

Research Article

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Political Theology and COVID-19: Agamben's Critique of Science as a New "Pandemic Religion"

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Abstract: The philosopher Giorgio Agamben has reacted to the coronavirus crisis in a way that markedly contrasts with most other positions in contemporary political philosophy. His position has been described as irrational, politically incorrect, and unfair toward the victims of COVID-19. In this article, we delve into the foundations of this peculiar, pessimistic, and controversial reaction. From Agamben's conceptual framework, we will explain how state responses to the COVID-19 crisis have turned science into a new religion from the dogmas of which various strategies have been developed in order for states to exercise biopolitical power under theological guises.

Keywords: state of exception, political theology, COVID-19, sovereignty

1 Introduction

At the beginning of 2020, an important philosophical debate took place on the COVID-19 crisis. Various contemporary thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek, Roberto Esposito, and Jean-Luc Nancy put forward their positions regarding the critical situations then developing. In February 2020, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben intervened with a press release that aroused the most relentless criticism from the philosophical community. The title of the publication: *The invention of an epidemic* revealed the critical position that Agamben advanced against the measures that have been imposed by states within their responses to the health emergency. In that publication, the renowned philosopher called the state responses to the pandemic crisis "frantic, irrational and completely unjustified." Agamben questioned why the media and the authorities were making an effort "to spread a climate of panic, causing a true state of exception, with serious limitations on movements and a suspension of the normal functioning of living and working conditions in entire regions." From Agamben's perspective, those measurements were totally out of proportion to what, according to him, was simply a typical common flu.

A wave of criticism was quickly levied against Agamben and we shall examine in this article the most important elements thereof. We will not discuss the virus's destructive capacity since Agamben's classification of COVID-19 as "simply flu" falls by itself. What interests us is the link Agamben makes between the emergence of COVID-19 and what he conceptualizes as a resultant permanent state of exception.

Agamben has devoted himself for more than twenty years to the scholarly study of the state of exception in Western culture. While his study of the subject began solely on a theoretical and abstract plane, it

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suddenly took life before his eyes in the form of the worldwide response to COVID-19. For this reason, quite beyond Agamben's controversial position on the lethality of the virus, we are interested in the argument that the philosopher puts forward about a growing tendency of states to use the state of exception as a standard paradigm of government, a propensity of theirs for which the cover given by COVID-19 is ideally suited, as he explains in his most recent work.¹

This article will fulfill three purposes, arranged into three sections. First, we will examine Giorgio Agamben's theoretical proposal of the state of exception as a dialogue, on the one hand, with the criticisms received from other philosophers, and, on the other hand, with the possible applications that this theory would have in concrete situations generated by the COVID-19 crisis. Second, we will analyze the conceptual framework of political theology and economic theology in Giorgio Agamben's work, especially that developed in *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*. Finally, we will put this theory in the context of the health crisis and the question of the origin and legitimacy of laws and measures that affect social life in the state of emergency generated by the coronavirus. In Section 4, we will draw attention to the scope of the current state of exception that, in the Agambenian theoretical framework, will not be overcome with the end of the pandemic, in the same way, that it did not begin with it.

2 Pandemic and *homo sacer*: Our neighbor has been abolished

The Italian philosopher has attempted to carry further the philosophical project dealing with biopolitics and their underlying genealogical considerations that was initiated by Michel Foucault. Agamben describes the contemporary age as a time that manages to materialize the diagnosis that Foucault hinted at in reference to the concept of "biopolitics" in his last works. The notion of biopolitics has been used to describe the administration of power in human life as a government paradigm in Western culture. According to Foucault's conception of human powers: these act in two ways:² those that boost life or those that end it.³ From the first perspective, that of the impulse of life, human beings are, for those in power, simply raw material to be preserved; however, in the second case, those in power are compelled to exercise mechanisms that end the life of a part of the population that they administer. The two visions are complementary because, ultimately, the deaths of some subjects may serve to protect the lives of others. Giorgio Agamben revives the concept of biopolitics in order to describe contemporary society and goes one step further: he focuses his attention on a pessimistic perspective of biopolitics. Agamben dedicates himself to understanding the criteria for the administration of death that are exercised in the history of the West so as to identify biopolitical patterns in the governments of Western societies, as well as the reduced possibilities of resistance that may emerge in a world that has been turning into a "gigantic concentration camp."⁴

From Agamben's perspective, the most reprehensible cruelties that have taken place in the exercise of power in the West, instead of being exceptional anomalies, constitute instances inherent in the process of the social construction of modernity.⁵ In this way, Giorgio Agamben interprets Ernst Nolte's position on Auschwitz: history seems to resist being left in the past. Indeed, Auschwitz constitutes the obscene paradigm of the modern that Agamben turns into the founding myth of a biopolitical era. This paradigm refuses to "remain in the past" and gives meaning to contemporary forms of government. The Italian follows the weak but the constant beat of the *Muselman*⁶ of Auschwitz. The philosopher carries out, in a research

