

Reply

Hans Joas*

It is always an honor for an author when colleagues make his or her writings the subject of thorough reading and detailed written discussion. In this respect, I am very pleased with each of the volumes and journal issues that have been dedicated to my work in various languages in recent years. Now, for the first time, this is happening in the Spanish-speaking world. I would therefore like to thank all the contributors and editors, especially the initiators Diego Fonti and Claudio Viale.

The publication of this issue is certainly also due to the fact that a whole series of my books are now translated into Spanish. There are still gaps; in particular, there is no edition of my book *The Genesis of Values*, which represents the decisive link between my work on a pragmatist social theory and that on a historical sociology of religion and morality¹.

On the other hand, for example in the review by Martina Torres Criscuolo within this issue, I am quite rightly accused of insufficient consideration of Latin American thinkers. It is true that I have only briefly commented on Catholic liberation theology - albeit my fundamental sympathy with it, an unforgettable personal encounter with Enrique Dussel in Mexico in 2001 and the supervision of a doctoral thesis at the University of Chicago, which led to

¹ Hans Joas, *Die Entstehung der Werte*, Frankfurt/M. 1997. This book has been translated into English, French, Italian, Polish and Russian. For a long time a Chilean publishing house planned a Spanish translation, but finally it did not come about.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.22529/sp.2025.65.11>



STUDIA POLITICÆ Número 65 otoño 2025 pág. 210-218

Recibido: 06/07/2025 | Aceptado: 06/07/2025

Publicada por la Facultad de Ciencia Política y Relaciones Internacionales
de la Universidad Católica de Córdoba, Córdoba, República Argentina.

one of the best books on the subject and the appointment of the author to the Chair of Catholic Studies at Harvard University². In any case, my latest book contains an extensive chapter on the beginning of Spanish colonial history, the work of the Dominican Bartolomé de Las Casas, the Jesuits in Paraguay and Bishop Vasco de Quiroga in Mexico.³ But I certainly still have a lot to learn here in order to be able to hold my own in dialog with Latin American intellectuals.

I would like to begin my response to the contributions in this issue with those that encompass the broadest scope and by which I feel particularly well understood. This applies first of all to the philosopher Jesús Conill, who teaches in Spain and who, more than most, recognizes the close connection that exists between my theory of action, the theory of the emergence of values, historical sociology and the methodological proposal of an “affirmative genealogy”. He recognizes that for decades I have tried to counter the overwhelming influence of Max Weber’s theory of action and concept of rationalization and its transformation by Jürgen Habermas in the form of a theory of communicative action and communicative rationalization with an alternative that does better justice to the problems of the history of religion, but also to those of a history of secular ideals. What I find particularly instructive about his contribution is that it contains specific references to Spanish-speaking thinkers - such as Xavier Zubiri - whom I do not know and from whom, as well as from Jesús Conill himself, I hope to learn in the future. Compared to this pleasing agreement, the small indications of possible differences between us recede completely. The critical objection to my expression “non-rational forms of human communication” must be countered by the fact that, following Talcott Parsons, I make a conceptual distinction between “non-rational” and “irrational”, i.e. the non-rational should by no means be classified as inferior to the rational. This does not mean, for example, that poetic expression is based on an opposition to all rationality, but only that we do not do it justice if we apply the standard of discursive, argumentative rationality to it. There is a fundamental similarity in thinking here, which is perhaps even greater than Jesús Conill assumes. The remarks at the end of the essay are too brief for me to fully grasp them. Conill relies more on Nietzsche, I rely more on Troeltsch. I have dealt with the more precise difference between the two and

² Raúl E. Zegarra, *A Revolutionary Faith. Liberation Theology Between Public Religion and Public Reason*, Stanford 2023.

³ Hans Joas, *Universalismus. Weltherrschaft und Menschheitsethos*, Berlin 2025, p. 425-489

Troeltsch's criticism of Nietzsche in my latest book.⁴ It would be interesting to pursue the question of whether there is a real or only apparent difference between Conill and myself.

