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## Giorgio Agamben and the Concept of Messianism

*„The Messiah always already had his time, meaning he simultaneously makes time his and brings it to fulfilment”<sup>1</sup>.*

G. Agamben

The aim of this paper is to trace the connection between Jewish messianism and the idea of „messianicity” adopted by the contemporary postmodern thinker: Giorgio Agamben.

Giorgio Agamben is a contemporary Italian philosopher reaching out to the Jewish Torah and Christian biblical texts, Greek and Roman law, Midrashic literature, as well as of a number of Western literary figures and philosophers, including among others Arendt, Benjamin, Foucault, Heidegger, Kafka and Schmitt. Combining ancient and postmodern ideas, he critically diagnoses the present political and cultural order. This article is trying to show the traces of Jewish philosophy in Agamben’s work and to examine to what extent is Agamben’s messianicity – messianic.

### Messianism

Messianism as a concept deriving from the Jewish tradition focuses on the expectation of a redeemer (Messiah) which will bring the world to the age of peace and prosperity (the messianic era). The nature of the event itself and the subject of redemption, or the temporal nature of redemption, differ in different theories.

The term Messiah derives from the Hebrew word *Mashiach* („anointed one”), used in the Hebrew Bible in relation to priests and kings. The term also denotes the religious concept of a person entrusted with a special task from God that can be understood in a threefold way: eschatological (concerned with end times), political (improvement of the state of mean or the world), and as a final consummation of history<sup>2</sup>.

The visions of idyllic future appear already in the Old Testament as a fulfilment of the covenant between God and the Chosen People. The concept of the Messiah as

<sup>1</sup> G. Agamben, *Time that remains. Commentary on the letter to Romans*, trans. P. Daly, Stanford 2005, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> *The Oxford dictionary of Jewish religion*, ed. r. J. Zwi Werblowsky, G. Wigoder, Oxford, 1997, p. 458-60.

a figure to come at the time of redemption can be found in the prophecy of Isaiah who gives a detailed description of an ideal king, but also in Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

In the prophetic writings, the term Messiah does not appear, yet the idea of an idealized political figure is presented as a person in the vein of David that will restore the Jewish Kingdom or will gather the Jews back to the Land of Israel. The eschatological meaning of messianism is however absent in the narrative of the Old Testament. The shift from the concept of the Messiah as simply a leader to the idea of a future redeemer of Israel stems from the change in the understanding of the monarchy and the dissolution of the Davidic dynastic rule following the destruction of the first Temple in 586/7 BCE<sup>3</sup>. Following these catastrophic events, political concepts evolved, shaping a more idealized figure of a Messiah portrayed as a perfect leader, one who will subsequently lead the Jewish nation towards an utopian age of moral perfection and reunification.

According to Gershom Scholem, this concept of redemption had not been linked with Messianism from the very beginning, and it only developed as an idea in the middle ages, linked closely with the Lurianic Kabbalah<sup>4</sup>.

On the other hand, Jacob Neusner claims that messianic ideas are already present in Jewish liturgy (i.e. the Siddur), in the Targum (the spoken paraphrases of Jewish scriptures) and in Rabbinical writings<sup>5</sup>, as well as in later Jewish mysticism and philosophy (Kabbalah and, especially, Sabbateanism). Be that as it may, these early writings do not supply a coherent concept of Messiah and are primarily influenced by the political understanding of the term<sup>6</sup>.

There are two main ways to understand messianism according to G. Scholem: restorative and utopian. They both aim to change *the present* and to transform the present into an ideal form which existed before (restorative) or the form that have never occurred before (utopian).

These messianic ideas have spread outside the Jewish context and are also present beyond the religious context as such. The idea of messianism without God has also been introduced by some Jewish thinkers, among others by Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch. In addition, some postmodern thinkers, such as Alain Badiou, Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Žižek, have found inspiration in messianic concepts, however, they have interpreted them in a distinct way and have developed the idea of messianism in philosophy to a much greater extent.

According to Jacques Derrida, messianicity (as opposed to messianism) marks a kind of non-contemporaneity of present time with itself. For Alain Badiou, the mes-

<sup>3</sup> See: *The encyclopedia of Judaism*, ed. J. Neusner, A.J. Avery-Peck, W.S. Green, Leiden – Boston 2000.

<sup>4</sup> See: G. Scholem, *The Messianic idea in Judaism*, New York 1978, p. 13, 37.

<sup>5</sup> J. Neusner, *Ancient Judaism and modern category formation: Judaism, Midrash, Mesianism and Canon in the Past Quarter-century*, Lanhan 1986, p. 63.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

sianic thinking is a framework that comes to explain the establishment of the subject and brings a possibility of a new definition of truth.

Interestingly, these contemporary thinkers derive their remarkably different understanding of messianism from the same text, the writings of St. Paul, searching for a new understanding of the term in it and coming to very different conclusions about it.

The aim of this paper is to present continuities and discontinuities between two understandings of messianism, the religious and the postmodern (messianicity) referring to the interpretation of messianism given by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben. I would like to discuss several different aspects of messianism which rises from Agamben's theory:

- The messianic subject
- The messianic time
- The messianic Law
- The messianic transformation

## The Messianic Subject

Traditional Jewish messianism derives from the idea of Messiah (as explained above). The Messiah is the actor of the messianic age, the messianic transformation and the figure which marks the beginning of the messianic era. The description of the genealogical features of the Messiah played a key role in Jewish tradition (just as they later did in Christianity) focusing the events of the messianic transformation around the Jewish people.

Jewish messianism has split into two separate conceptualizations of the messianic age; one understanding holds that the Messiah will arrive „when the time comes”, i.e. no matter what the people of Israel do and is initially decided by God; the other maintains that the arrival of the Messiah depends on the deeds of the people, who may hasten his coming by performing certain deeds and living according to certain laws. The nature of these deed has also served as a topic of some debate, and according to Rabbi Yohanan „the son of David will come either in a generation that is altogether righteous or altogether wicked”<sup>7</sup>.

The concept of Men being responsible for the arrival of the messianic age had initially developed from Kabbalistic ideas and was later used in the historical, political project of Zionism.

For Agamben, the actor of the messianic age on the other hand is surely not religious, and God does not play a role in its bringing about. Moreover, the Messiah him-

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<sup>7</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin, folio: 98a.

self, as noted by Agamben, is at best a metaphor which only marks the arrival of the messianic age. The true actor of messianism for Agamben is the (individual) subject.

## The Messianic time

Jewish tradition speaks about the messianic age in terms of chronological time. It is either a point in the future – the messianic age that begins with the coming of the Messiah – or the lost past (which can be restored).

For Agamben, messianism does not only stand for a particular point in time in which the world will be transformed. It is neither the future, nor the past, nor it is the end of time, but rather the time of the end.

In Jewish tradition, there is a distinction between the world that is and the world to come (*olam ha-ba*) and the former can never be the messianic time. For Agamben (and – as claimed by him – for St. Paul), the messianic time does not belong to any of them.

Messianic time is therefore not the eschatological time: „The messianic vocation is a movement of immanence, or, if one prefers, a zone of absolute indiscernibility between immanence and transcendence, between this world and the future world”<sup>8</sup>. The distinction between the past and the future is therefore suspended. The inoperativity of such division is the realm of the messianic. It is what remains after the division of the partition of time itself into secular time (*Chronos*) and eternity (*Eschaton*).

Agamben offers another way to understand the idea of time: *Chronos* and *Kairos*. *Chronos*, according to him, is the historical time and the *chronological* one, i.e. the time of THIS world. *Kairos* is a moment in time when something special happens. The former is quantitative, the latter – qualitative.

For Agamben messianic time appears within regular time. It is the *Kairos* (the moment) in time of the end. The messianic, hence, is *what has never happened*, and as Alan Murray puts it: „The fact that it has never happened means that it is always already happening”<sup>9</sup>. It is the suspension of the present time.

Messianic is not only the moment in the future nor is it a transformation of the world. It is both at the same time, as the messianic transformation is enrooted in the NOW and it transforms not the world itself, but our perception of it. The messianic change is not a destruction of the current state of the world, but rather a *modus of existence* that comes to an end: „The meaning of revolution is never only to change the world, it is also – and especially – to change time”<sup>10</sup>. Therefore the messianic idea is to have a different perception of the present.

<sup>8</sup> G. Agamben, *Time that remains*, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> A. Murray, *Giorgio Agamben*, Routledge 2010, p. 131.

<sup>10</sup> M. Idel, *Torah Hadasha*, [in:] *Benjamin- Agamben: Politics, Messianism, Kabbalah*, Würzburg 2010, p. 177.

## The Messianic Law

The problems I would like to investigate in this part might be framed in the following question: are tradition and the prevailing law valid in the messianic Era? In order to present the relationship between the messianic and the Law, it is necessary to consider the dynamic and limitations of each of them.

The task is also difficult because, as Moshe Idel puts it: „(..) both Law and Messiah are terms without clear content, since their meaning is general or nebulous and changes dramatically from religion to religion, from period to period, (...) Thus when speaking about Law and Messiah, we should be aware of the multiple types of encounters influencing a variety of messianic ideas and the different types of law”<sup>11</sup>.

Bearing this statement in mind, I would like to show some connections and conclusions that derive from thinking in terms of the messianic age about the Law.

Some Jewish traditions suggest the concept of messianic Torah. This messianic Torah (Torah Hadasha or a New Torah) is somehow different than the one we have in our hands, the one given to Moses at Mount Sinai. Such concept appears in the Midrash and is revisited in the Sabbatian tradition. The essence of that concept refers to an idea that the messianic age will bring about a sort of change in the rule of the law.

Moshe Idel distinguishes between two kinds of messianisms that relate to the question of Torah Hadasha<sup>12</sup> and presents two different understandings of the status of the Old Torah:

- a. eschatonic – the idea that the messianic improvement requires some sort of rupture in history, a dichotomy between exile and redemption, breaking of the already established law while introducing a new law and breaking the Old Torah (such understanding is typical for Rabbinic literature, but also presented by G. Scholem).
- b. synchronic – progress and rupture are parallel processes, instead of linear understanding of the Torah in time, it is understood as coexistence of two kinds of Torah.

These two understandings coexist parallelly in Jewish tradition and are usually presented intermittently and confronted. For example, there are two (important for the point of this chapter) stories presenting the double character of the Law:

- 1) The figure of two trees of Paradise – the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life: There are two symbols that control the state of the world in the Kabbalist book Ra’ya Mehemna – the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. Before the exile of Adam the world was ruled by the Tree of Life, which represents pure power

<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 177.

<sup>12</sup> Ibidem.

of the holy, but since Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden fruit, the world has fallen under the rule of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which represents a division into the holy and the profane. And the Torah, according to the tradition, presents itself in every state of the world in various ways.

- 2) The figure of the two tablets Moses received at Mount Sinai: after he had ascended to the mountain to receive the Torah and upon returning to the awaiting Israelites, Moses saw his people had been worshipping the Golden Calf. Discovering that, Moses breaks the tablets he received (Ex 32:19)<sup>13</sup>.

Per contra, the following passage from the Babylonian Talmud confronts the eschatonic and the synchronic understanding, quoting:

A. r. Simeon b. Eleazar says: „and the years draw nigh when you shall say, I have no pleasure in them’ (Ec. 12:1) – this refers to the days of the Messiah, in which there is neither merit nor guilt.

B. This differs from what Samuel said, for said Samuel, ‘The only difference between this world and the days of the Messiah is Israel’s servitude to the nations of the world. As it is said, ‘For the poor will never cease out of the Land’ (Deut 15:11) [Babylonian Talmud, Shabath 151].

This passage suggests two ways to interpret the status of the Law in the messianic age. In the first one, an approach which is ascribed to r. Simmeon and B. Eleazer, the assumption is that at the time of the Messiah, the commandment will no longer apply as law. The latter presents a continuous character of the transformation, one in which the world (and the Law) will not change, – only the status of the people of Israel will change.

The relationship between the Old and the New Torah can be understood as either continuity or discontinuity:

The relationship between the Old and the New Torah can be understood either in the sense of continuity or discontinuity:

- a) the New Torah is a fulfilment, a perfection of the Old Torah.

In that case, the messianic Law might be understood as a fulfilment and perfection of Halakhah, which is the law of the unredeemed world. The Law will be finally realized, a matter which was not possible in the Exile. Israel will finally be capable, or rather the Torah of the Messiah will provide complete reasons for the commandments<sup>14</sup>. At any rate, messianism does not annul the Halakha but presents a legitimization, a better understanding and an overcoming of its mistakes.

<sup>13</sup> M. Idel, op. cit. p.177.

<sup>14</sup> G. Scholem, op. cit., p. 20.

b) the New Torah is something different, even contradictive to the Old Torah.

By this approach, the Old Torah is destined to be replaced, annulled or suspended as „when he, about whom it is written ‘Lowly and riding upon an ass will come [...] he will elucidate for them the words of the Torah[...] and elucidate for them their errors. r. Hanina said: “Israel will not need the teachings of King Messiah in the Future to Come, for it is said, Unto him the nations shall seek [the nations] but not Israel’ . If so why will King Messiah come, and to do what will he come? To gather the exiles of Israel and to give them thirty mitzvot”<sup>15</sup>. The new Law will be given as the one that was given is violated and is full of mistakes.

However, the messianic era in its eschatonic understanding is often intertwined with visions of destruction and doom. Many such visions describe a state of immorality, a state of suspension of all norms, and an age of wickedness. The Mishnah states: „In the footsteps of Messiah presumption will increase and respect disappear. The empire will turn to heresy and there will be no moral reproof”<sup>16</sup>.

Redemption (restorative or utopian) is understood as moral improvement that comes about either through the apocalyptic destruction of the current state of the world or through the transgression of the law (as moral and legal order), as according to Rabbi Johanan in the Babylonian Talmud ‘the son of David will come only in a generation that is either altogether righteous or altogether wicked.’

At this point, I would like to focus on the eschatonic understanding of messianism, which, as I intend to present, opens the space for the understanding of the difference between the Old Torah and the New Torah as it’s suspension, in the frames of the category of Agamben’s concept of „the state of exception”.

In order to understand what is messianic for Agamben, we must turn to his understanding of the law. And in order to understand that – some other terms need to be explained.

Agamben introduces different key figures that illustrate the subtle dialectics of his thought. In his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* Agamben introduces a paradigmatic figure of modern politics which he names *homo sacer*. To clarify this figure Agamben uses an idea that refers to the concept of taboo and the idea of the ambivalence of sacrum, as well as to the Greek demarcation of the term „life”:

- a) as *bios* – the political qualities of life that are realized inside the polis,
- b) as *zoe* – natural life, without political qualities, that applies also to animals and plants.

<sup>15</sup> M. Idel, *op.cit.*, p. 182.

<sup>16</sup> G. Scholem, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

To explain the essence of the problem Agamben introduces also the term *bare life* (*naked life*) meaning the sphere where *bios* and *zoe* become indistinguishable, the sphere of permanent conversion between human and animal, nature and culture.

Bare life is at the same time a result of the production of *sovereign power* – the symmetric opposition of bare life. *Sovereign power* can be understood as the subject that decides of establishment of the „state of exception”, so the actor in power to suspend the law. To explain this concept Agamben recalls the Roman law: „Sacred man is the one that was judged for offence and is not honoured to be sacrificed, but the one that kills him cannot be sentenced for homicide. (...)”<sup>17</sup> – It is a life that is exposed to violence and death.

The Law is not only a set of rules. Agamben is concerned more with its performative character, he understands it as an anthropological machine which works by producing tension between its structural elements. He views messianism in the perspective of the Law and introduces different forms of distinctions. The distinctions Agamben is most concerned with are those which divide things to ones belonging to the sphere of *sacrum* and one belonging to the sphere of *profanum*.

The term *sacer* refers both to something that cannot be touched without being desecrated, similarly to a taboo. The status of the sacred should be understood in the context of its structural ambivalence – the primal indistinguishability of the impure and the holy. *Homo sacer* belongs neither to the mundane order nor to the holy order. The rules of law do not apply to him either, nor can he be sacrificed (devoted as a sacrifice). That is why *homo sacer* is an exception, a gap in the rules which prohibit murder.

At the same time, *homo sacer* cannot simply pass from *profanum* to *sacrum*, but rather stays „outside” of both human and divine jurisdiction: „Sacred life is neither political *bios*, nor it is natural *zoe*, but is rather a sphere of indiscernibility, where both of them involve each other and exclude each other, and constitute each other”<sup>18</sup>. Sacred life and naked life are two aspects of the same figure – the *homo sacer* and the sovereign.

The sphere in which naked life appears as such is the sphere of the suspension of law. Law is suspended by a sovereign by the act of establishment of the state of exception (according to Carl Schmitt, a sovereign is one who decides on the state of exception). Such a suspension entails the appearance of naked life: „Sovereign is the sphere where one can kill without committing a murder or making a sacrifice, and sacred life – meaning life that neither can be killed nor sacrificed – is the life that has been caught in this sphere”<sup>19</sup>. Sacred is the life that the sovereign ban overtakes, while the formation of the naked life is sovereignty’s crucial achievement.

<sup>17</sup> G. Agamben, *Homo sacer*, trans. D. Heller – Roazen, Stanford 1998 s. 101.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 125.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.



The naked life appears both as *devotus* (sacrificed) *homo sacer* as well as sovereign. Agamben claims that these figures - staying in the sphere of indistinguishability - are the „living dead” – figures which outlived the human.

*Homo sacer* is, therefore, a special case and an exception to the law. That is why Agamben introduces the Schmittian category of the *state of exception*, which is a state of suspension of the law (rule), and the state which defines the sovereign (as the one that is in power to introduce the state of exception).

Agamben applies this category to messianism: „From the political-juridical perspective messianism is, therefore, a theory of the state of exception – except for the fact, that in messianism there is no authority in force to proclaim the state of exception, instead there is the Messiah to subvert its power”<sup>20</sup>. In that case is messianism the theory of the state of exception?

Messianism is strictly bound by the Law. It is the messianic fulfilment together with the suspension of the law that makes the messianic moment. The problem is that, as Vivian Liska phrases it: „It is not possible to determine whether for Agamben the abrogation of the law is a *requirement* or a *consequence* of the coming of the Messiah and whether the law is potentially already abolished or whether this might no longer be required. The blurring of these difference might be Agamben’s intention; however, the question remains as to whether the Messiah will abolish the law or whether he will come through its demise”<sup>21</sup>. The abrogation of the law is both the requirement and the consequence because messianic change is a gesture that transforms both the cause and the outcome. Messianism, therefore, makes the Law inoperative.

Inoperativity (an originally French term introduced by M. Blanchot *désœuvrement*) is literary ‘lack of work’, being in potential, but never passing to actuality. The concept is introduced in Agamben’s essay *The Open*, where he discusses the man/animal distinction. Such distinction, as he claims, is driven by the logic of exclusive inclusion – the same logic which produces *homo sacer*, one which he calls ‘anthropological machine’. Agamben’s dialectics of opposition does not simply produce a synthesis out of thesis and anti-thesis. He introduces a third element, that is the zone of indiscernibility between them. Agamben is trying to „deactivate the machines” and prefers the dialectics of a standstill when neither man needs to master nature, nor the other way around. The same logic underlies the notion of inoperativity of the law where it is neither applied nor suspended.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 57.

<sup>21</sup> V. Liska, *The Messiah before the Law*, in: *Benjamin – Agamben: Politics, Messianism, Kabbalah*, ed. C. Morgenroth, V. Borsso, K. Solibakke, B. Witte, Würzburg 2010, p. 165.

## The Messianic transformation

For Agamben messianism is neither – as Scholem suggested – restorative nor utopian separately, but rather it is both at the same time: „In fact messianism has a destructive character and will ‘restore’ the world to a point it has never known, to an ethos which is both radically new and completely familiar”<sup>22</sup> – as Murray claims. So, it is not the appearance of something radically new, an event that breaks the chain of continuity. The messianic world is, just as in the Hasidic tradition, the same world – just a little bit different.

According to the Jewish tradition, the messianic age brings the moral and ontological transformation of the world and human beings in general through the Jewish people.

For Agamben it is more of an „abstract switch” that does NOT mark the eschatological end of this world and the beginning of something completely new. It is rather a universal, though subjective, change.

In *The time that remains*, Agamben reads St. Paul’s „Letter to the Romans” as a messianic text. He uses St. Paul’s term *hos me* („as if not”) as an explanation of the essence of the messianic. Such understanding shows the messianic potential of transforming reality without turning it into its opposite or reversing it to a former state. For Agamben *hos me* produces a „division of a division”, which suspends distinctions and makes the law dysfunctional since division is the very principle of the law.

The division introduced by the Law produces a *remnant* – that which remains from the separation of the law.

Agamben refers to Paul’s remark from the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of the Letter to the Romans:

Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law. For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart – it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

Paul, according to Agamben, speaks not only about the separation of Jews and non-Jews. He also speaks about the distinction between the body and the spirit, the division between a Jew and a non-Jew. The remnant produced by such division is a radical exception, which suspends the suspension of the law. It does not annul the

<sup>22</sup> A. Murray, op. cit. p. 129.

distinction between a Jew and a non-Jew, but cuts it and creates what he calls those „circumcised by heart”. The remnants are the non-non-Jews (not circumcised, but living according to the law), who are neither ‘outside’ of the law, nor they are within it.

At this point, the character of the law is radicalised. The suspension of the law pushes it to the impossibility of execution. This is not the end and fulfilment of the law, but rather its radical „passing out”, in which the current state of the law and the world are gone-by.

To put it in other words, The messianic does not annihilate the Law, but renders it inoperative – it opens to a new form of non-use and becomes inoperative in the messianic perspective.

Gershom Scholem describes the specific form of disappointment that comes together with the coming of the Messiah: The Messiah arrived and nothing happened. The poor are still the poor and the old divisions are still valid. There was no apocalypse. Moreover, we almost overlooked the Messiah. Scholem presents the story of Sabbatai Zvi and the Sabbatian movement as an example of such feeling of disappointment. The Sabbatian and the Frankist movements illustrate the paradoxical logic of the messianic: the messianic gesture leads to conversion, which is not just an act of apostasy, but is a sign of inoperativity of the law.

Agamben puts together two different approaches. One in which the Messiah has not come yet and nothing happened; and another when the Messiah had come and everything happened (as in the case of Christianity). Agamben tries to „cut” the division by creating a third option: The Messiah has come and nothing happened<sup>23</sup>. The point of Agamben’s messianic project is to transform *bare life* into the liberating *remnant*<sup>24</sup>.

The messianic is a division of a division that undoes (make inoperative) the oppressive power of the law. Agamben’s messianic era is one of overcoming all divisions and overcoming the permanent state of exception in which we live. The oppressive state of exception is suspended and the redemptive one is established.

According to Liska, the oppressive state of exception and the redemptive state of exception both rely on the self-suspension of the law. „However, while the negative state of exception proclaimed by the sovereign spills over into every aspect of life and put the entire planet under the ban of an oppressive law, the ‘real’, messianic ‘state of exception’ suspends the validity of the law and releases bare life from its ban into a new freedom”<sup>25</sup>. The messianic is a suspension of the suspension, an act of profanation (bringing back the use of life).

<sup>23</sup> A. Bielik-Robson, *Rozbita konstelacja. Teologia Agambena między tragedią a mesjanizmem*, Warszawa 2010, p.159.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 178.

<sup>25</sup> V. Liska, op.cit., p.161.

Sacrifice is the threshold between the sphere of humans and that of the gods, and it is the practice that produces the very division. Therefore, it is the point that can render the distinction as inoperative and return what was sacred back to the common use of mankind<sup>26</sup>. So profanation is the act that can bring the sacred to common use through an understanding of the law. Bare life and the remnant are structurally the same. The bare life is a product of the sovereign. The sovereign is the one that has a power of suspending the law and by doing so – of creating bare life. The remnant is, as Agata Bielik-Robson points out: „the (non) subject of actively doing nothing”<sup>27</sup>.

Agamben dreams of a messianic time in which there is pure potentiality, of existence without qualities: a *whatever being* that brings the redemption. Messianism becomes a form of the state of exception and allows life (zoe) to be its own sovereign. He brings up the concept of messianism and makes it a task for the subject, an ethical demand which does not require any intervention of the Messiah. This secular messianism aims to bring back the subjectivity of men from the power of the ‘anthropological machine’. And this is the true meaning of the messianic emancipation.

### Profanation

Agamben exposes points in which „the religious machine seems to reach a limit point or zone of undesirability, where the divine sphere is always in the process of collapsing into the human sphere and man always already passing over into the divine”<sup>28</sup>. Just like in the Haggadic story of Moses ascending to the heights to get the Torah:

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: When Moses ascended on high, the ministering angels said before the Holy One blessed be He: What is one born of woman doing among us? He said to them: He has come to receive the Torah. They said to Him: A precious treasure, which has been hidden away with You for nine hundred seventy-four generations before the world was created, You wish to give to flesh and blood? „What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? The Lord, our Master, how wondrous is Your Name in all the earth, your glory is upon the heavens!”<sup>29</sup>.

The angels are clearly surprised and discontent about the „son of a woman” transgressing the border of the profane and the sacred. Moses is given a clear message of being out of place.

<sup>26</sup> A. Murray, op. cit., p.125.

<sup>27</sup> A. Bielik-Robson, op. cit. p.183.

<sup>28</sup> G. Agamben *Profanations*, transl. J. Fort, New York 2007, p.79.

<sup>29</sup> Psalm 8:4, 2. [Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, folio: 88b-89a.

Later in the Aggadah, Moses gives a reply to the Angels, saying that the Law does not apply to them: He said before Him: Master of the Universe, the Torah which you have given me, what is written therein?:

I am the Lord your God who has taken you out of the land of Egypt" (Exod 20:2). Say to them: Did you go down to Egypt? Were you enslaved to Pharaoh? Why should you have the Torah<sup>30</sup>.

The Law cannot apply to the Angels as the „heights“ are the sovereign sphere where the Law is not in use:

Immediately, the Holy One blessed be He concurred with him, as is said, „The Lord our God, how glorious is Your Name“ (Ps 8:10) but [the words] „that your glory is given in the heavens“ is not written there. Immediately, each one of them [the angels] became his friend and gave him a gift, as is said: „You ascended on high, you were taken captive, you took gifts among men“ (Psalm 68:19). By virtue of being called „man,“ you took gifts.

Even the Angel of Death gave him something, as is said: „And he took the incense and atoned for the people“ and it says, „and he stood between the dead and the living“ (Numbers 17:12-13). Had he [the Angel of Death] not told it to him, how would he have known?

The point of this story is to present the zone of indiscernibility that is created in order for Moses to receive the Law. Moses makes a gesture of profanation: he brings what was hidden (sacred, separated) to the use of man. Moses comes to the sphere of indiscernibility: between the dead and the living, between humane and divine. Moses gets the Law „by the virtue of being man“ – the subject of the law according to Agamben. And in fact, perhaps Moses in this story represents the messianic remnant, the life that becomes its own sovereign? Thanks to Moses the Law (Torah) becomes indistinguishable from life and by this „entered the messianic process of consuming itself“<sup>31</sup>. Moses from the story could be an illustration of Agamben's idea of a shift from sacrum that brings the redemption – to profanation that establishes it.

## Conclusion

Contemporary philosophers reach out to the Biblical tradition and find the inspiration for their understanding of the present, the subject and its condition. Agamben

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem

<sup>31</sup> G. Agamben, *Homo sacer*, p. 55.

establishes a messianic project that goes way beyond the traditional understanding of messianism, creating messianism without Messiah and even without God. The project transgresses national and religious borders and loses the aspect of hopeful waiting. His messianic project tries to overcome the passivity of waiting by providing a different way of thinking about time. The potential of redemption is in the present. Redemption, therefore, is rather subjective than collective, even though it has a political connotation. The political change does not refer to the historical context, but to the basis of understanding of the political. The „coming community” is a community without subjects as Agamben’s messianism frees the subject from any qualities or essence that should be fulfilled. The subject is left with its own existence as potentiality and singularity. This coming politics, which Agamben suggests, will not be a power struggle and will not be based on the essential identity. Instead he interprets threads of Jewish messianic tradition: the problem of the law and the character of messianic transformation. He encourages action in making the messianic shift. He sees the possibility to transform the world in the transformation itself by emancipating the subject from power structures and by the destruction of anthropological machine that produces the subject.

His project, though, remains in a way tragic. The subject itself is its own Messiah who never arrives. The messianic project is – paradoxically – to free the subject from the machines that had produced it. A paradox similar to the idea of Jewish messianism: Messiah brings redemption to the world that needs to be abandoned beforehand.

## Giorgio Agamben i idea mesjańska

Idea mesjańska stanowi ważny aspekt żydowskiej filozofii i polega na oczekiwaniu przybycia zbawiciela, który zarazem zapoczątkuje erę pokoju i powszechnej harmonii. Istnieją jednak różne rozumienia okoliczności, w jakich przybycie mesjasza może nastąpić. Spór na tym polu dotyczy m.in. problemu czy ludzkość poprzez swoje uczynki może wpływać na przybycie mesjasza. Takie podejście prezentowały czerpiące z kabały ruchy mesjanistyczne np. sabataizm. Podążając za wątkami mesjańskimi włoski filozof Giorgio Agamben analizuje pojęcie czasu mesjańskiego, form obowiązywania prawa i roli jednostki w procesie przekształcenia świata, proponując zsekularyzowaną wizję epoki mesjańskiej. Artykuł skupia się na recepcji idei mesjanizmu w filozofii Giorgio Agambena, zarysowaniu kluczowych pojęć stworzonych przez włoskiego filozofa oraz wskazaniu inspiracji zaczerpniętych przez Agambena z tradycji judaistycznej.