1 Agamben, *A Che Punto Siamo?*, 5–6.

2 Foucault, "Il Faut Défendre la Société," 218.

3 Duque, "El Carl Schmitt de los Tanato-políticos," 109.

4 Agamben, *Quel Che Resta di Auschwitz*, 50.

5 Agamben, *Profonazioni*, 34.

6 The term was used in the concentration camps to refer in a derogatory way to the prisoners who fell to their knees with their heads on the ground due to hunger and exhaustion. They were the "resigned to die," who did not represent, for the agents of power, no biopolitical value.

program over a decade and producing six books, a prodigious archaeological excavation of power so as to identify among its meanings what is the essential core of the modern, an explanation of the question of “how did we get to Auschwitz?” and through that genealogy journey finds the origins of the concept of “*Nuda Vita*.”⁷

Contemporary life, in the concept of biopolitics proposed by Agamben, has become a bare life. Life thus conceived is reduced to what is produced and managed by law. The individuals in a concentration camp are stripped of all rights and political–legal status; their life is treated, by the agents of power, as matter without human form, naked life: they are data, figures, biological units that are always disposable, as opposed to the greater value of the future and the preservation, paradoxically, of other lives.⁸ Under the rule exercised by the agents of power, *Nuda Vita*, according to Agamben, gives rise to the pauperization of human life in general. Among the concentration camp subjects, Agamben focuses on two figures; the *Musselman*, on the one hand, represents the most powerless figure in the concentration camp. Resigned to dying, he is engulfed in humiliation, fear, and horror. On the other hand, there is the *homo sacer*, who lives trapped in the middle of an incongruity; on the one hand, he bears the burden of a crime, but he is legally unsacrificable. That is, it is forbidden to subject him to death at the same time that he has to live knowing that others are allowed impunity if they kill him.⁹ Agamben advances and relates the *nuda vita* and the *homo sacer* as metaphors of modern life and the concentration camp as its paradigm. In this regard, Múnera and Benavides indicate that:

Bared life [as life for death] is not the simple natural life, but a politically unprotected life, permanently exposed to death or the humiliations caused, with total impunity, by the sovereign power or by those who compose it as citizens.¹⁰

It is inevitable to compare Agamben’s bare life concept with his statements about the disease and the states of emergency that COVID-19 has generated.

In particular, the intergenerational differences that are promoted in defense of general well-being are striking. All, but particularly the older generations, have experienced, in a certain way, being locked in a politically unprotected life, permanently exposed to death. The older adult has become a *Musselman* of the twenty-first century, resigned to death but while being unsacrificable. His death is an expected result that, however, is not directly ordered. The death is, in this case, expected as a natural result of the isolation offered, in European nursing homes, for instance. His death is considered a natural and inevitable result. The fact that consideration of the option of saving a patient with a ventilator leans naturally to a question as to who “*has a whole life ahead of him*,” at no time admits the other option of considering that choice as a criminal act in respect of other patients not so saved, puts us face to face with biopower. If the meaning of that choice seems justifiably natural, it is because in that normalization of horror lies the essence of the administration of power in the contemporary age, a power that conserves one life and ends another. This is the meaning of the criticism that Agamben makes of the health emergency’s political background, which not only affects the elderly as *Musselman* of the XXI century but, in general, is directed at all individuals of Western civilization destined to become a contemporary *homo sacer*. For Agamben, the message that sustains the biopolitics of COVID-19 is based on the promotion of horror: the governmental machine tells us that “*our neighbour has been abolished*.”¹¹

To analyze how life in the West has been transformed into a simple naked life due to the pandemic, we have systematically studied all of Giorgio Agamben’s discourse on the health emergency and the changes that are taking place in some Western democracies. After studying the sixteen chapters of the book *A che punto siamo? L’epidemia come politica* we have come upon an interesting finding: not only can it be verified that we live in a permanent state of exception, as Agamben presented in his research, but the pandemic has

7 Agamben, *Il Potere Sovrano*, 120.

8 Agamben, *Mezzi Senza*, 37–43.

9 Agamben, *Il Potere Sovrano*, 94.

10 Múnera and Benavides, *Normalidad*, 13.

11 Agamben, *A Che Punto Siamo?*, 9–10.

created a particular religious need to which the church cannot respond, but to which science can. That is, in the pandemic crisis science has become the new religion and takes from religion its forms and strategies of governing life, all the while using scientific arguments.

The author presented his arguments in the face of the COVID-19 crisis, as quarantines and restrictions on movement were being put into place in Europe, being presented as the most plausible means of handling the peaks of contagion during 2020. In our study, we have identified that the progression of Agamben's argument follows three basic stages, the first of which is present in his February 2020 publications. Here we can identify the notion of a *fear of contagion* as a key element.

