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Towards Affirmative Economic Theologies Responses to the Problem of Evil in Contemporary Italian Thought

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ABSTRACT

The burgeoning field of economic theology constitutes primarily a critical device against the *Nachleben* of medieval providential theology in modern economic governance. Especially Agamben has highlighted the role of the notion of *oikonomia* in providential and modern economic thought to promote humble acceptance in light of the problem of evil. I show how economic theology can also be a vantage point for affirmative critique. I discuss Negri's interpretation of the Book of Job and the Italian feminist appreciation of the Virgin Mary as responses to the problem of evil. Both emphasize the ineradicable potential for resistance to *oikonomia* in human life instead of merely lamenting humanity's submission to God's providential economy, like Agamben. For Negri, this potential is located in humankind's capacity to protest against God-given evil and re-appropriate God's potential for creating the world, while the feminists point toward the human ability to care for the vulnerable.

KEYWORDS

Economic theology; Negri; Agamben; care ethics; problem of evil; Cavarero; Italian thought

In recent years, research in political theology has been supplemented with an interest in economic theology. Where Carl Schmitt's project of political theology elucidates the workings of modern sovereignty through the lens of divine omnipotence and the theology of the miracle, some have historically traced the practices of economic governance to medieval theological ideas of *oikonomia*. In theology, the term *oikonomia* gradually referred to God's providential management of world-history.¹ Just like Aristotle's father of the household (*oikonomos*) carefully managed the relations between the individuals under his authority, Christian theologians saw God as a power that functionally organized the world as his personal household. Every natural and historical event had purportedly a role to play in God's salvific plan. The world was allegedly created in such a way that it spontaneously strived toward redemption. Especially among contemporary Italian philosophers,² the history of Trinitarian and providential *oikonomia* is a starting point for the study of modern "economic" governance, where the free market is conceptualized as a spontaneous functional order led by "an invisible hand" toward the common good.³ Given the Italian

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¹I will refer to God with masculine pronouns whenever I refer to the patriarchal idea of God the Father who reigns over the world as a *pater familias*. For the conceptions of God that deviate from this approach, I reserve the neuter.

²Agamben, *Kingdom and the Glory*; Esposito, *Two: The Machine of Political Theology*; Cacciari, *The Withholding Power*.

³I will focus on these thinkers' dealings with the problem of evil and abstain from linking the theological arguments directly to the critique of political economy. Agamben's economico-theological critique mostly focuses on Smithian defenses of

thinkers' suspicion toward both political theology and contemporary economic governance, most of their studies are explicitly critical. Philosophers like Agamben and Esposito aim to discredit contemporary economic governance by unearthing its roots in distrustful theological dogmas.⁴

The question I address is whether there are also affirmative economic theologies to be discovered. Is religion really nothing but opium of the people? The theology of *oikonomia* is potentially not merely a “laboratory for the problems of worldly government,”⁵ but also a reservoir of emancipatory gestures.⁶ Apart from the economic theology of governmental power, economic theologies of resistance also exist. Deriding the theological heritage of Western thought entirely would hence be throwing the baby out with the bathwater. After explaining what philosophers like Agamben object to the heritage of providential thought, I will highlight two examples of affirmative economic theology within contemporary Italian Thought.⁷ First, Antonio Negri's commentary on the Book of Job as a direct rejection of divine rule.⁸ Negri interprets Job's confrontation with God as an ultimate unmasking of theological claims about salvation through submission to divine providence. Job allegedly expresses an atheistic kernel in Christianity that aims to emancipate humankind from its supposed duty to affirm God's will on Earth. Secondly, Adriana Cavarero and Massimo Cacciari have emphasized the role of the Virgin Mary in providential thought for a Christian ethics of care.⁹ They argue that, because of his incarnation in a helpless child birthed by Mary, God does not demand submission to its will as a transcendent ruler of world-history, but calls upon humanity to love the weak and vulnerable. God hopes that its followers will imitate this ethic of self-weakening (*kenôsis*) in the service of humanity. Mary, in this perspective, exemplifies the ethical stance of care that constitutes salvation.

The problem of evil and the providential economy

Agamben's *The Kingdom and the Glory* uses economic theology as a critical device by tracing the semantic history of *oikonomia* from the ancient Greeks to Adam Smith. The Greek term for the father's functional arrangement of household affairs had originally been imported into theology to combat a series of heretical objections to the dogma of the Holy Trinity.¹⁰ Critics found it hard to believe that a monotheistic religion could conceive of its god as simultaneously Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The Church Fathers' solution was that God was one *qua* substance, but triple *qua* praxis. Insofar as God merely is,

the free market (Agamben, *Kingdom and the Glory*, 277–86. See also Stimilli, *Il Debito del Vivente*; Montag and Hill, *The Other Adam Smith*, 266–73; Kotsko, “Theology of Neoliberalism”; Christiaens, “Hayek's Vicarious Secularization”). The affirmative critiques of Negri, Cavarero, and Cacciari can subsequently be read as appeals for a political economy based on care for the weak and a combative stance against evils like deprivation, inequality, and exploitation. Measures like a vibrant welfare state, a cultivation of the commons, and a shortening of the workweek fit that intuition.

