Arché-ic: Secularization in Giorgio Agamben's "*Homo Sacer*" series

Arché: *secularização na série "Homo Sacer" de Giorgio Agamben*

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Abstract

This paper puts Agamben in conversation with the topic of secularization. The fit between thinker and topic is quite natural, given that Agamben frequently approaches modernity through a theological archive, takes secularization narratives as the contrast space for his own account of intellectual history, and regularly discusses secularization through the lens of signatures. The result is that his work ends up revising secularization narratives by relocating the source of modernity in a deeper metaphysical regime rather than a past historical moment. The paper begins first by outlining Agamben's engagement with secularization theorists and concepts throughout the Homo Sacer series. Next, I sketch Agamben's ontological picture, exploring the "*arché*" as the backdrop for his analysis of secularization as a signature. I conclude with three ways Agamben's work might reconfigure our conversations about the secular and allow engagement with new theoretical partners. By turning our attention away from the binaries of religious/secular to the third option represented by the messianic, Agamben revises traditional narratives about the decline of metaphysics, broadens our alternatives beyond the overly-narrow constraints represented by someone like Charles Taylor, and opens the beginnings of a possible rapprochement with postcolonial accounts of modernity.

Keywords: Agamben. Arche. Secularization. Signature. Transcendence.

Resumo

O presente estudo coloca Agamben em diálogo com o tema da secularização. A relação entre o pensador e o tema é quase natural, dado que Agamben aborda a modernidade frequentemente através de um registro teológico tomando, por conta própria, narrativas secularizadas como o espaço contrastante da história intelectual e, regularmente, discutindo a secularização por meio da perspectiva das assinaturas. Em consequência, Agamben acaba revisitando narrativas secularizadas através da realocação da fonte de modernidade em um profundo regime metafísico ao invés de um momento situado em um passado histórico. Este estudo inicia-se destacando a discussão de Agamben com os teóricos da secularização e os conceitos desenvolvidos por ele no projeto Homo Sacer. *Em seguida, esboça-se o quadro ontológico de Agamben explorando a "arché" como pano de fundo para suas análises sobre secularização e assinatura. Conclui-se apontando três maneiras pelas quais a obra de Agamben poderia reconfigurar discussões sobre o secular de maneira a permitir* envolvimento

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com novos parceiros teóricos. Ao desviar a atenção dos binários religioso/secular para uma terceira opção representada pelo messiânico, Agamben revisa narrativas tradicionais sobre o declínio da metafísica, amplia nossas alternativas para além das restrições excessivamente estreitas representadas por alguém como Charles Taylor, e abre caminho para uma possível reaproximação com relatos pós-coloniais da modernidade.

Palavras-chave: *Agamben. Arché. Secularização. Assinatura. Transcendência.*

Introduction

Accounts of the secular often narrate its emergence as a question of continuity versus rupture relative to a past "religious" age of "transcendence." On these accounts, modernity is taken to derive from what preceded it chronologically, prompting scholars to theorize modernity's stance relative to that temporal deposit. This includes classic secularization thinkers such as Carl Schmitt or Max Weber, but also twentieth and twenty-first century standbys in the form of Hans Blumenberg or Charles Taylor. How might such conversations look, however, if the contrast space for modernity were situated differently? What if we asked about our continuity with what was ontologically originary rather than chronologically prior? How would secularization narratives shift if we looked to a metaphysical regime that was "deeper" rather than a historical regime that was "older"?

This paper takes up that wager in conversation with Italian philosopher and political theorist Giorgio Agamben, according to whom intellectual history offers insufficient explanations of modernity's rise because it fails to attend to the "ultra-historical" register that runs alongside any given configuration of history. In part, this register names the contingency of historical narratives by pointing to the way no narrative is ever total or absolute. Societies and events always exceed the stories we tell about them and hence history can always be reconfigured based on new artifacts or evidence. The ontological condition of possibility for such contingency is what Agamben refers to as the "*arché*". Secularization, on his account, functions at this deeper level rather than at the level of history and this is why Agamben describes secularization as a "signature" rather than a concept. Secularization is attached to modern concepts in the way that a signature attaches itself to a painting, referring modern ideas and practices to other (occasionally theological) interpretive fields. There is thus profound continuity between modernity and Christian theology for Agamben, but that continuity is a factor of the ultra-ahistorical regime that grounds them both.

If this ontology might initially come across as only so much philosophical speculation, it is important to recognize that Agamben puts his system in conversation with secularization in surprisingly concrete ways. This paper thus opens with a survey of Agamben's engagement with the icons of secularization debates and the way he situates certain strands of those debates as the contrast space for his own philosophical intervention, particularly as it manifests in his magnum opus, the "*Homo Sacer*" series. The paper will then turn to an outline of Agamben's ontological schema, sketching what he means by "*arché*" as the necessary theoretical backdrop for his more concrete description of secularization as a signature. After laying out the main thrust of Agamben's ontological picture and his points of tension with secularization debates, the paper concludes with three ways Agamben's work might reconfigure our conversations about the secular and allow engagement with new theoretical partners.

If Agamben is to be believed, secularization accounts remain limited by strictly chronological frameworks. He provides another option informed by political theology and hence directly

abutting conversations about the emergence of the secular. By turning our attention away from the binaries of religious/secular and continuity/rupture to the third option represented by the messianic or ultra-historical register, Agamben revises traditional narratives about the decline of metaphysics, broadens our alternatives beyond the overly-narrow constraints represented by someone like Charles Taylor, and opens the beginnings of a possible rapprochement with postcolonial accounts of modernity.

