
Hans JOAS, *The Power of the Sacred.*
An Alternative to the Narrative of Disenchantment
(New York, Oxford University Press, 2021, 402 p.)

Hungarians discomfited by the authoritarian rule of Viktor Orbán since 2010 like to tell untranslatable jokes in which their Prime Minister is likened to a monarch, or even to God. The citizens who poke fun at their supreme leader in this way allege that his corrupt domination rests on a mesh of secular institutions, located in Brussels as well as Budapest. Orbán began his career as an anti-communist liberal. Today, he is widely considered to be the ultimate political opportunist, devoid of any deep convictions let alone spirituality. In their populist crusading, however, Orbán and his Fidesz party have skilfully enlisted the support of the country's major Christian Churches and manipulated the most sacred symbols of Hungarian statehood and national identity.

Orbán may not be (a) God, but human leaders have assumed the mantle of the sacred in a range of guises since prehistory. One goal of Hans Joas in this extraordinary book (ably translated by Alex Skinner from the German publication of 2017) is to rewrite the history of what social anthropologists have variously labelled the symbolic, sacred, or cosmological dimension of politics. However, the empirical phenomenon of divine kingship is broached only in the last of the book's seven chapters. The preceding six are an adventure trail in the history of ideas, adding up to a humanist philosophy of history for the 21st century. Joas rejects Hegelian teleology ferociously. Yet the copious references to his own writings, dating back to an early critique of Jürgen Habermas and pioneering studies of American pragmatist philosophy in the 1980s, suggest a quality of inevitability in the author's personal path. In Germany, the author is respected for his expertise in various subfields of sociology as well as in the history of the discipline and in debates concerning *longue durée* history. But he also has a reputation as a public intellectual concerned with defending "faith as an option"—the title of a volume that was published in English in 2014 by Stanford University Press. In his case, faith means the Roman Catholicism in which Joas was raised in post-war Bavaria. This book can therefore be read at two levels. It is a magisterial exercise in historical social science with regard to religion that should be read by anyone interested in this field. At the

same time, the book is a highly self-conscious demonstration that a *Christian* social scientist can apply “objective” intellectual rigor when engaging with comparative religion and even theology. This second level lends the entire book a stimulating edge. In an academic world still pervaded by the assumptions of secularization, such an author is bound to sound defensive at times. But Joas’s stance is open and ultimately future-oriented: in an age in which the imperative to moral universalism has become urgent and apparently uncontentious, he presents a powerful case for grounding this universalism in new dialogues with the religious.

The main foil in this overall undertaking is Max Weber, though more than 100 pages pass before he moves to centre stage. Weber was not the first to use the metaphor of disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) but it is thanks to him, notably in the revised version of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that was published shortly before his death, that it has become almost a cliché in the social sciences. Joas is disenchanted with these disciplines and indeed with the very concept of modernity because, in his view, it blinkers the vision of the great majority of academic social scientists by turning them away from history. The concepts of differentiation and modernization are rejected as “dangerous nouns of process” that harbour Eurocentric bias. For the founders of sociology, in particular for Émile Durkheim as well as for Weber, nothing was more important for grasping human society than religion. 20th century theories of functionalist differentiation, by contrast, have relegated the study of religion to a marginal subdiscipline. Joas is convinced that the erroneous idea of a disenchanted secular modernity has impoverished our understanding of social change. It is therefore high time to come up with an alternative. Thoroughly familiar with anglophone and francophone literatures but relying above all on the hermeneutic and phenomenological traditions of his native country, no one is better qualified than Hans Joas to undertake this ambitious task.

Though they could not be held up for inspection and critique before the 18th century, the beliefs, myths and embodied practices that we today call religion are a human universal. Joas devotes much of his third chapter to Durkheim’s last great work, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* of 1912. This was based mainly on early ethnological data from Australia. Despite inadequacies in grappling with the realities of aboriginal totemism and its exaggeration of the congruence between the collectivity and the sacred (much that is sacred can be experienced by an individual self, while much that is collective is profane), Joas endorses Durkheim’s binary, and the argument that society is brought into being through the experience of “collective effervescence” in the performance

of rituals. The Australian forms are archetypal for comparable processes of “ideal formation” through sacralization that occur in all human societies. For Joas (and, he suggests, also for Durkheim himself), the secularism espoused by many early social scientists can itself be considered an innovative form of sacralization. (It is noted in passing that Soviet and Nazi regimes were later to introduce far more elaborate collective secular rituals than those pioneered in revolutionary France.) The dynamics of sacralization cannot be reduced to any evolutionary law but must be approached as contingent constellations. The infrastructural power of the state (if there is one) may be as important as military or economic power. As befitting an admirer of Dilthey, in Joas’s account *ideas* have a certain priority. But new ideas, such as the metamorphosis of a tribal chief into a divine king, tend to have a flip side: the language and symbols are also available to the underdogs and can potentially be turned against the rulers.

