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ANTONIO CIMINO

# Messianic Experience of Language and Performativity of Faith Agamben's Interpretation of Pauline Faith<sup>1</sup>

## 1. PRELIMINARY REMARKS AND METHODOLOGICAL CLARIFICATIONS: THE RELEVANCE OF AGAMBen'S INTERPRETATION OF ST. PAUL

Among the contemporary philosophical interpretations of Saint Paul, Giorgio Agamben's commentary on the Letter to the Romans<sup>2</sup> deserves special attention at least for three main reasons. Firstly, it reveals a strong internal coherence, since Agamben manages to show to what extent the most important aspects of the Pauline faith can consistently be traced back to its distinctive messianic commitment.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, in approaching the Pauline texts, Agamben combines many methodical strategies in a very original and fruitful way. In fact, his philological accuracy provides reliable and substantial starting points for philosophical considerations that also refer to basic problems of theology, the history of law, political science, the history of literature, and linguistics. Thirdly, despite his just mentioned interdisciplinary approach, Agamben's original reading of the Pauline texts does not lose sight of central philosophical issues. This is because, for Agamben, Paul is not merely an object or theme among others, but someone who also represents a fundamental challenge to philosophy as such. Due to this reading of Paul, Agamben is able to shed new light upon many classical philosophical problems and concepts (e.g. dialectics, performativity, potentiality etc.), and outline original paths of research for current and future philosophical work.

<sup>1</sup> The present article results from my post-doctoral research project *The Truth of Conviction: Attestation, Testimony, and Declaration*, financed by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO). It is part of a larger project, *Overcoming the Faith-Reason Opposition: Pauline Pistis in Contemporary Philosophy*, carried out at the Radboud University Nijmegen and at the University of Groningen. I thank Paul Carls for checking my English.

<sup>2</sup> AGAMBen, Giorgio: *Il tempo che resta. Un commento alla Lettera ai Romani*. Torino: Bollati Boringhieri 2000 (English transl. *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2005). For the present contribution, my primary sources are the original Italian editions of Agamben's books. Nevertheless, for text passages quoted in extenso, I will refer also to English translations, if available. As for Paul's Letters, my quotations are based on the 27th edition of Nestle-Aland's *Novum Testamentum Graece*.

<sup>3</sup> As for messianism in Agamben, see MILLS, Catherine: *The Philosophy of Agamben*. Stocksfield: Acumen 2008, 107–131.

In the present contribution, I intend to demonstrate the fruitful and original character of Agamben's reading of Saint Paul, focusing especially on two themes, namely, messianism and performativity. Even if Agamben explicitly uses performativity only in the last part of his commentary, upon closer consideration one can provide evidence of the fundamental thematic and methodic role performativity and related conceptual frameworks (e.g. operativity, activation etc.) play, more or less implicitly, throughout his interpretation. So I will explain why and how Agamben's interpretation places special emphasis on Paul's messianic experience of language and also what role the performative character of faith plays within this experience.<sup>4</sup>

In order to specify the methodological strategy of my approach to Agamben's interpretation of the Pauline messianism, it makes sense to clarify very briefly in which sense I will use the notion of performativity. My account of performativity exceeds Agamben's conception of the performative, even if in principle the former includes the latter. In fact, in a certain way I intend to radicalize Agamben's approach, showing that he manages to highlight very well many of the dimensions of performativity that define Paul's messianism, even if he explicitly speaks of performativity above all in reference to what he calls "*performativum fidei*".<sup>5</sup> Since the concept of performativity is used in many authors in very different ways,<sup>6</sup> I propose to start from a minimal definition of performativity, which will be specified in the course of my following analyses. In the first instance, then, one could define performativity as the primacy of enactment as such.<sup>7</sup>

In my elaboration of the above-mentioned themes, I will especially focus on three points. My initial concern will be to give a general presen-

<sup>4</sup> In my reading of Agamben's interpretation of Paul, I focus on the relationship between faith, messianism, and language, but I don't devote special attention to Agamben's interpretation of the Pauline experience of time (see AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 60–84; *The Time That Remains*, 59–87), because this theme would require extended specifications, which exceed the immediate scope of the present analysis. So I confine myself to Agamben's account of the Pauline messianism, starting from the primordial discourse dynamics involved in the messianic form of life, namely, the vocation or calling (κλησις), and analyzing the performative character of faith emerging in Paul's experience of the ῥῆμα τῆς πίστεως (Rm 10:8).

