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The Last Temptation of Giorgio Agamben?
The Anti-Christ, the *Katechon*, and the Mystery of Evil

A review of Giorgio Agamben, *The Mystery of Evil: Benedict XVI and the End of Days*, tr. Adam Kotsko (Stanford University Press, 2017). 96 p. \$15.95/\$50.00. ISBN: 9781503602731 (paper) 9781503600935 (cloth).

The Messiah comes not only as the Redeemer, but also as the vanquisher of the Antichrist.

---Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*

Who, really, *is* the Anti-Christ? Vladimir Putin? Bashar al-Assad? Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi? Pope Benedict XVI? The Holy Roman Emperor? The Wizard of Oz? Or---horror of horrors!--- President Donald J. Trump? In the 21st century world after the September 11th terror attacks, subconsciously haunted by the specters of the Syrian civil war and Islamic State terrorism, of 18th century Great Russian imperialism and the 2016 American presidential election, of global ecological catastrophe and thermonuclear warfare, it's easy enough to believe that Satanic forces are at work in the contemporary world, propelling current events toward some apocalyptic anticlimax, and that the Great Lord and Master, Mister Satan Himself, has already arrived on the Late Great Planet Earth, to preside over the final battle between the cosmic forces of good and evil, called, in the apocalyptic vernacular, Armageddon, which is prophesied to take place, if apocryphal sources can be believed, just west of Israeli Route 66, in Tell Megiddo, Israel. It's distinctly more difficult to believe, however, that, at the last moment, Jesus Christ will re-appear as the Son of Man, flying on clouds of heaven (cf. *Daniel* 7:13-14) to stop that apocalyptic battle, to solve all the world's problems, and to inaugurate the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, as described in that Christian Gospel book most beloved of Southern Baptist televangelists and rapturous born-again converts: *The Apocalypse of John, the Book of Revelation*. And so maybe it's not surprising that the prestigious Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben's recent works have been distressingly preoccupied (not to say unhealthily obsessed...) with a certain obscure passage from St. Paul's *Second Epistle to the Thessalonians*, in which the perhaps pseudo-epigraphical author (maybe not St. Paul, but only his apostolic alter-ego) describes the portentous events that must occur before the Second Coming of Christ can finally take place, and the New Jerusalem descend upon the post-apocalyptic planet earth: specifically, the appearance of a "man of lawlessness" (ἄνθρωπος τῆς ἀνομίας) who "exalts himself above every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the Temple of God, declaring himself to be God," and the exposure of who or what is currently restraining 'the man of lawlessness' from being exposed as the Antichrist---a mysterious agency called, in St. Paul's often bowdlerized Greek, the *katechon* (Gk.: τὸ κατέχων, "that which withholds", or ὁ κατέχων, "the one who withholds") (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12), whose exact referent is doubly obscure.

There is no doubt that Mister Agamben takes this passage seriously, since he has devoted his political-theological meditations upon it to a short book, cryptically entitled *The Mystery of Evil: Benedict XVI and the End of Days*, in which the theological discussion of St. Paul's epistle is prefaced by a more directly political discussion of the abdication of Pope Benedict XVI (*née* Joseph Ratzinger) as the Supreme Pontiff of the Holy Roman and Apostolic Catholic Church: a surprising self-defrocking of the distressed pontiff in which Agamben finds, not a craven abdication before the spectacle of scandal and corruption overshadowing the Catholic Church, but a courageous response to the crisis of legitimacy facing all Western political and religious institutions in this contemporary 'end of days.' Agamben's defense of Pope Benedict XVI might appear astonishing, coming from an Italian philosopher who has been outspoken in his criticism of both the Vatican and the Mafia alike, of both Church and State, and especially of the sinister complicity between the Western security states (the United States, Britain, and France) and the terrorist organizations (Al Qaeda, ISIS, et al.) they are purportedly fighting in the 21st century international war on terror. And the critically-minded reader might be tempted to wonder: Does Giorgio Agamben---who is widely known as a distinctly sacrilegious thinker---really *believe in* the Second Coming? The Anti-Christ? The Mystery of Evil? The End of Days? Or the messianic mission of Pope Benedict XVI? To which the critical commentator must respond: Probably not, at least not in the sense in which these apocalyptic figures are taken by the aforementioned Southern Baptist televangelists and rapturous Christian converts. Which suggests, to the critical reader, that these obscure theological figures---the Antichrist and the *katechon*, the Messiah and 'the mystery of evil'--- are really metaphors, in Agamben's political-theological parlance, for current events, which must be decrypted or translated into contemporary terms before the befuddled reader can come to understand what Agamben is *really* talking about, much less to decide who 'the man of lawlessness' *really* is, and who or what the mysterious agency restraining the Antichrist, called the *katechon*, might actually be. The FBI? The CIA? The FSB? The Mossad? The Jesuits? Or the Wicked Witch of the West? And the list goes on....

For benighted fans of Christian apocalypticism, the big question raised by St. Paul's *Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* is, of course: Who is the *real* Antichrist? A question whose answer depends upon whether 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 is read within its world-historical context, as a response by the Early Christian writer to the stunning events in Judaea and the Roman Empire during the build-up to The First Jewish War (66-72 CE) or immediately after, or whether the Pauline epistle is read, in the style of Southern Baptist televangelists, and of Signore Agamben, as a prophesy of 21st century events, in which case the interpretation largely depends upon the ingenuity of the interpreter in making 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 fit into whatever apocalyptic scenario she or he might currently be fantasizing. To stick with the first option: Most Christian biblical scholars believe that 1 & 2 Thessalonians were written during a brief hiatus in St. Paul's frenzied missionary activities in *Magna Graecia* during the early 50s CE, following a mission by Paul, Sylvanus (Silas), and Timothy to the Early Christian congregation in Thessalonika (cf. 2 Thessalonians 1:1, and Acts 17), chastising them for their backslidings amidst their sufferings and afflictions, and cautioning them "not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or word or by letter, as though from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here" (2 Thessalonians 2:2, NRSV version). If that is the case, then 2 Thessalonians was actually written by St. Paul "with my own hand" (2 Thessalonians 3:17), as it claims to have been, during the first persecutions ordered by the Roman emperors, Caligula (39-41 CE), and his successor, Claudius (49-54 CE), against the Early Christian *ekklesia*; and the Antichrist is Caligula, who, in

fact, also ordered that he should be worshipped as a living god by the Roman Senate, and who sent a Roman legion to install his god-like statue in the Second Temple in Jerusalem (although after Caligula's assassination, it appears that Claudius was somewhat more circumspect about asserting his god-like status). But other Christian scholars argue, based upon stylistic and thematic discrepancies between the two epistles, that while 1 Thessalonians is Pauline, 2 Thessalonians was written by one of Paul's disciples, sometime after Paul's death (c. 64-68 CE?), perhaps during the *second* great wave of persecutions of the Early Christians, instigated by the Emperor Nero, after the Great Fire of Rome (64 CE), in the early years of The First Jewish War (66-68 CE), before the destruction of the Second Temple (70 CE) and before Nero's assassination (68 CE), in which case the Antichrist is Nero, who is also probably the Beast of the *Apocalypse of John* (Revelations 13:1-18). And there are also scholars who argue that 2 Thessalonians was written as late as 80-115 CE, during the reign of the Emperor Domitian (81-96 CE), who allegedly gave himself the title, *Dominus et Deus*, in the Augustan imperial cult, who was known to hold Black Masses in the Roman imperial palace, and who also instigated a *third* great wave of persecutions (c. 89-96 CE), making him another plausible candidate for the Antichrist. It should be mentioned, however, that St. Paul himself does not employ the Greek term, 'Antichrist' (Ἀντίχριστος) in reference to 'the man of lawlessness,' but the term, 'anti-christ' (singular and plural) is instead derived from the *First and Second Epistles of John*, where it is employed to designate "those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (2 John 1:7) and whoever "denies the Father and the Son" (1 John 2:22), making them, like the Orthodox Jews who refused to believe that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah (in Greek, the Christ), or like the Jewish Christians (Ebionites) who refused to believe that Jesus Christ was the Son of God, unbelievers in the Christian revelation, as expounded by St. Paul's epistles, and therefore also, for Early Christian purists, candidates for antichrist status.

Whether the Antichrist is Caligula, Nero, or Domitian, however, it's clear in the Early Christian writings that *who* or *what restrains* 'the man of lawlessness' (the *katechon*) is the Roman Empire, following an interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 first proposed by the Patristic Fathers, Irenaeus (c. 130-202 CE) in *Against All Heresies*, and Tertullian (c. 160-220 CE) in *On the Resurrection*, and subsequently endorsed by St. Jerome (347-420 CE), who argued that the apostle had not wanted to condemn the Roman Empire directly, for fear of inciting persecution and losing converts for the Early Christian congregations. But there is also a semi-heretical position within the Christian exegetical tradition, supported, somewhat obliquely, by St. Augustine, that attributed the *katechontic* function of restraining evil, while also delaying the exposure of the Antichrist and preventing the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, to the Holy Roman and Apostolic Catholic Church itself: a somewhat anachronistic interpretation of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12 that is adopted by Agamben for his own purposes in *The Mystery of Evil*. "Some think that the Apostle Paul referred to the Roman empire" in his oblique allusions to the *katechon*, St. Augustine wrote in *The City of God Against the Pagans* (410-426 CE), while attempting to explicate the theological obscurities of St. Paul's epistle, which Augustine frankly confesses he does not himself wholly fathom. "But others think," Augustine continues, "that the words, 'And you know what is now restraining him,' and 'the mystery of lawlessness is already at work,' refer only to the wicked and the hypocrites who are in the Church," and that "this is the mystery of iniquity (*mysterium iniquitatis*)," which will persist only until "the mystery of iniquity which is now hidden departs from the Church" (Book XX; 10, 62-63). According to

Agamben, Augustine derived his oblique interpretation of this already obscure passage from a certain “extraordinary character” (24), a North African theologian named Tyconius (c. 330-400 CE?), who was actually a staunch member of the Christian sect most diligently persecuted by St. Augustine as Bishop of Hippo: the Donatists, who argued that the Christian bishops who had apostasized during the Roman persecution of the Church of Carthage in the early fourth century CE, before the conversion of the Constantine and the issuance of the Edict of Nantes decreeing toleration in 313 CE, or even afterwards, were irremediably damned, and could therefore not be readmitted to the Christian congregation or permitted to take the Eucharist. Tyconius’s heterodox view that the Christian church must necessarily contain both sinners and the saved, both the guilty and the blessed, was condemned as heretical by a Donatist council (c. 380 CE?); but Tyconius himself never apostasized from Donatism or became a Catholic converts, like St. Augustine, who had been a Manichean before his conversion to Christianity (386 CE) and his baptism by St. Ambrose (387 CE), after which he became a priest in North Africa (391 CE), and finally Bishop of Hippo, making him the great persecutor of Donatism (c. 400-412 CE).

In his *Book of Rules*, Tyconius had argued that the body of the Christian Church was inextricably divided into two bodies: a dark (*fusca*) body and a bright (*decora*) body, composed of the wicked and the self-righteous, respectively (7-9), which were “inseparably commingled” in the current ‘fallen’ state (24-250, but which would be separated, at the end of days, by “a great *discessio*” (13, 15), when ‘the mystery of evil’ would be unveiled, ‘the man of lawlessness’ exposed, and the Second Coming of Christ would take place, bringing about the salvation of the blessed and the damnation of the reprobate, along with their expulsion from the Christian Church. Following Tyconius, then, Agamben implausibly argues that Pope Benedict’s ‘abdication cannot fail to evoke ... something like a *discessio*, a separation of the *decora* Church from the *fusca* Church” (13), foreshadowing ‘the end of days’ when the Church’s function as *katechon* will cease to restrain the Antichrist and ‘the mystery of evil’ will be finally exposed; and Agamben supports his argument by pointing out that the future Pope Benedict XVI, while still the Catholic theology student, Joseph Ratzinger, had written an article citing Tyconius’ Manichean theology in a scathing critique of the wickedness within the Catholic Church (5-7), before again evoking Tyconius when laying his pallium on the tomb of a former self-deposed pope, Celestine V, prior to his abdication as Pope Benedict XVI (12). Agamben then also argues that this “great *discessio*” is “not only a future event that, as such, must be separated from the present and isolated in the end of days; it is, rather, something that must orient here and now the conduct of every Christian” (15), who must choose, like Benedict XVI, to dissociate themselves from the wickedness and evil within the Holy Roman Catholic Church, and thereby also to withdraw from their association with the Antichrist, which Agamben identifies with the Church as a bureaucratic institution (*oikonomia*) (16, 38) and with the sovereign State as a multinational corporate capitalist system (17, 34). By hypostasizing ‘the mystery of evil’ as an ontotheological structure (36), Agamben further argues, Christian theology, like the Catholic Church, has functioned as a *katechon* to prevent or restrain the political struggle against that mysterious evil, and has therefore established its complicity with the Antichrist. The Church, Agamben concludes, must reopen its ‘eschatological office’ (13) and take up its messianic challenge to the Antichrist, so that a directly political action against the Satanic forces at work in the contemporary world, which appear so frighteningly omnipresent and omnipotent, can effectively be made, and

something like the Second Coming finally take place (38-39). But again: Does Giorgio Agamben really *believe in* the Second Coming? In Jesus Christ as the Messiah? In Pope Benedict's messianic calling? Or in the excommunication of wicked and sinful unbelievers from the Holy Roman Catholic Church? An event which, according to his obscure argument, simply *must* take place before the Second Coming can come and the Messiah finally arrive? But again: If Signore Agamben really *believes in* all these things, it must be in some obscure sense still unintelligible to the critical reader, since neither Jesus Christ nor the Antichrist make an appearance in *The Mystery of Evil*. And as for the *katechon*, well, that's a whole different story...

At this point, the *un-catholic* reader might get the distinct impression that Giorgio Agamben's Catholic theology is not to be taken quite seriously, and that it is simply a provocation disguising his directly political message, which has been amply expounded in his *Homo Sacer* series, beginning with *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995) and culminating with *The Use of Bodies (Homo Sacer IV, 2)* (2014) and *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm* (2015). In the *Homo Sacer* series, by contrast to *The Mystery of Evil*, Agamben's critique of the subjectification of biological individuals ('bare life') by the sovereign State and its extrajudicial violence is fairly plainly stated, even if his proposed alternative to that sovereign state violence is not. But this would be, I believe, a false impression. In *The Mystery of Evil*, Monsignor Agamben really *is* reminding the Catholic theology students gathered for his lecture in Freiburg, Switzerland, on the occasion of his receiving an honorary doctorate in theology on November 13, 2012, that the Holy Roman Catholic Church really *does* have an apostolic mission, beyond its *katechontic* function of restraining the rampant evil of the Western sovereign states; and he is exhorting the Catholic clergy to carry out that apostolic mission by helping to bring about what he calls, following Walter Benjamin, an eruption of 'messianic time' into the degraded, profane present, and thereby of hastening the transformation of the Satanic contemporary world into what Jesus of Nazareth called 'the Kingdom of Heaven.' The Kingdom of Heaven on earth, for Agamben, would then be a utopian condition of free-spirited souls, equivalent to St. Paul's apostolic congregation of Christianized Gentiles and Jews, who have been freed from the Jewish Law of Torah into the Eucharistic communion of the Early Christian Church, except that this spiritual communion of this Early Christian community would have to be translated into the distinctly more secular terms of 1970s Italian Autonomism, as in the anarchist fantasy described in Agamben's *The Coming Community* (2001). According to Agamben's thinking of this messianic event, which is derived from St. Paul via Walter Benjamin's "Theological-Political Fragment," the experience of messianic time---which, by the way, is not apocalyptic time, but rather *the time between* the degraded present and the coming of the Messiah, and is therefore always a *future-present*, a *now-time*---can help to bring about a transformational experience, whereby the critical reader, who is distinctly *not* a Christian convert or an orthodox believer in the Jewish Messiah, can still experience the poignancy of the contemporary situation, and therefore help to bring about the messianic transformation of the contemporary world into the Kingdom of Heaven which is so drastically needed by un-Christian souls. In a similar fashion, Walter Benjamin argues, the Christian Church and Western State, which currently serve as *katechons* to restrain the rampant evil of the Antichrist, and therefore to prevent the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, nonetheless work to bring about the final breakdown of sovereign worldly power, and thereby also to hasten the coming of the Jewish or Christian Messiah; and

even the screaming anarchist revolutionary or flaming nihilist suicide-bomber who contributes to the profanation and degradation of the contemporary world, serves, according to Benjamin, to help bring about the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

But in St. Paul's epistles, written after Jesus of Nazareth's crucifixion (c. 30-33 CE?), during the charismatic period of the Early Christian Church (c. 49-65 CE?), the advent of messianic time and the downfall of the Antichrist (the Roman Empire) were clearly associated with the immediate expectation of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ (the *parousia*), which, St. Paul believed, was the supernatural force or metaphysical agency that would bring about the transformation of the Augustan Roman Empire into the Kingdom of Heaven. And in Benjamin's critical fragments of the German 1930s, written during the clashes between German (Spartacist) Communists and German (Nazi) National Socialists which foreboded World War II, the eruption of messianic time into the degraded present was predicated upon the arrival of a Bolshevik-style, Marxist/Leninist revolution, like the 1917 October Russian revolution, which, Benjamin believed, would bring about the downfall of the Weimar State and the Catholic Church and the emergence of a Soviet Communist socialist utopia. But, in Agamben's apocalyptic thinking of the 'end of days,' what will help bring about the messianic transformation of the contemporary world into an anarchist utopia? For a short answer, the critical reader must look beyond Agamben's recent works, to some of his earliest publications. Following Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" (1921), Giorgio Agamben's first published essay, "On the Limits of Violence" (1970), written in the Postwar Italy of the Red Brigades and the Italian National Fascies, had dangerously identified the contemporary revolutionary violence with the 'sacred violence' of sacrificial religions, as a 'pure,' 'divine' violence, existing wholly outside the sovereign law, which might succeed in bringing down both Church and State; and Agamben had further described, in crypto-messianic terms, the contemporary revolutionaries of the Italian 'years of lead' (*anni di piombo*) as self-sacrificial martyrs who had sacrificed themselves in the self-righteous cause of political liberation or religious salvation, as if their terroristic acts of revolutionary violence were, in fact, equivalent to the messianic event itself. Whether Agamben still believes in revolutionary violence as a necessary means to the arrival a future utopian anarchist state is a difficult question which can only perhaps be answered by Mister Agamben himself. But if Agamben continues to subscribe to the obsolete belief in a Bolshevik-style Marxist/Leninist revolution (*pace* Benjamin), or in its Italian equivalent (*pace* Antonio Negri), that radical commitment is cleverly disguised, in the current work, behind his exhortations to the Catholic clergy to reopen their long-shuttered eschatological office and to abandon their *katechonic* function, to take up, once again, their apostolic mission of bringing about the advent of messianic time, which apostolic mission has also been long forgotten, in the contemporary world, after the Nietzschean 'death of God' and Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor.

The problem is, however, for the critical reader of Giorgio Agamben's recent works, that the staggering disconnect between the two hyphenated terms of his political-theology, viz., politics and theology, makes it difficult to translate Monsignor Agamben's often abstruse, esoteric theology, into a directly political message capable of motivating collective action against the sovereign State, and therefore of bringing about the transformation of the sovereign State into the future utopian condition of a Christian anarchist community, for which Agamben is evidently

proselytizing. The critical reader might then also get the vaguely disquieting impression that Monsignor Agamben, like his Early Christian alter-ego, St. Paul, is attempting to bring about a conversion experience in the skeptical reader, like St. Paul's stunning experience on the road to Damascus, to convert the un-catholic reader to his crypto-Catholic Autonomist credo: an impression that is further strengthened by perusal of Agamben's previous excursion into Pauline theology, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (2000), in which St. Giorgio devotes an entire tome to explicating the *first sentence* of St. Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*. But, for the nonce, it can simply be said, that although Agamben's *The Mystery of Evil* exhorts the Catholic clergy to take up the apostolic mission of political opposition to the sovereign violence of the Western State, and prompts the un-catholic reader to join in the messianic effort to bring about an apocalyptic change in the cataclysmic conditions of contemporary existence, Mister Agamben is frustratingly vague about exactly *how* this apocalyptic transformation is to be brought about, and about exactly *what* its aftermath might be, leaving the critical reader stuck in limbo between the Satanic world of the Antichrist, and the future utopian condition and the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. Which is to say, leaving us stuck exactly where we were, before we began reading Giorgio Agamben's *The Mystery of Evil*.

But what if Monsignor Agamben is simply mistaken in the exegetical principles by which he interprets St. Paul's obscure epistle? What if the mysterious figures of 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12---the Antichrist, the *katechon*, and 'the mystery of evil'---do *not* actually refer to specific world-historical individuals, like Caligula, Nero, or Pope Benedict XVI, or even to worldly institutions like the Augustan Roman Empire or the Holy Roman and Apostolic Catholic Church? What if St. Paul's epistle can only be plausibly interpreted, in the contemporary context, as referring to world-historical trends within Western European Christian civilization itself, which have resulted in a complete inversion of the Western Christian world-view, the desecration of the Papacy and the Holy Roman Catholic Church, and the devaluation of all higher Christian moral values, culminating in what Fredrich Nietzsche notoriously referred to as 'the death of God'? What if these world-historical trends have secretly transformed Western European Christian civilization into an *anti-Christian* civilization, resulting in the past century, in the spectacle of criminal lawlessness and apocalyptic destruction raging over the surface of the perilously endangered earth, as evident in World War I, World War II, the Holocaust, and the Cold War thermonuclear arms race? (And, I might add, in the 21st century international war on terror...) What if St. Paul's epistle can only plausibly be read as a self-fulfilling prophecy of the sinister trends within Western European Christian civilization itself, which, after two thousand years, has finally reached the climactic point of its complete demoralization, and is bringing about its own self-destruction? But if Western European Christian civilization has finally reached the climactic point of its apocalyptic self-destruction, what will continue to restrain the criminal lawlessness and cataclysmic violence currently raging over the surface of the perilously endangered earth? When Western European Christians and Orthodox Jews alike no longer believe in the Second Coming or the Anti-Christ? And there's no Messiah anywhere in sight?