TOWARD A MORAL UNIVERSALISM

Hans Joas, *Im Bannkreis der Freiheit. Religionstheorie nach Hegel und Nietzsche*
(Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2020, 668 p.)

For the better part of three decades, Hans Joas, who currently holds the Ernst Troeltsch Honorary Professorship for the Sociology of Religion in the Department of Theology at the Humboldt University of Berlin, has been engaged in one of the most challenging and ambitious intellectual projects unfolding within contemporary thought. Combining immense erudition spanning the fields of philosophy, history, sociology, and theology, with an acute analytical mind, Joas has pursued in a series of books what he calls an "affirmative genealogy" of values, one that does not downplay or deny the reality of religious experience, but acknowledges its continuing relevance and importance for all of humanity. Growing out of his early work on pragmatism—Joas's dissertation was on the American sociologist, philosopher, and psychologist George Herbert Mead—this project gradually took shape in such major works as *Die Entstehung der Werte* [1997], *Braucht der Mensch Religion? Über Erfahrungen der Selbsttranszendenz* [2004], *Die Sakralität der Person. Eine neue Genealogie der Menschenrechte* [2011], and *Die Macht des Heiligen. Eine Alternative zur Geschichte von der Entzauberung* [2017]. The fact that Joas sees all of these works as building blocks in the construction of an even larger, coherent edifice is evident in his newest book, *Im Bannkreis der Freiheit*, where he refers frequently in footnotes to those earlier studies, explaining how they elaborate or expand on arguments he makes about various issues he is able to touch on only tangentially here. The effect is very much one of a work in progress, not in the negative sense of something that is deficient or incomplete, but rather in the positive sense of an expansive, vital exploration of a vastly complex set of phenomena.

At the heart of this enterprise, as the titles of his most recent books suggest, is the effort to construct an alternative history of modernity that questions many of the fundamental assumptions underlying our conception of it. And central to that effort is Joas's insistence that religion, or rather religious experience, be taken seriously as an integral component of our human existence and therefore an indispensable part of all cultural production. Joas is fully aware of the provocative nature of that claim within the *soi-disant* secular intellectual Atlantic world, and he devotes a

Robert E. Norton, University of Notre Dame, USA [rnorton@nd.edu]

European Journal of Sociology, 62, 3 (2021), pp. 514–518—0003-9756/21/0000-900$07.50per art + $0.10 per page
© *European Journal of Sociology* 2022 [doi: 10.1017/S0003975622000030].

good deal of energy to explaining what he both means and does *not* mean by it. He is not talking about any particular expression of religious feeling, nor is he focusing solely on any of the major world religions, and even less is he making a narrow plea for the validity of specific religious tenets. Rather, he is referring to something similar to what Rudolf Otto called *das Gefühl des Numinosen*—"the feeling of the numinous"—that he claimed could be found across all cultures and times. It is this profound, lived *experience*, in which we feel transported beyond our own personhood or transcend our individual boundedness, and which, precisely as a lived experience or feeling, cannot be reduced to or explained by purely rational categories, that stands at the core of Joas's reflections.

Not surprisingly, Joas devotes one of the chapters in his book to a discussion of Rudolf Otto and to what Joas identifies as his notion of "secular holiness." Otto's work is still valuable today, Joas argues, because it offers a bridge between the dominant discourse of secularization and the undeniable "multitude of experiences of self-transcendence even outside of religions, for example in art, nature, and eroticism" [124]. But Otto is only one of the many figures Joas considers here, who include Max Scheler, Ernst Cassirer, Paul Tillich, H. Richard Niebuhr, John Dewey, Reinhart Koselleck, Charles Taylor, Paul Ricoeur, Wolfgang Huber, Werner Stark, David Martin, and Robert Bellah. Yet if there is one person who stands out for Joas among this impressive line-up of thinkers it is Ernst Troeltsch, the namesake of the chair he holds in Berlin, who lived from 1865 to 1923. For Joas, Troeltsch, whose work also traversed the fields of philosophy, theology, history, and sociology and to which he made many pioneering contributions, provides a robust set of intellectual tools that can be used to construct the "alternative" history of modernity that Joas wants to offer, which justifies, in Joas's words, "Troeltsch's preeminent significance for the questions that are pursued in this book" [66].

