The Church’s Extrincist Response to the Pandemic: Re-reading the Church’s Acquiescence to Regulations in Agamben’s Wake

Enrico Beltramini | ORCID: 0000-0001-9704-3960
Senior research fellow, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Notre Dame de Namur University, Belmont, CA, USA
ebeltramini@ndnu.edu

Abstract

In this article, I return to Giorgio Agamben's intervention on the pandemic to reflect on one of his claims, namely the mundanity of the Roman Catholic Church. Agamben comes to this conclusion after reporting about the passive response of the Church to the state-of-emergency legislation and the “barbaric” conditions of social relationships that followed. These conditions, and not the conspiracy theories on the invention of an epidemic to extend forms of social control, are the primary focus of Agamben's concern. I confine Agamben's critique of the Church with a stipulation concerning the extrincist character of the Church's reaction to the recent epidemic crisis. I argue that, due to the extrincist character of that reaction, the temporal power of the state has proven itself necessary to the defeat of the pandemic, but the spiritual power of the Church has manifested itself as superfluous.

Keywords

Agamben – pandemic – Church – mundanity – extrincism
Many Christian institutions in the West [...] often show less trust in the Spirit than in scientific techniques. 

Henri Le Saux, 1966

1 Introduction

In the deserted streets of Rome, a solitary pontiff, surrounded by a police escort kept at a safe distance, walked along the normally bustling Via del Corso in Rome on March 15, 2020. The street was almost empty because of Italy’s strict coronavirus restrictions. Pope Francis was going to the Church of San Marcello, home to a crucifix that believers say helped to end an outbreak of the plague in 1522. After that, the pontiff walked to the Basilica of St. Mary Major to visit the icon of Salus Populi Romani, Mary Protection of the Roman People. In 1837, prayers were offered to the icon by Pope Gregory XVI in an attempt to end a cholera pandemic. Pope Francis invoked her prayers against the coronavirus pandemic affecting Italy and the world.

This brief memory of a pontiff’s short pilgrimage in the streets of Rome reminds the readers that coronavirus is not the first plague that Rome and Italy suffered. The icon housed at the Basilica of St. Mary Major was the same carried in a procession led by Pope St. Gregory the Great meant to stop a plague in 593. The memory also reminds that once upon a time, God was invested of salvific power, and that the troubles and crises of this earthly world were immediately correlated, in the social imagination of those times, in the notion of “hope in God.” The image of a pope praying a crucifix that is believed to possess thaumaturgical powers, finally, transports us into a premodern world in which worship and pestilence were still capable of coexisting. But the praying pope is not the focus of this article, rather that of walking pope in a deserted Rome under lockdown. Liturgical services had been canceled, and the churches were empty. Pastoral life was reduced to a minimum, and the religious dimension of the individuals in Rome and Italy was sacrificed for security reasons. Survival was all that counted. People died in the hospitals without the comfort of confession and last rites. Bodies were brought to the cemetery

1 Le Saux, Mountain of the Lord, p. 43.
2 I recognize Adam Kotsko’s and Valeria Dani’s excellent English translations of Agamben’s pieces, but for this article, I translated directly from the Italian originals.
without a funeral. Political philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who adopted a critical position against the measures that the Italian government imposed in response to the health emergency, expressed his surprise that the Roman Catholic Church had acquiesced to those measures. He labeled the Church “mundane.”

The question addressed in this article is related to the Church’s acquiescence. How was it that it came so easily to the Church to conform to limitations on her freedoms that would have been unthinkable even a few months prior? By acquiescing to the various restrictions issued by the government, particularly the prohibitions of any form of social gathering and public events and indeed closure of places of worship, the Church respected the law. But she has also implicitly accepted the redefinition of the pandemic in pure biological terms and the admission of her own impotence before the crisis. Does the acceptance of a management of the crisis exclusively in worldly manners not mean an inevitable loss of the transcendent horizon of human existence and providential action of God? Although the Church recognized the reasons for politics and science, she did not have to identify herself with those reasons, nor did she have to contradict such reasons. The Church could have complemented the political-scientific reasons of the government regarding the crisis with her own reasons of the economy of salvation.\(^3\) She could have been firm on her call of viewing all things \textit{sub specie aeternitatis}, the divine economic activity that pervades every sphere of human life.\(^4\) But throughout the pandemic, the Church had little to say about the pandemic except for praying and respecting the law. The inability to think other than in administrative and scientific terms is evidence of the Church’s inability to reframe the crisis in biological \textit{and} spiritual terms.\(^5\) In Agambenian terms, the Church gave priority to survival over vitality of the individuals and failed to recognize that even

---

3 With “complementary,” I mean that state and Church are no longer allies, rather they work on their distinct spheres, the secular and the religious, the former by exercising its temporal power, the latter her spiritual power. Neither is autonomous; therefore, each needs the other as a complement.

4 Having in mind the celebrated Pope Gelasius’s doctrine of the “Two Powers” (or Two Swords), I believe that the entire debate of the church-state relationship during the pandemic depends on whether the crisis is spiritual or mundane. According to Pope Gelasius I, church and state should work in harmony, although in the distinction between the two. However, it clarifies that in spiritual matters the emperor must obey the bishop, and that the bishop of Rome must obey the emperor in mundane matters.

5 I am not alone in this criticism. For an incomplete list of Catholic intellectuals, spiritual leaders, and members of the clergy who protested the Church’s response to the pandemic, see Allan, \textit{On Pope Francis}. I actually think I treat the matter gently if compared to historians Alberto Melloni and Roberto de Mattei, one positioned on the left and the other on the right.
in the pandemic there was the potential of “an inexhaustible abundance of Christian situations.”

