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Book Talk:
*The Power of the Sacred: An Alternative to the
Narrative of Disenchantment*, by Hans Joas
(2021, Oxford University Press)

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Overview: Critique of Weberian “Disenchantment”

Hans Joas’ *The Power of The Sacred* is a landmark in religious studies. It critically synthesizes 300 years of historical, psychological, anthropological, sociological, and indeed theological scholarship on the origins, meaning, and social consequences of religious belief and practice. The scholarship synthesized is all European and North American, but has provided the main social scientific frameworks for understanding religion throughout the planet. It is impossible to summarize here the multitude of themes and the richness of insights in the book, but the organizing theme is a critique of Max Weber’s assertion about the “disenchantment of the world.”

Joas criticizes both Weber’s use of disenchantment and the way in which a standard interpretation of the concept has been a staple of modern social scientific writing about religion. Chapter 6 offers a meticulous examination and new interpretation of Weber’s “Intermediate Reflection,” a long essay originally meant to link Weber’s 1915 book *The Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism* with his 1916 book *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism*. It lays out Weber’s framework for a comprehensive study of religions and describes modern religions as caught within a field of tension between rationalized value spheres. Out of this vision, social theorists have drawn a comprehensive theory of “modernization” in which “rationalization” leads to a “disenchanted” world devoid of any religious meaning. An overly systematized “modernization theory” replaces human creative agency with supposedly deterministic historical processes.

Joas, however, argues that Weber, as in much of his other writing, did not really present a well-integrated system, that his use of the word “disenchantment” covers a number of different processes, and that what many have taken to be the master term of “rationalization” has an “extreme, confusing, unmanageable ambiguity” (p. 231). Weber brilliantly calls our attention to a modern predicament full of different tensions (not necessarily confined to those cited in his essay), all caught up in relations of power, but there are many paths into and out of these tensions. Totalizing assumptions of “rationalization” and “disenchantment” (static nouns instead of verbs representing dynamic processes) do not capture these paths and the historical contingencies that shape them.

The book’s preceding chapters lead up to this critique and suggest ways to go beyond Weber to a better comparative account of religion in human history. In the final chapter, then, Joas presents his own framework for the social scientific study of religion.

Materials for a New Synthesis

In the first chapters, Joas recounts attempts, beginning with Hume, to explain religion through historical processes. This is followed by an extremely thoughtful account of William James' psychological/phenomenological analyses of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

Joas contends that any adequate treatment of religion must include both this historical and psychological dimension. He then considers Durkheim, again through a masterful synthesis of Durkheim's conception of the "sacred," which Joas proposes to enrich and deepen by reference to James' studies of religious experience, and by subsequent work in semiotic theory. But such accounts need to be placed into the flow of history shaped by processes of power, and Joas finds the model for such a study in the work of Ernst Troeltsch, the Christian theologian, historian, and sociologist who was a close colleague and friend of Weber. The conventional account is that Weber took the best ideas (about church and sect, for instance) from Troeltsch and improved upon them. For Joas (the Ernst Troeltsch Professor of the Sociology of Religion at the Humboldt University of Berlin), Troeltsch had the deeper understanding and Weber didn't learn enough from him.

Rather than focusing, as did Weber, mainly on the development of religious ideas and their consequences, Troeltsch, in Joas' telling, began his master work about *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches* with the lived experiences of worship of the Christ mediated through implicitly shared cultural understandings, which then formed ideals which could be embodied in and shaped by many different forms of organization, all subject to the contingencies of power configurations in different periods of history. This way of telling the story of all religions, not just Christianity, becomes central to Joas' work.

There is one final classical theorist whom Joas uses in his framework – Karl Jaspers, who opened up scholarship on the Axial Age. Jaspers contended that parallel developments in world cultures in the first millennium BCE led to breakthroughs in the human capacity to imagine a transcendent sacred uniting all of humanity under a universal ethic. After surveying the enormous scholarship responding to Jaspers' 1949 book, *The Origin and Goal of History*, Joas contends that the main element of "axiality" was a "reflexive transcendence" – experiences of transcendence now reflected on in such a way that they had universal significance.