The central idea raised by Agamben indicates that the management of the COVID-19 crisis has generated "a perverse vicious circle: the limitation of freedom imposed by governments is accepted in the name of a desire for security that has been induced by governments themselves, the same governments that are now intervening in order to satisfy that desire."¹² In this sense, this fear of contagion forms the fundamental basis of a new form of the traditional transaction between protection and obedience that has characterized the relationships between modern states and their citizens.

In his March 11 publication, at one of the most critical moments of the pandemic, Agamben explains that the fear of contagion has made citizens accept unprecedented restrictions on their freedoms, fuelled by the uncertainty generated by not being able to identify materially the source of risk and harm. The second group of arguments follows from the previous ones and supposes the transition from collective fear to *individual isolation*, with the deterioration in human relationships that this produces. These two elements, collective fear and individual isolation, support the third argument, which leads to the culmination of Agamben's criticism of governments. More specifically, in *Riflessioni sulla pestee* the author claims that the pandemic has reactivated a *need for religion* that the church cannot satisfy. This demand for religiosity is met today by what we refer to as science.

In summary, beyond confirming that we live in a permanent state of exception, the interesting finding that we would like to highlight is the emergence of a need for religion that the Church can no longer satisfy but that science can, even if only through theological strategies of government.

Agamben describes the theological form of science as a new religion made evident through a discourse disseminated via the media that combines religiosity with science. The author affirms that the obsessive appeal, "especially in the American press, to the word 'apocalypse' and to the end of the world is an indication of this."¹³ However, blind faith in science is not only evident in the media's discourse, but is also transferred to politics and decision making, that is, to the terrain of sovereignty. The decisions that promote life or end it in the context of the pandemic have been supported by scientific reasons that are sometimes contradictory. This reveals to us a science of differing opinions and prescriptions that range "from the heretical minority position (also represented by prestigious scientists) of those who deny the seriousness of the phenomenon to those within the mainstream orthodox discourse who affirm it and yet radically diverge among themselves in their opinions on how to deal with the pandemic."¹⁴

Contrary to what the essence of science would indicate, some experts (or some self-defined as such) act like governmental commissioners to define how life is to be promoted or ended. This situation is similar to that of a religious conflict, where the role of experts is not always to reach the best solution but rather "to ensure the favor of the monarch, who at the time of the past religious disputes that divided Christianity, took sides according to his interests with one current or another and imposed his solutions."¹⁵ In other words, this new "science" of religion comes interweaved with a new biopolitical government relying on theological strategies. In this article, we will analyze arguments that explain this change based on Agamben's work, mainly his genealogy of sovereignty in his work *Il regno e la gloria*.

¹² Agamben, "L'invenzione," 7.

¹³ Ibid., 5.

¹⁴ Agamben, *A Che Punto Siamo?*, 10.

¹⁵ Ibid., 20.

It is indispensable to compare Agamben's bare life concept with his statements about the disease and the states of emergency that COVID-19 has generated. In particular, the intergenerational differences that are promoted in defense of general societal well-being are striking. All, but particularly the older generations, have experienced, in a certain way, being locked into a politically unprotected life, permanently exposed to death. The older adult has become a *Musselman* of the twenty-first century, resigned to death, while being unsacrificable. His death is an expected result that, however, is not directly ordered. The death is, in this case, expected as a natural result of the isolation they offer, in Europe, for instance, in nursing homes. His death is considered a natural and inevitable result. The fact that the choice between saving a young patient with a ventilator leans naturally to who "*has a whole life ahead of him*," at no time admits the option of considering it as a criminal act, puts us face to face with biopower. If the meaning of that choice tends to naturalize, it is because in that normalization of horror lies the essence of the administration of power in the contemporary age, a power that drives one life and ends another. This is the meaning of the criticism that Agamben makes of the health emergency's political background, which not only affects the elderly as *Musselman* of the XXI century but, in general, is directed at all individuals of Western civilization destined to become a contemporary *homo sacer*. For Agamben, the message that sustains the biopolitics of COVID-19 is based on the promotion of horror: the governmental machine tells us that "*our neighbor has been abolished*."¹⁶

The sovereignty exercised by the governmental powers in this interpretation by Agamben does not require greater legitimacy than the very fact of being able to dispose of the lives of subjects. That is, the decisions of government agents are considered legitimate "by the simple fact of their sovereignty."¹⁷ This is what grounds as legal and legitimate the sovereign decision of the attribution of the ventilator referred to above, where reasons may be given or not since the symptom and the expression of sovereignty do not need reasons in order to be exercised.