<sup>5</sup> See AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 122–127 (*The Time That Remains*, 131–137).

<sup>6</sup> For a general introduction see LOXLEY, James: *Performativity*. London: Routledge 2007.

<sup>7</sup> The methodological meaning of such a minimal definition should be understood in the same sense in which Heidegger speaks of "formally indicative concepts" and Wittgenstein of "family resemblances": see HEIDEGGER, Martin: *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt – Endlichkeit – Einsamkeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann 2004, § 70, and WITTGENSTEIN, Ludwig: *Philosophische Untersuchungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1960, 324. Conceived in general terms, the genuine function of philosophical concepts doesn't consist in a definitive and hypostatized determination, but in a pre-delineation that remains flexible and also open to self-correction. Already Aristotle saw very clearly, more than Plato, this fundamental methodological commitment of philosophical conceptual work: see especially *Eth. Nic.* I 3, 1094b 20, where Aristotle underlines that philosophical discourse operates τύπω, according to the nature of the intended topic.

tation of Agamben's conception of the Pauline messianism. In this regard, I will take into account his interpretation of three seminal Pauline terms, namely κλήσις, ὥς μή, and χρῆσις, which, according to Agamben's reading, express the basic characteristics of Paul's messianic attitude. In the second part, I will concentrate on the fundamental relationship between πίστις and νόμος, which cannot be reduced to a mere opposition, and in which a radically new experience of language emerges. Agamben interprets this relationship on the basis of the dialectics between operativity, an aspect of performativity, and deactivation. Finally, I will explain the reasons why Agamben uses the notion of performativity in order to specify the linguistic features of the Pauline faith. In fact, the concept of *performativum fidei* enables Agamben to put the problem of faith into a more general context, which concerns other domains of human culture, particularly law and institutionalized power.

## 2. AGAM BEN'S READING OF THE PAULINE MESSIANISM: κλήσις AS A MESSIANIC TRANSFORMATION

In the course of his interpretation, Agamben gives priority to the notion of the Pauline κλήσις,<sup>8</sup> being convinced that it and its related terms express Paul's messianic form of life in a very significant way.<sup>9</sup> According to Agamben, the basic meaning of the Pauline κλήσις can be summarized underlining the fact that vocation is

“the particular transformation that every juridical status and worldly condition undergoes because of, and only because of, its relation to the messianic event. It is therefore not a matter of eschatological indifference, but of change, almost an internal shifting of each and every single worldly condition by virtue of being ‘called’”.<sup>10</sup>

In his account of the Pauline vocation as an “internal shifting” of factual worldly conditions, Agamben strongly emphasizes the transformative character defining the dynamics of the messianic κλήσις. The first peculiar point of this reading is the radical formality of the Pauline κλήσις, namely, the fact that this κλήσις doesn't have any determined content and doesn't contain any particular prescription.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the messianic vocation doesn't represent an alternative to the factual conditions in which individuals stand. Rather, the primordial emptiness of Paul's κλήσις is characterized by a productive negation, which should be understood as a *revocation*:

<sup>8</sup> See especially AGAM BEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 25–46 (*The Time That Remains*, 19–43).

<sup>9</sup> Agamben particularly refers to 1 Cor 7:17–22 and Rm 1:1, stressing Paul's consistent use of terms and clauses related to καλέω: κλήσις, κλητός, ἐκκλησία, and, above all, ἕκαστος ἐν τῇ κλήσει ἢ ἐκλήθη, ἐν ταύτῃ μενέτω (1 Cor 7:20).

<sup>10</sup> AGAM BEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 28 (*The Time That Remains*, 22).

<sup>11</sup> See AGAM BEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 28 (*The Time That Remains*, 23).