How did it happen that the Church feels so content that she so easily abdicated her mission to offer a providential perspective to all and stay close with the sufferers? Agamben’s answer is simple: the Church was already mundane, that is, she had already assimilated in her bones the priority of science and the irrelevance of religion. An Italian philosopher, Italo Testa, has expressed opinions like those articulated by Agamben. For Testa, “the image of Pope Francis walking along the deserted streets of the Eternal City […] is perhaps the living symbol of that eclipse of religion which, among other things, seems to be confronting us these days.”

Thus, for Testa is not a matter of evangelical cowardice, rather of intellectual exhaustion. The difference between Agamben and Testa on this point is clear: for Agamben, the Church ignored her mission because she is mundane; for Testa, the Church recognized her impotency because she is a spent force. In this article, I gravitate around Agamben’s thesis, although I limit my argument to the Church’s action during the pandemic, and I do not argue that the Church is tout court mundane (like Agamben does). In first approximation, I share with Agamben the argument that the Church has been mundane in her response to the pandemic: the Church allowed the displacement in the mind of the people of God’s action by science and His sovereignty by the government. However, I prefer to frame the Church in terms of extrincism, not mundanity. Mundanity stands for a Church that is wholly worldly; extrincism, instead, means that the Church is dualistic in her management of the natural and the spiritual orders of reality.

Both a mundane and an extrincist Church has forgotten what Henri de Lubac would call a “complete act;” the world should be addressed in its totality and understood as such, that is, as a sacrament unity. It means that natural order, the worldly reality, and the spiritual order, the otherworldly reality, are

---

6 The original sentence reads: “life’ today has more to do with survival than with the vitality or form of life of the individual.” See Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, p. xx. The reference to Christian situations comes from von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, p. 71. The original sentence reads: “Each situation in the divine-human life is so infinitely rich, capable of such unlimited application, so full of meaning, that it generates an inexhaustible abundance of Christian situations.” I recognize Lyle Enright for linking Agamben and von Balthasar. See Enright, *Agamben and Francis*.

7 Testa, *La Religione*. Another line of thought is offered in Costa, *Prisoners of a Metaphor*.

8 I borrowed the term “extrincism” from Henri de Lubac. See de Lubac, *Drama of Atheist Humanism and Theology in History*, Part 2, section 111. See also Pabst, *Metaphysics*, pp. 311–312.

everywhere and always present together. There is only one reality, a unity of nature and spirit. The reality is not the sum of the two orders, rather the sacramental unity of the two. A mundane Church has retreated within the natural (historical, worldly) order, the order of science, medicine, and politics, and dismissed the spiritual (otherworldly, divine) order as irrelevant. This is, in a nutshell, Agamben’s argument. An extrincist Church, instead, conserves the view of the dual order of reality, the natural and the spiritual, but accepts that the former is autonomous from the latter and self-sufficient. To put it differently, the order of politics, medicine, and science do not need the spiritual to pursue their goals. The Church can add her spiritual contribution if she wants to do so. An extrincist Church proceeds as though the spiritual is added to a self-sufficient world of human affairs. This is, in brief, my argument. When Pope Francis invoked Mary Protection in a deserted Basilica of St. Mary Major, he added a spiritual component to the self-contained natural order that was already pursuing in full autonomy and with proper resources its own fight over the pandemic.

The article is divided into three sections: in the first, I report some elements of Agamben’s intervention on the pandemic. In the second, I discuss Agamben’s comments on the mundanity of the Church; in the third, I approach the extrincist status of the Church during the pandemic. It is important to stress that I limit my analysis to the administration of the crisis (lockdown, social distance, mask), and I do not intend to address the question of the vaccine, that is, whether the state can or ought to mandate the vaccine or whether an individual, by appeal to conscience, has power against the power of the state. Whether I fully agree with certain elements particularly dramatic of Agamben’s reflection, there is much in his conceptual logic at work here that demands attention. As usual, the Church is female.

2 Agamben and the Pandemic

The comments written on the pandemic have caused Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben a battery of criticisms from all over the world. His opinion that a transitionary state of emergency might become a permanent state of exception has been rejected as radical and inopportune because such an opinion prescinds from the contingency in place. The crisis imposes a state of emergency that would end as soon as the pandemic is under control. Agamben does not believe that because – and this is the crucial point of his position – he argues that the political-scientific apparatus has no self-justification. Lacking self-justification, the apparatus invents it. The crisis did just
that: it offered the political-scientific apparatus the opportunity to justify and legitimize itself.

In a series of posts on his personal blog, eventually translated into English by a reluctant Adam Kotsko (one of the main translators of Agamben’s works), then in articles published in Italian newspapers, and finally in a book translated into English, the Italian philosopher has framed the pandemic as, at once, an “ideal pretext” for exceptional measures and a situation of fear so disruptive “that Italians are disposed to sacrifice practically everything – the normal conditions of life, social relationships, work, even friendships, affections, and religious and political convictions – to the danger of getting sick.”\(^\text{10}\) It is crystal clear that Agamben’s concern is double: one refers to “the limitations of freedoms implicit in the provisions,” and the other to “the degeneration of the relationships between individuals” that these provisions can produce. It is the second one that takes priority in his reflection.\(^\text{11}\) In a later post addressing an anonymous criticism, Agamben once again frames the problem according to a dual narrative. On one hand, there is the question of the state of exception and the related limitations to freedom: “the state of exception, to which governments have habituated us for some time, has truly become the normal condition … A society that lives in a perennial state of emergency cannot be a free society.” But it is the problem of degeneration that comes first in his analysis:

How could it happen that an entire country has, without noticing it, politically and ethically collapsed in the face of an illness? The words that I have used to formulate this question have been carefully weighed one by one. The measure of the abdication of our own ethical and political principles is, in fact, very simple: it is a matter of asking ourselves what is the limit beyond which we are not prepared to renounce them. I believe that the reader who takes the trouble to consider the points that follow will not be able not to agree that – without noticing it or by pretending not to notice it – the threshold that separates humanity from barbarism has been crossed.\(^\text{12}\)

He makes some examples of these forms of barbarisms: dying alone and without a funeral, renouncing proximity, and losing freedom of movement.

