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DESACRALIZING POLITICAL THEOLOGY:
DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE AND GIORGIO AGAMBEN

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Although secular democracies no longer locate authority in a monarch modeled on the divine, they practice rituals centered on sites of extraordinary significance–the flag, the founding, the constitution, the nation. These things are sacred insofar as they inspire reverence and are valued for their own sake rather than for their utility. When individuals, texts, and institutions are invested with special significance, they may energize political movements and inspire sacrifice for the sake of a greater good. They create a sense of shared meaning, which situates democratic contestation within a community. However, the sacred is also dangerous. Reverence may strengthen support for a leader's ideals, but it can also crowd out criticism of their shortcomings. Zeal for national greatness can fuel hostility toward others, and it makes it harder to reckon with national guilt. To honor something as sacred entails horror at its desecration, but this leads some to label any dissent as sacrilege. There is therefore reason to worry that the sacred sustains the status quo by numbing political imagination.

Giorgio Agamben develops a compelling critique of sacred politics. Where some political theorists assume that modern politics is thoroughly secular, Agamben argues that the sacred remains indispensable to the operation of power. In his view, however, its influence is nefarious. According to Agamben, modern governmental power is modeled on the relation between divine transcendence and God's work in the world. On his account, both Christian theology and modern democracies reinforce mundane government by investing it with glory. Because Agamben thinks the sacred functions to neutralize resistance, he concludes that profanation is politically urgent.

I think Agamben is right that the sacred poses a problem for politics. However, I will argue that he misconstrues the texts he presents as evidence, which leads him to exaggerate the danger of sacrality. My argument focuses on the sixth century theologian Dionysius the Areopagite. As Agamben observes, Dionysius describes an ornately stratified order, which stretches from heaven, through various angelic ranks, and down to the structure of the church. Because this hierarchy is only authoritative insofar as it mediates the unknowable God, Agamben concludes that the true function of Dionysian mysticism is to reinforce ecclesiastical bureaucracy. In Agamben's reading, Dionysius exemplifies the way in which the glory of transcendent sovereignty sacralizes governmental power. In my view, Agamben correctly identifies the central tension in the Dionysian corpus, but he misunderstands its significance. On Dionysius's account, rather than neutralizing resistance, the sacred disrupts the status quo through intensified critique.

Dionysius argues that, if God transcends the world (as its creator), the categories of human thought do not apply to God. In this light, he insists that every name for God must be negated, but at the same time he proliferates talk about God in the mode of liturgical praise. According to Dionysius, the logic of creation requires that God be called by every name, including those that are apparently scandalous. The tension between mystical silence and the profusion of speech constitutes what Dionysius calls *apophasis*, Greek for "unsaying". Whereas affirmation or negation could seem, on their own, to capture the divine, Dionysius juxtaposes the two in order to underscore that there is no grasping God.

Agamben claims that the affirmation of Christian worship circumscribes this apparent negativity, but in my reading Dionysius does not exempt Christian practice from apophatic dispossession. On the contrary, Dionysius's account of divine transcendence entails that Christian discourse and practice are provisional and therefore subject to revision. Rather than investing worldly government with transcendent glory, Dionysius subjects every order to unstinting critique. Where Agamben inadvertently sacralizes the profane, Dionysius desacralizes the sacred, affirming some things as sacred while submitting them to critique. In this way, I argue, Dionysius offers a compelling response to the problem of sacred politics.

Dionysian *apophasis* resists hegemonic power without falling into an unsustainable anarchy, affirming imperfect structures while opening them to transformation. On his account,

rather than foreclosing dissent, reverence for the sacred opens the individual and the community to unpredictable transformation. In my view, although Dionysius's hierarchical vision of the world seems out of step with modernity, he models a politics that balances boldness and circumspection, affirming realistic proposals while subjecting them to radical critique. Where Agamben assumes that political theology functions to sacralize power, Dionysius points to a negative political theology that desacralizes every authority including its own.

I. Glory and Government

Agamben argues that modern governmental power derives from a theological paradigm. In *The Kingdom and the Glory* he traces a series of attempts by early Christian theologians to relate God's transcendent nature (what they called *theologia*) to God's immanent ordering of the world (i.e. *oikonomia*, or economy). Where their Gnostic opponents claimed that a transcendent God could not intervene in human affairs, theologians such as Irenaeus of Lyons linked the economic relations among the three persons of the Trinity to the economy of salvation.[1] According to Agamben, this avoided dividing an inactive God from an active demiurge by introducing a break within the divine between God's being and God's praxis.[2] Some theologians sought to resolve this rupture through the doctrine of providence, which grounds God's temporal action in God's timeless being; this link was later elaborated in an account of ministering angels who mediate God's will.[3] According to Agamben, this providential-economic structure provides the model of the modern state, which legitimates the management of individuals by gesturing toward a distant and impersonal sovereignty.[4]

By means of this genealogy, Agamben aims to clarify the insidious power of government.[5] On his account, just as medieval theology presents the angelic hierarchies as the expression of God's will, modern political thought assumes that the administrative state simply expresses

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[1] Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, Meridian, Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011), 50–51.

[2] Ibid., 53, 140.

[3] Ibid., 141, 158.

[4] Ibid., 135.

