

The Cross as the Fulcrum of Politics:
Expropriating Agamben on Paul¹

Paul J. Griffiths
Duke Divinity School

Giorgio Agamben is Professor of Philosophy and Aesthetics at the University of Verona in Italy, and has published a dozen or so books on topics as diverse as the history of poetry and poetics, the nature of sovereignty, the future of politics, the distinction between the human and the animal, and Paul's Letter to the Romans. He was born in 1942, and is a man of the left, politically speaking, which means that he was formed, like all of that European generation, by the frustrated near-revolutions of 1968, when he would have been 26, and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the consequent dissolution of the Soviet Empire. This was a generation of utopian political hopes of a broadly Marxist kind, hopes that had to be reconfigured because of the discrediting of standard-issue Marxist theory. One resource for this reconfiguring, the most vital and these days among the most often appealed to, is the material preserved in the Christian archive; and among this material the Pauline literature is the most often discussed. The last fifteen years or so has seen a flowering of interest in the Christian archive by European intellectuals many of whom are neither Christian nor Jewish, but who see in it materials they need and want. The Christian archive is for them approximately what the pagan classical archive was to Christian theorists of the first four centuries or so: indispensable, attractive, and dangerous.

Agamben reads Romans from without, therefore, writing about it neither as a church theologian, nor as a member of the professional guild of New Testament scholars. He is interested in the letter as a text of foundational significance for Western thought about law and politics, and a good deal of what he writes about it is in broadly genealogical vein. He traces, for instance, the trajectory of Paul's thesis about the deactivation or emptying-out of the law, centering on the Greek verb *katargeô*, which Paul uses to describe this process, and its subsequent transformations into the Latin *evacuari*, by Jerome, the German *aufheben*, by Luther, Hegel's appropriation of that same term into his post-Christian dialectic, and Walter Benjamin's critique of Hegel in the theses on the philosophy of history. The conceptual grammar of all this is fundamentally Pauline (or anti-Pauline), thinks Agamben; and only when this is understood can the European intellectual tradition be seen clearly. But Agamben's interest is not only genealogical; he is also interested in the letter constructively, taking its conceptual grammar, if I read him rightly, to provide a good solution—and perhaps the only viable solution—to the constitutive problem of political theory. Agamben, that is, endorses Paul on a particular reading of him, and in so doing approaches at least to the antechamber of theology's boudoir. This is not to say that he is Christian, or that he has anything good to say about the church, by which he seems usually to mean the Catholic Church. But it does mean that he thinks Paul is right, though usually misunderstood by the church—and in so thinking he recapitulates a trope of central importance to the history of church

theology, according to which rereadings of Paul have been taken to reconstitute a lost orthodoxy.

Agamben then interprets the Christian archive—or at least this particular piece of it—from outside, as a resource for thinking through theoretical problems not, as he thinks, generated by it. In doing so, he performs an activity like what Christians have called despoiling the Egyptians, which is to say relieving the aliens of their treasure in order to put it to better use than the aliens know how to do. Efforts of this sort are, or ought to be, of considerable interest to Christians, and so, writing as one, I'd like to return Agamben's compliment, and begin the process of despoiling him for the benefit of the Church.

Biopolitics and the state of exception

The grammar of Agamben's thought has at its root a distinction between political life (*bios*) and bare, or nonpolitical life (*zoê*).ⁱⁱ The former is the condition in which we humans find ourselves when we live in the city, are subject to the laws of the city, and, thus, are citizens. The latter, bare life, is the pre- or non- or trans-political life we have simply as human beings, members of the species *homo sapiens sapiens*. The constitutive political problem, then, is that of how to relate the one to the other. How is it that living human beings, conceived and born, enter into a biopolitics, one form or another of legal-political life? How, to put the same point differently, does nativity get transformed into subjection to a sovereign? And what happens when sovereignty is lost, abandoned or otherwise dissolved?

The logic of sovereignty, thinks Agamben, evident in especially pure form in the founding texts of the modern democratic republic, which is to say those of the French and American revolutions, effectively dissolves the distinction between bare life, life as human being, and political life, life as a citizen. But it does this in a profoundly paradoxical way. The human being is depicted in these texts, and treated in the forms of political life they engender, as the bearer of inalienable rights; but the only guarantor of those rights is the state, typically the democratic republic. Outside the democratic city's walls there are other democratic cities; together they aspire and conspire to leave no territory unruled, and, therefore, no human being as stateless noncitizen. But when the fact of being human is effectively collapsed into the fact of being a citizen, then should one fail to become a citizen or, having been one cease to be one, one becomes thereby not just stateless but also, and much more disturbingly, effectively nonhuman, a bearer of a life to which anything at all can be done. If the only life recognizable by the democratic republic is *bios*, the political life of rights and laws, guarantees and protections, due process and proper legal procedure, positive law and constitution, then the inevitable implication is that only citizens truly live, that only citizens are human. The others, the slaves, the unborn, the stateless, the refugees, the inhabitants of the camps, have lost *bios*, and in losing it have lost everything. They can be slaughtered, ignored, starved, imprisoned for life, and tortured, all without any laws being broken.

