

Theorizing the Empty Throne *The Kingdom and the Glory*

Giorgio Agamben

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Reviewed by Robert Geroux, DePauw University

for Joel Olson

The so-called ‘major religions’ or ‘universal religions,’ far from being the quintessential embodiment of religion, are in fact just so many stages of its abatement and disintegration. The greatest and most universal of them, our own, the rational religion of the one god, is precisely the one that allows a departure from religion.

Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, 9.

Radical theorists have for generations acknowledged an important and underexamined aspect of the late modern condition, namely the subsumption, marginalization, perhaps even the erasure of the political, properly understood. From a Schmittian stance on the right, this danger is represented by the triumph of liberal “eternal deliberation” above and against the decision. From a very different Arendtian stance on the left, the marginalization has occurred instead by means of the triumph of the modern “social” as a mode of human experience, and the concomitant loss of a worldly space for natality. What *The Kingdom and the Glory* represents is a further chapter to this story of loss and theoretical reconfiguration and possible recapture. What makes it fascinating and unique is the particular genealogy it pursues, namely an interrogation of economic theology as the place where several deep and lasting fissures develop: Being and praxis, foundation and pragmatics, Father and Son, and of course, power and glory. In what follows here, I want to examine both sides of this complex historico-political equation, not to find an answer but perhaps to generate and proliferate further questions. Questions, that is, not only about the work-at-hand but about the subterranean conceptual configurations and structures it lays bare.

I: Power

Christian Europe’s entire religious and intellectual history will revolve around this unique central point: it is biased in favor of God’s omnipotent exteriority and requires a certain effort to block or reverse its effects. This is the Archimedean point for understanding the extraordinarily complicated successive battles and disputes.

Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World*, 60.

If patristic discussions on the Trinity were, as Agamben says, a “privileged laboratory” (xi) for a discussion of the internal dialectic of political power, as well as its external emanations, then the most important conceptual product of that lab was a working notion of *oikonomia*. The term incorporates multiple operators from different contexts: from the Hellenistic and Classical congeries of concepts, the Stoic notion of an internal or immanent principle of self-ordering is important (19), as is Xenophon’s definition of a “functional organization” (18) and Aristotle’s domestic signifier (17). What Christian thought does is identify and deploy this knot of ideas as part of a necessary separation of foundational action from government, of Being from praxis. Why is this separation necessary in the first place? Here, Agamben’s work can be usefully supplemented by Blumenberg’s observation that the rejection of gnostic dualism meant the inheritance and intensification of a problem concerning God, the world, and the conduit between the two. For the gnostics of late antiquity, this problem was solved quite simply by means of a separation between the “true God,” fully separated from the impure world, and a demiurgic principle who cast human beings into that world and ruled over them. As Augustine acknowledged, such a dualistic vision was profoundly inconsistent with ontotheology. Reconfiguration by means of integration meant internal tension, however, which in turn unleashed a series of conceptual maneuvers that would structure the language of power (and politics) in the West.

Of primary importance is the necessary fissure between foundational eventality on the one hand, and the space of pragmatic, governmental normality on the other. The nature of divine action in relation to the world’s beginning discloses the origins of this split. Or in Agamben’s words, “What is incompatible with the classical concept is here not so much the idea of a divine operation, but rather the fact that this praxis does not necessarily depend on being, and nor is it founded on it, but is the result of a free and gratuitous act of the will” (55). Over time, *oikonomia* becomes identified with both the time and the space that concretes around the norm, while God becomes the “unfounded founder,” the actor whose sovereignty bounds it and, in a sense, defines it negatively. The evolution of Trinitarian theology illuminates not only the conceptual energy necessary to separate Being from praxis, but the necessity of sustaining that separation, as well as encompassing it holistically, that is, “economically.” The central question “why does power need glory?” finds part of an answer here: glory serves the function of disclosing and emphasizing the difference between the exception and the norm, of displacing/separating and (economically) knitting the two into a comprehensive whole. As Agamben shows, it does so not by a positive gesture of metaphoric crossing, but negatively and apophatically; it does not hide the “empty throne,” but rather elevates and prioritizes it as a site where representation ends.

II. Glory

In this grand image, in which the world created by God is identified with the world without God, and where contingency and necessity, freedom and slavery all merge into one another, the glorious center of the governmental machine appears clearly. Modernity, removing God from the world, has not only failed to leave theology behind, but in some ways has done nothing other than to lead the project of the providential *oikonomia* to completion.

Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 287.

The machine of modernity inherits the internally-articulated logic of the Trinity and deploys it by means of a hieratic distancing, indeed in Nietzschean terms as a religico-political “pathos of distance.” The tension established by the orthodox Christian incorporation/subsumption of gnosticism was already there; what modernity in its post-Reformation configuration does is accelerate the unfolding of that dynamic. Perhaps by means of an (auto)immunitary process, it constitutes an action whose principle calls for radical systemic distention and eventual dissolution. If it is true that what Agamben calls the “signatures” of secularization are unavoidable, then it is indeed curious that few studies have examined the way in which the trinitarian articulation of *oikonomia* unfolded and translated into the secular space of what Adorno would call a “fully-administered world.” A key gesture or figure in Agamben’s science of signatures is the focus on providence:

Providence (the government) is that through which theology and philosophy try to come to terms with the splitting of classical ontology into two separate realities: being and praxis, transcendent and immanent good, theology and *oikonomia*. Providence presents itself as a machine aimed at joining back together the two fragments in the *gubernatio dei*, the divine government of the world (140).