---

\(^{10}\) For “ideal pretext,” see Agamben, *L’invenzione di una epidemia*. For “that Italians,” see Agamben, *Contagio*. For the book, see Agamben, *Where Are We Now*.

\(^{11}\) Agamben, *Contagio*.

\(^{12}\) Agamben, *Una Domanda*. 
According to Agamben, barbarism comes with the degeneration of the social tapestry but autocracy (or even “tyranny” as he mentions in another post) with the loss of freedom.13

Two dynamics are at work in Agamben’s commentary on the pandemic: one is the active role of the power to fabricate the crisis and obtain gains from it. In his first post, he mentioned this self-fulfilling prophecy: “in a perverse vicious circle, the limitations of freedom imposed by governments are accepted in the name of a desire for safety that was created by the same governments that are now intervening to satisfy it.”14 In the very last post dedicated to the pandemic, he returns to the same concept: “The dominant powers of today have decided to pitilessly abandon the paradigm of bourgeois democracy – with its rights, its parliaments, and its constitutions – and replace it with new apparatuses whose contours we can barely glimpse.”15 Those in power have exaggerated a certain situation of crisis as an opportunity to press forward on a paradigm shift that matches their political agendas. A new paradigm of governance is emerging, one that is based on “the state of exception,” the suspension of normal activities on the grounds that the nation faces an emergency. This is, so to speak, the first argument, and it has attracted almost unanimous criticism in the communities of scholars outside Italy (and, of course, also in part of the Italian academia). Kotsko, who is not only a translator but also a scholar of Agamben and an established political theologian on his own, has written an emotional piece in which he mixes professional comments and personal memories of his contact with Agamben. His thesis is that Agamben’s pandemic intervention is simultaneously surprising and rooted in Agamben’s previous work. Kotsko labels such an intervention “disastrous” and wonders whether Agamben’s “pandemic writings” may eventually tarnish his legacy.16

Kotsko identifies the roots of Agamben’s pandemic comments in his famous book Homo Sacer. Kotsko’s colleague Eric Santner instead locates the comments in Agamben’s distinct interpretation of Hobbes.17 The Italian political philosopher Giacomo Marramao sees the source of Agamben’s comments in the “Foucauldian idea of control.”18 Although pursuing a different path of critique, Marramao seems to agree with Santner, a professor at the University

---

13 For “tyranny,” see Agamben, Riflessioni sulla peste. The statement reads, “only a tyranny can be founded on the fear of losing one’s life, only the monstrous Leviathan with his sword drawn.”
14 Agamben, L’invenzione di una epidemia.
15 Agamben, Riflessioni sulla peste.
16 Kotsko, What Happened to Giorgio Agamben.
17 Santner, On Agamben’s Pandemic Writings.
18 D’Alessandro, Marramao a Cacciari e Agamben.
of Chicago, in detecting a sort of ideologization of Agamben's thought, as if he left the field of the political-philosophical analysis to enter the arena of cultural wars. This is the opinion of Carlo Salzani, a researcher at the University of Veterinary Medicine Vienna, too.\textsuperscript{19} In an inflamed article on the failure of philosophy to seize the moment, Benjamin Bratton returns to Agamben's intervention on the pandemic to criticize it as tainted by premodern irrationality. For Bratton, Agamben's entire work is a capital example of the failure of certain post-Foucauldian biopolitics to adequately address the most essential crisis of modern society.\textsuperscript{20} This is only a small list of references covering the responses to Agamben's comments on the pandemic. The epideemy itself has been addressed vastly via the work of philosophers and political theorists, and the towering status of Agamben in the field of political philosophy has made inevitable the engagement with his position.\textsuperscript{21}

Certainly, the barrage of criticism is not only a conflict of opinion but also of perspective. It did not help, in fact, that the pandemic has been administrated and received differently in the Anglo-Saxon world and the Latin world. In the United States, the problem was the initial lack of reaction on the side of the government, then an excess of resistance to biopolitical administration, but in Italy, the opposite happened. The problem began with contradicting media reports, with people in government on both sides of the spectrum claiming both ways – the lockdown and business as usual. The same day Agamben published his first post, national leaders in Rome were discussing the lockdown across local municipalities in Bergamo, one of the manufacturing capitals of Italy, and ultimately rejecting it.\textsuperscript{22} There is more to say: American, British, French, and German scholars active in left-wing politics were appalled that Agamben, one of the most refined Italian philosophers in the world, situated himself in the same position as the populist extremists of the right. His friends experienced as particularly intolerable Agamben's skepticism about science

\textsuperscript{19} Both comments from Santner and Salzani are reported in Kotsko, \textit{What Happened to Giorgio Agamben}. Salzani is the author of the first Italian-language study of Agamben: \textit{Introduzione a Giorgio Agamben}.

\textsuperscript{20} Bratton, \textit{Agamben wtf}. For Bratton's in-depth critique of Agamben's work, see \textit{Revenge of the Real}. See also Prozorov, \textit{Farewell}. Among the few comments circumstantially positive to Agamben's intervention on the pandemic, see Reader, \textit{Review of Giorgio Agamben}.