For Agamben, where this sovereignty is developed is closely related to the duality between normality and exception that Carl Schmitt raised; however, it breaks the dichotomous scheme that characterized Plettenberg's jurist. Agamben indicates that the sovereign is not the one who decides *in* and *on* the state of exception but rather is the one capable of maintaining exceptional actions as an area subject to his control and presenting them as standard actions. Thus, to the old logic: *normality – exception – new normality* that we would long for with Schmitt's scheme, Agamben proposes a notion of permanent exceptionality. If Carl Schmitt went so far as to affirm that "the sovereign is at the same time, outside and inside the legal order"¹⁸ for his ability to suspend normality with the declaration of a state of exception and reinstitute a new legal order, Giorgio Agamben goes one step further: He affirms that his sovereign acts under a self-justifying imperative, which indicates: "the law is outside itself, and I, the sovereign, who am outside the law, declare that there is no outside the law."¹⁹

While in the Schmittian approach, exceptionality and sovereignty are attributes of the political struggle,²⁰ in Agamben, the place of power and its exercise are transcendent to political groups and actors. Authority and administration are expressed from a permanent exceptionality. For that reason, the sovereignty in Agamben is a place, not a specific actor. The government is a verb rather than a noun. So, while the sovereign for Schmitt may be a political party, a monarch, a populist leader, or even, in its last stage, a guerrilla group that decides *in* and *on* the state of exception, for Agamben, that role is the experience of governing, not a specific social actor.²¹ That is, it is not the result of a specific decision-maker but of the social and legal order that has been built in the West.²² This form of exceptionality is expressed permanently, without breaks or claims of *new normalities*. For Agamben, sovereignty and the right that emanates

¹⁶ Ibid., 9–11.

¹⁷ Múnera and Benavides, *Normalidad*, 15.

¹⁸ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 13–20.

¹⁹ Agamben, *Il Potere Sovrano*, 27.

²⁰ Duque and Del Prado, "A 100 Años," 286.

²¹ Agamben, *Stato di Eccezione*, 75.

²² Ibid., 34.

from it do not arise from the pauses of exceptionality that Schmitt proposes because, in the contemporary West, there is nothing more normal than living in a permanent state of exception. In other words, the state of exception in Giorgio Agamben's thought is not characterized by its abnormality and contingency, and it is not explained in terms of "normality to come," but instead by its permanence, which is why it is, in most cases, an imperceptible exceptionality.²³

Although the approach to a permanent state of exception places the COVID-19 crisis in a broad panorama, the criticisms received by another biopolitics researcher, Roberto Esposito, reflect that it is still too early to see beyond the "death toll," as Agamben urges. It is not yet time to analyze the qualitative effect that the decision to quarantine humanity and its freedoms will leave in the long term. Specifically, Esposito indicates to Agamben that the comparison between spending a few days in isolation in a comfortable Italian middle-class house and the horror of a concentration camp is implausible and irresponsible.²⁴ Esposito is right. However, we should add to his reply that the way COVID-19 restrictions are assumed is not the same in regions of the world where, for example, washing hands with soap and water has been a luxury for centuries. So, Esposito seems to lose sight of the fact that the exceptional is not dictated by the circumstances in which isolation is assumed but comes from how we internalize in customs what should not under any circumstances be accepted.²⁵ For example, we have incorporated as something "normal" that enormous regions of the world live under the quarantine imposed by hunger and misery. Agamben reminds us that the genuine plague is none other than the meekness with which we accept to live with exceptional and reprehensible situations.²⁶ Finally, this "normalization of the exceptional" is a consequence of sovereignty in the biopolitical era and the permanent state of exception, and the emergence of COVID-19 is settling into it, like its most advanced chapter.

3 COVID-19 and democracy: A people that can reign but not govern

Many of the criticisms that Agamben received sought to label him as part of the "conspiracy theorist paranoiacs" who assign to the states and the capitalist elites the responsibility of having spread fear amongst citizens when, in fact, capitalism and its government elites have been highly affected by the crisis. Žižek's criticism of Agamben, for example, questioned the benefit that the state of emergency could bring to governments and capitalist elites because, in the end, the emergency has accentuated, on the one hand, general distrust in the governments and, on the other hand, an unprecedented economic crisis. Žižek asks Agamben: what elite would be interested in promoting such a movement against their interests? The answer in favor of Agamben to this question can be found in the criticism that Paolo Flores d'Arcais made of Agamben in *MicroMega*. For Flores d'Arcais, COVID-19 has not strengthened the state or capital's power. This position coincides with that of Žižek. However, the pandemic has been characterized by the appearance of a new "conspiracy of white coats": doctors and scientists who appear today as depositaries of the "last word" in government on the lives of its citizens. According to Flores d'Arcais, this is/represents a power more significant than the interests of governments and capital.²⁷

If we focus on the way decisions are made in the COVID-19 state of exception, and in the Agambenian theoretical framework, we will see that governments rely on the medical-scientific argument to justify their decisions with two benefits to them, such administrators; on the one hand, they avoid the need to submit their proposals to the demanding deliberation of democratic systems and, on the other hand – with that

²³ Ibid., 75–100.

²⁴ Esposito, "Curati a Oltranza," 2.

²⁵ Agamben, *A Che Punto Siamo?*, 17–8.

²⁶ Ibid., 18–20.

