

# Charisma and Capitalism in Motion: the Continuing Relevance of Robert P. Weller's Ideas for Indonesian Islamic Modernity

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This study examines Robert P. Weller's theoretical contributions to understanding the relationship between religious transformation and the capitalist economic system in Asia. Weller challenges the Weberian secularization paradigm by proposing a dialectical model of secularization–religionization and a typology of three religious responses to capitalism: embracing amorality, prosperity theology, and philanthropic amelioration. Through empirical studies in Taiwan, he demonstrates that religion is not a victim of modernity but a moral actor negotiating global economic values. This review evaluates Weller's theoretical framework, methodological approach, empirical contributions, as well as its limitations and directions for future research.

**Keywords:** religion and capitalism, global charisma, secularization, moral economy, Asian globalization

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## 1. Introduction

The complex relationship between religion and capitalism has been a central theme across various disciplines since Weber's work on the Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. The classical Weberian paradigm, which emphasizes a linear secularization process whereby capitalist modernity progressively eliminates religion's public role, now faces significant empirical and theoretical challenges. The resurgence of religion, particularly in Asia, demonstrates that modernity does not follow a singular trajectory toward religious privatization. Instead, modernity takes plural forms that accommodate the vitality of religion within the public sphere (Berger, 1999; Casanova, 1994).

The accelerated economic transformation in Asia since the late 20th century has created a paradoxical condition. Capitalist growth has occurred alongside the intensification of religious expression. Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea, and Indonesia exhibit patterns in which economic liberalization has not produced substantial secularization; rather, it has facilitated the emergence of new forms of religiosity integrated with market logic (Fealy & White, 2008; Yang, 2011). This phenomenon calls for a theoretical reconceptualization that transcends the simple dichotomy between tradition and modernity, or between religion and secularism.

Weller, (2008) revises Max Weber's theory in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* by positioning the Asian experience as a new conceptual foundation. He rejects Weberian cultural determinism and views religion as a value system adaptive to modern economic and political transformations. Through case analyses of Taiwan and Chinese societies, Weller demonstrates that religion not only adapts to capitalism but also generates distinctive Asian forms of ethics, morality, and alternative economies. Within the context of globalization, Weller expands Weber's concept of charisma by introducing the notion of *global charisma* one of the most systematic efforts to develop an analytical framework capable of capturing the complexity of religion–capitalism relations in non-Western contexts. Religious charisma endures through media mediation, spiritual commodification, and transnational networks. He shows that spirituality

now operates within market logic without losing its affective power, with religious institutions acting as active agents that not only adapt to capitalism but also shape its moral and material configurations.

Weller's framework has made a significant contribution to the literature on the sociology of religious economy. However, its application and generalization face several limitations. First, the dominance of Taiwan as Weller's empirical base raises questions about the conceptual relevance of his framework in contexts with distinct cultural-institutional configurations, such as Indonesia, where the asymmetrical majority-minority religious composition poses unique dynamics. Second, Weller's framework has yet to systematically integrate increasingly crucial dimensions of contemporary religious economy, including the state's regulatory role, gender dynamics within religious institutions, and the digital transformation of spiritual authority. Third, Weller's comparative-historical approach, which is predominantly descriptive-interpretive, needs to be complemented by the specification of causal mechanisms linking structural variables (economic transformation, state policy) to institutional outcomes (types of organizational religious responses).

The contribution of this review lies in providing a comprehensive critical evaluation of one of the most influential frameworks in the sociology of Asian religious economy, toward the development of a more contextually grounded middle-range theory. The findings serve as a basis for strategies in religious organizational management, the formulation of religious economic policies, and the design of inclusive development programs that integrate spiritual and material dimensions. Based on this background and its relevance to the Indonesian context, the objectives of this review are: RQ1: What are the epistemological foundations and conceptual architecture of Weller's theoretical framework on the economy of global charisma?. RQ2: How can Weller's framework be contextualized within Indonesia's structural characteristics, and what theoretical modifications are necessary?