⁴For more descriptive economic theology, see Nelson, *Economics as Religion*; Dupuy, *Economy and the Future*; Leshem, *The Origins of Neoliberalism*; Singh, *Divine Currency*.

⁵Dean, “Governmentality Meets Theology,” 151.

⁶Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, 13–14.

⁷Other examples could be given, like Pauline eschatology (Agamben, *The Time that Remains*), Münzerian apocalypticism (Bloch, *Thomas Münzer als Theologe der Revolution*), papal environmentalism (Latouche, *Comment Réenchanter le Monde*), or weak theology (Vattimo, *Belief*).

⁸Negri, *The Labors of Job*.

⁹Cavarero, *Inclinations*; Cacciari, *Generare Dio*.

¹⁰Agamben, *Kingdom and the Glory*, 31–41.

he remains inactive but singular; but insofar as he governs the world, God reveals himself as three different persons. Within the single godhead, the persons of the Trinity are purportedly organized as an *oikonomia*. The latter term, however, gradually referred not only to the Trinity's internal organization, but also to God's salvific government of the world itself. Apart from a "Trinitarian economy," there was hence also a "providential economy" designating God's management of world-history. Just like an ancient Greek father functionally managed his household to procure a harmonious whole, God had purportedly structured the world in a way that would naturally produce a harmony of all elements within it.

A major problem was how to reconcile God's omnipotence with worldly freedom.¹¹ If God were to directly implement his will on Earth, he would annul creaturely freedom.¹² How could creatures ever retain their freedom if confronted with a direct commandment from the creator? They would be reduced to passive pawns in God's providential machinery. The solution was to interpret the providential economy as the outcome of God's decision to restrain his own omnipotence.¹³ God can supposedly voluntarily submit to self-imposed limitations, effectively opening up an autonomous space for his creatures. As a benevolent *oikonomos* of the world, however, God has established the laws of nature to govern the conduct of creatures from afar. At the time of creation, God foresaw how the free interaction of creatures would develop and so he instituted some general laws that would ensure this spontaneous order to independently evolve according to his will. God has created the world in such a way that, if every creature follows its own natural God-given inclinations, the interaction among creatures inevitably brings about redemption. "A sovereign decision determines the general principles of the organization of the cosmos, and then entrusts its administration and execution to a subordinated, yet autonomous, power."¹⁴ Without God having to directly command his creatures, salvation is hence indelibly inscribed into the providential economy. He reigns but does not have to directly govern his creatures himself. Individual creatures' actions thus have a double status: they not only enact the preferences of said creatures, but also unknowingly and vicariously enact God's will on Earth.¹⁵ God has created the world such that all its elements spontaneously do what is to be done to ensure redemption. Autonomous self-movement and heteronomous direction perfectly coincide. Just like an arrow moves with its own momentum toward its target, but is also directed by an outside force, creatures act autonomously, but are also steered by God.¹⁶

This conception of providential economy proved very helpful to counter the problem of evil.¹⁷ Thinkers like Chrysippus and Boethius were confronted with the enigma of believing in a benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent God, while also having to acknowledge the occurrence of evil.¹⁸ How could such a God allow for the meaningless suffering of the innocent? According to Agamben, the concept of *oikonomia* allowed theologians to

¹¹Ibid., 141.

¹²Heron, "The Ungovernable," 162.

¹³Agamben, *Kingdom and the Glory*, 104–6.

¹⁴Ibid., 128.

¹⁵Ibid., 86.

¹⁶See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae Pars I*, Q103a1ad.1.

¹⁷Agamben, *Kingdom and the Glory*, 114.

¹⁸Zartaloudis, *Giorgio Agamben, 75*; Dean, *Signature of Power*, 185.

explain evil away as “collateral damage.”¹⁹ If God has withdrawn from any direct interventions, he cannot be held liable for the actions of his representative agents on Earth. He is not responsible for the fate of every individual creature, only for the general course of world-history. God solely determines the general outline of providence (*providentia generalis*), but he has entrusted to his creatures the concrete enactment of that plan for every specific event (*providentia specialis*).²⁰ The immanent interaction of creatures can consequently foster unintended side-effects that nonetheless have to be embraced in the name of God’s salvific plan. A lion, for example, simply by enacting his lion nature, will kill and eat deer.²¹ The lion – and God as primary cause enacting his providential will through the lion as his representative – does not aim at harming deer. It only secures its food supply in order to subsist, an emphatically good inclination. The killing of deer is an accidental means to an arguably good end. God never intended for any specific deer to be eaten, but this suffering is nonetheless necessary to sustain the lion’s role in God’s providential economy. God could intervene and save the deer, but that would annul the lion’s freedom to ensure its own sustenance. Evil is, in other words, the inevitable price for freedom in providential government.²² What we experience as evil is, in fact, not meaningless suffering, but a regrettable yet inevitable side-effect of the unstoppable march to redemption. Providential theology hence expects people to voluntarily and humbly submit to this order, even if it occasionally allots them pain and suffering. Whatever happens, it will have been part of the enactment of God’s will on Earth, as mysterious as this will might be for us mortals. Even if God has not directly caused evil to happen, he has authorized it as part of his salvific plan.²³ The prime virtue of Christian theology is unsurprisingly then *humilitas*, the acceptance of one’s subordination to God’s glorious plan of redemption.

