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AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF DUTY



# PUS DEI

Giorgio Agamben

TRANSLATED BY ADAM KOTSKO

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OPUS DEI

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M E R I D I A N

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*Crossing Aesthetics*

Werner Hamacher

*Editor*

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OPUS DEI

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*An Archaeology of Duty*

Giorgio Agamben

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## Translator's Note

One difficulty facing the translator of this work was the multiplicity of Italian terms connoting the concept of “duty.” The first is *ufficio*, which primarily connotes “duty” but can also mean “office” in the sense, for example, of holding a political office. (Though the English term *office* can carry connotations of “duty,” this meaning is somewhat antiquated.) Like the Latin term *officium*, which plays a decisive role in Agamben’s archaeological investigation, this term can also refer to the “Divine Office” or liturgy. I have rendered this term as “office,” “duty,” or “office or duty,” depending on the context, and have frequently left the Italian word in brackets. Most notably, the term *ufficio* is rendered as “duty” in the subtitle of the work as a whole but as “office” in the title of the third chapter.

A related word is *dovere*, a noun meaning “duty” and also the infinitive of the Italian auxiliary verb meaning “must, should, ought to, to have to.” One challenge in translating this term comes in Agamben’s references to two ontologies, one of *essere* and one of *dovere-essere*. This distinction is often captured in English by juxtaposing the terms *is* and *ought*, but that conventional translation lacks the connotations of the imperative or command that Agamben associates with the ontology of *dovere-essere*. Thus I translate this contrast as one between “being” and “having-to-be.”

Finally, a much less frequent term is *vece*, which carries connotations of duty, as well as alteration and vicarious action (as in the

phrase *fare le veci*, to act in someone's place or stead). When this term occurs, I have translated it according to the context but left the Italian word in brackets.

Another difficulty stems from words related to the Latin term *effectus*: the Italian *effettuale*, *effettualità*, etc. In Italian these terms are generally translated with words like *real*, *actual*, or *true*, but to emphasize the etymological connections Agamben is making, I have chosen to translate them more literally with the English terms *effective* or *effectiveness*.

Works are cited according to the page number of the original text, followed by the page number of the English translation (where applicable), or else by a standard textual division that is consistent across translations and editions. All translations from the Bible are based on the New Revised Standard Version. Translations have been frequently altered throughout for greater conformity with Agamben's usage. Where no English translation is listed in the bibliography, the translations are my own. Where the main text is a close paraphrase of a Latin quotation or where Agamben's purpose in quoting a Latin text is simply to demonstrate the presence of a particular term or phrase in that text, I have often opted not to provide an English translation in order to avoid redundancy.

I would like to thank Giorgio Agamben, Kevin Attell, Colby Dickinson, David U. B. Liu, and Harold Stone for their suggested improvements; Virgil Brower and the rest of the Paul of Tarsus Interdisciplinary Working Group at Northwestern University for inviting me to discuss a portion of the translation; Junius Johnson for providing his translation of Agamben's quotations from Innocent III's *De sacro altaris mysterio*; Michael Hollerich for providing his translation of Peterson's *Theological Tractates*; Henrik Wilberg and Kieran Healy for bibliographical assistance; and Emily-Jane Cohen, Emma Harper, and the rest of the staff of Stanford University Press.

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## Preface

*Opus Dei* is a technical term that, in the tradition of the Latin Catholic Church that starts from the *Rule of St. Benedict*, designates the liturgy, that is, “the exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. . . . In the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and His members” (Vatican Council II, Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy, December 4, 1963).

The word *liturgy* (from the Greek *leitourgia*, “public services”) is, however, relatively modern. Before its use was extended progressively, beginning at the end of the nineteenth century, we find in its place the Latin *officium*, whose semantic sphere is not easy to define and in which nothing, at least at first glance, would seem to have destined it for its unusual theological success.

