

Chapter 2

Agamben, Girard and the Life that Does Not Live

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'Life does not live', the epigram deployed by Theodor Adorno at the start of *Minima Moralia*, embodied Adorno's conviction that life could not flourish at a time when production superseded it in importance.¹ In the dedication to this very work, Adorno observes caustically: 'Our perspective of life has passed into an ideology which conceals the fact that there is life no longer'.² The *Minima Moralia* reflect on the fallout of this ideology in the bourgeois-created, consumer-led Western societies of the mid-twentieth century. Undoubtedly, his other source of pessimism in this work can be located in the long shadow of the concentration camp, the gloom of which had reached Adorno in his US exile during World War II: 'The subject still feels sure of its autonomy, but the nullity demonstrated to subjects by the concentration camp is already overtaking the form of subjectivity itself'.³ Paradoxically, as if the subject's autonomy were always dependent on social recognition, this collapse of subjectivity resulted from the impact which total exclusion from the community had had on the individual within the paradigm of the camp. Indeed, what could be more isolating, and thereby more destructive for the individual, than to be thrust beyond the realms of recognized humanity, subject to unbridled violence, and exiled to the darkness outside human and divine law where Giorgio Agamben will locate his *homo sacer*?

It is right to elect major cultural commentators like Adorno as our interlocutors, as we seek to try to understand ourselves, our history and our very own life. However bad the concentration camps were, nevertheless, the pre-Holocaust world itself was far from Edenic. Without wishing to mobilize the Holocaust for any cause whatsoever, one cannot help drawing correlations between the isolation and death which it so emblematically represents to Adorno's mind and to ours, and the forms of isolation, dislocation and death – beyond the alienating effects of overproduction lamented by Adorno – experienced by many Western people

¹ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005 [1951]), p. 19. The epigram is in fact a quotation from Ferdinand Kürnberger, an obscure Viennese writer whose only previous claim to fame was to have been cited by Wittgenstein at the opening of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.

² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

within the fifty years that preceded and coincided with it. Applying Adorno's concern with life to their case, we could ask how life might live for those who, like the Surrealists and the Dadaists, embraced Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God and turned increasingly towards the realms of absurdity, expressing the isolation of the thinking mind from Christian, deist or even rationalist teleologies. How might life live for those who endured the daily horror of trench warfare and witnessed first-hand the transformation of northern France and the Low Countries into the greatest open charnel house until that time? How might life live also, for those who, confronted with such isolation, dislocation and death, were turning away from the Enlightenment's unfulfilled promises of progress and asking, with T.S. Eliot in *Choruses from The Rock*, 'Where is the Life we have lost in living?'⁴ Eliot's rhetorical question suggests that the life 'that does not live' has in fact been disguised by a simulacrum of life which has obscured true life in a flurry of inauthentic activity. More significantly, however, it also implies that the recovery of that lost life is not as remote a possibility as Adorno's judgement seems to assume.

Unquestionably, therefore, Adorno's anxieties about a life ruined by production and devastated by the disintegration of subjectivity find many correlations within modernity. The problem this chapter faces, however, is that to search for an answer to Adorno's question about life while ignoring the problem of life as posed by Eliot in 1934 – that some kinds of living are the enemies of an authentic life – promises a counsel merely for survival. Moreover, the problem of life necessarily raises the problem of the subject: who lives? Is it in fact life that lives, or do life and the problems associated with it not inevitably raise again the possibility of the divine subject who in the Christian tradition claims to be *Life* itself?

In order to elaborate answers to such questions, this chapter will first consider the subject and the matter of life as embodied by Giorgio Agamben's *homo sacer*, a figure embedded in the experience of the Holocaust and emblematic also of the emergence of biopolitics as announced by Michel Foucault. Agamben's view of the subject of life is written into his analysis of how the very existence of sovereignty is founded on the power to exclude that subject, the *homo sacer*. His proposition for the matter of life, on the other hand, is contained in his critique of how the Western tradition of political thought has divided what he will call *bios* from *zoe*, a distinction which stands in need of rigorous questioning.

