

This reviewer too is astonished at the fecundity of those who cannot imagine God and God's majesty, but can write eloquently about sin and the effects of sin. Joseph in *Wuthering Heights* (1845–6) by Emily Brontë, Arthur Dimmesdale in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), and Margaret White in Stephen King's *Carrie* (1974) are some who would have done well to have studied Erasmus. These fictional characters would not have been mentioned here unless they are just types for a large number of real, living people who dream hellfire for others during the course of their boring days. Erasmus is an antidote to morbid self-aggrandisement and apocalyptic thinking.

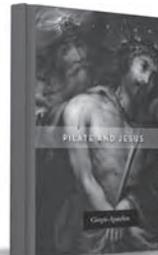
Anthony Grafton's foreword is clear and situates Erasmus within the lineage of Lucian of Samosata. Grafton's write-up proves the historically important role which Erasmus played in affecting Greenblatt's 'swerve', but Grafton's foreword also necessitates the substitution of the normative Renaissance for the more accurate Early Modernism. When men began guffawing at their own absurd ideas about the cosmos and realised the extent of their own psychoses; their insights into their own selves made them realise the split between the one, imaginary, integrated person into a persona or mask which was public, and a lie, and their own schizoid interior world of the grotesque and freakery, which is the reality (see *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, ed. Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University, 1996)); then Modernism truly began. The Reformation is the beginning of the Modernist turn within the history of ideas. Erasmus was the first of the Modernists and this reprint under review, will urge new readers to savour the wit of a man who bandied words in friendliness with Saint Thomas More (1478–1535). Is it not an irony that Erasmus has to be contended with by Catholics when they scrutinise the life of one of their greatest Renaissance men of letters? Saint More and Erasmus are signs of contradiction, but together they *are* the best early Moderns. Both of them overreached their mandates.

It is passé in Erasmus scholarship that folly is a sanctifying trope and Christianity is folly too. The Russian holy fools are all exemplars of foolishness in as much as the ancient Hindu king

Jadabharata is a fool. Shakespeare's sages are all fools; for instance, the wisest in *King Lear* is the fool. Without the fool or folly, there can be no self-recognition in Shakespeare's dramas. These ideas are so common that this reviewer did not enter into the ambiguities inherent in the choice of folly as Erasmus's protagonist, if we can at all call folly the protagonist here. It seems that the word which is Brahman qua wisdom is the main presence in this text. Erasmus's concern in this book is the techné of *becoming* a saint, like his friend Thomas More. It is entirely wrong to presume that Erasmus would have ever bothered with dunces.

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### ***Pilate and Jesus***

Giorgio Agamben. Trans.

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The Supreme Court of India has asked Indian parliamentarians to consider whether chemical castration of those who rape minors should be allowed under Indian law. The film *Dead Man Walking* (1995) advocates life over the death penalty. It is within these contexts of jurisprudence, literature (see Jainendra Kumar, *The Resignation: Tyagpatra*, trans. Rohini Choudhury (New Delhi: Penguin, 2012) and Vijay Tendulkar, *Silence! The Court Is in Session*, trans. Priya Adarkar (Oxford: Oxford University, 1979)), and religion that Giorgio Agamben's latest book *Pilate and Jesus* becomes important for Indians. Jesus, the 'Ecce homo', the archetypal Suffering Servant mentioned separately, but with different connotations in the *Qumran Caves Scrolls* or *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, the *Gospels*, and even within Hinduism becomes important. This is because to be human is to be abject (see Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University, 1980)). The Suffering Servant both as a trope and as God incarnate has to endure pain

and abjection: 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' (Matthew 27:46). Gautama, the Buddha died of disease, Sri Ramakrishna died of cancer, and Christ was slowly crucified and mocked that he was not rescued by his own father. Jesus could be crucified because 'The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity' (W B Yeats, *The Second Coming*).

Pontius Pilate, the *Gospels* tell us, did nothing even when his wife exhorted him to prevent the murder of Christ (Matthew 27:19). Pilate just went along with the mob demanding the blood of a scapegoat (see René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: John Hopkins University, 1986)). Much later, many like Pilate among the Nazis, the Khmer Rouge, and similar genocidal organisations will shift their culpability to either their bosses or to society at large. We have forgotten that Pontius Pilate, 'an ordinary judge who, as representative of Caesar, had jurisdiction over the entire human race' (39) inaugurated Christian soteriology within time. Agamben shifts the academic gaze on to Pilate, which is both laudable as well as misplaced. This has far reaching consequences; more important than say, the works of Noam Chomsky or Jacques Derrida. Chomsky refuses to encounter head-on the reality of evil in the woof of history. The Shoah had stunned philosophers into intellectual indolence. Agamben's analysis of the Jesus-Pilate dyad, if such a monstrous binary can be conceived, is in fact a Leibnitz monad which needs to be scrutinised if we are to study the rise of the inhuman aka the problem of evil. It is interesting that Agamben situates Pilate before Christ in the title of the book. As will be explained later, this is a mistake.

As literature served Sigmund Freud construct his theories of anxiety and obsessions, and Martha Nussbaum to develop her theories of the fragility of goodness, Dante explicates jurisprudence for Agamben. This long essay sees the Jesus event through Dante: 'Why must the decisive event of history—the passion of Christ and the redemption of humanity—take the form of a trial? Why must Jesus deal with the law and contend with Pilate—the vicar of Caesar—in a struggle that he ultimately does not seem to bring to a conclusion? Dante sought to answer this question, and

not evasively, in the *De monarchia*, even if what he was concerned with above all was the legitimization of the Roman Empire' (55).