Agamben takes this absorption of *zoê* into *bios* to be intrinsic to the state rather than accidental to it, and especially clearly evident in the contemporary, late-capitalist democracy. It is inevitable, he thinks, that such forms of political life will show that they are constituted by this collapse, and that they will do so ideal-typically by establishing with a juridical gesture what he likes to call states of exception. Two examples will show what he means. First, on 28 February 1933 Hitler suspended the central articles of the constitution of the Weimar Republic, an act which that Constitution of that republic itself made possible and which was thus legally performed. This act inaugurated a legal state of affairs in which the status of citizens of that republic could legally be determined by dictatorial fiat, and was. The results are too well known to need summary. Exactly parallel, argues Agamben, is the military order issued by George W. Bush on 13 November 2001 which authorized the indefinite detention, with or without trial, of those suspected of involvement in terrorist activities directed against the United States. In each of these cases we have a legal suspension of law, both constitutional and legislated, which is in Agamben's view best described as the application of a juridical claim to what

lies outside the sphere of law. In legislating a state of exception, the law erases itself with its own hand, but remains visible under the act of erasure. It acts to annex lawlessness to itself, and thus, paradoxically, to give legal force, the force of law itself, to what it excepts from its own power. In legally removing all legal protections from, for example, those imprisoned at Guantánamo or those in the extermination camps in wartime Germany become not just outlaws, but more radically those who have nothing more than life, a life which can be—and usually will be—defined as nonhuman and treated accordingly.

If the suspension of law is itself established juridically, then there is nothing external to law: law and life, *bios* and *zoê*, now coincide without remnant, with nothing left over. Whatever might happen in the state of exception is then coincident with what's legal, and in Agamben's view the camp, whether for refugees, terrorists, kulaks, Jews, homosexuals, or gypsies, is the place in which the state of exception shows itself for what it is: a place where anything is possible because the life established there is nullified, and anything done to it will occur under the force of the law that legislates even its own suspension.

This is the fundamental grammar of Agamben's thought. It belongs, we might say, to an intensified neo-Marxism; and it generates desiderata. The most pressing among these is that of finding a way to construe human life as such (*zoê*) so that it is not juridicalized without remainder, while at the same time recognizing that the law is necessary, that the figure of the *anomos*, depicted, for example, in 2 Thessalonians 2:3-9, by which law is destroyed and in which law is absent—that figure cannot be permitted to extinguish the law. That state of affairs, were it to happen, would be nothing other than the reverse image of the state of exception: just as the juridicalizing of law's absence makes everything possible because everything that happens when that move is made is legal, so also the simple absence of law makes everything possible because nothing is illegal. What's needed is a kind of universalism that does not fall into the statist trap of extending the juridical without remainder by legislating its own exceptions. But the conceptual resources for this are not easy to find. What's needed is a dialectical move, one that goes beyond law without erasing it, that empties law without removing it. Agamben is of course aware that the principal examples of such attempts in European thought are Hegel and Marx; but their solutions, he thinks, are shadows of a more radical and more consistent one which is to be found in Paul. And so it is to Paul that he turns for a depiction of the dialectical solution to the dissolution of *zoê* into *bios*.

It should now be clearer why Agamben, along with others, needs the Christian archive. What he needs is a way of thinking about law—and thus about politics; the two, for these analytical purposes, are not distinct, politics being just those processes by which laws are brought into being and taken out of being—which avoids two extreme positions. The first is legal universalism which legislates even its own exceptions; this is what we now live under, he thinks. And the second is a simple absence of law which prevents any form of biopolitics, a condition imagined by Hobbes and Rousseau in their own characteristic ways, and imagined also, in a rather different key, by the theorists of the garden, whether the garden of the first three chapters of Genesis, or the *hortus conclusus* of the Song of Songs. Given the failure of the Hegelian-Marxist attempt to sublimate these options, to resolve them into a synthesis in which the law remains but is in some fashion transcended, there is nowhere else to look than the dialectics of the Christian archive,

evident in their most pointed form in Paul's letters. So let's now look at how Agamben construes these works.