[5] Agamben's genealogies are often illuminating, but they tend to rely on a dubious reconstruction of the "original" meaning of the concepts and practices in question (Giorgio Agamben, "What Is an Apparatus?," in *What Is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, 2010, 8; Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath*, trans. Adam Kotsko [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011], 65–66; cf. Leland de la Durantaye, "Homo Profanus: Giorgio Agamben's Profane Philosophy," *Boundary 2* 35, no. 3 [August 1, 2008]: 29, 30, 32).

legislative authority.[6] In Agamben's view, however, it is a mistake to assume that economic management is grounded in a sovereignty that precedes it. He explains, "What our investigation has shown is that the real problem, the central mystery of politics is not sovereignty, but government; it is not God, but the angel; it is not the king, but ministry; it is not the law but the police—that is to say, the governmental machine that they form and support."[7] In both theology and politics, according to Agamben, transcendent sovereignty legitimates a governmental system that is, in fact, primary. Where earlier commentators on political theology focused on the sovereign power personified in the monarch, Agamben argues that the key issue is bureaucracy.

The name Agamben gives to this legitimation is glory. Agamben observes that praise and adoration are directed toward the immanent Trinity (i.e. God in Godself) in response to the economic Trinity (i.e. God's work in the world).[8] In similar fashion, Agamben says, the acclamations offered to Roman emperors connected the rule of particular individuals to the glory of imperial sovereignty.[9] He argues that a similar dynamic persists in modernity. In his view, modern democracies sustain the government of life by drawing on the glory of transcendent sovereignty. Agamben explains, "At each turn, [the modern democratic state] wears the regal clothes of providence, which legislates in a transcendent and universal way, but lets the creatures it looks after be free, and the sinister and ministerial clothes of fate, which…confines the reluctant individuals within the implacable connection between the immanent causes and between the effects that their very nature has contributed to determining."[10] This ambivalence, by which modern democracies promise freedom to individuals that they nevertheless manage in myriad ways, is the central object of Agamben's anxiety. Although secular politics claims to exclude the sacred, Agamben suggests that it relies on glory in order to legitimate the extension of economy.

Agamben argues that glory invests economic management with transcendent significance, but in his view this effect is illusory. He writes, "Government glorifies the Kingdom, and the

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6   Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 276.

7   Ibid. Agamben is building on the genealogy of governmental power developed by Michel Foucault (cf. Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1978-79*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell [Basingstoke [England]; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008]). I have argued elsewhere that Foucault's analysis is more circumspect and convincing (David Newheiser, "Foucault, Gary Becker and the Critique of Neoliberalism," *Theory, Culture & Society* 33, no. 5 [2016]: 3-21).

8   Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 209.

9   Ibid., 178. On Agamben's account, this affinity between religious and political ceremony is not accidental; as he describes, each was modeled on the other (ibid., 190).

10   Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 142.

Kingdom glorifies Government. But the center of the machine is empty, and glory is nothing but the splendor that emanates from this emptiness, the inexhaustible *kabhod* that at once reveals and veils the central vacuity of the machine."[11] In Agamben's account, the reciprocity between Kingdom and Government, *theologia and oikonomia*, transcendent sovereignty and economic order, obscures the fact that there is nothing at the heart of this circular system. He explains, "Just as liturgical doxologies produce and strengthen God's glory, so the profane acclamations are not an ornament of political power but found and justify it."[12] Although glorification presents itself as a response to a glory that is prior, Agamben claims that the act of glorification produces the glory toward which it is directed. For this reason, he concludes that the function of glory is to reinforce mundane power.

Agamben argues that Dionysius the Areopagite exemplifies this structure.[13] As he observes, Dionysius invented the term hierarchy—Greek for "holy order" or "sacred power"—and the bulk of his corpus is taken up by two works on the topic, *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. Agamben comments, "It is a case, on the one hand, of placing the angels in a hierarchy, arranging their ranks according to a rigidly bureaucratic order and, on the other hand, of angelifying the ecclesiastical hierarchies, by distributing them according to an essentially sacred gradation."[14] On Agamben's reading, Dionysius projects a bureaucratic order onto the angels and then interprets the ecclesial order in this light as sacred. Insofar as he invests mundane government with celestial glory, Dionysius exemplifies the providential-economic paradigm. Agamben writes, "The central idea that runs throughout the Dionysian corpus is that what is sacred and divine is hierarchically ordered, and its barely disguised strategy aims…at the sacralization of power."[15]

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[11]   Ibid., 211.

[12]   Ibid., 230; cf. ibid., 199, 224, 226.

[13]   Although Agamben's engagement with Dionysius in *The Kingdom and the Glory* is relatively brief, Dionysius plays a pivotal role in his overall argument. He explains elsewhere, "It is within the reflection on angelic hierarchies as a model of ecclesiastic hierarchies that, starting with the Pseudo-Dionysius (whose work should not be read, following the equivocation that has dominated its reception in the West, in a mystical way, but as an attempt to found the sacredness of power and of ecclesiastic hierarchies on the Trinity and the angelic hierarchies), the first legitimization of the Church as a 'worldly' structure of the government of souls takes shape" ("Angels," trans. Lorenzo Chiesa, *Angelaki* 16, no. 3 [September 1, 2011]: 121).

[14]   Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 152.

[15]   Ibid., 154. Agamben associates glorious acclamation with the sacred, which he analyzed in (*Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen [Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1998], 9; *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 188). Colby Dickinson comments on the earlier work: "Politics is therefore nothing less than a human situatedness founded upon a notion of sacrality which, though religion appears to many to be fading from popular acceptance in the West, cannot ever be fully effaced from what constitutes the basis for all personal and social identities formed in a sense that conveys political meaning" (*Agamben and Theology* [T & T Clark International, 2012], 75).

