

Christian Religion and the European Civilising Process: The Views of Norbert Elias and Max Weber Compared in the Context of the Augustinian and Lucretian Traditions

JOHAN GOUDSBLOM
University of Amsterdam

ABSTRACT: *Both Norbert Elias and Max Weber were concerned with the 'European civilising process', in the sense of the strong shift in socially induced individual self-control observed from the Renaissance onwards. Religion does not play a prominent role in Elias's explanation of these changes. In contrast, it is argued that, despite his disclaimer, Weber in The Protestant Ethic veers towards 'a one-sided spiritualistic interpretation of culture and history'. In that respect he followed the dominant intellectual tradition deriving from St Augustine, which singles out religion as a powerful force in the civilising process. Both Weber and Elias were concerned with the unintended consequences of long-term social processes. Weber, however, while acknowledging the importance of the dynamics generated by social interdependencies, confined his analysis to a religious 'spirit' that supposedly determined the course of human affairs. In so doing, he followed a tenacious tradition which can be traced to Augustine's The City of God. Elias, on the other hand, can be placed within what is here called the Lucretian tradition. Lucretius, in De rerum natura, anticipated the modern theory of evolution, and he attributed religious belief to people's ignorance of principles underlying life on earth. The dominance of the Augustinian tradition has promoted a persistent tendency to conceive of the European civilising process in terms of providence and teleology, and to give pride of place to religious beliefs as the driving force of the entire process.*

Introduction

Religion does not play a prominent role in Norbert Elias's by now classic study *The Civilising Process*. This raises a question. Did Elias, as a critic once asserted, 'overlook religion'? Or, more precisely, did he underestimate the influence of Christianity in the civilising process in Western Europe?¹

Undoubtedly the absence of a systematic discussion of the role of religion in *The Civilising Process* reflects a deliberate decision. One likely reason for this decision was Elias's relation to the work of Max Weber. It has been said that underlying a great deal of Max Weber's work is a running discussion with 'the ghost of Karl Marx'.

A similar observation can be made about Elias: many of his writings can be read as a continuing discussion with Max Weber, sometimes explicit, more often tacit, even when Weber is not mentioned by name. Thus Elias took issue with Weber's conception of sociology as starting from 'subjective action'; with his treatment of the notion of charisma; and with his emphasis on capitalism, Protestantism, and (by implication) the bourgeois and the ecclesiastical lines in the European civilising process.²

In this article I shall focus on the latter issue; and I shall extend the argument beyond Weber. For beyond Weber looms an old and strong tradition in European thought which is still very much alive: the Augustinian view of the history of civilisation, according to which religion, and the Christian religion in particular, has been the prime moving force in the civilising process in Europe. I shall give a brief sketch of this dominant tradition, and contrast it with its 'recessive' counterpart, which I shall call the Lucretian tradition. Elias's approach was in line with the latter school of thought.

Norbert Elias on the European civilising process

The Civilising Process is a very rich book; I shall not try to summarise it here. As Elias said in the opening sentence of the Preface to the first German edition, written in 1936, he was concerned first of all with modes of behaviour that appeared as 'civilised' to the members of modern Western societies in the early twentieth century. To many people those modes of behaviour seemed self-evident; but on closer examination they were highly problematic. The task Elias set himself was to gain a better understanding, based upon empirical inquiry and theoretical reflection, of how these modes of behaviour had developed in a process of socio-psychological change extending over many generations.

In *The Civilising Process* Elias presented documentary evidence for changes in conduct and feeling among 'the secular upper classes' of European society since the late Middle Ages. He began with excerpts from manners books, containing instructions about what was regarded as proper conduct. Successive editions of those manners books showed remarkable changes, leading Elias to the conclusion that in the course of time the ruling strata in Western Europe cultivated standards of conduct that became more refined and increasingly demanded a continuously vigilant self-control. Similar standards, requiring a similarly constant self-restraint, spread to other social circles as well. Different social classes certainly continued to have their own distinct customs, but in general the ways in which they controlled their emotions tended to converge. All in all, Elias concluded that 'from the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance on, there was a particularly strong shift in individual self-control – above all, in self-control acting independently of external agents as a self-activating automatism' (Elias 2000: 478).

