

Symposium—Robert Yelle’s *Sovereignty and the Sacred: Secularism and the Political Economy of Religion*

The Sovereign Remains

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Key words

Sacred Kingship, political theology, sovereignty, state of exception

Let me begin with a note of thanks and appreciation to my colleagues who contributed to this forum on *Sovereignty and the Sacred*. These essays vindicate my hopes when writing the book: namely, that it would inspire thoughtful reflection on the foundations of polity and economy, and sharpen critique of where we are in the present moment. The essays in this forum stand on their own, noting sins of commission and omission in my argument while marking out fruitful lines of inquiry that I did not follow myself. What a range of reactions and creative takes! Connecting the book to Marxism, Trump, debt and sacrifice, to Giorgio Agamben’s mature work on political theology in the West, and to the ancient Indian horse sacrifice, among other topics. Hence, the book may have an afterlife of sorts, and for that, I consider my efforts well-compensated. Rather than respond to each of the essays point-by-point, especially when this would mainly mean nodding in agreement, I would like to add a few reflections of my own on how the book’s argument could be extended. After all, it was submitted to press at the end of 2017, and a great deal has happened since then, while my own thinking on the subject has progressed. I will start by remarking on the state of exception as an idea that remains necessary to think with (and against), and continue by adding some thoughts regarding the tension between authoritarianism and democracy that still occupies us, weaving these reflections together in a manner that, I hope, responds in some way to the issues my colleagues have raised.

First, however, a methodological point. Like some others, perhaps, I have been drawn to the discourses on political theology because they seemed to offer a way out of the antiquarianism and false positivism in which the discipline of religious studies, and particularly my own field, the history of religions, has often seemed stuck. To read the past in dialectical tension with our own concerns is not an abdication of science but rather a response to the urgent call of the present moment. Political theology, or call it what you will, began as a

critique of the self-image of Western liberal modernity as fully rational, as having mastered every form of superstition and excess, as in effect having ended history, or at least neutralized the political value of history. It is obvious to many of us that the modern settlement is unsettled, and in some respects may deserve to be. The theological debates that occurred at the foundations of the modern order were not final and conclusive. We have merely forgotten what was at stake in these debates and need to remind ourselves, for the sake of overcoming alienation from our past, as well as for the renewal of community. In the last few years, I have returned to working on the historical sources of liberalism in the seventeenth century, and particularly on Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. These founding figures of the modern constitution cannot be understood without awareness of the theological context in which they operated. In fact, both must be included in the broader movement, often called Christian Hebraism, that inaugurated our modern, ostensibly secular polity and economy through a sustained reflection on the Bible and especially the relationship between Christianity and Judaism (Nelson 2010). (As Adam Kotsko notes, that the Hebrew Bible does not figure more prominently in contemporary political theology is indeed odd.) I believe that we may once again be experiencing such a moment when it is necessary to revisit fundamental questions of sovereignty, polity, and belonging. To do so, we must turn back to our traditions, but also refigure them for the present and future. The task today is much greater, not only because the old order has splintered, but also because the world today is much more plural, multicultural, and interconnected.

Sovereignty and the Sacred used the concept of the “state of exception,” in both its good and bad forms, to analyze a number of cases in the history and anthropology of political economy. The book defended the idea that the state of exception—whether mythologized, ritualized, or actualized—defines a necessary moment in the life of a polity, and is indeed in some sense the source of that life, which can only be relocated or repressed, but never fully extinguished. This moment represents the convergence between the two categories of sovereignty and the sacred, each of which exceeds the strictures of an orderly,

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rule-governed system, while serving as a reference point or anchor for such order.

Several of my colleagues note the danger of glorifying sovereignty by sacralizing it (or perhaps of weaponizing the sacred by politicizing it). Indeed, as Schmitt already exemplified, there is a real hazard in this path of falling into illiberalism, or even what Brian Collins calls “devil worship.” As Finbarr Curtis and Devin Singh both note, President Donald J. Trump (who is not once mentioned in my book) was a walking illustration of the state of exception, who modeled both wretched excess and the thirst for absolute power. James I of England famously declared that “Kings are justly called Gods, for they exercise a manner or resemblance of Divine power upon earth: ... to give life, to send death, to judge all, and to be judged not accomptable to none” (22). This is the same logic that led Trump to brag, during the 2016 campaign, that he could shoot someone in broad daylight in the middle of Fifth Avenue and get away with it. Absolutism has ancient roots, and it has taken many forms, from tyrants such as the biblical Pharaoh to dictators such as Hitler and Stalin. The figure that Trump most closely resembled, however, may have been the clownish and profane King Ubu of Alfred Jarry’s infamous modernist or proto-surrealist play, *Ubu Roi* (1896), which seems to have portended the madness of the twentieth century while caricaturing it. As Singh notes, “Trump was the jester or inverted king.” Even the association of clownishness with transgression does not appear new, being represented not only in forms of Carnival receding into the distant past but also, quite possibly, the prehistoric age.¹ We can mock such figures, yet the fantasy that Trump projected proved attractive and cathartic for his followers, and dangerous for the polity. It was, as Curtis put it, “a jubilee for racists.” Trump lurched from one violation to the next, seemingly because he could (or because we let him), especially when it came to attacks, whether real or actual, against migrants at the border (borders being important for sovereigns, as both Collins and Singh note); “shithole countries” (using profanity reminiscent of the use of “merdre” [sic] or ‘shit-er’ at the start of *Ubu Roi*); against “Little Rocket Man” Kim Jong Un of North Korea, whom he threatened with nuclear war (“fire and fury”), etc. Not to mention Trump’s abuse of the pardon power (which Singh notes), assertions of executive privilege, etc. Much of this is not at all comical.