Strange that Agamben chooses the *De monarchia* over Dante's understanding of moral neutrality as a sin. Stranger still is Agamben's conclusion that Dante was bothered solely with the 'legitimation of the Roman Empire' (ibid.). Dante surely knew that one renders 'unto Caesar' what is Caesar's and not mix the kingdom of God with the Roman empire (Matthew 22:21 and Mark 12:17). It is hard to believe that Agamben has greater insight in the Christ event or justice than Dante. Be that as it may, we now turn to Agamben's treatment of the continuous elision of justice that faces the *homo sacer* or the abject being in *the here and the now* who has risen out of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. The thesis that justice evades the human person is nothing new. Kafka in *The Trial* (1914–5) points out the inhuman nature of the legal system. Agamben's latest book, which is celebrated online as a fitting closure to his series on the *homo sacer*, reduces the economy of salvation, the role of a personal God, and Christ Himself to human frailty and not to Divine *fiat* through the primacy Agamben gives to Pontius Pilate. The telos of all major religious soteriologies is the sovereignty of the good and not the victory of evil.

Reading this book one gets the impression that human history is no longer guided by God. Agamben's is the most nuanced academic attack so far on the Hindu karma theory, though he never mentions Hinduism. John Hick attacked karma normatively but Agamben does it without even mentioning karma. Yet Hindu soteriology will reject Pilate over Jesus since Jesus is the incarnation who answers perfectly Pilate's question: 'Quid est veritas?, What is truth?' (John 18:38). The answer is to be found in Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ* (c. 1427 CE), a book revered by Swami Vivekananda: Jesus *is* the truth. Pilate is all that masquerades as the truth. Agamben's interrogation of jurisprudence and history of incarnations vis-à-vis human history is flawed to the extent that it is an irreligious structuralist assessment of a religious event. Jesus suffered on the Cross not merely because Pilate did nothing but solely because Jesus freely and of his own accord chose

to suffer (*see* The Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, Matthew 26:42) like Sri Ramakrishna chose to suffer of his own free will. Nonetheless Agamben should now supplant Derrida *et al* within the social sciences and humanities since it is not grammatology which demands our immediate attention, but the rise of fundamentalism. The world is teetering towards a Third World War as Pope Francis has warned; where Yazidi women, for instance are being sold in the bazaars of The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant; a non-state which is nonetheless hell on earth—Dante’s *Inferno* realised. Agamben’s critique of Pilate warns us of the consequences of inaction and the futility of asking ‘Quid est veritas?’ and then doing nothing when confronted with the truth. The answer to what the Supreme Court of India has asked, the question with which we began this review, is that we have to either choose harsher punishments for perpetrators of heinous crimes or let our minors be raped. There is no middle ground. Agamben in the best philosophical fashion, following Frank Kermode, opts for the morally convenient ‘sense of an ending’ rather than condemning Pilate once for all. Agamben is himself morally ambiguous and thus sees Pilate as not entirely morally culpable. The *New Testament* on the other hand is certain of Pilate’s complicity with evil. Dante, whom Agamben tears apart, was convinced that a wrong is a wrong and nothing can justify violence against the non-violent; there are absolute evils as there is one absolute Good. Immanuel Kant is more existentially honest than Giorgio Agamben.

Lest our intellectual honchos find this reviewer lacking in rigorous homework, he quotes the following from a very lucid article, which naturally finds Agamben suitable for defence of a man who stands for the fragmentation of India:

The contemporary Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben has written in a manner that is both intellectually persuasive and ethically pressing, about a figure found in ancient Roman law called the homo sacer. This is a man who is the most vulnerable denizen of the political community, because his absolute vulnerability is the condition for the absolute power of the ruler. ...

Agamben delves deep into the political and philosophical treatises of ancient Rome to

understand this strange figure because he finds, within the murderous space of the Nazi concentration camp, the same utter abandonment/banishment that does not make sense in the inclusive framework of modern citizenship. ... Thus every person in Auschwitz, according to Agamben, is a homo sacer: neither a criminal, nor a sacrificial victim, and yet consigned to death (Ananya Vajpeyi, ‘The Bare Life Of S.A.R. Geelani, Ph.D’ <<http://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/the-bare-life-of-sar-geelani-phd/226458>> accessed 26 February, 2016).

This *homo sacer* that Agamben strives to make explicit is not the *homo sacer* who is Jesus, the Suffering Servant. Agamben uses sacred motifs to deconstruct major faith traditions.

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## **One Self**

Nome

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2015. viii + 648 pp. PB. \$24.95 ISBN  
9780981940977.

Another Q: What of a situation of extreme engagement of the senses in violence in a concentration camp? There may be torture, starvation, or extreme pain. Can one still connect with this Knowledge under such violent circumstances?

N.: The violence or injury is to the body only. The Knowledge is intrinsically bodiless. The situation has no effect. ...

N.: If we want to eliminate sensory pain, an anesthetic will do, but giving someone an anesthetic does not endow her with wisdom. Nowhere has the [Ramana] Maharshi, Sankara, or ... the Buddha, recommended anesthetics as a practice. ... The Wisdom, which is Self-Knowledge ... is not reached by the senses ... The idea that you are a sensing entity or a nexus point of all the senses is only imagined in the mind. When you do not imagine such in the mind, you are unaffected, just as space is unaffected by whatever seems to coursing through it. (312–3)