In the West, Dionysius is best known for his argument that every attempt to talk about God must be subject to *apophasis* (i.e. "unsaying"). Whereas many readers assume that this mystical silence is solitary and apolitical, Agamben argues that it reinforces governmental power. He explains, "According to the postulate of the governmental machine with which we are now familiar, an absolutely transcendent thearchy beyond every cause acts in truth as a principle of immanent order and government."[16] On Agamben's reading, Dionysian negative theology exhibits the circular link between Kingdom and Government, transcendent sovereignty and economic order. In his view, just as glory legitimates imperial power by making the emperor more than a man, reverence for divine transcendence invests ecclesial bureaucracy with glorious authority.

Agamben points out that, in apparent contradiction to apophatic unsaying, Dionysius insists on perpetual praise. He comments, "That apophatic theology has here the function of cover and serves, in fact, to found a governmental hierarchy is evident in the function of acclamation and liturgy that belongs to the divine names, with which the ineffable god must—in apparent contrast with his unsayability—ceaselessly be celebrated and his praises sung."[17] Because Dionysius says that the unsayable must be sung, Agamben concludes that *apophasis* is only a ruse. In Agamben's reading, mystical silence intensifies hierarchical power by amplifying its sacred aura. He comments, "Ineffable sovereignty is the hymnological and glorious aspect of power."[18] On this reading, Dionysian mysticism strengthens governmental power by investing it with glory. If Agamben is right, resistance requires undoing Dionysius's legacy.

II. The Ambivalence of Negative Theology

I think Agamben is right that the Dionysian corpus is destabilized by a profound ambivalence. On the one hand, Dionysius argues that, because God transcends creation, God is beyond proclamation, beyond mind, and beyond reason.[19] In *The Divine Names* he writes, "Nothing that is or is known can proclaim that hiddenness beyond every mind and reason of the transcendent

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16   Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 155.
17   Ibid.; cf. ibid., 224.
18   Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 156; cf. ibid., 242.
19   DN 981A, 129. I have abbreviated references to the Dionysian corpus as follows: DN, *The Divine Names*; MT, *The Mystical Theology*; CH, *The Celestial Hierarchy*; EH, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*; Ep, *Epistles*. Page references correspond to *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibhéid, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

Godhead which transcends every being."[20] He argues that, because human language is derived from the created realm, the creator lies beyond the scope of speech. Thus, although Dionysius says that "goodness" is the name for God "which is most revered," he insists that it too is inadequate: "There is no name for [God] nor expression. We cannot follow it into its inaccessible dwelling place so far above us and we cannot even call it by the name of goodness."[21] Since even the best name for God fails, Dionysius says that the writers of scripture prefer "the way up through unsaying [*tēn dia tōn apophaseōn anodon*]"–that is, *apophasis*.[22]

In *The Mystical Theology* Dionysius systematically negates the names for God: "It has no power, it is not power, nor is it light. It does not live nor is it life…It is not wisdom. It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness….It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being."[23] This litany undoes the privileged categories of Christian discourse, including the notion of divinity itself. It might seem that negation simply erases affirmation, leaving a mute silence in its wake, but Dionysius is clear that neither affirmation nor negation is adequate. He explains, "What has actually to be asserted [*tithenai*] about the Cause of everything is this….[It is] beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion [*thesin*]."[24] Pure negation is impossible, according to Dionysius: in this passage, at the very moment at which he says that God is beyond every assertion (i.e. *thesin*), he is making an assertion about God (*tithenai*, which shares the same root). Insofar as even negative statements make a positive claim about God, Dionysian *apophasis* cannot consist in pure negation.

Dionysius explains,

Since it is the Cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it [*kataphaskein*] all the affirmations we make in regard to beings, and, more appropriately, we should unsay [*apophaskein*] all these affirmations, since it surpasses all being. Now we should not conclude that the unsayings [*tas apophaseis*] are simply the opposites of the affirmations [*tais kataphasesin*], but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations [*hyper tas sterēseis*], beyond every removal [*aphairesin*], beyond every assertion [*thesin*].[25]

In this passage, Dionysius distinguishes *apophasis* from two forms of negation–privative negation (*steresis*, by which qualities are denied that would connote some deficiency in God) and removal

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[20]   DN 981A, 129.
[21]   DN 981A, 129.
[22]   DN 981B, 130, translation modified.
[23]   MT 1048A, p.141.
[24]   MT 1000B, 136, translation modified.
[25]   MT 1000B, 136, translation modified.

(*aphairesis*, which inverts a particular name for God). Dionysius emphasizes that mere negation cannot achieve the unsaying that is required, but in his view theological affirmation is inadequate as well. For this reason, beyond affirmation and negation, *apophasis* indicates that God is beyond understanding.

At the same time, although Dionysius argues that God is beyond understanding, he sometimes suggests that God can be understood through the mediation of the church. *The Mystical Theology* ends in a frenzy of negation, but it opens with prayer and describes an ascent that mirrors the movements of Christian liturgy. Dionysius's central concern with respect to theological language is to praise God appropriately; *hymneō*, the term Dionysius often uses for talk about God, connotes a liturgical song rather than a declarative statement.[26] Dionysius situates Christian worship within a cosmic order that he calls hierarchy. Whereas *apophasis* suggests that God is radically elusive, Dionysius's account of hierarchy suggests that ecclesial structures provide reliable access to the divine.