It is suspicion toward this kind of argument that justifies the reluctance of Italian Thought to embrace economic theology as an emancipatory resource. Throughout its history, *oikonomic* thought has justified meaningless human misery by referring it to a transcendent mysterious order to which individuals are expected to submit. Everyone is expected to unquestioningly and humbly accept their fate in that order. The hypothesis of economic theology “puts us on the path of an analysis of the *fatality* imposed on us by the necessities of an order of which one however fails to recognize its human basis. The economic order, in our eyes, names immanence itself, but an immanence that is, from a certain point of view, radically beyond our control.”²⁴ As an alternative to humble acquiescence, Agamben pleads for the “ungovernable” as a practice of resistance.²⁵ Some part of human life supposedly exceeds God’s providential government and thereby liberates itself from the duty to passively accept evil. Agamben himself, however, keeps his

¹⁹Agamben, *Kingdom and the Glory*, 119.

²⁰Ibid., 116.

²¹Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae Pars I*, Q19a8co.

²²Zartaloudis, *Giorgio Agamben*, 78.

²³Agamben describes the role of God in the providential economy as that of its *auctoritas*. This concept derives from Roman law where it designated a person who ratified the legal actions of someone else. A *pater familias*, for instance, authorized the legal actions committed by his family members, and the Roman emperor authorized the decisions made by his administration. According to Agamben, God similarly does not participate in the government of the world itself, but authorizes the actions his creatures do on Earth. Suffering and evil are hence to be accepted because their legitimacy stems not from fallible creatures, but from a supreme and glorious transcendent God as *auctoritas*. See Agamben, *Kingdom and the Glory*, xi–xii.

²⁴Karsenti, “Agamben et le Mystère du Gouvernement,” 374, my translation.

²⁵Agamben, *Kingdom and the Glory*, 65.

readers in the dark about the exact contours of this figure. I propose to turn to other Italian thinkers for paradigmatic instances of affirmative economic theology. Antonio Negri, on the one hand, and Massimo Cacciari and Adriana Cavarero, on the other hand, unearth theologies of resistance to evil that deviate from the providential command of passive submission to God's mysterious ways.

Job as revolutionary against god

Job against providential justice

In *The Labor of Job*, Negri addresses the problem of evil and its relation to theodicy through a reading of the Book of Job. He emphasizes Job's unrelenting defiance to God's providential economy.²⁶ The story contains a particularly harsh treatment of providential theology atypical for Biblical texts. It tells about a wager between God and the "accuser" (*ha-satan*) over the authenticity of Job's faith. The accuser suspects that Job only honors God because the latter has given him a prosperous life. In that case, Job's faith would not be genuine, but a quid-pro-quo matter. God agrees to let the accuser test Job's humble faith. Job loses his possessions, his family, and his health until there is nothing left but a singular isolated body in pain. In the midst of his misery, Job is visited by some friends who defend God's ways. The friends elaborate two flawed forms of theodicy: (1) a retributive model where divine providence ultimately rewards or punishes each individual according to merit and (2) a mystical model where divine providence is an opaque redemptive plan that is good simply because God is good *per definitionem*.

- (1) The first type delineates a retributive account of God's government of the world.²⁷ The friends contend that there is a just measure in world-history: the pious are ultimately rewarded and the wicked eventually face punishment. Job's case is hence purportedly not hopeless: his friends advise him to put his trust in God and change his ways accordingly.

Should not your piety be your confidence and your blameless ways your hope? Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever destroyed? As I have observed, those who plow evil and those who sow trouble reap it.²⁸

Job responds that this tale of measured justice is an illusion. The wicked prosper and the innocent suffer all the time. Job admits that he himself is not without sin, but he insists that the punishments he has undergone are out of proportion. The scrutiny God has employed in Job's case seems immeasurably cruel. There is, however, no tribunal Job could address to correct this wrong.²⁹ In a court case, God would simultaneously be party and judge, creating a constitutive imbalance. A legal trial presupposes that parties temporarily bracket their factual inequalities to let both present their case as equal litigants; but how could the inequality between God and his creatures ever be erased? The court hence

²⁶Negri, *Labor of Job*, 8. I will here only deal with Negri's approach and his Christian interlocutors. An even richer reception of Job and the problem of evil exists in Jewish theology, especially after the Shoah. See, among others, Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz*; Susman, *Das Buch Hiob*; Wiesel, *The Trial of God*; Jonas, *Mortality and Morality*.

²⁷Negri, *Labor of Job*, 31–6.

²⁸Book of Job 4: 6–8.

²⁹Negri, *Labor of Job*, 27.

remains closed and any promise of just measure falters. “Though I cry, ‘Violence!’ I get no response; though I call for help, there is no justice.”³⁰

- (2) The second kind of response gives a mystical account of divine providence akin to the discourse on *oikonomia* Agamben traced.³¹ It accepts the absence of a rationally discernable measure of justice in world-history and replaces this yardstick with a purely transcendent legitimation of the providential economy. Whatever happens is good simply because God authorized it and God is good, even if human beings suffer undeservedly as a result. A mere human like Job is purportedly in no position to evaluate God’s mysterious plan of redemption. If Job were able to transcend his restricted point of view, he would allegedly see the overall goodness of the providential economy. The *providential generalis* is good because God willed it, but he is not responsible for the individual minutiae that might befall upon individual creatures. In this view, “there is no longer a problem of justice, but only one of surrender, of devotion and adoration.”³² Job supposedly ought to simply accept his limitations and submit to whatever comes. The fact that Job refuses to surrender and questions God is purportedly uninformative about divine providence; it only showcases Job’s hubristic pride.