Secularization narratives as contrast space

To position Agamben relative to secularization is to immediately notice two things: first, he gives no account of the secular per se but, second, he nevertheless consistently confronts, skirts, or subtly revises certain secularization claims. Lacking any intention to systematically theorize secularism, Agamben's engagement with secularization debates is far from systematic and instead manifests in gathering a wide array of secularization themes which he positions in contrast to his own ontology. This gathering cashes out in two repeated claims: first, that certain iconic thinkers of modernity have missed the messianic dimension of early Christianity, mistaking it for a transcendence that has come under fire in secular modernity; second, that some scholars of both law and religion are guilty of incorrectly positing a sphere of magico-religious indistinction at the origin of history. Both critiques illustrate Agamben's interest in deflating intellectual historians' eagerness for transcendence – an eagerness manifest either in incorrectly identifying transcendence where there is none or positing transcendence as a necessary backdrop to facilitate their own hypotheses about decline.

Following Agamben, then, what this paper names "secularization accounts" are academic theories that attempt to narrate the origins of modernity, locate some form of transcendence as what came "before", and/or identify the shape of historical transmission to the present along a broadly linear vector. If this definition seems overly capacious or lacking in precision, this is in part because Agamben's engagement with secularization debates is wide-ranging and itinerant. Rather than directly critiquing secularization or taking on one thinker wholesale, Agamben quietly resists general trends among arguments which he identifies as falling into either of the camps just mentioned (decline of metaphysics or linear transmission).

If we can only locate somewhat scattered instances of secularization debates throughout the Homo Sacer series, one claim on which he is particularly consistent is the existence of a third way beyond Western binaries – a "messianic" way, in particular, which theorists of secularization have often overlooked. By the "messianic", Agamben has reference to a weak force internal to the articulation of binaries that renders them inoperative. Rather than straightforwardly negating or eradicating an opposing term, which would be to operate along and reinstall further binaries, messianicity "suspends" or renders "inoperative" the binary apparatus altogether. This is the force at work in Pauline vocations as the figure of the "as-not," in which early Christian converts neither oppose old societal roles nor create new ones; instead, the apostle encourages the suspension of their normal relationship to those roles, encouraging early disciples of Jesus to "have wives [...] as though they had none", to mourn or rejoice "as though they were not" mourning or rejoicing, and to "buy as though they had no possessions" (1 Cor 7:29-30)[2].

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[2] See Agamben (2005a, p.23).

To take another example, one perhaps more obviously relevant to secularization, many theorists have noted the structural entanglement of the secular with the religious – that is, the way that the terms historically arose together and are constituted in part by being not-the-other (*i.e.*, the secular is defined as the not-religious and the religious as the not-secular)³. Because their opposition is constitutive, definitional, and cannot be overcome through more forceful oppositions of one category to the other, Agamben argues for a third way that cuts across this binary altogether. This is the force of what Agamben calls a "division of divisions", a double negation whose operation produces a "non non-A" (AGAMBEN, 2005a, p.51). To overcome the binaries of religious/secular or transcendent/immanent on this model would require something that is non non-transcendent and non non-immanent. Agamben's innovation is to articulate with razor precision a philosophical ontology for that third way and how it can suspend every binary apparatus.

We will attempt to clarify that ontology in the following section; for now, it is only necessary to note that, according to Agamben, it is only the "messianic" that could be accurately described as a casualty of secularization or routinization, never the religious or transcendent. It is precisely in mistaking the messianic for the transcendent that so many theorists of secularization go awry. This is a consistent theme in "The Time That Remains" and it is in line with this theme that Agamben gathers together a wide array of thinkers familiar to secularization debates – Carl Schmitt, Max Weber, Karl Löwith, and Hans Blumenberg primary among them. Insofar as these thinkers recognize that secularization is keyed to the messianic dimension of early Christianity rather than its religious or theological dimension, Agamben is willing to grant their account; insofar as they miss the messianic dimension, however, they have gone astray. This is why Agamben is willing to follow Weber's claim that capitalism is a secularized version of Christian vocation: the Pauline term "*klēsis*" or "calling" has an exclusively messianic meaning and hence Agamben describes the term's German legacy as "the process of secularization of messianic *klēsis*" (AGAMBEN, 2005a, p.20). Still in an economic vein, Agamben attributes a similar function to "the Marxian concept of a 'classless society'" which is "a secularization of the idea of messianic time" (AGAMBEN, 2005a, p.30). Turning to figures more local to secularization debates, Agamben mentions the debate between Löwith and Blumenberg as an instance of missing the messianic dimension: "Without entering into this debate, I would simply like to note that Blumenberg and Löwith both mistake messianism for eschatology, the time of the end for the end of time. What is essential in Paul, messianic time, thus escapes them" (AGAMBEN, 2005a, p.63). According to Agamben, both scholars divided time along binary lines, into historical and eschatological time. Insofar as they overlooked "messianic time", they overlooked a third option that would not only provide a more accurate account of Pauline temporality but would also render inoperative the dualistic machinery of Western thought. Agamben takes on even someone as high-octane as Hegel, noting that where Hegel secularizes the messianic force of early Christianity, his commenters Koyré and Kojève are, like Blumenberg, responsible for "flattening out the messianic into the eschatological" (AGAMBEN, 2005a, p.99).

