CHAPTER ELEVEN

EAST ASIAN TRADITION ACCORDING TO MODERNISATION THEORY

The renowned study *Tokugawa Religion: The Cultural Roots of Modern Japan* by Parsons’ brilliant disciple, Robert Bellah, of the University of California at Berkeley, reached me in translation two years ago. I read it in one breath and learnt much from it.

1. *From Weber to Bellah*

Bellah’s *Tokugawa Religion: The Cultural Roots of Modern Japan* is his 1955 Harvard doctoral thesis, awarded jointly by the East Asian Department and the Sociology Department. This in itself explains the special feature of this book: the combination of historical research and sociological theory. The author’s sociological thinking depended at the time largely on the social thought of Max Weber and his disciple Talcott Parsons concerning the framework of modernisation.

We know that Weber’s research in religious sociology began with his *The Ethics of Protestantism and the Spirit of Capitalism*. He also undertook the same line of thought in a study of Chinese Confucianism and Daoism and Indian religions. His method was to note the role of religious ethics in the process of the growth of the economy (whether positive or negative). Weber’s point of view, put simply, is that the thrift in the asceticism of Protestant ethics and the Protestant view of work was instrumental in providing an attitude that was supportive of early capitalism in Western Europe. Neither the religions of China nor of India were able to provide the same kind of attitude and this is one important reason why Asian capitalism was not able to generate itself.

In Weber’s time, the success of Japan’s modernisation was already something that people had begun to notice. However, we do not know if Weber deliberately tried to avoid it or for some other reason, the fact is that he never used the example of Japan to prove his thesis. Now, as Bellah says, “the book [Tokugawa Religion] remains one of the few sustained efforts to apply a Weberian sociological perspective to a case that Weber himself did not seriously study.” Up until the early 50s Japan was the only non-Western country that reformed itself and became a modernised industrial state. In the atmosphere of modernisation theory of the 50s, scholars influenced by Weber’s theory would naturally think along the following lines: Japan’s success may not be ascribed to what people refer to in general as some mysterious ability of the Japanese to imitate others, rather it should be ascribed to some cultural elements of pre-modern Japan that were later able to serve as a basis for this development. Bellah follows this line. His book aims to “reveal those origins of Japan’s pre-modern culture and how they helped to explain this success.” Very clearly, Bellah is situated wholly in the Weberian mode of thinking. From the start he places in the centre the presupposition that Japan’s pre-modern culture and the successful transformation by which Japan modernised are related. From this he goes on to seek the religious elements in the case of Japan’s success, to seek the “similar functions” of Protestantism in Japanese religion. This then forms the leading line of inquiry of Bellah’s book.

2. Bellah and Parsons

Apart from using Weber’s theory, Bellah also uses the notions of “pattern variable” and “behavioural dimension” from Parson’s sociological theory as part of his interpretative framework. He holds that the type of basic values in Japanese culture are based on the characteristic of political priority, whilst medieval Europe was characterised by the priority of religious value and, in contemporary America, the characteristic is the priority of economic value. In the process of development, there are two ways of effecting the transformation from a non-industrial to an industrial society. The first way is to make a complete transformation

---