

Examiner's Report on the Ph.D. Thesis "The People's Sovereign" by Joachim von Wedel

The thesis under review was submitted by the Ph.D. candidate, Joachim von Wedel, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) at the Department of Religious Studies, Protestant Theological Faculty of Charles University in Prague in 2024. The title of the thesis is "The People's Sovereign."

The thesis has 139 pages, including the title page, table of contents, and bibliography. It does not include all necessary items that are usually part of this academic genre, such as a declaration, acknowledgements, abstract (though there is a Summary which, however, rather serves the purpose of an introductory chapter), keywords, or list of abbreviation.

The thesis explores the relationship (or, as the candidate says, the "gap", p. 132) between modern democracy and religion. It proceeds by way of reviewing various attempts to address this relationship. As such, the first aim of the thesis is to explore alternatives to the, purportedly ineffective, concept of "political religion" (p. 7). To the candidate's judgment, one such alternative, which he refers to as a "People's Sovereign" can be traced back to the events around the French Revolution of 1789 and deliberations in the (French) National Assembly in 1789-1791. The second and main aim of the thesis, therefore, is to explore the hypothesis that the religious "quality" of modern democracy can be traced back to these revolutionary events (p. 7). The candidate seeks to argue that the events related to the French Revolution, and particularly the deliberations of the members of the National Assembly, can be considered to be a revelation (p. 8). His conclusion is that although modern democracy is a secular phenomenon, it still features a religious core based on a revelatory event (p. 132), originating in a "supranatural force" (p. 110) or a "spiritual reality" (p. 75) that the candidate refers to as a "People's Sovereign." **This admittedly modest conclusion begs for elaboration. At least two directions of inquiry can be outlined. First, is this finding, related to a very specific historical period and context (i.e., revolutionary events in the 18th century France) applicable to other contexts? Second, what contribution does this finding (or, the thesis as a whole) make to the field of religious studies (or, else, historical theology)?**

The thesis consists of a summary and five main chapters. In the summary (p. 3), an overview is given of the whole thesis. Chapter I ("Introduction: Aims of the Work and Literature Overview", pp. 4–12) introduces the theme of the relationship between religion and (modern) democracy as well as some concepts, such as political religion. Again, a (more detailed) overview of the thesis, its aims, and main arguments is given. However, the research question is never explicitly formulated in this introductory chapter (or anywhere else in the thesis for that matter). Chapter II ("Approaches to the Relationship between Religion and Modern Democracy") starts by addressing the presupposition about the non-religious nature of the modern state. The candidate then goes on to problematize this presupposition by introducing and critically discussing proposals to the contrary, including the concept of the modern state as Christian in nature (Rothe, Gogarten, Rhonheimer), the modern state as religion (Durkheim), civil religion (Rousseau, Bellah, Luhmann, Luebbe), human dignity as the religion of the modern state (Hoernle), and nationalism as modern religion. Unsatisfied with the previous proposals, the candidate goes on with his own thesis to argue that there is a religious core of the modern state. This argument is addressed in more detail in Chapter III ("How Should We Interpret the Events of the Summer of 1789?"). The candidate first introduces the interpretation proposed by (contemporary) French theologian Emmanuel Joseph Sieyes to criticize it in the next step. The candidate challenges Sieyes's claim that it was the modern nation that declared itself sovereign in the French Revolution. The candidate's objections can be summarized as follows: a) the modern nation did not exist back

in 1789; b) the nation that emerged after 1789 was never sovereign. As an alternative the candidate offers his own interpretation that the French parliamentarians in 1789–1791 perceived they were led by an “invisible hand” from beyond. For this process – the candidate employs the term “revelation.” Chapter IV (“The Phenomenon of Revelation”), therefore, discusses the phenomenon of revelation, both from a theological and a religious studies perspective. Finally, Chapter V briefly summarizes the results of the thesis.