“Vocation calls for nothing and to no place. For this reason it may coincide with the factual condition in which each person finds himself called, but for this very reason, it also revokes the condition from top to bottom. *The messianic vocation is the revocation of every vocation.*”<sup>12</sup>

Vocation as revocation doesn’t consist in a mere elimination or abrogation of the factual worldly conditions, but in an essential transformation of them. This transformation is at the same time a preservation and an overcoming.<sup>13</sup> It is preservation because individuals remain in the same factual conditions in which they have already been. The change and the overcoming indeed affect the way in which individuals experience their worldly situations, since they live their factual conditions on the basis of the *ὥς μή*.<sup>14</sup>

Since the messianic transformation doesn’t have any content, it is able to pervade each factual condition and to give a new feature or form to it. If the *ὥς μή* represents the negative aspect of the Pauline *κλήσις* as the messianic attitude toward the factual conditions, the positive one is *χρήσις*, namely, the “use” of them. According to Agamben’s inspiring clarification,<sup>15</sup> one should focus on the juridical sense of *χρήσις* and therefore emphasize the fact that, in the messianic form of life, worldly conditions don’t represent tenures and essential features. The messianic life only uses the worldly facticity in which it finds itself, making no claim to full possession. For the messianic life, the world remains the same, only the way in which it is experienced and lived is radically different. One could also formulate this point by saying that the world doesn’t change at all; rather our world-experience receives a new tone or rhythm.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 29 (*The Time That Remains*, 23).

<sup>13</sup> In his reading of the Pauline messianism, Agamben formulates a very interesting interpretive hypothesis, according to which one may notice similarities between Paul’s messianic logic and Hegel’s dialectic logic. In this regard, Agamben especially refers to the fascinating connection between the Pauline *καταργεῖν* and Hegel’s basic concept of *Aufhebung*. Similarly to Hegel’s *Aufhebung*, the Pauline *καταργεῖν* means a preserving deactivation: see AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 94–96 (*The Time That Remains*, 99–101). See DE BOEVER, Arne: *Politics and Poetics of Divine Violence. On a Figure in Giorgio Agamben and Walter Benjamin*, in: CLEMENS, Justin/HERON, Nicholas/MURRAY, Alex (eds.): *The Work of Giorgio Agamben. Law, Literature, Life*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2008, 82–96, here 93–94. I will specify this point in the section dedicated to the relationship between *πίστις* and *νόμος*.

<sup>14</sup> See AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 28 (*The Time That Remains*, 22–23): “The messianic vocation does not, however, have any specific content; it is nothing but the repetition of those same factual or juridical conditions *in which* or *as which* we are called.”

<sup>15</sup> See AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 31 (*The Time That Remains*, 26).

<sup>16</sup> Agamben’s interpretation is very close to Heidegger’s reading of the *ὥς μή*: see HEIDEGGER, Martin: *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*. Transl. by M. Fritsch and J.A. Gosetti-Ferencei. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2004, 72–73 and especially 86. Here one could also see further significant overlaps with other philosophical or theological authors. Just to mention an example, one could take into account Wittgenstein’s conception of the ethical attitude reached at the end of *Tractatus*. In fact, this attitude doesn’t affect the worldly contents, but only the manner in which one sees the world: see *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, 6.54.



The special emphasis placed by Agamben on the transformation that defines the messianic experience is clearly consistent with his interpretation of messianic time. Messianic time is not separate from worldly or chronological time, but it does represent a radical transformation of it in the form of a contraction.<sup>17</sup> One could also express this point of Agamben's interpretation by saying that, according to him, while messianic time is chronological, it is experienced in a very different way. This qualitative transformation of experienced (or lived) time presupposes an historical event, namely, the first messianic event referring to Jesus' resurrection. Nevertheless, it cannot be reduced to a chronological order in the normal sense. The second messianic event (παρουσία) cannot be considered as a predictable occurrence either. Messianic time, deeply different from the prophetic experience of time and also from the apocalyptic or eschatological one,<sup>18</sup> escapes every chronological objectification and relies on a contracted present, in which the apostolic announcement takes place in and through the above-mentioned messianic transformation.

