

SACRALISATION AND SECULARISATION – A MUTUAL RELATIONSHIP

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Foto: Heike Steinhilber

Few academics can pride themselves on such an extensive oeuvre as Hans Joas. In the plethora of his publications, he repeatedly examined questions surrounding the social dimension of values, how they emerge and how they change. In his internationally acclaimed book “The Genesis of Values”, published in 1997, the Permanent Fellow of the School of History investigated the experiences through which humans discover values for themselves and define them as important. “I maintain that we do not arrive at our most fundamental value commitments because someone has convinced us of them with rational arguments, but rather that we unquestionably perceive something to be good or bad. I am interested in looking at how humans develop these deep-rooted, subjectively evident and intensely affective convictions from specific experiences.” The theory formulated whilst writing this book is now taken as a starting point for the scope of the project entitled “Sacralisation and Secularisation” to which Hans Joas will devote his time at FRIAS until spring 2014. The move of the Erfurt Max Weber Centre’s former director to FRIAS last April marked a thematic shift in the School of History as it

opened up to historically-oriented neighbouring disciplines. Hans Joas also continued his visiting professorship at the University of Chicago.

He has already concluded the first of his FRIAS projects, a monograph entitled “The Sacredness of the Person. A New Genealogy of Human Rights” published in October 2011 by Suhrkamp. Here, Hans Joas explores the origins of the concept of human rights and, adopting the style of a “study in historical sociology”, shows how universal human rights were established as a moral value that has gained wide acceptance since it was enshrined in law in the 18th century. To illustrate his point, Joas takes a series of historical events against which he narrates the story of how these values came into being. “I wanted to apply the theory that I formulated in 1997 in my book on the genesis of values to a specific complex of values,” states the social scientist, explaining the idea behind the project. To do so, he looks in detail at two historic events that happened on specific dates, and two that were rather the product of more drawn-out processes: the declarations of human rights made in the 18th century in the context of the American and

French revolutions and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted in 1948 on the one hand; the abolition of torture in Europe in the 18th century and the abolition of slavery as a legitimate institution, which took place in many countries during the 19th century, on the other. “I attempt to account for these events and to explain why they happened at precisely those moments in time,” says Hans Joas describing his approach. “And I apply the term ‘sacralisation of the person’ to this entire complex of events”.

Another book project that the academic is about to complete at FRIAS is a study entitled “Faith as an Option” which is due to be published in 2012. This book intends to examine the state of religion in the present day. Its starting point is a phenomenon demonstrated by Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor – the emergence of the “secular option” – which developed in the 18th century triggered by a fundamental debate on religion, new schools of thought devoted to Enlightenment and a hostility towards religion elicited by the French Revolution. “In Europe it was all but impossible to be a non-believer until the 18th century. The birth and expansion of the secular option reduced religious belief itself to a mere possibility. The question was no longer why a believer professed a faith in a particular religion, but why he subscribed to a faith at all,” explains Hans Joas. “I am convinced that the current religious situation in Europe is influenced by the loss of certain pseudo-self-evidences. Since the 18th century, non-believers have said that they knew history was leading towards secularisation and that religion would become unnec-

essary in the future. This view, however, despite having long held sway in the social sciences, is now recognised to be untenable.” Joas cites the example of South Korea, where rapid modernisation was not accompanied by secularisation, but rather by Christianisation and religious revitalisation. Nevertheless, it is not impossible that the reverse development can take place. Emergence of the secular option may very well lead to a secularised way of thinking, and thus of living. “Today we have the first radically secularised societies, for example in the Czech Republic and Scandinavia,” the social scientist explains. “But it would be absurd, and empirically flawed, to purport that these societies have no moral self-discipline.” His theory is that the renunciation of faith in favour of the secular option does not inexorably lead to the decline of values and the collapse of moral standards. On the contrary, many Scandinavian societies in particular are characterised by remarkably strong cohesion. When seen in this light it becomes clear why Joas cites his fundamental insights into the genesis of values as the basis for this debate on faith.

A third work on what is known as the Axial Age likewise falls within the scope of this research. In an anthology that Joas is due to publish in autumn 2012 with renowned American sociologist Robert Bellah, he will focus entirely on the period from 800 to 200 BC, exploring it as a time in which the idea of transcendence developed historically. The term “Axial Age” was coined by philosopher Karl Jaspers to denote a time during which parallel changes occurred in religion and thought almost simultaneously in several ci-

vilisations. “It was a prophetic age which bore witness to a dramatic change. Suddenly, God or the Gods and divine powers were thought of as outer-worldly, and this led to consequences of a socio-political nature,” states Hans Joas. “As soon as the idea of transcendence emerges, a ruler or given structure of social inequality can, itself, no longer be divine. A ruler can then only claim to be appointed by God. This opens the door to criticism of those in power or social injustice.” The connection to the working title of Joas’s FRIAS project, “Sacralisation and Secularisation”, is clear: the criticism of ruling powers as made possible by the idea of transcendence provides the starting point for the de-sacralisation of political domination. The next part of the researcher’s project, which will explore the tensions between political domination and religious interpretation, is set to focus more closely on this field. (ab)