Dominion and awe belong to God; he establishes order in the heights of heaven. Can his forces be numbered? On whom does his light not rise? How then can a mortal be righteous before God? How can one born of woman be pure? If even the moon is not bright and the stars are not pure in his eyes, how much less a mortal, who is but a maggot – a human being, who is only a worm!³³

Job is not convinced passive submission is an appropriate reaction. In his view, the mystical account presents God as an immeasurably cruel despot.³⁴ It disregards the self-evident reality of human suffering in favor of an abstraction that justifies anything by fiat. The most horrendous crimes are thereby reduced to specks on the untouchable sigil of divine glory. Job reminds his friends of the love God is supposed to devote to the creatures with which he has sealed a covenant.³⁵ If God were really benevolent, he would care for the world and not merely live off the worship of humankind without giving anything in return.³⁶ According to Negri, this constitutes absolute exploitation: God lets humankind cultivate his world *ad majorem Dei gloriam* but afterwards feels free to let them suffer horrible misfortunes on the way to redemption. This can hardly be considered a loving God. Being a benevolent deity implies a minimum of reciprocity in exchange for Job’s loyalty. The discourse of *oikonomia* thus ends up contradicting itself: it assumes God is a benevolent father of the worldly household, but by embedding even the worst worldly events in a providential economy, Job’s friends must admit that God cannot be a benevolent *oikonomos*. “The groans of the dying rise from the city, and the souls of the wounded cry out for help. But God charges no one with wrongdoing.”³⁷

³⁰Book of Job 19: 7.

³¹Negri, *Labor of Job*, 37–41.

³²Ibid., 39.

³³Book of Job 25: 1–6.

³⁴Negri, *Labor of Job*, 43.

³⁵Ibid., 81–2.

³⁶Ibid., 20–21.

³⁷Book of Job 24: 12.

Job desires to confront God with his despotic lack of measure. He senses that his “war”³⁸ against God can no longer be mediated by any compromise, covenant, or dialectic. The adequate response to God’s providential economy and its tendency to eject collateral damage is, for Job, not passive acceptance because allegedly “*Deus vult*,” but rebellious defiance. The problem of evil presses him not to justify God’s rule over the cosmos despite of human misery, but to question God’s authority in the name of the miserable. God has outlived his legitimacy in the eyes of Job. To paraphrase Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov, we could say that, even if the providential order were just *in ultimas res*, Job hesitates to validate his entrance ticket.³⁹ He would rather remain with the unavenged suffering of the innocent buried under the road to salvation.

Job’s materialist vision of god

Job gets the confrontation he desires, but it does not turn out as expected. God appears from a whirlwind, but he does not respond to Job’s accusations and does not even mention the wager. He instead bombards Job with rhetorical questions and sublime imagery.

Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone – while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment.⁴⁰

The speeches are an overwhelming stream of symbols and accusations that overflow even the reader’s imaginative capacities. In response, Job grows silent and submits. “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”⁴¹

At this junction, Negri’s atheistic reading deviates sharply from mainstream religious interpretations, like Gutierrez,’ Terrien’s, or Newsom’s.⁴² According to more standard views, God scolds Job for his anthropocentric assumptions, while Job holds on to his faith. God does not owe humankind anything and believing otherwise is prideful. God’s whirlwind speeches explain that Job and humankind in general are not his primary concern. God’s providential economy aims at the salvation of the entire universe. God’s speeches subsequently detach Job from his petty personal fears to contemplate world-history from the divine point of view. He makes Job forget his individual fate in favor of the general *oikonomia* of the world. As if tracing a regressive current of “uncreation”⁴³ back to the beginning of time, the images God employs in his speeches travel from the concrete familiarity of Job’s situation to the chaotic, primordial scene that forms God’s cosmic workshop. God disentangles Job from his limited perspective by redirecting his gaze to the inhospitable habitats of wild animals, the corners of the Earth, and eventually the terrifying mythic monsters Behemoth and Leviathan. The sympathy God professes for

³⁸Negri, *Labor of Job*, 26.

³⁹See Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 245.

⁴⁰Book of Job 38: 4–9.

⁴¹Book of Job 42: 5–6.

⁴²Gutierrez, *On Job: God-talk*; Terrien, *Job: Poet of Existence*; Newsom, *The Book of Job*.

⁴³Newsom, *Book of Job*, 243.

these elemental beasts suggests that God exceeds justice measured by human standards. His allegiance is not squarely with Job and humankind.⁴⁴ God's providential economy concerns the cosmos as a whole and thus might produce some individual collateral damage along the way. It would be inappropriate for Job to expect God's concern for his petty worries. Job "seeing" God is, in this reading, a mystical experience where Job transcends his own self to see world-history *sub specie aeternitatis*. This participation in divine transcendence allegedly cures Job of his rebellious hubris and returns him to the willful submission prescribed by providential theology. Though a convincing reading of the whirlwind speeches, this interpretation makes God's response indistinguishable from the mystical account of Job's friends. In this conception, God's speeches arguably confirm Job's suspicions about God's cruelty and fickle tyranny. The friends had already accused Job of hubris for wanting to measure God's providential design by human standards. God himself however explicitly argues in the epilogue of the text that the friends were wrong and Job was right. Reading God's intervention as a mystical experience would hence install an insurmountable contradiction in the final message of the text.

