

THE SURREPTITIOUS DEFIANCE OF GIORGIO AGAMBEN

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Abstract: Many critics accuse Giorgio Agamben of an ahistoricism inherent to his thought. Recently, such criticism was put forward by Alberto Toscano, who formulated it referring to Hans Blumenberg's refusal of the secularisation thesis and his theory of epochal shifts. According to Toscano, due to the acceptance of the Schmittian notion of secularisation, based on a historical substantialism, Agamben is not only unfaithful to the Foucaultian methodology which he declaratively assumes, but he also tends to acknowledge the domination of theological notions as a source of the whole Western philosophical tradition and political institutions up until now. I am going to demonstrate that even somewhat superficial claims made by Agamben about secularisation find their compensation in his double effort. Firstly, even if he concedes the gravity of the theological legacy, at the same time he rebuts the primacy of religion as an indispensable grounding of ethics and politics. What is more, through his meticulous and condense studies on Christian theology he has already placed himself in the position of the most incisive contemporary critic of the Catholic church and any theological-political hybrids established on the abuse of power.

Keywords: economic theology, secularisation, Giorgio Agamben, Hans Blumenberg, Alberto Toscano

A predicament of secularisation

Il Regno e la gloria, published in 2007, marks a thematic shift in the whole Agambenian oeuvre, namely the involvement in a detailed analysis of Christian theology viewed from the perspective of its inner logic – the divine *oikonomia*¹. However, the text does not equate to a change of the political issues at stake in Agamben's theory. Rather, in his recent publications Agamben tries to complement his prolonged investigations by demonstrating how contemporary models of government depend on a peculiar *complexio oppositorum* laying at the centre of Christology and trinitarian theology. That is the problem of how to reconcile God's existence beyond time and space – his Being or eternal and unchangeable Essence – with his commitment to the economy (or the history) of salvation, which presuppose God's actions, decisions, and, at last, his incarnation into the form of the human-divine hybrid, Jesus Christ. When expressed in political terms, these dilemmas turn into a chiasmus, or binary coexistence, between sovereign decisionistic politics (transcendence) and the horizontal management of global economy (immanence). In other words, Agamben intends to explain the contemporary political realm – seen as the indivisible magma of life as such, and politics, mediated through management as the only active pseudo-political practice – by referring it to the theological debates of late antiquity concerning the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation of God. It may be that since the death of Hans Blumenberg we have not seen in the history of Western thought any theoretical framework comparable in its expanse and depth, except that offered by Agamben. The ambitious task of the latter confronts methodological constraints that must be always taken into account when one aspires to encompass two millennia within one horizon.

The Agambenian method of inquiry was criticized recently by Alberto Toscano, who employed Blumenberg's argumentation against the secularization theorem to accuse Agamben's approach of a double lapse that consists of "historical substantialism" and "reductivist idealism" (Toscano 2011, 126, 128). I feel tempted to scrutinize this intriguing polemics, because chances are that something important really happened when Agamben provided the appropriate key to the arcana of Christendom. What is ironic, and at the same time highly problematic for the purely secular flank, is that he did not need to break down the doors of the ecclesiastical archives, but opened them from within. For some critics this *faux*

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pas is unpardonable, because it contravened the well-guarded division between secularity and religion, which delineates one of the most relevant achievements of modern Western civilisation and its political culture. Thus, Giorgio Agamben became the *enfant terrible* of the global Left.

A brief elucidation must be made to indicate the quarrel's kernel. According to Toscano, Agamben's recent writings are founded upon substantialist and idealist presuppositions, because the author passed off an important German debate around the meaning of the term "secularisation" which took place mainly in the 1960s and 1970s. It concerned the original character of Western modernity. As one of its participants, Hans Blumenberg was compelled to defend the unprecedentedness and the legitimate character of the modern age against interpretations proposed by Eric Voegelin, Karl Löwith, and Carl Schmitt, who regarded modernity and its political vocabulary as the by-product of some older theological matrix (Blumenberg 1983). The consequence of such thinking is a vision of history as a transmission of the same "contents" disguised in different "forms". In effect, the so-called secular epoch could not emancipate itself from its religious-theological heritage. According to the propagators of the secularisation schema, modernity's secular character is nothing more than flimsy varnish that overlies previous epochs (treated as real "substance" or "content") which are supposed to surreptitiously mastermind the secular age. Toscano claims that the "economic theology" elaborated by Agamben suffers from the same methodological inadequacies that Blumenberg detected in the historiographical schemas of those thinkers who used the notion of secularisation in order to delegitimise the development of post-religious civilisation in Western Europe. What is more, Toscano dismisses Agamben's conception of the "signatures" – projected to explain how some notions as well as vast paradigms of political thought survived from antiquity to the present day, accommodating slightly their meaning without the need for changing names – as reliant "on putative personal insight and analogical thinking" (Toscano 2011, 128)².