\textsuperscript{22} For a detailed reconstruction of these initial days of the pandemic in Italy see Horowitz, \textit{Lost Days}. See also Pisano/Sadun/Zanini, \textit{Lessons from Italy's Response}.
and medicine that aligned him with the anti-science forces at work in the United States. They found his positions frankly incomprehensible. But it is fair to suggest that it is exactly this kind of juxtaposition of a comment born in the Italian context and a social situation in the United States that is the possible cause of that incomprehensibility.

Agamben’s invectives have been received critically by numerous interlocutors, including those fellow philosophers whose philosophical work has been deeply influenced by his. Some have tried to dissociate his pandemic writings from the work that made him famous. Others have recognized that his pieces on the pandemic are a natural consequence of his previous analysis. Coherently, they wonder whether Agamben’s “pandemic writings” call “the rest of his work into question.” In both cases, the pandemic writings raise a problem of reception of Agamben’s political thought that might have otherwise remained obscure.

It is possible that the reception of Agamben’s political thought suffers from either a missing or erroneous contextualization. In the first option, scholars apply to Agamben the same process of assimilation that Americans deployed with French intellectuals in the second half of the twentieth century: as an intellectual detached from his context and isolated from other intellectuals. In the second option, he endures the opposite destiny, namely, to be associated with political problems and traditions to which he does not belong. In other words, they get him wrong. A case in point is the connection between Agamben throughout the philosophical category of Italian Theory and Operaismo. For some, in fact, Italian Theory gained self-awareness of its specificity through the encounter with a unique form of Italian phenomenology formulated in the early sixties: the Operaismo movement. In a meticulously written article, Guilel Treiber and Tim Christiaens take a high philosophical road and connect Operaismo to Aristotle. From a more political perspective, however, Operaismo is related to the search for the revolutionary agent. In that period, that is, the early sixties, it became clear that neocapitalism has such a capacity for integration that it has managed to defuse the classic contradiction between

23 Kotsko, What Happened to Giorgio Agamben.
24 Kotsko, What Happened to Giorgio Agamben.
25 Already in 2013, William Watkin noted that “most of the criticisms levelled against him [i.e., Agamben] are based on a reading of his work that one can say it is substantially wrong.” Watkin, Agamben and Indifference, p. 4.
26 Perniola. Difference; Borradori, Recording Metaphysics; Virno/Hardt, Radical Thought; Chiesa, Italian Difference; Esposito, Living Thought; Gentili/Stimilli/Garelli, Italian Critical Thought.
27 Treiber/Christiaens, Introduction: Italian Theory.
capital and labor, which is the engine of the possible social-communist revolution. This means that the left-wing parties (including the Communist Party) and the trade unions are already subordinates of the capital. With the parties and the unions already domesticated, what or who will be the subject that can engine a revolution?

The answer of the theorists of Operaismo was the new factory workers who moved directly from the southern countryside to the assembly lines of the North of Italy. These blue-collar workers were not accustomed to factory discipline; they were, therefore, rebellious and not easily tamed by the rites of the Capital-Labor relationship. They were workers capable of autonomy from traditional parties and trade unions. They were what Alberto Asor Rosa and Mario Tronti called the “pagan race.” In 1969, Operaismo became Potere Operaio (Workers’ Power), a workerist organization led by Franco Piperno and Oreste Scalzone. After 1976, when Asor Rosa, Massimo Cacciari, and Tronti joined the Communist Party, Potere Operaio found new life in Toni Negri’s Autonomia Operaia (Workers’ Autonomy), which progressively collected the remains of other radical left-wing political organizations as well as the first nucleus of armed insurrectionism. The history of the workerist movement is more than a philosophical walk in the park. The point is that Agamben has nothing to do with Operaismo. Sure, some of his colleagues and friends, think at Cacciari, have that kind of background, and, yes, Agamben has provided important contributions to the relation between potentiality and actuality initially formulated by Aristotle. But he lacks that interest in grassroots politics that some of his critics evoke when they comment on his papers, particularly those on the pandemic. In the decade when Massimo Cacciari and Toni Negri were engaged in politics, Agamben was making a living working in the world of small Italian independent publishing houses.\(^\text{28}\)

Although Agamben’s opinion pieces on the pandemic might understandably lack the methodological rigor of his more academic works of political philosophy, there is nonetheless a clear connection between the two. For Agamben, the self-representation of modernity, including science and politics, is part of the problem not of the solution. Science and politics need to be engaged from a perspective that is different from the one they offer of themselves. The state of exception contests their rational self-justifications; as a matter of fact, it

\(^{28}\) “Unlike myself,’ Toni Negri noted,Agamben “was never involved in political struggles, for which he has an incredibly voracious curiosity, as they constitute a great lack in his life – and he very much regrets not having had such experiences. He is quite limited when it comes to understanding politics – and in his work this limitation takes the form of a radical Heideggerism.” Negri/Casarino, In Praise of the Common, p. 152.
treats them as groundless. He argues that the political-scientific apparatus has no rational self-legitimization; it is an ideology. Think of Agamben’s sceptical comments on science and medicine that have caused his critics to label him as a premodern. His point is not a rejection of science, but of the absolutization of science. Science and medicine do not belong to the reign of facts but to probabilities. Science and medicine do not deliver truths but formulas of probability depending on an aleatory scientific calculation. Agamben’s criticism of certain interpretations of science is epistemological in character: science and medicine belong to the domain of indeterminism. Then he wonders what kind of civilization ours is, the Italian (European, western) civilization, where scientists pretend to operate in the domain of determinism and consequently try to deliver the answers that have been expected of them; inevitably, they are unable to do so because science does not provide those answers. Yet, they tried, and the politics asked them to provide those answers that are impossible to provide. Agamben detects in this surreal situation an intentionality. He may be wrong, but critics need to consider where his analysis originated.