A special note needs to be made on the title of the thesis. I suggest that a more elaborate title, including a subtitle, would be at place. Particularly, the relationship between religion and modern democracy should ideally appear in the (sub)title. Furthermore, and significantly, the title does not really correspond to the main argument of the thesis. Something like “The Religious Core of Modern Democracy: A Case of the French National Assembly in 1789–1791. Historical and Theological Explorations” would be more appropriate, I would maintain. While I appreciate the candidate’s explanation of why he opts for the term “People’s Sovereign” (see his explanation on p. 74), I would still maintain that the title is too cryptic for a PhD thesis and another title would be preferable.

My general evaluation can be formulated as follows:

- 1.) The thesis is quite strong in its particularities (critical discussion of various voices, analysis, partial arguments) but less so in the overall design and argument.
- 2.) The candidate’s analysis of specific concepts and/or particular scholars and their positions is enlightening and helpful (e.g., critique of the secularization thesis, criticisms of Voegelin, the reviews of Rothe, Gogarten, Durkheim, Rousseau, Bellah, etc.).
- 3.) The candidate deals with various positions in details, discusses counter-arguments and critiques, and engages existing scholarship. All this is done logically and designed in a clear structure.
- 4.) Another strong point of the thesis is that the candidate works with primary sources (e.g., parliament speeches of the National Assembly members).

Formally and linguistically, the thesis shows the following problems:

- 1.) Page numbering is missing in the Table of Contents which makes it rather difficult for the reader to orient themselves quickly in the thesis.
- 2.) There is a continuous flow of the text which gives an impression of somewhat unfinished state of the thesis (e.g., main chapters starting right after the end of the previous chapters, the author does not use various fonts and styles to distinguish the chapters and subchapters, etc.).
- 3.) Formulations are not quite clear at certain places (e.g., paragraph 2 in the Summary – “As a result...”; p. 17: the uses of the term “state”; use of pronouns – “she” rather than “it” in terms such as *assembly*, *nation* or *theory*).
- 4.) Not all cited resources are included in the bibliography (e.g., Jacques Dupuis, Perry Schmidt-Leukel).

I recommend the candidate’s thesis to be accepted. However, its acceptance should be on the condition that he adequately addresses the following questions and/or remarks:

- The candidate never actually explicitly formulates his research question. How would he formulate it?
- The link drawn between “religion” (addressed via the concept of “faith/belief”) and “modern democracy” seems to be too straightforward and unproblematic. Is it justifiable to assume that every kind of faith/belief is necessarily of religious nature?
- How does the candidate regard the phenomenon of “populism” that is often (and, currently, increasingly) part of modern democratic systems? Can his thesis relate meaningfully to this phenomenon?

- Can the candidate's findings about "revelation" at the roots of the concept of the nation in the French Revolution be also applied to other contexts (and, via generalization, to modern democracy as such)? If so, in what ways?
- Supposing that we accept the existence of the People's Sovereign as a spiritual reality at the core of modern democracy, how can it be explained that it is a *People's* Sovereign – with the emphasis on the word "people's"? In other words, how is it that this kind of sovereignty is precisely working through people and leading to the establishment of democracy as a system? Furthermore, what is the role of history, context, and contingency in the realization of this transcendent spiritual reality?
- The candidate in his discussion of Rousseau in IV,7 (Rousseau as a prophet of the People's Sovereign) seems to disregard the conclusions of his own previous discussion on Rousseau in II, 2,c,(2). In particular, for example, when the candidate argues that, for Rousseau, the emergence of the People's Sovereign is conditioned by the existence of the social contract (p. 120), how can one become and effectively remain a member of a community if Rousseau's civil religion, stripped of rituals and culture, does not provide much space for becoming a popular religion?
- Is it possible to say anything more about the "People's Sovereign" as the candidate proposes it beyond a rather vague characteristic that it is a spiritual reality or supernatural force behind historical events? In particular, how does the "People's Sovereign," as construed by the candidate, differ from the proposal of Central European (West German) civil religion that the candidate (rightly) critiques as an instrument of social engineering (p. 46)?
- What contribution does the candidate's thesis make to the field of religious studies? Or, for that matter, of historical theology?

PS: The PDF file of the thesis with the examiner's comments is available upon request.

Written by: Pavol Bargár (March 3, 2024)