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PIETY, POWER, AND BARE LIFE:
WHAT IN THE WORLD IS GOING ON
IN THE NAME OF RELIGION?

ACCORDING TO DERRIDA, religion marks “the convergence of two experiences,” “1 the experience of *belief*, on the one hand,” and “2 the experience of the unscathed, of *sacredness* or of *holiness*, on the other.”¹ Neither of these experiences is strictly reducible to the other, and yet they cannot be separated and still constitute what we call ‘religion.’ Derrida’s analysis in his important essay “Faith and Knowledge” follows the imbrication and implications of these two experiences and their effects. In the process, he assembles his conception of a “religion without religion,” that receives a fuller treatment in *The Gift of Death*. Derrida affirms that there is a “gap between the opening of this *possibility (as a universal structure)* and the *determinate necessity* of this or that religion” which “will always remain irreducible....” This gap provides the possibility of critique, or an evaluation of any determinate religion or its expression, “in the name of the most originary possibility.”² This invocation of originary possibility constitutes the notion of “religion without religion,” because it refers to the slippage between what (a) religion is and what it could or should be.

Furthermore, Derrida aligns this critical capacity to question in the name of the most originary possibility with “**thought** in general,” which would “retain the *same* resource as religion in general.”³ The fold between originary possibility and determinate necessity is operative according to *both* sources or experiences, belief and the sacred, and cannot be assimilated solely to one or the other. I will briefly consider each source, belief and the sacred, and relate them to the thought of Philip Goodchild and Giorgio Agamben, respectively, before returning to Derrida’s other distinction between originary possibility and determinate

¹ Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone,” in *Religion* ed. by Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 33. All italics, boldface or other emphasis within quotes here and elsewhere in this essay already exists in the original.

² Derrida, 58-59.

³ Derrida, 59.

necessity at the conclusion, by introducing Agamben's notion of potentiality in the wake of a Deleuzian meditation on power.

Taking up the notion of belief, we can substitute other terms, including faith, prayer and piety. One attempt to reconfigure belief occurs in Goodchild's book, *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety*. Here is an analysis of the history of modern piety, which replaces faith in God with faith in capital or money, in a process that ultimately devalues human life and experience. Modern reason intensifies an ancient philosophical tendency toward abstraction that quantifies value for a system of universal exchange:

Commodity abstraction arises within a social practice, exchange, which is not thinkable while one is engaged in it; nevertheless, an expression of it may emerge into consciousness through a second abstraction implicit within it—the emergence of value, measured as an unusable, abstract, exchangeable quantity.⁴

Goodchild interrelates the philosophical and economic spheres of existence, without neglecting either one or reducing one to the other. He does not simply restore God to a transcendent place in an anachronistic effort to undo modernity; rather he conducts an immanent critique of piety in order to dislodge the dominant social and ideological relation, and constructively suggests a new way to understand piety. This effort culminates towards the end of the book, where he employs Schelling's notion of "potencies" to perform a Deleuzian intervention into the universal psychosis caused by our faith in capital that threatens a global ecological catastrophe.

Capitalism structures values based on universal, quantifiable exchange, which encourages abstract speculation in light of abstract notions of time and death; whereas Goodchild thinks the unconditioned "according to an apocalyptic piety which is entirely determined by the unconditioned." The first potency of this apocalyptic piety is "the demand of suffering which imposes upon attention."⁵ According to Goodchild, "suffering is that which is *unconditioned within experience*." Suffering "bears within it a power to generate thought and action, an urgency which is a demand of life."⁶ The second potency is "the power of attention to fulfill suffering."⁷ Attention has the power to transform and neutralize suffering, and leave it in the past, where "it becomes an event in a series which constitutes who we are."⁸ Finally, the third potency is a dim awareness of experience that escapes conscious attention. Awareness beyond attention is directed toward Truth, which as "the unity of thinking and being" is

⁴ Philip Goodchild, *Capitalism and Religion: The Price of Piety* (London: Routledge, 2002), 64.

⁵ Goodchild, 224.

⁶ Goodchild, 213.

⁷ Goodchild, 224.

⁸ Goodchild, 214.

