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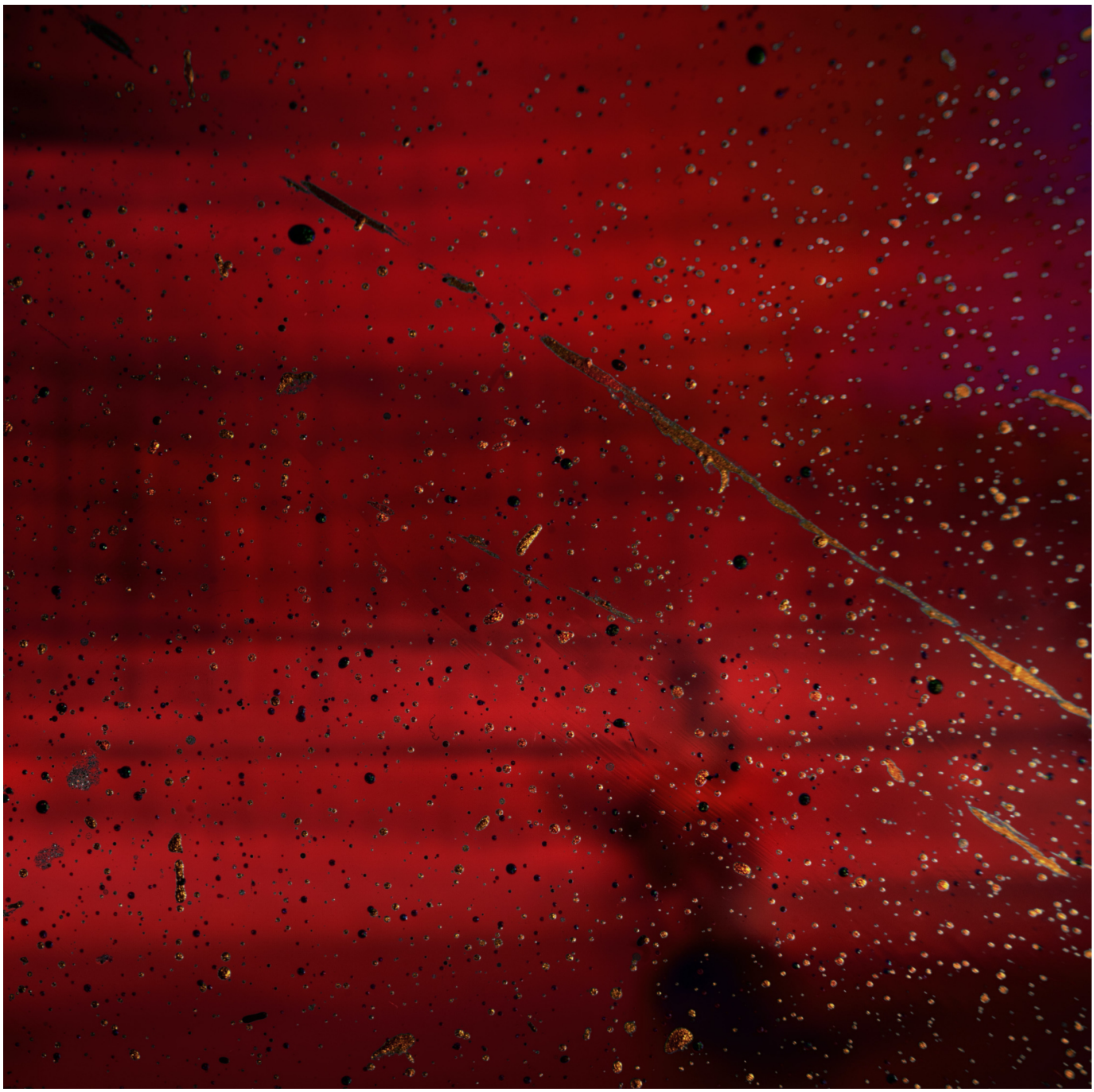