I also feel very well understood in the two important contributions by the Swedish social scientist Björn Wittrock, which have already been published in German but are now appearing here in their original English version. Since the author himself does not come from the Spanish-speaking world, he admittedly does not fall within the scope of my improved engagement with Spanish or Latin American thinkers. I would like to emphasize at this point that I have been associated with him as a colleague and friend for decades and owe him much institutional support and intellectual stimulation. Wittrock is one of the most important contributors to the international discourse on the so-called Axial Age. He has worked as closely with the Israeli sociologist Shmuel Eisenstadt as I have with the American sociologist Robert Bellah.⁵ Both of his contributions here sketch a convincing picture of the development of modern social theory; I have no objection to this. As I have already explained elsewhere, I hesitate to follow Wittrock in his assessment that the intellectual projects of Weber and Troeltsch were compatible or even complementary.⁶ I myself have come to the conclusion that Troeltsch pursued the project of a genealogy of moral universalism, albeit limited to Christianity and Stoicism, and Weber that of an explanation of the emergence of the modern capitalist spirit or a genealogy of "occidental rationalism", which drove him to pioneering achievements in comparison with India, China and the Islamic world. My ambition is to pursue the genealogy of moral universalism comparatively in the same way that Weber did with his other question. I cannot go deeper here explaining how these different projects relate to each, but the difference must be clearly stated.

I can also recognize myself in considerable parts of Alejandro Pelfini's article "Hans Joas as a Global Thinker", although not in all of them. The (iro-

⁴ Ibid., p. 39-70. I have presented my book mirroring Nietzsche's, as a way „from the genealogy of morals to the genealogy of moral universalism“.

⁵ Cf. Johann P. Arnason, S.N. Eisenstadt, Björn Wittrock (Ed.), *Axial Civilizations and World History*, Leiden (NL)/Boston 2005; Robert N. Bellah, Hans Joas (Ed.), *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, Cambridge 2012.

⁶ Hans Joas, "Kritik der „Entzauberung“ und Theorie der Sakralisierung: Voraussetzungen und Konsequenzen", in: Magnus Schlette et al. (Ed.), *Idealbildung, Sakralisierung, Religion. Beiträge zu Hans Joas' „Die Macht des Heiligen“*, Frankfurt/M. 2022, p. 493-514, here p. 497.

nic?) characterization of my intellectual path, which - according to Pelfini - “begins in Erfurt, continues in Chicago and, one might say, culminates in the Vatican” strikes me as completely fantastic. To avoid giving readers the wrong impression, I would like to emphasize that my path did not begin in Erfurt, where I only became active at the age of 50; that I was already in Chicago as a doctoral student in 1975/76, was a visiting professor for the first time in 1985 and have been teaching there for decades since 2000; and that there can certainly be no question of a culmination in the Vatican, especially since the decisive position there was only recently filled... In this characterization, the Bavarian Catholicism that shaped me and the intellectual and political milieu of Berlin, where I spent and spend most of my life, are not mentioned at all.

Unfortunately, decisive aspects of my involvement with “global” issues are also overlooked.⁷ There is no consideration of my books on war, although one of them has already been translated into Spanish, neither of other mentions in my writings that have to do with the global history of moral universalism. I find that unfair. I must also raise an objection to the interpretation of my views on the relationship between individual and collective forms of experiencing self-transcendence. I am a staunch opponent of attempts to ascribe one or the other to individual religions, denominations, cultures or regions of the world - as if Protestants were exclusively individualists and Catholics collectivists, as if Europeans were only one thing and Asians only another, as if modern people were only one thing and pre-modern people only another. It is difficult for me to recognize my own views especially on the last pages of the essay

With these critical remarks on a nonetheless interesting contribution, I come to Marcos Breuer’s essay “Hans Joas’ Theory of Religion and the Foundations of the Modern State”. In several respects, this author attributes to me views that are the exact opposite of what I advocate. This is not a matter of nuance, but of complete misunderstanding. Perhaps it is best if, quite independently of this text, I formulate some of the main propositions of my theory of religion with outmost clarity. *Firstly*, although I am a critic of the so-called theory of secularization, I am by no means a proponent of

⁷ Hans Joas, War and Modernity: Studies in the History of Violence in the 20th Century; Hans Joas, Wolfgang Knöbl, Kriegsverdrängung. Ein Problem in der Geschichte der Sozialtheorie, Frankfurt/M. 2008 (there is a translation of this book into Chinese, and one into English with the title War in Social Thought; finally: Hans Joas, Friedensprojekt Europa? München 2020.

the thesis that there is no weakening of religion anywhere. As a resident of one of the most secular cities in the world (Berlin), I would have to be struck with blindness if I denied the phenomena of secularization in this way. The criticism of secularization theory concerns the criticism of the thesis that phenomena of secularization can be explained by processes of modernization. This is why I have tried to develop an alternative explanation in many of my works, for example in the volume *Faith as an Option*, which I call a political sociology of religion.⁸ *Secondly*, I expressly do not advocate the thesis that it is attributed here to me, namely that there is no human being without religion and that religiosity is a universal anthropological fact. What I am arguing is that experiences of self-transcendence and dynamics of ideal formation are universal in an anthropological sense - but their religious articulation and interpretation are not. *Thirdly*, I do not argue that experiences of self-transcendence are experiences of the sacred, but rather that the sacred emerges from these experiences - the experiences are thus constitutive and not derivative. *Fourthly*, I do not claim that modern societies can only secure their cohesion through a religion in common; what I do claim is that they cannot be conflict-free and stable without a basic consensus on fundamental issues.