A ready foil for this analysis of Agamben is found in the work of René Girard. Girard's work has been contrasted several times with Agamben's in recent scholarship but not yet in ways that address this key question of life. While Colby Dickinson has analysed the correlations between Agamben and Girard on the topic of mimesis, and Christopher A. Fox has considered the ways in which these two major critics have distinguished and differentiated politics and religion, Frederiek Depoortere has cast doubts over the solidity of Agamben's analysis of *homo sacer* and turns to Girard's reading of the figure of the scapegoat as a means of clarifying

⁴ T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 140.

the difficulties posed by Agamben.⁵ By analysing still further the terrain which separates Agamben from Girard, this chapter will seek to reassess what exactly Agamben and Girard propose as the life that can live, and what the divergences between their findings signify.

Agamben's Bare Life

For Agamben, there is no sense in which the subject of political life, the 'who' of living, is anything else than the anthropic agent or agents; this is true, even though part of Agamben's philosophical work has been to dismantle what he calls the anthropological machinery which has historically sought to conceptualize humanity ontologically, rather than as a cultural construct.⁶ Whatever *ἄνθρωπος* ultimately means, the anthropic agent, whom Agamben will come to reinterpret from the perspective of the *homo sacer*, remains for Agamben the central figure of political life in the contemporary period with all its biopolitical possibilities. There are no other knowing agents who can contribute to this project for life.

Agamben's concern in his *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* is to unpack and develop the notion of biopolitics first broached by Michel Foucault in his history of sexuality and developed further in later writings and lectures. For Foucault, the threshold of biological modernity, signalled by the themacity of sexuality which arose during the Enlightenment, was also marked by a sea change which saw the simple living body becoming central to the state's political strategies. As Foucault argued in his 1978–79 lectures at the *Collège de France*, biopolitics emerged in the eighteenth century as governments began 'to rationalise the problems posed ... by phenomena characteristic of a set of living beings forming a population: health, hygiene, birth rate, life expectancy, race'.⁷ Capitalism itself, claims Foucault, was in part rendered possible by the kinds of discipline which biopolitical control made possible.

For Agamben, the impact of this biopolitical shift on the cultural episteme – the cluster of relations between discourses which express a culture's self-understanding – 'constitutes the decisive event of modernity' and colours all strands of modern

⁵ Frederiek Depoortere, 'Reading Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer* with René Girard', *Philosophy Today* (2011): 108–17; Colby Dickinson, 'Beyond Violence, Beyond the Text: The Role of Gesture in Walter Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben, and its Affinity with the Work of René Girard', *Heythrop Journal*, 52 (2011): 952–61; Christopher A. Fox, 'Sacrificial Past and Messianic Futures: Religion as a Political Prospect in René Girard and Giorgio Agamben', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 33/5 (2007): 563–95.

⁶ See, for example, Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004 [2002]).

⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, Michel Sennellart (ed.), trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008 [2004]), p. 315.

politics, even the most extreme, with all the enigmas that they pose for life itself.⁸ Yet, far from being content with this conceptualization of biopolitics as a uniquely modern phenomenon, Agamben discovers a foreshadowing of biopoliticization in two instances of classical thought and culture, both of which cast light on the perennial political problem of the state of exception, especially because of the processes to which they subject life itself. Life and its differentiation from death have always been a central consideration of how sovereignty is constituted, but the foregrounding of biological life under the conditions of biopolitics allows Agamben to pose the question of sovereignty again in a different light.

Accordingly, Agamben notes that the Greeks originally used two words for life: *zoe* and *bios*. *Zoe* denotes just life in general or bare life, as Agamben comes to call it; *bios*, on the other hand, is a particular kind of life, perfected individually by virtue and socially by politics. The entire Western tradition of politics which has incorporated bare life into the city through individual or political virtue has, Agamben argues, achieved this inclusion paradoxically through an act of exclusion. Bare life, or *zoe*, is included or co-opted into the political domain because of its potential to supply the raw lifeline of a particular *bios*, but excluded by the same token because it does not remain itself.⁹

The importance of this initially linguistic distinction of *zoe* and *bios* does not appear clear until we consider the second adumbration of biopolitics which Agamben detects in classical culture: the figure of the *homo sacer*. In the writings of Pompeius Festus, a grammarian and etymologist of the second century AD, the *homo sacer* is defined as

the one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide; in the first tribunitian law, in fact, it is noted that 'if someone kills the one who is sacred according to the plebiscite, it will not be considered homicide'. This is why it is customary for a bad or impure man to be called sacred.¹⁰