It is not disputable that Agamben sometimes takes the secularisation process for granted, especially when pointing to some religious antecedents and their "secularized" counterparts. For example, when he compares tourism to the pilgrimage movement (Agamben 2011a, 140) or when he has no reservations about calling the philosophy of history "an essentially Christian discipline" (Agamben 2012, 34)³. What must be genuinely harmful

2 Toscano refers to that methodological statement: "[i]f we are not able to perceive signatures and follow the displacements and movements they operate in the tradition of ideas, the mere history of concepts can, at times, end up being entirely insufficient" (Agamben 2011a, 4). In the original it sounds even more powerfully: "Se non si possiede la capacità di percepire le segnature e di seguire le dislocazioni e gli spostamenti che esse operano nella tradizione delle idee, la semplice storia dei concetti può, a volte, risultare del tutto insufficiente" (Agamben 2007a, 16).

3 The most intriguing is the statement that what we call today the "biological body" is a secularized notion of bare life (Agamben 2014, 267–268) – in *Il uso dei corpi* the author literally repeats some fragments

for a secular understanding of the world is the fact that for Agamben even the flagship representatives of non-religious thought – like Kantian ethics (Agamben 2013a, 122) and the Marxian conceptualisation of praxis (Agamben 2011a, 91) – might be seen as secularized forms that mimetically reflect some theological ideas. Thus, although the first set of examples does not go beyond conventional *bon mots*, the second one does not allow similar marginalisation, but rather resembles Schmitt’s “systematic structure” (Schmitt 1985, 36). Therefore, Toscano’s Blumenbergian scepticism towards Agamben’s “theological genealogy” (Toscano 2011, 129)⁴ was formulated not without reason. As overtly a- or anti-metaphysical philosophies, Kantianism and Marxism may be theologically structured. This is explicitly demonstrated in *Opus Dei* and *The Kingdom and the Glory*, and it implies a kind of transhistorical invariance. However, it would be an overstatement to decree substantialism on those grounds. Agambenian usage of structural analogies is “stronger” (in terms of historical continuity) than Blumenberg’s functionalism (and Foucault’s archaeology), although “weaker” than Schmitt’s, Löwith’s or Voegelin’s substantialism.

It also makes sense to point out the idealistic tone, sometimes evident in the writings of Agamben, who seems to believe in an almost autonomous life of the *dispositifs* he describes. In that perspective humans appear to be puppets without agency, whose efforts are reduced to the actualisation of some hidden patterns embedded in the structure of language:

It is all the more surprising that, in the 1977–1978 course [given by Michel Foucault – RZ], the notion of providence is never referred to. And yet the theories of Kepler, Galileo, Ray, and the Port-Royal circle that Foucault refers to do nothing other than to radicalize, as we shall see, the distinction between general and special providence into which the theologians had transposed, in their own way, the opposition between the Kingdom and the Government. The passage from ecclesiastical pastorate to political government, which Foucault tries to explain – in all truth, in not terribly convincing a way – by means of the emergence of a whole series of counterpractices that resist the pastorate, is far more comprehensible if it is seen as a secularization of the detailed phenomenology of first and second, proximate and distant, occasional

already written in 1993 in the text entitled *Forma-di-vita* (Agamben 2000, 7–8). It may imply that bare life, surrounded by Agamben with so much piety, is a life not totally deprived of transcendent connotation. Obviously, this uncanny ambiguity could be nothing more than a kind of gloriolae accompanying exceptional figures, like victims condemned to be killed. Seen through that prism, bare life is what remains after contact with transcendence, which brings about the kiss of death. Just for that reason, Agamben is looking for a “form-of-life” whose condition of being “unsavable” protects her once and for all from any romance with the divine. But is this a sufficient answer to the inner indecisiveness and excessiveness of life itself?

4 This undoubtedly malicious label serves Toscano for imputing that Agambenian “theological” writings keep their validity only within the Christian world view. The following cutting remark extends this hermeneutic stance: “it is the specifically *Christian* fate of *oikonomia*, as the anarchic immanence of a divine government tenuously articulated, via providence, with a transcendent God who ‘reigns but does not govern’, which justifies the theological character of this genealogical investigation” (Toscano 2011, 127; original emphasis).

and efficient causes, general and particular wills, mediated and immediate concourses, *ordinatio* and *executio*, by means of which the theoreticians of providence had tried to make the divine government of the world intelligible (Agamben 2011a, 112).