It is well-known that for Agamben, the relation between potentiality and actuality is marked by impotentiality. He argues that it is by not actualizing their potential that human beings through their impotentiality are humans at all: “the greatness of human potentiality is measured by the abyss of human impotentiality.” This impotentiality is, in his opinion, the response to the crucial problem of modern power: its potentiality as nihilist potenza. I believe the term “potency” for potenza would serve the English translation better than “potential,” particularly in the context of Potenza, which is both potential and potential-of-not. In his re-reading of Carl Schmidt’s *Political Theology*, Agamben finds a hiatus between potentiality and actuality of power that is the result of a decision. To put it differently, potentiality does not spontaneously extinguish itself into the actuality, but rather remains, by the sovereign’s decision, suspended. In this intermediate space between potentiality and actuality created by the sovereign’s decision, an element of indeterminacy exists, which places both potentiality and actuality at the disposal of the sovereign.

29 Much ink has been spilled in the pages of academic journals large and small on the reproducibility crisis embroiling many scientific disciplines these days. As a 2016 survey by the scientific journal *Nature* showed, only 24 percent of the surveyed scientists had ever published a reproduced result in their careers. Source: Baker, *1,500 Scientists*. On the current problems of statistics and their impact on science, see Clayton, *Bernoulli’s Fallacy*.

30 See for example Agamben, *Nuove Riflessioni*. The quote reads: “there is no agreement between scientists ... [they] have different opinions on the importance of the epidemic and on the effectiveness of isolation measures.”

that is, the state. This intermediate space, this space of *anomia* (i.e., without law, chaos) between potentiality and actuality, makes the state the sovereign of *anomia*. This nothing (i.e., no law, no order) that inhabits the machine, this *anomie*, this nihilist potenza, is the empty core of the biopolitical machine governing western civilization; it is what makes the machine capable of anything.

For Agamben, the state administers the passage from potentiality to actuality, from *anomia* to order and law, through the state of exception. The state of exception is the correlation between *potestas* (that is, a power that can be exercised) and *auctoritas* (that is, a power without actual execution). If *potestas* and *auctoritas* are correlated without confusion, the state works; when the two elements become indistinct from each other, the exception becomes the norm. Agamben is skeptical of any possibility to return to a situation of distinction between *potestas* and *auctoritas*: once the *anomia* is out of the bottle, there is no going back.\(^{32}\) The state of exception is an extreme, destructuring concept, as it demonstrates that the origin of any political order lies in a decision. In the exception and not in the norm lies the political power, but the civil world, the society, is always suspended on an exception and a decision. Obviously, the liberals reject this interpretation, presenting their political systems as well-founded on humanistic principles and values, on rational and transparent potestative procedures. For them, liberalism conforms to universal reason and to the rights of each citizen and focuses not on power but on the limits of power.\(^{33}\)

Agamben believes that the pandemic concurred to offer the chance to the political-scientific apparatus to frame itself as self-grounded and self-sufficient: “if the powers that govern the world deemed it necessary to resort to extreme measures and mechanisms such as biosecurity and health terror, established everywhere and without reservation and now threatening to go out of control, it is because they feared, on good evidence, that they had no other choice in order to survive.”\(^{34}\) Agamben does not deny the epidemic. Granted, titles such as that of his first article, “The Invention of an Epidemic,” are not helpful, but Agamben’s intention is not to question the epidemic: the epidemic exists. It is not an optical effect. He focused on the political effects produced by its management, namely the transformation of an epidemic into a case of exception.

---

\(^{32}\) During his conversation with Indian intellectual historian Ananya Vajpeyi, Agamben mentioned the contiguity between democracy and totalitarianism: “it’s always from democracy that totalitarianism comes, and into totalitarianism that democracy descends.” See Vajpeyi, *Waiting for Giorgio*.

\(^{33}\) An article written by Agamben’s colleague and friend Carlo Galli offers a detailed support to this specific argument. See Galli, *Epidemia tra norma*.

\(^{34}\) Agamben, *Sul Tempo che Viene*. 
His point is the decision to sacrifice almost everything: life conditions, work, religious practices, and social and family relationships for “bare life, and the fear of losing it.” In the pandemic, Agamben captures the fact that the biopolitical potenza reduces the distinction between zoë and bios to indistinction. This indistinction between zoë (natural life) and bios reaches a point that the individual is no longer a persona (a relational entity) but a Muselmann (or Musselman), the individual who, in the concentration camp of Auschwitz, carries a bare life. The indistinction of zoë and bios is neither an accident nor a mistake but, according to Agamben, the representation of how the biopolitical machine governing the western civilization operates.

3 Agamben and the Church

Agamben’s argument on the state of exception has attracted most of the attention in the scholarly community, but it is of less interest to this article. It is to the second dynamic, the one referring to the political and ethical collapse of his own nation of Italy, that I now turn my attention. It is, in a nutshell, the question of barbarism.

It should be clear at this point that in Agamben’s opinion, there was another way to face a pandemic, a way that would conserve the political and ethical integrity of the nation. To simplify, Agamben hoped that the Italian society would be capable of descent into the hell of the pandemic with dignity. But it was the opposite, and Agamben interrogates himself: is it possible that the degeneration was already in process and the pandemic simply became an occasion to reveal it? Is it possible that “the threshold that separates humanity from barbarism” had already been crossed before the outbreak of the coronavirus?