The use of the word 'sacred' in the context of purity and impurity requires contextualization. In its original meaning, 'sacred' denotes in fact that which is set aside or reserved for use in relation to worship. Such an action, however, exposes the sacred object to interpretation through the categories of cleanness and uncleanness. The ambivalence of the sacred, thus conceived, appears in the work of numerous early anthropologists, notably William Robertson Smith and Emile Durkheim. Now, while the concept of taboo is often used to manage this ambivalence, Agamben rejects this as a way of explaining the phenomenon of the *homo sacer*. Instead, he argues that *homo sacer* was a category which emerged when

⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998 [1995]), p. 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 9 and 11.

¹⁰ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 71.

sovereign power posed an act that was self-constituting by placing an individual beyond human and divine law. The *homo sacer* is beyond human law because his homicide is unpunishable; it would not be unfaithful to Agamben's thought to say that the homicide of the *homo sacer* is in fact literally an act of pesticide. Yet *homo sacer* is also beyond divine law, argues Agamben, because he cannot become the victim of a sacrifice; the paradox being that the *homo sacer* represents a sacredness which is antithetical to the domain of the gods. Agamben concludes that the *homo sacer* thus lies beyond the sacred and the profane, the province of divine law and the province of human law, and that this exclusion, ordained by sovereign power in a self-constituting act, produces or reveals the bare life or *zoe* that it co-opts. The *homo sacer* thus models the excluded life which Agamben claims emerges from the *zoe-bios* distinction. Together, they render more explicit the production of bare life which, Agamben argues, is at the heart of biopolitics.¹¹

Critical welcome for this theory in relation to life, death and sovereignty has been significant and has crossed disciplinary boundaries.¹² On the other hand, the sternest critique of Agamben's analysis questions his understanding of the primary sources. In Frederiek Depoortere's 2011 article on *homo sacer*, he argues that Agamben's argument fails to account fully for the fact that in the original Latin sources the *homo sacer* is one who has committed a heinous crime. Agamben's claim is that such crimes constitute 'the originary exception in which human life is included in the political order in being exposed to an unlimited capacity to be killed'.¹³ Depoortere's response is that Agamben provides no substantial proof of this; in his view, 'it seems more accurate to accept what the sources explicitly say and to consider *sacratio* [that is the condition of the *homo sacer*] to be the punishment for a number of severe crimes, crimes that ... affect the foundational relationships of Roman society'.¹⁴ However life is included in the political order, therefore, it is not through the mechanism that Agamben has wrongly attributed to the figure of the *homo sacer*, at least in Depoortere's analysis of the primaries.

Depoortere's objection is not the only one which can be made against Agamben's analysis and his characterization of the Western political tradition as perennially biopolitical. Even if we accepted Agamben's analysis of *homo sacer* as a figure of Roman culture, why should we also accept that the theological or jurisprudential postulates of Roman society have the same effects as those of Christianity which was a dominant influence on the tradition of Western politics and whose grand projects have included the recovery of the excluded and the exaltation of the humbled? In fact, the entire tradition of sanctuary laws, not only in their Christian forms but even in their Roman forerunners, seems to offer a refutation of Agamben's reading of *homo sacer*. While sanctuary law is thought by

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 71–4.

¹² See, for example, Andrew Norris (ed.), *Politics, Metaphysics and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

¹³ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 85.

