

World Religions and Social Thought

From Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber to Jürgen Habermas and Hans Joas

Religiones del mundo y pensamiento social

*Desde Ernst Troeltsch y Max Weber
a Jürgen Habermas y Hans Joas*

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Abstract

This paper was drafted on occasion of Hans Joas' 70th birthday, and published in German, in the book edited by M. Schlette, B. Hollstein, M. Jung and W. Knobl (2022), under the title *Idealbildung, Sakralisierung, Religion. Beiträge zu Hans Joas' Die Macht des Heiligen*. After highlighting the contributions of Joas' social philosophy, Wittrock shows the main traits of the history of social theory regarding the scientific research of world

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religions. This reconstruction places the questions asked and the answers provided within their historical context, while at the same time it identifies some persisting questions, such as the place and role of world religions compared to other religious phenomena, or that of the relationship between Christianity and Modernity. Further, a central asset of this article is the reconstruction of the sociological and philosophical understanding of the Axial Age. After these preparatory and reconstructive parts, Wittrock focuses his analysis upon the most recent works —until then— of Habermas and Joas regarding the discourse on the Axial Age, in order to show their tensions and inherent capabilities facing the current experiences of secularization and transcendence.

Keywords: world religions - social theory - modernity - secularization - transcendence

Resumen

Este trabajo fue escrito con ocasión del festejo de los 70 años de Hans Joas, y publicado en alemán en el libro editado por M. Schlette, B. Hollstein, M. Jung and W. Knobl (2022), con el título *Idealbildung, Sakralisierung, Religion. Beiträge zu Hans Joas' Die Macht des Heiligen*. Después de resaltar las contribuciones de la filosofía social de Joas, Wittrock muestra los principales rasgos de la historia de la teoría social con relación a la investigación científica de las religiones mundiales. Esta reconstrucción ubica en cada contexto histórico las preguntas que se hicieron y las respuestas que se proveyeron, mientras que al mismo tiempo identifica algunas preguntas persistentes, tales como el lugar y el rol de las religiones mundiales en comparación con otros fenómenos religiosos, o respecto de la relación entre cristianismo y modernidad. Además, un aporte central de este artículo es la reconstrucción de las interpretaciones sociológicas y filosóficas de la era axial. Después de estas partes preparatorias y reconstructivas, Wittrock enfoca su análisis en las obras hasta ese momento más recientes de Habermas y Joas relacionadas con la era axial, para mostrar sus tensiones y capacidades inherentes frente a las experiencias actuales de secularización y trascendencia.

Palabras clave: religiones mundiales - teoría social - modernidad - secularización - trascendencia

Hans Joas and his *oeuvre*: Introductory Remarks

In the course of an extraordinary scholarly career, Hans Joas has, in publications from the 1970s onwards, recast our conception of the nature of social theory.

During this period, he has held positions at a number of distinguished scholarly institutions starting with his alma mater, the Free University of Berlin, and the Max Planck Institute for Human Development in Berlin. He has subsequently been Director of the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at the University of Erfurt, and then a Permanent Fellow of the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of Freiburg. Since the year 2000 he is a regularly recurring Visiting Professor of sociology and social thought at the University of Chicago where he is a Member of the Committee on Social Thought and a Professor in the Department of Sociology. Hans Joas is now Ernst Troeltsch Professor for the Sociology of Religion at the Humboldt University of Berlin. He has also held visiting positions at many universities and institutes for advanced study across the world, including positions at Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin and the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in Uppsala, where he has also served as a Non-resident Long-term Fellow.

His achievements have been honoured through scholarly prizes, including the René König Prize, the Bielefeld Luhmann Prize, the Hans Kilian Award, Prix Paul Ricoeur, the Max Planck Research Award, as well as through membership in academies and by honorary doctorates (in Tübingen and Uppsala).

Hans Joas has elaborated a research programme that has entailed a reinterpretation of the history and commitments of sociology and social theory. This has involved the establishment of new links between scholarly traditions, not least between American-based traditions of pragmatism and European-originated social theories of a phenomenological and hermeneutic orientation but also scholarship of a conceptual historical nature.

He has also expounded the implications of this reinterpretation through an engagement and an educationally lucid presentation of the developments of main currents in social theory. His monograph, co-authored with Wolfgang Knöbl, *Sozialtheorie. Zwanzig einführende Vorlesungen [Social Theory: Twenty Introductory Lectures]*, is but one prominent example of this (Joas & Knöbl, 2004/2009).

In the last instance, Hans Joas engages with the conditions for human beings to understand and to act in a world that poses seemingly insurmountable problems of an epistemic, moral and existential nature. This engagement has characterized his *oeuvre* from his earliest works onwards in which he was able, e.g., to demonstrate that intellectually seminal links exist between pragmatism and classical European social theory and philosophy of action.

He has explored these ideas in a series of works. In his book on *The Creativity of Action* (Joas, 1992/1996), he outlines a comprehensive theory of action. In particular, this book refuses to reduce the problem of action to a problem of the nature of means-ends-rationality. Instead he proposed that other types of action also be included, be they norm-guided actions or forms of transformative action that Hans Joas has analysed in terms of the creativity of action.

In a further step, Joas extended his inquiry to include studies of processes of the constitution and emergence of values and of commitments that come to identify the core of a human being. This is a main theme of his book on *Die Entstehung der Werte [The Genesis of Values]* (Joas, 1997/2001). Through this move he was also able to open up a realm of research that both the neo-analytical and the linguistic-interpretive scholars had tended to place outside of their concern and as external to analysis of action proper.

Hans Joas then pursued an analysis of ways in which value commitments are consolidated and contested on a collective level as well as an analysis of norm-guided actions. His major study of this type had a focus on the emergence and the articulation of basic human rights over long periods of time and in different contexts. This work was presented in a major volume on *The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights* (Joas 2011/2013).

The book stimulated a dialogue between scholars in social theory and those with a focus on legal theory. It also provided an example of how universalistic claims, inherent in notions of human rights, are not specific to a particular, occidental, tradition but might be arrived at from a starting point in different cultural, societal and religious traditions. With this project, Hans Joas (2013) broached issues that had preoccupied Ernst Troeltsch in Troeltsch's efforts to discern pathways whereby human agents from different societal and religious backgrounds, might, through human interaction and interpretation, articulate a commitment of a universalistic nature, yet expressed with recourse to different vocabularies and traditions.

Hans Joas' research on the genesis of values and the origins of a notions of the sacredness of the person had also links to Joas publications on the cultural values of Europe and on world religions and on the possibilities to extend an action-based analysis to processes of global change. With this step Joas once again touched upon themes taken up by Ernst Troeltsch, Max Weber and other scholars in the period of reconstruction of European social thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Hans Joas' contributions in this field extend and deepen an understanding of the role of human agency in the constitution of societal institutions in their historical contexts. They also highlight links between human action and experiences of a transcendental nature. Thus we arrive at the core of what was at stake, at the time of reconstruction of social thought, in debates a hundred years ago about world religions and world history.

In his book, *Die Macht des Heiligen. Eine Alternative zur Geschichte von der Entzauberung* [The Power of the Sacred: An Alternative to the Narrative of Disenchantment], Hans Joas (2017) has chosen to focus on these themes and to outline an alternative to Max Weber's writings on disenchantment. The enquiry into the uses and validity of the concept of disenchantment serves as a pivot for a scholarly engagement that re-examines the history of the social and human sciences, the role of contemporary social theory and the interweaving of sociology, theology and the history of religion. However, there is an almost equally extensive and intensive engagement with the concepts of secularization, rationalization and modernization. There is also a treatment of a range of other concepts, not least those of differentiation, sacralization and ritual.

In effect, Hans Joas outlines a conception of the sociology of religion that draws on classic works by Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber but that also goes beyond these works. In particular, Joas proposes a new interpretation of Max Weber's conception of a sociology of religion.

Hans Joas' (2017) book also includes an extensive discussion of the concept of the Axial Age. Thus new volume contains what is arguably the most circumspect and thorough analysis to date of the history of the concept of the Axial Age, including discussions of Ernst von Lasaulx, Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron, John Stuart-Glennie, George Foot Moore and Rudolf Otto, to name but some of the authors taken up by Joas.¹ I shall return to Hans Joas analysis later in this essay. However, it might be noted already here that he also refers to Weber's footnote no 1 on page 155 in the second volume of the *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion*, with its remark about the temporal simultaneity of the "first blooming of Hellenic and Chinese philosophers" and of the Israelite Prophetic Age. Weber, in contrast to Eduard Meyer, rejects the idea of possible "loans" between these cultures (Weber, as

¹ See also Guy G. Stroumsa (2018) "Anquetil Duperron et les origines de la philologie orientale: l'orientalisme est un humanisme" in *ASDIWAL. Revue genevoise d'anthropologie et d'histoire des religions*, issue 13, pp. 161-174.

cited in Joas, 2017).