## 2. Theoretical Framework: A Post-Weberian Synthesis

Weller combines three intellectual traditions. The first is the Weberian ethic and religious charisma as sources of moral ethics and authority within the economy. However, Weller integrates Eisenstadt's theory of multiple modernities to explain why East Asia exhibits a pattern distinct from the West in the relationship between religion and modernity. There is a dialectical process in which institutional secularization (the formal separation of religion from the state and economy) occurs alongside the religionization of public space (the proliferation of religious organizations, the expansion of ritual practices, and the commodification of spiritual symbols). Weller rejects the linear model of secularization.

The second is the Polanyian concept of moral economy the idea that the market is a social institution requiring moral integration. Weller adopts Polanyi's thesis that modern capitalism creates a "disembedded market" that operates without moral constraints, resulting in social dislocation and a vacuum of values.

The third is the Benjaminian mediation of charisma reproduced through media and mass consumption. In this model, religion is not viewed as a remnant of the past but as a moral and emotional mechanism that actively regulates the logic of global capitalism.

## 3 Methodology

### Research design

This study employs a systematic document analysis approach with a qualitative-interpretative orientation to evaluate Weller's theoretical framework. Systematic document analysis aims to extract, reconstruct, and evaluate the conceptual architecture of a theoretical framework through critical readings of primary and

secondary texts (Bowen, 2009; Prior, 2003). The epistemological rationale for using systematic document analysis is that Weller's theoretical framework is a complex conceptual construction that integrates diverse intellectual traditions. A systematic reconstruction is required to identify premises, assumptions, and propositions that are often implicit in the texts. Critical evaluation requires in-depth analysis of internal coherence (logical consistency among framework components) and external validity (congruence with empirical evidence and compatibility with alternative theories). Third, contextualizing Weller's framework requires a creative interpretation that does not merely apply concepts mechanically but negotiates between theoretical logic and contextual characteristics such as those found in Indonesia.

### **Data sources and analysis corpus**

Primary documents include Robert P. Weller's relevant works, specifically: (1) the chapter "Asia and the Global Economies of Charisma" in *Discovering Nature: Globalization and Environmental Culture in China and Taiwan* (Weller, 2008); (2) Weller's other articles and books that develop the themes of religious economy and charisma, to understand the evolution of his thought; (3) the ethnographic data presented by Weller on empirical cases in Taiwan (Ciji Foundation, Yiguan Dao, amoral cults).

Secondary theoretical documents include works that constitute the foundation or interlocutors for Weller's framework, including: (1) classical works by Weber, Polanyi, and Benjamin Franklin (Weber 1958) that serve as conceptual references; (2) literature on secularization and post-secular theory (Asad, Berger, & Casanova); (3) literature on multiple modernities theory (Eisenstadt 2000); (4) religious economy literature (Iannaccone, Stark & Finke); (5) contemporary economic sociology literature (Granovetter, 1985 ; Fourcade 2018).

Contextual documents for Indonesia include: (1) empirical studies on the transformation of Indonesian religious organizations after the Reformasi (Fealy & White, Hefner, & Hoesterey,); (2) literature on the Islamic economy and philanthropy in Indonesia; (3) policy documents related to the regulation of religious economy (Zakat Law, Waqf Law, sharia economy roadmap); (4) studies on digitalization of da'wa and celebrity preachers (Slama, Beta).

### **Analysis procedure**

The first stage is theoretical reconstruction, aimed at systematically extracting and reconstructing the conceptual architecture of Weller's framework. The second stage evaluates the logical consistency and internal coherence of Weller's framework. The third stage assesses external validity. The final stage contextualizes Weller's framework with respect to Indonesia's structural characteristics by identifying similarities and differences between Taiwan (Weller's empirical base) and Indonesia (religious composition, the role of the state, economic transformation, institutional infrastructure), proposing theoretical modifications necessary to accommodate contextual differences without losing the core logic of Weller's framework, and testing and extending Weller's framework in the Indonesian context.