No wonder then that Toscano noticed a betrayal of the Foucaultian method. It is indeed analogous to Agamben's declaration that he intends to think starting from the frontiers reached but never crossed by Hannah Arendt. The same interpretative measure of absorption and abandonment was applied to Blumenberg's work. Agamben encounters Blumenberg as a reader of Jacob Taubes and this fact determines his stance. Like Taubes, Agamben works closely to Schmitt (even if he proceeds against him) and affirms the secularisation thesis. However, by doing this he aims just at overcoming the thesis and refuting any possible pretension formulated on its basis against "theological politics"⁵. Furthermore, Agamben's ambition is to abolish political theology, or at least to provide evidence that such a hybrid could not stem from Christianity. For that reason, he is not compelled to choose between Blumenberg and Schmitt, because he thinks he has found a vaster paradigm embracing them both. And not only them. Lastly, Jan Assmann, inspired by the cue made by Taubes in person, elaborated a thesis (which is partly a repetition of Ernst Kantorowicz's claim) which turns Schmitt's argumentation upside down: according to Assmann, Schmitt's famous dictum could be legitimately inverted and then one may, analogically, consider the main theological concepts as political ones at the bottom. Agamben comments:

More interesting than taking sides with one thesis or the other is, however, to try to understand the functional relationship that links the two principles. Glory is precisely the place at which this bilateral (or bi-univocal) character of the relation between theology and politics clearly emerges into the light (Agamben 2011a, 193).

What does this mean? First of all, that Agamben does not take Schmitt's side unreservedly. Further, that he, who himself put a lot of effort into being associated with the "I would prefer not to" position, *chose* a very risky path and *decided* to step onto theological ground to probe the endurance of the well-known conservative incantations about the fall of the West caused by the death of God and the diminishing role of religious authority. As we shall see, Agamben wants to show the one-sidedness of those claims by divesting them of their undeserved glory, that is – of their misleading force of persuasion. He intends to bypass current ideological conflicts between secular and religious forces without neutralising them. Using words that demand attention, in a speech delivered at the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris on March 8th, 2009, Agamben seemed to reach for the crest: "I say the following with

5 I borrow this term from György Geréby (Geréby 2008).

words carefully weighed: nowhere on earth today is a legitimate power to be found; even the powerful are convinced of their own illegitimacy” (Agamben 2012, 40). The Catholic church included, no doubt. No one can escape from guilt. Only the passionate toughness of impartiality can save us: parrhesia against irony and cynicism.

That is why I am not persuaded by Toscano’s argument that “Agamben haughtily dismisses the theoretical significance of the secularisation debate” (Toscano 2011, 127). On the contrary, in my opinion, Agamben belongs to the group of a few leading contemporary thinkers who regard themselves as responsible for the new phase of this debate⁶. My intention is not to judge whether he is right or wrong; it would be a chutzpah to deal in one short commentary text with the enormously rich material that Agamben studied. I find it more fruitful to take a step backwards and draw up the possibilities and ambiguities provoked by the theological-economic enterprise. This does not mean that Blumenberg’s reservations are annulled. Instead, it will be more appropriate to speak about their provisional postponement⁷.

The sacrifice of theology vs. theological sacrifice

No one could pretend to conduct value-free research when secularisation is concerned. So when Toscano states, in the form of an objection, that “for Agamben, secularisation is a strategic gambit, not a historiographic thesis” (Toscano 2011, 127), that is the point. Agamben tends to concede that, all in all, any debate on secularisation, at least since Max Weber (and I would prefer to say that at least since Hegel) is inseparable from politics (Agamben 2009a, 76–77). (Suffice it to mention the seemingly stable – if seen from the angle of both jurisprudence and official theology – status of ecclesiastical properties in times when neoliberal expropriations take place on a large scale). The very fact that Toscano engaged the Blumenbergian project (which, to tell the truth, is not at all leftist) and his methodology against Agamben, is sufficient proof in favour of Agamben’s persuasion that the concept of secularisation “has performed a strategic function in modern culture” (Agamben 2011a, 3). It usually marks a political enemy⁸. That’s why Carl Schmitt could not agree with Blumenberg

6 What might be justly admitted is that Agamben disavows the significance of “secularisation” in favour of what he considers to be a broader frame, namely the theodicy of history, which is also called *oikonomia* or *complexio oppositorum*. Thus, he suspends, in a sense, an inclination to Blumenberg or Schmitt, taking a step further.

7 Which is a manoeuvre not so distant from what Hans Blumenberg himself accepted as a mode of moral conduct proper to the modern age, namely: *la morale provisoire* (Blumenberg 2010, 2).