Negri gives an idiosyncratic interpretation that points toward an antitheist and materialistic rather than a mystical experience.⁴⁵ According to Negri, Job remains defiant and eventually wins the war. By forcing God, who otherwise remains silent at the sight of human suffering, to reveal and assert himself, Job has purportedly already prevailed. "The ethical trial of the book of Job does not raise the servant to the level of the master (and beyond) but lowers the master to the level of the servant. It is this that constitutes recognition. Here knowing is the key to liberation; it is the constitution of freedom."⁴⁶ Job succeeds in bringing God down to his level, even if God attempts to keep the distance intact with pompous rhetoric. This downgrading of transcendence effectively constitutes a "death of God," for Negri.⁴⁷ God has been pulled down to the level of his creatures and the transcendent position is left vacant. From now on, the government of the world has to be justified on the level of human reason. In Negri's reading, Job's vision is not an *unio mystica* with the beyond, but a re-appropriation of God's absolute creative potentiality for humankind. God's monopoly over the force of creation is broken down and distributed among his creatures. Killing God thus means reinstating humankind's place in the cosmic factory.

He saw God, hence Job can speak of him, and he – Job himself – can in turn participate in divinity, in the function of redemption that man constructs within life – the instrument of the death of God that is human constitution and the creation of the world. The materialist reading of the vision of God has, thus, the capacity to capture the creative moment of this ontological immersion of man [...] in the relationship with the divine, and thus of linking ontologically [...] the human powers to those divine.⁴⁸

Job apprehends God's creative potentiality and recognizes it as his own. Negri re-interprets the images of Behemoth and Leviathan accordingly not as a terrifying display of divine glory, but the prehistoric maelstrom of creation into which Job is sucked once God is deposed.⁴⁹

⁴⁴Keller, *The Face of the Deep*, 124–40.

⁴⁵Negri, *Labor of Job*, 70.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 96–7.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 51–5.

Negri's point is however not to celebrate this primordial soup of becoming as some sort of permanent revolution. He argues that once Job's vision has provided the positive immeasurability of creation to counter the negative immeasurability of divine transcendence from the mystical model of justice, there is also a positive, more human measure of justice to be constructed against the negative measure of the retributive model of justice.⁵⁰ The destruction of God's government of the world and its evils should open the way to human self-government.

The theme that we are concerned with is that of the living God, of concrete justice – it is, therefore, the theme of the foundation of another order of values, not one in line with the measure of the world but one against or, alternatively, in place of this world of injustice and pain. A reconstruction of the world and its value.⁵¹

Whereas the retributive model posits divine judgment over the pious and the wicked as the yardstick of justice, the death of God renders humankind itself the measure of all things. In the theological tradition Agamben described, the value of human actions depend on their role in God's transcendent salvific plan. An action was good insofar as it enacted the will of God, not because it fulfilled a human desire. Negri, however, rejects the transcendent infusion of meaning in creaturely actions. Creatures are not mere delegates of the divine economy: there are only beings' immanent inclinations and they do not receive their value from a providential design from above, unbeknown to them. There is no mysterious plan of redemption in which every human action has a pre-determined function. It is hence up to humankind itself to deliberate the value of all things. This is not settled by a transcendent decision, but becomes an issue exposed to continuous creation and self-renewal. Instead of letting divine providence determine the value of human actions – thereby reducing undeserved evil to an inevitable cost of the providential economy – Negri envisions an immanent theory of value as human self-valorization.⁵² He hopes to bring down the standards of justice to a human level.

Negri posits this alternative in messianic terms as a “resurrection of the flesh.”⁵³ Throughout the story Job's “flesh” is assaulted by immense injustices. This state of deprivation, however, provides the opportunity for Job's flesh to be resurrected once he successfully undermines God's authority and replaces it with a human basis of value. In the beginning of the story, Job's pain confines his attention exclusively to his own singular body. The experience of intense pain is so oppressive that it forces all other concerns to the background. It even destroys Job's ability to narrate his experience in connection to a meaningful past and future, as he remains silent for seven days and nights before his first lament commences.⁵⁴ When his friends say that Job's wounds will heal over time, he can only respond with cynical remarks that deny the wholesome continuity of time.⁵⁵ “Mortals, born of woman, are of few days and full of trouble. They spring up like flowers and wither away; like fleeting shadows, they do not endure.”⁵⁶ The suffering is so overwhelming that he loses his framework of reference to make sense of

⁵⁰Boer, “The Immeasurably Creative Politics of Job,” 102.

⁵¹Negri, *Labors of Job*, 47.

⁵²Stolze, “Marxist Wisdom,” 137.

⁵³Negri, *Labor of Job*, 72.

⁵⁴Newsom, *Book of Job*, 131.

