# Beyond Secularization– (De)Sacralization in Modern European History | Jenseits der Säkularisierungstheorie – (De)sakralisierung in der neuzeitlichen Geschichte Europas

Part III of the Conference Series
**A Europe of Differences | Ein Europa der Differenzen**
of the Leibniz Institute of European History 2020–2022
24–26 November 2021

Between 2020 and 2022, the Leibniz Institute of European History in Mainz (IEG) is hosting a series of conferences entitled »A Europe of Differences«. These meetings aim to bring the institute's researchers in contact with international experts to discuss perspectives on negotiating differences in early and late modern Europe. The third part of the series deals with the tension between sacralization and desacralization in modern Europe.

For more than two decades, there have been repeated declarations of the end of secularization theories and a return of religions in religious history and the sociology of religion. Consistent with the »post-secular era« proclaimed by Jürgen Habermas is the return of the sacred or at least a discernible increase in academic engagement with processes of sacralization and desacralization. Attention has focused on the question: what in a society is sacred and is therefore viewed as being non-negotiable, and how is the status of that which is sacred established and maintained, but also transformed and withdrawn again? The sacralizations of the nation, of the person and of human rights have been investigated, as well as the role of the sacred in the context of imperial expansion, in ethnological and missionary encounters with supposedly »primitive« religiosity, as well as the sacrality of art, nature, spaces, and heroism, among other things. While these studies diverge in their evaluation of the concrete historical relevance of the »power of the sacred« (Hans Joas), recent research certainly retains a fascination with the sacred. The sacred no longer appears as a neglected vestige in an inexorably secularizing society, but rather as the constitutive and meaningful core of different forms of human community formation.

This international conference at the Leibniz Institute of European History in Mainz ties in with the increased interest in the sacred in academic discourse and enquires into the heuristic potential of (de)sacralization processes for our understanding of the history of modern Europe. »Sacralizations« are understood in a cultural studies sense as acts and forms of repeated attribution, through which sacrality and the sacred are produced and marked out. Thus, the conference analyses processes in which ideas, people and actions, as well as objects and spaces, become established, and

are perceived as being absolute and intangible, normative, and as creating meaning and community. As a process of transformation, sacralization is also closely linked to desacralizations and re-sacralizations, as sacralized institutions and phenomena can change or lose their status, and the sacralization of one thing can lead to the devaluation of another. This broad definition of sacralization does not bind the process that it refers to exclusively to a particular religion, but is also able to detach the process from religion institutionally and in terms of its content.

The conference examines the actors and mechanisms, conjunctures and transformations of the sacred in European history from the 15th century. The following five aspects and dimensions are of particular interest:

(1) **Sacrality and difference**: Derivations of the term sacral often revolve around the distinction between the *sacred* and the *profane*. Even in an expanded form that includes, for example, the dimension of the *mundane*, this distinction is not sufficient to capture the sacred as a category and to distinguish between it and related phenomena. Taking Rudolf Otto's 1917 definition of the sacred as a contrasting composite of that which is frightening and fascinating in equal measure, the conference will ask to what extent can the semantics, but also the practise of the sacred be defined through a »contrast harmony« of opposites that are in tension with each other (for example, transcendence and immanence, sublimity and mediocrity, eternity and instant, prohibition and commandment, purity and impurity, belonging and exclusion, etc.). In this context, particular attention is placed on the dynamics and conflicts that result from the paradoxical character of the sacred, i.e., from the societal claim to have access to that which is unavailable, intangible and unconditional.

(2) **The interplay between (de-)sacralizations and secularizations:** From a historical perspective, desacralizations cannot be equated with secularizations. These processes did in some cases unfold at least partly in an identical way, however sacralizations and desacralizations can be identified both in the religious sphere and in non-religious areas, for example the sacralization of the state, the nation or the constitution. The conference thus explores the potential offered by an historical analysis of processes of sacralization and desacralization in modern Europe, including with regard to complementary and modifying explanatory models, such as those offered by the overarching narrative of European secularization. If Europe in the modern era has not been characterized by an all-encompassing and teleological long-term process of secularization understood as the advancing disenchantment of the world, is it nonetheless possible to identify cycles of desacralizations and re-sacralizations from the 15th century onward? And what role do these processes play in a supposedly secular society in the modern era?

(3) **Sacrality in colonial contact zones:** European and Christian understandings of the sacred and of religion developed to a large extent in the confrontations with those social practises, forms and objects that were considered sacral in societies outside Europe. The comparative sociology of religion, which emerged around 1900, and in particular Émile Durkheim's understanding of the sacred, could not have emerged without the ethnological studies on supposedly »primitive« religiosity in societies that had experienced European colonization and missionizing. The conference therefore enquires into the role that European understandings of the sacred played in the missionary contact zones, how these understandings were imposed, adapted and appropriated, and the conflicts that these different understandings of the sacred gave rise to. Conversely, the conference enquires into

the European reception of »other« forms of sacrality or the sacrality of the other, the appropriation of its concepts and terms (such as fetish, totem and taboo), but also the material transposition of these forms of sacrality (for example, their transformation into »ethnographica«) and the related epistemological consequences. From the perspective of the comparative sociology of religion, the conference seeks to identify the commonalities and differences that were construed in the examples of the sacred that were encountered in order to justify the assumption of a universal religiosity and of the superiority of European religions.