Agamben insists, then, that any true "crisis of religion" lies in the loss of this messianicity (AGAMBEN, 2005a, p.135). While he thus agrees with secularization theorists that modern religion is in crisis and he will likewise state that there has been a decline of an originary force

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³ For just one representative example, see Cavanaugh (2014 p.105).

at the center of the early Jesus movement, this crisis and decline are repeatedly indexed to the "messianic" rather than the transcendent/metaphysical. That so many iconic thinkers of (purportedly secular) modernity tend to mistake the messianic for the transcendent (whether in the form of eschatology or economic terminology or modern social arrangements, etc.) is, for Agamben, further proof of dualism's chokehold on Western thought. Insofar as Löwith and Blumenberg can only think the eschaton as a transcendent intervention into immanent history, for instance, they remain caught in the vice grip of a transcendence/immanence binary.

According to Agamben, transcendence muddies the water of intellectual history in a second way, as well. At several points across the "*Homo Sacer*" series, he takes aim at theorists who posit a sphere of magico-religious indistinction lying at the origin of history. This sphere is usually assumed, he says, in order to explain the pseudo-magical force or "sacrality" that seemed to accrue to ancient institutions such as oaths and sacrifice. Forestalling this misunderstanding is important enough to Agamben's project that he positions it quite early in the first book of the series that deals with his archaeological method, "The Sacrament of Language". In the nineteenth century, he claims, there emerged the idea "that explaining a historical institution necessarily means tracing it back to an origin or context that is sacred or magico-religious" (AGAMBEN, 2011a, p.12). He goes on: "According to an endlessly repeated paradigm, the force and efficacy of the oath are once again sought in the sphere of the magico-religious 'forces' to which it originally belongs and which is presupposed as most archaic: they derive from this and decline along with the decline of religious faith" (AGAMBEN, 2011, p.12).

It is telling that a traditional secularization thesis – In which a decline of sacrality is indexed to "the decline of religious faith" – is set up in direct contrast to Agamben's own method. What Agamben does "not" mean by "archaeology" bears profound similarities with traditional secularization accounts and it is in this sense that we can describe secularization debates as Agamben's contrast space. As he goes on to clarify, a model of archaic magico-religious entanglement is false in part because there exists no chronological origin to which we could readily point and because the sacred/secular distinction is itself produced by the apparatus of history such that even to use those terms, even to claim their primordial indistinction, is anachronistic. Some secularization theories, then, have fallen prey to a metaphysical fantasy in which immanent historical structures are grounded in a pleromatic fullness located at some purported chronological origin. They have fallen prey, for Agamben, to the explanatory pull of transcendence.

As an example of the subtle but real distinctions Agamben draws between an ultra-historical "*arché*" and an archaic magico-religious sphere, his treatment of Carnival provides a helpful illustration. The institution of Carnival has been a regular standby in secularization narratives about metaphysical decline, including as recently as Charles Taylor's "A Secular Age". For Taylor, Carnival is a kind of pressure valve expressing an ancient and medieval view that the world is built of opposing forces which must be maintained in a finely-tuned equilibrium. Especially interesting for our purposes is the way this "equilibrium in tension" becomes a constitutive force for day-to-day institutions. Taylor writes: "The intuition supposedly underlying these [festivals] is that order binds a primitive chaos, which is both its enemy but also the source of all energy, including that of order" (TAYLOR, 2007, p.43). Carnival becomes, for Taylor, a release valve for a pleromatic fullness of indistinct "chaos" with enough force that it can function as "the

source of all energy". Although Taylor distances himself slightly from what Agamben would call a direct claim of magico-religious indistinction, there are enough echoes in his account to be suggestive. More suggestive still is Taylor's claim that this worldview of opposing forces has declined in specific ways:

> This need for anti-structure is no longer recognized at the level of the whole society, and in relation to its official, political-jural structure [...]. It was the eclipse of this sense of necessary complementarity, of the need for anti-structure, which preceded and helped to bring about the secularization of the public space (TAYLOR, 2007, p.50).

On this latter point, Agamben's treatment of Carnival could not be more distinct. Rather than anti-structure being strained out of the public sphere, leaving behind only a privatized residue expressed in our need for holidays, Agamben claims that Carnival in fact attests to an institutional structure the modern age has with it more than ever before. He refuses the assertion that Carnival is a kind of release valve for a more originary fullness or chaos lying behind our juridical order and occasionally demanding to be freed. On the contrary, Carnival for Agamben simply reenacts the paradox of our juridical structure (the necessary entanglement of nomos and anomie) (AGAMBEN, 2005b, p.71)[4].

> The 'legal anarchy' of the anomic feasts," he writes, "brings to light in a parodic form the anomie within the law, the state of emergency as the anomic drive contained in the very heart of the nomos [...]. In other words, they point toward the real state of exception as the threshold of indifference between anomie and law (AGAMBEN, 2005b, p.72).

Where Taylor's Carnival functions as the avatar of a worldview that has room for transcendence and as the contrast to our secular age in which carnivalistic release has been excised and transformed, Agamben would say, in response, that secularization cannot have functioned as a decline of metaphysical transcendence of this sort because that was never what Carnival expressed nor how Carnival functioned. Rather than attesting to something we lost, Carnival attests to something we have with us "more than ever" because states of exception are more ubiquitous today than in the past[5].

Once again, it is clear that Agamben refuses secularization accounts that traffic in transcendence and linear decline and, in fact, that such accounts function as a regular point of methodological contrast in the "*Homo Sacer*" series. For Agamben, secularization claims of this sort risk concealing the apparatuses of Western power and their binary operation, thereby obscuring the messianic force that Agamben will claim is our only solution. Additionally, these claims symptomatically invest a chronological origin with transcendent force in order to fund inaccurate narratives of that transcendence in decline. There is a case to be made for both decline and routinization, and Agamben will agree that we have reached a crisis of religion and of the felt force of ancient institutions, but "what" has declined is not transcendence, and "how" it has declined is not linear.

