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Max Weber and the dangerous nouns of process

Interview with Max Planck Research Award winner Hans Joas about his book *Die Macht des Heiligen*

On 6 December 2017 in Wittenberg Hans Joas will give the keynote speech at the conference *Economies: Work, Values and Economic Ethics* organised by the Department 'Resilience and Transformation in Eurasia' of the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. Joas will talk about the central thesis of his book *Die Macht des Heiligen: Eine Alternative zur Geschichte von der Entzauberung*. Published in October 2017, the book is not yet available in English.

Hans Joas has been an Ernst Troeltsch honorary professor at the Humboldt Universität zu Berlin since his retirement, and since 2000 he has been a professor of sociology and a member of the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. After holding positions at universities in Erlangen and Berlin, he carried out research and lectured as a Max Weber Professor at the University of Erfurt and later at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies. In 2015 he was a winner of the Max Planck Research Award.

Before the conference in Wittenberg we had the opportunity to talk with Hans Joas about his critique of Max Weber and his theory of the formation of ideals. Questions by Sylvia Terpe and Stefan Schwendtner.

Professor Joas, in your new book *Die Macht des Heiligen* (The Power of the Sacred) you warn quite emphatically against the use of terms like rationalization, modernization, and functional differentiation. You describe them as "dangerous nouns of process". What is dangerous about them?

The danger is that they distort our view of the phenomena that they are intended to interpret and describe. For these terms create metanarratives and posit developments over enormous periods of time. This type of sociological metanarrative comes at a price: individual developments and processes that are actually completely unrelated are lumped together using homogenizing terms like rationalization.

Can you give an example of such developments?

Take the increase of efficiency in industrial production, the systematization of religious experience by theological experts, and the improvement of military exercise practices. It would be entirely false to treat them as a single process by subsuming them all under the term rationalization. Such a use of the concept of rationalization hides more than it reveals about the processes that underlie it.

But these processes are surely all examples of rationalization.



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That depends on what is meant by the term. These examples represent very different social processes that must not be interpreted as a shared result of some cultural core of occidental rationality. But the way that the concept of rationalization is generally used implies precisely such a cultural core of rationality. In order to avoid this, it is necessary to examine each process individually without treating them in advance as expressions of an overarching rationalization process.

And you would also disagree that there is such a thing as modernization?

I do not deny the existence of modernization in the innocent sense of economic growth and scientific and technological progress. The development of the plough in agriculture in the Middle Ages is unquestionably one example of such progress. And progress of this type can of course be called modernization. Modernization understood in this sense can be identified in all periods of human history to a greater or lesser degree. What I warn against is using the term in the sense of a historical transition to a period known as modernity.

So there is no age of modernity, as theories of modernization claim?

The term “modernity” has been used in so many different ways that no one really knows anymore exactly what it means. Consider, for example, the lack of agreement regarding the question of when this era supposedly began. Some people even claim that this era is already over.

Do you mean the use of the word in public discourse? Or by scholars?

Both. Here the scholarly use of the term is strongly mirrored by the use in public discourse. Recently, when women in Saudi Arabia gained the right to drive, headlines in the media declared things like “Saudi Arabia enters modernity”. And yet it’s far from clear what such a sentence is supposed to mean. This has nothing to do with democratic development, the introduction of market mechanisms, or rule of law. No: it’s just about the fact that women are now allowed to get driving licenses. But by describing it as modernization, we interpret it as an entirely logical step in a global trend of development.

But isn’t it possible that even though these terms are too often used unthinkingly, they nevertheless have a heuristic value for recognizing and understanding long-term developments?

I don’t see any heuristic value in these terms. Quite the contrary. They distract from empirical facts and relationships and result in us thinking that we see things that were never there. And yes: of course these terms are frequently used carelessly. But I am against their use on principle. For when we talk about, for example, functional differentiation, we are simultaneously positing a certain inexorable development trend.

But processes of functional differentiation exist – that’s surely undeniable.

Of course there are processes of functional differentiation. But they are not logical components of a single, overarching worldwide development, as the theory of functional differentiation alleges. Rather, they are individual developments that must each be separately analysed, reconstructed, and empirically verified. At the same time, it is essential not to overlook processes of social



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dedifferentiation; likewise, one must be prepared to acknowledge that some processes cannot be adequately described in terms of either differentiation or dedifferentiation.

