

# Commonweal

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Hans Joas (Ziko van Dijk/Wikimedia Commons)

American democracy is in trouble. The voices that command the most attention are those at the ends of the political spectrum. Extremists on the Right cling to the illusion that Joe Biden is an illegitimate president who must be opposed at every turn, just as Barack Obama was. Tough-minded insurgents on the Left insist that the time for compromise and concessions has passed because it is impossible to reason, let alone bargain, with people in the grip of feverish delusions.

Something similar is infecting European nations. Long governed by big-tent parties of the center Left and the center Right, nations such as Germany, France, and even Britain are now fragmenting as never before, and not only on the margins. Even the mainstream parties are splintering. Recent elections in Germany and the Netherlands demonstrated this dynamic with particular clarity. Germany's Social Democrats and Christian Democrats, the long-dominant forces of stability that appealed to a wide range of voters, no longer command even a third of the electorate. No party in Germany or the Netherlands attracted more than 25 percent of the vote. Putting together coalition governments is harder than ever at a time when partisan wrangling is intense and compromise has become a dirty word.

The voice of Hans Joas, a brilliant and wide-ranging social theorist who splits his time between his native Germany and the United States, is particularly valuable at this time of dueling dogmatisms. Joas's work in sociology, history, politics, and philosophy constitutes a singular contribution to

contemporary thought. How should we understand human experience after the linguistic turn? Why do we value what we value? How can believers respond to the narrative of secularization when religious observance appears to be collapsing in the North Atlantic West? To all these urgent questions Joas offers arresting answers.

**The list of Joas's published work** runs to fifty-three pages. His work has been translated into almost every European language and several others. He has held prestigious lectureships and fellowships across the globe. A lifelong Catholic, Joas has written widely about religion and its critics. He has been invited to participate in Germany's Synodal Way, which might lead to a rethinking and reorientation of the Catholic Church in Germany. Long active in Germany's anti-nuclear and peace movements, Joas also serves on a steering committee that helps shape the program of the German Social Democratic Party.

But above all Joas is a social theorist. In his many books and articles, he has drawn on multiple sources, including the German traditions of philosophical idealism descended from G.F.W. Hegel, the multi-dimensional tradition of Marxism, the hermeneutics of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey, the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the Frankfurt School of critical theory that originated with Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer and continues to develop in the voluminous writings of Jürgen Habermas and his successor, Axel Honneth. As a scholar of sociology, Joas has repeatedly turned to the founding giants of that discipline, notably Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, and Georg Simmel. Among theologians, Joas has drawn less from Hans Küng and Joseph Ratzinger than from Ernst Troeltsch—perhaps appropriately for someone who currently holds the Ernst Troeltsch Chair for the Sociology of Religion at Humboldt University in Berlin.

Most striking, though, is Joas's profound indebtedness to the American tradition of philosophical pragmatism, which he describes as “the unbroken guiding thread” of his work. In his first book, *George Herbert Mead* (German 1980; English 1985), Joas helped return that pioneering sociologist and philosopher to the center of contemporary sociology. In later books, *The Creativity of Action* (German 1992; English 1996) and *The Genesis of Values* (German 1997; English 2000), Joas turned to William James and John Dewey. He credited James, accurately, with being the first to discover the phenomenology of immediate, pre-reflective experience, particularly but not exclusively religious experience. Although that tradition is often traced to Edmund Husserl and those whom he influenced, the origins of phenomenology lay in James's landmark *Principles of Psychology* (1890) and his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902). In *The Power of the Sacred: An Alternative to the Narrative of Disenchantment*—the most recent of his books to be translated into English—Joas completes his investigation of the pragmatist tradition by explaining why Charles S. Peirce's semiotics is a necessary complement to the ideas offered by Mead, James, and Dewey. He also explains why, for many believers, religious faith is constitutive rather than dispensable, and why the narrative of secularization has become more problematic than many agnostics and atheists admit.