Dionysius explains that every being reflects the divine with the intensity appropriate to its nature, and it is only by their connection to each other that the splendor is spread.[27] The glow begins with the highest rank of angels, who exist in maximal proximity to God: they pass the divine gifts to the lower rank of heavenly beings, who in turn distribute them to the highest level of the ecclesial hierarchy, that of the hierarchs (i.e. bishops). Dionysius writes, "The source of spiritual perfection…made our own hierarchy a ministerial colleague of these divine hierarchies by an assimilation, to the extent that is humanly feasible, to their godlike priesthood."[28] By means of the link between bishops and angels, the ecclesial hierarchy is drawn into the divine.

According to Dionysius, it is through this chain of mediation that sacred things lead people to the divine. In his view, angelic contemplation is immaterial, but humans require perceptible symbols. He explains that this is the reason Christian worship uses physical things such as the bread that is central to the communion service: these objects serve as the means whereby people are drawn to the divine.[29] In *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* Dionysius comments at length on the sacraments of baptism, communion, and anointing with oil; in each case he emphasizes the need

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[26]   E.g. DN 597C, 58.
[27]   CH 165A, 154.
[28]   CH 124A, 147.
[29]   Cf. CH 144C, 152; CH 121C, 146.

to move from the material level to a higher understanding.[30] Although Dionysius's gloss on the meaning of the sacraments focuses on their symbolic significance, he is clear that these symbols are actually effective–they are, he says, "those saving sacraments by means of which the participants are divinized [*tōn teloumenōn theōsin*]."[31]

As Agamben observes, it is difficult to reconcile these two dimensions of Dionysius's thought. The hierarchical structure that encompasses Christian worship depends upon the immediate relation between the highest angels and God, but Dionysius's account of divine transcendence entails that this proximity is impossible. Whereas Dionysius sometimes says that the highest angels are like God,[32] elsewhere he writes that "no being can in any way or as a matter of right be named like to [the Godhead]."[33] Although he says that the highest angels see and know God, elsewhere he claims that "the divinity is not only invisible and incomprehensible, but also 'unsearchable and inscrutable.'"[34] If unmediated access to God is impossible for every created being (including the highest angels), it follows that the process of hierarchical mediation can never begin. Conversely, if God is known through Christian worship, it would seem that God is not unknowable after all. For this reason, Agamben concludes that Dionysian negativity is a tactic to intensify ecclesial power.

III. Apophatic Ethics

Like Agamben, some scholars of early Christian thought claim that *apophasis* reinforces the authority of Christian worship. As Charles Stang observes, earlier interpreters divided the *theologia* of *The Divine Names* and *The Mystical Theology* from the *oikonomia* of the hierarchical works, but recent scholarship tends to interpret the theological treatises through the lens of hierarchy.[35] Where I have argued that *apophasis* indicates that God is resolutely elusive, the consensus among specialist interpreters of Dionysius is that Dionysius's affirmation of Christian worship brackets his apparent negativity. According to Stang, Andrew Louth, and Alexander Golitzin, Dionysian

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30   Cf. EH 428B, 212.
31   EH 436C, 217; cf. EH 392A, 200; EH 424C, 209; EH 428C, 212.
32   CH 208C, 163.
33   CH 293B, 176.
34   DN 588C, 50.
35   Charles M. Stang, *Apophasis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite "No Longer I"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7–8.

unknowing actually refers to the knowledge of God that is available within the church. If these interpreters are correct, Agamben is right that the function of Dionysian mysticism is to sacralize ecclesial structures.

Although these scholars helpfully counter the tendency to portray *apophasis* as a purely intellectual exercise, I believe they underestimate the asceticism Dionysius describes. I agree with them that the two sides of the Dionysian corpus should be interpreted together. However, where they assert that Dionysian *apophasis* is circumscribed by his affirmation of ecclesial hierarchy, I think the coherence of the Dionysian corpus cuts in the other direction. In my reading, Dionysian *apophasis* cannot reinforce the affirmation of ecclesial hierarchy, for it calls every affirmation into question.

Dionysius writes,

Then he [Moses] breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing [*ton gnophon tēs agnōsias*]. Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive…he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else [*oute heautou oute heterou*], one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity [*anenergēsia*] of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing [*tō mēden ginōskein hyper noun ginōskōn*].[36]

Golitzin and Louth observe that this passage echoes the movements of the liturgy that Dionysius would have known (with Moses typifying the bishop), but this does not entail that it simply reaffirms Christian worship.[37] Dionysius's negativity is unstinting: Moses abandons what is seen, renounces what can be conceived, and knows nothing. This entails that he could not know whether he actually encountered the divine. On Dionysius's terms, if union with God were to occur, it could neither be described nor identified—if one truly "knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing," then one could not know that this has happened. For this reason, Dionysius precludes any confidence that Christian worship offers access to God.

Dionysius makes clear that *apophasis* is not an intellectual proviso to be noted and then forgotten. Instead, it is a discipline that must be continually renewed. He writes, "The way up [*anodon*] through unsaying…stands the soul outside [*existōsan*] everything that is like itself

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[36]   MT 1.3 1001A, 137.
[37]   Alexander Golitzin, *Mystagogy: A Monastic Reading of Dionysius Areopagita.*, ed. Bogdan Bucur (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014); Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London: Continuum, 1989), 30-31.

