



# The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights

By Hans Joas

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**The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights** By Hans Joas

What are the origins of the idea of human rights and universal human dignity? How can we most fully understand and realize these rights going into the future? In *The Sacredness of the Person*, internationally renowned sociologist and social theorist Hans Joas tells a story that differs from conventional narratives by tracing the concept of human rights back to the Judeo-Christian tradition or, alternately, to the secular French Enlightenment. While drawing on sociologists such as Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Ernst Troeltsch, Joas sets out a new path, proposing an affirmative genealogy in which human rights are the result of a process of "sacralization" of every human being.

According to Joas, every single human being has increasingly been viewed as sacred. He discusses the abolition of torture and slavery, once common practice in the pre-18th century west, as two milestones in modern human history. The author concludes by portraying the emergence of the UN Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 as a successful process of value generalization. Joas demonstrates that the history of human rights cannot adequately be described as a history of ideas or as legal history, but as a complex transformation in which diverse cultural traditions had to be articulated, legally codified, and assimilated into practices of everyday life. The sacralization of the person and universal human rights will only be secure in the future, warns Joas, through continued support by institutions and society, vigorous discourse in their defense, and their incarnation in everyday life and practice.

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#### Review

"Hans Joas presents fresh insights for all those who are interested in the debate on the foundations of human rights and their universal character. Due to the innovative character of its approach and to the clarity of its argument, this book will become one of the most important publications on the genesis and validity of human rights."?Wolfgang Huber, Chairman of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany from 2003-2009 and coauthor of *Violence: The Unrelenting Assault on Human Dignity*

"If we have anything like a global ethic, and not just one on paper but that is motivating people all over the world to take action to make things better, it is human rights. I have read much on this subject but nothing comes close to what Hans Joas has done in this brilliant new book. He somehow brings the reader into the intensely exciting history of where the idea of human rights came from, how many major issues it has taken on, and where it might go. . . . This is a book for teachers and students, but really for everyone in the world who is trying to make it better."?Robert N. Bellah, Professor of Sociology, Emeritus, Department of Sociology, UC Berkeley

"One of the world's most distinguished social philosophers takes on one of the most pressing issues of our times and offers an entirely original approach. No one interested in human rights can afford to ignore this book."?Lynn Hunt, Eugen Weber Professor, UCLA

"Eschewing ahistorical rational justifications of timeless universal values as well as debunking genealogical deconstructions of historical origins, Hans Joas offers an affirmative genealogy of human rights as a fruitful alternative. The book links brilliant theoretical argumentation with gripping phenomenological narrative as it illuminates modern processes of sacralization of the human person. This *tour de force* is obligatory reading for anybody interested in the birth, contingent history, and fragile fate of human rights in our global age."?Jose Casanova, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Georgetown University

#### About the Author

**Hans Joas** is professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, where he also belongs to the Committee on Social Thought, and at the University of Freiburg, Germany, where he is a Permanent Fellow at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies, School of History.

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