The call of the messiah, messianic time, and the deactivation of the law

Agamben prefers to construe the *klêtos* (called) of Romans 1:1 with the opening clause of the verse, rendering it "Paul, called as slave of Jesus the Messiah ..." rather than with the following clause, as most contemporary English renderings do -- and as Jerome did in the Vulgate.ⁱⁱⁱ With this as springboard, he then offers, in *The Time that Remains*, his meditation structured around the first ten words of Romans (*Paulos doulos Christou Iesou klêtos apostolos aphôrismenos eis euangelion theou*) and extended into the structure of Pauline thought in general, an extended discussion of calling, *klêsis*, in the Pauline corpus. Agamben's lapidary formula is this: "The messianic vocation is the revocation of every vocation."^{iv} *Vocatio* is the Latin rendering of *klêsis*, and Agamben plays in this formula with that fact: to be called as a slave of Jesus-Messiah is to have a meta-vocation which revokes, or calls back, every other particular vocation. Calling undermines or de-energizes (removes the *energeia* from) all particular vocations, while leaving them in their form unaltered. This has special application to the vocation of being a Jew, but it applies also, and in formal terms identically, to all other vocations: being married, being male, being female, being a slave, and so on.

The *ekklesia*, the community of the called, is then the community of those whose vocations have been revoked but not erased, emptied but not annihilated, removed from the juridical sphere to the sphere of life, of *zoê* reconfigured. Agamben appeals here to the *hôs mê*, the "as [if] not", of I Corinthians 7 as a way of explicating this. His understanding of the *hôs mê* is realist rather than fictional. It is not that the church's members adopt a new attitude toward their particular callings; they do not pretend, or make other fictional gestures. Rather, those vocations have been made actually different, ontologically different, emptied of legal force by a nonjuridical gesture, the gesture of slavery, of subjection to something external to and other than themselves. Notice here again Agamben's need to appeal to something external to biopolitics in order to reconstitute that same biopolitics: *bios*, biopolitical life, is not, for him, self-regulating. The Messiah's call to slavery, on this reading, is like the state of exception in establishing a sphere without the law; but profoundly unlike it because its sphere, the sphere of the church, is one in which vocations are, as Agamben likes to put it, made available for use in a reconfigured temporal order. If the camp of the condemned is the ideal-typical institutional form in the state of exception, those who live in the *ekklesia* are in a sphere of weakness which alone makes possible the use (rather than subjection to) their emptied but still present vocations.^v The church is in this sense without the law; it is what Agamben likes to call the coming community, the community that occupies the time that remains.^{vi} For this community, the revoking of vocation reconfigures time as much as it does action, and the call by means of which this is done is not juridical, not a legal gesture.

The time that remains, is not for Agamben a slice of time between the ascension and the parousia; it is not time extended as other time-slices are. Rather, it is the time the *ekklesia* takes to come to an end, time gathered into itself like a creature poised to spring out upon its prey, or—in an extended analogy that take up the best part of a chapter of *The Time That Remains*—the time a poem takes to come to an end, to achieve its condition as a poem; or, finally (and these are my analogies, not his), the rhythmic time of lovemaking or pregnancy, each of which has a time that it takes for its end to be

achieved—the orgasm and the birth, respectively. Messianic time, *ho nun kairos* to use the Pauline phrase, of which Agamben makes much, is therefore not a time-slice but time transfigured.

Let's pause on this and look a little more closely at it. It is here, if anywhere, that Agamben's eschatology is to be found. What, then, is poetic time, the time that a poem takes to come to an end, to resolve itself as a poem?

Agamben takes the example of the sestina, a 39-line poem in six sestets and one concluding tercet. The sestina as a whole is ordered around six words: each line in the sestets ends with one of the six words, and sestets are differentiated one from another by the order in which the line-ending words come. The rules for changing the order of the line-concluding words are difficult to state briefly and lucidly, but if you look at W. H. Auden's sestina, "Paysage Moralise" (1933), you'll see how it works:

Hearing of harvests rotting in the valleys,
 Seeing at end of street the barren mountains,
 Round corners coming suddenly on water,
 Knowing them shipwrecked who were launched for islands,
 We honour founders of these starving cities
 Whose honour is the image of our sorrow,

Which cannot see its likeness in their sorrow
 That brought them desperate to the brink of valleys;
 Dreaming of evening walks through learned cities
 They reined their violent horses on the mountains,
 Those fields like ships to castaways on islands,
 Visions of green to them who craved for water.

They built by rivers and at night the water
 Running past windows comforted their sorrow;
 Each in his little bed conceived of islands
 Where every day was dancing in the valleys
 And all the green trees blossomed on the mountains,
 Where love was innocent, being far from cities.

But dawn came back and they were still in cities;
 No marvellous creature rose up from the water;
 There was still gold and silver in the mountains
 But hunger was a more immediate sorrow,
 Although to moping villagers in valleys
 Some waving pilgrims were describing islands . . .

'The gods,' they promised, 'visit us from islands,
 Are stalking, head-up, lovely, through our cities;
 Now is the time to leave your wretched valleys
 And sail with them across the lime-green water,
 Sitting at their white sides, forget your sorrow,

The shadow cast across your lives by mountains.'

So many, doubtful, perished in the mountains,
 Climbing up crags to get a view of islands,
 So many, fearful, took with them their sorrow
 Which stayed them when they reached unhappy cities,
 So many, careless, dived and drowned in water,
 So many, wretched, would not leave their valleys.

