

## BOOK REVIEW SYMPOSIUM ON SOVEREIGNTY AND THE SACRED

# FROM SCHMITT TO THE HEBREW BIBLE AND BACK: A CONCEPTUAL ODYSSEY OF THE SACRED AND SOVEREIGNTY

*Sovereignty and the Sacred: Secularism and the Political Economy of Religion.* By Robert A. Yelle.  
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Robert Yelle’s *Sovereignty and the Sacred: Secularism and the Political Economy of Religion* is not only a spectacular conceptual investigation but also a profound and painstaking intellectual expedition across ancient religions and modern politics. Yelle’s mission is to understand the conceptual voyage of two fundamental ideas—sovereignty and sacredness—across these worlds. His well-informed analyses of both the religious and the political portray these realms as mirror universes between which the concepts of sovereignty and sacredness wander and operate.

The parallelism of theology and politics, and with them sacredness and sovereignty, is a leitmotif in the Hebrew Bible that explores the tension between God’s heavenly dominion and the earthly sovereignty of human beings.<sup>1</sup> Carl Schmitt’s *Political Theology*<sup>2</sup> provided an analysis of the fundamental components and the cross-fertilization inherent to this parallelism and demonstrated its relevance to twentieth-century politics and ideologies.

Picking up where Schmitt left off, Yelle deconstructs several of his ideas, then refines them and reconstructs them more broadly. The pillars of Yelle’s reconstructed political theology are three interdependent Schmittian ideas: the reflection of the theological in the political, the interconnection of sovereignty and the state of exception, and the critique of modernism as a pretentious and ideologically motivated project.

## SOVEREIGNTY AND THE SACRED

Throughout his criticism of modernist ideas of secularization, Schmitt argued that premodern religious ideas and mechanisms continue to function in modern politics. In light of the modernist inclination to deny the significance of sovereignty, Schmitt regenerated the concept and gave an accounting of its essence and its role in politics. Sovereignty, according to Schmitt, is not only

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1 Sometimes earthly sovereignty is depicted as antithetical and hostile to God’s exclusive dominion, as in Gideon’s rejection of rulership—“I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the Lord shall rule over you” (Judges 8:23)—and God’s response to the initiative to establish an Israelite monarchy—“The Lord said unto Samuel, ‘. . . they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them’” (I Samuel 8:7) (my translations). In other cases, the distinction between heavenly and earthly sovereignty is blurred and God is proclaimed the political sovereign on Earth.

2 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

the constructed source of the legal order but also a power capable of suspending and even subverting that order. The suspension of laws and constitutional norms due to a state of emergency is not an accidental disruption of the legal order but the very defining feature of sovereign power. Schmitt thus critiques the modernist political vision as a deceptive agenda that is predicated on illusions, such as the rule of law, constitutionalism, and international law, and denies or ignores fundamental truths, such as the rule of power and enmity, and the reflection of the theological and political.

Yelle disassembles these Schmittian ideas and reassembles them in a manner that illustrates their breadth and offers implementations beyond the theory of law and politics. He persuasively argues that political theology is only one-half of a mutual reflection. Not only are theological structures and features reflected in the political, but the political is also mirrored in the theological. Indeed, the phenomenology of the political is essential to understanding the religious universe. Yelle thus demonstrates that political theology is crucial to the mission of religious studies: to decipher the internal logic of the religious universe and the sacred. The claim of mutual reflection resets sovereignty and sacredness as not merely related, but equivalent. The two function against the background of the fragile legal order and are demonstrated by its instability.

This revised view of sacredness and sovereignty, according to Yelle, calls for a rearticulation of Schmittian exceptionalism. The state of exception accordingly is not only the suspension of the legal order, as argued by Schmitt, or the divestiture of subjects from this order, per Giorgio Agamben.<sup>3</sup> It signifies the antithesis of a stable legal order. By its essence, sacredness-sovereignty denotes a vibrant alternative to the actual legal order, an alternative that restores and recycles the possibility of the state of nature, defined as a chaotic and antinomian prelegal reality. This alternative to the existing legal order reaffirms and revalidates the dependency of that order on sacred-sovereign power. The turn from chaos to order, from anomie to a social life under the law, therefore is not evolutionary or linear, as suggested by various contractarians, but cyclical and recurrent. Recollecting or returning to the state of nature, whether spontaneously or by institutionalized rite, recalls the dependency on sacredness-sovereignty: the nomic experience affirms and attacks sovereignty (29–30).

In Yelle's eyes, the state of exception should be understood in terms of a transcendence that is inherent to the function of sacredness-sovereignty in the political arena and the religious universe. At the operational core of sacredness-sovereignty is not only the capacity to suspend the nominal order, but also an ambivalence that it represents and maintains—an ambivalence that constitutes the legal order, but simultaneously challenges its totality. The transcendental meaning of the state of exception is critical for a theoretical understanding of various biblical phenomena, such as the ban, the weekly Sabbath, the sabbatical year, and the Jubilee. These institutional practices are explained by the ambivalent character of sacredness-sovereignty as references to a reality that transcends and opposes the existing legal order. According to Yelle, Schmitt's focus on the miracle as a paradigm for the state of exception overlooks the ambivalent mechanism of sacredness-sovereignty. Grasping the state of exception as a reminder of an alternative to the existing legal order also accounts for the irrational dimensions of religious universes as innate deviations from economism, rational choice, utilitarianism, and self-interest.

