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Giorgio Agamben, *Il sacramento del linguaggio. Archeologia del giuramento*. Bari, Laterza 2008.

Kaius Tuori

Agamben's latest addition to the *Homo sacer* series is an essay on the history of the oath in Western culture. A slender volume of 99 text pages, it offers a history of the oath as a central concept in the 'sacrament of power' (a reference to Paolo Prodi's 1992 volume by the same title) in the political and religious history of the West. However, this is not a historical treatise; the 'archaeology' in the title refers to archaeology of philosophy, perhaps echoing Foucault.

Agamben traces the history of the oath through mostly ancient Greek and Roman sources with ample references to Hebrew authorities and older philosophical literature in general. The main argument is that the explanation of the oath as inviting divine sanction because of the perjury resulting from not honouring the oath is wrong. The argument is partly historical, but the implications that are drawn are aimed at modern audiences. Agamben writes that the claim often presented in literature that in archaic societies law and religion were interlinked and the development of civilization led to the separation of law and religion as separate spheres is false and derives from the insistence of modern authors to project their views on religion on ancient and 'primitive' societies.

In reality, what should be done is to do away with all preconceived notions and customary distinctions and understand ancient cultures as entities independent of them. Consequently, also the force of oath should be seen without the customary links to the sacred as a pre-existing field.

While scholars have supported the view that the oath's function was to guarantee the truthfulness of a claim and thus of language, Agamben suggests that the sacral or magical-religious sphere is secondary to the oath. The oath as a speech act is a foundational experience. Agamben sees the oath as a crucial element in the anthropogenesis (Agamben's terminology) of man, the process through which man becomes human. The oath is, according to Agamben, a sacrament of lan-

guage that has developed into a sacrament of power because through it man obligates himself with language, subjecting himself and his destiny to language.

The book is, as one would expect considering the author's previous books, not an easy read. The argument is original and occasionally persuasive, but relies to some extent on antiquated scholarship on the ancient world. Scholars of belief, religion, ancient magic, mythology and ancient history in general will frown at many of the leaps of argument and invocation of obscure authors and obsolete interpretations. It should be noted that a sound working knowledge of ancient history and ancient languages will be needed to understand the arguments that Agamben is making. It is with the arguments about blasphemy, the nature of god and god's name, which end in the discussion on speech acts that Agamben seems to go on overdrive, relying on Benveniste and a bevy of discredited scholars that subscribed to the Indo-European theories of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. While this remark could be called gratuitous nitpicking in a review of a philosophical essay, it is justified to the extent that the author makes claims based on historical evidence.

While at times confusing and convoluted, the book is nevertheless interesting and thought-provoking reading. Debunking combined with theorizing is what Agamben does best and while the current reviewer would be surprised if the book reaches similar popularity as *Homo Sacer, vol. I* and *State of Exception*, it is essential reading for anyone interested in Agamben's thought.