Born in Munich in 1948, Joas grew up in a Catholic workers' housing cooperative in Munich, where strict religious observance was taken for granted. Joas grew up admiring—and depending on—the neighborliness of the cooperative where his family continued to live; as a teen he gravitated toward radical Catholic social theory and action. Although education offered an escape from his family's poverty, he felt alienated not only by the well-to-do students who predominated in his gymnasium and at the University of Munich and the Free University of Berlin, but also by the dogmatism, intolerance, and doctrinaire Marxism of the student Left. In Berlin he worked to reconcile his strongest intellectual influences: post-Vatican II Catholicism, Marxism and other forms of radical democratic social and political theory, and the German tradition of philosophical hermeneutics. In his mature scholarly work, he has done just that.

For his book on George Herbert Mead, which began as a dissertation, Joas excavated Mead's previously unknown immersion in, and indebtedness to, the work of German thinkers including Kant, Fichte, Hegel, Schelling, and especially Dilthey, with whom, Joas found, Mead had studied in Berlin.

Joas also located Mead in the context of early twentieth-century American social thought, which was suffused with the ideas of pragmatists James and Dewey. Mead considered his pivotal idea of intersubjectivity, in Joas's words, to be nothing less than "the transformation of fundamental Christian assumptions into social psychology and ethics." Whereas secular scholars could interpret the word "transformation" to indicate that Mead was abandoning no longer tenable Christian ideals, the word could just as easily be understood to mean, in Joas's words, "a contemporary articulation of belief." In that ambiguity lies much that has remained tantalizing in Joas's scholarship.

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**Why do we value what we value?** Why are our goals our goals? For some people, who have always taken for granted the ideals they cherish, or who see them as God-given, eternal, universal truths, enshrined from time immemorial and impossible or irrational to doubt or to challenge, such questions might seem decidedly odd. *Of course* we value what we value. Our values are immune to questioning. They are God's will, or natural law, or the self-evident truths proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence. For well over a century, though, ever since books such as Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* and *On the Genealogy of Morals* exploded conventional ideas of morality, most academic philosophers on both sides of the Atlantic have denied that we can establish, through reasoned argument, any immutable truths beyond the truths of mathematics and symbolic logic. Questions of ethics, or of social and political philosophy, have been expelled from the domain of philosophy proper and consigned to the realm of taste or opinion. Such questions are answered in different ways at different times in different cultures. Although idiosyncratic preferences, in this view, are gussied up as something compelling or law-like, the obvious relativity of values across different times and cultures exposes the brittleness, indeed the futility, of all such efforts.

Metaethics, the study of the formal properties of ethical argument and the assumptions that lie behind those arguments, has been a lively field of inquiry, but moral philosophers have struggled to convince skeptics within and beyond their discipline that genuinely universal ethical principles exist. Even John Rawls, in his later work *Political Liberalism* (1991), revised his earlier attempt, in *A Theory of Justice* (1971), to establish principles of justice for any people other than "us," meaning members of late-twentieth-century North Atlantic cultures. Anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists are said to have disclosed the particularity of Western logic and all cultural, social, and individual standards, mores, and choices. Whereas the existence of bedrock standards was long taken for granted, in recent centuries drilling straight through such bedrock has been the objective of the human sciences.

In light of that sustained skepticism about the very possibility of universal norms, the question of values has become increasingly problematic, so problematic that most scholars now simply avoid asking the question and proceed along the more or less taken-for-granted assumptions that govern academic inquiries. If brain chemistry, genetic inheritance, simple self-interest, or inherited and unexamined religious or ideological premises lie behind human behavior, then questions of what people might naïvely think motivates them are beside the point.

