

Is it God or the State that Gifts Salvation? Sovereignty in Agamben and Calvin

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Introduction

What is the relationship between the political and the theological? To whom do you grant your hope of salvation? Is it possible to see God and the state as sovereign? An understanding of theological sovereignty can grant a vision of God that is the ultimate giver of gifts, specifically the gift of grace and salvation. John Calvin seeks to articulate this specific understanding. Giorgio Agamben offers a profound reading of the problems of political sovereignty. I will read these two in light of one another to question the ways in which salvation is argued to come from the theological sovereign but is actually gifted by the political sovereignty of the state. The state, in Calvin's articulation, comes to be the granter of salvation, and this is seen in the political life of the United States through the lens of the Asian American Experience. In this essay, I argue that Agamben clarifies the theological sovereignty of Calvin because the logic of state sovereignty ultimately cancels out the theological understanding of divine sovereignty making the state the granter of salvation, not God.

The problem that this essay seeks to answer or at the very least question surrounds the ramifications of political and theological sovereignty for notions of salvation; particularly through grace with Calvin or through the state with Agamben. When questions or theories are just close enough to be contrasted then they offer a place to notice the variety of ramifications for particular concepts, which is why I have placed Agamben, a contemporary social philosopher, and Calvin, a not so contemporary theologian, together on notions of sovereignty. By asking different questions, these two notions of sovereignty can be disentangled to see their promise and peril. In the first section, I point to Calvin's understanding of sovereignty, political and theological, and then look at Agamben's understanding of sovereignty. The first two sections draw out the particularities to ask, "what are the ramifications of such an understanding?" The last section articulates Agamben's corrective to an understanding of salvation through the radically sovereign God that leads to the state being the ultimate giver of salvation and ends with questions concerning the political and social ramifications of such a thought.

Calvin and the Sovereign

Calvin's use of sovereignty is multilayered and complex with outright acts of naming salvation as the gift from God. However, the notions of sovereignty outweigh his vision of the gift. The primary understanding of sovereignty comes from God's governance of the world. Calvin writes, "But as we know that it was chiefly for the sake of mankind that the world was made, we must look to this as the end which God has in view in the government of it."¹ God's

¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion (1559)*, Trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1845), 180-181. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes.pdf> (Accessed 8/8/18)

governance is another way in which Calvin articulates God's sovereignty over the whole of creation. He, then, goes further after a series of Scriptural texts:

Scriptures moreover, the better to show that everything done in the world is according to his decree, declares that the things which seem most fortuitous are subject to him. For what seems more attributable to chance than the branch which falls from a tree, and kills the passing traveler? But the Lord sees very differently, and declares that He delivered him into the hand of the slayer (Exod. 21:13). In like manners who does not attribute the lot to the blindness of Fortune? Not so the Lord, who claims the decision for himself (Prov. 16:33). He says not, that by his power the lot is thrown into the lap, and taken out, but declares that the only thing which could be attributed to chance is from him.

Calvin's theological sovereignty is an understanding of the sovereign that controls every aspect of the life of the kingdom, in this case, the world. For Calvin, if an apple falls and hits you on the head, then God has a hand [*sic*] in it. In 1554 he writes, "For this reason, we must impute to him whatever evil and guilt there is in his works. For he is striving against God in intention, in will, and in deed. But God as he wills, now bends now forces and controls man's evil will and his evil effort; now gives a happy issue and adds strength. But God does all things justly."² The sovereign, God, is the ruler of the universe that controls every aspect of the world. God is deeply involved in everything.

The holiness, the untouchability of the sovereign, is a key emphasis within Calvin. Commenting on the first line of the Lord's Prayer, Calvin writes, "So, when we ask that God's name be hallowed, we must then have no consideration of our own advantage but must set before ourselves his glory, to gaze with eyes intent upon one thing... When his name is allowed as we ask, our own hallowing comes about."³ The human can do nothing to make their lives holy. The human person can do nothing that affects God. The entreating of the sovereign is the hope that through the grace of the Sovereign you will be hallowed.⁴ This is an emphasis on the glory that is recognized by the subjects as they realize that nothing they do can ever hallow what is already hallowed. This vision of the holiness of God is profound as it points to the King who is untouched and does not become less holy through the ways in which the subjects praise or act.