“the potency of experience, the mode of experience itself.”⁹

Religion is defined in light of this third potency: “*religion may be defined as attention to a potency of awareness in experience which escapes all possible objects of thought*. Religion attends to that which escapes its attention. Then the condition for a public religion, however difficult to achieve, is simply as *awakening* of this potency.”¹⁰ The reorientation of a critical piety to potencies of experience is a third way that escapes the dichotomy of transcendent deity and immanent materialism. A singular individual experience testifies to an ethical relation with others, and renewed attention becomes aware of these singularities and these relationships, where the most important political problem is “to restore to people an insight into the power and freedom of their attention.”¹¹ Apocalyptic piety exposes itself “to the higher potencies of awareness that coexist with experience” in order to lead “to the possibility of a transfigured experience of suffering.”¹² Goodchild attends to experience in order to conceive of God, the experience of the unconditioned, as a gift of potency. Potencies give power to experience, granting awareness and transformation.

Goodchild’s project generally follows that of Deleuze, who states in his book *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, that the task of contemporary thought, along with contemporary cinema, is to restore belief, or to relink humanity and the world. “The modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world,” Deleuze writes.¹³ “The link between man and the world is broken. Henceforth, this link must become an object of belief: it is the impossible which can only be restored within a faith.”¹⁴ According to Deleuze and Goodchild, the problem is that we can only have faith in other worlds, not our own. Therefore, this world is “intolerable,” and we take refuge in other worlds, and refuse to live in this world, which according to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* is all that is the case. For Goodchild, restoring belief is the goal of a complete reconstruction and reorientation of piety. As Deleuze claims, “whether we are Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrenia, *we need reasons to believe in this world*,” and it is the significance of contemporary cinema at its best that it can film “belief in this world, our only link.”¹⁵ Goodchild focuses on experience in a more general sense, and argues for a public religion that would restore power and possibility to the awareness of human attention, primarily of suffering. The actualization of potencies of life and thought immanent to experience relinks humanity and this world after it has

⁹ Goodchild, 228.

¹⁰ Goodchild, 227.

¹¹ Goodchild, 242.

¹² Goodchild, 242.

¹³ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 171.

¹⁴ *Cinema 2*, 171-72.

¹⁵ *Cinema 2*, 172.

been torn asunder by the deterritorializations of modern capital and its abstract values.

Turning to the sacred or holy, one way to define the second source of religion is to understand it as what escapes technological control. In Giorgio Agamben's terms, biopower focuses its efforts upon "bare life," which now takes on the qualities of the sacred, or *homo sacer*. According to Agamben, *homo sacer* is an exceptional person who may be killed but not sacrificed. Classically, "*homo sacer* belongs to God in the form of unsacrificeability and is included in the community in the form of being able to be killed."¹⁶ As human life becomes equalized under the process of modern secularization, the notion of the "sacredness of life" goes hand in hand with the development of sovereign secular power over life and death. As life itself or bare life becomes seen as sacred, it is easier and easier to accumulate sovereign biopower to dispose of or kill it. As Agamben concludes, "if today there is no longer any clear figure of the sacred man, it is perhaps because we are all virtually *homines sacri*."¹⁷

Finally, this logic leads to the creation of concentration camps as spaces to house or hold bare life, and Agamben makes the striking claim that the camp is the *nomos* of modern life. "In the camp, the state of exception," Agamben writes, "which was essentially a temporary suspension of the rule of law on the basis of a factual state of danger, is now given a permanent spatial arrangement, which as such nevertheless remains outside the normal order."¹⁸ The law and society of Nazi Germany transformed "the entire German people into a sacred life consecrated to death, and a biological body that must be infinitely purified." Rather than aberrant exception, however, "in a different and analogous way, today's democratico-capitalist project of eliminating the poor classes through development not only reproduces within itself the people that is excluded but also transforms the entire population of the Third World into bare life."¹⁹ Agamben's pessimistic conclusion is also the opportunity for a transformation of politics and life, even though he barely indicates this possibility. He argues that we cannot disavow or get rid of the notion of bare life, and substitute for it another, new body that would overcome the problems of the current "biopolitical body of the West." "This biopolitical body that is bare life must itself instead be transformed into the site for the constitution and installation of a form of life that is wholly exhausted in bare life...."²⁰

I am suggesting that what is sacred or holy in modern terms is both that which

¹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 82.