Building upon all these ideas and more, Joas presents his own account of the Sacred and Power – an agenda and methodology for comparative study of religions. Religion is not primarily about rationally articulated ideas about God, but is about sacralization – a "complex of affective qualities that arise from self-transcendence" in which self-transcendence (following William James) is the experience of breaking boundaries between self and other, in everything from experiences of

collective effervescence to the raptures of falling in love. This sacralization can come about in an immense variety of ways and can be institutionalized in many different forms. Sacralization brings power, the energy to go beyond the practices of quotidian life, and an ability to carry out collective action. It leads to the formation of ideals, which can be symbolized in many ways, including ritual, art, and discursive language. Sacralization is enabled by, shaped by, and in tension with many other forms of power which Weber analyzed. The way this happens depends upon all sorts of contingent configurations of power in the course of history. Sacralization and self-transcendence are essential qualities of human culture, and they continue even when the particular forms of religion that embodied them decline. The sacred continues to take new forms and arises in new contexts. Since the Axial Age, the sacred can be seen as globally transcendent, even as this transcendence is carried on through particular religions. Sacralization has always led to group solidarity, and Axial sacralization has supported the solidarity of empires and nations. One form it takes today is nationalism. This is self-sacralization, which in the form of modern nationalisms becomes extremely dangerous. But even when the universalism of reflexive transcendence becomes embedded in self-sacralizing collectives through the dynamics of power vectors, the possibility always remains that it can break the boundaries of such collectives “in such a way that one pays heed not only to all people living today, but also to those in the future, and not just to the well-being of all human beings, but of the world as a whole” (p. 272).

Questions

Joas argues that the narrative of “disenchantment” has become an integral part of “modernization theory,” and this has exercised an unfortunate influence on contemporary social science. I would agree, but also might change the verb tenses. Among the social scientists I know, modernization theory had exercised an influence but is now thoroughly discredited. My generation, who received our Ph.D.s in the 1970s, fought against modernization theory and we won. In my own case, this involved examining the utopian social movements of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. In my book *Morality and Power in a Chinese Village* (1984), I argued that what superficially looked like processes of modernization built upon, incorporated, and drew energy from traditional understandings of social morality. This view has become standard among scholars of modern China and indeed of “post-colonial” scholars elsewhere. Instead of rescuing modern scholarship from Weberian influence, we may need to rescue Weber from disillusionment with modernization theory. (Indeed, education in sociology today has less and less emphasis in classical social theory.) Joas’ work rehabilitates Weber – and indeed Durkheim and others of their generation – by facing up to their ambiguities and

inadequacies while recognizing the genuine brilliance of their insights. How then to keep new generations inspired by these thinkers without being “turned off” to sociology?

Another line of questioning concerns Joas’ powerful notion of “sacralization.” This complex of affective qualities that arise from self-transcendence gives rise to “ideal formation,” at least in Axial religions. I might like a clearer account of what “ideals” are. Joas warns against the use of “process nouns” to describe dynamic processes that ought to be rendered by verbs, but in my reading, he doesn’t do this for “ideals.” I wonder if we should think of ideals as an emergent process that only ever partially transcends practical material interests. Might this too be applied to the process of “sacralization” itself? Durkheim made an absolute distinction between sacred and profane. Joas’ notion of a sacralization process goes beyond this, but does it go far enough? Scholars of Chinese religions, for example, now seem to agree that Chinese language and culture do not make such a sharp distinction. This is true even for the Axial religion/morality of Confucianism, and certainly also for Taoism. Insofar as the self is seen in relational terms, it has always been transcended (at least in terms of Western perspectives) and may be transcended somewhat further in intense experiences, but the experience may be grounded in the mundane to a greater degree than we imagine in the West. Does Joas’ formulation account for what Tu Wei-ming (1985) paradoxically calls “the immanence of transcendence”? In any case, I might recommend a greater engagement with the work of contemporary Asianists. (Consider Peter van der Veer’s *The Spirit of Modern Asia* (2013), along with his colleagues at the Max Planck Institute in Gottingen.)