The sovereign body of the king leads to a reflection on Christian freedom and the roles of the magistrate or other governing bodies. The necessity to set up a corollary between the sovereign body of the king/magistrate and the sovereign God leads to ways of viewing justice, both from the divine and the magistrate, that show entities untouched and untroubled by the world. "Yet if we understand that the magistrate in administering punishments does nothing by himself, but carries out the very judgments of God, we shall not be hampered by this scruple."⁵ This is a vision of the world where there are two kingdoms, one of the world and one of the heavens, in which the magistrate runs the world yet is still under the supreme authority of the Sovereign God. There is, in this understanding, a sovereignty attached to being the magistrate and wielding the judgment and justice of God. The divine sovereign, the uber-

² John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* (1554) Trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 46.

³ *Ibid.* 75.

⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* (1554), 75.

⁵ Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* (1554) 212.

sovereign/magistrate, is still the one that holds the power. The acts of the magistrate still fall under the realm of divine justice.

Ultimately, Calvin's vision of sovereignty undermines his vision of grace as a gift, which is not easy to get to even through a detailed reading of his text. In the 1536 Edition of the *Institutes* Calvin writes, "This knowledge of ourselves and of our poverty and ruin teaches us to humble ourselves and cast ourselves before God and seek his mercy."⁶ Even though the term sovereign is not here, the text is saturated with an understanding of power that is entirely hierarchical and the human has no capacity to do anything; neither good works nor turn toward God. Does this not resist market-based transactions since God is the total giver and the human the receiver? Yes and no. Yes, because it is God who gives all the good gifts to those who are loved.

And no, because as Calvin writes, "We are not inviting men to sin when we affirm the free forgiveness of sins, but we are saying that it is of such great *value* that it cannot be paid for by any goods of ours. Therefore, it can never be obtained except as a free gift. Now for us indeed it is free, but not so for Christ, who dearly *bought* it at the *cost* of his most sacred blood, beyond which there was no *ransom* worth to satisfy God's justice."⁷ Notice, how quickly once the cross is brought into the conversation around sovereignty that the language of the transaction becomes the normative manner to speak. In Calvin, the very capacity to give a free gift must be paid for so even as a gift it is purchased. The cross, even unspoken here, must function as part of a transaction to appease one party for another. The image of the Sovereign who gifts freely must, first, be given what is desired. The gift is not free, nor will it ever be.

What I have sought to highlight here is the tension that comes from an extreme vision of divine sovereignty and its ramifications for political sovereignty. Calvin struggled with the relationship between the divine gift of salvation, divine control in the world, and the political necessity of magisterial sovereignty in the city-state. The problem intensifies as the clarity diminishes between who truly gives salvation. Is it the earthly gift of the State? Is it truly the Divine? Does the logic hold up if, as Calvin argues, that God is so intimately in control that everything that occurs comes from the Divine even through the State? It is here the logic of this vision of sovereignty breaks down and becomes troubling.

Agamben, Sovereignty, and the Deeper Problem

Giorgio Agamben traces the notion of sovereignty specifically as it related to political power. Unlike Calvin, it seems, Agamben is not interested in notions of salvation and yet what is essential is the role of life. Eric Daryl Meyer explains the distinction between *zoe* (bare life) and *bios* (A way of life, a politically ordered way) in Agamben, which is necessary to his understanding of sovereignty. "The goal of political life (*bios*) in the city is to prove a setting where the bare life (*zoe*) of eating, sleeping, breathing, and procreation *may be arranged* for deeper flourishing. Bare life (*zoe*) is dissolute, concerned only with basic material urges: it must be ordered, organized to attain the good life with its higher goods- justice, friendship, and true happiness."⁸ Sacred life is always connected to its capacity to be arranged or conditioned or measured by the political sovereign. Agamben writes, "What is decisive, however, is that from

⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* (1554), 18.