It is our sorrow. Shall it melt? Then water
 Would gush, flush, green these mountains and these valleys,
 And we rebuild our cities, not dream of islands.^{vii}

The word that ends the first line in any sestet, "valleys" in the first, for instance, ends the second line in the next; the word that ends the second line in any sestet, "water" in the fourth, for example, ends the fourth in the next; and so on. Then, in the envoi, the concluding tercet, all six words occur. The sestina may in addition rhyme, and may be written in a variety of metrical forms. What defines it is not those matters, but rather the red thread of the six words. In the order of composition, of course, the envoi would be written first, and the play with the sestets worked backwards. But in the order of reading (or hearing), the effect is different: if the reader knows what she reads, by the end of the first sestet the end is already known in form if not in particulars, because the six line-ending words must, it is known, occur in the envoi and, in varying orders, in the intervening five sestets. In the beginning the end is already present, gathered up, folded in, and ready to unscroll.

Not only that, however. While in the order of reading or hearing the poem takes time to come to an end, the time in question is not chronological, not one damn thing after another, not what is measured by the clock or the hourglass or the sundial. It is poetic time, in which what counts, and what is counted, is a tensive recurrence: the reader's breath and body are, metaphorically, and perhaps actually, ordered to and by the sestina's form. That form is highly formal and rule-governed, but also playful and, when it works, beautiful. The poem's playful beauty, if it is attended to, reorders the attentive reader to itself and thereby gives her entry into a poetical *kairos*, a time in which all that counts is the time the poem takes to come to an end as a poem. The reader may be male or female, Jew or Greek, slave or free: those vocations are revoked (but not erased) in the time of the poem. And all this serves, for Agamben, as a figure for messianic time, the time of the coming community of those whose vocation has been revoked.

This is a version of the usual Christian distinction between the already and the not-yet, a construal of the as-not of the *nun kairos* of the church. But it adds some depth not found in those ordinary formulations, I think. There is a telos, an eschaton that beckons; but it is one whose main function is not to point to speculation about the nature or moment of the end, but to reconfigure those who permit themselves to be drawn by it. This theme is itself often explicit in Scripture, as for example in the opening lines of the Song of Songs:

Let me be kissed with your mouth's kiss
 for your loves are better than wine

fragrant with your best ointments.
 Your name is oil poured out
 and so the young girls have taken delight in you.
 Drag me after you—let us run!
 May the king lead me into his storerooms
 so that we might exult and rejoice in you.
 Mindful of your loves above wine
 they rightly delight in you.^{viii}

The (female) beloved seeks to be reconfigured by her lover (*drag me after you*) and thereby to enter into the time of exultation and rejoicing. The figure here is that of sexual play; but the time in which that occurs is in every important formal respect just like the time in which poetry is read, or that in which the eucharist is celebrated.^{ix}

The point or purpose of reading the sestina, then, to return to Agamben's instance, is not anything consequent upon that act, just as the point or purpose of lovemaking or receiving the eucharist is not anything consequent upon those acts. If it were, if one made love for one's health or received the eucharist for the benefit of one's moral character one would in fact not be doing either: these are actions that cannot be performed in subordination to calculations of consequence because to do so makes it impossible to perform them. It would be like making a promise with the fingers crossed behind the back: the promise is thereby cancelled.

One more point to note about the sestina as example. The structure is six-plus-one, six words and six sestets, followed by a seventh in which the preceding six are recapitulated and brought to rest. This should sound familiar: it reflects the six days of creation followed by the sabbath, and that is why Agamben chooses the sestina, just as it is why the fathers of the church chose a seven-ages schema by means of which to depict the history of the world. The time of the poem, the time that remains, is also the time of the sabbath, a time in which rest transfigures the time of the six days, and does to those days what the revocation of the messianic call to slavery does to the vocations given in biopolitics.

But this means that the community of the called, the coming community, is without the law in rather an odd way. The opposition is not between those under the law and those not. It is, rather, between those for whom the law is something one can either be or not be under, on the one hand, and those for whom the only possibility is the double negation of not-not being under the law.^x This is a standard dialectical move, and in Agamben's hands it yields the conclusion that in the *ekklesia* everyone relates to what he or she is by placing that identity under negation or erasure, without thereby discovering a new identity beneath that negation which is affirmed positively and without remainder. To be a new creation in Christ, on this reading, is not exactly or simply to take on a new identity; it is to empty one's already-in-place identity of juridical significance without thereby removing it.