In his essay “The Axial Age and Its Interpreters: Reopening a Debate”, another sociologist, Johann P. Arnason (2004), also discusses this footnote and Weber’s interpretation of the Indian case relative to the “first blooming of Hellenic and Chinese philosophy”. His conclusion is that Weber has, *in nuce*, formulated an Axial Age hypothesis. However, it would appear to be at least as important for a discussion about the Axial Age to go beyond the footnote and to view it in the context of Weber’s *oeuvre*. In such a context, the most relevant question is that of the overall structure of the three volumes.²

In the following, I shall argue that in the early history of social theory there is an intimate relationship between the sociological study of world religions and the historical analysis of civilizations and global historical change. This relationship is at the core of Max Weber’s *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion*. Furthermore, there is a distinct, but partially overlooked, scholarly tradition throughout the last century that has shared this focus.

I shall start by highlighting a few key contributions to this tradition starting with works by Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch and ending with two recent publications by Jürgen Habermas and Hans Joas. In this latter context, I shall come back to Max Weber’s collected essays. In particular, I shall engage with a text that is central to Hans Joas’ (2017) analysis in *The Power of the Sacred*, namely Weber’s *Zwischenbetrachtung*, originally published towards the end of the first of the three volumes. In my essay, I shall maintain that social theory and universal history were closely linked in the works of Weber and Troeltsch. However, it is only towards the end of the twentieth century, largely due to contributions by Robert N. Bellah and Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, that these linkages have become clearly recognized again, if still only partially so, and have come to exert a formative influence on our understanding of the contemporary role of the social sciences.

1. Social Thought and the Study of World Religions

The period from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century was one in which Europeans came into ever more frequent contact with the inhabitants of other parts of the world and tried to understand, trade with and, increas-

² See also Arnason (2003), *Civilizations in Dispute: Historical Questions and Theoretical Traditions* (pp. 86-105, 157-179). Brill.

singly, to dominate and subjugate peoples and territories in Africa, Asia and the Americas. Out of such contacts, disciplines such as anthropology and a variety of linguistic and ethnographic forms of knowledge emerged but also new types of medicine. Gradually, in the second half of the eighteenth century there was also a shift in the balance of economic, commercial and political resources that tended to give increasing weight to European powers relative to nations and societies in other parts of the world.³

Similarly, there were signs that European cultural and scientific achievements were increasingly being incorporated into an imaginary in which Europe was presented as being no longer one among several civilizations but as epitomizing the characteristics of civilization as such. This imaginary became more prominent relative to an older conception that had depicted other civilizations as different, but not inferior, and sometimes also superior in some respects, as in the views among some Enlightenment thinkers of China as being exemplary in the way in which wisdom and power were linked in the conduct of public affairs.

It is only in the course of the nineteenth century, though, that ever larger parts of the world became subjected to European territorial expansion and acquisition on a massive scale and that it is possible to characterize the entire age as one of imperialism. In this period many European scholars and observers took it for granted that a profound divide existed between their own religious faith, most often varieties of Christianity, with a foundation in religious experiences of divine revelation, and other forms of beliefs and practices. Simultaneously, however, the nineteenth century also witnessed a gradually growing interest among European theologians in extra-European religions. In the early twentieth century this ushered in a debate about the possibility of a sociology of religion and, indeed, about the scholarly study of religion in general. This is a debate, however, that has to be seen in a wider intellectual context.

Thus this was a period, which the intellectual historian H. Stuart Hughes (1958) in a now classical overview, *Consciousness and Society*, described as one in which an earlier confidence in the universal applicability of a naturalistic and positivistic programme to all domains of scholarship, was waning

³ I have addressed some of these questions in various publications, including Johan Heilbron, Björn Wittrock and Lars Magnusson (Eds.). (2001): *The Rise of the Social Sciences and the Formation of Modernity: Conceptual Change in Context, 1750-1850*. Originally published in 1998 by Kluwer Academic Publishers.

despite advances across a range of fields in the natural sciences. At the same time a variety of programmes for the incipient social sciences were competing with each other.

It was also as a time when political and social contestations within countries were becoming sharper, a time when deeper international scientific cooperation occurred amidst an ever growing volume of international trade and commerce at the same time as relationships between nations became sharper and more closely tied to armaments. Religion, its study and its roles, was in many ways at the crossroads of this variety of processes. At this juncture in time, programmes were outlined for the systematic study of religion. Two of these programmes came to be particularly seminal and exemplary for the study of religion in its historical and societal contexts, namely the historical sociology of the Protestant theologian Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber's strongly historically orientated sociology of religion.

A sociology of religion in general and of world religions in particular has to articulate a stance towards two sets of problems, namely the following ones:

First, on what grounds can a distinction be drawn between the so-called world religions and other conglomerates of religious practices? Furthermore, if such a dividing line can, indeed, be drawn, what then is the status of the so-called world religions relative to each other and to sets of religious practices of a more local or regional nature?

Second, is it possible to explain how and through which mechanisms world religions influence key societal practices and vice versa? In particular, what is the interconnections between world religions and those wider patterns of exchange, domination and interpretation that may be labelled civilizations? Furthermore, are there features in some world religions that have been of key significance for the formation of a modern world and for its further efflorescence and radicalization? Is it, for instance, as Weber suggestively proposed, possible to outline mechanisms through which the emergence and growth of modern capitalism depends on a specific type of religious system of beliefs and modes of conduct? Can we, as Weber more intimates than demonstrates, discern tensions that emerge as a result of the unfolding of ever more radical features inherent in both religious practices and other societal and cultural practices?

Both Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber engage with these problems. They do so in terms that differ in style, temperament, form of exposition, intensity of narration and theoretical imaginary. Yet, both of them produce versions of

answers to these two sets of basic problems for a sociology of religion that, for all their differences, tend to be compatible, complementary and mutually reinforcing.

However, from its inception in scholarly works and universities in Europe and North America in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, scholars engaging in any debate about history of religion as an academic subject were confronted with an even more elementary question than the two discerned about, namely the following one: should the dominant religion in Europe and North America, i.e., Christianity, be assigned a special, privileged position as a pre-eminently universalistic religion of revelation and salvation. Such a stance could be asserted and perhaps even imposed. However, in scholarly terms it required that two intellectual moves be made.

First, Christianity as a religion of revelation would have to be regarded as categorically different from the forms of tribal and clan religions reported by European explorers and administrators as they travelled across or conquered ever larger extra-European areas of the Globe. Such a move entailed that religious practices among inhabitants in the subtropical, tropical and subarctic zones, increasingly subjected to European rule, were assigned to fields of study such as folklore and ethnography and kept separate from those of theology and biblical and religious studies. In practice, most European and North American scholars adhered to a delimitation roughly along these lines.

Second, another move had to be performed, namely one that ensured that a distinction be made between Christianity and other forms of “higher” religion that bore an appearance of being analogous to Christianity in structural, semantic and even genealogical terms and, possibly, constituting religions of revelation.

In order to perform this second move, some scholars, notably the Leiden Old Testament scholar Abraham Kuenen (1883), argued that a distinction be made between truly universal religions and religions that in fundamental ways were rather exponents of various ethnic or national properties. The upshot of this analytical apparatus was that, despite apparent similarities between Christianity and other religions with a vast extension, elaborate rituals and with theologies inscribed in books that had been assigned sacred status, it was in the end only Christianity that might be labelled a truly universal religion rather than merely being a cultural and theological expression of a particular nation, people or a similarly delimited collective.

2. On the Possibility of a Sociology of World Religions: Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber

Already at the turn of the nineteenth century an assumption about the superiority in terms of universalism of Christianity relative to other world religions was becoming, even though still being widely held, increasingly problematic. This problematic position is reflected in the programmes for a sociology of religion elaborated by Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber.

In the German academic world, a group, mainly of theologians, emerged and gained strength within the framework of the so-called religious-historical school. It had taken shape in the 1880s and 1890s at several German universities, including Göttingen, Tübingen, Marburg, Leipzig and Bonn. Its members argued for a strengthening of the study of the history of extra-European religions also within theological faculties of universities. Ernst Troeltsch was a key member of this intellectual circle. The group met with sympathies in several circles.⁴

However, as late as in 1901, Adolf von Harnack, like Troeltsch a Protestant liberal theologian and church historian but of an older generation, resisted the idea that faculties of theology should create Chairs in the history of religion in terms that reveal a deep emotional aversion to the idea of such Chairs and of studying the history of Christianity and of other religions on equal terms.

Harnack was not alone in holding such views but his reputation and position in the German academe was exceptional and he played a prominent role in academic and public life in general. He was also some years later, namely in 1911, to become the first President of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft (KWG), the precursor of today's Max Planck Society (MPG), at the time sometimes ironically described as the Emperor's academic guards regiment.