Then there is the deadly seriousness of the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. Observers pretty quickly pointed out the resemblance to the sacking of Rome by the Vandals. What the event most closely recalled, however, was another classic form of the state of exception: the violence that can break out during any transition of power, such as that occasioned by the death of a king, thus commonly referred to as an *interregnum*. As I pointed out in my book (30-31, 143), these events have often been accompanied by violence, looting, and license, which Roger Caillois and Georges Bataille theorized as transgressive forms of the sacred, as

indeed they sometimes are. The profanation of the hallowed halls of Congress in a wild frenzy, even a shamanic ecstasy, was simultaneously an expression of the sacred, indeed potentially of a new order, a return (if only momentarily) to the beginnings, to the mythic time, *in illo tempore*, to borrow Mircea Eliade’s refrain. This was also the moment for the de- and reconstitution of the body politic.

Historically speaking, such events are not at all uncommon. They have merely been more or less successfully managed by the legal mechanisms of the U.S. Constitution and by the laws and procedures of the various states governing elections. Ernst Kantorowicz’s classic work, *The King’s Two Bodies* (1957), which I barely mentioned, was precisely about the theology of the body politic and how this was designed to paper over any gaps in sovereignty precisely because these were so dangerous. Although Kantorowicz did not focus much on the violence of the interregnum but rather on its avoidance, one of his sources, F. W. Maitland (1936, 104), began his essay on “The Crown as Corporation” by noting that when the king dies, the king’s peace is broken. We may be living still in the aftermath of that rupture. It is difficult to reconstitute the mystical body of the polity.

I realize that all this talk of kings may sound anachronistic, or even nostalgic for things best left dead and buried. Yet the threat of authoritarianism is not safely in the past. Democracy may have a more tenuous grasp on hearts and minds than we realized. After finishing *Sovereignty and the Sacred*, I finally got down to reading David Graeber’s and Marshall Sahlins’s *On Kings* (2017), where they describe that most perennial form of polity, sacred kingship, often in the transgressive form of the “stranger king,” in ways that resonate with my own approach. They leave the impression, and at times assert, that we have still not escaped the gravity of such traditional modes of authority. (Although Graeber and Wengrow 2021 complicates the history considerably.) I have spent much time these past few years reflecting on how matters may have changed from the admittedly rather perennialist outlook presented in my last book. To put it bluntly, if we have abandoned monarchy for democratic republics, have we also freed ourselves from the idea of an absolute sovereignty that, formerly, was projected onto the figure of the sacred king? Have we successfully transmuted sovereignty into less hierarchical and violent forms? Have we really even evolved? So far, I have not found a clear answer to such questions (but see Yelle 2022).

Despite the iconoclasm of the English Civil War, the Republic it inaugurated was short-lived, and the monarchy was soon restored. Prophesying the new age, Thomas Hobbes embraced a form of civil theology that was pagan and anti-Christian, being focused on the colossus of the Leviathan, which drew on traditional models of divine right kingship and, more covertly, on Egyptian idolatry (Yelle 2022). In France, a more thorough break with monarchy brought about what Jesse Goldhammer (2005) called the “headless Republic,” which may have exacerbated the problem of how to represent authority. For many, the focal point became the Revolution itself, with its violence and festivals (or both at once)

(Ozouf 1988). Scholars of religion know how Émile Durkheim sketched the primal scene of both religion and community as one of collective effervescence experienced while whirling around a totem or *churinga*. This sketch may owe as much to the remembrance of the French Revolution and its Liberty Tree as to the Australian data that he cited. Durkheim's (1995, 121) insistence that such totems were originally abstract, aniconic, may have reflected his own preference for the republic over monarchy. Unlike Hobbes, Durkheim needed no leader as focal point of his group rituals. Like Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (141-42), whom Durkheim read, this enshrines the state of exception itself at the heart of the republican *imaginaire*. However, the state of exception is inherently unstable, and all revolutions must end eventually. The question is whether or not crowds need leaders; if you will, whether Hobbes or Durkheim was right. Perhaps we have a choice. Time will tell.

NOTE

¹ Graeber and Wengrow (2018), foreshadowing Graeber and Wengrow (2021), state: "Then there are other, even stranger factors, such as the fact that most of the 'princely' burials consist of individuals with striking physical anomalies, who today would be considered giants, hunchbacks, or dwarfs." At a conference on sacred kingship I attended in May 2019, Graeber referred to such figures as a manifestation of the phenomenon of "clown kings."

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