(4) **Management, performance and mediality:** The insistence on the socially-binding character of the sacred made rules, ritualization, discipline and supervision necessary. Officials and institutions derived power from the sacred, which required administration and dissemination by »sacral experts«. The conference is thus also interested in changing practices of the sacred, i.e., its actors, forms and means of dissemination – including, but also other than, holy texts. Who are the authoritative actors of »sacrality management« and what is the relationship between them and religious and secular power? What influence did the new visual, audio and digital media of the 20th and 21st centuries have on socially-relevant forms of the sacred, for example?

(5) **Transfer of sacrality:** Historians have often analysed the asymmetrical, but mutual interference between religion and other fields of society in terms of a transfer of sacrality (Mona Ozouf). This term refers to the adoption of religious categories, rituals and symbols in non-religious contexts. In this way, non-religious phenomena are declared to be beyond time, unavailable and the basis of societal order. The sacralization of the nation, the ethnic group or the state through the attribution of signs, symbols, rites and narratives from the »religious« sphere is a prime example of this. Those who refer to the transfer of sacrality frequently associate it with an explicitly-connected statement about the origins of sacralizing elements, and simultaneously suggest a clear direction of transfer. The assumption on which this is based – that every form of sacralization must be viewed as deriving from the religious sphere – is a topic for discussion at the conference, as is the assumption that religious and non-religious spheres are separate.

**Wednesday, 24 November 2021**

| 15:00–15:30 (MEZ) | Johannes Paulmann (Mainz): Welcome<br>Bernhard Gissibl / Andrea Hofmann (Mainz): Introduction |

## European Modernities beyond Secularization Theory

(20 minutes presentation + 20 minutes discussion + 5 minutes break, applies to all sections)

| Chair | Irene Dingel (Mainz) |

| 15:30–16:15 | Volkhard Krech (Bochum): What's Left of secular Europe? |

| 16:15–17:00 | Monika Wohlrab-Sahr (Leipzig): How to deal with the living dead? On the usefulness of analyzing boundaries between religion and its others as one element of secularization theory |

| 17:00-17:30 | Break |

| 17:30–18:15 | Gordon Lynch (Canterbury): From Christendom to culture wars: developing narratives of the sacred and society in European modernity |

## The Sacred in Colonial Contact Zones – Part I

| Chair | Joachim Berger (Mainz) |

| 18:15–19:00 | Sarah Longair (Lincoln): The many transitions of the Mwinyi Mkuu's ngoma and siwa in colonial Zanzibar |

| 19:00–19:45 | Erin Kathleen Rowe (Baltimore): Holy Blackness and Base Matter: The Paradox of Black Sanctity in the Era of the Slave Trade |

**Thursday, 25 November 2021**

## The Sacred in Colonial Contact Zones – Part II

| Chair | Esther Möller (München) |

| 13:00–13:45 | Andreas Pettenkofer (Erfurt): Is the critique of secularization theory shaped by a colonial discourse? Some postcolonial questions for Durkheim's sociology of religion |

| 13:45–14:30 | Benedikt Brunner (Mainz): Contested sacrality. Deathways in Colonial Boston, c. 1680–1750 |

| 14:30–15:00 | Break |

## Religious Performances of the Sacred

| Chair | Christopher Voigt-Goy (Mainz) |

| 15:00–15:45 | Erin Lambert (Virginia): Sacred Matters in the Radical Reformation |
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| 15:45–16:30 | Alessandro Grazi (Mainz): (De)sacralization as reflected in nineteenth-century Italian Jewish liturgy |
| 16:30–16:45 | Break |
| 16:45–17:30 | Andrea Hofmann (Mainz): Sacrificing Life and the Sacralization of Death in the First World War |
| 17.30–18:15 | Break |

## Sacrality in Transfer/beyond Religion – Part I

| Chair | Thorsten Wübbena (Mainz) |
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| 18.15–19:00 | Inga Mai Groote (Zürich): The Sound of the Sacred in Recent Choral Music: Entanglements of Sacralization and Desacralization |
| 19:00–19:45 | John Carter Wood (Mainz): Christianity, Technology and Sacralisation. The World Council of Churches and the Technological Society, 1937-1948 |

## Friday, 26 November 2021

## Sacrality in Transfer/beyond Religion – Part II

| Chair | Stanislau Paulau (Mainz) |
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| 14:00–14:45 | Gregor Feindt (Mainz): Sacralising the "New Men": Ideology, practice and subjectification of social engineering in inter war Czechoslovakia |
| 14:45–15:25 | Lucyna Przybylska (Gdańsk): The proliferation of crosses and flags in post-communist Poland |
| 15:25–16:00 | Break |

## Conjunctures of the Sacred in the Anthropocene

| Chair | Anne Friedrichs (Mainz) |
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| 16:00–16:45 | Bernhard Gissibl (Mainz): Fifty ways of sacralizing nature (and the consequences thereof): Serengeti Experiences |
| 16:45–17:30 | Thomas Kirchhoff (Heidelberg): Eleven Types of (De)Sacralisation of Nature |
| 17:30–18:00 | Break |

**(De)Sacralization in European History – concluding perspectives**

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| Chair | Johannes Paulmann (IEG) |
| 18:00–18:10 | Birgit Weyel (Tübingen) |
| 18:10–18:20 | Christina Schröer (Bonn) |
| 18:20–18:30 | Katharina Stornig (Gießen) |
| 18.30-18.40 | Bron Taylor (Florida) |
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| 18:40–19:30 | Final Discussion |