Before I continue, I must register that most of the Italian population, as well as the scholars and thinkers, did not detect anything barbaric in the way the country reacted to the crisis. On the contrary, the country showed resilience and eventually a bit of courage. To borrow a few words of an Italian theologian, “How could it happen that an entire country has, although suffering

35 Agamben, Chiarimenti.
36 “They, the Muselmanner, ... an anonymous mass.” Levi, Survival, p. 90. Levi was an Auschwitz survivor.
37 For Agamben, the ancient Greek term zoë corresponds to “bare life,” a life that can be killed but not yet sacrificed. This differs from the term bios that denotes a qualified life: a life with dignity, endowed with meaning which was consequently considered “worthy” of sacrifice. Agamben, Homo Sacer, p. 4.
38 Agamben, Riflessioni sulla Peste.
ethically and politically, managed to [successfully] cope with such a serious pandemic?"39 Clearly, the pandemic has been addressed through competitive, alternative, and incommensurable epistemic frames.

In Agamben’s view, the various restrictions, including the prohibitions of funerals and any form of decent burying, signaled a sickness that went beyond the reality of the pandemic. It is a spiritual disease that has already affected the moral core of the Italian (or eventually western) civilization. This barbarism is the manifestation of moral deprivation. Italian society is entering a new season that is most certainly marked by a progressive collapse of a social order that transcends mere survival. The pandemic and the reaction against its effects are the triumph of instinct over reason, with the corresponding reduction of life to biological life and politics to the management of “situations.” Moreover, the pandemic is also the triumph of fear over love. Agamben criticized the Pope and the Church for not living up to their duty.

At this point, because I have declared the responsibilities [of crossing the threshold that separates humanity from barbarism], I cannot fail to mention the even more serious responsibility of those who had the duty to keep watch over human dignity. The Church above all, which, in making itself the handmaid of science, which has now become the true religion of our time, has radically repudiated its most essential principles. The Church, under a Pope who calls himself Francis, has forgotten that Francis embraced lepers. It has forgotten that one of the works of mercy is that of visiting the sick. It has forgotten that the martyrs teach that we must be prepared to sacrifice our life rather than our faith and that renouncing our neighbour means renouncing faith.40

This comment is a concentration of several lines of thought. One, of course, refers to religion in terms of “handmaid of science,” a criticism that is difficult to dismiss. Of course, Agamben has something specific in mind, namely the ecclesiastical acceptance of the government’s limitations to religious practices that are justified through medical-scientific arguments. But it is also possible that he contemplates something much grander. And if he had not, the theme still deserves more reflection. I will return to this soon.41

39 Grillo, Agamben.
40 Agamben, Una Domanda.
41 For a comment on Agamben’s reference on science as the religion of our times, see Silva/Andrés/Higuera, Political Theology.
Another line of thought is the repudiation of Christian principles. In brief, Agamben is convinced that the Catholic Church should have stood up against the evident barbarism of the crisis’s administration. Instead, Agamben sadly notes, the Church forgot what former Christians had considered self-evident: compassion, service (to the extreme of martyrdom, namely, to sacrifice one’s own life for others), and mercy even in a fear-laden world. Once upon a time, Agamben remembers, the social imagery would have surely been infused with fear but not to the point to dismiss affection and solidarity. In a short article, Stephen Metzger responds to Agamben that the martyrium is founded but it is not sought.42 Andrea Grillo argues that the divine is hidden in the new structure of relationships known as “social distancing.” The diminishing of relationships required by social distancing rules, in fact, do not contribute only to save the one from the others but also the others from the one.43 Explanations and eventually justifications for the Church’s conduct abound, ranging from clerical deference to the law to the imperative to protect human life as earthly life. All these justifications contain at least an element of truth, and some more than one.44 The objections to these justifications abound, too.45

In a later and definitive post, Agamben frames the Church as “mundane,” that is, worldly.46 If society has lost the sense of what is beyond mere life, the Church has lost what is beyond the horizon of history. In a dark reality that announces a return to the state of nature, where fear, danger, and solitude abound, Agamben reminds the Catholic Church that life is supposed to be more than pure nature: “Health has replaced salvation; biological life has taken the place of eternal life. The Catholic Church, long accustomed to compromising itself to mundane demands, has more or less explicitly consented to the substitution.”47 And this is what the real question looks like to Agamben: the worldly character of the Church. She has consented to the substitution of

42 Metzger, *On the Use and Abuse of St. Francis*. For a response to Metzger, see Enright, *Agamben and Francis*.
43 “La nostra rinuncia sociale alla libertà, oggi, è a sua volta il frutto di una accurata elaborazione della libertà. E il divino non sta nella libertà perdata, ma nella libertà riorganizzata.” Grillo, *Un dissidio*.
45 For example, Agamben evokes civil disobedience before an unjust law. He claims that “a norm that affirms that we must renounce the good to save the good is just as false and contradictory as that which, to protect freedom, orders us to renounce freedom.” Source: Agamben, *Una Domanda*.
46 Agamben, *Sul Tempo che Viene*.
47 Agamben, *Sul Tempo che Viene*. 
salvation with health and of eternal life with biological life. During the epidemic crisis, the Church showed a mundane character, that is, she appeared indistinguishable from every other institution on earth.

This statement on the mundanity of the Church invites reconsideration of the meaning of Agamben's previous statement on the Church's repudiation of her most essential principles. In his response, Metzger interprets Agamben's accusation in moral terms: the Pope and the Church have “forgotten their obligations,” and of having “lost sight of their primary duty to love their neighbor.”

It is a legitimate as well as a reasonable interpretation of Agamben's statement and this is why I mention it. Placed against the background of Agamben's second statement on the mundanity of the Church, however, his first statement on the repudiated principles opens itself to a different interpretation: the Church did not neglect her duty; rather, she lost the sense of her mission, which is to bring love to the marginalized, the needy, and the sufferers. God is love. And love is God. Give me love, and I will give you God (1 John 3:17–18).