Hence, when Troeltsch and Weber addressed the theme of the possibility of a scientific study not only in the form of church history but as a history that treated Christian religion as one among several world religions, this was a theme of interest to many intellectuals but within theological faculties and

⁴ For an interesting review of some of these developments, see Suzanne L. Marchand (2009), *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship*. Cambridge University Press, not least 252-284. See also „Nachwort des Herausgebers, 1. Das Interesse an den Weltreligionen am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges und das Problem der Wirtschaftsethik“, in Max Weber (1991), *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen: Konfuzianismus und Taoismus. Schriften 1915-1920* (pp. 235-241). Published by Mohr Siebeck.

also beyond it was still an unorthodox stance and to some even a scandalous proposition.

In the present context it is only possible to indicate Ernst Troeltsch's (1924) stance in some of its outlines by way of pointing to a small posthumous collection of five lectures, which he had been invited in 1920 to deliver in London, Oxford and Edinburgh, *Der Historismus und seine Überwindung: Fünf Vorträge von Ernst Troeltsch*. The lecture, first delivered in Oxford, on "Die Stellung des Christentums unter den Weltreligionen", is particularly fascinating (pp. 62-83). It contains a strong plea not only for contacts and dialogue between representatives of different world religions. There is also a vision of the elaboration through such contacts of a quest for a deeper understanding of questions of human dignity as they appear from within given traditions, each with its tacit presuppositions and its place within a certain cultural and societal context. Troeltsch articulates a vision that the end result of such communicative interaction might be something much more significant than a vague generalization of values. Rather Troeltsch holds out the possibility for the emergence of, to use Hans Joas' vocabulary, a new conception of the sacredness of the person, out of the particular conceptions of different forms of universalism inherent in different world religions.

For Troeltsch this dialogical quest was advocated on the basis of an autobiographical account of the intellectual development of his own views. Thus he tells how his own research gradually led him to a realization that Christianity as a religion with universalistic claims was nevertheless fundamentally shaped and permeated by the historical experiences of the areas in which it had taken root and grown over centuries in an originally pagan Europe (Troeltsch, 1924, pp. 74-83).

However, this sense of a common ground did not extend to forms of Christianity beyond the cultural sphere in which the merger of Latin-Romance and Germanic peoples had taken place. Thus adherents of Eastern forms of Christianity, such Jacobites, Nestorians, Armenians, and even the Russian Orthodox Church, fall outside of this image of Christian universalism, Troeltsch (1924) maintained, since they had emerged out of a different set of historical experiences and beliefs (pp. 75-76).

With an even more extended perspective, it had to be admitted, Troeltsch emphasized, that a naïve belief in something Absolute may be just as genuine a feature in non-Christian religions as among Western Christians, once it was admitted that different historical, geographical and social conditions and contingencies had given rise to beliefs that were genuine but inevitably had

a different appearance from those common in Christians belonging to one of the churches having their origins, if in the form of adherence or opposition, in some version of Latin Christendom.

In other words, there is, Troeltsch argues, in all the “great and spiritual religions”, a sense of “the Absolute”. However, this sense takes shape in intimate interaction with the entire cultural system of which it has become an integral part. A sense of the Absolute, which goes beyond the contextual limitations inherent in a religion, may only emerge as the result of a dialogue and a quest which is a common to all these religions and which may usher in a common objective that is as yet unknown.

In summary, Troeltsch adopts a position, shared by Weber, according to which world religions are regarded as analogous in categorical terms and may be taken up in scholarly works from both a theological and a sociological vantage point. However, in contrast to Troeltsch, Weber came to develop a programme for the comparative study world religions but also of the cultural worlds, i.e. the civilizations, of which these religions formed a significant part at least in genealogical terms. The most extensive scholarly work, which prepared for publication by Max Weber himself, even if not fully completed in the form he had envisaged, are the three volumes, more than 1400 pages of text, of the *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie* [*Collected Essays on The Sociology of Religion*]. In the form in which they were published after Weber’s death, they constitute a historical and comparative analysis of the early history of the great world religions.

Furthermore, while the point of departure for Weber’s project is the objective to formulate and examine an argument about the causes of a specific form of capitalism in the modern world, a major share of the pages of the three volumes have, as already noted, a focus on the transformations that occurred in the period which many, if not most, historians of world religions, have come to label the Axial Age.

This is true for almost all of the third volume on Ancient Judaism and for most of the second volume on Hinduism and Buddhism. As for the first volume, it has, as already indicated, a complex structure with more than 20% of the 573 pages devoted to four introductory, intermediary and concluding sections, each one with its one tone and emphasis. The remainder is rather equally divided between the two essays on Protestantism and one long section on Confucianism and Daoism, and the latter section has to a significant extent a focus on the Axial Age.

Against this background, it might be suggested, that Weber's collected essays on the sociology of the world religions constitute the largest sociological *oeuvre* on the Axial Age to be published before the late twentieth century projects of Shmuel N. Eisenstadt together with Wolfgang Schluchter and of Robert N. Bellah. The possible exceptions to the validity of this assessment might perhaps be some of the works by, or inspired by, Benjamin Schwarz. Needless to say, nothing of this detracts from the fact that it was Karl Jasper's (1953) book *The Origin and Goal of History* that introduced the term Axial Age even if its empirical part is just an interesting outline.

If this analysis, at least tentatively, is accepted, it entails that it is meaningful in terms of analytical categories to relate different Axial world religions to each other and to explore similarities and differences between them. It is precisely such an exercise that Max Weber undertakes in his *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion*.

In an analogous vein, Troeltsch also opens up for such an analysis in his essay on the position of Christianity relative to other world religions. This indicates the structure of a reasonable answer to the first analytical question posed above about the nature of a demarcation of world religions relative to other types of ritualistic and religious practices. The delineation of the great world religions is not merely conventional. It reflects the status of historical scholarship on some of the major transformations in societal practices that occurred in the centuries around the middle of the first millennium BCE. Both Weber and Troeltsch draw on such scholarship and structure their basic arguments accordingly.

Several later scholars have come to describe these transformations with explicit reference to Karl Jasper's terminology as constituting an Axial Age. However, what in the last instance is of significance is not whether a particular terminology is employed to describe some of these transformations but whether the transformations themselves are identified and assessed in terms of their causes and consequences (as Weber has an ambition to do in his essays). In Weber's case this is an explicit ambition, in Troeltsch's case it is only implicitly so, but both arguments are cast in terms that are consistent with each other and follow paths that are to some extent parallel and to some extent complementary.⁵

⁵ Some years after Max Weber's essays on the Protestant ethic and the Protestant sects were published for the first time, his friend Ernst Troeltsch (1923) undertook an extremely careful analysis of the emergence of and divergence between Lutheran and Calvinist forms

However, the change of terminology is not merely a matter of convention. It also has consequences for the substance and orientation of an analysis of religions and civilizations. In Hans Joas' (2017) words, the shift from a discourse about religions of salvation and redemption to that of an Axial Age entails a sharpening of the focus of scholarly debates (p. 290-291). In the next section, I shall outline the conditions and implications of this shift with reference to the contributions of Robert N. Bellah and Shmuel N. Eisenstadt. I shall then discuss two recent major publications, written by Jürgen Habermas and Hans Joas respectively.

In another context, I have highlighted conceptual developments in the middle of the twentieth century of the legacy of Weber's account of the transformative period that formed the focus of Weber's *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion* and that Weber's disciple and colleague Karl Jaspers came to denote by the term the "Axial Age". The key protagonists in my analysis of this period are Karl Jaspers and an American scholar who had been interacting with members of the Weber circle in Heidelberg in the 1920s, including Jaspers, namely Talcott Parsons. In a slender book, published in 1966, with the title *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives*, Parsons formulated, without mentioning Jaspers, an alternative narrative to that of Jaspers' (1953) account in *The Origin and Goal of History*.

Societies was published at a time when Parsons' influence in social science in general and in sociology in particular may have been at its Zenith. Its appearance may be seen against the background both of wider contextual shifts and intellectual challenges inherent in the Parsonian scheme. Interestingly enough, just a few years before its publication, Parsons had been teaching a course at Harvard together with both Robert Bellah and Shmuel Eisenstadt.

of Protestantism in his *magnum opus* *Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (pp. 605-794). See in particular section 3, "Der Calvinismus". Even if Troeltsch was a theologian, his writing is sociological and underpinned by a keen historical sense. The Protestantism part of his book takes up more than half of the nearly 1000 pages of the volume and the first section has the characteristic title "Das soziologische Problem des Protestantismus". What Troeltsch writes is compatible with the thrust of Weber's analysis but formed by a deep and detailed understanding of every stage in the early history of Protestantism. For an understanding of Weber's (1991) interest in China, the Studienausgabe to the volume of the collected works of Max Weber, Band I/19, provides interesting materials about the context in which Weber was writing and revising his study of the ethics of economy of the world religions as well as of its reception. See Max Weber, *Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen. Konfuzianismus und Taoismus, Schriften 1915-1920*, Studienausgabe der Max Weber Gesamtausgabe, Band I/19.