Should the social sciences perhaps stop using processual concepts altogether?

Oh no, by no means! Interpreting my criticism of such terms this way would be completely wrong. An analogy may be helpful here: if I warn about poisonous mushrooms, that is by no means the same as telling people to refrain from eating all mushrooms. Processual concepts are an important component of sociological theories. I even feel great affinity with contemporary sociologists like my colleague in Chicago, Andrew Abbott, who has called for a processual approach to sociology and the revision of vocabulary and concepts that must go with this. I even use such concepts in my own work, for example when I write about the development of human rights as a sacralisation of the person. But the particular course taken by the processes being described is always an empirical matter and cannot be a theoretical conclusion. Processual concepts are only useful as long as they are applied directly to a specific phenomenon. What I warn against is turning processual concepts into dangerous “metanarratives” or suprahistorical concepts that purport to know the logic governing a long-term development.

What processual concepts are good and useful, then?

The formation of power is a processual concept that is both meaningful and useable. Power is not simply there; it is not possible to simply connect it to resources and then look at their distribution. There are no fixed, unchanging distributions of power. Rather, power is constituted through processes that can be described, albeit not in the sense that in the course of history there are some necessary progressive concentrations of power. Naturally there are certain tendencies in the increase or decrease of power that can be empirically described. However, this does not mean that I am allowed to arrive at them by a false use of theoretical and conceptual definitions. If, for example, I examine three case studies of state-building and nationalism and identify trends based on them, I must be prepared to discard all my attempts at systematization if the empirical data from a fourth case study suggest something else entirely.

Given such an understanding of processual concepts, is it even possible to make assertions about long-term tendencies?

Certainly. However, such statements must always be derived from empirical material and offer a generalization for the case at hand, rather than starting from a theory or some assumption or another and forcing the material to fit it. Wolfgang Knöbl has described this cogently in relation to Max Weber – who, for the most part, follows precisely the methodology that I am advocating. When Weber writes about relationships, most of the time he is not orienting himself deductively on an already existing theory; rather, he draws on concrete empirical material. He compares, say, processes of urban development and attempts to derive generalizations from these cases. But these conclusions cannot simply be transferred to other cases of urban development.

How is it then that the processual concepts you warn against also come from Weber?



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Well, this is rather speculative, but when reading Weber one might get the impression that at some point he found himself confronted by a plethora of fragments on a highly diverse set of topics and ultimately couldn't figure out how all of it formed a whole. In response to this situation he invents a tremendously suggestive systematization that he moors using the terms "disenchantment" and "rationalization". In the reception of his work, these concepts have come to be significantly more powerful and influential than his empirical studies.

In one chapter of your book you examine the debates about the Axial Age, a "pivotal" period between approximately 800 and 200 BC – and you even build on certain insights of scholars who have studied this period. Doesn't this recourse to theories of the Axial Age and the macro-processes that took place during it also invite problems similar to those posed by the dangerous processual concepts?

No, I wouldn't say that. To begin with, when discussing the Axial Age it is helpful to distinguish between two things: on the one hand there are certain religious and cultural changes during this time, including the emergence of monotheistic religions; and on the other there are the conditions that enabled these changes. Karl Jaspers, from whom the term Axial Age originated, was concerned with changes taking place at a cultural and religious level, the causes of which he described as mysterious. He ultimately found the emergence of similar ideas in dissimilar cultures in different places to be inexplicable. My position is based on the abundant social and historical research on this topic that offers considerable evidence for the emergence of the archaic state during this time. This is a pivotal, epochal turning point. The religious and cultural changes can only be understood in relation to the emergence of the archaic state. Not, however, as an automatic consequence of this process of state formation, but rather as a contingent result of the confrontation with this newly emerged archaic state.

What exactly do you mean by that?

Wherever states emerged, these societies had a greater capacity for organization than their neighbours. The greater organizational capacity was expressed in the expansionist character of the archaic state – that is, they attempted to conquer neighbouring territories, who were generally poorly prepared to resist, for along with the archaic state certain forms of resource exploitation also emerged, and especially the disciplined organization of military forces. These were consequently superior to the neighbours' military forces. Such expansionist activities put the neighbours under pressure in various ways, including the danger that the things they held sacred would be devalued. They were expected to transfer their allegiance to the gods or ruler cult of the archaic state. Here I emphasize that one form of resistance consisted of saying "No, our god is greater than yours" or "Our god forbids us to worship your god or your ruler as one enthroned by god". Naturally this is a very complicated process in and of itself. But this religious tendency towards the idea of a transcendent god was radicalized in some cases with the result that a defeat was not interpreted as the result of the superiority of the other god or ruler, but as a punishment from one's own god. Thus, it became possible to uphold the superiority of one's own god in spite of the political subjugation of one's own people by another power.