The same operation can be attempted regarding Agamben's statement on religion as the “handmaid of science.” Once that statement is placed against the background of his second remark on the mundanity of the Church, it opens a more compelling explanation: the Church is not guilty of appeasement but subordination. The Church’s acquiescence in science can be measured by the extent to which she accepted the framing of the pandemic as a crisis as a biological emergency that was only addressable through appropriate political, administrative, or therapeutic techniques. The effect of that acquiescence is a loss of sense of the transcendence and the correlated “hope in God.” When the Church neglects its calling to view all things sub specie aeternitatis, human life is reduced to bare life. Once the concept of citizenship as citizens is reduced to their bare biological existences and citizens are prepared to sacrifice almost everything to “bare life,” what is left to religion? If science is the only effective means to face the pandemic, even if the Church places her ultimate hopes of salvation from the virus in science and not in God, what is the sense of pope Francis’s invocation to Virgin Mary at the Basilica of St. Mary Major? I will try to dig into this question in the next section.

48 For an earlier and deeper analysis of the mundanity of the Church, see Agamben, Church and the Kingdom.

49 Metzger, On the Use and Abuse.
4 The Church and the Pandemic

Agamben's comments on the repudiation of Christian principles have been called misdirected and even offensive. Yet, they are a breath of fresh air not because they are against institutional Catholicism, but because they leave the readers wanting to be more Christian in real life. The target of Agamben's critique is the Church's (mis)understanding of a horrible moment of crisis as a crisis of virus, its mutations, and the medical remedies only, as if a crisis of such world-historic significance was of no real liturgical importance and offering pastoral comfort was secondary and of no benefit to the sufferers. How many kisses have been denied to the sick, the afflicted, and the isolated because no one was there to console them? How many of them felt abandoned, rejected, and deserted in a moment of despair? Tormented by insecurity and physical impairments, the elders experienced the abyss of their solitude. The sick with the recurring, incurable thought of ending it all, implored with their silence the comfort of a spouse, a relative, a friend. The place of the Church was there, with the victims. From Agamben's comments, the readers can extract the image of a Church that, at least in a moment of crisis, dismisses the customary prudence and discretion and embraces her mission to be on the side of the vulnerable (Matthew 25:34–40 but also Isaiah 58:7).

Agamben’s interventions into the pandemic have been received as so surreal that they tended to elicit responses of extremism and revulsion from mainstream observers. For those on the same wavelength, however, those interventions are a bright light not against palace intrigue that had been going on, according to Agamben, in the epidemic crisis, but against conformism and mainstream thinking. This is particularly true regarding his comments on religion as the “handmaid of science.” The meaning of the pandemic that the Church offered under those papal robes was clearly a medical and administrative one, pitched to be managed on a secular, earthly level, not to illuminate any ineffable mysteries, including the mysteries of divine providence and the action of the Holy Spirit in the world. In this sense, according to Agamben, the Church has revealed to the world her worldly character, her mundanity. By confronting Agamben's already mentioned statement “health has replaced salvation; biological life has taken the place of eternal life,” the readers are given a glimpse of Christianity as it was and eventually it would be

---

50 I refer to Agamben's conspiracy theories on the invention of an epidemic to extend forms of social control.
if the “eclipse of the sense of God and of man,” as framed in the declarations of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, was challenged rather than accommodated.\textsuperscript{51}

And yet, Agamben’s criticism can be reframed in terms of extrinsicism. I will frame “extrinsicism” as a theological malaise.

The temptation of extrinsicism has challenged the Church throughout modernity, constituting her central intellectual preoccupation from \textit{Pascendi Dominici Gregis} to the Second Vatican Council (or ‘Vatican II’) and beyond.\textsuperscript{52} Agamben is correct in describing the Catholic Church as accustomed to compromising herself to mundane demands, but he does not identify the cause of it. The cause is extrinsicism. The frustration is that this state of extrinsicism was detected and explained decades ago, and the remedies were proposed before and during Vatican II. In brief, the source of the problem consists in the separation of the natural from the spiritual, or, in more technical terms, in the construction of a “twofold order of knowledge [that is] distinct both in principle and also in object,” according to the dogmatic constitution of that 1870 Council on the Catholic faith, \textit{Dei filius}. This twofold order corresponds to the epistemological distinction between reason and faith: the former investigates the law of nature, the latter the truths of revelation. The separation between natural reason and faith, and consequently between science and theology, caused two consequences: on one hand is the creation of a natural order completely self-grounded, independent from theology, and open to the investigation of natural reason; on the other hand is a spiritual order entirely separated from the concreteness of existence and open to theological reflection. This solution was considered acceptable by both secular institutions and the Church because it guaranteed an exclusive domain of knowledge of each of the two sides.

The problem, which became clear in the first part of the 20th century, is that the twofold order of knowledge implies not only a dualistic interpretation of the relationship between the worldly and the otherworldly but an extrinsic orientation of the otherworldly. It means that the spiritual is externally added to an already fully constitute nature, as an \textit{addendum}. Thus, the integrity of creation gives away to an interpretation of the universe as no longer dependent upon divine action and of the human being as independent from grace. The spiritual is relegated to the Sunday morning functions, when the

\textsuperscript{51} Pope John Paul II, \textit{Evangelium Vitae} and Pope Benedict XVI, \textit{Angelus}.

\textsuperscript{52} Pope Pius X, \textit{Pascendi Dominici}. The Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican was the twenty-first ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church. The Council lasted for four years, although the council fathers met in St. Peter’s Basilica only for a period of 8 to 12 weeks each year. The encyclical signaled the Church’s opposition to philosophical modernism; the Council marked the engagement of the Church with modernity.
believers recognize the divine sovereignty over the entire creation, worldly and otherworldly (“Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”) and profess, at the very end of the Creed, the supernatural reality of human body (“I believe in ... the resurrection of the body”). As members of society, the faithful rely on science and the law of physics; as members of the Church, they affirm that the entire natural order depends on God for its creation, preservation, and redemption. As citizens, they recognize the authority of the government in regulating their social behaviors and of medicine in protecting their health; as Christians, they confess that the ultimate destiny of the human being is grace.

