

University of Salzburg
Faculty of Catholic Theology

PhD Program in Religious Studies

PhD Research Proposal

Title: *The Ethical Re-Enchantment of Religious Studies: From the Sacredness of the Person to Freedom and Moral Universalism*

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Abstract

This project addresses the problem of how religion can continue to function as a generator of ethical meaning in a disenchanted world by reconstructing Hans Joas's trilogy as a coherent theory of ethical genesis. Methodologically, it integrates intellectual-historical reconstruction, affirmative genealogy, and cross-civilizational comparison to examine how experiences of calling, transcendence, and responsibility are translated into ethical creativity across different traditions. The study contributes to the methodological renewal of Religious Studies by repositioning the discipline as a science of ethical genesis and by opening a research trajectory for understanding religion as an ongoing source of freedom and moral universalism.

1. Research Background and Motivation

Since its emergence as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century, the study of religion has been shaped by oscillations between narratives of disenchantment and re-enchantment. As rationalization, differentiation, and secularization came to define

modernity, religion was increasingly displaced from the public sphere and reinterpreted primarily through causal, functional, or psychological categories. Max Weber famously captured this transformation in the concept of *Entzauberung der Welt*—the disenchantment of the world—which signaled not only the withdrawal of the sacred but also a fragmentation of moral horizons. Yet disenchantment revealed more than a sociological shift: it disclosed an ethical crisis, a depletion of moral energy once grounded in transcendent authority.

This dissertation therefore shifts attention away from the metaphysical content of religious doctrines and toward the generative structure of ethical action.

The central question animating this study—*whether ethical commitment remains possible when the sacred no longer appears as an external authority*—arose from the European experience of disenchantment and is not universally shared as a civilizational narrative. Nevertheless, if “universalism” refers to a cross-cultural aspiration toward shared moral horizons, then this question cannot remain confined to European intellectual history. Whenever established sources of sacred authority, political order, or normative tradition are destabilized, societies across cultures confront analogous challenges: how can ethical legitimacy be regenerated in the midst of historical rupture and normative uncertainty? This study therefore acknowledges the European origin of the problem while arguing for its intercultural translatability. The issue ultimately points to a more fundamental human condition: how moral sources are reopened across moments of historical disruption and value destabilization.

Within this broader context, Hans Joas offers a conceptual framework with significant cross-cultural potential. Across his trilogy, Joas does not treat religion as a residual form surviving the advance of rationalization, but reconceives it as an *experiential structure of ethical genesis* (*eine Erfahrungsstruktur ethischer Genese*). For Joas, the sacred does not vanish under conditions of disenchantment; rather, it continues to operate within the dynamic of *calling and response* (*Berufung und Antwort*) that animates ethical action. Individuals are morally “moved” in situations where freedom and responsibility intersect, and this affective responsiveness becomes the source of new ethical commitments. Religion, in Joas’s view, is not the antithesis of modernity but one of the generative conditions for ethical creativity—enabling diverse civilizations to articulate values and obligations that bear universal orientation.

This perspective suggests a renewed task for *Religionswissenschaft*: a shift from describing the social functions of religion to examining its capacity for ethical creativity—transforming the discipline from a science of social integration into a science of moral genesis.

Despite Joas's wide influence in sociology, pragmatism, and moral philosophy, his work has not yet been systematically integrated into the methodological foundations of religious studies. Existing scholarship typically situates Joas within philosophical or sociological debates but overlooks the challenge he poses to the discipline itself: after disenchantment and modernization, can theology still claim epistemic primacy? Should religious studies be subsumed under moral philosophy? Joas's theory of religious action rejects both options. Religion is neither reducible to confessional theology nor collapsible into abstract ethical theory; it is a concrete structure of ethical formation whose experiential, historical, and intercultural dimensions hold significant methodological implications for comparative ethics and civilizational dialogue. Precisely because these implications remain underdeveloped, Joas becomes a crucial theoretical resource for rethinking the disciplinary identity of religious studies.

This dissertation addresses this gap by reconstructing Joas's trilogy—*The Sacredness of the Person*, *Under the Spell of Freedom*, and *Universalism*—as a coherent theoretical framework for Religionswissenschaft. Through this reconstruction, the study demonstrates that even under post-disenchantment conditions—where transcendent authority no longer functions as the external ground of morality—religion continues to generate ethical worlds through the creative responsiveness of human action. The ethical power of religion has not disappeared with modernity; rather, it persists through concrete acts of calling, response, and value-creation, through which moral meaning is continually regenerated in history.