### 3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ΠΙΣΤΙΣ AND ΝΟΜΟΣ: AGAMBEN'S DISCOVERY OF THE PERFORMATIVE DIMENSION OF PAUL'S MESSIANISM

Agamben's conception of the Pauline messianic attitude represents an interpretive approach that also enables one to give a very consistent answer to a fundamental problem that every exegesis of Paul's Letters faces, namely, how the relationship between πίστις and νόμος should be understood. The central point emerging in Agamben's interpretation can be explained by introducing the notion of performativity, which will be taken in first instance here in the sense of the above-mentioned minimal definition.

In fact, even if tacitly, the performative character of the Pauline messianism already emerges in Agamben's account of the vocation. In fact, on closer consideration, the emphasis placed by Agamben on the primordial formal character of the Pauline κλήσις implicitly indicates two basic features of performativity as the primacy of enactment as such. Firstly, the genuine messianic attitude doesn't produce new contents, since its real substance consists in the new manner in which factual conditions are experienced. Otherwise put, according to Agamben, in the Pauline messianic life the fundamental point is not which factual conditions are experienced, but only how they are enacted. Secondly, in Agamben's reading, this performative disempowerment of the worldly contents is consistently linked to his general interpretive framework, which indeed makes use of the just mentioned messianic performativity. It must be remembered, of course, that this messianic performativity emphasizes the primacy of the enact-

<sup>17</sup> See AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 64 (*The Time That Remains*, 64).

<sup>18</sup> See AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 60–65 (*The Time That Remains*, 59–64).

ment as such over the worldly contents, in contradistinction to dogmatic forms of religion.<sup>19</sup> I will specify this point in the section devoted to Paul's experience of the ῥῆμα τῆς πίστεως.

The central role performativity plays in Agamben's account of the Pauline messianism is confirmed and becomes more and more apparent in his reading of further basic Pauline terms, especially in reference to apostolic announcement and faith.<sup>20</sup> In fact, Agamben stresses that the Pauline apostolic announcement as such has an operative character, since a clear distinction between the act of announcing and the content of the announcement is not feasible. So, according to Agamben, in Paul εὐαγγέλιον never means any written stock of dogmatic contents separate from the concrete enactment of announcement. This primordial indistinction between the act of announcing and the contents announced represents the crucial starting point that enables Agamben to single out the manifold performativity of the Pauline πίστις and of the related messianic experience of language.<sup>21</sup> Agamben emphasizes this point when he says: "What has just been announced is the same faith that realizes the power of the announcement. Faith is the announcement's being in act, its *energeia*."<sup>22</sup>

Agamben indeed substantiates his emphasis on the performative nature of Paul's faith by focusing on the essential relationship established in Paul's Letters between faith and ἐνέργεια and by referring to many text passages where this connection manifestly emerges:

"Paul often couples faith with *energeia*, being in act, so that with regard to potentiality, faith is *energumen* (*energoumenē*) par excellence, the principle of actuality and operativity (Gal. 5:6: '*pistis di'agapēs energoumenē*, faith operative in love'; Col. 1:29: 'according to his [the Messiah's] *energeia*, the one operating [*energoumenē*] in my power'). But for Paul, this principle is not external to the announcement; rather, it is precisely that within it which makes potentiality active [...] (Gal. 3:4: 'that which makes potentiality operative [*energon dynameis*] among you, comes from the hearing of faith [*euaggelizetai tēn pistin*']'), while at the same time, it may also be presented as the very content of what is announced (Gal. 1:23: 'Now he [Paul] announces the faith [*euaggelizetai tēn pistin*'])."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 9–10 (*The Time That Remains*, 1–2).

<sup>20</sup> See AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 85–89 (*The Time That Remains*, 88–93).

<sup>21</sup> AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 86 (*The Time That Remains*, 90): "Coming to grips with the *euaggelion* thus necessarily means entering into an experience of language in which the text of the letter is at every point indistinguishable from the announcement and the announcement from the good announced. *Pistis*, faith, is the name Paul gives to this zone of indistinction."