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[4] "State of Exception": A brief explanation of this paradoxical structure may be useful, here. Agamben, following Carl Schmitt, argues that law is grounded in the figure of a sovereign who is defined as the individual capable of suspending the law at any given moment. If the law is thus grounded in the possibility of its own suspension, *nomos* and anomie are coextensive and ever-present in every legal structure.

[5] Claims like this have led some scholars to aptly describe Agamben's account of the secular as an "intensification" of older political or theological forms, much along the lines that Foucault's archaeological method shows modern techniques of disciplinary power as an intensification of Christian discipline. See Chrulew (2015, p.139).

Arché-ic Origins

Agamben's system takes its bearings from the contrast just discussed – that is, from his refusal of any chronological magico-religious origin to history. His system thus has everything to do with the distinction he draws between the *"arché"* of his "archaeological" method and the *"arché"* posited by grammarians and other intellectual historians who locate the source of the present in the past. According to Agamben, what is most originary for our present moment – most *arché*-ic, in the original Greek definition of *ἀρχή* as "beginning" or "origin" – is something within history rather than prior to it. The present is best explained by reference to a metaphysical regime that is "deeper" rather than one that is "older". He writes:

> It is clear that the arché toward which an archaeology seeks to regress cannot be understood in any way as a given that can be situated either in a chronology (even in a broad category like 'prehistoric') or even beyond it, in an atemporal metahistorical structure [...]. It is, rather, a force working in history, exactly as the Indo-European language expresses first of all a system of connections among historically accessible languages; just as the child in psychoanalysis expresses a force that continues to act in the psychic life of the adult; and just as the 'big bang', which is supposed to have given rise to the universe, is something that never stops transmitting its background radiation to us (AGAMBEN, 2011a, p.10).

We should note, first, how Agamben here resists an overly binary picture of immanence versus transcendence. He rejects the claim both that an *"arché"* fully immanent to history must be simply historical ("situated [...] in a chronology") and that the only alternative is a kind of transcendence ("an atemporal metahistorical structure"). Beyond the binary of immanent history and transcendent non-history, Agamben espouses a third option: "a force working in history" – that is, fully immanent to history but nevertheless not reducible to it. The *"arché"*, then, gives us our first glimpse that Agamben is after something like a "third way".

To illustrate, he then lists three metaphors we might use to think about immanent forces that are nevertheless different in kind from what they produce: Indo-European linguistic structures, libidinal forces in an analysand's psyche, and the background radiation of the big bang. All three represent subterranean structures that are not immediately accessible but nevertheless operate incessantly beside the economy that is phenomenally given. Indo-European is not a language, precisely – it has no community of speakers today nor could it be identified with a written alphabet. All the same, it is the deep structure operating within every romance language spoken in the West. The Indo-European heritage of Western communication runs alongside and facilitates every concrete linguistic paradigm in operation today without coming into direct visibility as such or being reducible to any given contemporary language. In the same way, the childhood traumas posited by Freud produce neurotic symptoms and patterns of behavior in the adult psyche that, while they could never be reduced to the childhood trauma, are also the direct result of that trauma's ever-present repercussions. The big bang likewise continues with us into the present by virtue of the "background radiation" that "never stops transmitting". Insofar as planets continue to orbit and matter continues to travel outward from the center of the universe, the big bang remains the "present" causal force of phenomena. Like each of these examples, the "arché" is a deep structure operating within any phenomenal given, providing the visible form of our present factical configuration but simultaneously exceeding that visible form. While it can never enter presence directly ("the *arché* is not a given, a substance, or an

event," Agamben continues), it nonetheless *gives* presence and does so in a radically present and continuous way (AGAMBEN, 2011a, p.11)[6].

It is crucial, here, not to miss Agamben's commitment to the immanence of the "*arché*". If readers are not careful, it is easy to misconstrue the "*arché*" as simply another transcendental instance. That this is emphatically not the case can be illustrated by reference to the idea of operational time which serves as an excellent analogy to the "*arché*" in its immanence, contemporaneity, and originary force. Agamben lifts the concept of operational time from the work of linguist Gustave Guillaume, who uses it to describe the time it takes for the human brain to create temporal representations. Apart from the raw experience of time, Agamben explains, there is also the time that it takes for the brain to represent its temporal experience to itself such that operational time is defined as "the time the mind takes to realize a time-image" (AGAMBEN, 2005a, p.65). In the same way that history cannot gain conceptual perceptibility without an ultra-historical register running alongside it, or the way contemporary linguistic structures function communicatively only thanks to their deeper Indo-European roots, the human experience of time can never become conscious or explicable without the "operational time" required to make that experience phenomenally visible.

Making this concept admirably concrete, Adam Miller provides the example of a photograph:

> Consider a photo of the night sky. The photo documents in one stroke a simple, contemporaneous image of light shining from stars. But the simplicity of the accomplished image masks the complex temporality at work in its construction. It masks the time lag (the operational time) that makes it possible. Here, such lag is dramatic and can be measured in terms of the millions of years it took for that star light to reach us. A photo of the night sky is shot through with operational time (MILLER, 2016, p.390).

Operational time exemplifies how the "*arché*" can be both originary and undeniably immanent. Miller's photograph depends fundamentally on the light of the stars and the click of the camera shutter; the final image could never be produced without the originary force of both. It is also clear that the operational time at work here – the time it takes for light to travel millions of miles through space, or the time required for the camera shutter to release – is bound up with the photo in a fully immanent way, since the time required to produce the image has no phenomenal avatar apart from the image. Operational time is indelibly sutured to the time-image it constructs, completely originary to the photo without being somehow 'beyond' the final image. Every existing being or object – including schemas and concepts and ideological structures – is constituted from the arché in the same way that every representation takes operational time to come to completion.

