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Robert Yelle has ventured into a great subject: the relationship between religion and politics. He maintains that the two spheres exhibit essential similarities, both in regard to structure and content. In his view, both „sovereignty“ (of the state) and „the sacred“ (in religion) work by way of enforced rupture. The sovereign has the right to make decisions while religion uses the concept of the miracle to suspend the continuity and predictability of the lives of the faithful. Carl Schmitt, the theorist of the „Führerprinzip“ (leader principle) in National Socialism, accorded a pivotal role to this idea in his political philosophy of religion, as attested to by the formulation „souverän ist, wer über den Ausnahmezustand verfügt“ – Yelle translates „Ausnahmezustand“ mostly with „state of exception“.

The author discusses his thesis mainly with regard to modern Europe, but he is not afraid to occasionally delve into the history of the Aztecs, the occidental Middle Ages, and the India of the first centuries of the Common Era. According to Yelle, the productive and concurrently destructive force of religion was tamed through integration into the structures of political order. He discusses his ideas in four chapters on the „disenchantment of charisma“, on Giorgio Agamben’s theory of the „homo sacer“, on the sacrifice, and on the biblical ideas of jubilee and sabbath.

We need such wide perspectives in order to understand the religious history of modernity and the genesis of Western democracies – and in this perspective the book is stimulating. The question arises, however, as to whether Yelle’s examples can bear the burden of his argumentation. The chapter on the concept of the jubilee year in 1300 by Boniface VIII, a power-conscious Pope, as a break with the past since, from its conception in the Old Testament, a jubilee year symbolizes the abolition of economic obligations without replacement. This could in fact be an example of the disposition over the „state of exception“. But a contrary interpretation should also have been considered, namely that, in the regular celebration of the jubilee, Boniface also asserted the continuity of history against the prophecies of the end of the world by spiritualistic Franciscans. This is to say that Yelle’s example could also have been interpreted in exactly the opposite way as a means for creating continuity.

Of course, Yelle is aware of counter-models to such forms of the religious legitimisation of the „state of exception“, such as the social contract. In regard to this topic, he discusses the ideas of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke (but not those of Montesquieu). But his deliberations on the contrat social receive less attention than his reflections on rupture, the „state of exception“, and sovereignty. Because of this imbalance, it ultimately remains unclear how the relationship of both options is to be thought of in the course of history.

In the background of these considerations, another debate is going on. In its final instance, the conceptual axis of Yelle’s analysis is not the long history of religio-political concepts but their discussion in the context of the 20th century. One can read his reflections as a book about Carl Schmitt and his intellectual opponent, Max Weber. Yelle contrasts Weber’s „disenchanted“ modernity with politics as secularized theology in the spirit of Schmitt. Or: the Catholic theorist of the „state of exception“ is pitted against the Protestant theorist of the „routinization of charisma“.

Here, too, the devil lies in the historical details, for instance in the contextualization of these debates. One example of how historical details cause problems for Yelle’s analysis is to be found in his reading of Max Weber, whose theory of „Entzauberung“ („disenchantment“) Yelle semantically deduces from „Zauberei“ („magic“, p. 37), whereas (in my understanding) it is primarily to be derived from „Zauber“ („charm“). But for Weber, disenchantment is not just the end of magic, but
the hallmark of a categorically new world that „in principle no longer knows any mysterious, unpredictable powers”.\textsuperscript{1} If we want to understand Yelle’s reflections, we must at any rate not dive into the long history of religion but into the history of how German political theorists of different denominations reacted to the events and trauma of the First World War.

The conceptual agenda of Yelle’s Sovereignty and the Sacred ultimately is located in the intellectual debate of the early 20th century, and he is more concerned with the early 20th century rather than with a political theory in the context of ancient India and the occidental early modern period. But, if we are to discuss the great changes in history, we need such books with the courage to propose a broad thesis even at the risk of neglecting some of the details.


\textsuperscript{1} Max Weber, Wissenschaft als Beruf, Munich 1919, p. 16: „Entzauberung“ means „daß es also prinzipiell keine geheimnisvollen unberechenbaren Mächte gebe“.