In later decades of the twentieth century and in the beginning of the twenty-first century, the writings of these two scholars were instrumental in reinvigorating an interest in exploring links between a comparative sociology and history of religions and civilizations and efforts to understand the modern world and its antinomies. These concerns gradually came to attract the attention of a range of scholars in the humanities and social sciences and also contributed to a redefinition of the nature and commitments of social theory.

3. The Idea of the Axial Age and the Study of World Religions and World History: Robert Neelly Bellah and Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt

It would not be Parsons' sociology, however, that would engender a renewed interest in Weber's and Jaspers' works on the long-term history of world religions and civilizations. Instead, the first strong impetus in this direction would come in 1975 from another Harvard professor, namely the sinologist Benjamin Schwartz and a group of prominent scholars, including Peter Brown, Louis Dumont, Eric Weil, and Arnaldo Momigliano. They took up the notion of the Axial Age in a path-breaking special issue of the journal *Daedalus*, devoted to the theme "Wisdom, Revelation, and Doubt: Perspectives on the first Millennium B.C."⁶ Several of them later published major works that further explored these ideas.

Soon afterwards the two young colleagues of Parsons, already mentioned, namely Robert Bellah and Shmuel Eisenstadt (2005) embarked on research programmes that came to retain their commitment and engagement for the rest of their lives. These two scholars are rightly said to have "done more than anyone to make the Axial Age significant for comparative historical sociology".⁷

There is an obvious parallelism between the research programmes of Bellah and Eisenstadt and that of Max Weber's *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion*.

⁶ *Daedalus* 104, Spring 1975, no. 2.

⁷ The quotation is from an article where he generously acknowledges the significance of Shmuel Eisenstadt's contribution, a recognition that any fair observer should extend to include Bellah himself. See Robert N. Bellah (2005), "What is Axial about the Axial Age?" in *European Journal of Sociology* 46 (pp. 69-89).

In fact, Shmuel Eisenstadt's project in the 1980s and 1990s, in cooperation with Wolfgang Schluchter, on the Axial Age and the great world religions had Weber's collected essays as a key reference point.⁸ This project, which I came to join in 1991, was inspired by a vision of probing the continued validity —and the need for a possible rethinking— of Weber's analysis in his *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion*.

As to the substantive core of Axial thought, Jaspers and, even more so, later interpreters such as Bellah and Eisenstadt and their collaborators and colleagues have recognized the complexity and sophistication of the long history of narrative accounts in the form of myths and of rituals associated with such myths but also the multiple forms of Axial thought.

It is largely due to the dual commitment of both Eisenstadt and Bellah to focus both on detailed empirical scholarship and on theorizing opening wide theoretical perspectives that the idea of the Axial Age in later years has come to enter centre-stage in social science debates and theorizing.

Bellah and Eisenstadt represent different intellectual styles, but both of them have been crucial in transmitting to the scholarly community at large a strong sense of the intellectual urgency of the debates around the idea of the Axial Age. This idea has been the subject of an increasingly intense but also increasingly well-informed debate, involving ancient historians, historians of religion and philosophy, and linguists.

Scholars not only in the humanities and social sciences but also in fields such as cognitive science have explore ideas of the Axial Age. Most notably per-

⁸ See Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (Ed.) *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (1986). University of New York Press; *Kulturen der Achsenzeit I: Ihre Ursprünge und ihre Vielfalt*, Teil 1, *Griechenland, Israel, Mesopotamien*. Teil 2: *Spätantike, Indien, China, Islam* (1987); *Kulturen der Achsenzeit II: Ihre institutionelle und kulturelle Dynamik*, Teil 1: *China, Japan*. Teil 2: *Indien*. Teil 3: *Buddhismus, Islam, Alttägypten, westliche Kultur* (1992). See also Wolfgang Schluchter (1996), *Paradoxes of Modernity: Culture and Conduct in the Theory of Max Weber*. Stanford University Press. See also Wolfgang Schluchter (1998), *Die Entstehung des modernen Rationalismus: Eine Analyse von Max Webers Entwicklungsgeschichte des Okzidents*. Suhrkamp. Wolfgang Schluchter und Friedrich Wilhelm Graf (Hrsg.) (2005), *Asketischer Protestantismus und der 'Geist' des modernen Kapitalismus*. Moor Siebeck, as well as Johann P. Arnason, Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt and Björn Wittröck (Eds.) (2005), *Axial Civilizations and World History*. Brill, and Robert N. Bellah (2005), "What is Axial about the Axial Age?", *European Journal of Sociology* 46, 69-89 as well as Robert N. Bellah's (2010) magisterial works in this field in recent years are his monograph *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* and his and Hans Joas already mentioned co-edited volume from 2012, *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*.

haps a range of theoretically orientated scholars such as Johann P. Arnason, José Casanova, Merlin Donald, Jürgen Habermas, Hans Joas, Charles Taylor and Roberto Mangabeira Unger have come to deeply engage in the dialogue about transformative moments in world religions and world history.

As a result, this theme in general and that of the Axial Age in particular has emerged as one of the great scholarly discussions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.⁹

4. World Religions and the Evolution of Human Culture: Robert Neelly Bellah

In his late *magnum opus* *Religion as Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* as well as in the parallel volume, edited together with Hans Joas, *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, Robert Bellah (2011, 2012) explores in detail the different paths that led up to Axial breakthroughs in different cultural parts of the Old World, namely in Ancient Greece, Ancient Israel, and Ancient China, and plausibly also in the case of India. (As for Iran, Bellah refrains, with reference to the paucity and uncertainty of source materials, from analysing this fifth “classical” case of an original Axial transformation).

In Bellah’s (2011, 2012) account the Axial Age heralds the emergence of a new cultural stage in human evolution, namely that of so-called theoretic culture. In this characterization, Bellah is inspired by the evolutionary and cognitive perspective of Merlin Donald (1991, p. 214). Bellah emphasizes that the Axial Age is expressive of the possibilities that opened up to humankind at the time of the emergence of a fourth evolutionary stage in the development of human culture.

Thus from the earliest forms of human interaction in so-called episodic culture, over mimetic culture and, the development of language and the possibility of constructing “a unified, collectively held system of explanatory and regulatory metaphors,” a “comprehensive modeling of the entire human universe” (Donald, 1991, p. 214) made so-called mythic culture possible.

In this evolutionary scheme the Axial Age represents a relatively early phase of the fourth fundamental stage, the so-called theoretic age that allows for a

⁹ One example of the relevance of the Axial Age for efforts to reach an understanding of our contemporary age is Charles Taylor’s magisterial work *A Secular Age* (2007).

new type of critically reflexive activities. These activities complement those of bodily reactions and mimetic imitation and gesturing, and those of mythical narratives. Bellah also argues that this perspective serves as a means towards avoiding teleological reasoning. This is a convincing argument as far as the four, or possibly five, original cases of Axial breakthroughs are concerned.

In this perspective there is no need to privilege any one of the five cases as being the precursor. Nor is there a need to construe a genealogy and to establish streams of influence and of borrowing. However, it seems less clear how an evolutionary perspective can help explain developments once the original Axial qualitative changes have taken place.

Jaspers had argued that a distinctive feature of the Axial Age was the emergence of forms of thought that did not only involve transpositions and variations of mythical narratives but new forms of thinking that clearly transcended the limits of existing practices of human society. This feature figures prominently as a key characteristic in the analyses of many scholars, including Shmuel Eisenstadt and Hans Joas but also in the works of Robert Bellah. Bellah, however, also tries to construe the preconditions for the possibility of expressing a distinction between a transcendental and a mundane sphere.

One element in this line of argument is to emphasize that the Axial Age involved the emergence of a distinction between narrative and analytical accounts. Thereby humans are not only able give expression to visions and ideas of the world beyond the constraints of existence at a specific time and place. The distinction also enables a critical and analytically orientated stance towards both material and intellectual practices and beliefs. Already for Jaspers this marked the transition from *mythos* to *logos*, a breakthrough in critical reflection and indeed the emergence of history in the sense of the epoch in human existence characterized by a reflexive, historical consciousness.

Bellah also devotes much attention to the question of the form of religious practices in two main types of pre-Axial societies, namely tribal societies and large so-called Archaic societies. Thus in earlier tribal societies, the invocation and articulation of mythical beliefs in ritualistic practices would normally serve the social and cultural coherence of a collective. They would, of course, involve practices outside of the bounds of day-to-day practices of production and reproduction. They might also involve or usher in changes in the collective life of a community. In this way, myths could be reinterpreted and supplanted or even replaced by additional myths, as could imaginations

about the primacy of different forces or divinities associated with the different forms of myths.

In large-scale Archaic societies with rituals performed by Emperors or other centrally placed rulers, occasional and irregular, but inevitable, catastrophic external events, involving e.g. draughts, famines, pandemics and flooding, might lead to questioning and reinterpretations but rarely, if ever, to a fundamental challenge to notions of an ideal cosmological or societal order.