The "*arché*", then, is that immanent-yet-irreducible site of the non-self-identity of all phenomena, the deep structure within time that gives the present its phenomenal presence without ever entering phenomenal presence itself. Especially relevant to Agamben's project more broadly – and to his views on secularization – the "*arché*" is also the level at which messianicity operates. Agamben's messianic force depends on the constitutive non-coincidence created by the split between history and the "*arché*" (or between metaphysics and a deeper ultra-metaphysical regime, or between Being and beings, and so on). Insofar as all objects, persons, concepts, or categories are non-self-identical, they are constituted by a gap through which a

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[6] The similarities with Heidegger's ontological difference (Being/beings) are not coincidental. Something very like that same distinction undergirds Agamben's picture here.

messianic force can enter and suspend the norms and predicates by which power attempts to close that gap. Messianicity depends on the non-coincidence of all things and it is this same structure, in fact, that will fund Agamben's unique take on secularization as a signature.

The fact that messianicity operates on the same structural level as the "arché" also explains why Agamben is so insistent that it is the messianic dimension of Pauline thought which falls prey to routinization and decline rather than transcendence or the purportedly "sacred." As we have seen, Agamben differs from scholars who locate sacrality in an older "sphere of magico-religious 'forces'" which "derive from this and decline along with the decline of religious faith" (AGAMBEN, 2011a, p.12). We are now in a position to appreciate the contextual significance of this passage, which appears immediately after the explanation of the "arché" in "The Sacrament of Language". If there is no identifiable historical point that could provide such a "magico-religious 'force'", as Agamben claims, and if the "*arché*" these scholars are after is actually a deeper ultra-metaphysical regime rather than an older chronological origin, then the force they attempt to describe must also originate in the "*arché*" as Agamben defines it. A regime potent enough to both produce phenomenal history and exceed it is a regime potent enough to fund the felt intensity of oaths and sacrifice. Indeed, Agamben seems to suggest that these ancient Roman institutions felt so live and forceful because they stem from such a live well of potential. What is declining in modernity, in other words, is the originary force stemming from the "arché". Modernity does show signs of having routinized or secularized an originary force, but that force is neither transcendent nor chronologically prior.

Secularization as signature

If Agamben's comments about the "*arché*" have thus clarified how messianicity is sufficiently originary to be subject to secularization, they also help explain his commitment to the unsystematic and meandering trajectory of that secularization. Ironically, this commitment comes out clearest in the two texts in which Agamben seems most to mimic secularization narratives, "The Kingdom and the Glory" and its companion text *Opus Dei*, both of which advertise themselves as archaeological forays into Christian theology in order to trace the religious roots of contemporary political and ethical forms in the West. On a cursory reading of "The Kingdom and the Glory", Agamben seems more or less to duplicate Schmitt's method, showing how contemporary political concepts derive from Christian origins and tracing the linear chronological trajectory by which modernity inherited older theological models. Thus Agamben claims, for instance, that Trinitarian *oikonomia* debates throughout the patristic and medieval periods became the laboratory in which modern notions of will, providence, and historical progress were concocted, or that Christian liturgical praise lies behind secular democratic consensus and the media apparatus. It is abundantly clear that Agamben considers Christian theology to be a necessary explanatory register for some of the most standard logics and techniques of modernity. It is also clear, however, that "The Kingdom and the Glory" demands more than a cursory reading, and that closer inspection reveals a more nuanced relationship between Christianity and the modern political order than a first appraisal might suggest.

Our first clue that Agamben intends to differentiate himself from traditional secularization accounts is the methodological gloss that he positions on virtually the first page of the book. In it, he alerts the reader that although the following analysis might look like a secularization approach to intellectual history, his method is instead emphatically archaeological and that

the difference, though slight, is significant. Opening the gloss with a brief explanation of the "strategic function" played by the term "secularization" in modernity, Agamben unmasks some of the power plays at work in Weberian and Schmittian articulations of the secular. In light of the starkly opposed definitions of secularization on display in each (*i.e.*, that Weber marks the decline of theology while Schmitt instead identifies theology's continuation into the political order), Agamben concludes that secularization must be understood as "not a concept but a signature" (AGAMBEN, 2011b, p.4). By signature, as he goes on to explain, Agamben refers to "something that in a sign or concept marks and exceeds such a sign or concept [...]. Signatures move and displace concepts and signs from one field to another without redefining them semantically" (AGAMBEN, 2011b, p.4). Echoing the same ontological picture that funds his discussion of the "*arché*", Agamben defines a signature as that part of a sign that "exceeds" itself or that arises from a sign's failure to be perfectly self-identical. This excess or non-self-coincidence comes into play within systems of reference in that a signature can shift the sign from one interpretive field to another without altering its semantic content.

Secularization operates among theological concepts, in other words, in the way that a signature operates among paintings. Take for example an unsigned oil portrait of a seventeenth-century nobleman, perhaps on display in a museum gallery of other European portraiture collected based on common artistic techniques or similar clothing styles among their subjects. If, instead of remaining unsigned, that portrait were to bear the signature of a famous artist – Rembrandt, let's say – the painting could easily be moved from the gallery of portraits to a gallery dedicated to the work of the Dutch masters or to a private auction of artworks worth tens of millions of dollars. Without ever changing the content of the image, affixing Rembrandt's signature would dramatically shift the contexts into which the painting can be inserted. Its financial value, significance for art history textbooks, and the norms surrounding its display would change based on the signature granting the portrait its referential value. Secularization, according to Agamben, operates in the same way. A theological concept can be lifted from its Christian context and brought into political, ethical, or metaphysical interpretive fields based on the way the original concept – like all other concepts and objects – bears within it a slight referential excess.