¹⁴ Depoortere, 'Reading Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer*', p. 111.

some to have achieved its apogee precisely in the absence of properly constituted sovereign power, other readings of the sources find sanctuary, and the attendant practices of *intercessio*, clemency and pardon, to be deeply inscribed in Greek, Roman and Christian legal traditions which are at the same time predicated on clear conceptualizations of sovereign power.¹⁵ Given the thousand years of jurisprudential history in which sanctuary legislation was implemented widely across Europe, the idea that sovereign power generally constitutes itself through some self-constituting act of excluding the *homo sacer* is entirely moot.¹⁶

Another objection to Agamben's arguments can be formulated as follows. Agamben's treatment of the distinction of *zoe* and *bios* posits that *zoe* is excluded by *bios*, yet this proposition seems to obfuscate rather than clarify the relationship. *Bios* proposes not only to include but to perfect *zoe*, the biological resources of which far from exhaust human potential; indeed the idea that *bios* excludes *zoe* fails to account for all the benefits which *bios*, as a chosen form of life, can bring to *zoe* or bare life. In the case of ancient Greece, for example, from the language of which Agamben draws the distinction, the *bios* represented by medical science and culture is the very antithesis of a supposed exclusion of natural or pure bodily *zoe*. Rather than excluding *zoe*, Greek medical culture (or we might say a life perfected by medical *bios*) '[lifted] men up from the bestial level', according to Helen King.¹⁷ Moreover, while the sharp distinction of *zoe* and *bios* clearly serves Agamben's argument about sovereign power, at the same time it leads Agamben into creating a simplistic dichotomy which sits uneasily with the intertwining narratives of *zoe* and *bios* that shape Greek conceptualizations of the body and of the relationship of physicality to the human.¹⁸ Thus, a conceptualization of life as divided between *zoe* and *bios*, the latter being differentiated by the exclusion of the former, is by no means assured.

Yet if Agamben's analysis of biopolitics does not provide an answer to Adorno's question about life in terms of political science, it at least provides an observational and situational one: life is 'this' in the period of biopolitics. More crucially, the airbrushing of Christian legal tradition from his analysis of the constitutive elements of sovereignty suggests that the *kind of life* which Agamben observes in the *zoe-bios* distinction, and in his reading of *homo sacer*, is essentially, exclusively and deliberately intra-anthropoc – intra-anthropoc because estranged from the vistas

¹⁵ Karl Shoemaker, *Crime and Sanctuary in the Middle Ages 500–1400* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

¹⁶ Even after consultation with Colby Dickinson, Andrew Norris and Leland de la Durantaye, all leading Agamben scholars, this author could find no trace of Agamben ever having engaged with the tradition of sanctuary law.

¹⁷ Helen King, 'The Origins of Medicine in the Second Century AD', in Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne (eds), *Rethinking Revolutions Through Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 262.

¹⁸ Brooke Holmes, *The Symptom and the Subject: The Emergence of the Physical Body in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

which theological conceptualizations of the human subject appeal to. In placing the state of exception in the context of biopolitics, Agamben has thus succeeded in giving an account of sovereign power divorced from the kind of theological moderation which sanctuary practices exemplify. Now, while it is unsustainable in a European context to airbrush Christian legal tradition from a plenary history of how sovereignty is constituted, it is also undeniable that there has been an erosion of the influence of Christian legal dispositions over the public square since the early modern period. In other words, the secularization of legislative provision in European culture has in many ways run parallel to the turn towards biopolitics.

At this point in the argument, the question, thereby, naturally arises: if in the contemporary period of biopolitics the reduction of the human to the bodily is what fascist and liberal democratic societies share in common (as Agamben argues), might their own intra-anthropocentric limits be the reason why the former could wreak such outward destruction on life, after the other has felt such inward destruction (as Adorno and Eliot observed)? How indeed might life live if it is locked within the limits which biopoliticization places *de facto* on human life, whether by liberal democratic society or by fascist dictatorship? In this light, the conclusion of Agamben's study of *homo sacer* in which he evokes a variety of nameless terrains and biopolitical cases to generate the ways and forms of a new biopolitics appears fruitless.¹⁹ Biopolitical life, even when purged of what Agamben considers to be the toxic exclusion of *zoe*, remains exclusively intra-anthropocentric because the biopolitical space is circumscribed by the action of human agents alone. Moreover, looking for a form of life whose *bios* is only its own *zoe*, as Agamben endeavours to do, suggests the possibility of dispensing with inclusion and exclusion without at the same time accounting for the purpose that is fulfilled by these actions. For if we regard *zoe* or bare life only as the result of an act of exclusion, we have surely forgotten that all choices, regardless of their objects, involve the exclusion of alternatives and of stasis. If, after all, every choice could be invalidated simply because it necessarily involved the exclusion of something else, we would arrive at a *reductio ad absurdum* in which no political choice (let alone any other choice) is possible at all.