Joas disagrees. He thinks recent figures in the mainstream of European and American social theory have misunderstood human experience because many of its most influential figures have followed the lead of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. In his familiar typology, Weber divided action-orientation into four types: instrumental rationality (means/end reasoning), value rationality (reasoning in line with ethical ideals, including religious ideals), tradition (following longstanding customs), and affect (acting from emotion or aesthetic preference). And Weber elevated instrumental rationality above all the others. He believed means-ends reasoning to be the kind of reasoning most characteristic of modernity; the others were atavistic. For Durkheim, religion was significant because it provided, through ritual, occasions for "collective effervescence," experiences that enable individuals to see themselves linked with something bigger, something outside their daily existence. The problem with both Weber and Durkheim, from Joas's perspective, was their failure to acknowledge what American pragmatists placed

at the center of their arguments, something Joas addressed in the book he considers “his most ambitious,” *The Creativity of Action*.

There Joas argues that all intentional action has a creative aspect. Moreover, there is a reciprocal relation between means and ends, both of which change as the action is being carried out. Dewey in particular saw the “fluidity or changeability” of “ends in view” as well as the fluidity of our sense of the steps necessary to reach them. He saw that agents actively engage in modifying the means and the ends of action whether that action is instrumental or moral. We do not, Joas contends, separate our actions into Weber’s four ideal types, nor do we blindly follow or mechanically adopt Durkheim’s ritualized forms of behavior. No matter how strictly choreographed such behaviors are, individuals impute particular meanings to them and perform them in their own way. Whether a *Commonweal* reader is accustomed to reading each issue cover to cover, for example, or selects which articles to read and which to skip, she is making judgments—and acting creatively—with every page she turns. The meanings she extracts from what she reads are also her own, which anyone who has ever discussed an article or book with other readers knows from experience. When Catholics attend Mass, most now experience the rituals in their own distinctive ways, which depend on their prior experiences, their attitude toward the hierarchy, the clergy, and Catholic teachings, their understandings of the sacrament of the Eucharist, and many other factors. Joas’s ideas about the creativity of action might account for those variations better than some other alternatives.

Joas’s concept of immediate experience—pre-reflective, inescapably social, and value-laden—draws directly on the writings of James and Dewey. In his *Principles of Psychology*, James challenged the dualisms of mind/body and self/other that had dominated philosophy since Descartes. As a scientist trained in anatomy and physiology, James had to take seriously the physical dimension of experience. But having survived his brush with suicide because he was “able to sustain a thought because I choose to when I might have other thoughts,” he knew that neither philosophical nor biological determinism could account for the most important experience of his life, his experience of free will. Thus James balanced precariously on the knife edge of what he called “pure experience.” Later philosophers, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Joas, would call it phenomenology.

James recognized that our emotions “must always be inwardly what they are, whatever be the physiological source of their apparition.” In other words, our feelings “carry their own inner measure of worth with them.” Equally important was James’s path-breaking concept of the “stream of consciousness,” which helped revolutionize painting as well as literature through the efforts of James’s former student Gertrude Stein and others. Consciousness, James insisted, “flows.” The past intrudes into every present moment, as do anticipations of what will happen next. We do not experience the world as chopped into bits but instead as a whole. Moreover, “the important thing about a train of thought is its conclusion.” That is the *meaning* of that thought, “what abides” when everything else has faded. That abiding quality, Joas argues, is inseparable from the work of creativity that engages every human at almost every moment.

From Dewey’s early essay “The Reflex Arc,” Joas takes the idea of experience as a “circuit” rather than a separable “stimulus” and “response.” The experiencing subject, Dewey argued, ties together what is experienced, “because the motor response determines the stimulus, just as truly as sensory stimulus determines movement.” That “organic” process also makes it impossible to separate out the valuing that goes on at every instant, the “interpreting” of every stimulus and every response, which Joas takes as another indication of the value-laden creativity of action.

**There is one further dimension** of experience and action as Joas conceives of it: its social dimension. No human being, James pointed out in his *Principles of Psychology*, ever came into existence on his own, or ever had a single experience as an isolated, atomistic individual. From that insight Mead developed the linchpin of his sociology, the concept of the individual self developing only through interaction with other selves. Mead’s emphasis on what Joas calls “the *primary sociality* of the actor,” or the “practical intersubjectivity” of all human life, lies behind Joas’s conviction that just as experience

conceived phenomenologically is always creative and value-laden, so is it always and undeniably social.