⁵⁵Ibid., 132–6.

⁵⁶Book of Job 14: 1–2.

his own existence. Job hence, at first, seems isolated, cut off from social bonds by the incommunicability of his pain.⁵⁷

Negri, however, suggests that Job's destitution is also an opportunity for a new form of human community, the flesh, to take shape. Pain can only occur in the human body if there is some shared sense of communication by which to indicate it. Even inarticulate cries assume that the body stands in relation to others as addressees. Job's breakdown of the self thus uncovers a more visceral sense of community. Below any institutionalized form of life is the human affective capacity of "compassion," or "suffering-with," that weaves singular bodies together independently of organized institutions.⁵⁸ Job has lost his dignity and social status, and yet his suffering makes a demand upon others. That people are able to show compassion for each other, even when institutionalized bonds have broken down, demonstrates that human togetherness has an immanent bodily foundation. In this perspective, human suffering is not a collateral damage of the world's government to which one should voluntarily submit, but a lynchpin for active and collective self-organization. Not the equal subjection to a transcendent master like God makes humankind a community, but the immanent conjunction of bodies affecting and being affected by each other. Through their affective connections, people are "of the same flesh." This affective undercurrent is, according to Negri, a resource for the building of new and better institutions. "Pain is a key that opens the door to the community. All the great collective subjects are formed by pain – those, at least, that struggle against the expropriation of the time of life by Power."⁵⁹ Negri here voices the long-held observation that new political communities frequently arise from painful affects like anger, indignation, and sorrow. These affects lay bare a visceral communal bond that struggles against the injustices that cause this pain. Through the continued struggle against evil, institutions and forms of life are continually renewed and exposed to the human potentiality for creation.⁶⁰ By contesting painful injustices, political movements help to improve the institutions that organize human life. The resurrection of the flesh, in other words, demands "the destruction of every fetish,"⁶¹ every institution that idolizes itself as eternal and immune to the protestations of the individuals it hurts. The construction of *oikonomia* elaborated in providential theology classifies as one of those fetishes aimed at justifying evil instead of combatting it.

The Virgin Mary's ethics of vulnerability

Mary and the providential economy

Agamben's depiction of providential theology portrays the relation between humanity and God as humankind's unconditional submission to a mysterious divine economy. Creatures are unknowing instruments in a transcendent plan for redemption. For God's will to be done, they have to voluntarily surrender to whatever fate is allotted to them. One response is to rebel against this verdict, like Negri's Job. A less iconoclastic response to economic theology's disappointing answer to the problem of evil lies in Adriana

⁵⁷Negri, *Labor of Job*, 89.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 93; Stolze, *Marxist Wisdom*, 132.

⁵⁹Negri, *Labor of Job*, 90.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 98.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 74.

Cavarero's and Massimo Cacciari's appreciation of Marian iconography. Though Agamben and Negri focus on religious texts, theology comprises also other formats. Iconography is a medium of theological reflection and it paints a different picture of the relation between humanity and God.⁶² Icons of the Virgin Mary emphasize that "the son that grows in Mary is the Son. Her relationship with him defines her relationship to the divine; this mother and this son together decide upon the entire relationship to the divine appropriate for the Age that announces their image."⁶³ Contemporary thinkers highlight the images of the Madonna and child to subvert the discourse about God as a *pater familias* economizing his worldly household.⁶⁴ Instead of directly negating providential theology, it highlights its neglected history in Marian iconography to displace the focus away from God's supposedly benevolent *oikonomia* and its collateral damage. These feminist thinkers intuit a forgetfulness of the mother/son-relation at the heart of providential theological treatises, a forgetfulness only suspended in religious imagery. The attitude to evil Cacciari and Cavarero extract from this tradition is not passive submission to one's status of collateral damage. "The wonder of the incarnation lies not in its affirmation of but in its challenge to patriarchal concepts of generation."⁶⁵

Like the theologians Agamben discusses, Cacciari and Cavarero start from God's love for a helpless humankind and its will to save it, but they do not immediately direct this idea to the articulation of a providential *oikonomia*. To bring about redemption, God first incarnated himself in Jesus Christ, the son of Mary. The supreme being has purportedly chosen to belittle itself to the status of a helpless child in order to suffer for humankind and thereby make its salvation possible. This moves the discourse of providential economy in a significantly different direction. The providential theology targeted by Agamben sees God as a perfect, transcendent father of the household and is afterwards embarrassed by the apparent mistakes in the blueprints, individual occurrences of evil. The focus on incarnation highlights that humankind is always already exposed to suffering and regards God as a loving entity wanting to intervene on humanity's behalf. In order to deliver us from evil, it chooses to become a human being to suffer with and help its creatures. This is not the behavior of a household father, but – Cacciari and Cavarero argue – of a loving mother. God is here not the father who reigns over the world from above, but someone who, out of gratuitous love, lowers itself to live among its creatures and help them overcome their pains.

