

Agamben and the Problem of Evil

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The Kingdom and the Glory occupies an ambiguous place within Agamben's body of work and within the literature on political theology. The sprawling tome is out of character for an author famous for short, suggestive interventions—at least in English translation, it is his longest book, edging out the recently published *Use of Bodies*. One gets the sense that it could have been much longer, as the final appendices linking his argument to modernity seem to cry out for expansion. Compared to *The Use of Bodies*, which amounts to three related but separate studies, it is also a more cohesive and elaborately structured work, even if the flow of the argument is easy to lose in the face of the uncharacteristically exhaustive evidence provided. Though it was initially positioned as the (completely unanticipated) part two of the second volume of the Homo Sacer series, *The Kingdom and the Glory* was at least as long as all the extant volumes put together.

Conceptually as well, it is an outlier. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben introduces a whole new conceptual apparatus—both substantively, with the notion of “theological economy” as an alternative paradigm to “political theology,” and methodologically, with the theory of “signatures”—and only briefly mentions the dynamics of the sovereign

exception. It is difficult to discern how we are to relate his argument in *The Kingdom and the Glory* to the larger project, a fact that has had a bibliographic echo in Agamben's decision to revise its place in the architectonic of the series, shifting it from part 2 to part 4 of volume 2. It is the only volume of the series to be moved in this way.

The book's place in the field of political theology is also ambivalent. On the one hand, it seems to expand the discipline's scope from the narrow focus on sovereignty to much broader concerns of economics and governance. Yet on the other hand, it claims to be an alternative to or critique of the paradigm of political theology. Agamben's vast theological erudition puts much of the literature on political theology to shame, and yet he devotes only a few fragmentary appendices to the political-theological preoccupation of charting the path from the Middle Ages to modernity. And though arguably the most convincing and fruitful aspect of the work is his establishment of the parallels between modern theories of governance and medieval doctrines of providence, he abruptly sets that portion of his argument aside a little over halfway through in order to pursue an analysis of "glory."

In short, it is difficult to get a handle on exactly what is going on in *The Kingdom and the Glory*. This is a problem that has preoccupied me for many years. When I discovered the brand-new copy of *Il Regno e la Gloria* in the Regenstein library at the University of Chicago during grad school, I was so excited at Agamben's engagement with patristic and medieval figures that I literally taught myself Italian in order to be able to read it. Over the years that I have lived with this text, returning to its arguments again and again, I have come to the conclusion that what renders this work so unwieldy is that, despite its sprawling proportions, it is missing something: namely, any sustained consideration of the problem of evil. That is the problem that ultimately motivated the development of the theological apparatus that Agamben is investigating, along

with its modern successors. The question of evil is the absent center of everything Agamben is doing in *The Kingdom and the Glory*.

Fully justifying this claim would mean virtually rewriting the book—something that I have begun to do in my forthcoming book *The Prince of This World: The Life and Legacy of the Devil* and that I hope to continue in a follow-up investigation focused on the Trinity. Yet recapitulating my book, much less sketching out the subsequent project that I have barely begun, is obviously beyond the scope of a twenty-minute paper. In the time remaining to me, then, I will focus on an internal critique of Agamben's book. I will first provide a brief overview of the flow and structure of Agamben's argument as I understand it. I will then take a step back in order to point out a series of unasked questions at the foundation of Agamben's enterprise and demonstrate that all of those unasked questions point in the direction of the problem of evil. Finally, I will offer a brief account of what may have driven Agamben to deemphasize the question of evil before concluding with a reassessment of Agamben's achievement in *The Kingdom and the Glory*, which to my mind remains considerable even in light of my critique.

I.

Agamben's rhetorical strategy in *The Kingdom and the Glory* is complex. He frames his argument around the debate between Carl Schmitt and Erik Peterson, and although one might initially think he is taking Peterson's side, he is ultimately trying to get past both thinkers. Besides being complex in itself, Agamben's approach here carries with it the difficulty that Peterson's work is little-known in the English-speaking world (the first translation of his *Theological Treatises* appeared several years after *The Kingdom and the Glory*) and hence, so is Schmitt's debate with Peterson, which appears in *Political Theology II*.