## **4 Discussion**

### **Three Processes of Religious Adaptation to Capitalism**

Weller identifies three main processes: (1) financial restructuring of religious institutions, (2) the dialectic of secularization–religionization, and (3) the moral dilemmas of the market. These three processes mark the transformation of religion into an economic and moral actor within the global order. Weller demonstrates that secularization and religionization are mutually constitutive processes. Unlike the classical secularization paradigm that predicts the progressive elimination of religion, or the revivalist paradigm that emphasizes

religion's resistance to modernity, modernity is understood as an external force that drives the transformation of religion through the interaction between the logic of capitalist rationalization and the agency of religious actors.

Institutional secularization the formal separation of religion from the state and the economy creates an autonomous space for religious organizations to operate without direct subordination to political or economic authority. Paradoxically, this autonomy facilitates religionization through the proliferation of religious organizations, the intensification of ritual practices, and the commodification of spiritual symbols circulating within the free market. Religion and secularity are not substantial entities with fixed essences but relational categories that mutually define one another.

"Modern" religion differs qualitatively from "traditional" religion precisely because it is constructed in relation to the secular, distinguishing itself from the domains of economy, politics, and science, and claiming jurisdiction over a distinct "spiritual" sphere. Weller develops three types of religious responses to capitalism: embracing amorality, prosperity theology, and philanthropic amelioration. This typology shows that religion functions not merely as adaptive but also as transformative, creating new moralities within the market economy. Variations in religious response are determined by three main factors: (1) the institutional structure of religion, (2) the nature of economic transformation, and (3) the cultural-historical context. These factors form an analytical matrix for understanding how religion negotiates with capitalism across Asia.

However, unlike Polanyi who emphasized protective state responses through regulation and the welfare state Weller shows that religion plays a critical role as a re-embedding mechanism through three modalities: (1) providing moral critique against market amorality, (2) constructing alternative economies based on redistribution and reciprocity (such as religious philanthropy), and (3) legitimizing participation in the market by framing it within a religious value system (such as prosperity theology). Weller's contribution to the Polanyian tradition lies in his typological specification of re-embedding responses, showing that the "double movement" is not monolithic but takes plural forms determined by specific institutional and cultural configurations. Markets display gradations and modalities of embeddedness rather than a dichotomous state of being either "embedded" or "disembedded."

He demonstrates that secularization actually gives rise to religionization the strengthening of religious identities and symbols in the public sphere. Modernity does not erase religion but reconstructs religiosity within the logic of the market and media. It creates conditions for new forms of religiosity that differ from premodern models: from monopoly to pluralism, from ascription (inherited status) to active individual choice, from integration to differentiation and re-embedding. Religion, once fully integrated within the social structure, undergoes differentiation (separation from economy and politics) but is then re-embedded in new forms not through institutional subordination but through voluntarism, market mechanisms, and civil society networks. Religious authority is no longer monopolized by clergy with traditional legitimacy but is diffused among charismatic figures who build followings through media, persuasive communication, and spiritual performance. Epistemologically, this model is post-secular, positioning religion and secularity as two interrelated rationalities that mutually shape one another rather than oppose each other.

### Globalisasi Karisma

Drawing on Walter Benjamin's notion of the "loss of aura," Weller explains how religious charisma endures in the media age. He identifies two directions of charismatic circulation: the *centrifugal flow* (charisma spreading through media) and the *centripetal flow* (followers moving toward the spiritual center through pilgrimage). This model asserts that religious authority now operates transnationally and multimodally, balancing media decentralization with the resacralization of experience. Weller argues that charisma in the era of globalization not only undergoes routinization (bureaucratization), as Weber predicted, but also

experiences circulation in two directions. The centrifugal flow refers to the dissemination of charisma from the center to the periphery through mediated objects, emissaries or representatives, mass media, and followers' testimonies.

The centripetal flow refers to the movement of followers returning to the spiritual center through pilgrimage and collective rituals at sacred sites. This "homecoming" experience creates intense emotional bonds and strengthens the cohesion of geographically dispersed global communities. The theoretical contribution of this model lies in three dimensions: (1) expanding Weber's theory of charisma routinization by showing that globalization produces not only bureaucratization but also new modes of charisma transmission through technology; (2) integrating affective and emotional dimensions often neglected in institutional analysis, showing that loyalty to religious organizations is driven not only by rational calculation but also by transformative experiences and communal bonds; (3) providing a framework for analyzing transnational religious organizations that operate beyond the boundaries of nation-states.