⁷ Ibid, 39. Emphasis mine.

⁸ Eric Daryl Meyer, "Giorgio Agamben and The Gospel of John" in *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology* Stephen D. Moore, Ed. (New York, NY: Fordham, 2014), 152.

the beginning this sacred life has an eminently political character on which sovereign power is founded.”⁹ There is even the question of the *zoe* being arranged, not only by, but ultimately for, the sovereign. The sovereign's necessity to order through the political is only desired, ultimately, for the sovereign's own life. The reality is that the sacred life is finally and only the sovereign's own life.

The sovereign power's right to life is exemplified by this capacity to order even the other's life for the sovereign's own ends. Meyers writes, “In keeping with Agamben's analysis, sovereign power retains the capacity to strip a human being of his or her place in humanity so that someone is perceived formally as a human but treated morally and politically ‘like an animal.’”¹⁰ What Meyers sees as central is the idea of the absolute and unquestionable power of the sovereign. The sovereign has the right to strip the human of the capacity to be seen as a human. The sovereign has the right, by its nature, to assist the *zoe* through the *bios* toward a life of love and friendship. It is also in the right of the sovereign to end that teleological ordering in the name of the sovereign or because of an offense against the sovereign. It is this place and space that Agamben analyzes the death camp as the absolute place of exception over and against the asylum in *Madness and Civilization* and the prison in *Discipline and Punish*.¹¹ The right to control life through the sovereign gesture is, for Agamben, the death camps of the totalitarian regimes. “The totalitarianism of our century has its ground in this dynamic identity of life and politics, without which it remains incomprehensible.”¹² At the extreme end of sovereignty sits this vision of totalitarianism. The sovereign ordering through the political is the only way power manifests for the sovereign. Agamben is drawing a keen awareness of the ravages that sovereign power, especially the totalitarian regimes of Europe in the early 1900's, can operate on the eradication of the body of the other.

Differences and Repetitions: Salvation and Life

By digging deeper into notions of sovereignty, I hope to articulate a way to hold on to notions of the sovereignty of God, if you would like, particularly as they relate to the giftedness of salvation. If you desire to hold to a vision of divine sovereignty, then can you? Can you see God as the sovereign ruler of the universe without falling into this very trap?

An essential move that elaborates on Calvin's vision of God and the person killed by the apple is Agamben's emphasis on the paradox of sovereignty. The sovereign is at once inside the system of life and outside of it. The sovereign is ordered by the system of laws and government yet is essentially outside of it when it suits the sovereign.¹³ This is important for understanding the nature of these two different visions of sovereignty that have serious overlaps. Both authors, see the sovereign as essentially related to the ordering of the *zoe* (sacred life) through the *bios* (political life). Agamben sees it as necessary to emphasize a vision of the political sovereign that is clearly articulated as living in these two spaces of inside and outside.¹⁴ The sovereign's needs

⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 100.

¹⁰ Meyers, *Giorgio Agamben and the Gospel of John*, 155.

¹¹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 20 and 166-88. Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1965); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1977).

¹² *Ibid.* 148.

¹³ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 15.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 21.

come over the rule of the law. The necessity for suspension comes whenever the sovereign needs it to be suspended. The capacity for the sovereign to suspend the rule of law is fundamentally problematic. Calvin's logic becomes staunchly set as the magistrate must be sovereign because God is sovereign. The human can do nothing under these acts of divine sovereignty.