Forms of Bare Life in the Anthropology of René Girard?

In Girardian mimetic theory, what accounts for the existence of sovereign power and all social institutions is not any act of inclusion or exclusion but the need to control the effects of imitative behaviour between individuals. All life within the category of human culture is, according to Girard, made up of the patterns which emerge from the dangerous playing out of mimetically learnt desire in the social arena.

Unlike Agamben, whose analysis of bare life is an attempt to reveal a third domain which is neither sacred nor profane, Girard first frames the profane and

¹⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 187.

the sacred as the spaces in which mimetic pressures respectively unfold and are relieved, before discovering in Christianity a *tertium quid* which offers a real encounter with a life which is divine but not sacred in the sense that Girard lends to the word. By way of furthering our study of the 'life [that] does not live', we will consider here the Girardian profane and sacred and their points of tension with Agamben's analysis, and in the next section we will turn our attention to the third possibility for life, as set out by Girard in what is arguably his most important work, *Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*.

Girard's fullest account of mimetic desire actually appears in his first work, *Le Mensonge romantique et la Vérité Romanesque*.²⁰ In the first section of *Des Choses cachées*, however, he retraces some of the key steps which characterize his reflections on this area. Girard's profane occupies the arena of mimetic desire as yet uninhibited by taboo, myth, ritual or scapegoating. Therein, Girard argues, all subjective desire emerges from the imitation of the desires of others. Subjects initiate the generation of desire by observing the possession of some good by a third person (the model) and by calibrating their own desires against the measure provided by this model.²¹ The collision of wills which this imitation gives rise to is what Girard classes as mimetic rivalry, a pathology which usually escalates into a condition of violence, leading eventually to the mimetic crisis wherein the subject and model become monstrous doubles of each other, contending first over the good desired, before finally their rivalry itself becomes the theme of their relations. For Girard, the characterization of desire as imitative served initially as a literary theory; it explained for him how certain writers, notably Stendhal, Flaubert and Dostoyevsky in the nineteenth century, had challenged the Romantic view of desire as auto-generative. The development of his theory of desire and its links to violence came about through further explorations which Girard conducted in classical mythology, as his work took a cultural and anthropological turn in his later study *La Violence et le Sacré*.²²

Clearly, there are objections that could be made to this account of desire – not least because of the perpetual chain of desire and imitation that it requires – and to Girard's claim that these processes point the way towards the origins of all cultural institutions. We shall return to the Girardian account of the origins of institutions below. Nevertheless, if we consider mimesis in relation to the question of life, as it arises in Agamben's analysis of biopolitics, we might say that mimesis is Girard's fundamentally intra-anthropoc principle since it posits the notion that desire arises from contact with the desires of other human agents. As Colby Dickinson has observed, there are some correlations here between Agamben and Girard, especially given Agamben's reading of Walter Benjamin's analysis of mimesis,

²⁰ René Girard, *Le Mensonge romantique et la Vérité Romanesque* (Paris: Grasset, 1961).

²¹ René Girard, *Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (Paris: Grasset, 2004 [1978]), p. 18.

²² René Girard, *La Violence et le Sacré* (Paris: Grasset, 1972).

language and violence. In developing his reflections on the consequences of the act of exclusion, notably in relation to how humanity is differentiated from animality, Agamben has even tried to associate the state in which the *homo sacer* lives with a state where mimesis has not yet entered in. As *zoe* or bare life precedes *bios* and its attendant vices, so for Agamben gesture could precede mimesis and the *bios* to which it leads. The importance of pre-mimetic gesture, as Agamben sees it, is that it 'breaks with the false alternative between ends and means that paralyzes morality and presents instead means that, as such, evade the orbit of mediality without becoming, for that reason, ends'.²³ In this condition, as Dickinson sums it up, 'not only are we capable of living without a sovereign politics, enslaved to our mimetic heritage, we are, if we embrace it, capable of living in a realm of pure gesture beyond language as we have known it'.²⁴