### **Practical Implications of Weller's Analysis for the Indonesian Context: An Applied Framework for the Sociology of Religious Economy**

#### **a. The role of the state as regulator and facilitator**

Weller, (2008) analytical framework has substantial relevance to Indonesia's context, given three structural characteristics that parallel his study of Taiwan. First, Indonesia has experienced accelerated economic transformation since the New Order era through post-1998 liberalization. This transformation created material conditions for the restructuring of religious institutions from a state-patronage model toward a market orientation (Hefner, 2000). Second, Indonesia's religious landscape has become increasingly plural, as large mass organizations such as Nahdlatul Ulama (NU) and Muhammadiyah coexist with contemporary urban dakwah movements and spiritual cults each showing varied responses to capitalism as conceptualized by Weller. Third, Indonesia has also undergone simultaneous institutional secularization, marked by the formal separation of religion and state alongside the religionization of public space (the expansion of religious symbols and practices in the economy, media, and politics), validating Weller's dialectical model (Fealy & White, 2008).

In Indonesia, however, the state plays a far more central role. The Indonesian state uses the religious economy as a political instrument to build legitimacy and co-opt religious organizations. Budget allocations for religious infrastructure (mosques, pesantren), subsidies for religious activities, and access to government projects function as patronage mechanisms that shape religious organizations' dependence on the state. This dynamic produces a configuration of power distinct from the "free" religious market assumed in the religious economy paradigm.

#### **b. Mapping Indonesian religious organizations**

In line with Weller's analysis of the transition from land-based and state-subsidized financing models to market mechanisms, this has direct implications for the governance of Indonesian religious organizations. Major organizations such as NU and Muhammadiyah historically managing vast networks of productive assets (pesantren, hospitals, universities) now face the imperative to adopt corporate management principles without losing moral legitimacy (Salim, 2008). These organizations accept the market as an efficient mechanism for wealth creation but mobilize resources to correct inequitable distributions through Islamic redistributive mechanisms. However, important variations exist in orientation: some organizations emphasize charity (direct assistance to *mustahik*), while others prioritize empowerment (economic independence through long-term development). These differences reflect tensions in Islamic philanthropic discourse between traditional charity-based models and developmental investment-based models.

Weller's typology is valuable in identifying systematic patterns in how organizations negotiate between market logic and moral imperatives. Yet, its application to Indonesia reveals that these categories are not mutually exclusive: a single organization may combine characteristics of multiple types or transition between them throughout its life cycle. Thus, the typology is best understood as an analytical dimension rather than discrete categories.

### c. The charisma model in Indonesia's digital context

Weller's concept of centrifugal–centripetal charisma flows has critical relevance for Indonesian religious organizations managing spiritual authority amid digital media fragmentation. The phenomenon of celebrity preachers such as Abdul Somad, Hanan Attaki, Felix Siauw, and Oki Setiana Dewi demonstrates how religious charisma is now mediated through digital platforms (YouTube, Instagram, TikTok), creating centrifugal flows that spread influence without physical presence (Slama, 2017).

Digital centrifugal flows occur through: (1) short video content on YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok that enables mass reach without institutional infrastructure; (2) live-streamed sermons that create an illusion of real-time participation despite geographically dispersed audiences; (3) viral memes and quotations that circulate beyond the control of the original producer, generating autonomous “secondary charisma”; and (4) commercial endorsements that transform spiritual charisma into economic brand value. Centripetal flows take hybrid forms: (1) large-scale physical gatherings (*tabligh akbar*) mobilizing thousands to meet charismatic figures, creating intense collective experiences; (2) regular study sessions in mosques or specific venues serving as “centers” though not geographically sacred; (3) *umrah* or *hajj* pilgrimages led by celebrity preachers, combining religious journeys with communal bonding; and (4) commercial meet-and-greet events commodifying access to charismatic figures.