The view of the state of exception as an invasion by transcendent sacredness-sovereignty of the legal order informs the modernist vision. It is a view that aims to design and justify a rational harmony that is stable, self-sufficient, and devoid of irrationality and exceptionality.

3 Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

Hence, modernism is inclined to renounce sacredness-sovereignty and command theories in favor of the rule of law, contractarianism, and natural law theories. The exposure of its denial mechanisms also reflects on the dismissal by modernist thinkers, such as Kant and Weber, of irrational human behavior—violence, the influence of charisma, and the like. Their inability to accept sacrifice, mysticism, nonutilitarian acts, asceticism, and other irrational religious phenomena is cloaked by their attempts to explain them away as primitivism or in terms of social functionality. The stubborn faith of modernism in the totality of a rational legal order generates an anthropology of *Homo economicus* that leaves neither room nor legitimacy for *Homo religiosus*.

#### DEPOLITICIZED SACREDNESS-SOVEREIGNTY?

Schmitt famously viewed secularization as an indispensable component of political theology rather than a process unfolding on the sacred–profane axis. He considered secularization a modern notion denoting the transference of concepts and structures from the theological to the political realm on the basis of their analogousness: “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.”<sup>4</sup>

Yelle’s depiction, in which the theological universe is isomorphic with the political one, suggests a different notion of secularization. The similarity qua identity of sovereignty and sacredness raises a question about the precise meaning of secularization as a process of transference: In what sense does secularization mark a transfer from the theological to the political?

The idea of secularization can be reworked as a non-modernist notion that marks various shifts, projections, and transferences between theology and politics. While Schmitt stressed such shifts of the modern era, Yelle’s emphasis on the intrinsic affinity of theology and politics invokes an ahistorical definition of secularization as the ongoing interplay between the two universes.

Numerous premodern examples and much modern scholarship support the conceptualization of secularization as a multidimensional and transhistorical phenomenon that has different appearances in different contexts. Yet the peculiarity of modern secularization remains striking. In what sense is secularization in modern times unique?

Schmitt and Yelle’s focus on theology and politics as the main arena of secularization would appear to neglect a dramatic turn in the conceptual genealogy of secularization and sacredness-sovereignty. A most significant process of secularization, in Yelle’s sense, took place in modernity elsewhere than the theological–political axis: in the rise of the liberal ideas of individualism and privacy. The endorsement of humanist ideas such as personal autonomy, self-determination, and privacy as sanctuary, or a state of exception from societal interests and regulations can indeed be characterized as a secularization of sacredness-sovereignty, a process that transfers sacredness-sovereignty from an exclusive and centralized setting to one that is decentralized and private. The notion of secularization, then, is not limited to the sacred–profane and theological–political axes, but is remarkably meaningful on the theocentric–anthropocentric and public–private axes as well. Modernist secularization may accordingly be defined as a feat of depoliticization, an endowment of all human individuals with features of sacredness-sovereignty.<sup>5</sup>

4 Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36. “The exception in jurisprudence is analogous to the miracle in theology. Only by being aware of this analogy can we appreciate the manner in which the philosophical ideas of the state developed in the last centuries.” Schmitt, 36.

5 The universalist and rationalist Kantian conceptualization of human dignity as a quality of sovereignty is thus understood as an alternative to the Judeo-Christian view of human dignity as stemming from the biblical idea of *imago dei*.

The construal of secularization as transference of sacredness-sovereignty away from the traditional pairing of theology and politics and to the individual human being appears consistent with Yelle's account of "religious rejections of exchange" (chapter 6). His analysis of such repudiations of the ultimate logic of economic exchange is a wonderful demonstration of how his refreshing conceptual investigation sheds new light on biblical texts and institutions. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that the use of money itself is another embodiment of sovereignty. The development of money can be seen as a process in which sovereignty begins to be privatized and decentralized. A money-based economy places a small measure of sovereign agency in the hands of those individuals who possess money and can use it to exercise liberty and free will. The personalized sovereignty of the use of money, in the lens supplied by Yelle, is a threatening alternative to the sovereignty of sacredness-sovereignty, in constant tension with it by virtue of posing a challenge to its exclusivity and centrality. This subversive feature of the exchange of money lies behind the commonplace practice of imprinting rulers' likenesses on currency, to be seen as an effort to reaffirm the superiority of the political sovereign by giving him presence precisely where private sovereignty is exercised and expressed. Indeed, the power of such portraits is attested by their prohibition in early Jewish and Muslim contexts, though the concern behind those proscriptions was the challenge they posed to divine sovereignty. Throughout, financial transactions are a locus in which potential sovereignties appear, interplay, and clash.

The emergence of money can be viewed as a commencement of the depoliticization of sovereignty, a process that sprouted with modernist individualist ideology while rejecting the economic valuation of the individual<sup>6</sup> and constructing privacy as the realm of the individual's sacredness-sovereignty.<sup>7</sup>

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6 "In the kingdom of ends everything has either a PRICE, or a DIGNITY. What has a price can be replaced with something else, as its equivalent; whereas what is elevated above any price, and hence allows of no equivalent, has a dignity." Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: A German-English Edition*, ed. and trans. Jens Timmermann and Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 96–97.

7 In fact, cryptocurrencies well exemplify the detachment of money usage from political sovereignty—an advanced phase in which sovereignty is depoliticized and individuals' independent sovereignty is enhanced.