The key texts here is Peterson's "Monotheism as a Political Problem," where he claims that orthodox Christianity has rendered the idea of political theology utterly impossible. The doctrine of the Trinity has completely undercut any conceivable analogy between God and the earthly ruler, insofar as Peterson, a good Barthian at heart, claims that the Trinity is radically unlike anything in human experience. What's more, Augustine's doctrine of the two cities shows the earthly city to have only a provisional and indirect significance for God's sovereign plan. Anyone arguing otherwise—and a footnote makes it clear that Peterson is thinking of Schmitt—is the equivalent of Constantine's propagandist Eusebius. This does not mean that a Christian politics is impossible, however, because for Peterson the earthly church's liturgy participates in the angelic liturgy of the heavenly city and is therefore profoundly political (in the etymological sense, if not in the common-sense meaning of the term).

Peterson thus supplies the key themes of Agamben's investigation: the Trinity, the doctrine of providence, and liturgical display. The burden of Agamben's argument, however, is that Peterson *fails* to provide a genuine alternative to Schmittian political theology. To demonstrate this, he first shows that both Peterson and Schmitt systematically avoid a key theological concept: namely, *oikonomia* or economy. The underlying logic of this concept—which proves to be useful in contexts as diverse as household management, rhetorical theory, imperial administration, and theology—is the ongoing attempt to harmonize competing incompatible needs. As an attempt to provide a common measure for the incommensurable, *oikonomia* designates a flexible, open-ended, and improvisational style of management. Agamben's detailed philological examination shows that the concept of economy links together the doctrines of the Trinity and of providence—both of which strive to make sense of the concrete historical action of an infinite, unchangeable God. Yet economy also links Christian

theology to the liberal democratic economic order that both Schmitt and Peterson held in utter disdain.

This first step of Agamben's argument occupies chapters 2-5 of *The Kingdom and the Glory*, or roughly half the text. By the final chapter of this sequence, Agamben has shown that the paradigms of political theology and theological economy, which both Peterson and Schmitt were at pains to dissociate to the point of systematically ignoring the latter, are in fact deeply entangled with one another. This means that Peterson's combination of Trinity and providence, which Agamben has shown to rest on the logic of economy, cannot truly be an alternative to political theology.

The second step begins with chapter 6, "Angelology and Bureaucracy," where Agamben links together the themes of *oikonomia* and glory. The hinge of his argument is the figure of the angel, who at once carries out God's providential plan and praises him for all eternity. In our fallen world, the two tasks are necessarily connected, but after the Last Judgment, the good angels will devote themselves entirely to the glory of the Lord, while the fallen angels will spend all of eternity managing the interminable punishments of hell. I will be discussing this chapter at greater length, but for now it suffices to say that Agamben takes this division of labor as justification for setting aside the logic of economy (at least until the final appendices) and treating glory in relative isolation. This sets up the seventh chapter, where Agamben finishes off Peterson by highlighting the intimate connection between public ceremonials or liturgies and political theology—particularly under the fascist regimes that Peterson experienced during his own lifetime.

Hence Peterson has failed to provide an alternative to Schmittian political theology, but at the same time the logic of theological economy, which Agamben initially puts forward as an

alternative paradigm, has proven to be at best supplementary to the paradigm of political theology and in any case to be undesirable due to its association with hell. Thus he concludes with a chapter on glory, which is nearly as long as one of his typical books. There he characterizes glory as a kind of veil or mask that hides the fact that the order of sovereignty has no foundation—or more precisely, the fact that the sovereign order that puts us all to work is founded on the primordial *lack* of a natural task or work of human beings. Agamben names this foundationless foundation “inoperativity” and suggests that it holds the key to bringing the destructive political-economic-theological regime of the West to a halt.

II.