What is fascinating in the process of production and proliferation of secularized providence is the manner in which it simultaneously ties-together aspects of worldly praxis “here below” and signifies/valorizes the abyss that separates the exception from the norm. An awareness of this logic is present very early on, in the works of thinkers like Bodin and Rousseau, who addressed early modern conceptions of sovereignty. As Bodin was perhaps the first to emphasize, sovereignty properly understood was both indivisible and inalienable. As Rousseau was to reinterpret and emphasize in turn, sovereignty properly formulated had to be general in two respects: it had to arise generally *qua* its nature as unified will and, more importantly, it had to be applied generally. The profoundly important gap between the particular and the general finds political expression here, but as Agamben highlights (as well as Patrick Riley and others before him), the distinction is originally a theological one. In order for a will to be properly divine,

that is, allegedly reflective and symptomatic of its origin, in its original religious context it cannot will in a singular or particular manner. The early modern discussion around miracles reflects this orientation as well; the “particular will” that seems to erupt into the normative order of nature becomes understood as something beneath the dignity of a God who wills only in comprehensive and general sense.

Rousseau of course argued that any particular expression of the general will must be carried out by what he called government. The distinction seems commonplace enough; it appears to bear a family resemblance to the liberal reconfiguration of the republican idea of legislative and executive power. As Agamben indicates, however, “government” in this pragmatic *oikonomia*-oriented sense exposes a profound gap that only grows in importance under the horizon of secularity. If providence in the premodern frame worked to conjoin and cohere Being and praxis, it was limited then, as well as in our own disenchanted world, by the fact that its sphere of influence could penetrate only so far. Its mimetic capacity bumped up against a fundamental limit, a limit implicitly discovered and expressed in Bodin and Rousseau’s formulation of the sovereign will-as-general. The internal tension here again comes from a deeper, inherited structure: for the (now secularized) sovereign will to be signified as such, it has to move in a conceptual direction as far away from government as possible. This becomes the fate of post-providential articulations of government; like the *deus absconditus* of early modern theology, the sovereign recedes, leaving administration alone with its praxis in the secular world, a disenchanted space of material relations and general, nomological forces.

At the same time, however, and again just like the theological dynamic of early modernity, the *deus* who absconds, recedes, even disappears does so by means of a logic that *increases* rather than decreases the intensity of attention and power. In religious terms, God’s absence from the world only separates and strengthens the action of one’s faith. Governmental power grows precisely because the process of translation (general \longrightarrow particular) becomes so difficult. In its original context(s), the numinous glory of God, perhaps alone among all signifiers, pointed in the direction of a self-referential absence, a sense of limits, of emptiness as a metaphor of the end of metaphor. Glory did not represent mimetically the shape or contours of Being, but rather prioritized two things: distance/difference and danger. Late modern secularized glory works in a comparable fashion. Agamben turns his analytical eye to the phenomenon of acclamation as an example of the latter aspect of glory and critiques it along Debordian lines as a manifestation of a democratic politics of the spectacle. This is indeed compelling, but what interests me more is the former aspect of late-modern glory, namely the apophatic gesture of legitimation that occurs by means of a capture of the categorical. Here, it joins up

with the notion of governmental “providence”; perhaps in an immunizing manner, administration or government (as Rousseau meant it) moves particularly by means of a reference to what social scientists call “nomological” forces. This is part of the subsidiarity of the neoliberal state in action: it moves punitively (via the power of the police or the military) with regard to ineluctable social and (especially) economic “laws” and refuses to move (to provide assistance, for example) according to those same laws. It authenticates and legitimates its power as subject to larger, impersonal, providential forces. The glory of a neoliberal world calls attention to the impersonality and indifference of those forces; in an uncanny manner it *reenchants* the world by means of hieratically emphasizing that world’s disenchanted (empty, material) nature. Government-as-*oikonomia* subjects bodies to almost total biopolitical control precisely by means of a gesture that emphasizes its own subordination and subjection (to nomological forces). Glory is this gesture.

It’s not surprising that postmodern forms of fundamentalist Christianity are also in play: Puritanical Protestantism was a crucible within which many of these orientations were alloyed into their ultimately secular form. Considered comprehensively, we end up with an unholy trinity (economics/religion/politics), a factually systematic mathesis that overdetermines late modern life. Derrida’s late writings on religion examined this phenomenon, this crystallization of what he called *globalatinization*. We are legitimately left wanting to know more about the nature of Agamben’s “inoperativity” as a means of facing and responding to this constellation of forces. We are also left asking how that concept improves, for example, on a Heideggerian distancing from the “will-to-will” that allegedly structures and distorts all relations in the late modern world.¹ We should expect more on this front from Agamben, who continues to work on the *Homo Sacer* series. For now, we are fortunate to have this English translation of a brilliant and sustained meditation on the administrative occupation of the political.

Robert Geroux is a political theorist and Assistant Professor of Political Science at DePauw University. He is formerly Postdoctoral Teaching Fellow in Western Traditions (now Core Humanities) at the University of Nevada-Reno. His most recent work appeared in the *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, and *Polygraph* 19/20 and 22. He is currently at work on a project that examines the work of Robert Owen and alternative currencies.

1 See for example Antonio Negri, “Sovereignty: That Divine Ministry of the Affairs of Earthly Life,” in *The Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory*, 9:1 (2008), 99.