These patterns indicate three modifications to Weller's model. First, the centrifugal–centripetal distinction becomes fluid and simultaneous: followers can experience both virtually (through live streams) and physically (by attending *tabligh akbar*), or transition rapidly between the two. Digital platforms enable an “omnipresence” where charismatic figures can be “present” in multiple locations simultaneously through technological mediation. Second, the center is no longer geographical but algorithmic: visibility and reach are determined not by the sacredness of a physical site but by position within platform algorithms. A preacher who is “trending” on YouTube or Instagram wields greater authority than one with institutional legitimacy but limited digital visibility. This creates a new charismatic regime where *algorithmic authority* (Gillespie, 2014) operates alongside traditional theological authority. Third, charisma becomes volatile and precarious: unlike traditional institutionalization, which is relatively stable, digital charisma is vulnerable to cancel culture, algorithmic shifts, and competition in the attention economy. Personal scandals exposed via social media can trigger rapid delegitimation that cannot be reversed through traditional institutional mechanisms.

## 6 Conclusion

A systematic critical evaluation of Robert P. Weller's theoretical framework on the global charisma economy in Asia identifies four fundamental contributions that enrich contemporary sociology of religious economy. First, the post-secular dialectical paradigm transcends the secularization–revival dichotomy by demonstrating that both are mutually constitutive processes within modernity. Institutional secularization creates autonomous spaces for religionization through the proliferation of organizations, the intensification of practices, and the commodification of symbols explaining the paradox of religious vitality amid economic modernization in Asia. Second, the systematic integration of three intellectual traditions (Polanyian, multiple modernities, and religious economy) produces a multilevel analytical framework for understanding the

dialectic of structure and agency in the religious economy. Although epistemological tensions remain unresolved, this integration offers more comprehensive conceptual tools than any single approach.

Third, the tripartite typology of religious responses to capitalism (embracing amorality, prosperity theology, and philanthropic amelioration) captures systematic variations in how religious organizations negotiate between market logic and moral imperatives. This typology is heuristically valuable, though it requires modification to accommodate the empirical complexity of concrete organizations that often exhibit hybrid characteristics or transition between types. Fourth, the centrifugal–centripetal charisma model expands Weber’s theory by adding a spatial dimension, explaining how spiritual authority is maintained globally through a combination of dispersion (via media and objects) and concentration (via pilgrimage and collective ritual). This model introduces a new perspective on the charisma economy as a circulation system with geographical, technological, and affective dimensions. In the Indonesian context, Weller’s theory is highly relevant for understanding how religion, media, and the market interact in shaping public ethics, philanthropic economies, and digital charismatic figures.

**Theoretical Implications:** This study provides the first comprehensive critical evaluation in Indonesian-language literature of Weller’s framework, including a systematic reconstruction of its conceptual architecture, an assessment of its internal coherence and external validity, and contextualization within Indonesia’s structural characteristics. The evaluation indicates that Weller’s framework requires modification in three dimensions state, gender, and digital yet it remains a robust theoretical foundation for studying Indonesia’s religious economy. **Practical Implications:** It formulates concrete implications for the management of religious organizations (professionalization, resource diversification, impact measurement), public policy formulation (regulatory harmonization, social performance–based incentives, facilitation of multi-stakeholder dialogue), and inclusive development strategies (integration of zakat and social protection, mobilization of productive waqf, and support for the halal creative economy). These implications can inform practice and policymaking to optimize the positive functions of the religious economy.

**Directions for Future Research:** Weller offers a relational perspective in which religion and economy mutually shape one another through contingent and plural historical processes. However, further modification and elaboration are needed, grounded in new empirical evidence and alternative theoretical insights from relevant disciplines. In the Indonesian context, Weller’s framework provides a valuable but insufficient starting point. Future research should integrate perspectives that are more sensitive to the roles of the state, gender dynamics, digital transformation, and structural inequality, while maintaining a core understanding of the dialectic between secularization and religionization as well as the variations in organizational responses.

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