This is not to claim that everything in human history is fluid and continuous. Joas rejects the Weberian proposition of a great divide accomplished by the Protestant Reformation as the harbinger of capitalism, only to endorse an alternative model of “before” and “after”. Following Karl Jaspers and an impressive cast of European and North American scholars, Joas proposes that a world historical breakthrough occurred in the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE: the Axial Age. China, India, Israel and Greece, for the most part independently, influenced by highly variable forms of the archaic state, gave birth to new ideals of ethicized “transcendence”. The overview in Chapter 5 of ongoing debates in this field is superb. Joas acknowledges familiar objections, for example the fact that in China we are dealing with the ethicization of much older teachings, a phenomenon very different from the rise of monotheisms, which in any case can hardly be confined to the time-frame proposed by Jaspers. If this is so, and if the “breakthrough” to what Joas terms “reflexive sacralization” was foreshadowed in numerous “higher tribal religions,” it seems reasonable to question this demarcation, even as an abstract ideal type. Joas opts to retain the term Axial Age, but to pluralize it, while calling for further empirical investigation to clarify the many uncertainties in the historiography.

The “transcendent” religions differ sharply from the “immanent” forms examined by Durkheim and the ethnologists in pre-Axial or tribal societies. Durkheim failed to appreciate this epochal shift. Weber did grasp it, by homing in on the Jewish prophets. Yet when he wrote of disenchantment, he failed to distinguish clearly between the shift away from magic and the much later changes in the “higher” religions that

eventually led to their decline. Juxtaposing microscopic textual analysis with concrete examples from the historical record, Joas demonstrates that Weber confused *demagification* with *detranscendalization*. Neither of these entails *desacralization*. The upshot is that much of Max Weber's writing about religion is demonstrably ambiguous and inconsistent. He famously described himself as "religiously unmusical" but his work was contaminated by anti-Catholic polemics, not to mention an evolutionism that betrayed the influence of James Frazer. Joas criticises Weber's habit of disguising interpretations that lacked empirical support with bold assertions of veracity. He recommends jettisoning the key Weberian concept of Occidental rationalism along with the suspect noun of process, "rationalization". At the same time, however, via a close reading of the master's celebrated "Intermediate Reflection," Joas detects a prescient outline of the "fields of tension" that humans cannot evade. These cannot be reduced to functionalist differentiation theory, nor can they be superseded by Habermasian ideas of communicative rationality. They prove fruitful in formulating Joas's own synthesis of moral universalism with religion. It seems that, despite the seemingly devastating critique, even in a work whose main goal is to set out an alternative narrative, it remains practically impossible for a German scholar to desacralize Max Weber.

The historical-sociological empiricism that Joas prefers to the philosophical abstractions of Jaspers extends to the history of ideas in general. They must be investigated in material, institutional contexts. As a result, causalities become highly complex. Despite his suspicion of directionality and denial of evolutionary stages, an insidious evolutionist trend is apparent in Joas's final chapter on power. The egalitarian societies that Durkheim considered in 1912 left no scope for individual domination. This changed with the emergence of the state and of priest-kings, whose activities were somehow linked to agriculture and the production of a surplus. The nature of this sacralised kingship was transformed by the prophets but, drawing on the work of Kantorowicz and many other authorities, Joas shows that such ideas of sacrality remained endemic in Christianity as in other post-Axial traditions. Eventually, however, the sacralization of peoples displaced the divinity of rulers. The demise of multicultural empires and their replacement in recent centuries by nation-states are dealt with rather brusquely. Joas approves of Anthony Smith's emphasis on the continuities between modern nationalisms and earlier forms of collective identity that highlighted religious symbols and notions of a "chosen people". Modernist accounts that stress the requirements of an industrial social order are not considered (Ernest Gellner's theory of nationalism would doubtless be dismissed as functionalist).