A potential corrective would come from Calvin with his idea of *duplex gratia* or "activating presence." J. Todd Billings argues this against John Milbank's theology of gift noting that, for Calvin, the justification and sanctification resist the criticisms of Milbank of the 'negative anthropology'¹⁵ and 'passivity'¹⁶ of the Reformers. It is not the passivity or the negative anthropology that I find to be troubling as it comes to Calvin's theology of grace but the sovereignty that resists any sort of theology of grace. Billings is right to emphasize that, for Calvin, the human is never *simply* passive in the grace of the reformers. For Calvin, passivity is resisted because you receive grace and your life is to live into a "vivification by the Spirit to grow in love and holiness."¹⁷ The gifted nature of the "activating reception" is suggestive for a powerful move toward reimagining the problems within Calvin's vision of divine sovereignty and activity of the human. It does not, however, ultimately disentangle the troubling issues within the *Institutes* concerning the human person. The human person can respond to the outpouring of grace, but only if the apple has not fallen from the tree or the state does not will the execution.¹⁸

The critique of sovereignty made by Agamben points to a radically renewed vision of engagement with the political order. Calvin explains that the magistrate *must* be sovereign in order for the continued order of the world to be shown. That is, in order for it to clearly be shown that the Divine is sovereign then the magistrate *must* be sovereign. Not only does the Divine's sovereignty involve a necessary correlation to the human world, which ultimately undermines any sense of sovereignty, but the political ramifications become a nightmare. How do you distinguish the unjust acts of sovereignty from the just? The human under the sovereign system does not but must wait to see the divine ordering.¹⁹ The extreme visions of sovereignty are problematic in light of Calvin's articulation of sovereignty. The totalitarian regimes that claim to gift salvation to their homelands would ultimately fail to name God as the granter of grace, which for Calvin is idolatry. If salvation is a gift from the sovereign, then state sovereignty willed and ordered by the divine sovereign is the primary granter of salvation and not the Divine. The gift of grace comes from the primary granter of the sovereign state even if it is willed by the Divine.

In the end, I am interested in the way this spells out in contemporary life. Who grants salvation? Who gifts salvation? As I sit in the Bay Area of California and think of contemporary issues on sovereignty, my mind is drawn to Angel Island, which housed both an Immigration Center and an Internment Camp during World War I.²⁰ The sovereign state, in the acts of internment, wrought salvation through the sovereign need to protect the sovereign's body. Salvation was granted through exclusion. Who gifts salvation? In contemporary political

¹⁵ J. Todd Billings, "John Milbank's Theology of the "gift" and Calvin's Theology of Grace" *Modern Theology* 21.1 (2005): 93-4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 91-2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 91.

¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* (1559), 180-181.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes* (1554), 46.

²⁰ Angel Island Immigrant Station, "Angel Island History" <https://www.aiisf.org/history/>, (accessed October 24, 2018)

discourse, there are clear places to that point to where the dangers of not articulating this assumption about sovereignty are clearly articulated. The unassailable fact of the sovereignty of God and the state in some contemporary evangelical discourses, particularly Robert Jefferies, Franklin Graham, or Jeff Sessions, should remind us to continue to question this relationship. The politics of sovereignty must continue to be questioned in light of internment camps and contemporary acts of locking up persons of color and immigrants. The internment camps and immigration centers remind those thinking theologically to question what it means to articulate sovereignty. Specifically, it troubles any capacity to connect the sovereignty of God with the sovereignty of the state. The question, “who gifts salvation?,” gives space to articulate moments to question these forms of political discourse. It is a reminder of the consequences of theological doctrines and the necessity to be explicit about the doctrines and their ramifications.

Conclusion

My interest in using Agamben and Calvin comes from a suspicion that the relationship between political sovereignty and theological sovereignty are not too far from one another. I have argued that Calvin’s understanding of the *must* of his political sovereignty of the magistrate overcomes his theological emphasis upon the divine sovereign. It is not enough, as Billingsley has suggested, saying that theological sovereignty gifts the human person with the capacity to respond through grace. What is needed is a subtle corrective to the potential for sovereignty in the political sphere at all. Is this an anachronistic critique on Calvin? Perhaps. What is more important is the anxiety underneath the logic of political sovereignty to have the state be the ultimate guarantee of salvation, even if never stated.