

Religious Studies

The seeds of secularization

By Klaus Uhrig



Source: ullsteinbild/Sylent Press

The process of secularization did not begin with the Reformation. It is already implicit in the beginnings of Christianity, says LMU historian Robert Yelle.

Before engaging Robert Yelle in a discussion of the phenomenon of secularization, it is a good idea to ask what he takes the word to mean. "These days, 'secularization' can mean almost anything," he says, with an amused look on his face. "In academic discourse, the term is now used in all sorts of contexts. Instead of secularization, one could simply say 'today's world', or as Walter Benjamin put it," – and here he suddenly switches from English into German – "'die Jetztzeit'".

It may also be helpful to mention here certain elements that do not fall within Yelle's concept of secularization: The phenomenon at issue has nothing to do with the expropriation of church property by secular authorities – a historical process that is firmly anchored in Germany's cultural memory – nor with the legal separation of Church and State, one of the foundational principles of the modern French Republic.

As used here, the term 'secularization' refers to the long and complex process of the desacralization of societies. This is a development that is not restricted to the Christian West, though Europe provides perhaps the most striking instance of the process. In Yelle's view, that is because secularization is inherent to Christianity. – And it does not begin with the sober and skeptical perspective

that Protestantism brought to Christian debates. Instead, he contends, that secularization's roots go back much further.

The notion that the Reformation had a major impact on the secularization of Western societies is one of the central ideas enunciated by the famous German sociologist Max Weber. This view remains valid, says Yelle, but it doesn't go far enough. What Weber defined as the disenchantment of the world – the retreat from ritual, magic and the mystical – can already be discerned in early Christianity. "I don't mean that as an attack on Weber. On the contrary, I want to extend the line of thought that he pioneered."

Extending Max Weber's line of thought

In Yelle's model, the Reformation represents a direct continuation of secularizing tendencies that are already intimated in the first centuries of Christianity. This can be seen, for instance, in the notion that, with Jesus's death on the Cross, the pagan oracles have been silenced, Jewish rituals have been superseded and the veil of mysticism that encompassed them has been torn away. These views can be traced in part to St. Paul. Then there is the equally old idea that the era of miracles and wonders ceased during the lifetime of the

Apostles. Thus the Christian religion defined itself from the very beginning in terms that anticipated what Weber called "disenchantment" (*Entzauberung*).

Yelle's argument comes as a surprise principally because secularization has for so long been understood as a process that is diametrically opposed to religion itself. The slow demise of religion and the rise of rationality is one of the grand narratives of the advance of modernity. In fact, the idea that the world has been demystified derives from ancient religious notions that were already current in Early Christian times and were revived during the early Reformation by Protestants – for use as arguments against Catholics. Ideas such as progress, modernity, historical evolution, stepping from the darkness of ignorance into the light of knowledge, can all be found in the theology of the 16th-century reformers.

The central point for Robert Yelle here is that the secularizing tendencies that emerged during the Reformation were not directed against religion itself, at least not against *all* religion. On the contrary, while Luther and Calvin specifically criticized the rituals of the Catholic Church, they did not demand their abolition. What they proposed was a change of paradigm. Many Protestants

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called for the rejection of ‘empty’ ritual, of quasi-magical, repetitive invocations and formulaic prayers, and of church services as sacred theater in favor of a new sense of personal, interiorized belief, which was less flamboyant but more meaningful than the old ways. In the context of the Reformation at least, the disenchantment of the world appears as a quintessentially religious undertaking.

Robert Yelle has devoted much of the last 12 years to the study of the Reformation and its impact on the secularization of Western society. It has become one of the central themes of his life as a researcher – a life which might well have unfolded very differently. Having graduated from college with a degree in Philosophy, Yelle changed course and attended the School of Law at the University of California in Berkeley. This characteristically American career path enables students with a Bachelor’s degree in any subject to qualify as attorneys after a further three years of study. Graduates can then join a legal partnership or pursue postgraduate studies to become judges. Indeed, Yelle did work as a lawyer for a while, though he already had a very different goal – he wanted to earn a doctorate in Religious Studies.

“At the time, I thought that I had definitively said goodbye to Law”, he says. “But only four years later I found myself studying topics that lay at the interface between religion and legal science.” And even now, he sometimes writes from a lawyer’s perspective on topics that impinge on both of his specialties and at the same time reveal the lines of conflict between secular societies and their religiously motivated opponents. For example, he has published an article in which he considers the question of



The fact that very few of today’s architectural wonders – such as Hamburg’s Elbphilharmonie – are places of worship is a reflection of the secularization of modern societies.
Source: ullsteinbild/Sylent Press

whether the constitutional principle of freedom of religion holds for corporate entities as well as individuals.

