

A Critical Introduction to *The Kingdom and the Glory*

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Carl Schmitt claims that political concepts are secularized theological concepts, and he claims that understandings of political sovereignty correlate with understandings of divine sovereignty.¹ Because of the emphasis Schmitt places on the political sovereign, as the protagonist of *Political Theology*; because of the association of Schmitt's ideas with National Socialism, justifying a certain form of sovereignty for the Führer; and because of the apparent centrality of sovereignty in discussions of political theory, Schmitt's readers often take sovereignty as the key secularized theological concept. This has resulted in sovereignty being at the heart of the contemporary discourse on political theology. Giorgio Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory* rejects, or at least complicates, the centrality of sovereignty to political theology.² In doing so, he makes room for political theology to have a more expansive remit, and he reassures skeptics who would charge political theology with leaning on outdated, unrefined conceptions of both the political and the theological.

Like Schmitt, Agamben sees a close connection between Christian theology and European (and American) politics. However, Agamben claims that economy, not sovereignty, is the key to understanding these connections. With the term economy Agamben evokes, and explores, a variety of meanings, ranging from the Greek *oikos*, household, to the economic Trinity (the relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit with creation). In doing so, Agamben amplifies the voice of Schmitt's contemporary Erik Peterson, who urged a turn towards the

¹ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

² Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

Trinity as a remedy for the political excesses authorized by an excessively unitary conception of the political theological sovereign.³ A key aspect of economy is that it involves internal differentiation: the relationship between several components. This shift from sovereignty to economy, in addition to moving the focus away from all-powerful rulership, allows Agamben to tie together religious ideas (understandings of God and God's relationship to the world) and religious practice (liturgy, praise of God) – and so, analogously, to tie together political ideas and political practice. It is easier to dismiss political theology as a discourse of elites, with minimal real effects, when political theology takes its remit to include only political concepts, not the way they are put into practice by governments and by their subjects. Or, put another way, Agamben tries to teach political theology the lesson of Foucault, that sovereign power may be a less useful category of analysis than disciplinary power (and the closely related “governmentality”), the power that flows through the practices and lives of ordinary people.⁴ While Foucault sees the relative importance of disciplinary power as an aspect of modernity, Agamben tracks governmentality through the course of Western history, and through both theological and ostensibly secular political forms.

Citing varied examples from antiquity, early Christian Fathers, and Scholastic theology, Agamben identifies a logic named by economy that informs how religion and politics have been approached for the past centuries in the West. This logic is deeper, as it were, than a certain word or concept that transforms over the ages, but it is not so deep as to be a first principle, requiring commitment before the historical data is encountered. The logic is both discerned in the historical data and organizes the historical data, and this is reflected in the organization of

³ Erik Peterson, *Theological Tractates*, trans. Michael J. Hollerich (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); idem, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978). These themes are explored further in Foucault's late lecture courses.

Agamben's book not through a narrative but through a long series of vignettes discussing primary or secondary literature, or sometimes simply quoting a source directly at length.⁵

Agamben not only tracks the history of economy as a nexus of political theology, he also tracks the relationship between economy and sovereignty. Where Foucault tells a diachronous story about sovereign power becoming disciplinary power, for Agamben these two modes of power have coexisted, their relationship articulated differently at different historical moments – and it is as a pair that they have moved from theological to political domains. For example, this pair sometimes is articulated as being and praxis; sometimes is articulated as God who creates the world and God who participates in the world; sometimes is articulated as the immanent Trinity (the relationship in principle between Father, Son, and Spirit) and the economic Trinity (that relationship in history); and sometimes is articulated as the ruler reigning from on high and the angels or bureaucrats who work in the name of the ruler on the ground, as it were (or, the higher ranks of angels who assist God and the lower ranks of angels who administer God's will).

Agamben's narrative culminates in the concept of glory, which he presents as the solution to the conundrum of how to hold together the two sides of theology, and so the two sides of politics. Through glory, external actions (prayer, liturgy, acclamation), an aspect of economy, point towards the absent sovereign. The image of an empty throne, discussed by Agamben and featured on the cover of *The Kingdom and the Glory*, encapsulates this process. One might think the empty throne points to unrepresentable sovereign power, but actually, according to Agamben, it signifies glory: "Its purpose is to capture within the governmental machine that unthinkable inoperativity – making it its internal motor – that constitutes the ultimate mystery of divinity" (245). In other words, the elaborate designs and material objects composing the throne,

⁵ Agamben discusses and defends this method in *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, trans. Luca D'Isanto with Kevin Attell (New York: Zone Books, 2009).

including both spear and cross, which represent economy (God's workings in the world, conjoined now with government bureaucracy), solicit praise for an all-powerful God absent from the world, paradoxically unable to exercise power in the world: inoperative. That all-powerful but absent God is in a sense both constituted by and captured by economy, and Agamben names this nexus glory. There is one more twist in the plot. "[G]lory is as much the objective glory that exhibits the inoperativity of the divinity, as it is the glorification in which human inoperativity celebrates its eternal Sabbath" (245). The secret at the heart of sovereign power, that it is constituted by acting as if it existed, is also the secret of the human: that the human is essentially inoperative (a concept Agamben closely associated with potentiality) but is constantly involved in work. The inoperativity of the human is a recurring theme throughout Agamben's works, and acknowledging this inoperativity is the one place where it seems the reader is to turn for some sort of redemption, for what Agamben calls "eternal life" (259).

