***The Mystery of Evil: Benedict XVI and the End of Days***

GIORGIO AGAMBEN, translated by Adam Kotsko

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What possible interest can contemporary philosophers like Alain Badiou, Massimo Cacciari, and Giorgio Agamben all have in an obscure passage from Saint Paul’s epistles (2 Thessalonians 2: 1-11), which describes the signs and wonders accompanying the exposure of “the mystery of evil” (the workings of Satan?) and “the man of lawlessness” (the Antichrist?) that will precede, the apostle says, “the coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ”? And what possible relevance can this scriptural passage have to the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI, in which Agamben finds, not a craven abdication before the exposure of scandal and corruption, but a courageous response to the crisis of legitimacy facing the Catholic Church, presaging the end of days?

Although Agamben’s answer to the first question risks becoming as obscure as Saint Paul’s epistle, the second can be simply answered. On April 22, 2009, four years before his abdication, Pope Benedict delivered a sermon, based upon the commentary on *Revelation* of the fourth century theologian, Tyconius, in whichthe Church was described as inextricably divided between two spiritual bodies, one dark (*fusca*), one bright (*decora*), which would finally be separated by a “‘great *discessio’* … between the Church as body of the Antichrist and the Church as body of Christ” (12). Agamben’s tract implies some connection between Benedict’s abdication and that great *discessio*, although the precise connection remains obscure. But if Benedict’s gesture was meant to precipitate an apocalyptic event, it would appear to have gone astray, since the revelation of the Antichrist, like the Second Coming, appears to have failed to arrive.

The failure of the Antichrist and of the Messiah to arrive is attributable, Agamben suggests, following Paul’s epistle, to a sinister metaphysical agency, called ‘the *katechon’* (Greek: who or what withholds, restrains, brakes, etc.), which exerts some mysterious influence upon contemporary events, and either saves us from the Antichrist, or else prevents us from being saved by the Messiah. Or maybe both. And although Agamben is not interested in deciding who (or what?) the Antichrist is (various candidates are proposed), he is fascinated with the *katechon*, which either must be celebrated for restraining the Antichrist, or else condemned for preventing the arrival of the Messiah. And this bewildering conglomeration of ambivalent theological concepts then poses hermeneutic problems for critical readers of *The Mystery of Evil*.

But what possible relevance does all this crypto-theological rhetoric have to the great problems of 21st century humanity? Agamben’s political theology is predicated upon Carl Schmitt’s thesis that contemporary political concepts are secularized theological concepts, and upon Walter Benjamin’s statement that capitalism is the religion of the contemporary world—which means, Agamben responds, that the Bank is the Church. Or vice versa. The mystery of evil, the man of lawlessness, the messianic event, and the *katechon,* must therefore have some relevance to the political-economic crises that plague contemporary humanity. But whether Agamben succeeds in decrypting the obscurities of 2 Thessalonians 2: 1-11, and transposing them into political concepts, or, instead, leaves readers stumbling in the scriptural dark, fumbling for their decoder rings, is a question might occur to the critical reader while wrestling with *The Mystery of Evil*.

Behind Agamben’s political-theology, the critical reader will find a slightly veiled critique of the out-of-control “political machine” of legitimacy and legality (4), of “the laissez-faire ideology that is dominant today” (17), of “the paradigm of the self-regulating market that has taken the place of justice” (ibid.), and of “the powers of [S]tate [that] act openly outside the law … within which [S]tate and terrorism form a single system” (34)—which, taken together, make the political theology appear relevant. The question then becomes whether Agamben’s political theology really helps the reader to debunk the mystification that disguises the mystery of evil behind the spectacular façade of the contemporary multinational military-industrial capitalist world-system, or whether that political theology does not contribute to the mystification, especially since it is not clear what alternative to the capitalist system Agamben is actually proposing, if any.

The reader might also observe that there is a striking disconnect between the crypto-metaphysical rhetoric of Agamben’s tract, with its antichrists and *katechons*, and his directly political critique of Church and State, and that Agamben’s critique of the Catholic Church might have been made more clearly without all this theological double-talk. But Agamben’s critique is theological, and not political, because he is addressing an audience of theologians, on the occasion of his reception of a doctorate in theology in Freiburg, Switzerland; and so he exhorts the Church to abandon its self-appointed role as the *katechon*, to re-open its eschatological bureau, and to take up the apostolic mission of confronting the *mysterium iniquitatis*, so that the messianic event (whatever that is …) might finally, belatedly, arrive.

But does Agamben really believe in the Antichrist, the Messiah, or the *katechon*? And what do these obscure terms actually correspond *to*, in the contemporary political parlance? The adoption, by Post-Marxist thinkers like Agamben, Badiou, and Cacciari, of this crypto-messianic rhetoric, might appear as compensation for the downfall of Marxism/Leninism, which has left them without a framework to make prognostications about ‘the end of history.’ But, for Agamben, as for Paul, the messianic event (the *parousia*) is not some distant future happening, heralding the end of days, but a directly present moment, taking place in the here-and-now, which demands that the Catholic Church throw off its *katechon* and take up the apostolic mission of confronting the mystery of evil, thereby hastening the arrival of the messianic kingdom.

But, when faced with the colossal evils of contemporary politics, Agamben finally argues, Catholic theologians have hypostasized the mystery of evil as the Antichrist, thereby making them complicitous in the *mysterium iniquitatis* and paralyzing their capacity for political action. Whether Agamben’s political theology is equally guilty of hypostasizing evil is a final question that might be posed of *The Mystery of Evil*.

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