Given the centrality of American pragmatists' insights to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and Alfred Schutz, and their importance for the emergence of Gestalt psychology in the interwar years, readers might wonder why earlier European thinkers failed to grasp the significance of James, Dewey, and Mead. Explaining that absence is Joas's goal in *Pragmatism and Social Theory* (1993). Joas argues that, from the late eighteenth century onward, creativity in German thought was channeled into the aesthetic realm—into the work of poets, painters, and composers rather than the everyday experience of ordinary individuals. That tendency reached its apogee in Nietzsche's celebration of the artist's creativity and his contempt for almost everyone and everything else. On the other hand, many of the early interpreters of pragmatism, including Durkheim and the Frankfurt School, failed to grasp the similarities between the pragmatists' critical project and Nietzsche's. The stark differences between Nietzsche's nihilistic insistence on nothing more than "another mask," on the one hand, and the pragmatists' focus on solving the problems that he—and they—identified in earlier philosophical traditions, on the other, obscured the meaning and significance of their ideas.

The caricatures of James and Dewey offered by some early enthusiasts for pragmatism, including Mussolini's close associate Giovanni Gentile, caused other European thinkers to dismiss the pragmatists as simple-minded positivists and vulgar, scientific celebrants of Americans' "can-do" spirit. That lack of understanding, as Joas points out, meant that pragmatists' valuable insights were submerged beneath twentieth-century European intellectuals' propensity for denigrating all things American. Notoriously evident in Horkheimer and Adorno's widely read but outrageously inaccurate account of pragmatism in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Eclipse of Reason*, that tendency was also apparent in Europeans' enthusiasm for what Joas calls the late-twentieth-century "Heideggerianization" of American thought apparent in the Nietzsche-tinged writings of Richard Rorty. Although Rorty claimed the mantle of pragmatism, Joas points out that Rorty's allergy to the idea of experience and his relentless insistence of the primacy of language showed the distance separating him from James, Dewey, and Mead.

A similar misappropriation marked the use of pragmatism by Habermas, the most influential European social theorist of the past six decades. Although Habermas has called himself "a good Deweyan pragmatist," he built his monumental oeuvre around the armature of "undistorted communication," the idea that all language use is oriented toward the horizon of mutual comprehension. Joas points out that despite entitling his major work *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas envisioned interaction in a way that narrowed it down to a particular kind of language use. For that reason Habermas has overlooked much of what James, Dewey, and Mead aimed to achieve by conceptualizing experience as they did. Whereas Habermas elevated the idea of communicative rationality to the pinnacle of his theory, the early pragmatists incorporated the body, emotions, creativity, and values into their phenomenology. From Joas's perspective, Habermas's emphasis on language, much like Rorty's, caused him to miss the depth and complexity of intersubjectivity.

If the claim that secularization is an inevitable feature of modernity is no longer tenable, neither can believers assume that they alone have access to the truth.

In *The Creativity of Action*, Joas argued that values are an indispensable dimension of intentional action, but his critics faulted him for failing to explain the origin of those values. That would be the subject of his next book, *The Genesis of Values*. After examining recent efforts by philosophers and social scientists to answer this question, Joas turned to the analysis of value formation in James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Unsatisfied by attempts to explain religious experiences scientifically, James explored accounts of how individuals came to feel themselves in contact with a power that enabled them to discern, and perhaps to bridge, the gap between their present selves and their ideal selves. For James, that awareness was the genesis of values, and it came about not through philosophy, theology, churches, or rituals, but instead through powerful pre-reflective experiences that Joas calls "self-opening," "self-surrender," or "self-transcendence."