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What distinguishes the description of this development from a problematic processual concept?

It would be incorrect to derive an irreversible tendency of development from such a reconstruction of actual historical events. For the responses to the development of the archaic state could easily have been completely different. And most archaic states eventually disappeared again due to a variety of causes. Of course, we also cannot know whether in the future monotheistic religions will continue to exist in the form they have today.

Why is it unproblematic to talk about a new epoch or an epochal turning point in connection with the Axial Age, but not in connection with the modern era?

It is unavoidable that, looking back at the past, we say that there were points in time in which new epochs began. When did the industrial mode of production begin? When did humans become sedentary and begin engaging in agriculture? When did states emerge? – There are well-founded empirical answers to all these questions. Therefore, in retrospect, we can call such points in time epochal turning points and have solid reasons for doing so. Admittedly, whether something is a turning point or not always depends on the way the question is framed. My scepticism about the concept of modernity and similar diagnoses of our time pertains to the fact that it is impossible to know whether a turning point is present at the time it is happening. Whether the present is characterized by an epochal turning point is something that we can only know in the future. We shouldn't be continually declaring certain present events to be historical and epoch-making. Simply because we cannot know.

Why is the Axial Age in particular so important for your theory of sacredness and the generation of ideals?

That is connected with the cultural and religious changes that we've been talking about. Scholars have described these cultural innovations in various ways. Of these different characterizations, the genesis of the idea of moral universalism is perhaps the simplest to explain. A cognitive concept of "humanity" arose and became normatively charged. Humans do not automatically have a concept of humanity. First they live according to the idea that they have something in common with other members of their own family or their own tribe. Thus, seeing others – people who are not part of one's family or tribe, and above all those who are one's enemies – as possessing a common empirical quality of being "human" is a further stage of development. And this idea can become normatively loaded, with the result that one thinks: because those others are also humans, I must consider whether an act is justified or not in terms of how it affects them. I must consider them in my actions because I perceive and experience them as humans.

And another cultural innovation of the Axial Age is a new vision of the hereafter?

People have probably always had some concept of an afterlife. But highly metaphysical conceptions of transcendence did not arise until the first millennium BC. By this I mean the assertion that there is something beyond this world. During the time when Jesus was alive, these visions of a dimension that transcends all mundane affairs was already a well-established cultural pattern. When Pontius Pilate asked Jesus whether he was the king of the Jews and he replied "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36), this answer presumes that strong metaphysical ideas of



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transcendence already existed and played a role in social life. Had this not been the case, he would not have been able to talk this way and expect to be understood.

A third cultural innovation of the Axial Age is reflexivity. What is meant by this?

Naturally people were already busy thinking, calculating, and measuring long before the Axial Age. But they didn't ask, at least not to the extent they would later do: What is the right way to think? What is the right way to calculate? What is the right way to measure? These questions involve thinking about thinking. So during this period people began to ask whether there are rules about how one should think.

What is the connection between these three characterizations – moral universalism, transcendence, and reflexivity?

One could say that ideas of transcendence make it easier to imagine moral universalism. If I think that all people collectively face a single transcendent god, this thought also contains some awareness of a common quality of being human. However, for my work what is more important is that the idea of reflexivity as a characteristic of the Axial Age can be applied to my theory of sacredness: I argue that transcendence arises when sacredness becomes reflexive. Humans spontaneously sacralize – just like they spontaneously think, calculate, and measure – but now they also ask what the real source of the sacred is.

This characterization of the Axial Age doesn't, however, imply that these cultural innovations would inevitably have continued to spread across the world, is that right?

Correct; that would be another problematic assumption of a process. The genesis of the idea of moral universalism does not necessarily mean that this idea will spread. That this is not inevitable can be seen in the empirical observation that within a very short period of time the new ideas were, in turn, used as a source of legitimation of power. The potential to criticize power that is inherent in the idea of transcendence thus often had little actual effect, or at least only in much later applications. I am expressly not interested in arguing some kind of cultural deterministic position that once an idea is there it automatically establishes itself in the legal or political order.

