

Genealogy and Political Theology:  
On Method in Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory*

by Adam Kotsko  
Shimer College

The field of political theology has not yet been rigorously defined. It is more a field of affinities than a clearly delineated disciplinary space—a kind of “zone of indistinction” between theology and political theory where the terms of debate are still very much up for grabs. Even as the range and shape of political theology as a field of inquiry remain somewhat inchoate, however, there are points of reference that already seem more or less obvious or obligatory. The work of Giorgio Agamben is surely one of them, a status that *The Kingdom and the Glory* will just as surely reinforce.<sup>1</sup>

Rarely has the work of documenting parallels between the political and the theological been carried to such a fine-grained level. Where much work in this field focuses on the sovereign decision and its analogies with the acts of God, here we are treated to visions of angels as God's middle managers and of political ceremony as an echo of the acclamation that calls divinity into being. Yet at the same time as the analogy on which the field of political theology depends is filled in with such detail, the very notion of “political theology” (as developed by Carl Schmitt) is displaced in favor of the competing paradigm of “theological economy” (associated with Erik Peterson), and the miraculous “state of exception” fades in importance when compared to the providential “invisible hand.” By the end of Agamben's analysis, it seems that the exemplary figure for what we call political theology is no longer the sovereign president, with his power to declare alleged terrorists *homo sacer*, but the technocratic central banker, whose invisible hand moves the entire economy through actions that few notice or understand.

Hence it seems likely that *The Kingdom and the Glory*'s influence will lead political theologians to devote greater attention to economics and to the concrete workings of government, and it is hard to object to such developments. Yet I believe that this work has something more fundamental to contribute to the field of political theology: its genealogical approach can point the way to greater methodological clarity in a field that too often relies on vague structural homologies.

Rather than directly laying out Agamben's approach to genealogy, however, I will proceed by responding to a critique recently leveled against Agamben by the Marxist philosopher Alberto Toscano, for whom Agamben's interest in economy is long overdue—and in many respects inadequate.<sup>2</sup> In this context, I will primarily be defending Agamben from Toscano's attacks, but my purposes is not to “correct” Toscano, nor to suggest that a Marxist critique of Agamben's “left Heideggerianism” is not warranted.<sup>3</sup> I choose to focus on his critique here because in my view, Toscano misconstrues Agamben's project and its relationship to theology and does so in a way that could easily lead some in the field of political theology to embrace Agamben for the wrong reasons. On the other hand, however, Toscano's attempt to play

---

<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Alberto Toscano, “Divine Management: Critical Remarks on Giorgio Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory*,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 16:3 (2011): 125-136.

<sup>3</sup> For an extended defense of Agamben's “left Heideggerianism,” see Matthew Abbott, “No Life is Bare, the Ordinary is Exceptional: Giorgio Agamben and the Question of Political Ontology,” in *Parrhesia* 14 (2012): 23-36.

Agamben's approach to genealogy off against more "standard" exemplars of the method like Nietzsche and Foucault points toward ways that Agamben's argument in *The Kingdom and the Glory* could be expanded and deepened by future scholars.

## I.

In a strange way, Toscano's method in critiquing Agamben mimics an aspect of Agamben's method that has often left readers skeptical: his focus on tracing the fates of individual words. For Agamben, it is an urgent political task to trace the origins and vicissitudes of such key concepts as the sacred, the exception, or economy. Similarly, in Toscano's politically-charged critique of Agamben's work, one suspects that it comes down to tracing the effects of a key word: namely, "theological." In a sense, once Toscano takes note of Agamben's description of *The Kingdom and the Glory* as a "theological genealogy," the die is already cast. A covert theological apologetics and an ahistorical concern for origins and unchanging essences follow automatically in its train.

First, the apologetics. For Toscano, the goal of Agamben's "theological genealogy" is to claim that "the atheism or secularism which nominally characterize contemporary philosophy—be it liberal, conservative, or Marxist—are surface effects beneath which lie the compulsions of a theological matrix."<sup>4</sup> Political theologians will immediately recognize this style of argument, which has been forcefully deployed by the Radical Orthodoxy school of theology. In this perspective, modernity turns out to be nothing but a derelict form of Christian heresy, which only a theological approach can allow us to properly diagnose. Indeed, it is probably inevitable that at least a few theologians sharing that "sensibility" will rush to claim Agamben as one of their own on the basis of his work in *The Kingdom and the Glory*.