There is a striking resemblance between the transformation sketched here by Elias and the transformation in mentality described by Max Weber in his famous essay *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

Max Weber on the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism

Max Weber's study *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, first published in German in 1905–6, has long been the most famous and prestigious work in sociology on an aspect of the European civilising process. Although Weber did not use the term 'civilising process', he dealt with a theme that was highly similar to the one that Norbert Elias treated in his *magnum opus*. Just like Elias, Weber observed in his essay on Protestantism and capitalism a profound historical change in mentality or habitus – a shift towards more regular and all-round self-restraint – and he tried to find an explanation for this change. In this section I shall summarise Weber's essay critically, in a way that will facilitate a comparison with the work of Elias.

In the Introduction, written in 1920, to the three volumes of *Collected Essays in the Sociology of Religion*, Weber began by stating that Western civilisation was marked by an exceptionally high level of rationality in science, law, music, architecture, art, organisation of the state, and in 'the most fateful force in our modern life, capitalism' (1958: 17).⁴

Capitalism, he continued, is not to be equated with the pursuit of gain; that may be a universal human inclination. What distinguishes capitalism is 'the restraint, or at least a rational tempering, of this irrational impulse' (1958: 17). A capitalist enterprise rests, for its success, on regularly recurring, calculable profits, on 'the utilisation of opportunities for exchange, that is on (formally) peaceful chances of profit' (1958: 17). Adventurers and speculators who seize a one-time chance have existed everywhere. However, the acquisition of booty by force is very different from rational capitalism.

The same rational spirit that is characteristic of capitalistic enterprise can also be observed in technology, science, law, warfare, education, and other areas of modern life. In all these areas we encounter 'the ability and disposition of men to adopt certain types of practical rational conduct' (1958: 26). The first task that Weber set for himself in his *Collected Essays* was to come to a better understanding of the spirit of rationality by investigating the origin of 'this sober bourgeois capitalism with its rational organisation of free labour' (1958: 24).

Setting out to trace the roots of 'sober bourgeois capitalism', Weber decided focus on those forces that traditionally were 'the most important formative influences on conduct': the ethical ideas of duty bolstered by religious beliefs about the good life on earth and about rewards and punishments in the hereafter. He immediately added two caveats to this programme. First, he noted that by focusing on ideas he would treat '*only one side of the causal chain*' (1958: 27). Second, he stressed that '*the relative value of the cultures which are compared here will not receive a single word*' (1958: 29). I italicise these caveats because I shall return to them. Their function seems to have been mainly rhetorical; the actual text contains many passages which flatly ignore these caveats.

Thus, even in the first substantive chapter, Weber was already arguing that there is a stronger tendency toward economic rationality among Protestants than among

Catholics, and that the principal explanation of this difference 'must be sought in the permanent intrinsic character of their religious beliefs' (1958: 40). Little or no heed is given here to the warning that we are dealing with only 'one side of the causal chain'. Similarly, the intention not to use value judgements seems forgotten when Weber speaks of the 'unexampled tyranny of Puritanism' (1958: 37) and says that it 'was infinitely burdensome' (1958: 36) and 'would be for us the most absolutely unbearable form of ecclesiastical control of the individual which could possibly exist' (1958: 37).

Unlike Elias in *The Civilising Process*, Weber did not give a chronological series of quotations showing a sequence of changes. He began his analysis of the spirit of capitalism with a lengthy quotation from Benjamin Franklin's *Advice to a Young Tradesman* (1748) and *Necessary Hints to Those That Would Be Rich* (1736). Weber interpreted this text as exemplifying an ethic of duty – a 'value-rational' creed which was, according to Weber, more than purely utilitarian.

There was of course, as Weber admitted, a practical tinge to Franklin's recommendations: be industrious and frugal; show yourself to be trustworthy; remember that time is money and money, if well invested, breeds more money. All these virtues are useful because they assure a good reputation and improve one's credit. But, Weber added, Franklin's moral attitudes also contained something 'entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational' (1958: 53).