Joas likens such experiences to interpersonal love, which can be “shattering” in that it can awaken individuals to the distance between their ideals and what exists. For Dewey, what individuals judge “desirable” emerges through education, understood not as the transmission of information but as the formation of judgment through open-ended inquiry. As we make decisions concerning what steps of creative action are necessary to overcome obstacles or resolve problems, we are constantly reflecting on, and revising, our understanding both of means and of ends. Thus “the desirable” is never fixed; it remains provisional, contingent, subject to revision pending future reflections and judgments on experience. For Dewey, the “religious” is, as it was for James, a category wider than conventional religion. It encompassed various forms of “consummatory experience” that carry individuals beyond things as they are and toward things as they might be, including experiences of the aesthetic and the erotic, as well as experiences of self-opening that can occur in the natural world, in religious rituals or “mystical intuitions,” or in “feelings of togetherness that accompany happy, communal life.”

Fascism, fundamentalism, totalitarianism, authoritarianism (including that of the pre-Vatican II Catholic Church), and Soviet Communism all threatened the ethos of experimentation that Dewey associated with the authentically religious. For that reason Dewey “sacralized” democracy. Although Joas judges the “empty universalism of the democratic ideal” too “weak and abstract” to motivate action, he endorses Dewey’s view that values originate in “the creative work of our imagination.” He agrees with Mead that developing the capacity for empathic “role-taking” responds to the “universal need for the normative regulation of human cooperation.” For that reason Joas contends that nurturing this capacity—and the social conditions that best facilitate its development—is of the highest priority.

**How can we develop the capacity for empathy** without succumbing to the moral and cultural relativism that Joas finds incoherent? Even those who claim to prize tolerance above all, he argues, require standards to which they can appeal to justify that position. It is to these questions that Joas has directed much of his recent work, including not only his study of the origins of human rights, *The Sacredness of the Person*, but also his ambitious critique of secularization, *The Power of the Sacred*.

Joas argues that we must get past the dueling narratives of secularization and anti-secularization. Among the principal professional projects undertaken by the first generation of social scientists was the argument that religion would fade away. Its place in modern cultures would be taken by a new high priesthood, social scientists themselves. Many of these pioneering social scientists, in Europe and in the United States, were themselves religious, and they saw their work as augmenting rather than supplanting the work of traditional churches. Others, however, such as Weber and Durkheim, agreed with Marx that religion was but an indefensible holdover of the superstitions that had led the earliest human communities to see the natural world, and humans’ place in it, as the gods’ handiwork. Now that scientists from Newton to Darwin had disclosed the mechanisms governing the physical world and the process whereby humans had evolved from other forms of life, rationality could take the place of such illusions.

A century later, Joas observes, such predictions seem considerably less persuasive. Although religious observance in Western Europe and the United States has clearly declined, in much of the rest of the world Christianity, Islam, and other traditional forms of religious faith have persisted or even surged in popularity. Thus we need another approach, which Joas first outlined in *Faith as an Option* (German 2012; English 2014). “A sphere is opening up,” he writes, in which believers and nonbelievers alike “can articulate their experiences and assumptions and relate them to one another.” If the claim that secularization is an inevitable feature of modernity is no longer tenable, neither can believers assume that they alone have access to the truth. Joas holds out what he calls “faith as an option,” a formulation influenced by Charles Taylor’s account of the rise of a secular option, an account that might leave both believers and nonbelievers dissatisfied. As Josiah Royce quipped when confronted with William James’s “will to believe,” when the gods are demonstrable only as hypotheses, they are no longer gods.

Yet Joas insists that conceiving of faith as an “option” offers an alternative to the rival dogmatism of religious traditionalists and “new atheists” such as Richard Dawkins. In *The Power of the Sacred*, he modifies his earlier accounts of religion by supplementing the arguments of James, Dewey, and Mead with the semiotics of the fourth founding pragmatist, Charles S. Peirce. We need to move beyond James’s account of religious experience, Joas now argues, and “link the psychology of religion with semiotics, the theory of signs.” Although our immediate religious experiences, our encounters with the sacred, may be pre-linguistic, we require language to write or talk about those experiences. Even our self-knowledge, our reflections on our experiences and their meaning, depends on signs, for which Peirce offered insights more useful than those of James.