That paper was inspired by the recent case involving *Hobby Lobby*, an American chain of arts and crafts stores founded by David Green. Green is an evangelical Christian who, on religious grounds, refused to offer his employees health insurance plans that covered the cost of certain methods of contraception such as the intra-uterine coil or the morning-after pill. The case was finally decided – in favor of the plaintiff – by the US Supreme Court. Yelle regards that decision as problematic, because it placed far too little weight on the fundamental differences between churches – for which the relevant statutes guaranteeing freedom of religion were intended – and profit-oriented commercial entities. In addition, the judgment could be seen as establishing a dangerous precedent – which could in future be used to justify

all kinds of discrimination in the name of freedom of religion. There is, however, another reason why the case continues to attract attention in US: The decision in one of the lower courts, which played a large part in the subsequent deliberations in the Supreme Court, was written by Neil Gorsuch – whom Donald Trump has nominated for the currently vacant seat on the Supreme Court.

Yelle says that he rarely ventures into his old field these days. Instead, he increasingly concentrates on an area of research which once appeared much less interesting to him: the historical development of Christian theology. His PhD thesis dealt with Hindu mantras, and he went on to study the encounter between British and Indian cultures and religions during the colonial period. “I was primarily concerned with Hinduism at that point. During my time in Chicago, where I obtained my doctorate, a strict distinction was drawn



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between theologians and scholars of religion, and it was tacitly assumed that the historians didn't need to know anything about theology. I now believe that was a big mistake."

To understand contemporary society, one has to take the history of Christianity into account

Yelle's decision to focus his research on Christianity was prompted by his work on secularization in the context of colonial India. To understand how the British authorities behaved in India, one must take their attitudes to religion into account, he avers. "So it is surprising to discover how many researchers in the field of Post-Colonial Studies regard religion as being of no importance. You cannot ignore accumulated historical knowledge simply because you are using a few novel concepts or methodologies. We need to make use of both!" Yelle's studies of India examine what happens when a strongly secularized culture – in this case, British culture – comes into contact with the essentially

non-secularized traditions of the country's majority religion, Hinduism.

Traditional Hinduism does not differentiate between the spheres of religion and law. Thus, older Indian legal codes include detailed descriptions of religious rituals. "Then the British arrived, took a look at these texts and said: 'These are religious laws', not 'real' laws at all, so to speak." In many of the scholarly discourses published at the time, the British actually compare Hindu laws with the Mosaic law of the Jews. In other words, Hindu law was totally anachronistic – yet another reason for the colonizers to feel superior to the locals. In doing so, the British simply followed the highly secularized notion that proper jurisprudence is not a matter of religion and ritual. "But that, of course, is nonsense: Court cases have all the trappings of ritual: the judges' robes, the ceremonial procedure, the formal use of language."

Many of the most striking passages in Yelle's writings on the British encounter

with Hinduism point out parallels with debates among Christians. For example, the British often referred to the religious practices of the Hindus as formulaic and ritualistic. "In the course of my research on Hinduism I worked on mantras. Mantras depend on repetition for their impact. Repetition is ubiquitous in rituals. One finds it not only in India, but also in old English incantations. But Protestantism generally shuns repetition. So I asked myself why this is so, and I soon discovered that Jean Calvin explicitly opposed the use of meaningless repetition in prayer." And here again, the reformers' attacks were directed against the use of stereotyped formulas in Catholic practice, which often employs repetition – as in the case of the rosary. "What disturbed the reformers was primarily the fact that these prayers were reminiscent of magical formulas," Yelle explains: "These expressions can be understood as invocations, and were consequently associated with the idea that God could be implored – and persuaded – to intervene directly in events on Earth."



Source: LMU Munich

On the basis of his own researches, Robert Yelle concludes that secularization must be understood in an entirely different way – not as a development that was fundamentally anti-religious and sought to replace the spiritual truths of religion with the empirically established truths of science – but as a fundamentally progressive effort to purify and reform religion, which has its roots in Christianity itself. Here Yelle cites the case of the British Empiricist philosophers of the 18th century – and their predecessors, the experimental philosophers who founded the Royal Society in 1660 – many of whom had very strongly religious backgrounds. Thus, in his "History of the Royal Society" (1667), Thomas Sprat, who would



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later become an Anglican bishop, argued that, in undermining superstition and magic, the Society's members were silencing heathen oracles, just as Jesus did.

The history of religions, Yelle affirms, is in reality intertwined with the history of secularization – a history that explains how we got to where we now find our-

selves. So to understand contemporary society, one has to take the history of Christianity into account. Yelle's approach to this task is not that of a theologian, but that of 'an outsider', as he says himself. So he feels quite comfortable in his role as a member of the Faculty of Philosophy in Munich, and looks forward to his intellectual interactions with his colleagues. When asked

about upcoming projects, he has a ready answer: "What we really need," he replies, "is to rediscover the cultural history of modernity. We need to define more precisely where our central ideas and assumptions come from, the origins of the categories we use to understand the world around us. And this will inevitably involve a further investigation of the role of Christianity."

Prof. Dr. Robert A. Yelle

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