8 Toscano’s reaction provoked by some Agambenian critical remarks towards Marxism is rather a sidestep than an attempt to challenge them. In contrast, Agamben seems to feel obliged, as an intellectual who acknowledges also his Marxian roots, to criticize totalitarian and bureaucratic abuses of power committed by the political regimes that called themselves “communist”. What is also important for Marxist studies, his

who tended to present his historiographical study on the threshold of modernity as politically neutral.

Although the references to Blumenberg in Agamben are sporadic, in *Il regno e la gloria* we can find some comments, which clearly show that the latter is not unconcerned about the stance of the former. In an opening passage Agamben expounds that for Schmitt,

theology continues to be present and active in an eminent way. This does not necessarily imply an identity of substance between theology and modernity, or a perfect identity of meaning between theological and political concepts; rather, it concerns a particular strategic relation that marks political concepts and refers them back to their theological origin (Agamben 2011a, 4).

There is no doubt that the phrase “identity of substance” evokes *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*⁹. Like Blumenberg, Agamben is preoccupied with a refutation of Schmitt’s thesis. But, unlike Blumenberg, he cannot do so by defending modernity and its secular ethos.

Agamben considers modern politics to be theological, in other words, still reliant on the schemas elaborated as explanations of the divine government over the world. He reveals its “theological origin” without the intention to acknowledge (like Schmitt) that secular politics is impossible, *ergo* – that all political concepts remain delegitimised (Toscano 2011, 128) unless they return submissively to the *dictatus papae*. Conversely, to christen modern politics “theological” is to call for its stronger and more definitive profanation. In other words, politics that needs the extra-terrestrial to legitimize itself in fact delegitimises itself as theologically structured. As far back as 1995, when Agamben initiated an investigation of the ambiguous sacredness of the scapegoat¹⁰, he unequivocally declared that “the proximity between the sphere of sovereignty and the sphere of the sacred [...] is not simply the secularized residue of the originary religious character of every political power, nor merely the attempt to grant the latter a theological foundation” (Agamben 1998, 84–85).

In order to stem the Uroboros-like cycles of violence and to put an end to the economy of sacrifice, the very principle of division must be abolished. Theology, due to its obsession with theodicy, is one of the nodal points that keep this cruel machinery in motion¹¹, but it is not its ultimate ground. Additionally, Agamben posits that “the thesis

theological genealogy almost directly implies that what was originally used in the discussions on the Holy Trinity and predestination later become a basis for the reelaboration of dialectics in German philosophy.

9 See Blumenberg 1985, 16, 29, as well as the entire chapters 8. and 9., where Hans Blumenberg challenged Carl Schmitt’s political theology.

10 The term *homo sacer* appeared for the first time in Agamben’s writings in 1982 (Agamben 1991, 105; Agamben 1999, 136).

11 One of the thinkers to whom Agamben is mostly indebted, René Girard, stressed that theology had always served – in contrast to the unjustified pride expressed in the dictum *philosophia ancilla theologiae* – as the

according to which the economy could be a secularized theological paradigm acts retroactively on theology” (Agamben 2011a, 3). The concession given to Schmitt by emphasizing how important theology has been turns against the conservatism implicit in his theories¹², as well as against the exceptional character of theology. Agamben is convinced that ignorance with regard to the theological tradition not only indicates a “decline of philosophical culture” (Agamben 2011a, 5), but also strengthens this taboo-like status of theology. In contrast, what could finally make it inoperative is nothing other than studying it¹³. Studying uncovers the consequent layers of “tradition”, showing that all of them were failed attempts to keep the unnamed at distance¹⁴. For Agamben, archaeological inquiry focuses *simultaneously* on this empty centre *and* its historical articulations that overshadowed the emptiness of language building – upon, and thanks to, its arbitrariness – an illusion of the primary “origin”.

The Agambenian approach hesitates between the temptations of metaphorical and literal meaning. Thus, his “theological” description of biopolitics is affected by ambivalence. I will show two appropriate examples, starting from the following statement: “It is not necessary to share Schmitt’s thesis on secularization in order to affirm that political problems

universal mechanism of justification: “the sacrificial process requires a certain degree of misunderstanding. The celebrants do not and must not comprehend the true role of the sacrificial act. The theological basis of the sacrifice has a crucial role in fostering this misunderstanding. It is the god who supposedly demands the victims [...]. Interpreters who think they question the primacy of the divine sufficiently by declaring the whole affair ‘imaginary’ may well remain the prisoners of the theology they have not really analyzed” (Girard 1977, 7).

12 The same can be said about Agambenian “metabolisation” of Girard’s legacy. For further elaboration of this topic, see Fox 2007, Depoortere 2011, Dickinson 2011b, Sudlow 2012.

13 This may be seen as a betrayal of his own idea of profanation based on “negligence” (Agamben 2007b, 75), which was intended to secure from the aporia of transgression as an implicit confirmation of the *status quo*. Nonetheless, I am partial to another spin: that at first Agamben was collecting the elements of the paradigm he intended to destroy and in the end attained the level of such a condensation, that it allowed him to “abandon” this paradigm, when all was said and done. I would venture to say that by doing this he became the *homo sacer* of theory, because it was rather his duty, not pleasure, to be rapt in political consideration. This may throw light on the harsh criticism he received and also on his spiritual position on the map of contemporary thought. Suffice it to mention here only one, but incisive example. At the end of his article, one author used Jesus’ words, turning them towards Giorgio Agamben as a judgement passed on his messianism: “let the dead bury the dead” (Sharpe 2009, 40.16).

14 Hans Blumenberg initiated his *Work on Myth* from a magnificent anthropological narrative according to which the human being’s initial and formative challenge was “the absolutism of reality” – the cavernous vastness of space that was losing its tremendous hostility in the course of naming it. Naming means dividing, i.e. weakening the pressure of unpredictability and fear that could paralyse human life, endangered, because deprived of any natural niche. For Blumenberg “myth” and “dogma” are two different methods of coping with the aboriginal danger. “The stories that it is our purpose to discuss here – he writes – simply weren’t told in order to answer questions, but rather in order to dispel uneasiness and discontent, which have to be present in the beginning for questions to be able to form themselves. To prevent fear and uncertainty already means not to allow the questions about what awakens them and excites them to arise or to reach concrete form. In connection with this, the consciousness that one cannot, after all, answer such questions may enter in as an imponderable factor, as long as they cannot be averted, in an institutionalized milieu, or disparaged as hubris, or as in the milieu of modern science assigned to progress that has not yet occurred” (Blumenberg 1985, 184). So Blumenberg shares with Agamben initial intuitions about foundational negativity, but the former affirms the linguistic event that gave birth to humankind, while the latter expresses his great wariness of it.

become more intelligible and clear if they are related to theological paradigms” (Agamben 2011a, 229). In my view, here we still have the possibility of a metaphorical (that is to say Blumenbergian) reading of economic theology. In the case of the second example, things go differently, particularly if one takes into consideration that it is a quote from the already evoked speech that Giorgio Agamben gave at the Notre Dame Cathedral, so the place and circumstances enhance the resonance of this unique voice: “The crises – the states of permanent exception and emergency – that the governments of the world continually proclaim are in reality a secularized parody of the Church’s incessant deferral of the Last Judgement” (Agamben 2012, 40). Had it been a casual association, Agamben’s statement would not have judged the contemporary legal crisis as blasphemy. But what stands behind this claim can by no means be limited to a figure of speech, because according to Agamben, Christian theology of the first centuries struggled with the same ontological schemas that have been capturing the Western perception of life. Those schemas constitute a solid structure. What is more, by tracing theological (and ontological) thought back to its roots, Agamben not only intends to uncloak the structural analogies and the empty centre, but to indicate at something hidden beneath – the aliveness upon which the discourse about “life” was formed¹⁵. To treat the above-mentioned seriously, literally, one must acknowledge what is the subject of the politics of deferral. It is not a meaning or an abstract structure, but suffering life.

This leads directly to a question concerning the human condition and more specifically, a question about where lie the limes which make suffering caused by natural fatality almost indistinguishable from what befalls history. Even if Agamben would not agree with that, his divorcing from anthropocentrism does not exclude therefore some kind of anthropology, otherwise one could not explain his persistent obsession with anthropogenesis (Agamben 2004). Humanity means coming to terms with animality, or, to put it more precisely, an attitude of speaking beings toward the fact of their aliveness. Theology is only one of many speculative formations that responded to this challenge, but its response, especially in a moralistic explanation of the original sin, obscured the whole question,