[*symphylōn*]."[38] The term Dionysius uses for this change (*existōsan*) refers broadly to a change of position, but it also carries the sense of abandonment. The effect of *apophasis* is to abandon everything familiar in pursuit of that which is radically unlike oneself. Dionysius is clear that *apophasis* constitutes a way (*anodon* in Greek); it is a dynamic process, not a static structure. In his view, the self who seeks God must maintain a disciplined openness to the unexpected. He writes that we are "forever being raised up toward his divine enlightenments" (not once and for all).[39] Thus, although the Dionysian system sometimes seems static, it describes an ascetic practice that is dynamic and developing.

As I have described, Dionysian *apophasis* juxtaposes affirmation and negation in order to indicate that neither is adequate to the divine. From the perspective of synchronic logic this could seem like bare contradiction, but once it is situated within the temporal perspective of an unfolding life *apophasis* becomes a means of ethical transformation. In Dionysius's view, we have the tendency to grasp what is beyond us, reducing it to the contours of what we already know.[40] He suggests that treating God as a knowable object is a form of self-reinforcement, asserting a transcendent security that depends upon the adequacy of one's understanding. For this reason, Dionysius claims that relation with God requires self-critique.

At the outset of *The Mystical Theology* Dionysius writes, "By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted [*anachthēsē*] to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is."[41] This unmitigated abandonment calls into question any horizon that might allow union with God to be recognized. Dionysius goes on to enact the negation of every category for God, finally denying that God is soul, mind, speech, understanding, number, order, greatness, smallness, equality, inequality, similarity, dissimilarity, power, light, life, eternity, time, knowledge, truth, kingship, wisdom, oneness, divinity, goodness, spirit, sonship, fatherhood, nonbeing, being, darkness, light, error, and truth. For this reason, Dionysius says, "Someone beholding God and understanding what he saw has not actually seen God himself…, for he himself solidly transcends mind and being."[42] According to Dionysius,

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38   DN 981B, 130, translation modified.
39   CH 293B, 176.
40   DN 865C, 106.
41   MT 1.1 100A, 135.
42   EP 1 1065A, 263.

since God transcends every category of understanding, there is no way that an experience of God could be understood as such an experience. In this way, the darkness of unknowing calls into question every claim to locate the divine.

This discipline provides the context in which Dionysius's affirmation of Christian worship should be read. He writes,

> We now learn these things in the best way we can [*analogōs hēmin*], and as they come to us, wrapped in the sacred veils [*tōn hierōn parapetasmatōn*] of that love toward humanity with which scripture and hierarchical traditions cover [*perikalyptousēs*] intelligible things [*ta noēta*] with perceptible things [*aisthētois*] and what is beyond being in beings…But in time to come [*tote de*], when we have become incorruptible and immortal,…we shall have a conceptual gift of light from him and, somehow, in a way we cannot know [*agnōstois*], we shall be united with him beyond understanding [*hyper noun*].[43]

In this passage Dionysius describes ecclesial hierarchy as a provisional attempt to approach the divine in the present, one that is radically qualified by the fact that union with God remains yet to come. In keeping with his sacramental theology, Dionysius affirms that the perceptible symbols of Christian discourse and practice guide Christians to God, but he insists they also veil the divine.[44] Dionysius refers to these veils as sacred, but at the same time he underscores that they are inadequate to represent what is invisible. In this way, his affirmation of the sacred enacts a disciplined critique that keeps both discourse and practice in motion. Where Agamben assumes that *theologia* sacralizes *oikonomia*, for Dionysius divine transcendence functions as a critical principle that renders hierarchical order subject to revision. Rather than sacralizing ecclesiastical power, Dionysius desacralizes every attempt to access the divine.[45]

IV. Profanation and Play

Although Agamben intends to dissolve Dionysius's legacy, I think Dionysian *apophasis* resembles Agamben's own attempts to disrupt the link between glory and government. Agamben argues that glory is pernicious because it circumscribes possibility. On his account, human life has an

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[43] DN 592B, 52–3, translation modified.

[44] Cf. CH 121B, 146.

[45] In his novel, *Silence*, Shusaku Endo writes in a different idiom but to similar effect: "The priest raises his foot. In it he feels a dull, heavy pain. This is no mere formality. He will now trample on what he has considered the most beautiful thing in his life, on what he has believed most pure, on what is filled with the ideals and the dreams of man. How his foot aches! And then the Christ in bronze speaks to the priest: 'Trample! Trample! I more than anyone know of the pain in your foot. Trample! It was to be trampled on by men that I was born into this world. It was to share men's pain that I carried my cross.'" (Shusaku Endo, Silence [London: Quartet Books, 1978], 259).

undetermined character that he calls impotentiality, "being able to not do."[46] Unlike animals (which

are ruled by biological necessity), Agamben claims that "human life is inoperative and without

purpose."[47] This freedom from teleological determination does not entail that humans ought to do

nothing; instead, Agamben's point is that the ability to not do is what enables free action. He

suggests that, when alienated from their impotentiality, democratic subjects are rendered docile,

directed by governmental power toward activities that serve the state.[48] Since government

operates by putting its members to work (with rather than against their consent), impotentiality

threatens governmental power. Agamben explains, "We can now begin to understand why

doxology and ceremonials are so essential to power. What is at stake is the capture and inscription

in a separate sphere of the inoperativity that is central to human life."[49] According to Agamben,

glory captures the capacity to not do within a particular sphere lest it disrupt governmental order.[50]

