A Christian Perspective

With philosophy and sociology called to the witness stand for the material side of the actor-network, I want to propose a Christian perspective which strengthens the human side as well. Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer* project helps us find ways how we as humans can become both materially and socially sensitive through subversive strategies.

As a theologian, I sometimes wonder how the Judaeo-Christian heritage that talks about the goodness and purposefulness of creation can even bring forward a world view that subjugates the material to the human will in a way that in the end leads to a subjugation of *both* men and material. I also wonder if the same heritage can contribute to a materially sensitive position which shows respect for all of the actors in the network. While I will only briefly touch on the first question, the latter shall be my main concern here. This theoretical position will then be brought in contact with Christian practice in the following parts of this book.

A Christian position that is sensitive to the potential of the material has to come to terms with the question that already became important in the discussion of Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*: How can we talk about the goodness of the material world when the material's potentiality can yield both positive and destructive results? Even if Christians, as well as Bloch, refer to the "already and not yet" (e.g. John 3:2) of salvation, and with that account for the unperfected state of the world, they must explain how the perfected state at the end of times will be reached – without forcefully bringing the world round to the divine plan.

An Exegetical Exhortation for an Engagement with the Material World

Materialistic exegesis has approached the problem of a perfected state in the material world with a focus on human praxis. If we take Kuno Füssel's guide to a materialistic reading of the bible as an example, it becomes apparent right at the beginning of his book that his reading aims at an overcoming of the current praxis, especially the politics of oppression as witnessed by him in the 1980s in the countries of Latin America. He is deeply engrained in the thought of Marx and Engels, which sought to change the praxis – and through that the "conditions for the perception and the circumstances of human life as such"* (Füssel 1987, p. 17) – and not merely to contemplate it.

> The efforts of materialistic theory are to recognise the individual moments of praxis – work, fight, thought – in a way that concrete change is guided by them. This is the moment where Marx and Engels separated themselves from Hegel's philosophy* (ibid., p. 15).

There is much to say for this reading of the Bible and two aspects stand out for a materially sensitive theology. One is that praxis, in particular the daily lives of the workers,[1] is given a prominent epistemological dignity, because these men and women "are experiencing the construction of reality with their bodies and not just with their minds, because they are grasping [or comprehending in the literal sense; C.P.] things with their hands"* (ibid., p. 17). This appreciation for a physical and bodily engagement highlights the importance of deeply engaging with the material world which other philosophers and sociologists, such as Jane Bennett or Bruno Latour, have emphasised in their approaches.

The other aspect that is noteworthy is the partiality against the reigning political discourse, which stabilises the power and exclusivity of a small group of people. While terms such as "class struggle" seem outdated nowadays, the question if and how theology should be partial and how its liberating potential should influence politics remains valid.

1 Füssel is conceptually rooted both in the Marxist vocabulary and in the struggles of Latin America in the 1980s and 90s.

> The *partiality of God's acting* in history prohibits a neutral, literal, and timeless-general reading, which dismisses everything into the mental/spiritual. The belief of scripture is liberating praxis […]. Materialistic reading of the bible means: awaking the sense of scripture as liberating praxis! (ibid., p. 27)

There is no doubt that the focus on the human engagement with the material world is an important learning from materialistic exegesis. Regarding the practical application of that approach today, it is important to search for an actualisation that widens the scope beyond the basic ecclesiastic communities of the 1980s. After all, the first part of *Lumen Gentium* (LG 8) follows the call to deeply engage with the world, which it applies it to the whole of the church:

> Christ Jesus, "though He was by nature God […] emptied Himself, taking the nature of a slave", and "being rich, became poor" for our sakes. Thus, the Church, although it needs human resources to carry out its mission, is not set up to seek earthly glory, but to proclaim, even by its own example, humility and self-sacrifice. Christ was sent by the Father "to bring good news to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart", "to seek and to save what was lost". Similarly, the Church encompasses with love all who are afflicted with human suffering and in the poor and afflicted sees the image of its poor and suffering Founder. It does all it can to relieve their need and in them it strives to serve Christ (LG 8).[2]

And at the same time it is important that an actualisation of materialistic exegesis does not just help us engage with the concrete, material historical realities but reminds us that this engagement must follow the path that is respectful of the material realities of the world. It resembles Latour's constructive critic we discussed earlier rather than an absolutist ruler who bends the world to his or her will. One could argue that such an image of God challenges our longing for a divine architect to make things right against the injustices of history.