In *The Kingdom and the Glory* we investigated the liturgical mystery above all in the face it turns toward God, in its objective or glorious aspect. In this volume our archaeological study is oriented toward the aspect that above all concerns the priests, that is, the subjects to whom belongs, so to speak, the “ministry of the mystery.” And just as in *The Kingdom and the Glory* we sought to clarify the “mystery of the economy,” which theologians had constructed by reversing a Pauline expression that was clear in itself, here it is a matter of tearing the liturgical mystery out of the obscurity and vagueness of the modern literature on the subject, returning it to the rigor and splendor of the great medieval

treatises of Amalarius of Metz and William Durand. The liturgy is, in truth, not very mysterious at all, to the point that one can say that, on the contrary, it coincides with perhaps the most radical attempt to think a praxis that would be absolutely and wholly effective. The mystery of the liturgy is, in this sense, the mystery of effectiveness, and only if one understands this arcane secret is it possible to understand the enormous influence that this praxis, which is only apparently separate, has exercised on the way in which modernity has thought both its ontology and its ethics, its politics and its economy.

As happens in every archaeological study, this one leads us well beyond the sphere from which we started. As the diffusion of the term *office* in the most diverse sectors of social life attests, the paradigm that the *Opus Dei* has offered to human action has been shown to constitute for the secular culture of the West a pervasive and constant pole of attraction. It is more efficacious than the law because it cannot be transgressed, only counterfeited. It is more real than being because it consists only in the operation by means of which it is realized. It is more effective than any ordinary human action because it acts *ex opere operato*, independently of the qualities of the subject who officiates it. For all these reasons, office has exercised on modern culture an influence so profound—that is, subterranean—that we do not even realize that not only does the conceptuality of Kantian ethics and of Kelsen's pure theory of law (to name only two moments, though certainly decisive ones, in its history) depend entirely upon it, but that the political militant and the ministerial functionary are also inspired in the same way by the model of the "acts of office," that is, duties.

The paradigm of the office signified, in this sense, a decisive transformation of the categories of ontology and of praxis, whose importance still remains to be measured. In office or duty, being and praxis, what a human does and what a human is, enter into a zone of indistinction, in which being dissolves into its practical effects and, with a perfect circularity, it is what it has to be and has to be what it is. Operativity and effectiveness define, in this sense, the ontological paradigm that in the course of a

centuries-long process has replaced that of classical philosophy: in the last analysis—this is the thesis that our study will wish to put forward for reflection—being and acting today have for us no representation other than effectiveness. Only what is effective, and as such governable and efficacious, is real: this is the extent to which office, under the guise of the humble functionary or the glorious priest, has changed from top to bottom the rules of first philosophy as much as those of ethics.

It is possible that today this paradigm is going through a decisive crisis, the results of which cannot be foreseen. Despite the renewed attention toward liturgy in the twentieth century, of which the so-called “liturgical movement” in the Catholic Church on the one hand and the imposing political liturgies of the totalitarian regimes on the other are an eloquent testimony, many signs allow one to think that the paradigm that office or duty has offered to human action is losing its attractive power precisely when it has reached its maximum expansion. Thus, it was all the more necessary to try to establish its characteristics and define its strategies.



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# OPUS DEI

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To act is said in two ways:

1. the true and primary act, that is, to produce things from non-being to being
2. to produce an effect in that in which an effect is produced.

—Al-Kindī

The work of art is the setting-to-work of the truth of Being.

—Martin Heidegger





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## § 1 Liturgy and Politics

1. The etymology and meaning of the Greek term *leitourgia* (from which our word *liturgy* derives) are clear. *Leitourgia* (from *laos*, people, and *ergon*, work) means “public work” and in classical Greece designates the obligation that the city imposes on the citizens who have a certain income to provide a series of services for the common interest. These services ranged from the organization of gymnasia and gymnastic games (*gymnasiarchia*) to the preparation of a chorus for the city festival (*chorēgia*, for example the tragic choruses for the Dionysian festival), from the acquisition of grain and oil (*sitēgia*) to arming and commanding a trireme (*triērarchia*) in case of war, from directing the city’s delegation to the Olympic or Delphic games (*architheōria*) to the expectation that the fifteen richest citizens would pay the city for all the citizens’ property taxes (*proeisphora*). It was a matter of services that were of a personal and real character (“each one,” writes Demosthenes, “liturgizes both with person and with property” [*tois sōmasi kai tais ousiais leitourgēsai*]; Fourth Philippic Oration 28) that, even if they were not numbered among the magistracies (*archai*), had a part in the “care of common things” (*tōn koinōn epimeleian*; Isocrates 25). Although the services of the liturgy could be extremely onerous (the verb *kataleitourgeō* meant “to be ruined by liturgies”) and there were citizens (called for this reason *diadrasipolitai*, “citizens in hiding”) who sought by every means to exempt themselves from them, the fulfillment of the liturgies

was seen as a way of obtaining honor and reputation, to the point that many (the prime example, referred to by Lysis, is that of a citizen who had spent in nine years more than twenty thousand drachmae for the liturgies) did not hesitate to renounce their right not to serve the liturgies for the two following years. Aristotle, in the *Politics* (1309a18–21), cautions against the custom, typical of democracies, of “costly but useless liturgies like equipping choruses and torch-races and all other similar services.”