Whether from a polemical or positive perspective, however, such a view of Agamben's project here does not square with the rest of his work. I have tried to show elsewhere that Agamben's method, drawn from Walter Benjamin, systematically ignores the line between the religious and secular.<sup>5</sup> In *The Sacrament of Language*, for instance, he frequently castigates theorists of religion who too easily demarcate "the religious" as a purely separate sphere,<sup>6</sup> expanding on *Homo Sacer*'s scathing polemic against nineteenth- and twentieth-century conceptions of the "ambivalence of the sacred."<sup>7</sup> In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, he argues that the "secularization debate" shares in a similar misunderstanding. His dismissal of the latter may, as Toscano says, be "haughty"—Agamben's work is, to put it lightly, characterized by ample self-assurance—but it does not indicate any kind of preference for the religious over against the secular.<sup>8</sup>

Rather than indicating an attempt to discredit secular modernity—and hence Marxism—it thus seems to me that the phrase "theological genealogy" indicates simply that he is carrying out the theological *portion* of a hypothetical complete genealogy of "economy and government."

---

<sup>4</sup> Toscano, "Divine Management," 125.

<sup>5</sup> See Adam Kotsko, "Dismantling the Theo-Political Machine: On Agamben's Messianic Nihilism," in *After the Postsecular and the Postmodern: New Essays in Continental Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Anthony Paul Smith and Daniel Whistler (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language: An Archeology of the Oath*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 75-80.

<sup>8</sup> Toscano, "Divine Management," 127.

That is, he is particularly concerned with the fate of the concept of *oikonomia* when it goes through a kind of hibernation in the rarefied realms of scholastic philosophy, providing only a sketchy account in the concluding appendix of how it reawakened in the thought of key early moderns, from which it would spring again into practice in the concrete techniques of governance. Even if Agamben admittedly does not fully articulate this bridge into modernity, it seems to me that his brief discussion of Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” in terms of his “theological genealogy” is enough to demonstrate his argument’s relevance for the economic debates that shape all our lives.

## II.

Toscano’s methodological critique of Agamben’s work is not so easily dismissed. Echoing many who have found Agamben’s project to be ahistorical, Toscano argues that the procedure of *The Kingdom and the Glory* is too “substantial” and “idealist” to count as a proper genealogy.<sup>9</sup> Here again, the notion of a “theological” genealogy assumes prime importance:

This has to do with the idea of a theological *origin*. Behind this reference lies not only Agamben’s sympathy towards the Schmittian notion of secularization but the conviction, mediated by a pervasive Heideggerianism, of a historical-ontological *continuity* which allows one to argue that our political horizon is still determined—and worse, *unconsciously* determined—by semantic and ideational structures forged within a Christian theological discourse.<sup>10</sup>

In Toscano’s view, such a stance again puts Agamben dangerously close to embracing the Christian apologetic claim that the Christian patrimony has been somehow “stolen” by modernity and needs to be restored to its rightful place. Yet the problem is more fundamental: he is ultimately arguing that a “theological genealogy” is a contradiction in terms.

To support this contention, Toscano turns to the example of Foucault. This is not simply one example among others. Agamben has repeatedly put Foucault forward as a primary interlocutor for his project in the *Homo Sacer* series, and so Toscano’s accusation that Agamben has betrayed Foucault’s legacy is a serious one. The basis of this accusation is the claim that for Foucault, genealogical research “is concerned with dispersed events of heterogenesis and truncated lineages,” so that “the search for continuities which defines the history of ideas is to be subjected to unsparing critique.”<sup>11</sup>

Rather than adjudicate this claim in terms of Foucault’s own work, which Agamben himself has discussed at length in his recent book *The Signature of All Things: On Method*,<sup>12</sup> I believe it will be more economical to turn to Foucault’s own source: the genealogical *ur-text* of Nietzsche. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, one finds the following methodological credo:

there is for historiography of any kind no more important proposition than the one it took such effort to establish but which really *ought to be* established now: the cause of the origin of a thing and its eventual utility, its actual employment and place in a system of purposes, lie worlds apart; whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over,

---

<sup>9</sup> Toscano, “Divine Management,” 128 and passim.

<sup>10</sup> Toscano, “Divine Management,” 128.

<sup>11</sup> Toscano, “Divine Management,” 128.

<sup>12</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Signature of All Things: On Method*, trans. Luca D’Isanto and Kevin Attell (New York: Zone Books, 2009).

transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it; all events in the organic world are a subduing, a *becoming master*, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous 'meaning' and 'purpose' are necessarily obscured or even obliterated.... the entire history of a 'thing,' an organ, a custom can in this way be a continuous sign-chain of ever new interpretations and adaptations whose causes do not even have to be related to one another but, on the contrary, in some cases succeed and alternate with one another in a purely chance fashion.<sup>13</sup>

The emphasis here is clearly on discontinuity. The thing that has “somehow come into being”—a phrasing that obviously displaces the question of origin—becomes caught up in a power struggle whose results could not have been predicted, and it is the aleatoric path of that power struggle that is of real interest. Yet it is not at all clear to that a reference to something like an origin and an at least provisional continuity are actually being *excluded* here. The thing that gets caught up in the power struggle has, after all, “somehow come into being,” and over the course of the power struggle it remains, in some sense, still recognizably *that thing*. It is, however, not *that thing* in the sense of a persistent substance or concept that would exhaustively determine in advance the kinds of relationships it would enter into or the uses to which it would be put—hence Agamben’s use of the term “signature” to indicate this less strictly defined point of continuity.