<sup>22</sup> AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 87 (*The Time That Remains*, 90).

<sup>23</sup> AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 87 (*The Time That Remains*, 90). In this regard, further text passages from Paul's Letters can be taken into account in order to confirm and substantiate this interpretive approach on the basis of concrete textual references. I would like to mention just a few cases from the letters to the Thessalonians and to Philemon: μνημονεύοντες ὑμῶν τοῦ ἔργου τῆς πίστεως (1 Thess 1:3); λόγον θεοῦ, ὃς καὶ ἐνεργεῖται ἐν ὑμῖν τοῖς πιστεύουσιν (1 Thess 2:13); ὅπως

This operative or performative nature of the Pauline faith and of the related announcement is also highlighted by Agamben on the basis of the term πληροφορία.<sup>24</sup> Agamben reads it within the framework of the fundamental contraposition between an empty discourse, which may be repeated, believed or verified (ἐν λόγῳ μόνον), and the genuine apostolic announcement, which relies on very specific conditions that are strongly linked to performativity. What these conditions could be will now be discussed.

Agamben focuses on the situation-related nature of the Pauline announcement and faith. In fact, Paul's announcement is not a mere discourse expressing certain information, but it originates in a concrete situation. This link to the concrete individual situation of the announcement is an essential feature, not a contingent or accidental one. Under these circumstances, the announcement and the related πίστις address concrete individuals and originate in Paul's factual situation.<sup>25</sup> Otherwise put, announcement and πίστις are based on the first and second person perspective. According to Agamben, the πληροφορία that defines Paul's announcement has its roots exactly in the πίστις of Paul and also of his listeners or addressees, so that, for the given situation, Paul's announcement is always enacted and comes to fulfillment in and through the πίστις.

Against this background, one can appreciate the consistency of Agamben's reading, paying attention especially to what extent the emphasis on the performative or operative character of the Pauline πίστις enables one to consider the relationship between πίστις and νόμος from a new viewpoint, which is expressed with the verb καταργεῖν. In fact, the relationship between πίστις and νόμος cannot be reduced to a mere opposition, in which the Pauline πίστις would simply abolish or eliminate the νόμος. One could summarize Agamben's point by saying that the performativity or operativity of the Pauline πίστις deactivates, or renders inoperative, the νόμος.<sup>26</sup>

ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς σου ἐνεργῆς γένηται ἐν ἐπιγνώσει παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ τοῦ ἐν ἡμῖν εἰς Χριστόν (Philemon 6). Agamben mentions also the Aristotelian conception of ἐνέργεια within the framework of his analysis of the performative character, which defines the Pauline word of faith: see AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 126 (*The Time That Remains*, 136). For Agamben's reading of Aristotle's distinction between potentiality and actuality see also AGAMBEN, Giorgio: *Potentialities. Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 1999, 177–184.

<sup>24</sup> See AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 87–88 (*The Time that Remains*, 91). In his clarification of πληροφορία, Agamben especially refers to 1 Thess 1:5: ὅτι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον ἡμῶν οὐκ ἐγενήθη εἰς ὑμᾶς ἐν λόγῳ μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν δυνάμει καὶ ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ καὶ [ἐν] πληροφορίᾳ πολλῇ.

<sup>25</sup> AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 87 (*The Time That Remains*, 91): "The *euaggelion* is therefore not merely a discourse, a *logos* that says something about something independent of the site of its enunciation and the subject who hears it."

<sup>26</sup> AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 93 (*The Time That Remains*, 97–98): "This is the meaning of the verb *katargeō*: just as, in the *nomos*, the power of the promise was transposed onto works and mandatory precepts, so does the messianic now render these works inoperative; it gives potentiality back to them in the form of inoperativity and ineffectiveness. The messianic is not the des-