The German thinkers who had drawn most directly from pragmatism, Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel, had emphasized for just this reason the importance of Peirce’s ideas more than those of the other early pragmatists. Thus Joas’s turn to Peirce (and to Royce) constitutes a notable modification of his ideas. When individuals reflect on and interpret pre-reflective experiences, they depend on linguistic tools, and culturally shaped and shared understandings, to communicate that experience. Again, it is the multi-dimensionality, plasticity, and variability of that language and those understandings that Joas is at pains to emphasize.

In light of the undeniable fact of steady secularization in the North Atlantic, believers should try to articulate the meaning and significance of their faith in terms comprehensible (if not necessarily persuasive) to nonbelievers. Committed secularists should do the same. In a splendid forthcoming book on secularization and the stubborn persistence of belief in the United States, *Christianity’s American Fate*, historian David Hollinger models the forbearance that Joas has in mind. Although Hollinger insists that the more education people have, the less likely they are to invoke the supernatural to explain events, he acknowledges that some individuals manage to balance their faith with their commitment to the life of the mind.

Joas thinks he can explain that phenomenon. Central to his argument in *The Power of the Sacred* is his contention that what Durkheim identified as “the sacred” and associated with religious rituals should be understood to have a permanent place in all societies. “Sacredness,” Joas argues, “also exists, outside of institutionalized religions, in a wide variety of forms, and underlies the development of all ideals, including secular ones.” As Durkheim himself acknowledged, ideas such as “progress” or “democracy” become sacred for those who believe in them, and rituals of various kinds emerge to give believers the occasion to practice their faith. Joas argues that such rituals create “a controlled environment that temporarily suspends the mechanisms of everyday life. Ideal states can thus be rendered experienceable, in such a way that individuals remember them as intensive experiences when they have returned to the realm of the quotidian.”

Ideal formation, at least as Joas sees it, is universal, whether it takes the form of religion or not, and it can happen in experiences ranging from prayer to play. Unlike Durkheim, who limited occasions of “collective effervescence” to totemic rituals, or Habermas, who grudgingly admits the importance of religious traditions even though he contrasts such “archaic” holdovers to his ideal of “rational argumentational discourse,” Joas insists on the continuing salience of “individual experiences of love, of fusion with nature, of sexuality, or of shattering compassion.” Exiling from the process of ideal formation everything except rational linguistic communication, as Joas argues that Habermas does, impoverishes our understanding of the richness and variety of our lives as humans. Do we really want a utopia without music, poetry, dance, theater, sports—or sex?

Together with Robert Bellah, Joas has also written about the “axial age,” the era when the world’s great religions took shape around universalistic rather than particularistic values. Christianity (like Buddhism and Confucianism) stressed the value of every human being and thus challenged prevailing hierarchies and exclusions—in principle if less often in practice. Although the ideals of these religions contrasted with existing standards, and also with individuals’ practical needs and prevailing political and social norms, such ideals nevertheless persist as permanent challenges to all cultures that pay lip service to them. Ideals such as equality and responsibility have a similar significance: they unsettle us by asking whether we are willing to take steps to realize the ideals we claim to cherish. In certain circumstances

at least, humans have advanced “to an idea of ‘transcendence’ that points beyond all this-worldly ‘sacredness.’” That, Joas concludes, is simply “a fact,” and that continuing process, he contends, shows why Weber’s influential concept of “disenchantment” fails to convince. The process of ideal formation is every bit as vibrant in post-religious cultures as in religious ones.