¹⁷ *Homo Sacer*, 115.

¹⁸ *Homo Sacer*, 169.

¹⁹ *Homo Sacer*, 180.

²⁰ *Homo Sacer*, 188.

escapes technical control, and at the same time that which is the object of this control, here defined as bare life. It is the sacrality of bare life that both defines it as the beyond of (present) technical control and the object or project of (future) control. Bare life, which is sometimes referred to as the body, represents the penumbral shadow that exceeds modern control, and escapes instrumental knowledge and power. At the same time, bare life is the focus of biopower, and the goal is to subject it to forces of technical control, based on the logics of sovereignty and exception that Agamben develops in *Homo Sacer*. The sacred as object is problematic, impossible to define, but more and more inescapable as bare life, which is then the object of powers or potencies of piety, politics and technical control. The question is whether a critical piety directed towards bare life relinks humanity and the world, or makes existence more intolerable. The answer is, both.

I want to insert into this discussion of piety (belief) and bare life (the sacred) a schema of the three syntheses of power. This model is analogous to Deleuze's discussion of the three syntheses of time in *Difference and Repetition*. According to Deleuze, the first synthesis, habit, constitutes time as a living present; the second synthesis, memory, constitutes time as pure past; while the third synthesis is the pure and empty form of time that constructs the future as repetition or eternal return.²¹ Here the first synthesis of power is force, which is dominated by the present mode of time, although arms, tanks and bombs supply spatial extension. Force is an immediate and crude application of power. We could view the war against Iraq, and the militarization of American life and culture as a regression to this first synthesis in light of the terrorist attacks, or with Paul Virilio, as a devolution to the logic of the war machine. The second synthesis is money, or economic wealth, and this form of power is dominated by the past, because it is based upon a previously established standard of universal exchange. Even though financial investment and speculation is oriented toward future returns, the present and futural aspects of wealth depend upon the fact that values that have already been quantified in the form of money as medium of exchange. In fact, each of these three syntheses of power has past, present and future effects, even if one temporal mode predominates.

Finally, the third synthesis of power is the idea, and this synthesis is essentially futural, because the power of ideas always depends upon putting them into practice. At the level of the third synthesis, the idea is divided in itself, and this gets back to Derrida's fundamental distinction between an originary possibility and a determinate expression. We could define technology as an idea that becomes actualized or capitalized into force and/or wealth. Here technology is the instantiation or actualization of an idea. On the other hand, we could think

²¹ See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 93-94.

about the potential of an idea which does not pass over into the actuality of another form of power, an idea that never turns into past and present control, but remains eternally “to come.” This notion, the notion of potentiality, is perhaps Agamben’s most important contribution to philosophical thinking.

In an essay called “On Potentiality,” Agamben discusses Aristotle’s distinction between potentiality and actuality. Much of Western theoretical thinking makes a simple opposition between potential and actual, although Walter Benjamin, Deleuze and now Agamben provide resources to undo this simplistic understanding. According to Agamben’s reading of Aristotle, potentiality is a capacity or a faculty that touches on “*the existence of non-Being*, the presence of an absence.”²² Aristotle distinguishes two kinds of potentiality, one of which is the capacity to acquire a knowledge or ability, such as the potential to learn a foreign language. This is a generic potentiality. On the other hand, humans have existing potentialities, that is, a person who has already learned a foreign language has the potential at any moment to read or speak it, even if she is not doing so at a certain moment. Agamben states that an existing potentiality, precisely insofar as it remains potential, exists as “potential to not-do, potential not to pass into actuality.”²³