This is why Agamben thinks profanation is a political task. He writes,

"Profanation…neutralizes what it profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and

separate loses its aura and is returned to use."[51] Agamben explains that, in contrast to

secularization (which displaces sacrality from heavenly to earthly sovereignty), profanation

neutralizes the sacred, thereby releasing a given object from the religious norms that bind it.[52]

Where profanation opens the possibility of a new use, Agamben claims that religion aims to

circumscribe inoperativity through the figure of glory. He writes, "Glory is what must cover with its

splendor the unaccountable figure of divine inoperativity….[The] typical form [of the *theologia

gloriae*] is that of mysticism, which—in the face of the glorious figure of power—can do nothing

except fall silent."[53] In his view, by localizing inoperativity within a particular domain (such as God's

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[46]   Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford California Press, 2011), 43.

[47]   Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 245; cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 42.

[48]   Agamben explains, "Separated from his impotentiality, deprived of the experience of what he can not do, today's man believes himself capable of everything, and he repeats his jovial 'no problem'…precisely when he should instead realize that he has been consigned in unheard of measure to forces and processes over which he has lost all control" (*Nudities*, 44).

[49]   Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 245. He comments elsewhere: "All apparatuses of power are always double: they arise, on the one hand, from an individual subjectivizing behavior and, on the other, from its capture in a separate sphere….We must always wrest from the apparatuses—from all apparatuses—the possibility of use that they have captured" (Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort [Zone Books, 2007], 91-92).

[50]   Elsewhere he writes, "Glory is nothing other than the separation of inoperativity into a special sphere: that of worship or liturgy." (ibid., 101; cf. Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko, 2016, 265).

[51]   Agamben, *Profanations*, 77.

[52]   Ibid., 73.

[53]   Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 163.

inactivity before the creation of the world), mysticism precludes profanation by enforcing silent compliance.

My argument indicates that this is an unjustified stereotype. Dionysian mysticism is not mute; on the contrary, Dionysius insists that divine mystery requires the proliferation of speech. He writes, "The unnamed goodness is not just the cause of cohesion or life or perfection so that it is from this or that providential gesture that it earns a name, but it actually contains everything beforehand within itself."[54] On this view, God shouldn't be named selectively, as if some things spoke of God but not others. According to Dionysius, God's act of creation sets both affirmation and negation in motion, requiring at the same time that God be called by every name and by none. Dionysius writes that "as Cause of all and as transcending all, [God] is rightly nameless and yet has the names of everything that is."[55] In his account, just as negative statements about God constitute a form of affirmation, the logic of theological affirmation inevitably demonstrates its inadequacy. "The God of infinite names"[56] is effectively nameless, for this profusion defies any attempt to arrange it within an ordered system. In keeping with the apophatic tension between affirmation and negation, each of Dionysius's four treatises proliferates speech about God that undoes itself.

In an echo of Agamben's profanation, Dionysius says that scandalous names for God are preferable to those that are pleasant because they disturb pious inertia.[57] He writes that people call God "good, beautiful, wise, beloved,…sun, star, and fire, water, wind, and dew," but they must also speak "of his anger, grief, and rage, of how he is said to be drunk and hungover, of his oaths and curses, of his sleeping and waking."[58] Because Dionysius worries that theology will provide false assurance, he argues that it must make affirmations that destabilize any sense of security.[59] Dionysius suggests that "each of the many parts of the human body can provide us with images

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54   DN 596D, 56.
55   DN 596C, 56.
56   DN 969A, 126.
57   CH 141B, 150.
58   DN 596B, 55-6; MT 1033B, 139.
59   CH 141B, 150. Agamben takes the oath to be the sacrament of power, which guarantees the connection between words and things. He writes, "To pronounce the name of God means to understand it as that experience of language in which it is impossible to separate name and being, words and things" (Giorgio Agamben, The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath, trans. Adam Kotsko [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011], 52), and on this basis he claims that "the age of the eclipse of the oath is also the age of blasphemy, in which the name of God breaks away from its living connection with language and can only be uttered 'in vain'" (ibid., 71; cf. 2, 40-41). Insofar as Dionysius divides strictly between the names of God (which must be plural) and divine transcendence (which is neither a being nor a thing), he suggests that the prevalence of blasphemy is not unique to modernity: in fact, it was never possible to avoid taking God's name in vain.

which are quite appropriate to the powers of heaven"[60]—including "eyes, ears, hair, face, and hands, back, wings, and arms, a posterior, and feet."[61] Against this background, he explains how God is like sight, smell, taste, touch, teeth, adolescence, eyelids, eyebrows, shoulders, and arms.[62] Dionysius notes that "[God] is represented [in the Bible] as drinking, as inebriated, as sleeping, as someone hung-over."[63] Although these passages are potentially scandalous, Dionysius claims that they signify "that incomprehensible superabundance of God by virtue of which his capacity to understand transcends any understanding or any state of being understood."[64] Rather than foreclosing speech, Dionysian *apophasis* unleashes a riotous creativity.