That is the basic shape of Agamben’s argument, at least as I understand it. Now that it is laid out before us, there are a number of questions we could ask. One might ask why he chose this particular argumentative strategy, which is so indirect and which devotes such seemingly disproportionate attention to a little-known critic of Schmitt. One might also ask whether he is actually right—for instance, whether his understanding of patristic and medieval thought is accurate, or whether the connections he is drawing between the Trinity, the doctrine of providence, and modern political-economic thought actually hold.

For the purposes of this paper, however, I am more interested in a different sort of question: assuming for the sake of argument that the genealogy Agamben traces is broadly accurate (and I personally think it is), *why* do these connections hold? For example, it seems difficult to dispute that the logic of *oikonomia* proved attractive to patristic thinkers as they were developing the doctrine of the Trinity. Agamben has shown that *oikonomia* is flexible enough to adapt to the differing demands of household management, rhetorical theory, and imperial

administration—but what makes it particularly suitable for those settings *and* for the theological problems that the patristic writers (and their so-called “Gnostic” rivals) set themselves? And why should a concept that is suitable for God’s own internal life prove equally suitable for an examination of his providential action toward his creation?

Agamben establishes that the kernel of *oikonomia* is the management of the incommensurable, but why should there be anything incommensurable between God and his creation, much less within the divine life itself? When it comes to the Trinity, Agamben essentially begs the question: there is a need for an intra-divine economy because Christ represents God’s economy toward creation, hence God must “manage” his relationship to his own economy. This account allows him to sidestep virtually any details of the doctrine of the Trinity, particularly the question of why there should be three rather than two—or to put it in an admittedly heretical way, why there should be *two* subordinate or creation-facing instances in the Godhead rather than just one.

When he turns to the doctrine of providence, where the notion of economy comes more to the fore, he provides us with some incommensurables—God’s unchanging eternal being and his finite historical actions, God’s universal and particular wills—but they are very abstract, as befits the atmosphere of scholasticism in which they became major intellectual problems. Yet such abstract, purely intellectual puzzles cannot possibly be at the *root* of the doctrines of the Trinity and of providence. They lack the existential heft required to form doctrines that people will live and die for.

There is only one plausible candidate for the shared root of the doctrines of the Trinity and of providence, only one problem with sufficient existential charge: the problem of evil. Providential narratives do not exist in order to solve niggling problems of universal vs.

particular, but to account for the place of suffering and injustice in the creation of a just and all-powerful God. If evil did not occur, there would be no need to develop elaborate theories about how all things work together for our good, because it would be immediately obvious. Similarly, the doctrine of the Trinity does not exist in order to solve the arbitrary and misleading problem of how three can be one. As any student of the patristic literature is surely aware, the presenting problem was one of suffering—specifically, the suffering of a divine being. The doctrine of the Trinity is an attempt to account for the scandal of a God who dies on the cross, who suffers the blows of injustice.

The questions of providence and of a suffering God converge in Pauline apocalyptic. Agamben makes much of the reversal of the Pauline phrase “the economy of the mystery”—which Agamben takes to mean Paul’s improvisational management of his role in God’s providential plan—into the patristic “mystery of the economy.” What he doesn’t address is why God’s plan should be “mysterious” from Paul’s perspective. The answer is obviously the unforeseen death of the messiah, which for Paul opens up an equally unforeseen opportunity for the Gentiles to take part in the divine promises. How God could turn such a seeming catastrophe into such a superabundant benefit is mysterious—indeed, gloriously so, as Paul expresses in Romans 8. With this in mind, it becomes clear why the reversal into the “mystery of the economy,” which is to say, into a stance where the true mystery is how God could interact with the world at all, could become possible once Paul’s apocalyptic immediacy gave way to the apparently indefinite deferral of the Last Judgment.

Agamben refuses to acknowledge Paul’s apocalypticism, however, even going so far as to claim that understanding Paul as an apocalyptic thinker is the gravest possible error. In doing so, he not only uproots the doctrines of the Trinity and of providence from the apocalyptic

horizon in which they arose, but effectively covers over Christianity's roots in Judaism. Paul's apocalyptic narrative cannot be understood outside the context of the themes from the Hebrew prophets and Jewish apocalyptic that he takes up, and it is this reworking of the Jewish inheritance that sets the pattern for later Christian providential thought. By ignoring this, Agamben tacitly repeats Peterson's gesture in the monotheism essay of radically dissociating Christian theology from Jewish thought.