The historian Michael Saler and scholars in the field of science studies have shown that the idea of “demagification” is a myth. Whether in natural- or social-scientific or political communities, even those proudly and self-consciously devoted to rational inquiry do not always proceed rationally. The concept of disenchantment is, from Joas’s perspective, “wholly inadequate” to describe a “vital, basic attitude of the human being, in which the world is experienced as being of value. When human beings perform an activity they enjoy for its own sake, as in the case of play or work they relish, they are not projecting anything.” Neither are they “succumbing to illusions,” nor are they “victims of a spell from which they ought to emancipate themselves.” Our “everyday experience of a value-laden world” is neither transitory nor a function of belief in the divine. It is instead universal, as James argued in *The Principles of Psychology* a decade before turning his attention to religious experience. If the world lacked meaning and value for us, we would care nothing about it. The “pre-reflective constitution of meaning” is instead what humans do, and will continue to do, whether or not that “sacralization” takes the form of conventional religion or some other form.

The emergence of human rights as a global ideal after World War II illustrates this perennial process. Joas readily admits what historian Samuel Moyn has hammered home: proclamations of human rights have often merely masked nations’ continuing tendency to maneuver for power rather than address the problem of continuing oppression and exploitation. But like the emergence of anti-slavery discourse in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Joas argues, the emergence of human-rights talk reflects changing ideas in both religious and secular communities. It signals a further broadening of what historian Thomas Haskell, in an effort to explain why anti-slavery agitation emerged, called the “horizon of responsibility” so that it encompasses not only one’s own family, or tribe, or nation, or race, or the enslaved, but everyone.

That process, which Joas examines in *The Sacredness of the Person*, shows how new ideals can seep into and transform what was taken for granted, upsetting ways of thinking and practices long assumed to be unproblematic. The persistence of poverty, as well as the persistence of child labor, sexual trafficking, and the death penalty surely illustrate the limits of the commitment laid out in the United Nations Charter, even though almost all nations (the United States is a notorious exception) now profess to honor the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Such long-acceptable practices now count as scandalous. Campaigns exist to eradicate them, just as earlier abolitionists worked to eradicate slavery. Joas interprets such efforts as evidence of the continuing formation of ideals, with or without religious sponsorship or sanction. Despite the persistence of injustice, many of the same people who have turned away from religion have shown a willingness to sacrifice, a “readiness to master and suppress desires and immediate bodily needs,” for a variety of different reasons. Compelling new ideals continue to emerge. New experiences bring together people who no longer share the common bonds formerly supplied by religious congregations. Joas is not proposing a singular process akin to Weber’s notion of world-historical rationalization, the supposed triumph of instrumental reason over all other forms, or Habermas’s struggle of the “lifeworld” to stave off “colonization by the technostucture.” By “sacralization” Joas means instead “a complex and unpredictable plethora of such processes,” most crucially the history of the ideal of moral universalism.

**In the closing pages of *The Power of the Sacred***, Joas lays bare his own normative commitments. First, he contends that “moral universalism is fundamentally superior to moral particularism.” Even those who profess to value toleration and difference above anything else are making a “non-relativist judgment,” which is a kind of universalism whether they admit it or not. Second, by suggesting an alternative to the narrative of disenchantment, Joas has in mind nothing like a value-free description but is instead aiming to transcend “all forms of moral particularism” and to offer an alternative, grounded in human experience and judgment, that can motivate respect for the “dignity of every individual.” Finally,



Joas concedes that such a commitment does not and cannot resolve the inevitable tension between our obligations to those closest to us, our families, and our aspirations to moral universalism. The challenge that Jesus issued to those who would follow him will remain as haunting as ever.

Religious people with a traditional understanding of their faith and the imperatives of religious doctrine may find Joas's account of ideal-formation as unsatisfying as Royce found James's ideas. Yet for other early twenty-first-century believers, marooned in secular communities in which their faith is considered either incomprehensible or a quaint holdover from earlier eras, Joas's ideas about the meaningful, value-laden quality of immediate experience, the creativity of all action, the generation of values through sacralization, and the elusive quest to honor the sacredness of all persons might represent a coherent, even inspiring, body of ideas.

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**James T. Kloppenberg**, Charles Warren Professor of American History at Harvard, is author of *Reading Obama: Dreams, Hope, and the American Political Tradition* (Princeton) and *Toward Democracy: The Struggle for Self-Rule in European and American Thought* (Oxford).

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