²⁷ Flores-D'Arcais, "Filosofia e Virus," 2.

shortcut and delegation to the scientists – the governments exempt from their original responsibilities; as simple “operators” of a scientific decision that, after all, is alien to them. So, that last decision of the “white coats” to which Flores d’Arcais refers is not taken in some way above the governments themselves but is instead used by the latter as an argument of authority that operates theologically. If we consider the theological background in which the scientific decisions that subsequently sustain government actions arise, we see a correlation between earthly government authorities and “scientific sovereignty.” This self-power justifies coercive decisions under the irrefutable halo that medicine offers. In the long term, contrary to what Žižek says, those measures that in principle seem to affect capital and the states will strengthen them notably, since the exceptional will become routine, in an accelerated way and with a high democratic cost that will be difficult to recover. In the end, with the irrefutable and self-imposed argument of “medical reason,” the governments that have sustained the temporary suspension of the legal order will have been able to justify unprecedented control over the individual and society to protect them from an unprecedented danger. In summary, by dint of the medical–political duality, in the crisis of COVID-19, a contemporary version of the theological–political duality that Agamben studied is forged to explain that who governs, in the occidental democracies is that power capable of converting the state of exception into order, and the world – into a gigantic “concentration camp.” Seen like this, the relationship between theology and politics that can be established in the decisions taken to contain COVID-19, coming from Agamben, does not correspond in any way with a conspiratorial agenda.

In Agamben’s viewpoint, the world configured as a concentration camp predates COVID-19; in fact, it is as old as Western societies’ very formation. How does Agamben explain why we got to this point? Agamben considers that the West’s history is the history of creating a bipolar biopolitical “governmental machine” that operates theologically on human lives, despite having eliminated the need to sustain its actions in some essence or primary political substance: the machinery of government that does not need to refer to a divine foundation and, nevertheless, is always presented as a sacred institution.²⁸

The biopolitical government is clothed with celestial majesty without properly a divine substance from which its authority emanates. In *Il regno e la gloria*, Agamben performs a genealogical exercise of modern government. He explains the emergence of this governmental machine, moving back to the Judeo-Christian theological origins. This genealogical development is highly relevant for understanding Agamben’s criticism of the global state of exception that has unleashed through COVID-19. Agamben’s research allows us to understand that modern Western culture has built a type of government that can dispense with the need to refer its decisions to a fundamental, essential, and superior power and, even so, operate under theological principles. The modern understood in this way does not presuppose, much less arise from, the rupture between substance and form, nor the separation between *auctoritas* and *potestas*. Rather, the modern invokes the discovery of an absent, immobile divine power, whose sacredness depends not on itself, but on the glorification of those who, without being God, have assumed the management of its praxis on earth.

In modern government the providential and scientific levels – that of power and that of authority – make up two poles that cooperate: they maintain the place of the sacred as an empty throne, that is, without a specific substance and, at the same time, they preserve the sacredness in the management rites that, “in the name of the sacred,” are carried out by angels, ministers, shepherds, saints for each prayer and, in general, all the bureaucratic machinery responsible for religious praxis. To reach this conclusion, Agamben faces the task of creating a genealogy of government, similar to that carried out by Foucault while going beyond Foucault’s work. Concurrently, the French philosopher finds in the pastoral work of the first two centuries of Christianity the authentically modern moment that found the birth of political power in the theological contamination of the human government’s world. Let us remember that for Foucault, this moment is characterized by transforming power into a properly human management attribute, that is, detached from transcendental sovereignty. Modern political power, that is, the capacity to provide security, administration, and management to the state, would be born, in Foucault’s perspective, from that pastoral power,

²⁸ For this reason, it is bipolar. It operates on the division between pure power and its management. Entre *Bios y Zoe*, economics and politics, sovereign power and biopolitical power.

in essence, private, and oriented to the economic technique that the priests and first Christian leaders carried out on their flock and over each one his “sheeps.”²⁹ For his part, in various theological treatises, Agamben analyzes how the political is also present in the origins of Jewish and Christian religious dogmatic discourses. Agamben explains, for example, that the term *oikonomia*, which characterizes the first private management of the “*pater familias*,” not only has the political implications that we know today in the states but also had and has profound theological implications to which Foucault did not pay enough attention. Thus, the domestic administration to which modern *oikonomia* refers is part of both the theological and the political.³⁰ For example, the Holy Trinity expresses a form of political management of the world; the economy is applied as an internal articulation that favors its praxis. Due to the internal connection that the three elements that compose it are unity and, at the same time, plurality of actions; here, the economy not only acts as a metaphor, of the modern separation of the legislative, executive, and judicial powers – as Foucault indicated – but they constitute – according to Agamben – its historical origin since it took place first in theology and later in politics.³¹ In summary, through an analysis of theological treatises, which are in themselves an invaluable finding,³² Agamben overcomes, on the one hand, the causal link between theology and politics and, on the other hand, questions the overvalued secularization of present theological concepts, for example, those of Carl Schmitt. For Agamben, theology is at the base of politics in the same way that politics was at the base of theology from its origins. The problematic issue has been that the bureaucratic apparatus of “domestic administrators,” those who today issue movement restriction orders, for example, has evolved to the current forms of *absolute control* over a social life, without the substance or foundation of those measures coming from *absolute power*.