In other words, in both types of pre-Axial societies, there might be, Bellah argues, instances of disruption but rarely ushering in more than a partial adaptation and not in a critical reflection and rejection of some myth by way of questioning its premises or engaging in a comparative exposition of its merits and shortcomings in, say, a Platonic or Aristotelian, dialogical form. This started only in some societies in the Old World around the middle of the first millennium BCE. This change is profound enough to justify the designation Axial Age and the identification of those civilizations where this first occurred.

In many ways, Bellah's argument is similar to Jaspers'. However, it is less philosophical and involves an incomparably more extensive and careful reconstruction of historical scholarship. It is also, contrary to Jaspers' and Eisenstadt's inquiries, grounded in —the expression inspired by seems too weak— an evolutionary perspective represented, as already mentioned, not least by the works of Merlin Donald. Interestingly enough, this link between evolutionary theorizing and psychology has also come to exert an influence on discussions in the field of cognitive science.

Bellah's project on religion in human evolution was meant to be carried on beyond the original Axial Age. Alas, Robert Bellah's death in July 2013 meant that this project has not been finalized. Whether manuscripts covering later periods exist and may come to be published remains an open question.

5. Comparative Civilizations and the Antinomies of World History: Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt

Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt has sometimes been described as the Max Weber of our times. At least for a time, and in particular in the 1960s, he was often perceived as a representative of the structural-functional school that came to occupy a dominant position in much of social science.

Eisenstadt's early studies involved a focus on the study of cultural and religious practices and traditions. Already in these early works there was also one important feature that came to pervade virtually all of Eisenstadt's works, namely an emphasis on antinomies, inherent tensions and processes that have opposing consequences and on a dialogical view of human action and of society.

In 1963, and as already mentioned, his early *magnum opus* appeared, namely *The Political System of Empires*. This book made him famous throughout the scholarly world of social science. It analysed structural features and contestations, which appeared in imperial societies, over the control and use of free resources in societies where a large share of all resources were bound up in traditional and ascriptive settings beyond the control of a central imperial apparatus and its rulership and taxation. Different empires develop different strategies to enable control of free resources but also different strategies in their use of a variety of military or cultural projects, dependent on different civilizational imaginations and visions.

The new direction of the research programme of Eisenstadt gradually took form during the second half of the 1970s and the first half of the 1980s. These were years when there occurred what might perhaps best be termed a rediscovery of both Max Weber's *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion* and of Karl Jasper's (1953) book *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*.

For Eisenstadt (1963), the hypothesis of the Axial Age held out a triple promise. Firstly, it might broaden and complement the institutional analysis of the political systems of empires. Secondly, it might provide, or at least suggest, an understanding of the emergence in some societies, as well as the non-emergence in others, of distinctly imperial political forms of rulership in some parts of the world at a, broadly speaking, similar period in time. It might, however also and thirdly, provide an analytical account that would be less constricted by the somewhat rigid taxonomic categories of structural functional analysis of Parsons.

Together with a prominent Weberian scholar, Wolfgang Schluchter, Eisenstadt made the idea of the Axial Age focus of a sustained research programme. Eisenstadt extended the analysis considerably and involved humanistic scholars in fields such as Egyptology, Assyriology, Sanskrit studies, History of Religion, Sinology, and many others with an interest in an overall analysis of societies and cultures in their historical contexts and in exploring linkages between history, philosophy and religion across regions and across time.

The idea of the Axial Age suggested a research focus that was related to Eisenstadt's earlier works and to his interests in Weber's sociology. It also provided an analytical framework that gave prominence both to institutional and cultural phenomena. Furthermore, it went beyond a North Atlantic perspective, given that the key sites of the Axial breakthroughs were located in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East and in South and East Asia. In a sense it was a form of analysis that had affinities with a cultural and intellectual cosmopolitanism that recognized the achievements of different sites across the world.

Eisenstadt published a large number of monographs, edited volumes and articles in the 1980s and 1990s on the idea of the Axial Age. A succinct presentation of the early part of his project together with Wolfgang Schluchter is given in the edited volume *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (Eisenstadt, 1986).

Eisenstadt's interest in the Axial Age was never that of an antiquarian. Rather it reflected his sense that the momentous upheavals of the Axial Age provided an echo for the most deeply transformative events of our own age as well. There is a deep connectivity between his interests in antiquity and in modernity. In both areas, his original Buberian influences became gradually more pronounced and both his theorizing and scholarly style came to differ ever more from those of his former colleague Talcott Parsons.

More precisely, for Eisenstadt, modernity was never mainly the successful end-result of a process of differentiation and modernization. Even if those elements are relevant, modernity for him is rather a situation characterized by a lack of markers of certainty. As such it entails great potentials but also great threats of the use of violence.

In practical terms, Eisenstadt elaborated the ideas of multiple modernities in Jerusalem from the early 1990's but also, in the context of a joint research programme with Wolfgang Schluchter (at Heidelberg and Erfurt) and myself (in Uppsala). Some of these ideas involved exploring societal transformations in the course of the second millennium CE, what was sometimes called "early modernities" or, to use a term coined, by the Sanskrit scholar Sheldon Pollock, the "vernacular millennium". In this context, Shmuel Eisenstadt and some of his colleagues elaborated what became an alternative to both classical modernization theory and to ideas about an inevitable clash of civilizations, namely the paradigm of so-called multiple modernities.

In many ways, the age of modernity was for Eisenstadt an age of pervasive institutional and cultural transformation of a significance equal to that of the Axial Age. In fact, he sometimes described it as a second Axial Age, i.e., an age in which new notions of temporality, the construction of social bonds, and of cosmology ushered in institutional transformations previously unimaginable. However, in this respect modernity represented an intensification of features of the Axial Age to such an extent that it threatened to undermine its own conditions.

Moreover, and more systematically than perhaps any other social scientist, Eisenstadt argued against the identification of modernity solely with a Western tradition. Even if the contemporary world is one characterized by a belief in the potential of human action to change social and political conditions, there are many different sets of such beliefs and many different institutional paths. In works on India, China, Japan — in particular the great study of *Japanese Civilization: A Comparative View* and on Islamic societies, Eisenstadt was able to demonstrate that these societies in fact exhibited both cultural and institutional features, typical of modern societies, at a much earlier stage and in much more widespread form, than scholars had assumed (Eisenstadt, 1996).

In works such as *Fundamentalism, Sectarianism and Revolutions* he consistently argued that fundamentalism is not a traditional but a distinctly modern phenomenon (Eisenstadt, 1999). Specifically, it is modern not only by the fact that its adherents tend to use modern technologies to the limits of their capacity. It is also profoundly anti-traditional in its rejection of practices of continuous textual contestation and reinterpretation. Instead of such practices the different varieties of fundamentalism assert the absolute and unchangeable validity of their own decontextualized interpretation of textual passages in those scriptures about sociality, cosmology and temporality that they elevate to an ontological status of self-referential and eternal validity.

In practice this tends to entail a social and political stance characterized by efforts to violently impose upon society at large a combination of political voluntarism, institutional enforcement, technological pragmatism and intellectual curtailment and inflexibility. In other words, it means the emergence of cultural and institutional practices that are completely at odds with those of traditional institutions, be they classical empires, traditional religious orders or the legal and political organs of pre-industrial societies.

In parallel to his interests in the contemporary age, he extended and deepened his engagement with research on the Axial Age. In dialogue with a

variety of historical experts he explored the emergence of axial forms of cultural and institutional phenomena in the first millennium BCE. Perhaps the most extensive demonstration of this from later years of his career is the volume *Axial Civilizations and World History*, edited together with Johann P. Arnason and Björn Wittrock (Eisenstadt et al., 2005).

In these historical contexts, Eisenstadt always pressed for a close inquiry into precisely those cases that might constitute the strongest and most convincing counter-instances to the hypothesis of the emergence of the Axial Age in those civilizations that had been highlighted by Jaspers, Bellah and Eisenstadt himself. In the volume just mentioned those instance were the ones of Pharaonic Egypt and of Mesopotamia. The authors of these chapters, Jan Assmann and Piotr Michalowski, explored them in depth as possible examples of Axial-analogous breakthroughs prior to the Axial Age proper — but came out strengthening rather than weakening the original hypothesis about the location of the Axial breakthroughs.

Furthermore, Eisenstadt argued that many previous forms of ritualistic practice were, if in a different guise, continued in religious practices after the Axial breakthroughs and thereby contributed to the tensions and antinomies inherent in all highly articulated civilizations. In the core epoch of the Axial transformation, the fact that the most important proponents of the transformations had a peripheral and heterodox position *vis-à-vis* mainstream cultural and political order led to an opening of horizons and the emergence of a variety of critical voices. Eventually, however, the Axial ruptures were, in Eisenstadt's view, given a standardized form and became more or less closely tied to new political centres and to new cultural-religious orthodoxies. However, they still retained a potential for the emergence of new heterodox interpretations that might take the form of a serious threat to central political power, no matter how closely linked the clerical and religious interpreters had become to that centre.