The lack of an explicit thematization of evil also leads Agamben, at the crucial turning point of his argument, to endorse Schmitt and Peterson's rejection of liberal democracy. What is surprising is not so much that he is skeptical of contemporary political-economic arrangements—I am as well—but that his critique takes the form of a joke. When he shows that the only place where the economy obtains for all eternity is hell, Agamben notes that indefinite "management" for all eternity is essentially the model of liberal democratic capitalism, and hence that Christian thinkers would recognize our present-day mode of governance as "hellish."

This rare joke is satisfying, but strange—does he really expect it to count as evidence? Is the association between economy and hell in Christian theology really a good enough reason to dismiss economy completely in favor of glory? After all, why should we take Christian theology's word for it? After ignoring questions of moral value for 200 pages or more, why should he suddenly embrace the Christian standard of good and evil so naively? Furthermore, how does the juxtaposition of heaven and hell point toward the *seperability* of economy and glory? Both endure for all eternity, and Agamben himself points out that from Tertullian to Aquinas and beyond, observing the sufferings in hell is part of the fun of going to heaven—a fact that should make us cautious, to say the least, about simply going along with the moral valuation at play here.

It is only in the appendices on early modern thought that he explicitly takes up the problem of evil—and then it is only to critique modern attempts at theodicy as somehow “anti-Christian,” insofar as they attempt to justify the world as it is. Again, this is a strangely naïve idealization of Christianity and a virtually nonsensical claim from a historical perspective: everyone from Isaiah to Paul to Milton and beyond has tried to justify the ways of God to man. It *can’t* be a purely modern problem, because the question of how suffering and injustice are compatible with God’s sovereign rule is an unavoidable one—much more intuitive and immediate than the question of how God’s universal will squares with particulars, for instance. The problem of evil hits us where we live, calling into question the legitimacy of the world order and of our place in it. If it only occurred to Christians to try to grapple with this problem in early modernity, then Christianity never would have survived because no one would have been able to take it seriously. The problem of evil and the enterprise of theodicy are not some late, decadent outgrowth of Christianity, they are at the root of Christian thought, just as they were at the root of the Jewish thought that gave rise to it.

III.

What led Agamben to ignore this crucial problem? I would suggest that it grew out of the rhetorical strategy that he has deployed throughout the *Homo Sacer* series. In every volume, he theatrically sets aside clichéd moral binaries, and he systematically resists the inertia of those conventional categories. In *Homo Sacer*, he undermines the distinction between “good” liberal democracy and “bad” totalitarianism by showing that the two share the same underlying logic. Similarly, in *State of Exception*, it isn’t a question of doing away with the “bad” emergency powers and returning to the “good” normal rule of law, because the two necessarily belong

together. Most shockingly, in *Remnants of Auschwitz* he asks us to set aside our natural revulsion at the horrors of the concentration camps in order to see how the experience of their most degraded victims shows us a profound truth about the human condition. The association of liberal democracy with hell must have been an irresistible counterintuitive gesture—even if it ironically meant endorsing the most conventional moral binary of them all.

In the last analysis, however, I come not to bury Agamben but to praise him. His systematic avoidance of the problem of evil introduces distortions into his argument and arguably leaves the whole enterprise feeling somehow ungrounded. Yet I believe that his primary claims are correct and that his argument would be enhanced rather than undercut by explicit attention to the problem of evil. It would clarify the connection between the Trinity and providence and deepen the genealogical link with modern economics—the Invisible Hand, after all, brings good out of our greedy and selfish choices, not our altruistic ones—and it would provide the means to link both to the Jewish apocalyptic heritage.

Agamben has contributed immeasurably to rewriting the history of Christian thought and the transition to modernity. To complete the work, we must now repeat Agamben's gesture with regard to Schmitt and Peterson—we must rewrite Agamben's argument to take account of what he systematically ignores.