Genealogy does reject the easy continuity posited by something like the “history of ideas,” but that doesn’t mean there is no continuity whatsoever. At the same time that genealogy is concerned with discontinuity and rupture, it also reveals what might be called inertial effects. One can see this in Nietzsche’s *Genealogy*: certainly no one would have predicted that the logic of debt would get tangled up in the bad conscience and become guilt, but at the same time, the logic of guilt is still recognizable as a descendant of the logic of debt.

In this sense, I would argue that Agamben’s genealogy is very much in the spirit of the “classic” genealogists. Who would have guessed that *oikonomia*, a concept of household management, would be pressed into the service of imperial administration? And from there, who could have possibly anticipated that it would become an important point of reference for Christian articulations of the inner life of the Trinitarian God, then supply the paradigm for God’s indirect providential governance of the course of world history, only to wind up as a guiding principle for the management of people and things toward the end of endless accumulation of capital?

Even if one can scarcely make out the remains of ancient Greek “home economics” in the grim realities of the global economy, it is nevertheless the case that across each transition, something of the previous articulation of “economy” remains recognizable. The shifts are strange and vertiginous, and the new contexts significantly change the character and function of “economy,” yet this discontinuity is not simply a Heraclitan flux—the power struggle which seizes upon “economy” and variously transforms it is itself continuous. One can trace the “signature” called “economy” through it, and one must do so *precisely because* one cannot locate a stable concept or essence of “economy.” To deny this particular kind of continuity would not only be a betrayal of the genealogical method, but would render any kind of intelligible historical account impossible.

---

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “‘Guilt,’ ‘Bad Conscience,’ and the Like,” second essay of *Genealogy of Morals*, in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 513; §12.

### III.

While I don't agree with Toscano that Agamben betrays the genealogical method, it is difficult to deny that Agamben's "pervasive Heideggerianism" is problematic in several respects.<sup>14</sup> The difficulty, however, is not so much that the influence of Heidegger leads him to a too-substantial view of the concepts or "signatures" at play in his genealogy as that his Heideggerian ambitions lead him to flatten out the historical field through which they move. As the *Homo Sacer* project has unfolded, it has become increasingly clear that Agamben envisions it as a kind of reworking of the Heideggerian *Seinsgeschichte*—and even an attempt to do Heidegger one better.<sup>15</sup>

Whatever the differences in Agamben's approach, the field over which it unfolds is substantially the same. Like Heidegger, Agamben seems to view "the West" as an unproblematic historical unity, for which the advent of modernity represents at best a particularly extreme development. He certainly does not appear to regard the Christian era as something notably different from the late classical era, and his account of the history of Christian thought treats the patristic and medieval periods as essentially one undifferentiated field.

Agamben's fidelity to the genealogical task pushes against this Heideggerian oversimplification, but the Heideggerian influence does artificially limit the number of "pivot points" in his narrative. It is clearly the case that Agamben has more work to do in connecting up his "theological genealogy" with modernity, but in my view he also still has more work to do in fully developing the "theological genealogy," with greater attention to the twists and turns of the history of Christianity and of Christian thought. I would argue in addition that he needs to cast a wider net in terms of filling out the context within which the notion of "economy" operates in any given era—for instance, "economy" is central to the way the patristic writers understood the salvation that God had brought about in Christ, and so why couldn't Agamben look at some of their narrative accounts of how that plan was supposed to have been carried out? The very significant difference between patristic and medieval narratives of salvation would have made it clear that no easy continuity can be found between the two era's notions of "economy."<sup>16</sup> From a more Marxist perspective, one might also ask after how the shifting theological concepts of "economy" may have affected what we would recognize as the material "economic" sphere.<sup>17</sup>

Overall, though, it seems to me that Agamben's genealogical approach provides a rigorous and flexible methodology for the field of political theology—and in fact, it provides a point of view from which Agamben's own project can be critiqued, deepened, and extended.

---

<sup>14</sup> Toscano, "Divine Management," 128.

<sup>15</sup> This perhaps becomes clearest in *Opus Dei. Archeologia dell'ufficio* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2012), forthcoming in English translation as *Opus Dei: An Archeology of Duty*, trans. Adam Kotsko. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>16</sup> I carry out a detailed comparison of patristic and medieval accounts of the narrative of salvation in *Politics of Redemption: The Social Logic of Salvation* (New York: Continuum/T&T Clark, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> In the first section of the long-awaited "fourth volume" of *Homo Sacer*, one could argue that Agamben begins to move in this direction, albeit in a very schematic way. See Giorgio Agamben, *Altissima povertà: Regole monastiche e forma di vita* (Vicenza, Italy: Neri Pozza Editore, 2011), forthcoming in English translation as *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming).