

Book Review

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BOOK REVIEWED: GIORGIO AGAMBEN, *OPUS DEI: AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF DUTY* (STANFORD, CA: STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013), 164 pp. ISBN: 978-0804784047

Reading Agamben is hard work, and his *oeuvre* is like a seamless garment: one finds neither beginning nor end, neither justification nor means. Often, one is simply inside or outside its bounds; intrigued by its explorations or disinterested in his conclusions. His latest book, *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty*, is no different. Yet, I would also like to argue that both *Opus Dei* and Agamben's larger career are of considerable importance to historians. This review will thus attempt to note some of the difficulties and promises of reading Agamben.

The fundamental premise of *Opus Dei* is that the modern, post-Kantian concept of moral duty derives ultimately from Christian discussions of the nature of liturgical performance and effectiveness, specifically that of *officium* ('duty') and priesthood. Liturgical action 'is more effective than any ordinary human action because it acts *ex opere operato*, independent of the qualities of the subject who officiates it' (p. xii). It is instead wholly dependent on the action of God working through the human being as an instrument. This model was, according to Agamben, transferred to Kantian ethics, and, in their dependence on 'acts of office', it also inspires the duties performed by 'the political militant and the ministerial functionary' (p. xii). But the paradigm of duty and effectiveness is losing its strength in our time, and 'the problem of the coming philosophy is that of thinking an ontology beyond operativity and command and an ethics and a politics entirely liberated from the concepts of duty and will' (p. 129).

Needless to say, Agamben does not quite offer the solution to that problem. Instead, the main text of *Opus Dei* is putatively dedicated to a Foucauldian, genealogical exploration of duty. That is, it does not attempt to discover the origin of the concept of ‘duty’, although Agamben claims to have done so, but ‘by means of the fine-grained analysis of details and episodes, of strategies and tactics, of lies and truths, of *détours* and main roads, of practices and knowledges’, to explore the questions of what is at stake in ‘conceiving human action as an *officium*’ and ‘[w]hat is the nature of a liturgical act, of an act that can be defined totally in terms of *officium*’ (p. 91). To do so, Agamben leads his reader through a varied literature in roughly the following order: the New Testament, early twentieth-century Roman Catholic liturgics, patristic theology, monastic rules, the Council of Trent, medieval scholasticism, papal encyclicals, and a relatively lengthy exploration of Ambrose’s *De officiis* in comparison with Cicero and Varro, before ending with modern philosophy. He jumps from literature to literature, from era to era in his analysis, and all of this is executed in a mere 129 pages. So, what is the historian to make of this *mélange de cuisine*? Is it a delicious stew or a distasteful hash?

First, the difficulties. For the liturgical historian, *Opus Dei* can be a disappointing read. Far from being a masterful contribution to liturgical history, as its cover promises, it comes across as a tendentious and light reading of too many sources. Secondary literature is largely ignored. There is little reference to actual liturgical texts or rituals. Liturgy, priesthood, and St Benedict’s ‘work of God’ (*opus dei*) are all discussed solely in terms of the debates on Eucharistic validity; there is no acknowledgment of other liturgical actions, like the other sacraments, the Daily Office, or other rituals. Also, even for the historian (such as myself) who sympathizes with the Foucauldian paradigm of genealogy, Agamben’s slim volume is unsatisfactory. Famously, Foucault’s attempt at uncovering the genealogy of sexuality was a multi-volume work, left incomplete at the time of his death. Agamben’s attempt to perform the same amount of work in a single volume can only fail to deliver; there is no fine-grained detail here. Finally, even the reader unconcerned with either historical fidelity or historiographical practice will find themselves poorly served by *Opus Dei*, in this English translation. Unlike the other books in Agamben’s *Homo sacer* series, as published by Stanford University Press, the translation truly suffers. The author has usually requested in the past that translations follow his own Italian rendering of sources, no matter the language of their original publication or the prior availability of translated texts. But that method was abandoned in *Opus Dei* and so one is faced with English translations that frequently seem not to match the point Agamben is making, a considerable problem, given his philological approach to word usage.

Second, however, the promises of Agamben’s work, of which I will highlight one. In many ways, Agamben is doing the sort of work that many intellectual historians used to think was their primary task: uncovering and exploring the historical roots of modern concepts and thereby transforming or calling into question the present. Indeed, this is clearly Agamben’s understanding of both historical and philosophical investigation.¹ He sees his work as preparatory for the formation of ‘the coming

¹ See, for example, *The Sacrament of Language*, p. 2, where he distinguishes (and fails to distinguish) his ‘philosophical’ and interdisciplinary investigation of ‘oath’, from the historiographical one deployed by Paolo Prodi, *Il sacramento del potere. Il giuramento politico nella storia costituzionale dell’Occidente* (Bologna, 1992).

community' or 'the coming philosophy,' two phrases that recur in his work. Fundamentally, then, he forces us to ask the question of the utility of history. Why do we engage in such a patient exploration of sources, such a careful establishment of dating and provenance, such an assiduous attention given to proper arguments and recent research? Disciplinary excellence is, of course, one common answer, especially under the constraints of the United Kingdom Research Excellence Framework in the age of austerity. But the fulfilling of one's duty as a functionary of the university-industrial complex, however efficacious its monetary results, has never been the rallying cry of academia, nor should it be, when the meaning of historical work needs a clearer grounding in the public's eye, as the effects of the financial crisis continue to pinch departments ever smaller. Agamben's work can challenge historians to move towards a more articulate understanding and defence of their chosen profession, so that they become as visibly invested in the present as they are in the past. In other words, Agamben's work challenges us to do better, both at rectifying the perceived deficiency of some of his studies and to articulating the purpose and relevance of our own.