Perhaps these attempts at clarification will suffice as rebuttals; it should only be added that the reference to other authors who have also criticized the central elements of my theory, without even having properly scrutinized them, does not increase its cogency.⁹

In the next step, I would like to turn to the two contributions that are dedicated to my connection to American pragmatism. More than a decade ago, the philosopher María Cristina Di Gregori, who has unfortunately recently passed away, presented a clear and insightful account of my theory of the creativity of human action. It is not outdated in most respects. It just seems to me that it exaggerates the importance of John Dewey in my work, because it completely ignores my early and ongoing engagement with George Herbert Mead. The remark she mentions from the American philosopher Vincent

⁸ Hans Joas, *Faith as an Option*, Stanford 2014.

⁹ Regarding the accusation that I have not sufficiently dealt with the explanatory potential of contractualism, I would like to point out that the critique of neo-liberalism and a primarily normative alternative to it plays a central role in my work, although not in the field of political theory, but in that of social theory. Cf. Hans Joas, Wolfgang Knöbl, *Social Theory. Twenty Introductory Lectures*, Cambridge 2009, p. 20-42, 94-122.

Colapietro from 2009 about the lack of reception of my theory among philosophers also seems to me no longer accurate.¹⁰ In Germany, for example, I am in the fortunate position of being able to refer to the writings of Matthias Jung, who has related my theory of action in a highly original way to more recent developments in the philosophy of mind and language.¹¹ Because I mainly referred to Dewey's theory of aesthetic experience in my book on creativity, she fears one-sidedness on my part. In other works, I have mainly dealt with Dewey's theory of religion. Di Gregori's central critical point, however, is a different one. She accuses me of insufficient consideration of Dewey's later work, in particular the book "Knowing and the Known", published with Arthur F. Bentley in 1949. I have to accept this accusation in the literal sense. However, it has not yet become entirely clear to me whether Dewey really developed his philosophy in this work beyond terminological changes ("transaction") in a way that is consequential for my own project. The essay does not really specify this possibility, but it leaves me with an important reminder.

Germán Arroyo also deals specifically with my connection to John Dewey and generally rejects my criticism of him. He does so by means of a comparison with the much less critical connection to Dewey in the thinking of the critical theorist Axel Honneth. I leave the assessment of the section on Honneth to him. Overall, Arroyo comes to the conclusion that Honneth remains closer to Dewey than I do and that both Hegelianisms differ positively from my critical assessment of Hegel. I have two problems with the result of Arroyo's considerations. One of them lies where the assessment on the correctness of an interpretation is not sufficiently separated from the approval of the interpreted thinker. My clear criticism of Dewey's "sacralization of democracy" in his book *A Common Faith* is not rejected by Arroyo as a misunderstanding, i.e. as a false interpretation. Rather, he rejects its content because, like Honneth, he himself is closer to this Deweyan idea than I am. But this is actually clear from the outset and does not require any complicated expla-

¹⁰ Since she leans strongly on Richard Bernstein's book of 2010 *The Pragmatic Turn*, I allow myself to add that I greatly appreciate his praise of my understanding of pragmatism (p. 24), but of course I also regret that the last of my books that he mentions, precisely the book on the Creativity of Action, was published in the German original version in 1992, and thus he left out of his consideration all the following decades.

¹¹ Matthias Jung, *Der bewusste Ausdruck. Anthropologie der Artikulation*, Berlin 2009, i.e. p. 222-259 and p. 351-356

nation. As for the question of whether Dewey remained a lifelong Hegelian or, as a thinker of historical contingency, increasingly detached himself from all teleological philosophy of history - as I maintain - it seems crucial to me that we assign Dewey's statements to the exact phase in his intellectual development from which the statement originates. It is probably undisputed that Dewey's intensive reception of Darwin already distanced his historical thinking from Hegel in essential respects. This becomes even more apparent when, in coming to terms with the First World War, he speaks of it as an opportunity to leave the "fool's paradise" of an evolutionist and teleological belief in progress. In 1916, he wrote "We confused rapidity of change with advance, and we took certain gains in our own comfort and ease as signs that cosmic forces were working inevitably to improve the whole state of human affairs."¹² The question of how far this revision went, whether progress only became more contingent for Dewey, but whether he ultimately did not doubt it, does not need to be discussed here. However, there seems to me to be no doubt that Dewey's classification as a contingency-oriented historical thinker in my book *Under the Spell of Freedom* is justified.

