

**DO WE NEED RELIGION? ON THE EXPERIENCE OF SELF-TRANSCENDENCE** by Hans Joas (*Paradigm, Boulder, 2008*) Pp. x + 152, £45.00 hbk / £22.99 pbk

In contemporary Britain and in the mass media in particular, religion has taken a battering. Of late, it has come to be treated as disreputable and divisive. The celebration in 2009 of the bicentenary of Darwin's birth and the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species* were occasions employed to celebrate the hegemony of science over religion. Oddly, despite a rapidly growing interest in religion in sociology and philosophy, there has been a curious silence within these disciplines over the imperialising and polemical ventures from some zealots within the natural sciences.

One reason might be a sense of *déjà vu* in sociological circles. Methodological disputes occurred in the late nineteenth century over the autonomy of the cultural sciences from the explanatory claims of the natural sciences. Culture was to be characterised in terms of understanding and empathy, and religion was a beneficiary of these stipulations. The rise of post-modernity also marked a long retreat from deference to the absolute claims of reason that have been invoked to discredit religion. Set in the context of these culture wars, where religion is very much a site of battle, this collection of essays is to be warmly welcomed.

As the Max Weber professor at the University of Erfurt, Germany and also holding a chair in sociology at the University of Chicago and there, a member of the influential Committee on Social Thought, Joas, a Catholic, is well qualified to offer an unexpected defence of the need for religion. His range of publications is formidable, covering European values, war, social actions and human nature, and the American sociologist, G. H. Mead. Strangely little on German sociology and religion comes over the English Channel, hence this collection is especially welcome. Its eleven essays were written between 1998 and 2003 and they still have a topicality. In his preface, Joas acknowledges the stimulus provided by Cardinal Lehmann in publishing the collection. He has been well served by his translator, Alex Skinner.

The collection is in three parts: on religious experience; on 'between theology and social science'; and on human dignity. The first essay, which provides the title to the collection, was the 'main lecture' for a combined congress of Catholics and Protestants held in Berlin in 2003 with 100,000 taking part. This first essay starts brilliantly with reference to a poem by Bertolt Brecht, written in 1943. Entitled 'Embarrassing Incident', it refers to the deep discomfort felt in Hollywood, when celebrations for Brecht's friend and colleague Alfred Döblin were marred by his announcement to those gathered that he, a well known Jewish intellectual, had become a Catholic (pp. 3–5). The issue of whether Brecht or Döblin was weak over this conversion is well put. All the time, Joas complicates assumptions that modernity and secularisation combine to strangle religion. Somehow, rendering religion extinct never quite succeeds, for the issue of self-transcendence remains, of openings to God, but also to what is to be designated as a sacred, or as a religion, for as Joas notes, all the time the self faces its finitude but also the impulse to go beyond this limitation. He makes a surprisingly good defence of the need for faith (pp. 15–18).

In his second essay on 'religion in the age of contingency', where Berger makes frequent appearances, Joas makes a striking point that faith has to emerge from 'the self-intimidation anchored in secularization theory' (p. 33). This is a very pertinent point to make in the context of the United Kingdom, where faith is presented as a discredit, not a credit. The third essay in this first section dwells on Castoriadis.

The second part of the collection is by far the most interesting and substantial, containing essays on key texts in the sociology of religion, and on Milbank,

Taylor, Ricoeur, and Habermas. Those seeking a concise account of the sociology of religion need look no further than chapter 4. As he rightly suggests in dealing with religion, sociology runs along a narrow ridge between proclamations of disinterest in issues of belief and what he terms ‘cryptotheology’ (p. 62). Chapter 5 provides a rare sociological response to Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory*. At a time of multi-disciplinary dialogue, Milbank’s study achieved widespread prestige in theology; in sociological circles it was completely ignored, being treated as an opaque, idiosyncratic caricature of the discipline. The futility of that study illustrates the perils of mere cleverness. Listing six steps of objections, Joas concludes ‘that Milbank, by offering such a distorted picture, cuts himself off, not merely from the rich tradition of sociological theory but also from the empirical research based on it’ (p. 76). By contrast, the sixth essay, on Taylor, provides a valuable contextualisation of his Catholicism. It is a gentle, searching piece.

Chapters 7–8 illustrate the importance of religion in the humanities. Aptly titled, ‘God in France: Paul Ricoeur as theoretical mediator’, Joas reflects on this deeply Christian philosopher who so helped to advance understandings of the application of hermeneutics to text. The embarrassment at the prospect of a Christian being elected to the Collège de France (echoing the start of chapter 1) is well brought out. Ricoeur’s contribution to phenomenology and faith is well appraised to show ‘with tremendous sensitivity how religious self-discovery is possible through the reading of the sacred text, how the book becomes a mirror for the reader’ (p. 99).

Joas is especially good at turning the need for religion into an imperative of belief and to that degree, invaluable opens out new horizons for theological deliberation. These changing shifts in opportunity are well brought out in chapter 8, where Joas’ close links with Germany come to the fore in an important essay on Habermas and his ‘late’ discovery of religion. His speech in 2001 at Frankfurt, as Joas suggests, wrought a paradigm shift and the invention of a new term, the ‘post-secular’, whose implications have been subject to much recent debate. The term marks recognition of the inconvenient persistence of religion and the necessity of the state and intellectuals to accommodate to this realisation. A need to recognise the significance of the Judeo-Christian tradition recasts secularisation. Instead of seeking to destroy this tradition, Habermas argues that secular assumptions need to be recast to ‘salvage’ understandings and thus, as Joas suggests, ‘acknowledging the daily translation that believers have to perform and to reciprocate’ (p. 108).

Part 3 contains three essays, on Avishai Margalit, on debate on bioethics (useful) and on ‘Human Dignity: the Religion of Modernity?’. This last essay has some useful comments on Durkheim and the sacralisation of the individual. There is much to learn from this collection, which is very concisely written and unexpected in its insights.

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