It is important for our purposes to note that there is nothing chronologically determined about that referential shift. The signature of Rembrandt does not refer a painting back in time so much as it puts the painting in relation to other similarly-marked paintings here in the present and shifts the way viewers relate to the artwork in the here and now. Discovering a lost Rembrandt painting can change history by revealing new stages of the artist's development, but it may also impact present norms in museum security or display techniques or the way portraiture is appraised. There is nothing chronologically unidirectional about the impact of a signature. Indeed, this is how Agamben can prioritize the present to the point of materially altering the past; the secularization thesis "acts retroactively on theology itself" because signatures create novel interpretive constellations – including constellations with repercussions for history – in the present (AGAMBEN, 2011b, p.3).

If the temporal contingency of signatures' operation seems already to bear on secularization debates, Agamben then makes the point explicit. After summarizing the definition and function of signatures, he writes:

> Sciences of signatures [...] run parallel to the history of ideas and concepts, and should not be confused with them. If we are not able to perceive signatures and follow the displacements and movements they operate in the tradition of ideas, the mere history of ideas can, at times, end up being entirely insufficient (AGAMBEN, 2011b, p.4).

Intellectual history, for Agamben, is too often wrapped up in the register of history and its linear chronological constraints, thus missing the fact that the more important borrowings between theology and modernity belong to the "science of signatures" rather than the "history of [...] concepts." Agamben hints that a fully sufficient approach to the archaeology of modernity involves tracking more contingent patterns of change ("displacements and movements"). As we will see, those hints expand into full-blown assertions as the text progresses.

After this initial methodological clarification, Agamben launches his trek through the theological archive, but he clearly maintains worries that readers will mistake his approach for a history of ideas rather than an archaeology. Crucially, those worries emerge at the same moment that Agamben again employs secularization language and are assuaged only by another methodological gloss. Now several chapters into the book, he writes: "The passage from ecclesiastical pastorate to political government [...] is far more comprehensible if it is seen as a *secularization* of the detailed phenomenology of first and second, proximate and distinct, occasional and efficient causes" (AGAMBEN, 2011b, p.112, emphasis added). No sooner has he finished the sentence, however, than he immediately introduces another aside about the "science of signatures". Because it follows on a good hundred pages of analysis, this gloss is in some ways even clearer on Agamben's methodological qualms about secularization than the gloss that opened the book. In addition to demonstrating Agamben's simultaneous willingness to employ secularization terminology and his wariness about the misunderstandings such terminology might cause, this clarification is especially useful for the way it plays up the contingency inherent in the referential movement of signatures. He writes:

> When we undertake an archaeological research it is necessary to take into account that the genealogy of a political concept or institution may be found in a field that is different from the one in which we initially assumed we would find it [...]. Once again, archaeology is a science of signatures [*segnature*], and we need to be able to follow the signatures that displace the concepts and orient their interpretation toward different fields (AGAMBEN, 2011b, p.112).

The deliberate ambiguity of the twice-repeated "different" in this passage is especially noteworthy. Rather than making any claim for the universal necessity of rooting modern politics in a theological past, Agamben points up the contingent and arbitrary route archaeology often takes. While in "this" case the origin of political administration can be found in theology, in other cases that origin might be more properly located elsewhere. Even as Agamben commits himself to three hundred pages of close readings of theology, he studiously avoids any claims that would elevate the theological archive to anything like an obligatory status. The self-description of his project in this gloss is also interesting: "We are faced with what, to the modern eye, appears to be an inconsistency and with a terminological confusion that, at times, makes it impossible to establish a convincing connection between modern political categories and medieval concepts" (AGAMBEN, 2011, p.112). On his own account, then, Agamben is not attempting to trace a theological concept into its political appropriation; rather, he identifies inconsistencies in traditional political narratives and attempts to give a more satisfying account

of where the notion of governmentality originates. The subtext once again speaks clearly: it "just so happens" that in this case, governmentality stems from theological *oikonomia* but there is no guarantee that theology might house any other political origins for future investigations.

If there is a critique of secularization narratives to be found in these glosses, then, it seems that Agamben finds traditional accounts of modernity to be too necessity-driven and too linear. He aims to show structural commonality between theology and politics – and maybe even genealogical derivation, in some cases – but with more contingency, less necessity, and less linear directionality. Less explicit but still significant is the additional fact that Agamben's analysis in "The Kingdom and the Glory" makes no claims about metaphysical decline as part of the transition from medieval theology to modern politics. On Agamben's telling, Christianity was neither enchanted nor transcendent and hence there was no need to eliminate transcendence in order to make way for the political. Christianity was, rather, always already political and always already immanent. This, too, marks Agamben's self-differentiation from other theorists of modernity. He may retain some of the same structural entanglements between the religious and the secular but by deflating any notion of metaphysical decline and punching up the contingency of signature-driven movement, Agamben's account ends up looking noticeably distinct.

