

BOOK REVIEW

Sovereignty and the Sacred: Secularism and the Political Economy of Religion, by ROBERT A. YELLE. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018, 304 pp.; \$32.50 (paper).

To the yelping chorus of social scientists informing us of the health benefits of religious life—from length-of-life to greater happiness to lower blood pressure—Robert A. Yelle offers a devastating demurrer. Religion, he argues, is not best seen as something rational, but rather as something wild, a set of “exit signs” from the rational economies that appear to structure much of human life. Religions posits laws but, more importantly, offer an escape from them via the antinomian. “Religion” from this perspective is best conceived of as a series of states of exception, of bombs laid in the path of economism, calculability, and rational-actor theories of agency. The historical record makes this clear, Yelle argues, though scholars mostly misrecognize it in order to make it fit within Enlightenment programs of progress and explanation. Against such distortions, Yelle invites readers to see religion in relation to a range of performances that suspend the usual values of transactional economies: in play, asceticism, rituals of return to primal chaos, sacrifice, carnival, the Feast of Fools, *communitas*, Jubilee, charisma, wastage, wilderness; in short, to a wide comparative range of anti-economistic acts that offer no obvious advantage or benefit other than the attraction to the act itself. No lowered blood pressure, no competitive marketplace advantage, no longer life, no happier marriage. To the contrary, “religion” is an exit, a refusal, even a negation of all such calculations.

Through such negations, religion asserts sovereignty; here, nearly collapsed with the idea of the sacred. Yelle builds on and expands from a wide range of scholars, from Max Weber himself to the neo-Durkheimian members of the *Collège de Sociologie* like Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois; from foundational figures of political theology from Carl Schmitt to Giorgio Agamben; and from craftsmen of intellectual genealogy, like Gustavo Benavides and Roland Boer. One of the wonders of this work, in fact, is the range of diverse materials and arguments it marshals to the persuasive argument about religion as exit sign, as a kind of transcendence, not of the world itself but of transactional modes of occupying the world. Religion is a series of states of exception that may equally take the form of radical violence and radical pardon, from sacrificial massacre to the democratic benevolence of the Roman and then biblical Jubilee.

Within this broad argument, Yelle makes several fascinating moves. One is to rethink Max Weber’s notion of charisma as a form of antinomian exception, as a rejection and counter to legal-rational authority rather than as complementary with it. Another is to locate Weber’s figuration of disenchantment (*Entzauberung*) in early Christianity’s irresolvable tension between law and charisma, itself perhaps a reworking of Greek debates between platonists and sophists. And a third major move is his compression of sovereignty and the sacred into a single, complex glyph. Insofar as “the sacred” entails that which is set apart, circumscribed by rules and taboos but itself exempt from those rules (and marked by their periodic breach or rupture), and “the sovereign” signifies that power that anchors all rules but that also

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decrees when they cease to matter (the state of exception), sovereignty and the sacred do the same work. They join in their overlapping functions. The religious miracle, an antinomian exception to the laws of nature, is analogous to and contiguous with the monarch, a human mediator of miracles. No surprise, Yelle points out, that gods and kings or queens so often overlap in their nomenclatures: a king is “Lord,” crowned with beams of light, even as a god is addressed as royalty.

Yelle’s mastery of multiple literatures is impressive and on display: from biblical literature and its text-critical interpretation to arguments drawn from anthropology, sociology, classics, history, and within the latter, from the comparative and genealogical impulses that inform the best work in *History of Religions*. Yelle’s book is exemplary in this regard; it leverages comparison toward surprising, sharp revisions of the familiar story of religions as having laid the groundwork for the modern individual. That story over-domesticated religion, yoking it to plodding oxen like rationality, progress, capital gains, and agency.

Yelle makes religion interesting again by resituating it in the blasts of radical excess, a transcendence of the usual economies. It’s brilliant work.

I suppose one might raise the question of to what degree religious performance entails the “exit” from calculable economies through the actual *performance* of violence and its cessation, versus the mere imagination or citation of such violence. After all, when Bataille and Caillois formed a secret society called *Acéphale* (“headless”), they planned ritual actions to inspire a social revolution against what they regarded as the overly rational, utilitarian society, including a public human sacrifice to be staged in Paris. But they never really did it. Instead they just published a journal together, where they wrote about *ideas* of sacrifice, from 1936 to 1939. Chaos, waste, and radical violence were just over the horizon. It turned out there was no need for a ritual to summon it.

Paul Christopher Johnson
University of Michigan

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