This served as yet one more source of inspiration for Eisenstadt's fascination with possible parallels between the ruptures in some civilizations in antiquity and the revolutionary transformations of the modern age. It is not co- incidental that while working on the large volume about the Axial Age, he also wrote a monograph with the title *The Great Revolutions and the Civilizations of Modernity* (Eisenstadt, 2006). In both periods there is a crisis in terms of the, at least temporary, absence of markers of certainty. In both there is also an emphasis on the role of human agency to shape mundane reality so as to better conform to a visionary imaginations of human amelioration.

This emphasis on parallels between transformative sequences of events had important epistemic consequences. It meant that Eisenstadt, while fascinated with the ruptures both in the middle of the first millennium BCE and in the middle of the first millennium CE (with the rise of Christendom and later Islam) as well at the end of the second millennium CE (with the Great Revolutions of Modernity) needed analytical categories capable of grasping similarities and differences between transformations in distant and different historical landscapes.

Two strategies immediately presented themselves. Occasionally, Eisenstadt tended to deal with this problem in terms of temporal notions. Thus one possibility was to recognize the similarity of later developments to those that had occurred in the middle of the first millennium by describing later developments, e.g. the emergence of Islam, as constituting a “secondary” breakthrough. This might appear as a convenient stratagem. However, with an increasing distance in time and space, the case for suggesting a reasonable genealogy tends to become weaker. As a consequence, Eisestadt became increasingly hesitant to use such a terminology.

An alternative stance might be to distinguish between the temporal notion of an Axial Age and an analytical one of Axial civilizations or features characteristic of Axiality. This was an epistemic stance that was reflected in Eisenstadt’s (1996) famous book about Japan as an example of a modern but non-Axial civilization.

Even though possible, this is perhaps not always an analytically satisfactory solution. An alternative way to proceed might be to recognize that at the core of both Jasper’s, Bellah’s and Eisenstadt’s analyses, there is an assumption that human beings, once they have acquired access to the means to record and store their memories and have recognized their capacity to change states of affairs in the world, cannot avoid the possibility of reflecting on their own existence relative to the passage of time, to their relationship to others, to their own finite existence and to their potential to intervene into the world. These dimensions of human existence may however be given vastly different interpretations in different contexts and some of which may enable, others obfuscate, different types of institutional practices.

Major institutional restructurings will tend to occur in conjunction with the articulation of different positions along such dimensions and, if deep-seated enough, to constitute something of a cultural crystallization that may create path of developments of some endurance. In this perspective both the origi-

nal transformations of the Axial Age and those of the modern era —and, for that matter, those that occurred in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries at the Western and Eastern seaboards of the Old World— constitute such periods of cultural crystallization.

Furthermore, in recent decades, historical social science seems to have arrived at a set of relatively well-documented hypotheses about conditions for the occurrence of such crystallizations. In other contexts, I have, to some extent also inspired by the conceptual historical work of Reinhart Koselleck, tried to demonstrate the fruitfulness of such an approach.

Shmuel Eisenstadt, perhaps more than any contemporary scholar, explored these types of conditions for deep-seated change in human societies. In particular, few scholars of equal prominence in his generation maintained such a keen interest in the great variety of societies and cultures across time and space. These interests were not subsiding but became greater with the passage of time. Eisenstadt became ever more deeply engaged with the study of the world beyond the Atlantic seaboard. This engagement was also reflected in a dialogical form of curiosity-driven research which ensured him of friends, readers and colleagues far outside of the areas along the North Atlantic were most historical social science at that time was being pursued. It is difficult to imagine a scholar more driven by intellectual curiosity than Eisenstadt nor anyone more interested in exploring the antinomies of human life and more prepared to expose his own favourite ideas to being probed in dialogue with others.

6. Contemporary Crossroads: Jürgen Habermas and Hans Joas

At the beginning of the twenty-first century it became increasingly evident that questions about the history and future of humankind could not be limited to accounts of the achievements of a relatively small number of North Atlantic societies in the course of the last two or three centuries. Shmuel Eisenstadt's proposal that the implications of a notion of multiple modernities be spelt out and that ancient history might profit from exploring the hypothesis of an Axial breakthrough in human self-reflectivity, emerging at different global locations, reflected such concerns. So did also calls for a renewed reflection on the nature of grounded knowledge *vis-à-vis* different forms of Faith and religious belief and about the possibilities of human beings to use reason and creativity to overcome societal constraints and impositions. Towards the end of the second decade of the century, two prominent sociologists, namely

Jürgen Habermas and Hans Joas, have each written a *magnum opus* that addresses these themes from a vantage point in which an analysis of Axial Age is of constitutive significance.

6.1. Jürgen Habermas and the Occidental Genealogy of Reason and Liberty

In his late *magnum opus*, *This Too a History of Philosophy*, to quote the title of the —at the time of my writing this essay not yet published— English translation, Jürgen Habermas (2019) explores the complex and rich genealogy of a philosophical and ethical tradition that embraces efforts to establish and to articulate a conception of philosophy entailing the closest possible link between notions of reason and liberty.

This involves tracing a genealogy that takes its starting point in the period of the Axial Age. In fact, the idea of the Axial Age is introduced by Habermas (2019) already in the preface to the first of the two volumes, the one with a focus on *Die okzidentale Konstellation von Glauben und Wissen* [*The Occidental Constellation of Faith and Knowledge*], and is then pursued throughout this volume, being the main theme of the analysis for some 300 pages, as well as recurring in many instances also in the following volume, *Vernünftige Freiheit. Spuren des Diskurses über Glauben und Wissen* [*Rational Liberty. Traces of the Discourse on Faith and Knowledge*].¹⁰ In this analysis, Habermas is elaborating an account that in many ways is situated in close proximity to Weber's account of the ethics of world religions.

In both volumes of Habermas' *oeuvre* there is a sustained engagement with the relationship between an “occidental constellation” and the gradual emergence of a political philosophy with a focus on exploring inextricable links between notions of reason and liberty. However, Habermas analysis also takes up ideas of some social theorists, including John Meyer and Johann P. Arnason, about properties of a world society or of a global, if diverse, modernity constituting a form of civilization *sui generis*. Thus while Habermas

¹⁰ I write this at a time when the English translation has not yet been published. I have hesitated to use the expression “rational liberty” to denote the German term “vernünftige Freiheit”. Alas, it is not easy to imagine a more appropriate translation. Instead I have, tentatively, settled on using a circumscription in the form of a conjoined concept of reason and liberty. This is linguistically clumsy but avoids some of the infelicitous misunderstanding that might otherwise occur.

analysis has a focus on a broadly defined occidental genealogy, this does not entail negligence of or indifference to analogous developments on a global scale both in antiquity and in the modern world.

In fact, there is a near book-length long section in the first volume devoted to “a tentative comparison of axial-age world imaginations”. In this section Habermas has a focus on the same cultural worlds that Weber analysed in his study of the ethics of economy of the world religions. Thus, Habermas discusses ancient Judaism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism, and philosophical developments in Ancient Greece but leaves the Iranian case to the side, as did both Weber, although not entirely so, and Bellah.

Habermas (2019) inquiry is focused on ideational phenomena. It includes reflections on societal and contextual elements of these developments. However an analysis of societal, economic and even geographical aspects of the type that Weber, and to a considerable extent also Eisenstadt, engaged in, is not pursued unless there is an immediate relationship to the formation of different constellations of Faith, philosophy and knowledge.

Habermas points to the fact that Jaspers had been stimulated in his effort by Max Weber’s studies on the sociology of religion. However, Habermas emphasizes that despite these efforts of Jaspers, it is only with Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt that the historical philosophical concept of the Axial Age becomes the focus of an interdisciplinary research programme. Furthermore, he stresses that it is only through the embedding of the concept in this research context, with social scientists playing a key role, that the seminal nature of the concept has become apparent; religions are, Habermas continues, not only reflected in the cognitive dimension of imaginations of the world but are also constitutive for the structuring of early forms of socio-cultural forms of life in their entirety.

Habermas argues that through religious transmutations in Antiquity, in particular the emergence of a Christian version of Platonic thought in the Roman Empire, an important point is marked in the development of elements of a genealogy that will eventually usher in the emergence of, to use Habermas’ term, a post-metaphysical strand of thought that in the course of the nineteenth century will become a linguistically interpretable embodiment of an idea of liberty grounded in reason.