The dynamics of sacred power (including the balance between the magical-particular and the transcendental-universal) are evidently highly mutable, yet Joas pays rather scant attention to constraints imposed by forms of economy and political sovereignty that cannot be so easily reversed. His evolutionary ratchet (ostensibly denied but implicit nonetheless) culminates in the individual. The brevity of the discussion at this point is excused with references to a spate of related publications (notably *The Sacredness of the Person. A New Genealogy of Human Rights*, published by Georgetown University Press in 2013).

Though this is obviously the account of an erudite contemporary European relying on sources drawn overwhelmingly from the North Atlantic region, Hans Joas recognizes the accomplishments and fundamental equivalence of other Eurasian civilizations. When it comes to religion (as distinct from morality), he is a relativist, happy to acknowledge the enduring value of pre-Axial beliefs and practices as well as the plurality of Axial Ages. Within Christianity, it is curious to note that his heroes are a trinity of Protestants: the liberal theologian Ernst Troeltsch (a contemporary and friend of Weber), and the anglophone sociologists Robert Bellah and David Martin. Other names and other disciplines contribute to the mosaic. Some readers might question the need to open with a chapter devoted to David Hume's "natural history" approach to religion, and to follow this with a chapter explicating the psychology of William James. But for Joas these two authors are as crucial as Durkheim for the building blocks he needs in order to articulate a holistic account. In contrast, he suggests that the work of Charles Taylor is vitiated by a Catholic bias (Taylor has nonetheless supplied a generous endorsement for the book's cover).

It seems churlish to complain, but this magnum opus lacks an incisive conclusion, apart from a few paragraphs at the end of Chapter 7 in which the author reflects on how his normative position has shaped the preceding analysis. Durkheim reappears in this final chapter as the source for the notion of the sacredness of the person. Clearly, this form of sacralization has little in common with the ecstasy and effervescence that he had placed at the centre of his theory in *Elementary Forms*. According to Joas, processes of sacralization are endlessly dynamic and we should be open to new secular forms. Disenchantment must be firmly rejected, along with all forms of "collective self-sacralization"—after all, these were once responsible for plunging Europe into fascism. But some readers might ask themselves: what are the prospects for the liberal moral universalism that Joas urges if the dominant contemporary sources of ecstasy and transcendence are found (collectively) in populist politics, closely

followed by aggressive sporting contests, and (individually) via the mystique of capitalist branding and influencers in the social media? Was this not Weber's intuition when he extended the range of his metaphor? Is *Entzauberung* still not a useful umbrella term to grasp the predicament of a world in which collective self-sacralization—no longer the key to the very constitution of society—is now an obstacle to be overcome?

The moral universalism of Hans Joas is all-embracing. It covers not only humanity but also other species and our environments. It does not absolve its human adherents from the task of making choices and attaching appropriate weight to more *particular* commitments, for example to kin or perhaps to fellow citizens. At this point of the discussion, on the last page, we seem close to a Habermasian realm of sober rationalist public debate (Habermas is a brooding presence throughout this work). In order to continue, one needs to know more precisely how Joas envisages the sacredness of the individual person. Does it imply the free choice of faith on a religious marketplace? Historically, missionizing by the powerful has weakened and eliminated many traditional religions that Joas in principle wants to value. This is not just a question of indigenous cultural heritage in remote places. Most Roman Catholics in Hungary and Poland would agree with their Orthodox neighbours that their historic churches should be protected against the forces of religious globalization. Religious symbols are prominent in the crowds that cheer at the political rallies of populist leaders in Central Europe, as they are in the United States. When this book was originally published, the presidency of Donald Trump was barely under way. Perhaps in further editions Joas (who is certainly not one to shy away from the challenges of our era) can shed further light on the fanatical loyalty that leaders such as Trump inspire—and the sacralization constellations that make this phenomenon possible.

Hans Joas agrees with Robert Bellah that “nothing is ever lost” in the landfill of history. A lurch back to “magification” can never be ruled out. I find it hard to imagine how “collective self-sacralization” can be entirely transcended in human communities. Is individualist moral universalism a utopian fudge, or can the indispensable collective element be provided by some form of Church? Can Joas's universalism be reconciled with the doctrines, institutional structures and concrete practices of his own Church? If history teaches us that *collective* rituals are indispensable for successful ideal formation, how is the sacredness of the *person* to be realised in the twenty-first century? These are some of the questions I had in my mind at the end of this book, and no doubt the author will

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continue to engage with them. Meanwhile the current situation of liberal cosmopolitans in Budapest suggests that the Churches of human rights and tolerant civil society remain weakly developed. The populists are much more skilled at manipulating the sacred dimension of politics—and not only in Hungary.

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