Since the expenses for the cult also concern the community (*ta pros tous theous dapanēmata koina pasēs tēs poleōs estin*), Aristotle can write that a part of the common land must be assigned to the liturgies for the gods (*pros tous theous leitourgias*; *ibid.*, 1330a13). The lexicons register numerous witnesses, both epigraphic and literary, of this cultic use of the term, which we will see taken up again with a singular continuity both in Judaism and among Christian authors. Moreover, as often happens in these cases, the technico-political meaning of the term, in which the reference to the “public” is always primary, is extended, at times jokingly, to services that have nothing to do with politics. A few pages after the passage cited, Aristotle can thus speak, in reference to the season best suited to sexual reproduction, of a “public service for the procreation of children” (*leitourgein . . . pros teknopoiian*; *ibid.*, 1335b29); in the same sense, with even more accentuated irony, an epigram will evoke “the liturgies” of a prostitute (*Anthologia Palatina* 5.49.1; qtd. in Strathmann, 217). It is inexact to claim that in these cases “the significance of the *lēitos* [public element] is lost” (Strathmann, 217). On the contrary, the expression always acquires its antiphrastic sense only in relation to the originary political meaning. When the same Aristotle presents as a “liturgy” the nursing of puppies on the part of the mother (*De animalia incessu* 711b30; qtd. in Strathmann, 217) or when we read in a papyrus the expression “to oblige to private liturgies” (*Oxyrhynchus Papyri* 3.475.18; qtd. in Strathmann, 218), in both cases the ear must perceive the forcing implicit in the metaphorical shift of the term from the public and social sphere to the private and natural sphere.

8. The system of liturgies (*munera* in Latin) reached its greatest diffusion in imperial Rome starting in the third century AD. Once Christianity becomes so to speak the religion of the State, the problem of the exemption of the clergy from the obligation of public services acquires a special interest. Already Constantine had established that “those who see to the ministry of the divine cult [*divini cultui ministeria impendunt*], that is, those who are called clergy, must be completely exempted from any public service [*ab omnibus omnino muneribus excusentur*]” (qtd. in Drecoll, 56). Although this exemption implied the risk that affluent people would become clergy to escape onerous *munera*, as a subsequent decree of Constantine that prohibited *decuriones* from taking part in the clergy proves, the privilege was maintained, albeit with various limitations.

This proves that the priesthood was seen in some way as a public service and this may be among the reasons that will lead to the specialization of the term *leitourgia* in a cultic sense in the sphere of Greek-speaking Christianity.

2. The history of a term often coincides with the history of its translations or of its use in translations. An important moment in the history of the term *leitourgia* thus comes when the Alexandrian rabbis who carried out the translation of the Bible into Greek choose the verb *leitourgeō* (often combined with *leitourgia*) to translate the Hebrew *šeret* whenever this term, which means generically “to serve,” is used in a cultic sense. Starting from its first appearance in reference to Aaron’s priestly functions, in which *leitourgeō* is used absolutely (*en tōi leitourgein*: Exodus 28:35), the term is often used in a technical combination with *leitourgia* to indicate the cult in the “tent of the Lord” (*leitourgein tēn leitourgian . . . en tēi skēnēi*; Numbers 8:22, referring to the Levites; *leitourgein tas leitourgas tēs skēnēs kyriou*, in 16:9). Scholars have wondered about this choice with respect to other available Greek terms, like *latreuō* or *douleō*, which are generally reserved for less technical meanings in the Septuagint. It is more than probable that the translators were well aware of the “political” meaning of the Greek term, if one remembers that the Lord’s instructions for the organization of the cult in Exodus 25–30 (in