A central line of argument in your book is directed against Max Weber's concept of disenchantment, which he similarly arrived at through an analysis of the Axial Age (although he does not refer to it as such) and which has since risen to tremendous prominence in the social sciences and beyond. Why was it so important to you to concern yourself with Weber so intensively and with such philological meticulousness?

The term disenchantment that has come to be of such immense importance is of course a key precondition for the misleading metanarrative of an all-encompassing occidental rationalism that establishes itself everywhere. I consider this metanarrative to be incorrect and I criticize Weber and the many Weber scholars who follow him on this point. For me it goes without saying that such a severe criticism must be based on a solid knowledge of what I am commenting on. Therefore I have endeavoured to examine every instance of the term scattered throughout Weber's work in



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order to determine exactly what he actually wrote. I don't think anyone else has ever offered such a thorough interpretation of all the passages in which Weber writes about disenchantment.

Was the effort of conducting such a microscopic examination of Weber worth it?

Oh, yes, very much so. As a result of this work, it became clear to me that Weber finds connections between events from the time of the prophets of the Old Testament with the Reformation and even the First World War in a most suggestive manner and describes this with the term disenchantment. But what in his analysis appears to be a single, encompassing process of disenchantment actually needs four concepts to adequately describe the various phenomena included in it. These are: demagification, de-sacralization, de-transcendentalization, and secularization. And I really didn't begin my examination of Weber's texts with these concepts in mind. They emerged during the philological close reading and describe four very different historical processes and phenomena for which Weber only had a single term.

You propose three pairs of terms to indicate that these processes can go in more than one direction.

Yes, exactly. These pairs are sacred–profane, transcendent–immanent, and religious–secular. First, this is meant to make clear that these paired terms describe phenomena that should not be confused with each other. In addition, they describe processes that do not have a definite directional marker. There is secularization in the sense of weakening of religion as well as religious revitalization in the sense of strengthening of religion. Ideas of transcendence can become weaker or stronger. The processes of sacralisation and de-sacralization are the most difficult to explain. This is because Weber himself does not sufficiently distinguish between what we could call, following Giddens, discursive consciousness and practical consciousness. If something becomes weaker at the level of the discursive consciousness, this does not necessarily entail a corresponding weakening on the level of the practical consciousness.

Can you provide an example to explain this?

A person who believes in a causal-deterministic view of the world might travel around the world and give impassioned lectures about this worldview. But the same person might nonetheless be a cheerful and highly motivated individual. It is simply not the case that the logical corollaries of a causal-mechanistic worldview along the lines of "I have no power to change anything at all; everything that happens does so as a result of fixed laws" are necessarily reflected in the attitude towards life of proponents of this idea. Because Weber does not adequately separate these two levels, he thinks that additional arguments for a causal-mechanistic worldview are manifested in the motivations of a person.

So there is also no direct connection between technological progress and secularization?

No, there is no such connection. I can value and use the insights of science and yet still be religious and have strongly held ideas about transcendence. Likewise, I can believe that my life is completely predetermined without seeing this as a reason for hopelessness and depression. My knowledge about the world is not as immediately connected with my attitude towards the world as



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Weber thought. We need another way to understand why it is that humans take something that is affectively intense and subjectively evident and consider it good or evil and alter the way they lead their lives as a consequence.

Your proposed pairs of concepts suggest a separation between the sacred and religion. But in everyday understanding, the two are often treated as though they are inherently connected. What, in fact, is the relationship between the sacred and religion?

You are correct: until around 1900 sacredness was seen as an element of religion. Sacredness without religion was inconceivable. But then four thinkers in particular – Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Rudolf Otto, and Nathan Söderblom – pointed out in their writings that all forms of human experience have the basic potential to be sacred.

In other words, the sacred is possible even without religion?

Yes, because religions are attempts to systematize experiences and ideas of the sacred, to pass them on to others and make them accessible through rituals. How and in what form this occurs and who the specialists involved with it are – prophets, priests, or monks – is historically contingent. Sacredness, by contrast, is a universal anthropological phenomenon.

Can you clarify a bit more?