It is at this point that Agamben's work with the Pauline verb *katargeō* becomes relevant. He is especially interesting on the reception of this verb into the word-flood of European political theory, which as he reads it is largely a series of appropriations, misunderstandings, and rejections of Paul. Understanding *katargeō* in this way permits a clear statement of the difference between the statist universalism of our democracies and

the universalism of the Pauline church. According to the former, what the state guarantees you as citizen is your identity as a human being, a identity toward which you stand non-dialectically: you are identical with it, and so when the law is suspended in the state of exception the life you are left with is not yours and certainly not human. According to the latter, to Pauline universalism properly understood, *zoê*, bare nonpolitical life, has a beautiful dialectical relation to the juridical vocations of *bios*, deactivating them but not erasing them, doing to them what poetry does to prose, and thus permitting the kind of free use of them possible only when you are non-identical with them, without also postulating identity with something else. In the church, as Agamben reads it, you don't discover a transcendental identity overarching or undergirding your juridical identities: if you did, that would be one more juridical move, like the establishment of the human as a bearer of rights in the modern state. Rather, you return your juridical identity to its giver, and receive it again, transfigured—though that last formulation is mine, not Agamben's.

The Christian political agent

Suppose now that we accept Agamben's argument that the aporias of sovereignty can only be overcome by a properly configured universalism, which means a Pauline universalism, understood as it should be. Suppose, further, that all universalisms require a fulcrum external to politics, and that there are only two lively candidates for that position, the one being the assertion of rights located in the person as such, and the other being the Pauline dialectic just sketched. We might add a third, which is Marxism; but in Agamben's view, and about this I think he is right, this is just a shadow of the Pauline dialectic, reducing to it on proper analysis, or, as the history of European Marxism perhaps shows, collapsing into a vaguely leftist modulation of neo-liberalism, which is what the European left now amounts to. So that leaves two possibilities. The first, seen most clearly in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is the one favored by the liberal democracies. This is an internally contradictory solution according to the argument given above: it affirms on the one hand a law-independent bearer of rights, and on the other gives that very judgment legal form and reserves to itself the right to establish, juridically, states of exception to the judgment. Liberal democracies, then, like their totalitarian mirror-images, inevitably produce fields of blood by legislatively allotting to all that lies outside themselves the status of bare life to which anything at all can be done. That leaves the Pauline dialectic, the dialectic of the vocation revoked for its proper use, as the only lively candidate. Can this be intensified in a Christian direction?

The first move in doing so is to turn to a trope noticeably absent from Agamben's reading of Paul: I mean that of the cross. It is not merely that the messianic call revokes the vocation; it does so by crucifying it. The vocation of the citizen, then, which most of us have (if you don't you're in Agamben's state of exception), has been drowned in the baptismal bath along with all our other vocations, and it rises from that bath almost unrecognizable, as unrecognizable as Jesus was on the road to Emmaus. The vocation's revocation involves death. In the resurrection, the citizen—taking this term as synecdoche now for the political agent, one who acts as advocate for or performer of particular proposals for the ordering of common life and in service of the common good—still acts as such, but with a difference that requires closer attention than Agamben gives it. He likes the tropes of play and use for what he called ones, those who belong to Jesus in the Church, do with their revoked vocations.^{xi} But in the case of the vocation of the citizen, this is not enough. A fuller Christian analysis is that the revoked and crucified vocation of the Christian citizen should be evident in quietist political action. What fails to rise from the baptismal bath is interest in the outcome of political proposals: it is just such interest that has been given its quietus, brought to rest in the arms of Jesus.^{xii} It should be easy enough to see why. If the question of sovereignty is insolubly aporetic in the way that Agamben suggests, then the proper response to particular questions of politics on the part of those called into the messianic community is not to attempt to dissolve the aporia, but to act in the knowledge that it cannot be dissolved—which means, among other things, acting politically without interest in the outcome of such action. This, I suggest, is the appropriate Christian gloss on what it means to act politically *hōs mē*, to be to the sphere of politics as the non-non-Jew is to the law when that vocation is revoked.

To explain this more fully, some distinctions are necessary. To make them I leave Agamben behind with grateful thanks for his gifts, and turn, with Pascal's help, to a slightly more precise explanation of the quietism of political interest.^{xiii} Suppose we take as the defining mantra of quietism of all sorts Bartleby the Scrivener's "I would prefer not to," a refusal of a direct and uncompromising kind.^{xiv} The thing refused specifies the kind of quietism in play. In Bartleby's case, it is a complete and systematic refusal of all action and every proposal, a quietism without remainder of which he eventually dies. The quietism I'm recommending is much less radical. It is a quietism not even of political action, but only of interest in the outcome of such action: that, and only that, is what is renounced by the citizen whose vocation as such has been revoked. What gets put to rest by this quietism is a particular set of consequentialist interests, and what gets liberated is a genuinely Christian political agent, a citizen with vocation revoked, a member of the remnant who acts in the kairos of the messianic now.