In attributing such power to gesture, however, Agamben is only trying to escape the problems which he believes mimesis triggers: the forms of exclusion which produce sovereign power and the differentiation of humanity from animality. And yet, in what would such gesture consist if mimesis were not involved? Since the communication which gesture evokes would necessitate the sharing (and therefore the mimetic passage) of signs without which there could be no mutuality, Agamben's vision of the role that gesture might play in a purified condition of biopolitics risks again suffering a *reductio ad absurdum*. More to the point, from a Girardian perspective, the evasion of mimesis would require the resurrection of the *mensonge romantique* or the Romantic lie whose claims to originality are based on a veiling of the role of imitation in the generation of culture. Nevertheless, in linking mimesis and political or social structures as sources of coercion, Agamben perhaps unwittingly echoes the passage which Girard sees between profane mimesis and its sacred solutions. If bare life or *zoe*, the life prior to *bios*, might in Girardian terms be labelled as the life of unorganized mimesis, in which the processes of desire and imitation are unchecked and free to run wild, then *bios* can be associated with the way in which, according to Girard, mimetic desires have historically been brought to order within some sacred framework.

At the climax of the Girardian profane, the point at which the mimetic rivalry and the violence it engenders risk destroying all who stand in their path, Girard detects mechanisms – including sacred royalty, animal domestication and ritual hunting, sexual taboos and funerals²⁵ – which, he is convinced, are scattered across all cultures in various ways and guises. These sacred rites or institutions restore order by confronting and evacuating the dangers posed by the profane realm of imitative desire and its attendant violence. Moreover, in Girard's schema these manifestations of the sacred are all in one way or another ruled by the process of scapegoating in which an individual becomes the object of the common aggression

²³ Giorgio Agamben, *Means without Ends: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000 [1996]), p. 57.

²⁴ Dickinson, 'Beyond Violence, Beyond the Text', p. 957.

²⁵ Girard, *Des Choses cachées*, pp. 68–113.

of a community, hitherto divided by unpurged mimetic conflict and subsequently restored to peace and cohesion through the effects of the persecution of the scapegoat. To crown it all, this entire domain of the Girardian sacred is sustained by the emergence of myths that conceal from the community the acts of violence which ensure the community's cohesion. The dilemma that the Girardian sacred thus poses for life is that, like the Girardian profane, it evokes violence; one of the reasons why *La Violence et le Sacré* upon its publication was hailed by some as an atheistic text was that it seemed to give expression to the oft-repeated complaint against religion that it is the cause of war or conflict. Unlike the Girardian profane, however, the Girardian sacred seeks to displace violence through ritual canalization and to conceal it and its purgation through the generation of myth.

Now, Girard's scapegoat undoubtedly bears some resemblance to Agamben's *homo sacer* with regard to his exclusion from the community. Moreover, while Girard describes the erection of sacred institutions as the result of trying to control mimetic violence, he is by no means saying that they offer an authentic form of life, any more than Agamben is content with the act which he believes founds sovereignty by excluding *homo sacer*. In this respect alone Agamben and Girard might agree.

Nevertheless, there is another subtle difference between them even here. By the very process of bearing the burdens of the community's violence, the Girardian scapegoat, unlike Agamben's *homo sacer*, becomes something unholy and holy; unholy or *sacer* because it is the target of the pent-up aggression of the community in mimetic crisis, and holy or *sanctus* because its death or exclusion is associated by the community with a return of harmony and the re-establishment of unity. In this light, Christopher Fox's attempt to establish correlations between Agamben and Girard rather oversteps the mark for the sake of synthesis, and in other ways misses Agamben's intentions.²⁶ True, as we have noted, Girard's scapegoat seems to represent an excluded life like the *homo sacer*. Claiming, however, as Fox does, that both Girard and Agamben turn to religion in the search for tools to deconstruct the indissoluble dichotomy of friend-enemy (as defined by Carl Schmitt) fails to highlight sufficiently Agamben's secularist agenda. This agenda is most clearly inscribed in the annexation of Pauline messianism which Agamben undertakes in *The Time that Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* and in which he seeks to create a kind of temporal axis along which bare life and biopolitics can find their chronological coordinates.²⁷ The time that remains for Paul before the *eschaton* and the second coming of Christ is mobilized by Agamben as a way of describing an excluded moment. This is expressed by Paul in the Greek *hos me*, but Agamben understands it not as a gaze towards some future destiny (with its supposed indifference to the present) but as a time of indistinction, the chronological analogue of the indistinct space in which *homo sacer* dwells.