which the term *leitourgein* appears for the first time) are only an explication of the pact that a few pages earlier constituted Israel as a chosen people and as a “kingdom of priests” (*mamleket kohanim*) and a “holy nation” (*goj qados*) (Exodus 19:6). It is significant that the Septuagint here has recourse to the Greek term *laos* (*esesthe moi laos periousios apo pantōn tōn ethnōn*, “you shall be my treasured people out of all the nations”; Exodus 19:5) in order then to subsequently reinforce its “political” meaning by translating the text’s “kingdom of priests” as “royal priesthood” (*basileion hierateuma*, an image significantly taken up again in the First Epistle of Peter 2:9—“you are a chosen race, a *basileon hierateuma*”—and in Revelation 1:6) and *goj qados* as *ethnos hagion*.

The election of Israel as “people of God” immediately institutes its liturgical function (the priesthood is immediately royal, that is, political) and thus sanctifies it insofar as it is a nation (the normal term for Israel is not *goj*, but *am qados*, *laos hagios*, “holy people”; Deuteronomy 7:6).

8. The technical meaning of *leitourgia* and *leitourgeō* to indicate the priestly cult is standard in Alexandrian Judaism. Thus, in the *Letter of Aristeas* (second century BCE), *tōn hierōn hē leitourgia* refers to the cultic functions of the priest, meticulously laid out, from the choice of victim to the care of the oil and the spice (Aristeas 92). A little after *Eleazar en tēi leitourgiai* designates the high priest in the act of officiating, whose holy vestments and paraments are described with care (96ff.). The same can be said for Flavius Josephus and Philo (who also use the term in a metaphorical sense, for example with respect to the intellect: “when the mind is ministering to God [*leitourgei theoi*] in purity, it is not human, but divine”; Philo 84).

3. All the more significant is the lack of importance of this lexical group in the New Testament (with the notable exception of the Letter to the Hebrews). Beyond the Pauline corpus (where one also reads the term *leitourgos* five times), *leitourgein* and *leitourgia* figure only twice, the first time quite generically in reference to Zechariah’s priestly functions in the Temple (Luke 1:23) and the second in reference to five “prophets and teachers” of the *ecclesia*

of Antioch (Acts 13:1–2). The passage from Acts (*leitourgountōn de autōn tōi kyriōi*; 13:2) does not mean, as some have wanted to suggest with an obvious anachronism, “while they were celebrating the divine service in honor of the Lord.” As the Vulgate had already understood in translating it simply as *ministrantibus autem illis Domino*, *leitourgein* is here the equivalent of “while they were carrying out their function in the community for the Lord” (which was precisely, as the text had just specified, that of prophets and teachers—*prophētai kai didaskaloi*; Acts 13:1—and not of priests, nor is it clear what other *leitourgia* could be in question at this point; as to prayer, Luke generally refers to it with the term *orare*).

Even in the Pauline letters the term often has the secular meaning of “service for the community,” as in the passage in which the collection made for the community is presented as a *leitourgēsai* (Romans 15:27) or as *diakonia tēs leitourgias* (2 Corinthians 9:12). It is also said of the action of Epaphroditus, who has put his life at risk, that he has carried it out in order to make up for the “liturgy” that the Philippians have not been able to perform (Philippians 2:30). But even in the passages where *leitourgia* is deliberately connected to a properly priestly terminology, it is necessary to take care not to incautiously mix up the respective meanings, thus allowing the specificity and audacity of Paul’s linguistic choice, which intentionally juxtaposes heterogeneous terms, to pass unnoticed. The exemplary case is Romans 15:16: “to be a *leitourgos* of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, carrying out the holy action of the good news of God [*hierourgounta to euangelion tou theou*].” Here commentators project onto *leitourgos* the cultic meaning of *hierourgeo*, writing: “What follows shows that [Paul] is using *leitourgos* cultically almost in the sense of priest. For he construes it in terms of *hierourgein to euanglion*. He discharges a priestly ministry in relation to the Gospel” (Strathmann, 230). The hapax *hierourgein to euanglion*, in which the good news becomes, with an extraordinary forcing, the impossible object of a *sacrum facere* (just as, with an analogous *tour de force*, *latreia*, the sacrificial cult, is linked

in Romans 12:1 to the adjective *logikē*, “linguistic”), is all the more effective if *leitourgos* conserves its proper meaning as “one entrusted with a community function” (*minister*, as the Vulgate correctly translates it). The connection of the cultic terminology of the Temple to something—the announcement made to the pagans and, as is said immediately after, the “offering of the Gentiles,” *prosphora tōn ethnōn*—which can in no way take place in the Temple, has an obvious polemical meaning and does not intend to confer a sacrificial aura to Paul’s preaching.