Because of this capacity to not-do, potentiality is related to its own privation, or non-Being. Of course, potentiality *can* pass over into actuality, just as an idea *can* pass over into another mode of power, but its significance here is that it does not, that it maintains itself in its potentiality and refuses to act. In another essay on Melville’s short story “Bartleby the Scrivener” called “Bartleby, or On Contingency,” Agamben suggests that as a scribe who has the capacity or potentiality to write but does not, or “prefers not to,” Bartleby represents a “complete or perfect potentiality.”²⁴ This potential not to be or not to do is a “fundamental passivity” that at its extreme limit can be called impotentiality. “Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality are capable of their own impotentiality,” Agamben writes, “and only in this way do they become potential.”²⁵ Impotentiality means that every potentiality is in relation not only to a possible actuality, which Agamben in the essay on Bartleby calls will, but more importantly every potentiality is related to its own impotentiality, its own capacity not to become actualized. Impotentiality is the limit of potentiality and the key to understanding human power. “Every human power is *adynamia*, impotentiality...,” and this is “the origin (and the abyss) of every human power, which is so violent and limitless with respect to other living beings.”²⁶

²² Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 179.

²³ *Potentialities*, 180.

²⁴ *Potentialities*, 246-47.

²⁵ *Potentialities*, 182.

²⁶ *Potentialities*, 182.

Impotentiality is the source of limitless human power, but it is also strangely enough the abyss or ruin of this violent power. Impotentiality is related to human freedom, which is power and freedom to accomplish radical good and radical evil based on the abyss of potentiality at the heart of humanity. "To be free is, in the sense we have seen, to be capable of one's own impotentiality, to be in relation to one's own privation."²⁷

Agamben's thought is extremely difficult and subtle here, but I am drawing on his thought to make a distinction between the potentiality for any idea to actualize itself in a powerful way, whether as force or as power, and the impotentiality of that same idea, its power not to actualize itself, but to preserve its relation to privation and non-Being. Privation and non-Being here are only negative in respect to the positive and determinate effects of human power. So to go back to Derrida's terms, potentiality that passes into actuality is related to the thought about or piety directed towards determinate religions, while impotentiality is related to the originary possibility, the resource to think or be pious about religion without religion. Although the idea of potentiality is divided in itself, there are not two separate ideas, just as there are not two different religions in the case of religion without religion. For the third synthesis of power, there is a division between the idea insofar as it has the capacity to become actual as force or wealth, and the idea insofar as it preserves its incapacity to become actual and remain in potentiality. Again, however, there are not two ideas, but this split or division is the uncanny source of all human power.

Derrida's division concerns the scathing of the idea, here related to Agamben's idea of impotentiality. This is interesting in part because one of the two sources of religion specifies the holy or sacred as "unscathed," what is essentially undivided or unmarked in itself. The notion of the unscathed makes up one of the two sources of religion; therefore religion itself is always divided and scathed. In addition, at the level of belief the idea is scathed into originary possibility (impotentiality) and determinate necessity (potentiality-actuality).

Power stems from the idea, both as capacity to will (will to power) and incapacity or impotentiality. Power is directed towards bare life, as the contemporary version of the sacred. Would it be possible to remain at the level of the impotentiality of the idea, and not actualize power in terms of its necessarily violent effects that then create suffering that then demand pious attention? Is it possible to escape this wheel of suffering? Actually, no; that is why it is impotentiality. One cannot think without leaving traces, or effects, or creating karma. But that does not mean that one cannot also think ideas of impotentiality

²⁷ *Potentialities*, 183.

in their most impossible and most powerful sense, such as justice, or God.

Finally, is this contingency of piety and bare life the fundamental contemporary conjunction in power and potentiality of these two experiences, sacrality and belief, that defines what we know as religion? The challenge is to think or create a piety concerning the (im)potentiality of bare life, a power that has the potential to avoid being recapitulated as force or wealth. The paradox is that even if it was possible, it would not have any actual effects. No potentiality, no possibility, no actual thinking, without technology and biopower. Only the shadow of the angel Gabriel's dark left wing of impotentiality that sustains decreation. Agamben quotes a Persian Neoplatonist's imagery in order to suggest that "at this wing's every beating, the actual world is led back to its right not to be; all possible worlds are led back to their right to existence."²⁸ If "Bartleby is a new Messiah, he comes not, like Jesus, to redeem what was, but to save what was not."²⁹ The only salvation for the actual creature is in its being finally irredeemable, its power and freedom exposed as impotence.

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Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory 4.3 (August 2003)

²⁸ Potentialities, 271.

²⁹ Potentialities, 270.