Political advocacy that is quietist with respect to interest requires of us a good deal of work. This is because prospective judgment as to the effects of writing some political proposal into law is for us ordinarily intimate with advocating or opposing that proposal, and so ascetical effort is needed to refuse such judgments and to nurture those of a different sort, or none at all, while remaining a political advocate. This difficulty is not natural: it is like neither the difficulties involved in refusing linguistic or physical intimacy with other human beings, nor like those connected with the refusal of food. There are virtuoso quietists of these kinds (the Christian desert ascetics, Kafka's hunger artist, the Buddha's ascetical teachers): they are virtuoso practitioners of Bartleby's "I would prefer not to" in these spheres of human activity. But they have to refuse an appetite or a disposition proper to all human beings, or at least to all those not so damaged as to separate them from those appetites. The 'we' to whom these difficulties apply is all, or almost all, human beings. But severing political action from interest in its outcome requires an ascetical effort of refusal only when the presence of such a connection is the ordinary thing, as it is for us. Our political formation has been, for the last three centuries or so, democratic, and it is proper to that form of political life to nurture a strong connection between deliberation as to outcome and advocacy of particular political proposals. But nurturing this connection so that it seems obvious and inevitable is not proper to all forms of political culture. Arguably (though I won't argue it) it is not proper to many premodern political forms, and it may not be proper to some contemporary ones. Perhaps, for instance, in a polis ordered by Shari'a, those who make a habit of connecting their advocacy of political proposals to prospective judgments about their effects would be as locally idiosyncratic as German tourists sunning themselves naked on Indian beaches: the locals keep their clothes on at the beach, and look askance, with a mixture of disapproval and puzzlement, at tourists who take them off.

But among us everyone sunbathes naked, and the result is that clothing ourselves in a quietism of political interest requires effort. The resulting get-up feels uncomfortable and looks odd to the locals. This sense of oddity is on its face no different from any other produced by transgressing local custom and knowledge. I think, however, that clothing ourselves in a quietism of political judgment, whether of the preliminary kind in which we eschew ordinary, consequentialist judgment, or of the more radical kind, in which we seek to become political agents altogether without judgments, has some advantages over local custom which even the locals might be able to recognize and acknowledge.

Nakedness, after all, can lead to epidermal carcinomas, and wearing clothes on the beach, odd though it may look to Europeans and some Americans, may be a cover-up with some good effects.

The first advantage of quietism of the kind I've described is that those who arrive at it are likely to have a more accurate understanding of the limits of our capacity to make accurate prospective judgments about the results of enacting this political proposal rather than that than do those whose thinking hews to the ordinary consequentialist line. These limits are especially obvious, almost unarguably so, when the proposal under discussion advocates adjustment of a complex system. Adjusting such a system in one respect always has unanticipated and often undesired effects upon other aspects of that system's behavior. This is true in economics, both micro- and macro-: no one appears able to predict the results of legislation (or the weather) upon the workings of financial markets, even though the rewards for successfully doing so are vast. It is true, as well, in ecological matters, even of a quite local kind: the introduction of wild parakeets into the ecosystem of Chicago forty years ago has had effects upon local bird, tree, and human life whose particulars were quite unanticipated. And it is true in matters of foreign policy: one country's or international agency's intervention in the internal affairs of another, whether militarily, diplomatically, or economically, always produces unanticipated ripples and blowbacks. Ordinary consequentialist discussion about the likely results of actualizing one political proposal or another is blind to this incapacity: it is very rare to hear mention of it in campaigns for elected office or floor debates because the grammar of political talk in democracies requires that it be occluded. If we were to acknowledge that we sometimes or often or usually have no way to assess the outcomes of the proposals we advocate, then we, as good deliberative democrats, would have to give up an essential element of our political self-understanding. This is why those committed to democracy as the preferred form of political culture will ordinarily avoid looking at this incapacity, and if they do look at it do so glancingly, dismissing it as an unwarrantedly excessive skepticism or a cloak for some form of totalitarianism.

It is not so difficult, however, to see that skepticism in this area is, in general, more accurate than epistemic optimism. It is not that skepticism about our capacity to predict the results of political proposals is always right; a more precise formulation is that the more complex the system to which a particular proposal advocates adjustment, the more likely skeptical disavowal is to be the right response to claims to know the results of the proposed adjustment. Quietists of political interest, then, have a distinct advantage here. It is easier for them than for consequentialists to see that thinking in consequentialist terms about political proposals aimed at the adjustment of complex systems usually cannot successfully be done, and that therefore those who advocate it do so either confusedly or deceptively. Those committed to deliberative democracy in its ordinary forms will not want to see this, and will therefore usually avert their gaze from it.