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# Contents



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# *Sovereignty and the Sacred:*

## *Secularism and the Political Economy of Religion*

*Robert A. Yelle. University of Chicago Press, 2018. 304 pages. $32.50 (paperback).*

According to Robert A. Yelle, the last few decades have brought forth an increased scrutiny of secularism as a sustainable political model. *Sovereignty and the Sacred* develops this scrutiny into a broad-ranging excavation of notions of secularism, polity, and religion, and the way these concepts structure our lives. Yelle argues that previously, polities tended to be legitimated through the "unfortunate contingency" of violence, whereas now, they are supposedly legitimated by "popular consent and the social contract" (4). This book attempts to question whether this dichotomy whitewashes the history of religion by promoting a utopian view of our current socio-political system. Yelle also addresses how contemporary political theories have "based their answers on naked reason and the rejection of tradition," pushing away alternative solutions and political models of the past that could be attained through carefully studying the history of religion, specifically, the features of religion deemed illogical and insignificant by Enlightenment philosophy (4).

This book consists of six chapters that trace a genealogical history of sovereignty and the sacred as alternative political models to secularism. This might leave a disconcerting impression on the reader: surely, the way our current socio-political system operates must be more desirable than those that have existed in the past? Yet *Sovereignty and the Sacred* implores the reader to reconsider polity and religion. In chapter one, Yelle argues against the attempt to make history less bloody. He rejects relegating the violence of sovereignty to the





back burner of the historical narrative and promoting the myth that we currently live in an "inaugural age of wisdom transcending past superstitions" (35). Yelle insists that it is not effective or practical to reject the significant function violence "has served in the constitution of polity" (35). Through this process, Yelle engages with the writings of Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben, among others, to demonstrate the historical plurality of the definitions of sovereignty.

From the Middle Ages to the Reformation era, Yelle traces a history of Christian theological traditions and their larger significance in considering both polity and religion (38). This is inadvertently linked to Max Weber's theory of charisma and ideas on disenchantment, which Yelle argues were "originally an expression of Christian triumphalism" (72). He insists that it would be a mistake by contemporary scholars to identify the beginning of disenchantment, or "de-magicalization," to the era of Romanticism or the Enlightenment (37). It would also be a mistake to separate the discourse of disenchantment from theological discourses from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, of which Yelle claims "the roots of the concept were already established" (72). Yelle also challenges Agamben's ahistoricism in his "genealogy of sovereignty" that renders his conception of sovereignty deficient (75), and provides various case studies in subsequent chapters that demonstrate the failure of rational choice theory to explain the concept of sacrifice (102). The book's main arguments are summarily to confront the "untamed and spontaneous" nature of humanity and come to terms with the violence associated with sovereignty (184). What makes this book particularly fascinating is that it is entirely clear that a major motivation of this book is to blur the lines that separate secularism and theology into two distinct histories.

*Sovereignty and the Sacred* approaches the past through a history of religion that places modernity and secularism, concepts ingrained in our contemporary political and legal systems, under the academic microscope. The book is complex, innovative, and at times, not entirely readable. However, this is not because of any failing within the writing. Rather, the esoteric nature of the content does not make it light reading. At the same time, Yelle successfully conveys a palpable sense of urgency that acts as an underlying strength of this book. It is well-researched, erudite, and delivers a discerning critique of how we fail to account for the violent aspects of the history of sovereignty—to our own detriment. Yelle writes that "the antidote to this ignorance is a genealogy that overcomes the false dichotomy between 'secular' modernity and its theological past" (36). Regardless of whether the arguments within this book can be universally hailed, Yelle is sensible in positing that we cannot "close the door to the past" when studying the relationship between sovereignty, the sacred, and violence (186). Ultimately, Yelle puts forth a new theory of religion that has the potential to be both innovative and liberating in the vein of scholars like Talal Asad and Michael Saler.

*Reviewed by: Ruqaiyah Zarook (McGill University)*