While an absolutist position could claim many biblical references, the might of Israel under its God or the forceful beginning of the kingdom of heaven in the apocalyptic tradition, there are passages that make us doubt whether God

2 Herbert Haslinger has exemplified the meaning of this passage for the mission as well as the essence of what it means to be church in detail (Haslinger 2015, p. 337).

is indeed an almighty architect. The *Songs of the Servant* in the book of Isaiah speak of the servant of JHWH and his role in the history of salvation. They are part of the Deuteroisaiah tradition, which we might situate in the context of the Babylonic exile of Jerusalem's elite and their waiting for their liberation and return home. The authors were probably a group or a school of prophets which set the might of God and his plan for salvation against the dire situation in exile (cf. Rösel and Schwiderski 2011). Four songs speak about God's servant who will come and "bring forth justice to the nations" (Isaiah 42.1). But this servant is different from a powerful ruler:

> 2 He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice,
> or make it heard in the street;
> 3 a bruised reed he will not break,
> and a faintly burning wick he will not quench;
> he will faithfully bring forth justice.
> 4 He will not grow faint or be discouraged
> till he has established justice in the earth;
> and the coastlands wait for his law.
>
> Isaiah 42:2-4

Verse three is particularly important from a materialist perspective since it talks about preserving the structure of the material, however bruised and burnt it is. It is working with rather than against the material world. This requires time, as the servant needs not to be "discouraged." There are many passages, especially in the creation story, that speak of the wonders of nature at the beginning of the world, but this perspective adds that the eigenvalue of things will also be preserved at the *end* of time. Furthermore, since the *Songs of the Servant* have been understood as a parable either for a group of people within Israel, Israel as a whole, or the coming messiah, the preserving of the material also hints at the preserving of the human nature, however bent and bruised it is. This brings us to the question of how messianic power is being enacted.

Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer Project as a Subversive Praxis

While it exceeds the scope of this book to look into Giorgio Agamben's philosophy as a whole and in it discern between aspects that contribute to a materially

sensitive pastoral theology and more problematic passages that display an essentially pessimistic undertone,[3] he is an important interlocutor here, because he tries to deal with the temptation of power, in fact he questions power itself, much like the *Songs of the Servant* do. What makes Agamben's position different is that he does not call for the divine sovereign – in the sense in which Carl Schmidt portrays an absolute ruler in his 1923 *Römischer Katholizismus und politische Form* (Schmidt 2016), Roman Catholicism and political form. Rather, Agamben proposes a "potenza destituente," which does not destroy the structures of oppression and then turns into an oppressive power as well. Agamben's use of power is taken here as a strategy how human actors can be both active, in the sense of Bloch's "tua res agitur", and at the same time preserve the delicate and tightly woven web of human and non-human actors that surrounds our existence in this world.

To understand Agabmen's position it is helpful to remind ourselves of his philosophical background. He became first known as an interpreter of Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger, claiming that "one worked as an 'antidote' for the other, as they looked at the same problems from different perspectives"* (Gorgoglione 2016, p. 66), as Ruggiero Gorgoglione writes in his account of Agamben's philosophy. But Agamben's opus magnum are certainly the books that loosely form the corpus of his *homo sacer* project. According to Gorgoglione, Agamben works with the method of a Foucauldian "philosophical archaeology,"* trying "to understand how a discourse formed and then became canonised"* (ibid., p. 76). In the case of *homo sacer* he looks at the discourses of bio-politics.

> According to Agamben, the political is based on two contradictory but complementary processes. One regards the transformation of life into good life *(bíos)* and parallel to that the other regards the exclusion of naked life from the political existence* (ibid., p. 78).

As the title *homo sacer* suggests, Agamben looks in particular at life excluded from politics, which he calls "naked life" or, referring to the practice of declaring persons as outside of the law in both antiquity and modern states, *homo*

3 Agamben's criticism of democratic decision making during the coronavirus pandemic, which the philosopher laid out in an open-ed in the *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, has raised opposition from prominent theologians (cf. Agamben 2020; Florin 2020).

sacer. Today's *homines saceri* are for Agamben the "ultra-comatose, refugees, or the inmates of a camp"* (Gorgoglione 2016, p. 80).

Agamben's philosophy is decidedly political in that he argues that the status of the *homo sacer* stands at the beginning of politics, the constitution of the body politic itself. Political order begins with the power of the sovereign who creates order and at the same time produces naked life. Here Agamben follows Carl Schmidt and his concept of an initial "state of exception" during which the sovereign declares other people *homines saceri* (ibid., p. 103).

For Agamben the figure of the *homo sacer* shows that the exclusion of people is a necessary feature of the political order and not a by-product of the past atrocities of war and genocide. Agamben also reminds us of the deadly consequences of these exclusions, which become particularly prominent in prisoner-of-war camps such as Guantanamo or the camps for migrants in Italy. In these places, the political power manifests in the fact that it holds people in a suspended state where they are completely bereaved of their rights and the control over their bodies and actions, *their potentiality to act*, where they "are no longer alive but not dead yet"* (ibid., p. 103).

There are, however, ways out of this state of suspension, a form of resistance that breaks through the bio-political dispositive,[4] which Agamben looks at towards the end of his *homo sacer* project. Two of them we shall be concerned with here. Agamben mentions them – unfortunately only briefly – at the end of his book *The Use of Bodies* (Agamben 2016).