In his commentary on Franklin, Weber lost sight of his own caveat that he was treating only one side of the causal chain. He noted with great emphasis that the spirit of industriousness and frugality could not be explained simply as an adaptation (a strategy of survival, we might say) to capitalist conditions. Such an explanation in what Weber called 'materialistic' terms would be putting the cart before the horse: for capitalism could not have developed without the spirit of capitalism. That spirit required an explanation; 'the causal relation is *certainly the reverse* of that suggested by the materialistic standpoint' (1958: 56; italics added).

In almost personifying terms, making economic history sound like an ancient tragedy, Weber stated that 'the spirit of capitalism ... had to fight its way to supremacy against a whole world of hostile forces' (1958: 56). Its most important 'opponent' he considered to be 'that type of attitude and reaction to new situations which we may designate as traditionalism' (1958: 58–9). Thus in his rejection of historical materialism, Weber adopted a kind of heroic idealism.

He went very far in this: 'The question of the motive forces in the expansion of modern capitalism is not in the first instance a question of the origin of the capital sums which were available for capitalistic uses, but, above all, of the development of the spirit of capitalism. Where it appears and is able to work itself out, it produces its own capital and monetary supplies as the means to its ends, *but the reverse is not true*' (1958: 68–9; italics added).

This assertion is a long way from Weber's first caveat, about the one side of the causal chain. Nor is the second caveat, against value judgments, clearly observed in the passages that follow, describing the personality of the capitalist entrepreneur

in terms of ethical qualities such as 'an unusually strong character', 'temperate self-control', 'clarity of vision', 'strength to overcome innumerable obstacles' – a set of 'very definite and highly developed ethical qualities' (1958: 69).

In his further analysis of the origins of these character traits Weber did not turn to the social constraints and chances which prompted people to cultivate this particular mentality. He mentioned those social constraints only a few times, in passing. His main concern was to find 'the origins of precisely the irrational element which lies in this, as in every conception of a calling' (1958: 78). He therefore narrowed his inquiry down to a search for theological ideas and practices which showed a similar insistence upon the duty towards one's calling in life.

This approach led him to an erudite and eloquent discussion of, first 'the religious foundations of worldly asceticism', and then, as the final step, of 'asceticism and the spirit of capitalism'.

Weber sketched a chilling portrait of the ideal-typical Calvinist Puritan, who staunchly believed in the doctrine of predestination – a doctrine marked by 'magnificent consistency' as well as 'extreme inhumanity': 'In what was for the man of the Reformation the most important thing in life, his eternal salvation, he was forced to follow his path alone to meet a destiny which had been decreed for him from eternity' (1958: 104). No magic, no sacrament was allowed him in this lonely journey.

At this point Weber's argument took a decisive turn. He translated the logic of predestination into a theory of personal motivation, more or less converting theology into psychology. In this view, the Calvinist sought relief from his religious agony in an attitude of self-confidence, comforting himself with the impression that he actually belonged to the elect. To prove himself worthy of the state of grace he forced himself to live a life of 'systematic self-control' (1958: 115).

The Calvinists did not have to invent all the rules of asceticism, for those had already been cultivated in medieval monasteries. Western monasticism 'had developed a systematic method of rational conduct with the purpose of overcoming the *status naturae*, to free man from the power of irrational impulses and his dependence on the world and on nature. It attempted to subject man to the supremacy of a purposeful will, to bring his actions under constant self-control with a careful consideration of their ethical consequences' (1958: 118–19). This form of 'quiet self-control', strengthening the motives of constancy against the volatile emotions, was taken over by the Puritans with the aim of destroying 'spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment' (1958: 119). The 'gloomy doctrine of Calvinism' brought a regime of 'constant self-control' (1958: 126). The resulting 'rationalisation of conduct within the world, but for the sake of the world beyond, *was the consequence* of the concept of calling of ascetic Protestantism' (1958: 154, italics added).

