

Book Reviews

AGAMBEN, GIORGIO. *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*. Translated by ADAM KOTSKO. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013. xiii+157 pp. \$17.95 (paper).

The religious turn in cultural and political theory has led to surprising engagements with texts and practices ranging from Pauline epistles to Christian liturgy and prayer. Giorgio Agamben's *The Highest Poverty* follows monastic traditions from early Christianity to Franciscan debates on poverty with a concern to investigate efforts to establish a kind of life that cannot be separated from its form: a "form-of-life" (xi). Agamben's method is to survey primary sources on monastic community rules, and texts about them, to discover how they frame categories such as law, rule, and reading. His purpose, however, is more contemporary and ambitious: "to think a form-of-life, a human life entirely removed from the grasp of the law and a use of bodies and of the world that would never be substantiated into an appropriation" (xiii).

Like much of Agamben's writing, *The Highest Poverty* mixes historical, philosophical, and philological discourse with impressive skill. The author is surely right to suggest that theoretical insights have been too often lost in studies that limit monastic traditions to their original setting. Of course, the resort to the Franciscan tradition as a resource for cultural and political thought has a history of its own, including G. K. Chesterton's *St. Francis of Assisi* (1923; Garden City, NY: Image, 1957) and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). *The Highest Poverty* belongs to Agamben's *Homo Sacer* series (1995–present), a genealogy of Western political and theological sovereignty. This volume follows three others, each of which also focuses on Christian history: *The Kingdom and the Glory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), *The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), and *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), all of which demonstrate how theology intertwines with ethics and politics. Agamben regards the series as cumulative: the present volume on "form-of-life" and monasticism, he suggests, could be written only after *Opus Dei*, which derives duty from a genealogy of liturgy and the category of "office."

The Highest Poverty does not simply describe a religious past obscured by a secular present; instead, it seeks resources in the monastic tradition for contemporary political and economic criticism. Two main models emerge from this analysis: first, the monastic rule as the basis for a "form-of-life" quite different from notions of law, action, or discipline in Roman tradition and, second, the culmination of monastic thinking in the Franciscan rule, whose holistic life of the gospel includes poverty not based on law but united with life itself. This second development faltered, in Agamben's view, because it failed to take account of the first. Debates on poverty in the Franciscan rule turned too quickly to discourses of law and practice and thus missed the opportunity to uphold the category of "form-of-life" (141). The Franciscan dream is largely deferred to apocalyptic discourse, which Agamben finds in select quotations from Peter John Olivi (142–43).

At best, Agamben's book provokes insight through juxtaposition, analogy, and acts of theoretical imagination. Neither purely textual nor purely conceptual, one could describe these moves as a kind of theoretical commentary in the tradition of biblical exegesis. Many such points stimulate new insights that Agamben develops at length, such as the value of Franciscan debates on use and ownership for con-

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temporary discussions of consumerism. Others are mentioned in passing and deserve elaboration—for example, the suggestion that the Reformation affirmed monastic liturgy, with its emphasis on “prayer, reading, and psalmody,” over the “church” liturgy of the Mass and other sacraments (84). Yet sometimes Agamben overreaches by making theoretical suggestions in the form of historical claims—for instance, by suggesting that monastic rules completely reconceived human action “from the level of practice and acting to that of form of life and living” (61). To argue this claim is to inscribe a sharp binary distinction between monastic life and nonmonastic life in a way that overlooks not only many similar examples but also the realities of monastic institutions in their historical contexts.

Agamben’s study belongs to a growing body of theoretical studies of traditional religious practice, and his work takes great pains to engage seriously with premodern texts and contexts. Like others who have made similar attempts—including Michel de Certeau, Pierre Hadot, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Talal Asad—the tension between historical particularity and theoretical reflection is unavoidable. Like Asad’s *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), *The Highest Poverty* rightly sees holism in monastic life. But the category “form-of-life” strains to find a unique home in the monastic tradition: traditional religious life in general resists the kinds of divisions Agamben finds outside the monastery. And the question of how friars and monks relate to their fellow Christians, as experts, exceptions, and elites, deserves much more consideration and comparison with the clerical groups of other religious traditions, beginning with the formative contexts of ancient Israel and Rome.

Agamben’s desire to “think life as that which is never given as property but only as a common use” requires, he admits, a further investigation of the “theory of use,” a task he defers to the last volume of *Homo Sacer* (xiii). A hint of that next study can be found in discussions of “use” and “consumption” in the debates over Franciscan poverty, which provide models of consumerism and ownership in terms of “a use that is never possible to have and an abuse that always implies a right of ownership” (131). With this, *The Highest Poverty* prepares the way for a rich confrontation between Christian tradition and the culture of market economies.

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BEZZANT, RHYS S. *Jonathan Edwards and the Church*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xii+314 pp. \$49.95 (cloth).

Anyone who writes on Jonathan Edwards confronts a difficult task. To make a contribution, a new work must identify a fresh subject, an increasingly illusive discovery in the vast corpus of secondary literature analyzing the life and writings of this important colonial American pastor and theologian. Rhys Bezzant understood this challenge and chose his topic accordingly. He notes that although past scholars have considered Edwards’s doctrine of the church, “no one before now has written a book on [his] ecclesiology” (x). *Jonathan Edwards and the Church* aims to correct this oversight, which appears even more significant given the importance of church order both to Edwards’s ministerial career and to the history of New England Puritanism.

Bezzant argues that over the course of his ministry, Edwards developed an “evangelical ecclesiology” (260). This thesis targets two separate but interrelated audiences that both view evangelicalism as incompatible with a robust doctrine of the church. He cites older historians, like Roland Bainton, who have claimed that Edwards’s “concern for the revivals must have eclipsed any residual concern for the church” (3). Of greater importance, however, are modern-day evangelicals who, Bezzant asserts, look to