Close affinity to skeptical clarity about political prediction is not the only advantage of quietisms of political interest. An additional one is that quietists are not discouraged by, nor in any deep way concerned about, claims that the political proposals they advocate will have effects they do not want. Suppose, for example, that you advocate adjustment of the tax code in the direction of removal of tax relief on interest paid on mortgage loans. An objection to enacting this proposal might be that it would

discourage home ownership, which in turn would have deleterious effects upon the stability and order of residential communities, which in turn would threaten a range of civic virtues ... and so on. An argument in support of the proposal might be that by removing this particular federal subsidy for the middle classes more federal funds could be made available for the poor, which in turn might permit support of educational programs that would foster stability and order in towns and cities, which in turn would nurture a range of civic virtues ... and so on. Quietist advocates of the proposal are neither discouraged by the opposing argument nor encouraged by the supportive one. Because the grounds upon which they advocate the proposal are divorced from consideration of its effects, these kinds of encouragement and discouragement are in principle irrelevant, and this separation yields a constancy of advocacy not easily available to those who support the same proposal on deliberatively consequentialist grounds.

A third advantage, close kin to the second, is that while deliberatively consequentialist political advocates are discouraged when it appears likely to them that their proposal cannot be enacted, and are as a result likely to cease advocating it and begin advocating some associated proposal which they take to have a greater chance of being enacted—democratic politics is after all the art of the possible, and a good practitioner therefore does not continue to advocate a proposal which seems impossible—their quietist counterparts are less likely to engage in such substitution. Eschewing consequentialist judgments about a proposal's enactment, as quietists of political interest do, may very easily be extended in the direction of eschewing such judgments about the likelihood of a proposal's enactment. And if that move is made, the argument that there aren't enough votes for this proposal, or that there are other apparently good reasons why it cannot be enacted, will have no purchase, however true these claims may be. Since quietists are not advocating the proposal on those grounds, they will not be troubled by such arguments—not even when they take it to be true that the proposal they advocate cannot be passed. Here too, as with the second advantage, there is a skeptical and a nonskeptical form of such a repudiation. In the skeptical form, quietists refuse to take account of arguments about the likelihood of enactment because they think that such judgments have a low probability of being true. In the nonskeptical form, they refuse because they don't care whether such judgments are true or not. Skepticism in this area is less attractive than it is in the area of judgment about the effects of enactment because the systems that govern passage or denial of a political proposal are many orders of magnitude less complex than those which proposals attempt to adjust: you stand a much better chance of predicting outcomes on the floor of the House than you do those of adjusting interest rates or ecosystems. This means in turn that quietism's affinity to skepticism in this area is less clearly an advantage over consequentialism's lack of such affinity. It is still an advantage, however.

A quietist refusal of interest in political proposals, coupled with advocacy of such proposals on other grounds, permits, then, continued advocacy in the face of both consequentialist and utopian objections. This advocacy may be activist (barricades, protests, martyrdoms) or verbal (broadsheets, blogs, street-corner speeches); and it may occur within ordinary legal bounds (voting, running for office, lobbying) or without (civil disobedience, treason, fomenting revolution). In all its variants it is impatient with or indifferent to ordinary political deliberation. And it is often, though not inevitably,

skeptical about the likelihood that predictive judgments about the effects of political proposals will yield truths.

There is a fourth and final advantage that quietists of political interest have over their deliberatively consequentialist opponents. It is that pretence can be abandoned and consistency more easily embraced. For the ordinary, post-Fordist, democracy-advocating, consequentialist politician (whether running for office or voting), the absence of political interest must either be occluded or criticized when it surfaces. Almost never can it be embraced. A candidate for elective office cannot say that she has no idea what the results of writing her programs into law will be, even if this is true and she knows it to be true; neither, usually, can she say that she advocates what she advocates for reasons (and causes) that have nothing to do with the likely results of its becoming law. (The exceptions here are the occasional appeals to unadulterated principle—results be damned—that still survive in our politics.) Rather, she must say that she advocates what she advocates because of the good it will do, and because she knows that it will bring just that good about and carry no evils in its train. But the truth is almost always otherwise. Voters rarely vote because they are convinced of, or have thought much about, the things just mentioned; instead, they vote because they like one thing or another about the features of the campaigning politician (sex, race, hair color, tone of voice, manner of speech, and so on); or because it is a matter of custom for them and the people with whom they identify to vote for a candidate who speaks in these ways, advocating proposals of these kinds. Voters, that is, are closet quietists of political interest in any case; and the same is true, *mutatis mutandis*, for those who seek office. But they remain, by and large, in the closet because the public rhetoric of our polities requires this of them. And closets, when you've lived in them for long enough, begin to feel spacious, comfortable, and above all natural: a proper home. In the same way, lies can start to feel like the truth. Pascalian quietists of political interest, by contrast, need no closet and no lies: they can speak and act as they are. This is a deep advantage.