The next step led on to the road to Benjamin Franklin and to Weber's own time. After the seventeenth century, 'the intensity of the search for the Kingdom of God commenced gradually to pass over into sober economic virtue; the religious roots died out slowly, giving way to otherworldliness' (1958: 176). The great religious

epoch of the seventeenth century bequeathed to later generations 'an amazingly good ... conscience in the acquisition of money, so long as it took place legally' (1958: 176).

The descent is clear: 'One of the fundamental elements of the spirit of modern capitalism ... was born ... from the spirit of Christian asceticism' (1958: 180). 'Ascetism undertook to remodel the world' (1958: 181). 'The idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs' (1958: 181). 'The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so' (1958: 181). According to an early Puritan, the care for external goods should only lie 'on the shoulders of the saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment'. Weber quoted those words, with the ominous addition: 'But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage' (1958: 181).

This semi-final passage, filled with captivating metaphors, is followed by a repetition of Weber's two initial disclaimers, now in a reverse order. First, 'but this brings us to the world of judgments of value and faith, with which this purely historical discussion need not be burdened' (1958: 182). And second, 'it is, of course, not my aim to substitute for a one-sided materialistic an equally one-sided spiritualistic causal interpretation of culture and history' (1958: 183). These disclaimers cannot take away the overall rhetorical tenor of the essay, which suggests a straight genealogy: capitalism is a product of the spirit of capitalism, which in turn was a product of ascetic Calvinism, which found its inspiration in medieval monasticism.

The Augustinian tradition

Weber's attitude toward the Calvinist creed in his study of Protestantism and capitalism was far from sympathetic. Yet, despite his critical stance, he attached great importance to the social and cultural impact of Calvinism. In singling out religion as a powerful force in the civilising process, Weber followed a time-honoured intellectual tradition in which the Church Father St. Augustine was a towering figure.

Augustine (354–430) belonged to a generation of highly successful bishops during a formative period of the Roman Catholic Church who, in mutual collaboration and competition, did much to strengthen the organisation of the church and to canonise its doctrine. As a well-educated convert, Augustine was able to combine Roman learning with Christian teaching. His writings were soon taken up in the mainstream of European theology and philosophy. His books *Confessions* and, still more, *The City of God* left a strong mark on the development of ideas about morality and society. In his *Confessions* Augustine related how his conversion to Christianity brought him personally on the path to salvation and made him a better man; *The City of God* described the blessings of Christianity for humanity at large.

The City of God was written after the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410. Conservative Romans tended to attribute this humiliating event to the emasculating

influence of Christianity, which had undermined the ancient Roman virtues of courage and patriotism. To counter that prevailing view, Augustine came forward with a very different interpretation. He pointed out that Roman history consisted of a brute succession of wars and civil wars, all waged with horrible cruelty. Seen against that background, did not the behaviour of the soldiers from the North after their conquest of Rome compare very favourably with the frightful atrocities committed again and again by the Romans themselves? Roman citizens who regarded their recent invaders as barbarians failed to see the high ethical standards espoused by these men thanks to the fact that they were Christians:

All the devastation, the butchery, the plundering, the conflagrations, and all the anguish which accompanied the recent disaster at Rome were in accordance with the general practice of warfare. But there was something which established a new custom, something which changed the whole aspect of the scene; the savagery of the barbarians took on such an aspect of gentleness that the largest basilicas were selected and set aside to be filled with people to be spared by the enemy. No one was to be violently used there, no one snatched away. Many were to be brought there for liberation by merciful foes; none were to be taken from there into captivity even by cruel enemies. This is to be attributed to the name of Christ and the influence of Christianity. Anyone who fails to see this is blind; anyone who sees it and fails to give praise for it is thankless; anyone who tries to stop another from giving praise is a madman (Augustine I, ch. 7).

A large part of *The City of God* consists of a complete revision of the history of Greece and Rome. All the well-known episodes pass in review, but they appear in a new context, together with the history of Israel as recorded in the books of the Jewish-Christian tradition. Just as the *Confessions* described Augustine's own life in terms of a moralising developmental psychology, *The City of God* summarised the history of all known humanity in a theological synthesis. Every event was given a place in this synthesis; even facts which at first glance would seem to contradict Augustine's teleological view were shrewdly given a significance that made them fit in with the divine plan underlying human history.