Dionysius's account of theological affirmation opens Christian discourse to unpredictable play, but play is a feature that Agamben identifies as a prime example of profanation. According to Agamben, when a cat toys with a ball of yarn and when a child plays with a toy car, they deactivate characteristic behaviors (such as driving and predation) in order to open them to a new use.[65] Agamben assumes that such play is the opposite of religion; the Latin term *religio* stems, he says, from anxious scrupulosity in relation to prescribed forms of observance. Against this view, Dionysius suggests that Christian thought contains a critical principle that opens it to playful expansion. Where Agamben assumes that mysticism consists in a glorious silence that circumscribes possibility, Dionysius argues that divine hiddenness entails that speech must proliferate without restriction. On his terms, Christian discourse and practice are constitutively open to new use, for their present condition is only provisional.

As Rowan Williams observed in the initial discussion of this paper, rather than undermining the sacred altogether, the profanation I discover in Dionysius points to a sacrality that is distinct from immanent systems of power. In my reading, Dionysian *apophasis* interrupts the process whereby the sacred is appropriated as a tool of legitimation. Where Agamben claims that Jewish and Christian theologians elide the distinction between God's (objective) glory and the (subjective) glorification of worship, Dionysius insists on a strict distinction between them.[66] By insisting upon

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[60]   CH 15.3 329D, 185.
[61]   DN 597B, 57.
[62]   CH 332A, 185.
[63]   CH 1105B, 282.
[64]   CH 1112C, 287; cf. Ep 9 1112, 287.
[65]   Agamben, *Profanations*, 76.
[66]   Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 200, 214.

self-critique and the chaotic proliferation of speech, Dionysius distinguishes human attempts to glorify God from God in Godself. Dionysius affirms that some things are sacred while subjecting that affirmation to desacralizing critique. In this way, Dionysius holds sacrality and profanation together in tension.[67]

V. Negative Political theology

In my view, Agamben identifies an important problem. Political action is directed toward identifiable ends, but it is inspired by commitments that transcend the pursuit of individual interests.[68] This is especially clear in moments of national crisis when citizens are driven to extraordinary sacrifice on behalf of the nation, but even everyday politics is charged by values (such as justice, freedom, and equality) that go beyond particular policy goals. Such commitments constitute a faith that exceeds the calculation of cause and effect, and they are sustained by symbols that carry special significance.[69] Political communities are often motivated by appeals to revered individuals (such as Ronald Reagan or Martin Luther King Jr.), documents (such as the US Constitution or the Universal Declaration of Human Rights), and institutions (such as the judiciary or the military). The danger, as Agamben observes, is that holding such things as sacred can function as an obstacle to political imagination, freezing a given configuration of power through unquestioned reverence.

Like Agamben, many commentators assume that the function of political theology is to sacralize power, but my reading of Dionysius suggests this is too simple. Carl Schmitt argues that politics depends upon an exceptional authority that finds its model in the miraculous power of God.[70] Erik Peterson accepts this understanding of political theology, but he claims that Christian Trinitarian theology precludes any neat association between human and divine authority—for this

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[67]   In the initial discussion of the paper, Martin Kavka and Amy Hollywood worried that I oppose profanation and the sacred. As I explain here, this is not my intention.

[68]   My understanding of sacred politics draws on Paul W Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Ted Smith, *Weird John Brown: Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); and Harald Wydra, *Politics and the Sacred* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

[69]   Stephen Bush's analysis of the function of the sacred in debates over torture is helpful: Bush argues that the sacredness of human life does not supply independent reasons for prohibiting torture, but it can support the prohibition of torture through its emotional force ("Torture and the Politics of the Sacred," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 97, no. 1 [February 21, 2014]: 85–87, 95).

[70]   Carl Schmitt, *Political theology: four chapters on the concept of sovereignty* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 47.

reason, Peterson concludes that Christianity cannot have a political theology.[71] Contra Peterson,

Stathis Gourgouris claims that political theology is essentially monarchical, even when it is

Trinitarian in form; in his view, religion is inevitably idolatrous, elevating some things as sacred in

order to conceal the groundless character of human existence.[72] These theorists differ over

whether political theology is a good or bad thing, but they agree that it sacralizes worldly power.

Against this consensus, I have argued that Dionysius points to a negative political theology that

desacralizes every assertion of power.[73]

Agamben notes that Dionysius refers to the Trinity with the term *thearchia* (a compound

term for divine order or rule), and he claims in this light that Dionysius's politics is theocratic.[74] On

this reading, Dionysius exemplifies the danger of sacred politics, foreclosing critique by identifying

a given political arrangement with divine authority. However, this is precisely the opposite of what

Dionysius is doing. On his view, the divine cannot be appropriated in discourse or practice, and so

thearchy cannot be identified with any political system. Where Agamben claims that "the

providential *oikonomia* is fully translated into a hierarchy," I have argued that Dionysian *apophasis*

preserves the radical distinction between divine transcendence and earthly order.[75] Insofar as it is

unknowable, thearchy undermines every attempt to institute theocracy, including (above all) within

the church.