Although "The Kingdom and the Glory" stands out in the *"Homo Sacer"* series for the intensity with which Agamben engages theology, it is not the only book to do so. *Opus Dei* is likewise invested in a medieval Christian archive and, although substantially shorter than "The Kingdom and the Glory", explicitly announces its kinship with the earlier text. For this reason, among others, *Opus Dei* is a useful testing ground for Agamben's methodology surrounding secularization as signature. Indeed, to mine *Opus Dei* for comments on or nods to secularization is to confirm a handful of tactics, claims, and rhetorical stances already on display in "The Kingdom and the Glory". Like its companion text, for instance, *Opus Dei* opens with a comment on archaeology and gestures toward the wide array of fields that an archaeological study traverses. "As in every archaeological study, this one leads us well beyond the sphere from which we started", Agamben writes, and "the diffusion of the term *office*" occurs across "the most diverse sectors of social life" (AGAMBEN, 2013, p.xii). Signatures, as we have just seen, transmit concepts across a wide variety of fields; there is nothing ultimately privileged about the theological as the point of origin for modern notions of *oikonomia* or *officium* other than the accidental contingencies of history. Also as in "The Kingdom and the Glory", Agamben here indexes the necessity of his project not to any necessary relation between theology and contemporary ethics but simply to the fact that theology constitutes a "missing chapter" that will help clear up some academic confusions (AGAMBEN, 2013).

Opus Dei is not only similar to "The Kingdom and the Glory", however; it also sharpens and refines some of the earlier text's claims. Here we see more clearly, for instance, that Agamben's critique of the "history of ideas" has to do with his prioritization of structures over concepts. Writing about the curious idea of effectiveness lying behind Christian liturgy, he says: "The problem is not whether or not there is a juridical relation at the base of the eucharistic texts […] so much as that of the obvious structural analogy between the juridical sphere and the liturgical sphere" (AGAMBEN, 2013, p.60). What was on display methodologically in "The Kingdom and the Glory" here becomes an explicit claim: the main task of archaeology is not to uncover points of historical continuity or logical derivation so much as it is to reveal the "structural analogy" and function behind certain ideas.

This investment in structural function beyond mere conceptual similarity is enshrined in the penultimate moves of *Opus Dei*, which concludes with an investigation of Kantian ethics illustrating the affinities between the categorical imperative and the Christian *officium*. This conclusory spotlight on the religious logic of Kantian ethics is telling because it is, in broad terms, the very same move Agamben understands Schopenhauer to be making when he unmasked the affinity between Kant's ethics and Christian theology (AGAMBEN, 2013). If Schopenhauer thus reveals that all significant Kantian ethical categories are simply secularized theological concepts, the ways Agamben marks his difference from Schopenhauer will tell us a great deal about he way Agamben marks his difference from classic secularization narratives. Here again he sounds familiar notes.

> The genealogy sketched by Schopenhauer, which is certainly correct, shows how little has been done in removing the mask from something, laying bare its hidden origin. By relating Kantian ethics to its theological presuppositions one does not gain much, in fact, as far as what would be of interest above all, namely, the understanding of the practical paradigm that has produced [...] the structure (AGAMBEN, 2013, p.90).

Once again, we find Agamben frustrated by what he sees as intellectual history's lack of productivity. Revealing a concept's derivation from theological origins is meaningless, he thinks, unless one can also identify the parallel structures operating in its site of origin and its modern form. Locating a similarity accomplishes "little" unless we can also articulate that similarity in structural terms and account – with razor precision – for its development.

A second clarifying feature of *Opus Dei* is its more explicit recasting of secularization as a process of intensification rather than decline. After a full book carefully investigating instances of performative logic and imperatival grammar in Christian theology and modern ethics, Agamben adds a coy line at the very end about the way these forms feature in contemporary society: "It is significant, then, that the imperative defines the verbal mode proper to law and religion" (AGAMBEN, 2013, p.119) Given that this point in the text is discussing contemporary ethics and ontology, and that "law and religion" are not temporally located, it is clear that Agamben has modern legal and religious logics in mind as much as their ancient and medieval precedents. Agamben implies once again that what we have with us in modernity is not the absence of religion but religion "more than ever", and its intensity marks it as an intimate relation of secular law rather than its opposition. Clarifying this move, Agamben puts it in more directly Kantian terms only a few pages later: "At the threshold of modernity, [...] theology and metaphysics [only] seemed to definitively cede the field to scientific rationality". In reality, however, "Kant's thought represents the secularized reappropriation of the ontology of esto in the bosom of *esti*, the catastrophic reemergence of law and religion in the bosom of philosophy" (AGAMBEN, 2013, p.122). This quotation is exemplary for the way it shows Agamben's willing use of the term "secularized" and his simultaneous emphatic denial that secularization means anything like the decline of theology or metaphysics. Secularization is here keyed not to religious decay, which Agamben says never really occurred in any case, but to Kant's "reappropriation" of an idea in a new field. In addition to its obvious echoes of secularization-as-signature, keyed once again to shifting interpretive fields, this passage also reiterates the way that Agamben understands secularization to occur as intensification. Exchanging medieval religion for modern secular ethics or law has not effectively changed anything, ontologically speaking, and in fact the operative structures common to both have

only intensified. In some respects, this is Agamben's sharpest critique of secularization narratives we have yet encountered. Not only are such narratives missing the more interesting or fundamental story, they are also missing all of the ethical freight Agamben's Homo Sacer series assigns to the biopolitical and philosophical crises of modernity.

In sum, Agamben's engagement with theology in "The Kingdom and the Glory" and "Opus Dei" can too easily come across as a kind of historical analysis in the same register as traditional secularization accounts. After all, he traces a linear chronological history from patristic and scholastic theology into political administration and is manifestly amenable to using terms like secularization. What must be noted, all the same, is that every use of "secularization" is accompanied by methodological glosses and references to the theory of signatures that highlight the contingency of the historical vector he happens to be tracing in these books. Agamben may employ secularization terminology and inhabit rather naturally the political-theological territory that has housed secularization accounts in the twentieth century, but he does so self-consciously, with considerable warnings for his readers never to identify him too closely with the intellectual company he keeps.