The City of God is an impressive book. Because of its erudition and its lucid and ingenious argument, it lent itself very well to becoming an authoritative text in the expanding world of Christendom, helping to shape a new image of the development of civilisation as guided by the hand of God. If later generations thought of themselves as more literate and more refined in manners and morals than their ancestors, they could humbly declare that they owed this advance primarily to their religion, to Christianity as embodied in the church and its representatives, the clergy.

Indeed, in the early Middle Ages, religious institutions, especially monasteries, were foci of literacy. Here ancient texts were rediscovered, re-read, and reinterpreted, including the writings of such 'pagan' philosophers as Seneca and Cicero. Just as elements of Roman law helped to restructure legal and political organisation,

classical ideas about morality and personal well being offered guidance towards individual self-restraint.

Because of the dominant position of the Church and clerical institutions, the texts were read, at first, mainly in a monastic setting. This lent them an aura of religiosity: they became 'sacralised'. Their secular origins were largely ignored and forgotten, and the models of temperance and moderation derived from these texts tended to be preached as representing exclusively Christian virtues.³

The merging of ancient 'pagan' and Christian ideas continued throughout the Middle Ages. Thus the ideal of temperance, advocated by the Stoics and other Roman schools of philosophy, was cultivated and formalised into the ascetic regime of newly founded monastic orders such as the Benedictines. A pagan legacy was transmitted in a religious guise. Parish priests and monks became self-appointed 'civilising agents'.

Adopting Weber's imagery, we could say that the ancient spirit of asceticism was revived in the Christian monasteries, from where it then spread back into more mundane circles. As the medievalist C. Stephen Jaeger (1985) shows, clergymen played an important role among the high dignitaries at the medieval princely courts. Many of them were of noble descent themselves.

The lasting influence of the clergy rested largely on their virtual monopoly of literacy. As the literary class, they proclaimed themselves to be the First Estate. They made their own field of expertise, theology, into the first faculty at the new institutions for higher learning, the universities. They thus exerted a strong influence not only on practical conduct, but also on the intellectual justification of the rules of ethics and etiquette.

Their influence went very far, to the extent that, in the modern age, areligious critics such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Menno ter Braak were able to detect residual Christian beliefs in systems of thought that professed to be thoroughly secular, and to recognise the Christian ideal of equality before God in the popular political ideologies of their own days. Similarly, the idea of divine providence could be shown to resonate with the notion of an 'invisible hand' ruling economic action, central to the ideology of liberalism, as well as in the Marxist tenet of 'the laws of history'.

Such residues can also be detected in Weber's essay on Protestantism and capitalism. Just like Elias in *The Civilising Process*, Weber was concerned with the unintended consequences of long-term social processes. He did not, however, try to bring to light the dynamics generated by social interdependencies; he contented himself with speaking of a 'spirit' that apparently went its own way and determined the course of human affairs. Weber's implicit suggestion that terms like 'spirit' and 'fate' refer to decisive actors on the historical stage testifies to the tenacity of the Augustinian tradition: while determined not to let his own religious ideas interfere with his sociological analysis, Weber still adhered to a quasi-theological philosophy of history.

The Lucretian tradition

Medieval Christianity could easily absorb the practical moral teachings of such authors as Cicero. The innovators of monastic discipline found in classical philosophy a source of inspiration for their rules. One strand in the intellectual tradition of ancient Greece and Rome, however, contained elements that medieval theologians found unpalatable. This was Epicurean philosophy, represented in its most elaborate and elegant form by the Latin poet Lucretius (96–55 BC), one of the most radically 'secular' authors in the late republic.

The Roman Republic and the early Roman Empire were political entities in a military-agrarian society which, remarkably, lacked a strong priestly class. There was nothing in the republican and early imperial social structure comparable with the organisation of ecclesiastical administrators that emerged in the later empire at the time of Augustine. In the absence of a strong establishment of priests, a wave of secularisation in thought could manifest itself in the earlier era, which was swamped again from the late fourth century AD onwards by a process of 'sacralisation' under the influence of the triumphant Christian church (see Elias 1991: 136).