15 This enigmatic aliveness, given as an experience and forced to become a notion, was what Hannah Arendt in her doctoral thesis from 1929 destined to pertain to “the pretheological sphere”, which in my opinion accentuated anthropology as a point of resistance to theology and every totalizing discourse; see Zawisza 2012. Aliveness was then elaborated quite differently through the biopolitical paradigm, among others by Agamben, but with an unreserved acceptance of the Heideggerian antihumanist vista, which undermines the consistency of any positive proposal. Biopolitics fails in its conceptualisation of the endless richness of life by excluding one form of its expressions, namely the peculiar unnatural character of the human condition. Thus, I am inclined to regard Agata Bielik-Robson’s messianic vitalism, which is deeply concerned with antinaturalistic humanism (Bielik-Robson 2012), as an unavoidable voice in the contemporary debate about “life”, dominated mostly by thinkers associated with the biopolitical paradigm. Bielik-Robson’s theory of life introduces a polemical alternative, which is more in tune with the intuitions embedded in Arendtian natalism. On her polemics with Agamben, see Bielik-Robson 2010, Bielik-Robson 2011a.

ascribing imperfection to humankind and thus ending any discussion¹⁶. For that reason, Agamben seeks a detheologized view of life – trying to think simultaneously of the initial threshold when *homo sapiens* appeared – rather than theological ground.

What Toscano's critique misses is nothing other than anthropology, which allows Agamben to gaze at the far-reaching historical horizon, even at the expense of loosening ties with Foucaultian skepsis, but without the intention of its total abandonment. It seems that Agamben mistrusted consequent relativism and he is trying now to cope with the question of why some modes of thought, like the sacrifices, survived through the ages intact. Toscano underestimates the gravity of this question, saying, "Nor does Agamben consider the possibility that the persistence of certain thought forms might be less relevant than their redeployment to radically different ends within incommensurable discursive formations" (Toscano 2011, 127)¹⁷. For Agamben it would still be a sidestep to equate "systematic structures" with simple transposition or the mysterious journey of philosophically conceived essences. Agamben speaks also about necessary "omissions" and exclusions that accompanied operations of transfer between theology and politics (Agamben 2011a, 272). Those omissions are unpredictable and in that sense contingent, nonetheless their incessant returns are necessary¹⁸ – due to the impossibility of the goal they are supposed to achieve,

16 Although, as I argued, both myth and dogma try to face the problem of questions without answers and for that reason both of them pretend to have sufficient answers, „[...] the myth satisfies the criterion of totality by leaving nothing unsaid. The myth allows one to see that there is nothing more there to say and there will never be more to say something that no theory can dare to assert" (Blumenberg 1985, 177). Instead of an overabundance of stories produced by myth to accommodate various inquietudes, dogma chooses one version and attempts to make it definitive: "[...] across the history of mankind's consciousness, questions have been posed and then answers have been attempted whose inadequacy exposed them to displacement by other answers to the same questions. Dogma appears as a defense against this process of displacement, as laying something down in a written form made definitive by an extraordinary sanction. It can be accomplished only by institutionalization, and that makes it clear how inimical to institutions myth is" (Blumenberg 1985, 184).

17 Additionally, Toscano writes that "it is not so much the continuity of the theological but the persistence of certain social relations and their imaginaries, which explains the insistence of certain ideas of government throughout such a *longue durée*" (Toscano 2011, 127). Although Agamben does not employ this second option often, the "bi-univocal" structure of the governmental machine envisages as part of its inner, fundamental reciprocity a mutual bolstering of materially embedded patterns (e.g. the Persian court's rules – an example used by Agamben and praised by Toscano) and their ideal, conceptually codified images. What is more, Agamben's Girardianism predisposes him to detect in "the persistence of certain social relations and their imaginaries" an indispensable trace of theological justification, which every religion (according to him, the capitalist one too) uses to obscure cruelty behind the fumes of glory. Neither politics, nor theology dominates – rivalry between them resembles twin animosities: what dominates is symmetry, because to speak about God and Kingdom the first Christian theologians adopted political concepts which later were maintained by references to theology.

18 The problem of how to approach Agambenian methods in relation to the history of ideas and the history of concepts reaches beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, Elías José Palti in his text about German debates concerning the relations between these two methodologies posed the questions which must be addressed also towards Agamben: "On the one hand, it is necessary to postulate the existence of an ineradicable remainder of facticity that prevents the logical closure of conceptual systems and opens them to temporality. Only this postulate may explain the openness of conceptual formations: why change is intrinsic to conceptual history. But, on the other hand, this postulate raises a number of new issues: how to approach this realm that resists symbolization according to the categories available in a given language, and that dislocates it. If this realm is not already invested with meaning, what is its ontological nature, and what are the ways by which it eventually enters the symbolic ambit and

namely to bridge the gap between word and flesh, between the speaking being and its aliveness.

Since Toscano did not take into account the deepest ground of Agambenian thought, he could graciously write that,

though Agamben does not straightforwardly embody the apologetic Christian purposes that Hans Blumenberg identifies in the discourse on secularisation – the idea that the conceptual patrimony of the Church was expropriated and misused – he does manifest one of the key aspects of that discourse, the idea of a substantial continuity (Toscano 2011, 128).