²⁶ Fox, 'Sacrificial Past and Messianic Futures', p. 586.

²⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005 [2000]).

Fox's conclusion that this argument represents a use of religion – rather than a *détournement* which is aimed specifically at bringing under secular control the 'hunchback dwarf' of theology whose doctrines (says Agamben, echoing Walter Benjamin) act like puppet strings on materialist thought²⁸ – is itself intra-anthropocentric in its assumptions since it appears not to interrogate fully the uses to which religion is being put. Fox acknowledges that Agamben and Girard both challenge Schmitt's reading of the friend–enemy division as the basis for political life, but claims that while Agamben, 'disrupts the binary categories that underlie politics and ideology',²⁹ Girard only restores that binary division as an unconscious coda to his theories. Yet the truth of the matter is almost the exact contrary: Girard does indeed break the binary division of friend–enemy not through the creation of some indeterminate state of pre-mimetic gesture wherein such rivalry is supposedly overcome, but rather by introducing a third agent, the divine life, as a factor within the constitution of human community.

Life as Human Life plus Divine Life

Girard's singularity as an anthropologist in the contemporary period is that not only is he averse to the deconstruction of the human – the dismantling of the 'anthropological machine', as Agamben calls it³⁰ – he is also quite prepared to undermine the idea that the social and physical sciences can offer no insight into matters spiritual. It is not that Girard thinks Christianity is a religion whose faith is rationally demonstrable; rather, he sees himself as an enemy of that kind of social science according to which 'if an argument is favourable to Christianity, no matter its lack of importance or its justifications, it cannot be scientific'.³¹ Girard, in other words, is open to the possibility that anthropological science can point to a kind of life for humanity which is not purely and exclusively intra-anthropocentric.

Girard has written several works in recent years about God, Christianity and culture, notably *Dieu existe-t-il?* and *Christianisme et modernité* (2009) with Gianni Vattimo. It was *Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*, however, which established the *grandes lignes* of his thinking about Christianity. In the biblical accounts of Cain and Abel, in the persecution of Joseph by his brothers and, ultimately, in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, acts of mimetic violence or apparent scapegoating unfold. The violence they contain, however, is not disguised but condemned, and in the case of Joseph and Jesus, the conflict is solved through an act of self-renunciation and forgiveness obviating the processes of revenge and retaliation inscribed in the mimetic conflict. Instead

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 138–9.

²⁹ Fox, 'Sacrificial Past and Messianic Futures', p. 589.

³⁰ Agamben, *The Open*, p. 33.

³¹ René Girard, *Les Origines de la Culture: Entretien avec Pierpaolo Antonello et João Cezar de Castro Rocha* (Paris: Hachette, 2004), p. 265, my translation.

of rivalry and violence being avoided through taboo and ritual, cleansed through scapegoating and concealed through myth, their cause is removed by an action which resembles the generous nature of a selfless love, rather than the self-regarding nature of exacting psychological catharsis.

In fact, Girard contends that in the evangelical accounts of the death of Christ, the numinous atmosphere associated with sacred rites of purely human origin is deliberately eschewed. This eschewal, and its apparently profane implications, point not to a demystified zone, as if Girard's reading of the gospel was really a return to a theology of Ernest Renan – even if there are clear tensions between Girard's historico-critical readings of the Christian scriptures and Christian doctrine; he has in fact modified certain of his theses, notably concerning sacrifice, after dialogue with theologians such as Raymond Schwager³² – but rather indicate a turning from violence in what is called *la surtranscendance de l'amour* (the supra-transcendence of love) and in which Girard finds the presence of the divine.³³ The utter uniqueness of this solution to mimesis and violence is, for Girard, proof enough that it is the work of an agent who is more than human, since only an extra-human (or supra-human) perspective is capable of bringing humans to an awareness of the dangers of mimesis. Faced with the question of life, this *surtranscendance* offers to the 'life [that] does not live' a way out of its dilemma by modelling a new form of living in which the intra-anthropoc domain is forced to open up to possibilities that are divine in origin.