Lucretius, in his didactic poem *De rerum natura* ('On the Nature of Things'), presented a coherent account of the development of the world and of humankind that in many ways strikingly anticipated the modern theory of evolution. He avowedly wrote the poem as an antidote to religion – the belief in supernatural beings and in a life after death, with terrifying phantoms of eternal punishment. According to Lucretius, people were susceptible to religious beliefs because they were uninformed about the principles underlying the cosmos and life on earth. In their ignorance they attributed all the many events they did not understand to the will of gods before whom they then trembled with obsessive fear. A reasonable survey of the real nature of the universe should dispel that fear; it would help people to appreciate their own limited powers and to reconcile themselves with the fact that, for each and every individual, death is inevitable and final. It should teach us 'that the universe was certainly not created for us by divine power' (Lucretius v: 232). But it can also show that humans have been able to improve the conditions of their lives:

So we find that not only such arts as seafaring and agriculture, city walls and laws, weapons, roads and clothing, but also without exception the amenities and refinements of life, songs, pictures, and statues, artfully carved and polished, all were taught gradually by usage and the active mind's experience as men groped their way forward step by step. So each particular development is brought gradually to the fore by the advance of time, and reason lifts it into the light of day. Men saw one notion after another take shape within their minds until by their arts they scaled the topmost peak. (Lucretius v: 1448–57)

Because the Epicureans were unwilling to take part in the mandatory religious cults, they were accused of atheism – a charge that was later also made against the first Christians who likewise rejected the prevailing 'superstitions' and refused to

worship the officially venerated 'idols'. Apart from this shared (and, needless to say, for the Christians unjust) indictment, the Epicureans and the Christians had little in common; its hostility toward religion made Epicurean philosophy anathema to the Christians.

Consequently, the reputation of Lucretius was badly tainted and almost erased by the censorship of the triumphant early church. The only data that were allowed to come down to us are the words noted in the chronicle of Augustine's contemporary, the Church Father St. Jerome, according to whom 'the poet Titus Lucretius Carus ... lost his mind through drinking an aphrodisiac, and committed suicide at the age of forty-four, after having written in his lucid intervals some books which Cicero later corrected' (Hieronymus 1994: 149). This brief 'life of a heathen', the very opposite of a hagiography, is about all the information available about Lucretius. Its negative overtones keep recurring in modern encyclopaedias in which he continues to be characterised with such expressions as 'a tortured spirit'.

Still, Lucretius was disparaged but never completely forgotten. A battered manuscript of his poem was rediscovered in 1414 by Poggio Bracciolini, and from then on humanist writers began referring again to the Lucretian view of the human condition and history – first with circumspection and later in open agreement. Eighteenth century 'freethinkers' such as Edward Gibbon and Voltaire wrote works of history in which religion was treated in purely secular terms – not as something that had come to people through divine revelation from some external, supra-human source, but as an institution with specific social functions. This became an almost self-evident point of departure for the British historian Henry Thomas Buckle (1821–62) who, in his widely read *History of Civilisation in England*, declared the view that religion was a prime mover of human affairs to be obsolete and 'altogether erroneous'. Instead of seeing religion as a 'cause' of civilisation, we should see it as an 'effect' (Buckle, 1857–61: 235).

To the best of my knowledge neither Max Weber nor Norbert Elias ever referred to Buckle. Weber would probably have dismissed Buckle's position as materialistic. It would certainly have been more congenial to Elias – but with some significant qualifications. Elias did not share the unmitigated faith in progress that Buckle, like Lucretius, professed. And he avoided framing the relations between religion and the civilising process in a simple model of 'cause' and 'effect'.

The two traditions reconsidered

The risk of any distinction is, of course, that it may block the view of resemblances and interconnections. After the revival of the Lucretian tradition in the fifteenth century, there were many exchanges between the Augustinian and the Lucretian traditions, leading to a blurring of the distinction. Max Weber, too, leaned towards the Lucretian tradition in most of his writings – and its influence is visible even in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, his most Augustinian publication.

