
      a. This can be either substantive (rationalized in fact)
      b. or formal (rationalized in form, not just fact)
   4. in the West, formal rationalization of offices developed into legal authority
      a. impersonal, not personal
      b. loyalty to the office, not the holder
      c. established by rules/laws

E. One final distinction:
   1. status = honor/style of life; status groups = people who share status
   2. class situation = economic situation; class = people who share class situation
   3. in the past, the 2 did not coincide, and status was more important

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[] indicate outliner's extrapolations