It is right to point out here that Girard firstly sees such a possibility as an anthropological observation, though undoubtedly for Girard it is also a postulate of faith. Still, while the mechanisms that deflect violence through ritual and myth show the deployment of strategies against mimetic hostility in human communities, it is only the freedom of the Judeo-Christian scriptures from these dynamics which, in Girard's argument, allows them to act as a lens through which to judge all cultures mired in the logic of the scapegoat. We might even say that their avoidance of myth amounts in fact to the raw material of revelation since they seek to unveil an action and initiative – a life! – which begins as a divine intervention. This is how we can explain Girard's term *la surtranscendance de l'amour*: in *la surtranscendance* there is expressed a reality above the human construction of sacred gods, and in *l'amour* there is a relationship to the divine which begins in a divine initiative.

Hence, Girard's thought expands or reconceptualizes intra-anthropoc living – those relations which exhaust the juridico-political thinking of Schmitt as well as Agamben and many others – by pointing to an encounter with what we can dare to call the theandric possibilities made available in the Christian paradigm. By theandric we mean not those possibilities which are associated with the

³² Raymund Schwager, *Must there be Scapegoats? Violence and Redemption in the Bible*, trans. Maria L. Assad (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987).

³³ Girard, *Des Choses cachées*, p. 317.

perichoresis of Christ, but theandric by analogy – a relatedness, a shared *life* – which is proposed between God and humanity.

Conclusion

How might life live for Agamben and Girard? There is a curious paradox in answering this question insofar as Girard's and Agamben's arguments take them beyond the domains of the sacred and the profane. Yet there is this difference also: beyond Agamben's profane and sacred lies the realm of biopolitics, and a project in which bare life, *zoe*, must find a *bios* that does not exclude *zoe* as its founding principle. Life can only live for Agamben on those terms. Beyond Girard's realm of the sacred and profane, on the other hand, lies a solution to the threat which mimetic conflict poses to life, a solution that offers the possibility of relatedness to the divine. Life lives, for Girard, when the *surtranscendance de l'amour* breaks through the sentence of perpetual conflict which purely intra-anthropoc relations impose on human life and human living. In Girardian terms, this *surtranscendance* surely is the *Life* which Eliot felt that we had lost in living.

Likewise, the life that Girard identifies beyond the profane and the sacred raises many issues, not the least of which lies in the perennial problem of the credibility of Christian postulates to a humanist academy. Even if the Christian solution to mimesis is unique, is that necessarily a proof of its divine origins? Another problem which critics have not been slow to point out is the often violent character of Christian history. Since there is not space here to deal with all such objections, let us simply try to position Girard's thought in relation to the domain of the intra-anthropoc which is, after all, the hegemonic episteme of the twenty-first century in the West.

In *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Nietzsche, with whose philosophy Girard is in constant dialogue, proclaimed the death of God.³⁴ Thereby he did not, of course, mean the death of a divinity as such but the end of God as what later philosophers would call a cultural construct. Nietzsche's successors have, as Gabriel Marcel observes in *Les Hommes contre l'Humain*, also sought to announce the death of humanity; thereby, again, Marcel did not so much mean the death of humanity as a race – though *Les Hommes contre l'Humain* was written in the shadow of the mushroom clouds of Nagasaki and Hiroshima – but rather the death of humanity in its Western conceptualization.³⁵ Now, Agamben's *homo sacer* corresponds to these two conceptual deaths insofar as it attempts to give expression to a human life placed beyond human and divine conceptualizations. We are all, Agamben says, *homines sacri*. Still, in the light of such an observation, and in the light of the frequent hostility of the academy to matters religious, perhaps Girard's

³⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000 [1883–85]).

³⁵ Gabriel Marcel, *Les Hommes contre l'Humain* (Paris: La Colombe, 1952).

importance lies first in whether his thought genuinely encounters this problem of the deconstruction of the Western notion of humanity; second, whether it offers some genuine alternative to Adorno's 'life [that] does not live'; and third, whether it can posit instead the credibility, the recovery or we might say the resurrection of possibilities that offer to draw Agamben's *homo sacer* out of its exclusion and back into a theandric life.