Still, the long lasting dominance of the Augustinian tradition in European thought about the civilising process is indisputable. It has promoted, first of all, a persistent tendency to conceive of the civilising process in terms of providence and teleology – as if that process has always been guided by a divine or otherwise transcendental plan. Secondly, it has given pride of place to the church or, more broadly, to religion as the driving force in the entire process. Thirdly, as a strong side-effect, all theories of socio-cultural development – including those in which the ideas of providence and teleology are explicitly rejected (as in Elias's book *The Civilising Process*) – tend to be interpreted by many readers as if they too were still predicated on Augustinian assumptions.

The idea that religion is an ancient element of human culture is compatible with the Augustinian as well as the Lucretian tradition. The two views diverge, however, where the Lucretian tradition considers religion as a means of orientation that has lost its validity: just as magic has been superseded by technology, religion has been superseded by science. While Elias by and large accepted the Lucretian thesis, Max Weber avoided an outspoken statement on this issue; but he did come very close to the Lucretian view when he wrote about the inevitable advance of rationalisation and the concomitant 'disenchantment of the world'. Yet he always resisted embracing what he considered to be an evolutionary perspective of society and culture. Therefore, in order to account for the long-term processes of rationalisation and secularisation he eventually had recourse to dark phrases suggesting that those processes were 'decreed' by 'fate' (1958: 181).

In some passages Weber also followed a tendency, common among adherents of almost any religion, to present religious doctrines and rituals as timeless and unchanging. Thus, when speaking of the Puritans, he referred to 'the permanent intrinsic character of their religious beliefs' (1958: 40). At the same time, Weber knew all too well that religion is never a constant factor, in spite of the inclination among the believers themselves to 'eternalise' their creeds.

In fact, of course, both religious and secular ideas have changed over time; and, remarkably, in the course of change they have tended in the long run to converge. From the early Middle Ages on, the civilising process in Europe affected all the major social 'estates' – the clergy, the nobility, the bourgeoisie, and the 'fourth estate' of farmers and workers – and the institutions in which their members were primarily engaged. Religion, the realm *par excellence* of the clergy, was not exempt from the forces of change that transformed society at large. For this reason Elias concluded, in often-quoted words that are distantly reminiscent of Buckle:

Religion, the belief in the punishing or rewarding omnipotence of God, never has in itself a 'civilising' or affect-subduing effect. On the contrary, religion is always exactly as 'civilised' as the society or class which upholds it (Elias 2000: 169).

While these words are distantly reminiscent of Buckle, they also demonstrate how intimately the author of *The Civilising Process* was engaged in a discussion with 'the ghost of Weber'. He could not have claimed that his clause about the belief in

the punishing or rewarding omnipotence of God contained an exhaustive definition of 'religion'; but that clause was obviously inspired by Weber's interpretation of the belief of the Puritans.

Elias carefully avoided the word 'cause', used by both Buckle and Weber. He also insisted that it would be futile to look for a 'zero point' in the European civilising process: the process never started from scratch. In later work on the sociology of knowledge, Elias suggested as a mental experiment that his readers try to imagine a 'knowledge-less group' (Elias, 1987: 230). Clearly our imagination would fail here: no such human group could ever have existed. Nor can we conceive of a group that would be 'civilisation-less' or completely 'uncivilised' – its members lacking any form of socially acquired self-restraint.⁴

An analogy with the theory of biological evolution may be illuminating at this point. There is no life on earth in units smaller than one cell; 'semi-cellular' life cannot exist. From this it follows, as Stephen J. Gould (1996) argued, that once unicellular life had come into being it could not evolve into smaller units; any development in that direction was blocked by a wall of impossibility – if life was able to evolve at all, it could only do so by forming larger units, with higher levels of organisation. Gould used this argument to demonstrate that the theory of evolution need not involve any appeal to teleology. The same line of reasoning can also be applied to the civilising process. Like the evolution of life, the civilising process, too, could conceivably have gone in a whole gamut of directions; but one major direction was closed off. What Gould described as an imaginary wall may also be seen as a point (or a line) of no return: for any group to go beyond it in a 'negative' direction would amount to self-annihilation. On the other hand, we can conceive of a wide range of 'positive' directions in which the civilising process can move at any given stage; that range includes possible 'regressions' in the sense of a loosening of self-restraints. But then, again, there is a limit to such regressions.