While some of the accoutrements of glory have faded in modernity, new ones have taken their place. Agamben provocatively suggests that contemporary European and American practices of deliberative democracy should count as practices of praise. They are but another form of singing together the merits of an absent, all-powerful sovereign. In other words, democracy may not be a perversion or repression of political theology (of sovereignty, as Schmitt would have it), but simply a new iteration of the same political theology (of economy always already paired with sovereignty) that perdures in the West. For Agamben, it seems, this is a problem and an opportunity. It perpetuates the prime mystification of power rather than allowing us to see what it means to be truly human – and, in some sense, to achieve eternal life. But the glorified ruler is also a simulacrum of this ideal, and so a reminder of it. As Agamben wrote in a different context, "There is in effect something that humans are and have to be, but

this something is not an essence nor properly a thing: *it is the simple fact of one's own existence as possibility or potentiality.*"⁶

In one sense, *The Kingdom and the Glory* tells an opposing story to that of Agamben's earlier book, *Homo Sacer*.⁷ Agamben has now sided with Erikson instead of Schmitt, has turned to economy instead of sovereignty. In another sense, *The Kingdom and the Glory* simply adds another layer to the story of *Homo Sacer*, for at the end of the day both works present a picture of the human alienated from herself because of a trajectory that theological ideas have taken as they have moved into secular politics. In both works, too, does working through the theological heritage remind the reader of the possibility of a better understanding of the human, as aware of her own potentiality and not mystified by power.⁸

Regardless of whether *The Kingdom and the Glory* marks a new direction or a new layer to Agamben's earlier approach, the new emphasis on governmentality could be read as a deepening engagement with Foucault – or it could be read as reflecting a changing awareness of contemporary political conditions. Despite the anti-liberal origins of the discourse of political theology, in today's world perhaps political theology has become uncomfortably associated with liberal politics. Because of the secularist stigma associated with all things Christian, calling attention to the theological origins of sovereign power is often read as just one more insult hurled at the muscular state. Sympathy with the victims of a sovereign-decreed state of exception, such

⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 43, italics removed. See the discussion in Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 389.

⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

⁸ The redemptive power of the theological is also, and especially, on display in Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

as the men imprisoned at Guantanamo, is an emotion inextricable from liberal politics.⁹ What becomes radical, in the contemporary context, is the critique of neoliberalism, of the ways subjects are disciplined by power only indirectly emanating from a sovereign (more radical still: ultimately emanating from capital through puppet sovereigns, that is, perhaps, through economy at its purest). And this is the project of *The Kingdom and the Glory*.

Yet one worries that Agamben is heading towards a dead end. There are clear, immediate remedies to the excesses of sovereign power, but what are the remedies to the excesses of governmentality hinted at by Agamben? Apparently frustrated by this problem, Foucault turned to care for the self, while Agamben gestures towards an appreciation for the potentiality of the human (Agamben's situation seems even more dire, with no talk of sites of resistance). It is hard not to read both options as retreats. But perhaps, for Agamben, this is because he limits his own resources in order to craft his story. Surely the content of economy is, and has always been, more than praise and acclamation. What of desire, or love, or the other virtues? While Agamben adds one word, economy, to the vocabulary of political theology, there is still much room for expansion. Most important, perhaps, is sin, that which marks the human as distinct from the divine. The most frightening diagnosis that *The Kingdom and the Glory* suggests may be that this distinction has been forgotten in the migration of theological concepts into the political domain, with the result that humans, like angels, can only praise, never struggle. Rather than being satisfied with lifting the curtain on divine/sovereign glory to reveal the inoperative, and so redemptive, human, perhaps Agamben would benefit from yet another lesson from Foucault. If the theological veil obscures, it obscures resistance – like all mystifications of power.

⁹ Agamben is most explicit about this contemporary political connections in his *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). The reactionary implications of such projects, as well as their neoliberal analogues, are particularly well articulated by Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

The discourse of political theology too often remains at the level of concepts, ignoring practice. *The Kingdom and the Glory* begins to remedy this, but a remedy can come from the top down or from the bottom up, as it were. When practices (of praise and acclamation) can be seen as instantiations of concepts (economy and sovereignty), they appear unified, monotonic – and, in the case of *The Kingdom and the Glory*, all pervasive, for all examples of political practice are presented as examples of secularized praise and acclamation. But this is precisely how, according to Agamben, unity is produced and political power is expressed: the appearance of unity compels unity. Put another way, one worries whether the top down approach to political theology participates in mystification as it purports to be exposing mystification. That human difference – gender, race, sexuality, disability – is altogether missing from *The Kingdom and the Glory* heightens this concern. Perhaps this points to a broader worry about Agamben’s philosophical project, which extols human inoperativity. Is privilege the precondition of inoperativity? Or, more starkly, and in more theological terms, what hope does it offer to the slave, or the blind, or the impoverished for eternal life to mean that “the life that we live is only the life through which we live; only our power of acting and living” (251)? If this description of inoperativity is the truth behind the simulacra - the politicized *homo sacer* or the glorified but absent ruler – what role remains for faith, for hope, and for love?