If we would need to indicate a candidate for “substance” in Agamben’s thought, it could only be “life as such” (or maybe: pure aliveness), however – as I mentioned earlier – even this concept was affected by historical mutations (inter alia related to secularisation) and always already captured by some structure of its articulation. On the other hand, the mysterious continuity of those structures might be explained thanks to the following hypothesis: although we are removed from late antiquity by many epochal changes, dogma has nonetheless remained preserved by ecclesiastical bodies – simply by repetition¹⁹. In turn, this repetition was effective enough so as to transmit the general conceptual framework that had been forming Western thought throughout history even after churches and synagogues had lost their power over political institutions and communities. Even if this would be an accurate historical reconstruction, Agamben will remain mostly preoccupied by the very condition that makes life subjected, namely “[...] this split in the experience of language that law and religion are born, both of which seek to tie speech to things and to bind, by means of curses and anathemas, speaking subjects to the veritative power of their speech, to their “oath” and to their declaration of faith (Agamben 2011b, 58).”

We see how the fact that Agamben dared to take a step out of the edifice of historicism provokes anathemas that were intended to call into question his fame as a critical theorist. Nevertheless, there is no need to worry about his reputation in that regard. One may have reservations towards the methodology applied by Agamben; however, he can by no

forces it to become reconfigured?” (Palti 2010, 198). What is more, another challenge for conceptual history – next to Agambenian polemics with constructivist approaches – could be a history redescribed according to the lines of personal idiosyncrasies of the author and scientific writing practiced as a form of life, which is still characteristic feature of Central and Eastern European intelligentsia, see Bielik-Robson 2011b, Majewski 2011, Ulicka 2007, Ulicka 2013.

¹⁹ Agamben, however, seems to be more concentrated on continuity than on conceptual swerves. This is his vice, especially in comparison with Blumenberg whose arabesque style made his writings incomparably more profound. His *Work on Myth* is ornamented with many peculiar, often very funny examples and anecdotes that play on self-contradictions to expose fruitful incongruences or forgotten paths, neglected by “tradition” which, without these idiosyncrasies, would have become a lumber room full of slogans and banalities.

means be enthroned, neither ironically nor seriously, as a Church Father. On the contrary, the manner in which he scrutinised ecclesiastical history bespeaks the most possible detachment.

Conclusion: religion as a side effect

To sum up, Agamben recognizes the impact that theology exerted over political theory and jurisprudence, but he balances it using the opposite perspective with the help of which one can ask about the political provenance of theological concepts. Following Girard's intransigence on searching for the original²⁰, Agamben treats theology as merely a reflexive, theoretical and *late* expression of what had been practised by older institutions, even if without justification comparable in density to that elaborated by Christian theologians. In *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath* (Agamben 2011b) those older institutions were at the centre of the author's analysis: it turned out that religion, next to politics and law, had pullulated from the same, the oldest human institution, the oath. Oath illuminates the origin of language²¹, in turn marking a caesura when aliveness was alienated and abandoned by a creature who had begun to speak on its behalf. Life found itself under the stress of justification²². Reading *Il sacramento del linguaggio* (2008) through the lenses of *Il linguaggio e la morte* (1982), one may risk the hypothesis that, in order to speak, this particular animal, just while becoming a human animal, sacrifices itself, disassociating from aliveness and creating the first *homo sacer*, which became the model for every following act of inclusive exclusion. Viewed from that perspective, religion and theology seem to be derivative, not foundational.

Thus, Agamben deprived Schmittian political theology of its unjustified theological aura and the frightening seriousness that characterises "the ultimate". He pointed to an even more serious phenomenon, turning back to "a time before the separation"²³, meaning before politics and theology had diverged. This approach may compromise any more historically

20 "A unique generative force exists that we can only qualify as religious in a sense deeper than the theological one" (Girard 1977, 24).

21 Colby Dickinson even attempts to link the Agambenian quest for language with "the state of original sin", nonetheless he usually writes this term using quotation marks (Dickinson 2011a).

22 For that reason, the ruling classes often turned to theology, which was believed to represent a neutral, external authority: "In the same way that sacrificial victims must in principle meet the approval of the divinity before being offered as a sacrifice, the judicial system appeals to a theology as a guarantee of justice. Even when this theology disappears, as has happened in our culture, the transcendental quality of the system remains intact. Centuries can pass before men realize that there is no real difference between their principle of justice and the concept of revenge. Only the transcendental quality of the system, acknowledged by all, can assure the prevention or cure of violence" (Girard 1977, 23–24).