One could speculate as to why God would feel the need to be born as Mary's child to establish his salvific economy. As already noted, God's absolute potentiality would be too great to bear for humankind. God's omnipotence implies that human freedom could not survive a direct confrontation with the will of God. Providential theologians conclude that God chooses to limit its power over the world with ordained laws of nature. God remains the father of the worldly household, but abstains from directly intervening in the conduct of individual creatures. Depictions of the Madonna and child however – Cacciari focuses on Andrea Mantegna's *Madonna Poldi Pezzoli* (1490-1500) – do not construe God's self-limitation as a providential economy where God delegates the government of the world to his creatures. By revealing God as a bare child, these images portray the incarnation as an

⁶²Cacciari, *Generare Dio*, 10–11.

⁶³Ibid., 99. All translations from this text are the author's.

⁶⁴Cavarero, *Inclinations*, 14; Cacciari, *Generare Dio*, 103.

⁶⁵Beattie, *God's Mother, Eve's Advocate*, 93.

event of *kenôsis*: the divinity empties itself (*kenoein*) of its transcendence and renders itself a creature among others to share in the human condition.⁶⁶ God divests itself of its transcendent properties and powers to become a helpless, small child. “Truth, by which the world is held together, has sprung from the earth, in order to be carried in a woman’s arms.”⁶⁷

Important to Cacciari and Cavarero is that the Word becomes flesh thanks to Mary’s mediation. The iconographic emphasis on incarnation as *kenôsis* accords a crucial role to the Mother of God (*theotokos*). Her part in the world’s salvific economy is that of a human atelier for the production of the divine.⁶⁸ The small Jesus would not have been able appear or survive without his mother’s care. She not only mediates between the human and the divine, but also provides humankind with an ethical model. Her actions are exemplary of how believers are supposed to react to God’s revelation in Christ through a self-weakening gesture. God has lowered itself to the status of a helpless creature and it counts on Mary also abdicating her power as an autarchic ego to devote herself to its protection. Just like God emptied itself to save the weak, Mary abandons her position of autocratic subject to live in the service of her son. Redemption, from this perspective, results not from submitting to whatever the divine economy has in store for us, but from imitating God’s kenotic action like Mary. The Christian virtue of humility is not a passive surrender to the glory of God, but an active choice of self-weakening to look after the vulnerable.

Mary embodies this attitude in her iconography. In Mantegna’s painting, for example, the young mother’s face has some strikingly old features and a sad timbre.⁶⁹ She does not only look at the audience, but also peers into the future of her child. At the moment of Christ’s birth, she anticipates his impending passion. She is already grieving for Jesus, sharing his suffering.

The young woman and the child she has just given birth to, bear already the image of the old woman and the crucified. [...] The perfect *com-passion* is, in a sense, the sign of Mary [...], from the moment of her son’s birth to that of his crucifixion. No saint, no martyr can have suffered like her. She has relived in the flesh the divine *kenôsis*.⁷⁰

To stress this homologation of self-weakening, many paintings of the *mater dolorosa* give the crucified Christ and the mourning Mary the same body postures, to evoke the *imitatio Christi* expected from believers.⁷¹ Mary’s participation in the *kenôsis* of the Son sets an example for humankind. Her humility is not the passive obedience to a divine *pater familias* who commands her to accept her lot, but the autonomous choice to care for and feel with a helpless and vulnerable creature, becoming just as vulnerable in the process.

Mary and the ethics of vulnerability

Not all feminists agree with the Marian exaltation of self-sacrifice. Christian theologians have often put the blame for original sin on women, with the figure of Mary serving her Son subsequently operating as the only proper example for womanhood. Women’s

⁶⁶Cacciari, *Generare Dio*, 7.

⁶⁷Augustine, “Sermon 185,” 21.

⁶⁸For a full history of the theological debates surrounding the role of the Virgin, see Claverie, *Les Guerres de la Vierge*, 265–345; Carnes, *Image and Presence*, 30–34.

⁶⁹Cacciari, *Generare Dio*, 55.

⁷⁰Ibid., 63.

⁷¹Ibid., 64.

identity would then be subsumed under the service of other, better men.⁷² Too often, the Church and the State have used this discourse to feminize domestic labor, as if women who care for others are not really working, but merely expressing their God-given female nature.⁷³ “By considering maternal practice as instinctive or natural, the ideology of Capitalist Patriarchy has [...] fettered women through essentialism.”⁷⁴ Marian iconography then ideologically hides unwaged domestic labor under the cover of “essentially feminine work.” Simone De Beauvoir writes, for instance, that, with Mary, “for the first time in human history, the mother kneels before her son; she voluntarily recognizes her inferiority. This is the supreme masculine victory that culminates in the Cult of Mary: it is the woman’s rehabilitation through the completion of her defeat.”⁷⁵ With Marian self-sacrifice to the patriarchy, womanhood is ideologically defined through the care women gives to men.⁷⁶ Cavarero and Cacciari, however, read the Madonna as an exemplary figure not merely for women, but for all of humankind. Care, vulnerability, and self-weakening mark the human condition as such. They argue that the zero degree of human ethics lies in the female rather than the male experience.

