

Dissertation review

Author: J. von Wedel

Title: People's Sovereign

In his dissertation, the author investigates the relationship between religion and modern democracy. He attempts to trace this relationship in the context of the modern era of Western culture.

In the introductory chapter, the author surveys relevant scholarly literature on the topic. He presents, analyses, interprets and comments on the most significant views of scholars who dealt with the chosen topic in the past. He also focuses on the shortcomings and weaknesses of the theories proposed by various scholars who dealt with the question of how modern democracy relates to the religious heritage of Western culture. He goes through the views of Rothe, Gogarten, Rhonheimer, based on the idea that modern state is essentially a Christian state, he also deals with the sociological theories of Durkheim, assuming a religious nature of the state. The author then focuses on the concept of the so-called civil religion as it was conceived by Rousseau and later elaborated by Bellah, Luhmann and Lübke. He also deals with the view of Hörnle, suggesting that human dignity is the religion of modern state. Finally, he considers the question how modern Western nationalism may be viewed as a sort of religion.

In the following part of the submitted dissertation the author focuses on the events of the summer of 1789 and looks at the historical, social, cultural and political context of the so-called French Revolution. He asks how important scholars interpreted the revolutionary social and political events that took place in France towards the end of the 18th century.

The author then focuses on the thought of Rousseau and proposes an interpretation of Rousseau as a prophet of the People's Sovereign. In other words: he interprets Rousseau's thought as prophetic and emphasizes the revelatory nature of political events related to the French Revolution. If we accept that perspective, the French Revolution may be understood as a revelatory event, Rousseau himself as the prophet of the new organization of human society and social and political order which is the expression of divine intention. In that sense, history is understood as a revelatory process leading towards decisive events in which the historical process of revelation culminates. Rousseau prophetically foretold the manifestation of divine spiritual force in the events of French revolution.

The author proposes an innovation in the way the relationship between religion and modern democracy has been viewed and he also offers a new perspective on Rousseau's thought regarding political and social order.

The structure, inner logic and argumentation of the submitted dissertation are for the most part clear (though the fact that the table of contents does not include page numbers makes it difficult to follow the structure of the argument). The author's conclusions are based on

relevant primary and secondary sources and their thorough analysis and on the arguments presented in the body of the dissertation.

The question is whether the proposed understanding of the relationship between religion and modern democracy could be convincingly applied in other contexts, i.e. outside France and its particular historical situation towards the end of eighteenth century. Or would other countries which belong to modern democratic world be simply the heirs of what happened in France?

The author does not define a clear hypothesis to be tested and he does not clearly define the goal and scholarly outcome of his research. He attempts to reconceptualize the way religion and modern democracy have been related in previous scholarly discourse. But: If the People's Sovereign is viewed as an entity or force behind historical events, we are dealing with an essentially theological claim. But such theology should be presented in a comprehensive way, i.e. as part of a complete metaphysical system or worldview. Of course, only if such theology is actually part of the author's claim.

Plus, the discourse of religious studies does not include theological or religious truth claims, it studies them, but it does not make them. Theology deals with religious assertions and is concerned with their truth claims. Religious studies do not deal with truth claims (ontological referent) of religious assertions, religious studies follow methodological agnosticism concerning any truth claims (ontological referents) of religious assertions. This issue leads to the question: what is the scholarly field or discipline in which the dissertation has been written? Is it a theological interpretation of history? Is it history of religion? Is it a historical study of how religion and its relation to society has been conceptualized? These disciplines ask different questions and use different methods.

The title of the dissertation (with no subtitle) does not make these issues more understandable. Plus, since the People's Sovereign is definitely not the main topic of the dissertation from the beginning to the end, the title is not as helpful as it perhaps should be. Shouldn't the title of the dissertation as it is contain some reference to the relation between religion and modern democracy?

To summarize, in spite of the above mentioned questions and objections, the submitted dissertation proves that the author is able to work with relevant primary and secondary sources in several languages and that he is able to analyze them and interpret them in accordance with appropriate methodology of research. I recommend his dissertation for defense.

Prof. Pavel Hošek Ph.D.

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