What I mean is this: all people – whether religious or not – have things that are sacred. They may venerate Stalin or believe in human rights. In all cases, these conceptions seem self-evident with regard to good and evil to the people who hold them, and they have a high affective intensity. They are affectively intense conceptions of good and evil with self-evidential character. Religions, in turn, are very specific attempts to deal with this. Therefore, it is ultimately not so important for my argument whether something is a religion or not. That is a matter of terminology which is negotiated by the people involved. For some people it is important that their idea of sacredness not be considered part of a religion. And I am not willing to say: but it is in reality a religion, too. I don't want to do that. It is more important to me to respect people when they say they do not adhere to a religion.

Can you give an example of such non-religiously sacred things or experiences of sacredness?

Falling in love and delight in nature are experiences of self-transcendence out of which sacredness can emerge. Non-religious people have these experiences just as much as religious ones. That's why it is so important to me to separate sacredness and religion. Sacredness is the earlier phenomenon. It precedes all forms of religion. And whether that which people consider sacred is eventually called religion or not is a never-ending process of negotiation.

Why do you only propose three pairs of terms but not a fourth that might be called magicification – de-magicification?

Weber says that the original layer in the entire history of religion is magic – that is, a technique by which humans hoped to invoke something that would make their lives easier. Following Durkheim, we could respond: If magic allows more-than-human powers to be mobilized for human purposes,



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we must first ask ourselves where humans came to believe that such powers exist. Continuing Durkheim's line of thought, we can say that conceptions of sacred powers must be formed before it is possible for an individual such as a magician to claim: "I know how to manage this power." When Weber talks about disenchantment, he often means de-magicification. But this is based on a false understanding of the historic role of magic.

In addition to the concept of disenchantment, Weber's famous *Intermediate Reflection* also plays a large role in your book. There is already an overwhelming amount of literature on this text. Why do you give it such intense attention yet again?

Weber's *Intermediate Reflection* is considered one of the most important sources for sociological theory after 1945, in particular for theories of differentiation. I wanted to examine it closely to determine what precisely the text has to say about the matter and what has instead been interpreted into it by the many Weber exegetes. It is quite astonishing that this rather obscure text, which was inserted as a bridge between Weber's studies of China and India, has become such a central text in the discipline of sociology since 1945.

And why did this happen?

Wolfgang Knöbl has pointed out the most important reason in his book *Spielräume der Modernisierung*: around 1950 – during the Cold War – leading political circles in Washington were concerned because they felt the West lacked a macrotheory that could stand up to Marxism. In their search for such a theory, they turned to sociologists. Edward Shils came up with the idea that the work of Weber and Durkheim could be synthesized to create such a macrotheory on the basis of Parsons' convergence thesis. All that this would require would be showing that Weber's theory of rationalization was compatible with Durkheim's theory of functional differentiation. Once this had been demonstrated, one would have a useable theory of societal modernization.

And the theory of functional differentiation was discovered in the *Intermediate Reflection*?

Exactly. Weber's idea of increasing differences between the value spheres was turned into a variation of the theory of functional differentiation. As I think I showed in my book, the text of the *Intermediate Reflection* does not in fact permit this interpretation. Certainly it is possible to find deliberations in Weber's text on how rationalization has different characteristics in different value spheres and that as a result the differences between these value spheres become greater over time. This is the part I am mildly critical about. But Weber would probably have been very surprised if he had known that his successors would attribute a theory of functional differentiation to him. This is what I strongly disagree with.

If this mainstream interpretation of the *Intermediate Reflection* is not at all accurate, what, if anything, can this text still tell us?

The sixth chapter of my book has the title "Spannungsverhältnisse: Eine neue Deutung von Webers Zwischenbetrachtung" (Fields of tension: a new interpretation of Weber's *Intermediate Reflection*). This expresses what I think can be found in the text and what it still has to offer: the description of very different fields of tensions. The tension between moral universalism and moral particularism is



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different from the tension between two different points of access for the experience of self-transcendence, for example the aesthetic and the religious. This, in turn, is something different than the tension between ideals and reality or between ideals and instrumental rationality. Apart from this, Weber was of course immensely important for his reflections on economic theory and its larger social contexts, and he thus remains significant for economic sociology and economic anthropology. But he is not useful as a founder of a theory of functional differentiation. My criticism is not directed primarily at Weber, but against those who have interpreted him and what they have read into this text.