Conclusion

Reconfiguring contemporary conversations

It is necessary, here at the conclusion, to emphasize once again that secularization and accounts of the secular are not Agamben's primary interests in the "*Homo Sacer*" series – far from it. If secularization narratives occur repeatedly as a point of contrast for his archaeological method, it is primarily because, for Agamben, the contrast highlights the way intellectual history has overlooked the dimension in which he is more directly interested: the interaction between metaphysics and an ultra-metaphysical regime (along with all the related concepts that attach to the latter such as the messianic, the "*arché*", etc.). Along the way, of course, Agamben's ontology substantially reconfigures stereotypical secularization accounts by refusing any idea of a transcendent 'before" that declines into an immanent "after," instead preferring an always-present ultra-historical potency that is routinized through the several apparatuses operating in history – apparatuses that are juridical, political, secular, theological, medical, educational, ontological, ethical, and so on. Additionally, as we have seen, Agamben's differently-situated ontology leads him to describe secularization as a play of signatures that allows apparatuses to float their related concepts between a wide variety of interpretive fields. The first and most direct reconfiguration of secularization conversations, then, is what has been traced over the bulk of this paper: secularization is not the result of metaphysical decline and if anything "has" declined or been routinized over the course of history, it can only be history's messianic dimension. Relatedly, the task of theorists is to be more sensitive to the play of signatures and the structures of the interpretive fields they traverse. Only in this way will be able to produce an account of history sensitive to its ontological realities and free of conceptual aporias.

Beyond its implications for the somewhat dated accounts of thinkers like Weber or Schmitt, it is important to recognize that Agamben's intervention, however oblique, directly impacts the touchstones of more contemporary secularization debates, as well. In addition to the revision

of Charles Taylor we might extrapolate from Agamben's comments on Carnival, his theory also illustrates how Taylor overly constrains the available options for understanding and responding to secularism. For Taylor, there are essentially two alternatives – a deeply enchanted world and a deeply disenchanted world – and the task of "A Secular Age" is to trace a conceptual shift from the former to the latter. What Agamben shows, by contrast, is that the Christianity of the first century was neither enchanted/religious nor disenchanted/secular but instead messianic, and that Taylor's options simply realize two different possibilities that "both" stem from a non-messianic conception of Christianity. When Agamben's third way is brought into an analysis of the first-century religious landscape, secularization accounts are no longer hamstrung by an overly dualistic framework. What are the consequences for secular modernity when, taking seriously the messianic register of Pauline thought, we attend to a strand of Christianity that works against both enchantment and disenchantment?

Another promising point of engagement comes into view when Agamben is put in conversation with postcolonial accounts of secularization. Jared Hickman's recent "Black Prometheus: Race and Radicalism in the Age of Atlantic Slavery" takes direct aim at secularization accounts, arguing that they should be demoted as our guiding framework for modernity. What intellectual historians have named "secularization," he argues, is more accurately understood as the result of early modern reckoning with globalization. Furthermore, what intellectual historians have named "secularization" was in no way properly "secular" because it trafficked in its own mythmaking and the construction of transcendent, religiously-freighted categories. Hickman's is a "globalization – as opposed to secularization – narrative", he writes, and "secularization narratives can be shown in fact to be divinization narratives" (HICKMAN, 2017, p.15).

On Hickman's account, both Agamben and Taylor are susceptible to critique for their limited archive which ends up treating the constitution of modernity as what Hickman calls an "intra-European hothouse phenomenon" (HICKMAN, 2017, p.2)[7]. All the same, there may be room for a fruitful rapprochement between Hickman and Agamben given their joint interest in the logics of sovereignty. According to Hickman, what is usually termed "secularization" is better understood as the West's attempt to constitute itself as a rational sovereign in the face of global, racialized others. Given that Agamben, following Schmitt, attends with such precision to the structure of sovereign power, an Agambenian account of sovereignty may be capable of providing a conceptual hinge between secularization theorists and their postcolonial critics. This seems confirmed by another point of commonality between Hickman and Agamben: both aim to articulate a third way beyond the binaries of transcendence/immanence, noting that this binary apparatus is what has attempted to capture human lives and bodies throughout the entire history of the West. Where they differ is Hickman's emphatic insistence that this third way is represented in black Atlantic "Prometheanism" – a revolutionary opposition to the dualistic and dialectical categories of Western rationality. Whatever the ultimate consequences of this engagement, Agamben may prove a useful voice in urgent debates about secularity and the unavoidable racial logics of religion in the West.

For all that Agamben never narrates the rise of secularism per se or takes up any long-form engagement with secularization theorists, those theorists and their accounts have remarkable persistence along the margins of his Homo Sacer series. By using them as a contrast space

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[7] Hickman, it should be noted, puts this critique to Taylor explicitly.

to frame his third way, Agamben simultaneously reveals the dualistic constraints in which so many contemporary secularization debates remain caught (a dualism manifest in both temporal ["before"/"after"] and metaphysical [transcendent/immanent] strains) and opens room for a conversation with postcolonial theorists who likewise call for a third way and provide compelling contextual models of where that ultra-historical force has bubbled up in unexpected archives. Secularization accounts, in other words, may remain marginal in Agamben precisely because he has accurately weighted them in an archaeological and historical treatment of Western thought – because, that is, secularization frameworks deserve to be demoted to quasi-marginal, largely intra-Christian status. It may be time to ask, at the very least, what a marginal reframing of secularization brings into view and Agamben, having already begun to map that terrain, may be a particularly useful guide.

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