

## Hans Joas, Braucht der Mensch Religion? Über Erfahrungen der Selbsttranszendenz

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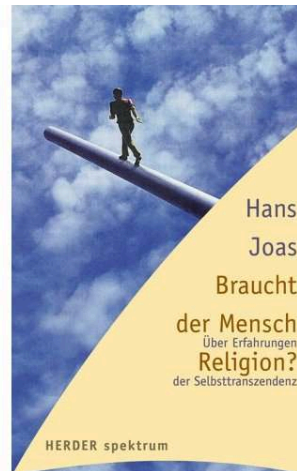
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## REFERENCES

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1 For decades the supporters of secularization and religious revival have conducted heated debates in support of the one or other thesis (or rather, hypothesis); each with increasingly fervent invective, each bent on defending an aprioristic point of view rather than collecting and comparing empirical data. Even in the face of significant empirical evidence, some uncertainties remain regarding the representativeness of the samples used, the possibility of generalizing the results and the duration of the trends emerging.



- 2 Meanwhile, one unequivocal fact must be taken into account: religions continue to resist various secularizing thrusts and persevere at global level, influencing, more or less openly, both the attitude and the behaviour of billions of people.
- 3 Moreover, sociologists themselves, although deontologically committed to maintaining a scientifically neutral stance, are not immune from some kind of confessional leaning, that shows through value judgments, operational suggestions, through dictates on what 'ought to be' and a-critical devaluation of the points of view of others, contested only because they do not converge with their own.
- 4 At times, the defence of a particular vision of reality is effectively shrouded in theoretical rigour and methodological thoroughness, but, in the long run, prejudicial positions can be detected in turns of phrase, allusions, the use of adjectives, reticence, and fundamental options.
- 5 When talking about values, social scientists, however scrupulous, cannot hide their own orientations which emerge in their language choices, the authors quoted, the geopolitical and territorial references made, the argumentative modes adopted.
- 6 However, the main flaw is to be found in the empirical grounds upon which theses supporting a particular *Weltanschauung* are built. Truly reliable research studies are, in fact, few and far between, especially at comparative level, because too many procedural problems deriving from exceedingly diverging contexts influence the results of scientific research. All told, only a profound knowledge of rationales and historical and cultural dynamics can – if at all – justify heterogeneous results, broadly diverging percentages, somewhat flexible correlations, correspondences between variables that are not easy to read.
- 7 Yet, by forcing statistics and similarities between different frameworks, one may end up by providing an all-inclusive interpretation of rather complex realities, weak in methodological acumen and devoid of the necessary adaptation of certain aspects of a social-historical-anthropological nature. This explains why some descriptions, the intrinsic value of which lies more in the rhetoric of appealing expressions (such as “the eclipse of the sacred”; “invisible religion”; “silent revolution”; “secular age”; and so on) than in the soundness of empirical data and in the efficacy of a scientific approach related to the phenomenon being examined, attain widespread credibility at international level.

- 8 Hans Joas's position in this sense appears rather problematic, because, while his affirmations, in the broad sense, may be agreed with, they contain contradictions and marginal notes that make it difficult to agree totally with them.
- 9 In various parts of Joas's discourse there are clear evaluative cues, accompanied by explicit assumption of stance, although later denied in the same passage.
- 10 In conclusion, the collocation of the author is clearly definable, at times self-consistent, with some suggestions of a prejudicial culture, despite some possibilistic openings concerning the definition of sociological situations and profiles on the whole.
- 11 Absolutism and dogmatism do not belong to the German scholar's usual vocabulary or even to his implicit language, although some of the positions, emerging here and there in his approach while probably masked, are always evident to the attentive reader.
- 12 On the other hand, his reference to sacrality, to transcendence, to the perception of values (and therefore to religion) does not pass unnoticed. Consequences and interpretations may be drawn from this reference, which, indisputably, deny both the decline of religion and religious awakening, and tend to confute correlations between the process of modernization and the progress of secularization, confining the latter to a simple "contingency", localized essentially in Europe.
- 13 In reality, Joas tends to refuse similarities between religion and self-suggestion therapy, and points, instead, to the historical novelty of secularization, that appears initially in the 1950's in Eastern Europe, in the 1970's in Western Europe.
- 14 He avails of all this to confute the idea that moral decline is due to secularization: even the most secularized European societies are not influenced – in his view – by processes of modernization, and therefore can maintain their own moral profile, despite the pressures of secularization. Indeed, to confirm this position Joas quotes the case of Banfield's amoral familism in southern Italy, in order to maintain that even the most religiously oriented of societies may be inclined towards corruption or analogous forms of amorality.
- 15 In reality, this kind of reference fails to mention the *vexata quaestio* which for decades has led to strong critiques of the true nature of the absence of morality in southern Italy. The fact is that amoral familism, precisely because it has been contested so much from so many points of view, is not sufficiently emblematic to corroborate the particularly relevant statement of the role of religion in relation to non-virtuous behaviour. In other words, Banfield's example does not suit discussion of a broader kind (a small town in Lucania can hardly be considered an adequate instance suitable for historical and international comparison).
- 16 All told, the fact that secularization does not necessarily imply moral decline is reasonable enough, but the empirical evidence produced does not add much to what is already known; instead, it seems to be counterproductive, being, as it is, associated with research, generally considered unreliable on account of its methodology and the degree of comprehension of the reality examined (also from a linguistic point of view). Above all, the theoretical conclusions of the study have led to prejudice, a bias so explicit that is now considered almost a classic *tópos* in the field of social sciences applied to the Italian context.
- 17 It is possible to agree with Joas, on the contrary, when he sustains the exiguity of the connection between the phenomenon of secularization and the decline of morality. The same can be said for the relationship between modernization and trends in ethical