Of course, it is a different question whether we agree with Dewey's view that belief in democracy as an ideal can itself develop sufficient binding forces for a liberal democracy to protect it from instability and collapse. I have rejected this belief. I am not, as Breuer and perhaps Arroyo have accused me of doing, attributing an indispensable role for democracies to Christianity or religion. I am simply saying that there must be value traditions that go beyond belief in democracy itself, such as belief in the sacredness of the person, which can also be founded in intense experiences of the violation of this sacredness, the degradation of the human being. "Never again war, never again fascism, never again Holocaust" - such slogans do not express a religion, but neither do they only express a belief in democracy. I am almost surprised that my objection to Dewey is controversial here, because this aspect of his theory of religion, if it is understood in this way, has hardly any supporters today. I say this not as an opponent of Dewey's belief in democracy, but as a critic of his simplistic notion of the cultural cohesive forces that democracy requires. Perhaps not having recognized this connection is, for me, the second difficulty with Arroyo's text. Nor should it be overlooked that my criticism of this aspect does not mean that I have dismissed Dewey's contribution to religious theory out of hand. The opposite is true, as will be clear to anyone who takes

¹² John Dewey, Progress, in: International Journal of Ethics 26 (1916), S. 311-322, here p. 312f.

note of my Dewey chapter in *The Genesis of Values* and its function in the argument of that book.¹³

Enrique Muñoz Pérez deals knowledgeably not with my assessment of Dewey, but with that of Max Scheler. Unfortunately, he limits himself to the philosophy of religion and leaves aside Scheler's ethics, his "material ethics of values", and my interpretation of it.¹⁴ Instead, he offers an informative account of the differences between Husserl and Scheler in the understanding of "evidence". However, another point seems decisive to me. The author defends "personalistic monotheism" and sees Scheler's strength and originality precisely in having defended it in the same way. Now, this certainly corresponds to my own (Christian) religious convictions. However, I differentiate between these and the tasks of a comprehensive theory of religion. In this, it seems more plausible to me to claim anthropological universality and "evidence" for the experience of self-transcendence and the constitution of sacrality in these experiences than for the idea of a single personal God. If this is true, however, then additional steps are necessary in order to show how concepts of holiness become images of God and even of one God. Without these additional steps, a phenomenological conception of God such as Scheler's seems to me incomplete and unconvincing.

I have already referred to the short contribution by Martina Torres Criscuolo in the introduction, because in the first of three desiderata she called for my inclusion of Latin American thinkers to a greater extent and I agree with this demand. However, she has two further suggestions for me. One is aimed at a more detailed discussion of Nietzsche than the short concluding section of my *Spell of Freedom* offers. On this point, too, I would like to point out that my *Genesis of Values* begins with just such a discussion, because I ascribe to Nietzsche a pioneering role in questions of the origin of values and at the same time find his comments on Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism

¹³ On the latest creative confrontations with Dewey's theory of religion: Randall E. Auxier, John R. Shook, Idealism and Religion in Dewey's Philosophy, in: Steven Fesmire (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Dewey*, New York 2019, p. 651-673; Annette Pitschmann, Religiosität als Qualität des Säkularen. Die Religionstheorie John Deweys, Tübingen 2017, summarized in Annette Pitschmann, Religion als Sinn für das Mögliche, in: Thomas M. Schmidt, Annette Pitschmann (Ed.), *Religion und Säkularisierung. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*, Stuttgart 2014, p. 99-114

¹⁴ Hans Joas, *Die Entstehung der Werte*, p. 133-161. Also Olivier Agard, Hans Joas, lecteur de Scheler, in: Alexandre Escudier (dir.), *Hans Joas et la question des valeurs*, Raison publique 27, 2024, p. 29-36

completely untenable. In this I am in good company with Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, Max Scheler and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

The last suggestion is that I should have presented my theory of religion more systematically than I did in the portraits that make up a large part of my *Spell of Freedom* book. This suggestion gives me the opportunity to point out two things. Firstly, *Under the Spell of Freedom* should be seen as the second volume of a trilogy that began with *The Power of the Sacred* and was concluded with the present global history of moral universalism. In the trilogy, I was concerned in volume 1 with Max Weber's rejection and in volume 2 with Hegel's, and thus, taken together, with the two most influential narratives on the historical relationship between religion and political power. This should provide the premises for my own alternative account of this history as an affirmative genealogy of moral universalism. The systematic presentation of my theory of religion and ideal formation will follow in the future and in other ways, if it is granted to me to do so. 