There are two main sources of this significance for Joas. The first is Troeltsch's abiding appreciation for the elemental nature of the experiential basis at the heart of all religions, which was informed and sustained by his own fundamental, and inexplicable, religious belief [68]. The second is his uncompromising historicism. For Troeltsch, all historical values and norms are radically contingent, the products of particular developments in particular places and at particular times. There is nothing "necessary" about any historical development; it merely occurs and could have always been otherwise. Not only does this view dispense with all teleological narratives; it also makes meaningless any claim for the superiority—or inferiority—of any individual cultural ideal or artifact, including, not incidentally, religion. They are all expressions or reflections of the people and circumstances that created them, but they cannot make any claim to being more "true" or "genuine" than any other. That does not mean that Troeltsch, or Joas, abandons truth as a point of orientation or standard; on the contrary. But there is not just one truth: there are multiple truths. Although Troeltsch, whose work focused almost exclusively on the cultures of Europe from Antiquity through the modern period, did not discuss in any detail non-European traditions, he explicitly referred to what he called the "sublime world of wonders"—*erhabene Wunderwelt*—embodied in non-Christian religions that emanated from the same primal experience but assumed different forms.

And here we begin to see how the structure of Joas's book is itself a reflection of his deeper philosophical and historical intentions. Although he admits that many of the figures he considers have been "forgotten" or are now "little known" [11], that is precisely the point. The subtitle of the book is subtly programmatic: Joas wants to liberate—the word is deliberately chosen—the study of religion and its role in modernity from the vice grip of the two most influential thinkers of the last two hundred years. Albeit for different reasons, both Hegel and Nietzsche—one a teleological philosopher *par excellence*, the other the most radical philosophical *provocateur* in the modern era—have dominated the discussion of religion in the West for the past two centuries. The underappreciated thinkers Joas presents in his unorthodox roster, and especially Ernst Troeltsch—all of whom were declaredly not Hegelians or Nietzscheans—exemplify, both in their thinking and in their relative reputations, the more pluralist, tolerant, inclusive, non-hierarchical, and non-normative approach that Joas himself takes to the subject. And the one normative idea that Joas calls into question is the notion of the absolute autonomy of the individual as expressed in our idea of political freedom. That is the meaning of the book's main title, which is difficult to translate into English: since the 18th century, Joas argues, the discussion of religion has stood under the "jurisdiction" or the "spell"—the *Bannkreis*—of freedom, that is, it has become "impossible to articulate any of the values of modernity without declaring it to be a facet of the idea of individual autonomy" [16]. Joas wants to break this "spell" by showing that there is an alternative path, one that rises above the individual and connects us to something that we all share. For, as he argues, what applies, following Troeltsch, to all religions applies as well to political ideologies, including the specific value we call freedom.

In the sixteen "portraits" of thinkers Joas presents in the book, we receive highly nuanced and deeply informed reflections on various facets of the problems outlined here. In each one, the place and function of religion, or its absence, are considered within the larger context of that thinker's oeuvre, and put into dialogue with the overarching themes Joas pursues. In each, there is something to discover even if the thinker's work may be familiar to the reader. And throughout, Joas shows himself to be a perceptive, patient, and fair-minded reader himself, noting his disagreements with individual arguments or thinkers, but always with generosity and respect. One feels in the company of someone who does not only speak, but also listens.

Which seems only appropriate given Joas's ultimate purpose. The book concludes with what he calls four "desiderata" for the discussion of religion and political freedom. The first is—and again taking the lead from Ernst Troeltsch—that the "independence"—*Selbständigkeit*—of religion, or of any ideal formation, be observed and upheld. By that Joas means that we should respect and try to understand the autonomous character of religious experience and not try to transform it into something else, including a rational accounting of it. Second, he calls for a radical understanding of historical contingency and acceptance that there is not *one* history but always and everywhere *multiple* histories. Similarly, and third, Joas reminds us that even individual freedom makes sense only in the relational context of others, and that for freedom and self-determination to be realized, inter-subjective conditions are necessary. Joas calls this, in another untranslatable phrase, *verdankte Freiheit*, or the freedom we owe to others: other people, other institutions, other ideals. And fourth and finally, he calls for a "global historical turn" that truly encompasses the cultures and traditions of the entire world when considering what makes us human [579-583]. If these four "desiderata" are fulfilled, Joas expresses hope that there would truly be a "third way" [584] beyond a Hegelian teleological universalism and a Nietzschean power-driven skepticism. It would yield what Joas calls a "moral universalism" that would form the content of the "affirmative genealogy" he proposed at the beginning:

> because the confrontation with the contingencies of history can after all also confront us with past suffering and injustice, so that we can feel ourselves be profoundly moved and called to undertake actions that are intended to prevent the repetition of such suffering and such injustice [603].

That seems to me to be the ethical core of this remarkable book: it does not just call on us to think differently about the meaning and function of those experiences which unite us with our fellow human beings; it urges us to heed what they tell us, and to act.

ROBERT E. NORTON