Although Agamben refers to ancient theological texts, he argues that these texts have implications for understanding the current political decline, the tendency to authoritarianism, and the crisis of liberal democracies. He considers that the contemporary era is characterized by the total triumph of life's economic government in all its dimensions. With his genealogy, Agamben shows that life's objectification as an administrable good has not always been the prevailing paradigm. On the contrary, Agamben explains that the birth of the modern perspective on power is located precisely in the separation between two paradigms and the subsequent autonomy of one over the other: *political theology* and *economic theology*. In the first, God's will is the origin of sovereign power; that is, where the divine plan of salvation resides in the Judeo-Christian culture. In the second, both God's and human life are manageable matter: objects of an economy of life administered by experts and authorities authorized to resolve human vicissitudes.³³ In God's figure, *political theology* found the symbol of sovereign power, and *economic theology* substitutes the said transcendence with the idea of an *oikonomia* conceived as an immanent order.³⁴ The contemporary political crisis, the one that has led to the creation of this gigantic concentration camp, exacerbated by COVID-19, would be based on the fact that political theology has lost almost all ground to economic theology, a field of power that acquires independence and that does not need to be justified in the will of God, that is in, authentic and transcendent power, to rule. In this fracture between God and his praxis, Agamben identifies the emergence of the “western governmental machine,” a bipolar machine that separates God's omnipotence from the world's rational government, that is, absolute power, from its worldly exercise.

To better explain the above, Agamben analyzes the motto of constitutional monarchies with which kingdom and government differ, thus graphically describing his finding of the fracture of God: in the same

²⁹ Foucault, “Omnes et Singulatim,” 136–40.

³⁰ Agamben, *Il Regno e la Gloria*, 76.

³¹ The fundamental strategic device that gives *oikonomia* a new meaning, present in modern politics, is the inversion of the Pauline phrase “economy of mystery” in “mystery of economy.” See: Agamben, *Il Regno e la Gloria*, 76.

³² From documents of the Greek commentator on Aristotle, Alexander of Aphrodisias or Plutarch, quotations from the first and first half of the tenth century of the emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. Agamben is also notable for mentions of primary source documents of the rabbinical tradition through medieval philosophers such as Saadia Gaon and Yehudah Halevi.

³³ Agamben, *Il Regno e la Gloria*, 17, 58.

³⁴ Galindo-Hervás, “La Gloria,” 68.

way that “*the king reigns, but does not rule*,” God reigns, but does not rule in modern societies of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Economic theology gains greater independence as the field of government is abrogated, sustaining its exclusivity overall “*that which God cannot do*,” that field between the challenges of day-to-day human life and the mystery of divine truth, “becomes in the paradigm of the distinction between power and its exercise, between kingdom and government.”³⁵

This division presents us with a powerless God before his creation since “he can only act through the natural order that he has established.”³⁶ He can do everything, but he cannot do anything that is not an automatic response to his wisdom and to the logic of the order that he has established. A God powerless in the face of the daily demands of his creature since his logic does not belong to the world of the contingent but of the transcendent. For its part, in the human world, changing and unpredictable, everything is manageable from the understanding between humans; that is why this is a world that fits the possibility of government. Through a journey between primitive and medieval Christian texts, Agamben argues that modern government is present to administer the intermediate space between the particular and unpredictable events of men and the general providence or absolute power of God. The decisions of the men who govern that terrain will tend to apply general providence to the situations they live, making a calculation, ultimately an interpretation, of their decisions regarding the unknown plan of salvation. In Agamben’s words, the first rulers of *modern oikonomy* “would assume an idea of an order founded on the contingent play of immanent effects.”³⁷

This distinction between the divine, inaccessible, and incomprehensible realm and human government may find an application in the case of the coronavirus crisis. The truth about the origin and ultimate solution to the pandemic seems to escape our frame of thought. Beyond the hope of a vaccine, comprehensive knowledge about the COVID-19 phenomenon seems to be sheltered in a place that is alien to us, before which we have left only the interpretations and improvisations of human management. For this reason, Jean-Luc Nancy’s criticism of Agamben, in which he replies to the Italian philosopher that the experience we are living is a “viral exception and not a political–legal exception.”³⁸ Nancy’s differentiation reflects the duality between earthly management and the mysterious core of power that Agamben describes in *Il regno e la gloria*. In the distinction made by Nancy in his question to Agamben, a current application of the difference between kingdom and government is installing itself, a reflection of our natural inability to access the origin of the problem, in such a way that we seek for the unknown, stratagems and euphemisms such as that of the “viral exception,” behind which we hide our impotence in the face of a problem that surpasses us in understanding and control. It is certainly not truly clear what Nancy means by a “viral exception” and how it differs from a political–legal exception. What is clear is that, since we are not, as humanity, capable of accessing a transcendent power to handle the problem of COVID-19 with that power’s full knowledge, we use restrictions on liberties like the exact measures of the imperfect world of government that we have built. Only that explains the response to the crisis through quarantines and impositions of authority that have not changed focus since the pest control we did centuries ago, for example, to the Spanish flu. To this same economic management of life belong, in fact, categories such as Nancy’s, related to a supposed “viral exception,” since with them an attempt is made to provide a mysterious legitimacy to the old and precious political–legal shackles of the West. In summary, if the state of exception in which we live has been based on the management of calculations and interpretations of a transcendent power that is inaccessible to us, then the contingent games of immanent effects that we create around emergencies such as COVID-19, and not only in it,³⁹ deserve questioning.