2. State of Research: Hans Joas and the Problem of Disciplinary Location

Recent scholarship has tended to approach Hans Joas through the established frameworks of sociology, American pragmatism, and moral or political philosophy, while giving considerably less attention to the methodological significance his work holds for Religionswissenschaft. Christian Stoll (2018) highlights this imbalance by arguing that Joas provides a distinctive opening for reassessing the long-standing tension between religious studies and theology: by challenging Weberian disenchantment and conceptualizing religious experience as a locus of ethical generation, Joas enables a reconsideration of religion beyond both reductionist social science and confessional normativity. At the same time, Stoll emphasizes that Joas himself does not elaborate the disciplinary implications of this model for religious studies.

This project addresses precisely that lacuna. It systematically develops the methodological potential of Joas's triad—sacralization, entrusted freedom, and moral universalism—for Religionswissenschaft, and evaluates its intercultural applicability through a series of comparative case studies.

2. Research Questions and Objectives

The central question guiding this study is: *How can religion continue to function as a structure of ethical generation in the aftermath of disenchantment?*

To address this overarching inquiry, the dissertation advances two interrelated sub-questions:

1. **How does Joas's three-stage model—sacralization, *Under the Spell of Freedom*, and moral universalism—constitute a coherent theoretical framework for understanding the genesis of ethics?**
2. **How do different civilizations transform religious experience into ethically oriented forms of freedom, and how do these forms attain the potential for universalization?**

The broader aim of this doctoral project is to reconsider the disciplinary mission of religious studies by demonstrating how religion, understood as an embodied, affective, and historically mediated *structure of ethical generation*, continues to produce freedom and universalistic moral orientations in post-secular contexts. Rather than offering a definitive normative conclusion, the study seeks to establish a viable scholarly trajectory—one that will be refined through ongoing dialogue with the supervisor and the academic committee, and that contributes to a deeper understanding of the ethical dimensions of religion.

This aim unfolds through three interconnected objectives:

(1) Methodological Reconstruction: Reframing Religious Studies as a Science of Ethical Genesis

This objective clarifies why an ethical turn in Religious Studies is necessary and how religious experience can be conceptualized as a structure of ethical generation in a post-disenchantment world. Joas's trilogy is thus employed not as a historical object of exegesis but as a conceptual reservoir from which this dissertation derives a unified theory of ethical genesis.

Key analytical steps include:

- Diagnosing the crisis of modernity through disenchantment and its ethical

implications

- Identifying the limitations of Weber for understanding ethical creativity
- Demonstrating that Religious Studies is neither reducible to functionalist social science nor collapsible into abstract moral philosophy

(2) Theoretical Construction: Rebuilding a Model of Ethical Genesis from Joas's Trilogy

This objective develops a coherent theoretical model that links sacralization, entrusted freedom, and moral universalism as the fundamental dynamics of ethical creativity. The aim is not to produce a historiographical study of Joas but to extract from his trilogy a *theory of ethical genesis* that will serve as the conceptual architecture of the dissertation.

(3) Cross-Civilizational Comparison: Testing the Universality of the Ethical-Genesis Model

This objective examines how diverse civilizations transform religious experience into forms of freedom and moral universalism, thereby testing the intercultural validity of the proposed model.

Illustrative cases include:

- India (Gandhi / Ambedkar)
- Islam (Hodgson)
- Christianity (Augustine / Martin Luther King Jr.)
- Confucian traditions

These objectives correspond to three core research questions:

- How can religion sustain ethical creativity after the decline of transcendent authority?
- How does religious freedom function as the anthropological and historical foundation of moral universalism?
- How can comparative religious studies demonstrate the universality of ethical genesis beyond Western paradigms?

The study proceeds from three working hypotheses:

(a) *Re-enchantment as Ethical Condition*—the structure of calling and response in religion provides the proto-form of moral action;

(b) Freedom as a Cross-Cultural Religious Formation

Freedom is not merely a philosophical idea of autonomy but a cultural and historical formation shaped within religious traditions. Through narratives, rituals, moral practices, and long-term historical developments, different civilizations generate distinct yet comparable genealogies of freedom. This allows freedom to be studied

empirically as a cross-cultural religious phenomenon rather than as a purely philosophical abstraction.

(c) *Universal Ethics as Historical Co-Generation*—moral universality arises from intercivilizational encounters rather than abstract rational deduction.

Each hypothesis will be examined and refined throughout the dissertation process, with ongoing supervisory feedback to ensure both theoretical coherence and empirical feasibility.

3. Theoretical Framework: Hans Joas and the Ethical Turn in Religious Studies

This dissertation adopts the premise that religion is not merely a system of beliefs but a historical structure in which experiences of transcendence become ethically generative—shaping commitments, obligations, and universalizable values. Hans Joas’s theory of religious action provides the central theoretical foundation for this perspective. Situated at the intersection of American pragmatism and German historicism, Joas reorients the study of religion from a paradigm dominated by rationalization and functional explanation to one centered on ethical genesis.