The first way that I want to mention here is the concept of *forma di vita*, or form of life, which for Agamben is every life that "evades every possible definition and therefore can autonomously control its potentiality"* (Gorgoglione 2016, p. 110). This control over one's own life and its potentiality means that one emancipates oneself from the reigning bio-political ontological dispositive which states that every potential must be realised in a specific way. This is where Agamben uses words such as de-institution, de-activation, or neutralisation to denote that his break through the power structures is different from other forms of resistance (cf. ibid. 131). Here the aforementioned "potenza des-

4 Agamben uses Michel Foucault's terminus "dispositive" to describe ensembles of power structures and systems, within which politics and modern life as a whole happens (cf. Agamben 2008).

tituente" comes into play as a way "to deactivate something and render it inoperative – a power, a function, a human, [an] operation – without simply destroying it but by liberating the potentials that have remained inactive in it in order to allow a different use of them" (Agamben 2016, p. 273).

The second way I want to highlight is Agamben's idea that we need to break through the total reign of capitalism which bases everything on the structure of consumption and consumer value. He calls this strategy "profanation," which he sees as "neutralising the given function of things […] and opening new and not yet given configurations of the relations between humans [and] things"* (Gorgoglione 2016, p. 126). As I understand "profanation" it means bringing back the richness of connections and the networked nature of our relations to things and people. It means that both things and people are set free from the function they are to fulfil in a modern economic and political system. Their eigenvalue – and stubbornness – is valued again.

Agamben is relatively brief when it comes to showing how his proposed de-institutionalising forms of resistance can be applied in the real world. I want to refer to two examples here that Agamben uses and that show how he meant the de-instituionalising power to be put into practice. Along these lines I can then further proceed with my own suggestions for human action in the third part of this book.

In his essay *Das Erfordernis einer destituierenden Gewalt und die Suche nach einer messianischen Lebenskunst*, the need for a destituent power and the search for a messianic way of life, Martin Kirschner takes up a biblical example from Agamben's *The Use of Bodies*, namely the way the apostle Paul relates to the Mosaic Law. Kirschner sets out to explain that Paul in 1 Cor 15:24, where he portrays the messiah as someone who will "disempower all dominion, authority, and power," and in Romans 10:4, where he says that believers will be "set free from the law," does not argue for a destruction of the law. It is rather a neutralisation of the destructive power of the law and an opening up a space for a new and positive use of the law (cf. Kirschner 2018, p. 14). The "messianic contact to the world […] breaks the system of power relations within which we exist and that hold us captive and determine us; he disrupts them so that we can […] approach them in a different way, so that we can use them freely"* (ibid., p. 23).

Paul can say that the messiah can both render the law inoperative and at the same time present himself as the telos, i.e. the "end or fulfilment" (Agamben 2016, p. 273), of the law because he sees the dawning of a new form of living,

which does not do away with the old ways for something new – that would be to institutionalise just another form of political power in Carl Schmitt's sense – but to live in a state which Paul defines with the formula "as if not", in 1 Cor 7:29-31: "From now […] those who use the things of the world [should live] as if not engrossed in them".

> The "as not" is a deposition without abdication. Living in the form of the "as not" means rendering destitute all juridical and social ownership, without this deposition founding a new identity. A form-of-life is, in this sense, that which ceaselessly deposes the social conditions in which it finds itself to live without negating them, but simply by using them (Agamben 2016, p. 274).

Another example mentioned by Agamben is the way in which the Franciscan monks tried to protect their *form of life* against the authoritative control of the Catholic church: they chose to live in radical poverty.

> New and relevant was the idea to base a form of life on radical poverty. In this way the Franciscans renounced every form of property and with that [in the dispositive of the medieval society; C.P.] every right, they neutralised the exercise of power without questioning the existence of the institutions. This is why the Franciscan order could respect the power of the church and ignore it at the same time* (Gorgoglione 2016, p. 127).

But Agamben does not just refer to a particular strategy of one monastic order, he also sees the potential of the contemplative way of life as such as a way to de-activate the present power structures through the mode of *inoperativity*.

> One can […] understand the essential function that the tradition of Western philosophy has assigned to the contemplative life and to inoperativity: […] the properly human life is the one that, by rendering inoperative the specific works and functions of the living being, causes them to idle […][,] so to speak, and in this way opens them into possibility. Contemplation and inoperativity are in this sense the metaphysical operators of anthropogenesis, which, in liberating living human beings from every biological and social destiny, and every predetermined task, render them available for that peculiar absence of work that we are accustomed to calling "politics" and "art" (Agamben 2016, pp. 277–278).

Being freed from the having to function in a predetermined way – along the dominant narrative or bio-political dispositive – enables humans to see themselves and the world around them in a new light, as well as to engage in changing their surroundings through politics and reacting to them through art. At the end of his epilogue to *The Use of Bodies*, Agamben quotes the philosopher Baruch de Spinoza to describe the joy this would bring.

> And in this consists the greatest good that, according to the philosopher, the human being can hope for: "a joy born from this, that human beings contemplate themselves and their own potential for acting" (ibid., p. 278).

In this way I see Agamben's writings at the end of his *homo sacer* project as showing a way how human beings can subversively de-activate power relations without breaking the network of relations. It is a way that demands a completely different mindset from the company-knows-best and bending-the-material-your-way mindset that has prominently featured in the description of the *Bell Laboratories* – but also, albeit in fainter traces, in Bloch's focus on human action – in this second part. Most importantly, Agamben provides us as human actors with a strategy that takes into consideration that, following the Christian imperative, we must act to make this world a better place.