³⁵ Agamben, *Il Regno e la Gloria*, 119.

³⁶ Rodríguez, “Teología y Política,” 3.

³⁷ Agamben, *Il Regno e la Gloria*, 138.

³⁸ Nancy, “Eccezione Virales,” 30.

³⁹ In the history of the West, the same logic has been used to construct legitimate responses, endowed with mystery, for example, in the face of the threat of terrorism; the same stratagem of the “sacred aura” has surrounded the justification of the “pro-democratic wars” and the “just war.” However, all these experiences can be understood by using the political management of some individuals’ death to benefit others. On this “continuity between cases,” Agamben elevates his biopolitics concept and a permanent state of exception.

4 Promises of glorification

The Agambenian genealogy takes an unexpected and provocative turn when, in the second part of *The Kingdom and the Glory*, the Italian philosopher asks himself about the bureaucratic circle closest to the power of God; the *Angels*. He wonders: what happens to them and their functional specialization when doomsday arrives? The question is posed to the theological tradition. However, the answer is found in the Heideggerian ontology: according to Agamben, the angels who, in principle, would not fulfill more functions than to satisfy the demands of humanity, would remain limited to performing their most essential function. That is: *glorify* God, keeping him isolated for his glory. What a paradox that Agamben discovers; not even a hypothetical day of judgment would break the logic of the government machine's bipolarity by revealing the absolute power of God. This paradox has implications in the current coronavirus crisis and in the proposals for an alternate world to be built.⁴⁰ With a hypothetical end of the world, the place of absolute power would continue to be isolated by its splendor and by the acclaim that the angels would do around and about it. From an imperfect humankind point of view, this separation from the core-power would reveal that pure power ever is, in essence, an empty place, a nothing that to "be power" needs the glorification of the angels at the end of the world, such as his earthly stewards did during normal times. Glory is, consequently for Agamben, the essence of the concept of the political that affects the supreme power of God in a different way than what it can do over men since it contains a correlation: on the one hand, God depends on the glory and glory of God and, on the other hand, glory becomes glory only through glorification. That is to say, the only sure thing, consequently, is that the human power resides in those who can glorify the sacred and mysterious nucleus. In other words, Agamben identifies that the power of the western governmental machine, the one that has acquired current absolute dominance over social and individual life, is sustained by the constant ovation and acclaim of men themselves in order for it to exist.⁴¹ In summary, the purest elemental power is an empty nucleus surrounded by the veil of Glory. That veil, on the one hand, glorifies it; that is, it elevates Glory to the place of absolute power and, on the other hand, hides such pure power from humanity under a halo of mystery. Agamben transfers this theological metaphor to the level of the individual. The humankind without politics is like that God, in essence, innocuous and isolated, described by Agamben as a being at rest, immobile and oblivious to the tasks of government, his life acquires a meaning when he is surrounded by Glory, at the same time that it becomes his condemnation: he leads him to pursue, through politics, utopias that, as such, are inaccessible; like promises about a kingdom that, written with strokes of glorification, mark our political identities with their indelible stamp.

For Agamben, the inaction of *Glory* brings together what we call politics: it surrounds the simplicity of the human species, its natural condition of lack of identity is overcome thanks to it. Politics understood as *Glory* provides us with a purpose that, although it is devoid of divine purity, justifies the absolute control over life as, after all, *our* purpose. It could be said that theology and politics live in the prelude to an "empty throne." To build that anteroom full of government mechanisms while simultaneously glorifying the inaccessible sacred is the purpose of modern politics.

In conclusion, Glory as inaction unites the sacred and the profane gives rise to the political as a meaning imposed on biological life. At present, in Western culture the hegemonic power of Glory is expressed, for example, in what we know under the name of "public opinion," which is constructed by the media, the social networks, and, in general, by the mass media. The force of this public opinion hides an empty center of truth that, despite its emptiness, rules over dissenting positions: it does not possess pure truths and, nevertheless, its inertia affects all political positions, even the best-supported ones, in such a way that consistently tend to conform to it as a paradigm of "politically correct." The politicians' or governmental agencies' extreme sensitivity to public opinion leads them to approach these views as more pressing and deserving of justice.