Does Weber have any significance for your theory of the formation of ideals?

He is of marginal significance here. The important sources for my theory of ideal formation are Durkheim's later writings, pragmatist philosophy, and Ernst Troeltsch's entire body of work. Troeltsch has all but disappeared from the intellectual landscape because the theologians did not cultivate his work and the sociologists did not take note of it in the first place. For questions of value-oriented or moral action, Weber is indeed not my essential source of inspiration.

Why not?

Weber's strong ethos of truth and truthfulness is exemplary. But he does not sufficiently recognize that we are not free to choose our values. Values take hold of us. And therefore the relationship between values and facts is not as simple as Weber describes it. Our situatedness in the social world conditions how we view reality. For scholars from Ernst Troeltsch to Hilary Putnam this insight has played a major role. But in Weber's work I don't find adequate reflection on the constitutive conditions behind his formulation of questions. His interests and his approach are not derived from some social zero point, but from somewhere within the particular subject matter. And this is precisely what he does not reflect upon enough. In Troeltsch's late work – for example, in *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* (Historicism and Its Problems) – this grounding of research is thought out much better and with much greater consistency.

In your earlier writings you dedicated your attention to the genesis of values. But your more recent work talks about ideals and their relationship to the sacred instead. How are sacredness, ideals, and values related to each other?

I use the terms "ideals" and "values" synonymously. However, I have moved away from the term "value" and rarely use it anymore, because for many people it is too reminiscent of something economic. But I have never understood it this way. By using the term "ideal" I can avoid this misunderstanding. However, there is an important distinction between ideals and sacredness. I understand sacredness to be a pre-moral, holistic emotional experience of vital force. This experience also includes everything that is qualified as evil in moral reflection – the demonic and the diabolical – but it also contains the divine and the good. Ideals, by contrast, are reflexive, explicit, ethicized positions that can be expressed as propositions that can and must be defended in argument. I am prepared to say: "It is good or bad to do this." It is thus an evaluative reflection about the all-encompassing experience of vital power. An ideal includes both an extra-ordinary experience and a content that can be articulated.



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You repeatedly emphasize the importance of emotions. Are they a necessary requirement for the genesis of sacredness, ideals, and values?

I would not necessarily say that they are a necessary precondition, but emotions are certainly a necessary component of experiences and situations in which sacredness is created. I cannot describe what I call sacredness if I do not describe it as an affectively intense experience. Experiences of the sacred do not have to be comfortable. They may also be frightening. For falling in love is not only pleasurable; it is also connected with a fear of transgression of the boundaries of the self. "My heart's so heavy, my heart's so sore, how can ever my heart be at peace any more?" sings Gretchen after falling in love with Faust in Goethe's drama.

Could your theory of sacralization also be made fruitful for empirical research?

I have to confess that this question leaves me feeling a bit helpless. I consider everything I wrote in the book to be empirical. I've been talking this entire time about phenomena of the real world. And the book is based in a large part on the empirical research of other authors. Historical research is per se empirical research. I would object to some particular form of research claiming a monopoly on the term empirical research.

In *Die Macht des Heiligen* you draw on thoughts from your earlier book, *The Genesis of Values*. In what ways does the theory about ideal formation that you develop in your new book go beyond the ideas of this earlier work?

Of course there is continuity between the basic idea of *The Genesis of Values* and my new book. But *Die Macht des Heiligen* goes beyond it in at least three ways.

First: The distinction between the holistic character of the experience of the sacred and the discursively explicit character of the defence of ideals is significantly more clearly realized than in *The Genesis of Values*.

Second: My criticism of Durkheim and William James is better developed and used constructively. While both thinkers have inspiring things to say about the qualities of certain types of experience, they do not confront the problem of how experience is articulated.

Third: the earlier book is a reconstruction of the intellectual history of certain discourses. *Die Macht des Heiligen*, by contrast, is a complex hermeneutic interpretation of the history of the sacred.

What do you mean when you talk about a "hermeneutic interpretation"?

When we reflect on history, we must always also reflect on those who have thought about history before us. There is no "blank slate" from which we could say, let's leave everything that has been thought previously behind us and approach the facts as they really were. In the hermeneutic tradition discussion of a subject always takes place through the medium of other reflections on that subject. I feel a close affinity with this tradition. I can think and write no other way.