In the Church, the dualism between nature and spirit translates into a separation between action and governmental, pastoral, and devotional practices, on one hand, and on the other, dogmas, doctrines, and theological reflections. The practices are detached from the speculations, and the speculations are detached from the practices. Once the separation from its transcendent order of nature is complete, practices inevitably become mere instruments of action. Those who oversee these activities are left free to appropriate the conventional modes of the secular culture, wilfully indifferent to the fact that these modes entail an entire theory of human nature and creation at odds with Catholic doctrine. Once speculations are unininvolved in the concrete reality of the Church, they become inert and crystallized, lifeless and without vigor, and ultimately incapable of bringing intelligibility of human action. The separation of practices and speculations, which reflects the separation of the natural and the spiritual, stressed the character of the Church that is, at the same time, mundane and extrincist. God only enters their thought as an addendum to pragmatic practice.

A monumental attempt to bridge the gap between the natural and the spiritual has been conducted by three generations of scholars, authors, priests, and even pontiffs before, during, and after Vatican II (1961–1965). Starting in the period between the two world wars, the efforts of overcoming the two-fold order of knowledge and recovering the pristine unity of God and Man which is essentially the Mystery of Christ have proceeded constantly. That Mystery, the union in the distinction of the natural and the spiritual, assumes not a spiritualization of the world, but rather a spiritual reading of the world; it implies a restoration of a true “sense of God” in this ordinary life. Another way to put it is this: the divine order, not in itself (i.e., God) but in its relationship of union with the human order, operates in the human order. It does not belong to the human order but is active there. The divine order is in the world but is not of the world. This relationship between the divine order and the human order, between the natural and the spiritual, is the Mystery of Christ,
or “supernatural.” “The supernatural,” to borrow a phrase from Roman Catholic filmmaker Robert Bresson, “is the real in all its precision.”\(^5\) What is crucial is that there is no natural world that is purely natural: what one mistakenly calls “natural” already participates in the divine. The world already reflects the presence of the divine. Reality is more than the appearances that one can see and touch; invisible realities, too, have their place. This is the mysterious character of the world that is, as mentioned, more than natural; actually, it is supernatural. The same is true regarding the human being: human nature is fulfilled and brought to completion by being enabled to go beyond itself. Human nature is not purely natural, but it participates in the divine, and human reason is linked intrinsically to grace rather than being purely natural. In conclusion, the notion of the supernatural character of nature, both the nature of the world and the human being, is about situating the world and human beings in relationship with God and understanding both in the light of revelation.

The history of the fortunes and misfortunes of this monumental attempt goes beyond the scope of this article. The moral and financial scandals, however, are a first indication of the substantial failure of this attempt, and the reaction to the pandemic a further confirmation that the Church remains, at her core, dualistic. In the dualism between nature and spirit are hidden the roots of the Church’s management of the crisis: she has separated the matter of the biological life from that of the eternal life (to use Agamben’s vocabulary), the natural from the spiritual. If the interpretation here is correct, the criticism against the Church is not simply referring to a profound moral failure but is fatefuly entangled with what one would call a “theological” issue.

The statement that functions as the epigraph of this article is relevant because encapsulates a techniques-Spirit relationship within Christian institutions of the West that needs to be explored regarding the pandemic. Did the Roman Catholic Church, the most relevant and oldest Christian institution of the West, embrace government and science over Spirit? In more precise terms, did the Roman Catholic leadership accept that the action of the Spirit was marginalized in the social imagination for mundane forms of government and science? Or, alternatively, did it put its trust in the divine providence and consider government and science integral to the economy of salvation? It is

obvious that one can subscribe to a governmental-medical approach and to a providential horizon of salvation at the same time. For the necessity of an ultimate organizing logic, however, either the approach is subordinated to the horizon, or the other way around is true. If the providential horizon does not position the governmental-medical approach, then it is inevitable that the latter will position the former. Thus, did Pope Francis’s invocation to Virgin Mary at the Basilica of St. Mary Major take place within a governmental and scientific approach to the pandemic, or did the lockdown and social distancing happen within a providential horizon? What did the Roman Catholic Church stand for?

It should be clear at this point that, under this specific perspective, during the pandemic, the Church has looked mundane, but she was more properly extrincist. She looked mundane in her acceptance of the pandemic as a biological crisis as if the world and humanity were independent from God as the source of their existence. Thus, in the words of Agamben, “health has replaced salvation.” But the Church has been more properly extrincist in the sense that she has accepted the primacy and autonomy of the natural order, limiting the role of the spiritual to a superfluous addendum. Pope Francis’s invocation to Virgin Mary at the Basilica of St. Mary Major during the lockdown, the priests segregated in their parish houses, the faithful segregated in their homes, were all consequences of the superfluousness of the spiritual order. To put it differently, the temporal power of the state has shown itself to be necessary to the defeat of the pandemic, but the spiritual power of the Church has manifested itself to be superfluous.

Acknowledgments

The comments of the anonymous referees and the editor of this journal have informed the final version of the paper.

Bio

Enrico Beltramini specializes in Christian theology, focusing particularly on historical and political theology. He is the author of three monographs and numerous book chapters, and he has contributed over 60 peer-reviewed articles to academic journals.
Bibliography


Agamben, Giorgio: *Contagio*, 2020, https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-contagio (date of last access: 15.05.2022).


Alvis, Jason/Louchakova-Schwartz, Olga/Staudigl, Michael (ed.): *Rationality and Religiosity During a Pandemic*, in: *Open Theology* 7 (1/2021).