⁴⁰ For example, in philosophers like Slavoj Žižek, for whom this crisis is the ideal opportunity for humanity to carry out the true communist ideal.

⁴¹ It is worth remembering here the mention of a "medical reason" to resolve purely ethical questions such as the ventilator.

Agamben questions the “pseudoscientific” claims of the approaches that try to name, explain, and deify Glory. On the one hand, he questions Habermas, who proposes certain idolatry in the search for consensus as an “achieved utopia” of institutional channeling of sovereignty.⁴² According to Habermas, the public sphere and deliberation refer to the pole of government. However, for Agamben, this is only one of the modern forms that the old glorifying acclaim of modern oikonomy acquires. On the other hand, he questions the power of the decision legitimized by a “cheering people” that Schmitt exalts as sovereign in *Constitutional Theory*; the acclamation of the *demos* around the ruler is just the other pole of glorification, according to Agamben.⁴³ Both Habermas and Schmitt try to impose a statute of logic and divinity on what, for Agamben, is an inaccessible substance. Deliberation and decision are nothing more than liturgical spectacles, two euphemistic artifacts created by man to explain what has no explanation; to place in the place of the “empty throne” that we described before, a role of authority that does not belong to them and to present them as the “discovered” origins of the power of governments. The truth, according to Agamben, is that the origin of a general acceptance of laws that, for example, define the life or death of thousands of people is unknown; what makes such a law an obligation accepted by the citizenry does not arise from debate or prior deliberation or from the simple fact of deciding. Deliberation and decision are parts of an economy of power that do not constitute transcendent sovereign power since there is nothing so rational and indisputable within a decision or deliberation that can explain the general acceptance of orders that define who lives and who does not.

Slavoj Žižek’s proposal regarding a humanistic emergence from which “true communism” would result does not stop attracting attention; in some way, it would adjust to one of the possible answers Agamben analyzes about the hypothetical apocalyptic situation. We should ask Žižek more than Agamben if the proposal of a “post-covid communism”⁴⁴ is not another accommodation of modern oikonomia to maintain the original divide between kingdom and government? Wouldn’t this *new communism* be another form of *glorification*?

It is possible to find ourselves in front of another “mirage of divinity,” another earthly “performance” such as that of Habermasian deliberation and Schmittian decisionism. It must be said that Agamben does not offer an alternative to lockdowns and quarantines, beyond criticizing the coercive response and warning of the totalitarian risk that the crisis and the state of emergency is generating. It is not clear that there really is an alternative proposed by Agamben to handle the pandemic without it being also a biopolitical response. The so-called herd immunity strategy, for example, or the actions that seek to save the economy are also responses coming from the government regarding people’s lives. Agamben’s argument does not suppose a miracle solution with regard to the public management of COVID-19, it is simply a warning that governments are taking advantage of the state of exception to replace constitutional rights and to self-abrogate an authority that goes beyond what is allowed by law.

5 Conclusion

When Agamben indicates that States’ response to COVID-19 is disproportionate, he does so from an understanding and from genealogical knowledge of the processes of government; it is not resulting from a conspiracy theorist-paranoid or irrational approach. From that perspective, governments’ authoritarian attributions are only the most recent radicalization of the forms of absolute domination over social life that has characterized Western culture since its origins.

For Agamben, modern biopolitics is expressed in the crisis of how COVID-19 reinforces a status of obligational? Control over human life grounded on in-determinacy and un-founded power. This

⁴² Agamben, *Il Regno e la Gloria*, 278.

⁴³ Ibid., 187.

⁴⁴ Žižek, *Pandemic*, 101–11.

indeterminacy of the “place” and foundation of power is more aggressive concerning the control that can be exercised, for example, in concrete forms of government such as “totalitarianism” or “dictatorship.” The state of exception that we experience is presented as a “threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism,”⁴⁵ as Agamben has proposed for decades. The West, according to Agamben, has built a state of exception that “is not a dictatorship, but a vacuum space of law. That is a zone of anomie in which all legal determinations are deactivating.”⁴⁶ As a result of perverse and “intimate solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism.”⁴⁷ So, the state of exception generated by COVID-19 is just the continuity of that order.

Agamben has been wrong on one point: COVID-19 is not a regular flu: it has been the “most important of all the flus” that he has been able to witness since he began his research program in 1996. For better or worse, COVID-19 has allowed the materializing for his critics to see “*in vivo*” the meaning of his extensive and abstract work on the permanent state of exception. Perhaps the harsh reality that forces us to experience biopolitical decisions first-hand today allows us to understand why the world, according to Agamben, has become a “place where the state of exception perfectly coincides with the rule and where the extreme situation becomes the very paradigm of everyday life.” In other words, it allows us to see how and why the world is transforming into a gigantic concentration camp.

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⁴⁵ Agamben, *Profanazioni*, 26.

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