So, the Christian citizen who playfully uses politics without the law, as Agamben would have it, does so with political interest crucified, with a deep skepticism about her capacity to predict the results of enacting a political proposal, and with a refusal to be discouraged by predictions of failure, or of success with undesirable results. She does not expect the proposals she advocates to reduce the quantity of blood shed within the walls of the city, or in the juridicalized state of exception without those walls. She may hope for a reduction, and she must lament the failure of that hope to be realized; but she cannot, to the extent that she understands what it means for her vocation to have been revoked, expect any such reduction. She knows, after all, with Paul, that the whole of the created order groans in anticipation of the salvation to come; she must therefore groan with it, and the groaning will be long and bitter. The four notes of the political agency of the Christian citizen are, then, quietism, skepticism, hope, and lament. Together, they configure an account of political agency among the slaves of Jesus-Messiah with both more detail and more precision than any Agamben offers. It remains, of course, to provide thickly-described instances of such political advocacy and agency; but that is a task for another day.

NOTES

ⁱ An early version of this essay was presented in Durham, England, at a joint conference of the theological faculties of Durham University and Duke Divinity School in May 2008; I am grateful for the critical discussion it received there, and especially for help from John Barclay, Gerard O'Laughlin, Anastasia Scrutton, Stuart Foyle, and Theodora Hawksley. A fuller version was given at the invitation of Douglas Harink at a conference called 'St. Paul's Journeys Into Philosophy' at the University of British Columbia in June 2008. I am grateful to all the participants in that conference for help in understanding Agamben, and most especially to Doug Harink, Stephen Fowl, Chris Huebner, Creston Davis, and Charlie Collier.

ⁱⁱ This distinction is the main theme of Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998; first published in Italian in 1995). See also Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2005; first published in Italian in 2003), §1.3; Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005; first published in Italian in 2000), pp. 122-124 (on grace as life).

ⁱⁱⁱ Agamben, *Time*, pp. 6-7.

^{iv} Agamben, *Time*, p. 23.

^v See, inter alia, the discussion of freedom and use in Agamben, *Time*, pp. 135-137.

^{vi} See Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993; first published in Italian in 1990).

^{vii} This poem was written, probably, in 1933. I have taken the text from William Packard, *The Art of Poetry Writing* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 85-86.

^{viii} Song of Songs, 1:2-4, translated from the Latin of the New Vulgate.

^{ix} Although Agamben does not, so far as I know, discuss Augustine's understanding of time, he would have found many resonances if he had done so. The lengthy analysis of the nature of time in Book XI of the *Confessions* uses the example of a poem's recitation as an index of temporal *distensio* (11.22.28, 11.24.33); and although Augustine is not easy to understand on this question, a possible reading is that he understands the time of a poem's (or a psalm's) recitation to be analogically like the time *in toto*, time as seen *sub specie aeternitatis*: the end is present in the beginning, which fact does not abolish, for those who live in time, the temporal passage from the one to the other. What it does do is make timed living a reality that does not bind but liberates. See, for useful discussions: James Wetzell, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 17-44; John M. Rist, *Augustine: Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 73-85; Robert P. Kennedy, "Book Eleven: The Confessions as Eschatological Narrative," in Kim Paffenroth & Robert P. Kennedy, (ed.) *A Reader's Companion to Augustine's Confessions* (Louisville & London: John Knox Press, 2003), pp. 167-183. See also Charles Taylor's useful formulation: "His [Augustine's] instant is not the 'nun' of Aristotle, which is a limit, like a point, an extensionless boundary of time periods. Rather, it is the gathering together of past into present to project a future," *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 2007), p. 56.

^x For the double negation see Agamben, *Time*, pp. 44-58, on *aphorismenos*, 'set apart', (*segregatus*).

^{xi} And not only for them: the trope of play is fundamental to Agamben's depiction of what it is to live a good life (to put one's life in play), whether or not he is thinking about Paul and the church. See, e.g., his analysis of Foucault's "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" (1969) in *Profanations* (New York: Zone Books, 2007; first published in Italian in 2005), pp. 61-72, and especially the gloss on Nastasya Filippovna's marriage-play in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* at pp. 68-70. Compare also Agamben, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience* (London & New York: Verso, 2007; first published in Italian in 1978), pp. 75-96.

^{xii} For a more extended treatment of the theme of political quietism, see my "The Quietism of Political Interest" in *Common Knowledge*, January 2009 (in press).

^{xiii} I draw here upon the fragments that survive of a letter Pascal wrote to Florin Périer in June 1657. The text is in Louis Lafuma, ed., *Pascal: Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1963), p. 281. There is a very suggestive analysis in Erich Auerbach, "On the Political Theory of Pascal," in idem, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 101-129. See also, though less usefully, Jacques Maritain, "The Political Ideas of Pascal," in idem, *Redeeming the Time* (London, Geoffrey Bles, 1943), pp. 29-45.

^{xiv} On Bartleby, see Agamben, *Coming Community*, pp. 34-36, and especially the following formulation: "Bartleby, a scribe who does not simply cease writing but 'prefers not to,' is the extreme image of this angel that writes nothing but its potentiality to not-write" (p. 36). Compare, interestingly (and quite possibly not compatibly) *Idea of Prose* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1995; first published in Italian in 1985), pp. 77-78, where Agamben assimilates Bartleby's existence to that of the inhabitants of Limbo.