The kenotic vision of humility exemplified in the depiction of Mary inspires Cavarero to develop an ethics of vulnerability as an alternative to passive submission to evil.⁷⁷ In *Inclinations*, Cavarero describes Leonardo Da Vinci’s *The Virgin and Child with Saint-Anne* (1501–1519) as a critique of the autocratic subject.⁷⁸ In this painting, Da Vinci dismisses the traditional depiction of the Virgin and child on the same horizontal plane in favor of a diagonal setting. Da Vinci’s depiction of the Virgin and child exemplifies the oblique line as a posture of care. He depicts Mary lovingly bent over the small naked Jesus. The latter mimics his mother’s posture while playing with a lamb. Behind them, Saint-Anne is likewise bent over Mary. Mary’s position is awkward, reaching out to her son, and yet she looks perfectly stable thanks to Anne’s support.

As the iconology of the Virgin Mary testifies, even though the mother is bent over the infant, tilting to the exterior, she doesn’t slip. Leaning over the other, forming an oblique line, she reposes in tranquility, in a static and perfect equilibrium. [...] She stays immobile and crystallized, in a ‘frozen state,’ as if maternal inclination were not a movement but an originary and natural mold, an archetypal posture.⁷⁹

The scene expresses vulnerability at the basis of the human condition. The child enters the world exposed to violence and death, if it were not for others taking care of them. The bare Jesus could and will be struck by a terrible fate. He plays with a lamb, signaling his future sacrifice as *agnus Dei*. “Already indebted to the *other* – the mother – for his arrival in and persistence within the world, the newborn depends, precisely by virtue of his vulnerability, on the one who, inclined and thus bent forward outside herself, leans over him.”⁸⁰ Yet the knowledge of his helplessness in the face of his impending suffering does not encourage

⁷²See Murgia, *Ave Mary*.

⁷³See especially, Federici, “Wages Against Housework,” 15–22; Dalla Costa, “Women and the Subversion of Community,” 17–49.

⁷⁴Vaughan, “Introduction”.

⁷⁵De Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, 275–6, my translation.

⁷⁶See also Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” in Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 234–64; Warner, *Alone of all her Sex*, 180–94.

⁷⁷Cavarero, *Inclinations*, 14.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 97.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 9.

⁸⁰Cavarero, *Inclinations*, 102.

quietist acceptance for Mary. She does not regard her son's fate as just collateral damage for humanity's final salvation.

The insurmountable exposure of the small child puts her for a choice: either withdraw and let the child die, or respond to his call with love, just like Anne does for her.⁸¹ The painting depicts human community as a network of relations of care built on motherly love. It reveals the human condition as an interwoven set of asymmetrical dependencies. Exposure to others is not a mere accidental feature of childhood, but a structural characteristic of the human condition. Even adult, upright individuals depend on others for their basic sustenance. These "others" are not an anonymous or abstract Other – like a God-creator –, but an identifiable series of concrete human caregivers. Mary exemplifies this concrete other, in the middle of asymmetrical relations of care, as both relying on her own mother and being a mother for Jesus. "Being" here means being for each other and relying on each other. Just like Christ depends on Mary and Mary on Anne, humankind as a whole is purportedly composed of chains of dependencies. According to Cavarero, Da Vinci's portrayal of the human condition prefigures a new form of politics beyond patriarchal authority.⁸² Providential theology envisions God as a universal *pater familias* in charge of a worldly economy to which all individuals must humbly surrender *de auctoritate Dei*. Marian iconography brackets the role of the father of the household to foreground the relation between mother and child. Not passive acceptance of one's fate determined by the father, but an active *kenôsis* in the service of the vulnerable serves as a paradigm of Christian love. Just like God chose to enter this world as a helplessly small child, trusting on the care of others and caring for them in return, we must acknowledge our constitutive vulnerability and our embeddedness in a network of relations of dependence from which there is no emancipation.

Conclusion

Contemporary Italian thinkers are usually skeptical about the influence of theology on modern political government. They frequently criticize the notion of sovereignty as a remnant of the medieval theology of divine omnipotence, but they also question the import of providential theology in modern economic governance. In *The Kingdom of the Glory*, Agamben explains this by highlighting that the idea of a providential *oikonomia* served to circumvent the problem of evil. By claiming that God allows for suffering in the world because he respects the freedom of the world and delegates the government of his providential economy to his creatures, providential theology demanded passive obedience to the will of God from people emphatically ill-served by God's supposed salvific project. God expects human beings to humbly accept their lot, even if it delivers them only misery. Negri vehemently rejects this attitude of submission. He gives an antagonistic reading of the Book of Job to argue for rebellion against suffering. He calls for a death of God and a reconsideration of humankind's capacity for creation as an opportunity to reform the world according to human, not divine, desires. Cavarero and Cacciari develop a less antagonistic alternative by highlighting the role of the Virgin Mary in the providential economy. As the prime mediator between the divine and the human, the mother of God provides an

⁸¹Ibid., 105.

⁸²Ibid., 131.

ethical model centered on humility and vulnerability. She imitates God's act of *kenôsis* by suffering with God and by living in the service of her helpless child. According to Cacciari and Cavarero, the adequate response to the problem of evil is hence not mere passive acceptance of nor devilish rebellion against evil, but a self-weakening in the service of the suffering. It is here not my intention to recommend one of the two options nor even to make the reader choose. Discovering the truth about human ultimate redemption surely lies beyond the scope of what a university researcher can accomplish from the comfort of his desk. In the meantime, the rich tradition of Christian theology can disclose affirmative potentialities to combat evil instead of submitting to it, until the Messiah will have surreptitiously crept through the back door to save the day.

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