Analogous considerations can be made for Philippians 2:17: “But even if I am being poured out as a libation [*spendomai*] over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith [*epi tēi thysiai kai leitourgiai tēs pisteōs*], I am glad and rejoice with all of you.” Whatever the connection between *spendomai* and the words that follow, the affirmation gains its pregnancy only if, leaving aside the anachronism that sees in *leitourgia* a priestly service (the Pauline community obviously could not have been familiar with priests), one perceives the contrast and almost the tension that Paul skillfully introduces between cultic terminology and “liturgical” terminology in the proper sense.

8. It has been known for some time (see Dunin-Borkowski) that in the earliest Christian literature the terms *hiereus* and *archiereus* (priest and high priest) are reserved solely for Christ, while for the members or heads of the communities, a properly priestly vocabulary is never used (leaders are defined simply as *episkopoi* [superintendents], *presbyteroi* [elders], or *diakonoι* [servants]). A priestly vocabulary appears only with Tertullian (*On Baptism* 17.1; *Against the Jews* 6.1.14), Cyprian (*Epistle* 59.14, 66.8), and Origen (*Homiliae in Numeros* 10.1). In the Pauline letters, which mention *episkopoi* and *diakonoι* (in Colossians 1:25, Paul calls himself a *diakonos*), particular attention is dedicated to the various functions carried out in the community, none of which is defined in priestly terms. (Cf. 1 Corinthians 12:28–31: “And God has appointed in the church first apostles [*apostolous*], second prophets [*profētas*], third teachers [*didaskalous*]; then deeds of power [*dynameis*], then gifts of healing [*charismata iamatōn*], forms of assistance [*antilēpseis*], of leadership [*kybernēseis*], various kinds of tongues [*genē*

*glōssōn*”]; Romans 12:6–8: “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering [*diakonian en tēi diakoniai*], the teacher, in teaching [*didaskōn en tēi didaskaliai*], the comforter, in comforting [*parakalōn en tēi paraklēsei*].”)

4. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews elaborates a theology of the messianic priesthood of Christ, in the context of which the lexical group that interests us occurs four times. Developing the Pauline argumentation about the two covenants (2 Corinthians 3:1–14), the theological nucleus of the letter plays on the opposition between the Levitical priesthood (*levitikē hierōsynē*, 7:11), corresponding to the old Mosaic covenant and encompassing the descendants of Aaron, and the new covenant, in which the one who assumes the “liturgy” of the high priest (*archiereus*, this time encompassing the descendants of Melchizedek) is Christ himself. Of the four appearances from the lexical family, two refer to the Levitical cult: in 9:21 Moses sprinkles with blood “the tent and all the vessels used in the liturgy” (*panta ta skeuē tēs leitourgias*); in 10:11 the author evokes the priest of the old covenant, who “stands day after day for his liturgical functions [*leitourgōn*], offering again and again the same sacrifices.” The remaining two occurrences refer in turn to Christ, the high priest of the new covenant. In the first (8:2) he is defined as “liturgue of the holy things and of the true tent” (*tōn hagiōn leitourgos kai tēs skēnēs tēs alēthinēs*; cf. Numbers 16:9); in the second (8:6) it is said that he “has obtained a different and better liturgy (*diaphorōteras tetychen leitourgias*), to the degree to which the covenant of which he is mediator is better.” While in fact the sacrifices of the Levites are only an example and shadow (*hypodeigma kai skia*, 8:5) of heavenly things and cannot therefore complete or render perfect (*teleiōsai*, 9:9, 10:1) those who offer them, the sacrifice of the new covenant, in which Christ sacrifices himself, annuls sin (*athetēsīn hamartias*, 9:26) and purifies (*katharīei*, 9:14) and sanctifies the faithful once and for all (*teteleiōken eis to diēnekes tous hagiāzomenous*, 10:14).



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