From the early traces in late Antiquity, he explores this genealogy into the Medieval period and then analyses its further articulations in the early modern and modern periods with Hume and Kant eventually outlining two

main philosophical paths. Thus, in this account the spelling out of a conjointed idea of reason and liberty is a phenomenon of post-metaphysical thought, drawing on Kant but, in Habermas' account, with a critically significant step taken with the emergence at the turn of the eighteenth century and in the early nineteenth century of philosophical and linguistic notions, formulated by Herder, Schleiermacher and Wilhelm von Humboldt. It is this step that allows notions of reason and liberty to be extended from conceptual formulations into ideas about how they might take societal form via language and communicative processes with knowing and acting human beings at the core of the analysis rather than ideas about an objective spirit.

In this genealogy Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Søren Kirkegaard but also American pragmatism, in particular Charles Sanders Peirce, are some of the significant participants in an exploration of the possibilities to formulate a post-metaphysical idea of reason and liberty. Needless to say, Jürgen Habermas himself has, arguably, contributed more than any other social scientist or social philosopher to the articulation of these types of ideas in the present age.

Throughout the two volumes, Habermas also returns to and expounds themes that he has made pioneering contributions to earlier, including the theme of the legitimacy of rulership, incidentally another area where the research interests of Habermas and Eisenstadt meet.

Finally, Habermas himself has ventured outside of the occidental constellation to which he refers. But it is in the case of this constellation that his analysis has ushered in a rich genealogy that is pursued by way of a detailed argument at every step. However, it will engender an interest on a global scale. Hopefully, this may entice scholars to explore analogous genealogies in the history of philosophy and political thought of other cultural worlds. If so, the potentials will be greatly enhanced for an understanding both of features of the contemporary world and of the emergence and grounding of these features in a history that has some of its anchoring points traceable to axial developments in different parts of the world in Antiquity and earlier and sometimes, if in transmuted forms, echoing down to the contemporary age.

6.2. The Sacred and the Modern World: Hans Joas and the Reconstruction of Social Theory

In his already mentioned book, *The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights*, Hans Joas (2011/2013) contributed to a dialogue

between scholars in social theory and those with a focus on legal theory. The book also provided an example of how universalistic claims, inherent in notions of human rights, are not specific to a particular, occidental, tradition but might be arrived at from a starting point in different cultural, societal and religious traditions. With this project, Hans Joas addressed issues that had preoccupied Ernst Troeltsch in his efforts to discern pathways whereby human agents from different societal and religious backgrounds, might, through human interaction and interpretation, articulate a commitment, expressed in universalistic terms.

This research programme had also, as already pointed out, links to Joas' publications on the cultural values of Europe and on world religions and on the possibilities to extend an action-based analysis to processes of global change. With this step, Joas once again touched upon themes taken up by Troeltsch, Weber and other scholars in the period of reconstruction of European social thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Hans Joas' contributions in this field extend and deepen an historical understanding of the role of human action in the constitution of human institutions. They also highlight links between human action and experiences of a transcendental nature. Thus we arrive at the core of what was at stake, at the time of reconstruction of social thought, in debates a hundred years ago about world religions and world history.

In his book, *Die Macht des Heiligen* [*The Power of the Sacred*], Hans Joas (2017) has chosen to focus on these themes and to outline an alternative to Max Weber's writings on disenchantment. However, there is an almost equally extensive and intensive engagement with the concepts of secularization, rationalization and modernization. There is also a treatment of a range of other concepts, not least those of differentiation, sacralization and ritual as well as a discussion of the thesis of the Axial Age and of other historical, theological and sociological categories, including, if more briefly than the ones just mentioned, the concept of power that also appears in the title of book.

The enquiry into the uses and validity of the concept of disenchantment serves as a pivot for a scholarly engagement that re-examines the history of the social and human sciences, the role of contemporary social theory and the interweaving of sociology, theology and the history of religion. In effect, Hans Joas outlines a conception of the sociology of religion that draws on classic works by Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber but that also goes beyond

these works. In particular, Joas proposes a new interpretation of Max Weber's conception of a sociology of religion.

This interpretation is profoundly critical and argues that, through Weber's use of concepts that assign magical properties to religious categories, not least to the sacraments of the Catholic Church, a meaningful dialogue about religion and society between believers and non-believers tends to become preempted. Furthermore, Joas (2017) argues that Weber's concept of Disenchantment entails that there is no other way to a modern capitalist economy than that of an inner-worldly asceticism. This, Joas implies is an unwarranted simplification. Inherent in Weber's notion of Disenchantment, there is also a tendency to exclude reversibility and processes whereby antinomies are actualized.

The first chapters of the book constitute enquiries into ways in which three (or rather more) disciplines have addressed the history of religion and the existence of religious practices. Thus the first has David Hume's *The Natural History of Religion*, originally published in 1757, as its focus. It highlights the way in which a moral philosopher writes about religion as a natural phenomenon with a historical progression.

An important chapter has the title "The Ritual and the Sacred" and is a broad review of notions in classical and contemporary sociology and anthropology. The key protagonist is Émile Durkheim. It is a learned and carefully argued text that leads up to a conclusion that is significant throughout the rest of the book, namely the definition that a ritual creates a controlled environment in which die mechanisms of everyday life are temporarily bracketed. This provides a setting in which ideal conditions may be experienced and after the return to everyday life remain in memory as an intense experience.

This definition appears reasonable. It also turns out to be useful in the further analysis. Two observations may be immediately suggested, namely the following ones:

First, the chosen definition is by no means limited to Christian religious practices. It would for instance be equally applicable to early Chinese religious practices.¹¹

¹¹ See e.g. David W. Pankenier (2013), *Astrology and Cosmology in Early China: Conforming Earth to Heaven*. Cambridge University Press; Michael J. Puett (2001), *The Ambivalence of Creation: Debates Concerning Innovation and Artifice in Ancient China*. Stanford University Press; Michael J. Puett (2002), *To Become a God: Cosmology, Sacrifice and Self-Divination in Early China*. Harvard University Asia Center for the Harvard-Yenching Institute.

Second, the definition is only applicable to the practices of so-called Axial religions, i.e., religions that are premised on the existence of a chasm between a mundane and transcendental sphere and on the assumption that gods do not inhabit a blurred zone partially mundane, partially transcendental, nor that they appear in embodied form as kings, pharaohs or emperors.

These exploratory chapters provide the background for an enquiry into the possibilities, as they appeared to be in the early twentieth century, for a sociology of religion and, indeed, for a scholarly study of religion. Hans Joas (2017) highlights, as already discussed, two programmes as being particularly seminal and as exemplary for the study of religion in its historical and societal contexts, namely the historical sociology of the Protestant theologian Ernst Troeltsch and Max Weber's strongly historically orientated sociology of religion.

This chapter is followed by one in which sacredness is interpreted reflexively and related to the concept of transcendence. The discussion of this theme has as its focus the idea of the Axial Age. This idea is subjected to an extensive enquiry involving both conceptual history, historical sociological arguments and an examination of contemporary social theory in the light of recent research on the Axial Age.

The third of the three analytical chapters is an in-depth discussion of one of the most significant texts in the sociology of religion and in Weber's *oeuvre*, namely the famous

Zwischenbetrachtung [intermediary observation], a text that occurs at the end of the first of the three volumes with Weber's collected essays on the sociology of religion and which has sometimes been described as enigmatic. Joas (2017) shares this view and argues that Weber's focus on processes of rationalization, which are specific for individual spheres of value, highlights tensions in a way that ultimately becomes bewildering and entails a no longer controllable multiplicity of meanings. Instead, Joas advocates a historical sociological study, on the basis of a theory of action, of specific processes of ways in which e.g. economic and political phenomena are being organized.

7. Max Weber, Hans Joas and the *Zwischenbetrachtung*

A discussion of the significance and meaning of the *Zwischenbetrachtung* may conveniently start out from an effort to locate this text within the context

of Weber's *oeuvre* in general and the collected essays on the sociology of religion in particular.

As to the overall structure of the volumes of the *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion*, it has been pointed out that Max Weber pursued his analysis of the great world religions in a form that entails a movement from East to West. This form corresponded to a convention that had become established in scholarly works in German that dealt with different cultures in the Old World. However, the first two essays of the collected essays deviate from this form. Instead, they were reprinted but revised versions of the two essays that dealt with occidental phenomena, namely the two essays on the spirit of capitalism and the Protestant ethic and the Protestant sects respectively that had been published some decade and a half before the publication of the first volume of the collected essays.

Thereby, Weber introduced a dynamic element into his account that could serve as a background for comparative observations of the developments in the Near and Far Occident of Europe and the United States (the empirical domain for the major part of the discussion of the Protestant sects). The two opening chapters with the revised essays on the Protestant ethic and the Protestant sects and their relationship to the Spirit of Capitalism also provided an analytical focus for the work as a whole. Furthermore, these two chapters are preceded by the *Vorbemerkung* to the essays in their entirety. This introductory “remark” involves both a delineation of a theoretical focus and an assessment of the methodological nature and dependence of the exercise.