propensities. In fact the frequently contradictory results that emerge from empirical data lead to corroboration of the hypothesis of the absence of a direct relationship between processes of modernization and a crisis of morals.

- 18 The four secularization and morality levels proposed by Joas deserve even greater in-depth analysis: first, whether the resilience of morality is due to its own long historical tradition; secondly whether the so-called tribal societies too base their morality on religion; thirdly, whether interaction between new religious modes and traditional morality exists; and finally, whether moral rules have a double origin. The aim is that of identifying the dangers (and risks) represented by the event of a moral regression. In short, as can be seen here too, the approach tends to focus more on the consequences of secularization than, perhaps, on the need to fully understand the reality underlying the analysis.
- 19 The first issue: the author makes a distinction mainly between Catholics and Protestants, affirming that where the former would be more inclined to see the world as separated from God, the latter, would see God as pretty well present in real life. In short, Catholics would claim that every human relation is established with the divinity itself, while Protestants would assign an exclusively human value to the issue. In education processes the differences would be evident: the Protestants would learn a spirit of enterprise, integrity and initiative, while loyalty, obedience and patience would be the values transmitted to the Catholics.
- 20 Joas shuns excessively simplified schemata and recurs to suggestions found in Ronald Inglehart's international empirical studies, now rather out-dated (going back to over thirty years ago) and, moreover, not always reliable from a methodological point of view, especially as far as the sampling used in the various countries examined is concerned. Above all, Inglehart's studies lack empirical evidence relating to the presumed connections between the different denominations that are more influential outside than inside the USA. The differences also regard the young and should not therefore be linked to age classes but to cultural factors peculiar to Great Britain, Ireland, Canada and Australia, which yield results contrary to those for the USA.
- 21 Therefore, the religious imagination appears to exercise continual influence even where it is quite distant from religious tradition. This position might be acceptable and shareable (it is no chance that it is quite similar to my theoretical proposal of *diffused religion* as a result of territorial and cultural confessional dominance). But Joas goes as far as to say that all secular visions retain residual traces of the religious imagination. My opinion differs from Joas's on this extension of religious content to all forms of secularization. Undoubtedly there are elements of the Lutheran Protestant culture in Swedish politics, and of the Orthodox culture in Stalinist Soviet politics, but it is not plausible to put a religious label on all cases, including atheism. In other words, secularization may have religious roots, but this is not necessarily true at all times and in all cases.
- 22 It must also be pointed out that in many instances Joas appears to be judgemental. On the one hand, he defines as ridiculous some opinions that do not coincide with his own, which, by the way, are not always empirically sustained. On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that the German sociologist does refuse some summary evaluations on the disinformation of religiously oriented individuals and on the immorality of atheists.
- 23 He rightly observes that those evaluations do have a moral content, but he adds that they contain ideological distortions and do not appear serious. Thus, considerations

based on value judgments and unverified sociological statements re-emerge, unsupported by adequate bibliographical references.

- 24 As regards the second issue, Joas does not insist on the pervasiveness of religion, and thinks that tribal solidarity originates from a moral source independent of religious afflatus, based on a (Durkheimian) feeling of collectivity and on a (Malinowskian) spirit of cooperation, and reciprocity in the generous (Maussian) exchange of gifts.
- 25 It is precisely the topic of reciprocity which re-emerges when addressing the third issue: morality, that orients the behaviour of mutual assistance, strives to assert itself and therefore requires a religious support. Once more the centrality of religion emerges, but Joas maintains, rightly, that religious motivations are not sufficient, and that the thrust towards non-violence and towards respect of human dignity may also characterise non-religious subjects, as in the case of the story told by Lescow of the missionary who was not helped by a baptized person but by a non-believer.
- 26 To conclude, the German sociologist holds that it is not secularization that has a negative influence on the survival of moral rules, because these may be observed simply as a result of rational calculation or due to commitment to the values they represent, or both. This might be the double origin of moral norms. But Joas claims that the origin can be traced back to explicitly value-based experiences, and to reflections regarding conditions vital to cooperation. In short, he identifies the origin in specific values or in values derived from cooperative exigency. Here the convergences are broader: goodness does not descend from religious perspectives alone.
- 27 But a trend that seems to be deontological and partly ideological appears; in fact – apart from some explicit militant choices on the author's part – a strong wish to avoid confusion between faith and values, and, consequently, a reluctance to impose the former, and a willingness to share the latter, also emerge.