From this might flow some final questions about the universalization of morality stemming from the breakthrough to transcendence of the Axial Age. If we accept Robert Bellah’s point that “nothing is ever lost,” we see how universalistic Axial traditions continue to carry and indeed remain dependent upon particularistic rituals and myths. Our idealization of the universal is always saturated with commitments to particular communities, nations, or institutions. As Joas warns us, affirmation of universal ideals has easily turned into self-sacralization of particular communities. But I might suggest that the connections are so intimate that it is difficult to tell when universalism has given way to self-sacralization. And, indeed, they depend upon each other.

There is a political dimension here. If, as Michael Ignatieff (1986) said, one stands alone in front of the torturers and killers who have proliferated in the modern age and relies only on an assertion of one’s universal rights as a human person but has no particular community, no state to come to one’s aid – one has no chance of survival. We need the particular to support universal aspirations.

There is also an epistemological dimension. We need to transcend the particular through self-reflection, but the ability to carry out such reflection is dependent on

particular communities. Joas articulates well the interdependencies and tensions involved here, but I wonder if he could go even further. There is also a question as to how far any social scientist can go, if they stick to the language of the discipline – because the paradoxes of these interdependencies may push us beyond language – toward the “gateless gate” as a Zen Buddhist koan goes.

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Author's Reply by Hans Joas Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Most authors of books have had the experience of unfair reviews, and very often they crave an opportunity to respond to distorted presentations of their intentions and unsatisfactory summaries of their argument. It is a very good idea, therefore, to create a genre of intellectual exchange in which the reviewed author has a chance to respond in public to the reviewer.

In the present case, however, I have been very fortunate. Richard Madsen has given a clear and fair summary of my book to which I have no major objections. In the sense of full disclosure, I should mention that Madsen and I have one important thing in common, namely our admiration for Robert N. Bellah, the great sociologist

of religion. Madsen was part of the Bellah group and co-authored two of Bellah's most influential books (*Habits of the Heart* and *The Good Society*). I myself have admired Bellah since I first heard him give a lecture at the University of Chicago in 1985. From 1998 on, when I received an offer from the Berkeley sociology department, Bellah and I developed a lively intellectual exchange culminating in a conference we organized together in 2008. The papers of that meeting were later published in a volume we edited together (*The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, 2012). Richard Madsen is one of the contributors to that volume.

I am happy that the reviewer has recognized that my book is not just another critique of the secularization thesis. Rather, it deals with the *prehistory* of modern European secularization. If secularization is mostly a modern (i.e., post-18th century) European phenomenon, the question is whether we explain it out of the conditions of that time and place or whether we consider it the result of a tendency that is inherent in the Christian or Judeo-Christian traditions. Nietzsche thought along the latter lines, and Max Weber, although critical of Nietzsche and differing from him, developed a similar argument in his extremely influential narrative of a world-historical process of "disenchantment" that had allegedly begun with the anti-magical polemics of the Hebrew prophets. My book attempts to do justice to all the individual components of Weber's narrative but still to dispute it as a whole and to offer the fundamentals of an alternative to it.

Just two brief remarks on Madsen's summary are appropriate here. First, when Madsen writes that sacralization "leads to the formation of ideals," I would prefer to introduce the word "can" into this sentence. For me, the formation of ideals is the reflective articulation of pre-reflective experiences, and not everything that is experienced as sacred is ever clearly and in propositional statements articulated as "good" or "evil." Second, the fundamentals of the alternative that I offer in this book have, of course, to be further elaborated. This is the main focus of my current work, both in a new book already published in German and forthcoming in English in 2023 (*Under the Spell of Freedom*) and in a sequel to both books that is now on my desk.