23 "For this reason, it does not make sense to oppose secularism and the general will to theology and its providential paradigm; what is needed is, rather, an archaeological operation like the one that we have attempted here, one that, by moving upstream to a time before the separation that took place and that turned the two poles into rival but inseparable brothers, undoes the entire economic-theological apparatus and renders it inoperative" (Agamben 2011a, 285).

oriented philosophical projects, like those conducted by Blumenberg and Foucault, nevertheless the Agambenian perspective also threatens the conservative tendency of conducting ahistorical analyses, or at least it blocks conservative interpretations of his own oeuvre. What can perhaps be estimated as the most promising opening of Agamben's "theological" writings is the chance given, once again, to speculative thought and the courage of posing truly ultimate questions about the human mode of being in the world.

At the same time, it is not nostalgia for dialectical synthesis that reigns in Agambenian thought, but its reversal. Agamben works like a patient watchmaker who, however, does not intend to repair a broken mechanism. His main task is to make a performance out of showing the interiors of this mechanism in their last detail, exposing how this precious toy functions and towards which aims it is used. Agamben's deconstruction of the Western tradition targets its most coherent and cumulative element, namely the transposition of Greek metaphysics into Christian, especially Catholic, theology. His recently published books seem to be the itemised commentaries to *Römischer Katholizismus und politische Form* (1923) written by Carl Schmitt, where he depicted the political genius of the Catholic Church built on the one sacrificial mechanism, namely *complexio oppositorum*. To put it in a framework alien to the Schmittian intention, but tethered to his conceptual language, this mechanism provided fertile ground for encompassing and overcoming every contradiction, which must have been very useful not only for theology, but also for papal policy as its power expanded and caused the physical or symbolic elimination of the Church's enemies, like Gnostic Christianity and other Gnostics, to only name a few²⁴.

Agamben disarmed this sacrificial mechanism, which was particularly active in Catholicism since this institution needed an ultimate justification both for theology (which resulted in the strive for theodicy) and for its "earthly" existence, to explain what would be the secular role of the Church after the Second Coming of Christ did not happen. While Schmitt was inclinable to affirm the whole history of Christianity, Agamben impugns every touchy element of its tradition, above all its political influence: from the titles attributed to Christ as the highest priest and, in consequence, the monopolization of spiritual power by the clergy, through the impossibility of canonical law on the basis of religion which abolished governance by law, to the controversial status of ecclesiastic property. There is no left here one stone upon another... An urgent question arises henceforth: how to put philosophy practised on rubble to good use?

24 What I can point to only marginally here is the fact that Agamben, despite his sympathy for heterodox and esoteric legacy – probably somehow inspired by Frances Yates who facilitated his stay at the Warburg Institute – remains mostly connected to Spinozian pantheism. That determines his misguided understanding of Gnosticism, which, in turn, affects his anthropology, miserably suspended in limbo between hope and hopelessness, between self-assertion and condemnation.

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TYTUŁ: Dyskretna przekora Giorgia Agambena

ABSTRAKT: Wielu krytyków zarzucało myśli Giorgia Agambena ahistoryczność. Ostatnio podobne oskarżenia wysunął Alberto Toscano, formułując je przez przywołanie krytyki Hansa Blumenberga względem tezy o sekularyzacji oraz jego teorii zmiany epokowej. Według Toscano, z powodu akceptacji dla Schmittiańskiego pojęcia sekularyzacji, bazującego na substancjalizmie historycznym, Agamben nie tylko sprzeniewierza się metodologii Michela Foucaulta – którą deklaratywnie przyjmuje – ale także ciąży ku uznaniu dominacji pojęć teologicznych jako źródła całej filozoficznej tradycji Zachodu oraz jego instytucji politycznych. Moim zamiarem jest pokazanie, że nawet poniekąd powierzchowne stwierdzenia Agambena na temat sekularyzacji są równoważone przez podjęte przez niego

podwójny wysilek. Po pierwsze, chociaż przyznaje on znaczenie dziedzictwu teologicznemu, to jednocześnie odrzuca pierwszeństwo religii jako niezbędnego fundamentu etyki i polityki. Co więcej, jego skrupulatne i bardzo gęste studia nad teologią chrześcijańską sytuują go na pozycji najbardziej przenikliwego ze współczesnych krytyków kościoła katolickiego oraz jakichkolwiek teologiczno-politycznych hybryd ukonstytuowanych poprzez nadużycie władzy.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: teologia ekonomiczna, sekularyzacja, Giorgio Agamben, Hans Blumenberg, Alberto Toscano