Rather than foreclosing contestation, Dionysius echoes Agamben's vision of an

undetermined politics. Agamben writes,

> One can therefore understand the essential function that the tradition of Western
> philosophy has assigned to contemplative life and to inoperativity: properly human praxis
> is sabbatism that, by rendering the specific functions of the living inoperative, opens them
> to possibility. Contemplation and inoperativity are, in this sense, the metaphysical operators
> of anthropogenesis, which, by liberating the living man from his biological or social destiny,
> assign him to that indefinable dimension that we are accustomed to call 'politics.'[76]

On Agamben's account, contemplation frees people from teleological determination, thereby

opening the space for politics (which is free from necessity). Agamben goes on to claim, once

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[71]   Erik Peterson, "Monotheism as a Political Problem: A Contribution to the History of Political Theology in the Roman
       Empire," in *Theological Tractates*, trans. Michael J Hollerich (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011), 102–5.
[72]   Stathis Gourgouris, "Political Theology as Monarchical Thought," *Constellations* 23, no. 2 (June 1, 2016): 145–59; cf.
       Stathis Gourgouris, *Lessons in Secular Criticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).
[73]   As an anonymous reviewer of this article observed, my argument suggests that Agamben's sweeping claims about the
       significance of Christian thought are also unreliable, and this in turn undermines Agamben's genealogy of
       governmental power.
[74]   Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 155.
[75]   Ibid., 154.
[76]   Ibid., 251.

again, that this inoperativity is antithetical to religion, but I have argued that this reading is wrong. Dionysius suggests that, on the terms of Christian thought, comportment toward the sacred does not constrain impotentiality. On my account, the discipline of *apophasis* is paradigmatically political, for its aim is to open possibility.[77]

Dionysius is an unlikely guide for secular politics. Whereas modern democracies are premised upon pluralism and equality, Dionysius describes a stratified order that appears to constrain contestation.[78] Nevertheless, although Dionysius does not directly address politics in the modern sense of the term, I think the structure he describes is politically indispensable. Some suppose that we can simply dismiss hierarchy and the sacred, but my argument suggests that this is a fantasy. Democratic societies are divided by hierarchies of race, class, and culture, and those who claim that equality is achieved only obscure persistent injustice. For this reason, a sustainable politics requires both the affirmation of particular structures and suspicion of those same arrangements. In my reading, this is what Dionysius describes. Against a politics of purity, Dionysius shows that it is possible to pursue particular political ends without relinquishing utopian critique.[79]

Sacrality is a source of power, and power is dangerous—but power is also the precondition for political action.[80] The sacred establishes community, holding together a fractious collective through shared sites of special significance. Although the sacred sometimes numbs political imagination, it can also proliferate interpretation of shared points of reference. Symbols of common identity give a group something to argue over, and they bracket even intense disagreement within a shared enterprise. The sacred brings bodies together within rites of communal identity: singing a hymn or the national anthem, eating the Eucharistic host or a piece of apple pie, processing on

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[77] Agamben writes, "While humans have reflected for centuries on how to preserve, improve, and ensure their knowledge, we lack even the elementary principles of an art of ignorance" (Agamben, *Nudities*, 113-14). However, such an art (sometimes called *docta ignorantia*) has been developed with a high degree of sophistication within Christian thought.

[78] Cf. Ep 1088C, 272; EH 432A, 214. On the other hand, there is a democratizing force to the many instances in which Dionysius invites correction on the part of his interlocutors (e.g. CH 308B, 181).

[79] In the initial discussion of the paper, Eric Gregory suggested that the biggest problem for contemporary politics isn't the threat of an evil or irresponsible leader but rather the feeling of impotence in the face of inscrutable systems. Although the approach that I describe here does not itself entail particular judgments—for instance, concerning what to do in response to climate change or the global financial system—I believe it constitutes a practice that is indispensable preparation for responsible judgment. Whereas it is tempting either to assert a holy confidence or to give up the fight, Dionysius models a middle way, which persists without assurance through a disciplined hope.

[80] Cf. Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Paul Rabinow and Hubert Dreyfus (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 256.

Palm Sunday or in a Pride parade.[81] Such collective action has a performative power that opens political possibilities.[82] For this reason, despite its danger, the sacred therefore remains an indispensable resource for a politics in pursuit of justice. What is needed, I think, is a politics that draws power from the sacred without allowing it to harden into myopia, insisting upon a justice to come while pursing particular improvements on the level of law.[83]

Whereas pretending to dismiss the sacred allows it to persist undetected, religious traditions have found ways to draw on its power while resisting its danger. This does not mean that the West must return to religious commitment, but it does suggest that religious thought offers resources that anyone may draw on, regardless of their own commitments.[84] Dionysius demonstrates that, rather than choosing between dogmatic adherence and pure profanation, it is possible to inhabit a middle space in which we affirm some things as sacred while holding them open to development. In this way, although it is dangerous, the sacred may expand the limits of political imagination through intensified critique.

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[81] In the initial discussion of the paper, William Cavanaugh pressed me to specify the difference between the Eucharist and apple pie. I think it is appropriate to discriminate between the various signs that lay claim to the sacred, but the present paper operates in a different register. My argument does not assume that the sacraments of Christian worship are efficacious signs of grace, nor does it exclude that possibility.

[82] Judith Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[83] One might object that practices directed toward God differ from those directed toward immanent ends, but I suspect that politics is motivated by transcendent objects (such as justice and democracy) that exceed any effort to specify them (in principle or in practice). In order to be politically effective, justice and democracy must be filled out with concrete content, but any judgement concerning them should held open to future revision. For this reason, negative theology models a discipline that is broadly urgent.

[84] I think William Cavanaugh is right to claim that "Christianity…thus serves a democratic order by relativizing any claim to justice and truth" (*Migrations of the Holy: God, State and the Political Meaning of the Church* [Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2011], 134). However, I think he is wrong to oppose Christian worship to secular liturgies (which are, he suggests, inevitably idolatrous) (ibid., 120–22). If Dionysius is right that Christian worship is not immune to idolatry, it is not unique after all. On the contrary, as I have argued, both religious and political reverence may attend to transcendence through a disciplined negativity.