No human group can function without a minimum of self-restraint on the part of its members. That self-restraint has to be learned, learned from others. Civilising processes are therefore universal; they occur in all human groups. But they take different forms at different stages of social development.

As I have argued before, at a certain stage of agrarian development, societies *with* priests had greater chances of survival than societies *without* priests (Goudsblom 1996: 42). Priests provided orientation and discipline which helped farming communities to cope with a whole range of problems raised by an agrarian existence – problems related to work and production, but also to the storage, distribution and consumption of food. I did not state in so many words, however, that priests stimulated an advance in the civilising process. I only noted that they insisted on greater (socially induced) self-restraint.

I am now prepared to argue, in more general terms, that human groups stand a better chance of survival in the long run with an advance in the civilising process than do groups that lag behind in this sense. This is a huge generalisation; the clause 'in the long run' is indispensable if it is to be upheld. The formulation does not

rule out temporary tendencies (or 'lapses') in the opposite direction. In many historical instances, groups with less regard for highly civilised strictures turned out to have an advantage over groups with greater respect for such strictures. In the very long run, however, the constraints of competition and collaboration put a premium on socially induced self-restraint.⁵

It is an empirical generalisation, and not just a theoretical assumption, that in the very long run, the entire web of human relations has changed, and is continuing to change, in the direction of more far-reaching social interdependence and greater complexity. The 'master process' is the external expansion of the anthroposphere, which is inseparably accompanied by its internal transformation (see Goudsblom, 2002). As a part of that transformation, human sensitivities have been changing, including their sensitivity for religious ideas and practices.

Conclusion

The Augustinian and the Lucretian traditions view the civilising process from opposite angles. This leads to different impressions, with different emphases. If the Augustinian tradition overestimates the importance of religion in the civilising process, the Lucretian tradition contains an anti-clerical sting that may bring about underestimation. There can be no doubt that what we now classify as religious forces have at times exerted a strong pressure towards socially induced self-restraint. That pressure should be seen, however, in the context of wider social and ecological pressures. Whatever influence religion had was always subject to historical circumstances. Religion was never the sole civilising factor. And in many instances it gave impetus to decivilising spurts such as crusades, persecutions, civil war and, as it has come to be called in our own days, 'ethnic cleansing'.

The concept of a civilising process applies to 'societies of individuals' – that is, to individuals linked with other individuals in social figurations (Elias 1991; see also De Swaan 1999). In all figurations the potential for civilising as well as decivilising tendencies is continuously present. In Western Europe in the period studied by Elias, decisive civilising shifts were initiated by various powerful groups: courtiers, priests, lawyers, business people, politicians; even the military played a part (see McNeill 1982: 125–39).

As the webs of human interdependence have expanded and differentiated, social figurations have generally become more dependent on forms of self-restraint that are attuned to these complex interdependencies. It is conceivable that – as the Augustinian tradition suggests – institutions focused on religion will further this socially-driven civilising process; but – as the Lucretian tradition suggests – it is hard to imagine how the process could continue if people were to rely only on their religions.

Notes

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1. The first critic who found that Elias paid insufficient attention to religion in *The Civilising Process* was Franz Borkenau 1938–9. The charge that Elias ‘overlooked religion’ was made by the Dutch sociologist I. Gadourek; see Goudsblom, 1977.
2. See Elias 1978 (on ‘subjective action’), 1998 (on charisma), 2000 (on Protestantism and the bourgeois line in the European civilising process).
3. Many examples are given by Bast 1995, Jaeger 1985, and Knox 1991, 1995.
4. On the connections between Elias’s theory of the civilising process and the sociology of knowledge, see Mennell 1989: 159–99.
5. As one example (which in itself offers no proof) I may mention the Third Reich, which, although intended to last a thousand years, failed to survive for more than twelve years.

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