Georg Jellinek and the Religious Foundations for the first Declaration of Human Rights

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Wednesday, September 19, 2018, 12:00pm
230 Prospect Street, Room 101, Yale University

At the end of the 19th century, revolutionary demands for human rights in Europe threatened the status quo. To counter the establishment’s fear of radicalism, Georg Jellinek, a legal scholar from Heidelberg, Germany, challenged the predominant narrative of their origins. Instead of only referencing the French Enlightenment, he emphasized the role of U.S religious traditions in the development of constitutional rights. Evangelical demands for freedom of conscience laid the groundwork for religious freedom – the first fundamental right. Although highly controversial, Jellinek’s study has not been conclusively refuted and might be of use in a time of increasing skepticism.

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