

Giorgio Agamben. *The Mystery of Evil: Benedict XVI and the End of Days*. Trans. Adam Kotsko. Stanford University Press 2017. 96 pp. \$50.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781503600935); \$15.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9781503602731).

Giorgio Agamben was once described as ‘the theologizing provocateur of academic philosophy.’ His work brings together obscure theological and philological explorations with matters touching our most urgent social and political concerns. This recently published short book, originally released in Italian in 2013, is no exception.

Mystery of Evil is composed of two essays followed by four appendices that reproduce the sources utilized by Agamben for his argument. The first essay explores Benedict XVI’s abdication to the papacy in 2013. The second is based on Agamben’s acceptance speech after receiving an honorary doctorate in theology in 2012. Both texts overlap to some extent, as Agamben acknowledges in the Foreword.

The first essay explores the pope’s unusual abdication, claiming that we can learn from this event a general lesson that applies to the ‘political situation of the democracies in which we live’ (1). The abdication was a carefully meditated decision intended to be exemplary, to call attention to the importance of the distinction—essential in our ethico-political tradition—between the principles of legitimacy (including natural law and spiritual power) and legality (positive law and temporal power). The erasure of this distinction and the tendency to substitute legitimacy with legality, causes, or at least contributes to, our present societal crisis, which is a crisis of the legitimacy of our institutions.

Agamben does not claim that either legitimacy or legality is superior and the other subordinated, but that both are required. If only legitimacy is taken into consideration, we risk the lethal effects of unrestrained totalitarianism. But when, as it happens in our democratic societies, the principle of legitimation is reduced to legal rules—a tacit criticism to Habermas’ ‘constitutional patriotism’—the political machine becomes paralyzed (4). This is the predicament to which Benedict XVI wanted to call attention with his dramatic move, surrendering the temporal power of the Church to cling only to the spiritual.

In order to substantiate his claim, Agamben proposes to contextualize Benedict XVI’s act in its theological context, drawing on the young Benedict’s study on the teaching of Tyconious, a Christian heretic active in fourth century Africa, who influenced Augustine. The excursus through the work of Tyconious centers on one specific affirmation: that the Church, until the end of days, is made of Good and Evil, two sides that cannot be separated in present times (6). Tyconious bases his claim on an obscure passage in *2 Thessalonians*, where Paul speaks about a *katechon* or restraint that prevents the messianic times. According to Tyconious, and apparently according to Benedict as well, the Church is the restraint that blocks the end of times. There is a different interpretation, more recently adopted by Carl Schmitt, which construes the *katechon* as what makes possible a history from a Christian point of view (11). History is, according to Schmitt, an idle time waiting for Christ’s second coming, and is made possible by the exercise of political power. According to Schmitt, politics is what prevents the apocalypse, what replaces ‘the end of days’ with a second best, our imperfect life on earth.

For Agamben, Benedict’s resignation teaches us that apocalyptic things are at the heart of the Church, even if the Church—as Agamben puts it quoting the protestant theologian Ernst Troeltsch—closed down the eschatological office some time ago. Against Schmitt, Agamben claims that the eschaton is not an empty time before salvation; it is a fundamental aspect of the doctrine ‘of end of days’ that should guide and orient action in ‘penultimate’ things (13-14). Agamben concludes

this section of the book referring to economy and eschatology, to the worldly and that which keeps itself connected to the end of time and of the world, as two aspects of the Church whose lost equilibrium needs to be re-established. This is further predicated of the political sphere, where Justice and Legitimacy play the role of the apocalyptic in the Church. This is a thesis that he developed in more detail in his earlier *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011).

Section II develops in more detail the philological and interpretative arguments that Agamben deploys in section I. Agamben proposes a reading of the section of 2 *Thessalonians* 2:1-12 which challenges the traditional interpretation of *mysterium iniquitatis* (which Agamben translates as 'mystery of lawlessness' following the Greek original) as the 'contradictory notion' of an ontology of evil. According to Agamben, in the early days, when the Church was still interested in apocalyptic things, Paul's words were the object of intense speculation, particularly regarding the identity of the two characters that Paul named 'the *one* (or possibly) *what* restrains' and 'the man of lawlessness.' Agamben follows the discussion of this matter in Augustine's *City of God* (xx, chapter 19, 59-65), which summarizes the positions taken by his predecessors. Augustine classifies the received interpretations in two groups: a first one that identifies the obstacle with the Roman empire, while the second group—which Agamben identifies with Tyconious—seems to identify the Church or at least part of the Church with the obstacle that prevents Christ's second coming (25). To resolve the difficulty, Agamben proposes to clarify Paul's notion of messianic time. For Agamben, messianic time is identical with historic time (27), based on the argument that 'history as we know it is a Christian concept' (26), and that 'eschatology' is a summary of the history of humanity (27). But, Agamben does not follow this lead, turning instead to explore the notion of 'lawless man' (*mysterion tes anomias* in the Greek original, and rendered into Latin as *mysterium iniquitatis* in the *Vulgata*). According to Agamben, we should not interpret *mysterium* as secret or riddle, but as 'a praxis, an action, or a drama in the theatrical sense of the term' (28), the performance of gestures, acts, etc., through which a divine action is actualized in the world 'for the salvation of those who participate in it' (28). Agamben expresses his idea as follows: '[mysterium] is not the wisdom of God, but that by means of which this wisdom is expressed and revealed' (29-30). The 'history of the end' (which for Agamben does not coincide with the 'end of history') is a 'mystery' in the sense of a performance drama, in which salvation and damnation are at stake. Going back to the Pauline text, Agamben suggests that we interpret the text as a tri-partite drama in which *katechon*, *messiah* and man of lawlessness structure eschatological time. There is an element that slows and restrains, which is identified with an institution (the Empire, the Church, etc.) and a decisive element (the *messiah*). Between them, we find the appearance of the *Antichrist* (the man of lawlessness). The *katechon*, interprets Agamben, is the power that conceals the lawlessness that defines the messianic times. The unveiling of this *mystery* manifests the essential illegitimacy of every power in the messianic times, claims Agamben. And he adds that this seems to be happening today, 'when the powers of the state act openly as outside the law' (34). The moment when the delay reaches its extreme limit coincides with the revelation of the outlaw. This is supposed to provide a convincing description of messianic time, which can be described alternatively as 'already' and 'not yet.'

What Agamben is leading to, beyond the meanders of the argument, is the following thesis: in the Church there are two irreconcilable elements, *oikonomia* (God's providence and salvific action in the world) and eschatology, or the end of the world and of time. When one of these elements is put aside, their equilibrium is disturbed, with far reaching consequences. When the eschatological element has been put aside, the secularized *oikonomia* (which then becomes economics or plainly, capitalism) becomes perverted and without a *telos*, mere means without an end. The mystery of evil becomes ontologized, blocking the Church from any true choice and providing an alibi for its ambiguities. Unfortunately, Agamben does not refer to the other side of the seesaw. What happens

when apocalypticism becomes dominant? And how exactly should we understand this notion? Agamben seems to think that by restraining instrumental action (the market economy) the equilibrium will be restored. But, if apocalypticism in his highly metaphorical interpretation has to do with views on the ultimate values that organize our social life, Agamben seems to avoid, at least in this text, the difficult question of the plurality of ‘apocalypticisms’ and of their composition.

Michael Maidan, Independent Scholar