As to the analytical focus, the first sentence of the introductory remark poses the question “

... which chain of conditions have entailed that precisely on the ground of the West, and only here, cultural phenomena appeared that however —as we at least like to imagine— lay in a direction of development of *universal* importance and validity. (Weber, 1978, p. 1)

This statement and the subsequent outline of the structure of Weber's argument has led observers to argue that Weber proposes an analysis that will amount to a sociology of absences, i.e. notations of which phenomena where lacking in extra-European settings to bring about a development of universal significance (Arjomand, 2004; Pommeranz, 2000). Needless to say, this statement does not in itself entail a specific value commitment either in general or in personal terms. It indicates, however, a perspective as to which phenomena will be further considered in Weber's analysis.

It is against this background that the *Vorbemerkung* may be seen as constituting an analytical focus for the work as a whole that ultimately aims at an understanding of the emergence of modern capitalism in some parts of the world — and the slow or aborted emergence of it in other parts. Furthermore, such an understanding does not have or aim at the form of the identification of a strictly causal mechanism that were able to unambiguously explain and predict the emergence of a particular form of economic organization and behavior, i.e. modern capitalism based on a systematic conduct of life in personal life and techniques of rational calculation in the economic sphere. Rather Weber's objective is to formulate grounded propositions about the internal dynamics in different domains of human activity. Such propositions have a degree of analogy to law-like statements but are not of a strictly deductive nature. Instead, Weber aspires to an understanding of pervasive tendencies and antinomies that constitute the conceptually possible spaces in which societal developments evolve.

This is made additionally clear in the so-called *Einleitung* [introduction] to the part of the entire work that follows after the *Vorbemerkung* [preface] and the two revised essays on Protestantism, i.e. to the volumes that have as their common theme “Die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen. Vergleichende Religionsoziologische Versuche” (Weber, 1991a).

In the preface to the collected essays, there is a carefully circumscribed account of the dependence of Weber's analysis on secondary sources and the statement that a real expert, “of course”, will find nothing new. Instead the justification for the analysis lies in its elucidation of an analytic problem concerning causation, the rise of a specific modern form of economic organization, and the need to construct a causal mechanism to account for that.

Such an account can only be outlined, Weber argues, by drawing on historical scholarship that sheds light on one if its components in the form of empirical studies of the ethics of economy of world religions in their societal and historical contexts. As a consequence, Weber's collected essays on the sociology of religion reflect the state of knowledge across a wide field of scholarship as it looked at the time of the former turn of a century and in the first two decades of the twentieth century in the academic communities of the German — and English-speaking worlds.¹²

The whole *oeuvre* begins, as already mentioned, with an assertion of the unique achievements in the West in creating science, rational procedures in all

¹² See also Weber (1991) “Nachwort des Herausgebers”, Studienausgabe.

spheres of life and a systematic and rational conduct of life. However, there is an element of doubt inserted by the side-reflection stating that this is at least what we like to believe is the case. After hundreds of pages of empirical reports and theoretical reflections, the collection then closes the second volume with still asserting the unique achievements of the West in creating science out of art and out of this technologies of war resulting in “progress, as we call it”. Thus a sense of antinomy and inner tension lingers, if differently expressed in different passages, throughout the collection. This may perhaps not be surprising for a work that was written during and in the immediate wake of the most lethal war conducted in Europe for centuries. However, what is remarkable is the sense of intellectual focus present on every page.

In exploring mechanisms whereby world religions may exert a formative influence on key societal practices, Weber came to highlight knowledge about ways in which ethical systems of world religions are contextually constituted. In the collected essays on the sociology of religion, there are four sections of the first volume in which Weber explicitly formulates questions about these issues, namely in the *Vorbemerkung* [preface] to the whole set of volumes, in the *Einleitung* [introduction] to the series, which appears in the first volume immediately before the section on Confucianism and Daoism, in the summarizing presentation of the results of his analysis of Confucianism and Daoism, including comparative reflections relative to Puritan forms of Christianity, *Resultat*, and finally in the concluding section of volume one, *Zwischenbetrachtung* [intermediary observation], which is an extensive exposé, presenting both empirical observations and theoretical conjectures and with its latter parts written in a style that Hans Joas characterizes as, to some extent, almost “hymn-like”. (The third part of the second volume on Hinduism and Buddhism is consistently comparative in its orientation but does, not except for the final 12 pages, provide an overview of the “general character of Asiatic religiosity”). The third volume, on Ancient Judaism, finally, is almost entirely devoted to the first millennium BCE and the first millennium CE).

One may perhaps state that Weber’s *Collected Essays on the Sociology of Religion* are permeated by two major antinomies. The first one, already alluded, to is constituted by Weber’s ambiguous relationship to the achievements of the Occident. Through a rational conduct of life and a systematic application of rational techniques, an efficient regulation of social life has been achieved as has a previously unimaginable extension of productive and destructive forces manifested in industrial life and modern warfare.

This antinomy, which some observers have criticized as ushering in a sociology of absences, is related to another, and perhaps more fundamental one, namely that of delineating what is to be elucidated and understood, in other words what constitutes the ultimate explanandum of the essays. Despite the initial declaration that the analytical focus is constituted by an effort to lay bare the ethics of economics inherent in different world religions, the domain of inquiry is not contained within the demarcations suggested by this delineation. There are also analyses that may appear as elements of a sociology of human interactions in their global and historical contexts in the period during and after the emergence of world religions.

In this perspective, the *Zwischenbetrachtung* is the section in the *oeuvre* as a whole, where a sustained effort is made to outline, on the basis on the empirical materials presented in the first volume, a conceptual scheme explicating basic patterns of interaction in and between different “spheres” of human life, although the section limits its attention, apart from the analysis of world religions themselves, to four spheres (the economic, the political, the aesthetic and the erotic) plus the domain of science and systematic knowledge.

This conceptual explication is, in turn, based on assumptions about internal dynamics inherent in these different spheres (*Eigengesetzlichkeiten*). Weber demonstrates how the internal dynamics of some social spheres tend to undermine the defining characteristics of these spheres themselves. In other cases, he seeks to demonstrate that an intensified and more complete realization of the tendencies inherent in the internal logic of a given sphere may thwart developments in another sphere. Thus Weber persuasively argues that it is inherently impossible to maintain a religious commitment to universal brotherly love and support of a religious community while simultaneously maximizing the realization of the type of rationality inherent in economic processes in a modern capitalist economy. As a result, the economically profit-maximizing entrepreneur will either have to give up the idea of brotherhood, or else maintain it but see it as guaranteed by a divine omniscience and omnibenevolence that transcends human cognition or else retain the idea in the form of a seemingly universal but in reality solipsistic form of acomism of universal love.

These types of analyses, are relatively straight-forward when it comes to the spheres of economy and political order, including war. When it comes to spheres of the aesthetic and the erotic, the focus shifts once again. We are now dealing with human forces that are both powerful and may seem remote from considerations of at least immediate rationality. (Some late twentie-

th-century economists would disagree, but for Weber there is a profound divide between the internal logic inherent in these spheres.) Still, one might, perhaps, even here pursue an analysis of the consequences of processes of an increasingly radical manifestation of features inherent in the internal logic dominating in different spheres.

A prerequisite for further advances in these respects, seems, however, to be an analysis of which sets of phenomena Weber designates as entities about which features such as that of exhibiting the property of being rational may be predicated. Even at a glance, it is obvious that the range of such phenomena even when it comes to Weber's use of a term such as rational is wide and encompasses not only individual actions, but bundles of actions and practices and also institutional arrangements as well as sets of human dispositions. Furthermore, some forms of sociality obtaining among some members of society, are so closely bound to a concept of rationality as to make the link a near-conceptual rather than a causal one, e.g. in the role of a sense of brotherhood, transcending commitments of family and kin, in the process of constituting a modern capitalist economy. This may constitute, to paraphrase Hans Joas, a situation characterized by a no longer controllable multiplicity of meanings. However, it may also be seen as a situation where the imaginary and richness of conjectures in the *Zwischenbetrachtung* may serve as a source of inspiration in the realm of scholarly discovery rather than that of justification.

Irrespective of this, *Die Macht des Heiligen* constitutes a major scholarly achievement. Hans Joas (2017) has outlined key requirements for a sociology of religion and a global intellectual history in which the Axial Age marks a crucial juncture. Drawing on but also transcending contributions by Karl Jaspers, Robert Bellah and Shmuel Eisenstadt he has demonstrated that we may use the term Axiality as an analytical category to characterize tendencies in the contemporary world as well as in that of Antiquity.

In his research, Hans Joas has rediscovered and reconfigured intellectual avenues that link contemporary scholars to a classical heritage. He has analyzed how human beings have coped with the impact of wars and catastrophic events. However, he has also demonstrated that there is always a potential, despite all differences, for human beings to jointly articulate values which may be characterized as universalistic and that embrace the sacredness of the person. For these and his many other achievements to the benefit of us all, the international community of scholars owes its deepest gratitude to Hans Joas. 

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