In *The Creativity of Action* (1992), Joas challenges classical sociology’s teleological model of purposive rationality by arguing that meaning is not presupposed but emerges through embodied, affective, and situational action. Human beings are thus not passive carriers of norms but creative agents who continually redefine value through their responses to concrete historical circumstances.

Joas subsequently extends this action-theoretical framework into the domain of religion. In *The Power of the Sacred* (2017/2021), he conceptualizes religion as a field of ethical genesis—a sphere in which individuals encounter transcendence as a call to responsibility. *Under the Spell of Freedom* (2020/2024) reconceives human freedom as *entrusted freedom*, emphasizing responsiveness and moral accountability rather than autonomous self-legislation. Finally, *Universalism* (2025) advances a genealogy of moral universalism, tracing how the ethical energies generated through religious experience have become institutionalized in concepts such as dignity, justice, and human rights.

Taken together, these three stages—sacralization, freedom, and universalism—form a coherent theoretical triad for interpreting religion as a creative moral force. By synthesizing pragmatism’s focus on embodied experience with historicism’s attention to contingency and transformation, Joas provides a framework for understanding religion as a historically mediated source of ethical creativity.

In this study, *religious experience* does not refer to private mystical encounters or metaphysical revelation. Following Joas, William James, and Ernst Troeltsch, it is defined as an affective–ethical structure mediated through cultural and historical forms. Religious experience denotes those moments in which individuals or communities—through narratives, symbols, rituals, or collective practices—undergo a sense of being “called,” “moved,” or “morally awakened,” such that their value commitments and orientations toward action are opened or transformed.

Such experiences are embodied, social, and historically situated; they are therefore accessible to empirical inquiry, hermeneutical analysis, and cross-cultural comparison. They constitute the affective and motivational sources from which ethical commitments and value-creation emerge.

Accordingly, in this dissertation religious experience is understood as an *experiential structure of ethical genesis*: a field of action through which moral meaning is awakened, formed, and renewed, rather than as a set of propositional beliefs or doctrinal claims.

4. Methodological Approach

To investigate the ethical re-enchantment of religion, this study adopts a threefold methodological framework that corresponds to the theoretical, historical, and intercultural dimensions of analysis within Religious Studies:

1. **Intellectual-Historical Reconstruction** (Chapters 1–2)
2. **Affirmative Genealogy** (Chapters 3–4)
3. **Comparative Civilizational Analysis** (Chapter 5)

Each component represents a distinct yet interrelated stage of the research process and remains flexible to refinement in dialogue with supervisory guidance.

(a) Intellectual-Historical Reconstruction

This first level reinterprets classical thinkers such as Weber, Durkheim, Troeltsch, Hegel, and Tillich in order to reconstruct the conceptual origins of religion as an agent of ethical formation. As a preliminary step, the study engages contemporary critiques of the category “religion”—especially the work of Jonathan Z. Smith and Russell McCutcheon—which demonstrate that religion is not a neutral, universal analytic concept but a historically contingent construction shaped by modern epistemic regimes. Accordingly, this dissertation does not assume a fixed essence of religion; instead, religion is treated as a constellation of practices, symbols, and experiences capable of eliciting ethical responsiveness.

Through close textual analysis, the research reexamines the tension between rationalization and ethical renewal, a tension often misrepresented as a one-directional narrative of decline. Situating this tension within the broader genealogy of Religious Studies allows it to be reframed as a dialectical process of ethical regeneration. Religion thereby emerges not as a static essence but as a dynamic historical medium of moral creativity.

By shifting the analytic paradigm from rationalization to ethical genesis, this section establishes the conceptual foundation for understanding religion as a creative force in modern moral development.

Key areas of focus include:

- Weber’s theory of disenchantment and its implications for the ethical crisis of modernity
- Troeltsch’s historicism and the dynamic moral energy within Christianity
- Joas’s value-generation theory (*Wertgenese*), which synthesizes American pragmatism, German historicism, and a critical rereading of classical sociology to interpret religious experience as a process of embodied self-transcendence whose ethical meaning emerges through cultural symbolization, historical narrative, and collective practice

This framework offers a non-reductionist, experience-based approach to analyzing how religious traditions continually generate and transform moral meaning within historical contexts.

(b) Affirmative Genealogy

The second methodological level examines how religious experience crystallizes into ethical order across moments of historical rupture. In contrast to Nietzsche's genealogy of suspicion, Joas's affirmative genealogy reconstructs the enduring moral creativity of religion. It traces how experiences of transcendence are ethically reinterpreted in response to crisis—producing new configurations of freedom, dignity, and justice.