At this point I can turn to Richard Madsen's questions. Both he and I make a clear distinction between Weber himself and the modernization theory of the 1950s and 60s that claimed to rely on him. While in modernization theory, for example, a close connection between (capitalist) economic modernization and democratization seemed to exist, Weber demonstrated, above all in his studies about Russia, that the relations are much more complex, and he considered the belief in a necessary connection and a bright future for democracy and liberal values completely misguided. This makes understandable why some social scientists, dissatisfied with optimistic modernization theory, turned to Weber as an alternative or tended to idealize him. But I am critical of both. Incidentally, I am not as sure as Richard Madsen that modernization theory is as thoroughly discredited as he assumes.

When the European communist regimes collapsed in and after 1989, the remaining proponents of that seemingly outdated paradigm took this as confirmation that they had always been right. Immanuel Wallerstein's famous 1976 obituary "Modernization: Requiescat in Pace" received a forceful rejoinder in 1991, when Edward Tiryakian published his essay "Modernisation: Exhumetur in Pace."

Madsen then asks for a clearer account of what I mean by "ideals." The most extensive account I have given so far is in my book *The Genesis of Values* (2000). It may be confusing that in that book my terminology is a little bit different from my later work. In the earlier book I speak of "ideals" mostly when I discuss John Dewey's theory of religion and otherwise use the term "values." Later, under the influence of Ernst Troeltsch and Émile Durkheim, I decided to speak of "ideals" as the reflective articulations of prereflective evaluations, and I use "values" as an umbrella term for both the reflective and prereflective levels.

Madsen also asks whether my term "sacralization" is not itself one of those "dangerous nouns of process" (Martin 2011) I am criticizing in the book. But not all nouns of process are dangerous; a warning about poisonous mushroom does not have to prevent us from eating any mushroom. I do not claim that "sacralization" characterizes a long-term world-historical process like "rationalization," "disenchantment," "modernization," or "functional differentiation" in most sociological theories. To study individual processes of sacralization does not fall into the same trap.

The distinction between "sacred" and "profane" in Durkheim – this is the next point in Madsen's list of questions – is an attempt on the conceptual level to articulate a difference on the level of experience. To make this conceptual distinction does not imply that cultures themselves make a clear conceptual distinction here. The vocabularies of different cultures vary enormously in this regard. I do not know Chinese, but the mere difference between German and French, neighboring cultures, caused Durkheim and Rudolf Otto to express similar thoughts quite differently. Whereas for Otto the "holy" necessarily implied something morally good, Durkheim's "sacred" was morally indifferent. The concept of "transcendent" is another topic where disciplinary language and natural languages have their own respective rights. In my book I discuss notions of "transcendence" "as the product of consistent reflection on the origin of sacredness. Ideas about transcendence radicalize the experience of the unavailability of the sacred. Demagification is thus a necessary correlate of ideas about transcendence because magic represents the attempt to command the sacred. Ideas of transcendence embody the ethicization of the abandonment of attempts to command the sacred" (p. 192). In the Christian tradition God can thus be addressed as *fons omnis sanctitatis*, "the source of all sacredness." But the idea that transcendence implies spatial distance ("heaven") is not logically necessary and has to a large extent become obsolete in the Western world due to revolutionary

changes in cosmology. Moreover, talking about immanent transcendence is not merely a phenomenon of the discourse about Chinese thinking, but goes back to Georg Simmel in European intellectual history.

But Richard Madsen, the China expert, is of course right when he recommends a greater engagement with contemporary Asianists. Fortunately, I am familiar with Peter van der Veer's work and have come into closer contact with others in the field, for example Michael Puett, who contributed one of the "blurbs" to my book. Four of my books have so far been translated into Chinese, but the discourse about religion is particularly difficult there at the moment.

I fully agree with Madsen when he writes in his concluding paragraphs that even universalist ideals can be used for the purpose of self-sacralization (for example in allegedly Christian colonialism or U.S. foreign policy) and that "we need the particular to support universal aspirations." Actually, I could not agree more. Other writings of mine on migration policy or the dangers of cosmopolitanism have a thrust similar to Madsen's here.

I also share Madsen's worries about the question of what all that means for the status and the future of the discipline of sociology. My own path is to take the deeply interdisciplinary character of the "founders" like Max Weber seriously and to include the much-neglected Ernst Troeltsch in the canon of our discipline.

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