This analysis will address:

- How religious freedom functions as the moral foundation of universalism
- How ethical ideals such as human rights undergo historical processes of re-sacralization
- How emotional experiences of the sacred become stabilized as durable moral commitments

From this perspective, moral universality is not an abstract philosophical construct but a historically generated phenomenon continually reshaped through intercultural interaction. By examining how diverse traditions reinterpret transcendence as freedom, responsibility, and moral obligation, this level evaluates the cross-cultural validity of Joas's model of ethical genesis.

These four civilizational traditions do not aim to exhaust global diversity but serve as paradigmatic cases that illustrate distinct modes of ethical freedom. The project is deliberately scoped to avoid an encyclopedic comparison. Each civilizational case focuses on a single historical episode and one contemporary interpreter, ensuring feasibility within the dissertation's word limits.

5. Expected Scholarly Contributions

Its originality lies in integrating Hans Joas's theory of religious action into a broader interdisciplinary framework—including intellectual history, ethics, and comparative civilizational studies—thereby contributing to the theoretical reflection and renewal of contemporary religious studies.

(a) Theoretical Contribution: Disciplinary Renewal

This project seeks to shift the paradigm of religious studies from a *science of social integration* to a *science of ethical genesis*.

While classical sociology (Durkheim, Weber, Parsons) emphasized religion's role in maintaining social cohesion, this study repositions religion as a creative field of moral innovation. Building on Joas's theory of *creative action*, the research intends to construct a generative model of religion in which sacredness, freedom, and responsibility interact dynamically.

The anticipated outcome is a renewed theoretical foundation for studying religion as a process of ethical formation rather than a static system of belief.

(b) Ethical Contribution: Reconstruction of Religious Freedom

Freedom will be approached as *entrusted freedom*: not mere self-determination but ethical responsiveness to both the sacred and the human other.

The project seeks to demonstrate that religious freedom is best understood as a *structure of moral genesis*, where transcendence and responsibility converge in lived experience. This approach is expected to enrich the anthropological understanding of freedom and offer new perspectives for post-secular ethics, moral philosophy, and political theology. The dissertation contributes to the methodological renewal of Religious Studies by proposing *ethical genesis* as a third path beyond functionalist explanation and hermeneutical interpretation.

(c) Comparative Contribution: Cross-Civilizational Genesis of Universal Ethics

Through comparative case studies in India, Islam, and Christianity, the research intends to show that moral universalism is historically co-generated through intercivilizational encounters.

It will examine how religious traditions transform experiences of transcendence into moral universality—supporting what Joas calls a “re-enchanted universalism.”

This framework provides an alternative to both relativism and Eurocentrism by grounding universality in historical responsiveness and ethical creativity.

The comparative section will remain open to adjustment in consultation with the supervisor to ensure methodological feasibility and thematic coherence.

(d) Overall Significance

Through its integration of theoretical reconstruction, affirmative genealogy, and cross-civilizational comparison, this study positions religion as an indispensable ethical resource within modernity and intervenes directly in contemporary scholarly debates concerning the place of the sacred in a secular age. The project develops a

methodological model for a “re-enchantmented Religious Studies,” demonstrating how experiences of the sacred continue to generate moral creativity within pluralistic and secular social contexts.

In doing so, the research addresses a broader set of questions: *After disenchantment, can religion remain a viable source of ethical formation? And how do diverse religious traditions contribute to the contemporary articulation of universal moral horizons?*

Ultimately, the project seeks to advance a renewed disciplinary orientation—*Religionswissenschaft* understood as a global science of ethical genesis, one that brings intellectual history, phenomenology, and intercultural ethics into a coherent analytical framework.

6. Work Plan and Timeline (2025–2028)

The project is organized as a phased, supervision-oriented research plan. Each stage centers on consolidation, analysis, and synthesis, with the timeline remaining flexible and subject to adjustment in consultation with the supervisory committee.

Year / Period	Main Tasks & Chapter Progress
Autumn– Winter 2025	Draft Chapter 1 ; finalize research positioning; complete Stoll–Joas literature review
First Half 2026	Draft Chapter 2 ; complete intellectual history of disenchantment; supervisor review
Second Half 2026	Draft Chapter 3 ; complete study of Joas’s trilogy; build theoretical framework
First Half 2027	Draft Chapter 4 ; A complete analysis of how Christian universalism emerges historically from the tension between imperial power and ecclesial Eucharistic ethics.
Second Half 2027	Draft Chapter 5 ; complete comparative framework and four civilizational case studies
Throughout	Draft Chapter 6 ; integrate and revise entire dissertation; prepare

Year / Period	Main Tasks & Chapter Progress
2028	introduction, conclusion, methodology; finalize manuscript and defense preparation

All stages are provisional and open to adjustment depending on supervisory advice and institutional requirements.”

References (Selected)

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