It makes sense to emphasize that the intriguing ambiguity of the relationship between faith and law also plays a central role in Agamben's account of the original meaning of πίστις, which, according to his reconstruction, should be contextualized in a primordial sphere, which he, following other scholars, calls "prelaw".<sup>27</sup> On the basis of his archaeological approach to the notion of faith, Agamben tries to show to what extent faith, in a primordial way, is strongly connected with oath, and to what extent both belong to the sphere of pre-law, in which one would not manage to distinguish magic, religion, and law. Under these presuppositions, Agamben argues that Paul's discussion of the relationship between πίστις and νόμος cannot be considered as a strict contraposition of two heterogeneous dimensions, precisely because they are both rooted in the sphere of pre-law. Otherwise put, the Pauline dialectics between πίστις and νόμος should be understood within the framework of this unique primordial dimension.<sup>28</sup> Consistently, Agamben places a special emphasis on the subsequent, more specific juridical features of πίστις in ancient civilizations.<sup>29</sup>

Agamben's archaeological remarks concerning the primordial meaning of πίστις are not only of historical and philological nature, inasmuch as they also represent a relevant basis for a more philosophical commitment. In fact, on closer consideration, emphasizing the (pre-)juridical features of πίστις and its intriguing relation with law and also prelaw implies a concrete substantiation of the thesis about the performative character of πίστις: if law and the juridical sphere are eminent dimensions in which the performativity of human language clearly emerges, the performativity of

struction but the deactivation of the law, rendering the law inexecutable." For a useful contextualization of this theme in Agamben's work see GULLÌ, Bruno: *The Ontology and Politics of Exception: Reflections on the Work of Giorgio Agamben*, in: CALARCO, Matthew/DECAROLI, Steven (eds.): *Giorgio Agamben. Sovereignty and Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2007, 219–242.

<sup>27</sup> As for the notion of pre-law, see AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 106–108 (*The Time That Remains*, 113–115). A more extended and critical analysis of this notion is to be found in AGAMBEN, Giorgio: *Il sacramento del linguaggio. Archeologia del giuramento*. Roma: Laterza 2008, 22–25 and 31–40 (*The Sacrament of Language. An Archeology of the Oath*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2011, 15–17 and 22–29). The following remark is particularly relevant in view of a critical approach to the concept of pre-law: "With the *fides*, exactly as with the oath, we thus find ourselves in a sphere in which the problem of the genetic relationship between religion and law has to be taken up again on new foundations. It does no good, in light of the complexity of these institutions, which seem to be at once moral, religious, social, and juridical, to appeal, as some do, to the category of prelaw (Imbert, 411). The fact that the institutions in question are not juridically sanctioned (impunity of perjury in the most ancient epoch, absence of legal recourse for the creditor who has trusted the *fides* of the debtor) does not mean that they must be considered religious rather than juridical; it means rather that in them the investigation has hit upon a limit, which obliges us to reconsider our definitions of what is juridical and what is religious." (AGAMBEN: *Il sacramento del linguaggio*, 37–38 [*The Sacrament of Language*, 27]).

<sup>28</sup> Within this framework, messianism as such cannot be considered as a purely religious phenomenon, but it should be understood in reference to the historical dialectics between law and religion: see especially AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 110–112 (*The Time That Remains*, 118–120).

<sup>29</sup> See AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 107–111 (*The Time That Remains*, 114–119).

faith is not an accidental or superficial feature, since it is rooted in the primordial performativity that characterizes human experience and language and defines the sphere of pre-law, even if faith will be characterized by a specific form of performativity.

#### 4. PAUL'S PERFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE OF τὸ ῥῆμα τῆς πίστεως

All above-analyzed points concerning the performative nature of Paul's faith and announcement are consistently synthesized in Agamben's account of the ῥῆμα τῆς πίστεως, "the word of faith".<sup>30</sup> In this regard, Agamben very convincingly shows that and to what extent Paul's experience of faith is, in the final analysis, an originary linguistic experience rooted in a primordial performativity, namely, in the *performativum fidei*, as Agamben denotes it.

The starting point of this challenging and original reading is, first and foremost, the verb ὁμολογεῖν in Rm 10:9, which, for Agamben, pointedly expresses the seminal correspondence, inside the word of faith, between mouth and heart.<sup>31</sup> In this case, the denotative correspondence between words and facts does not play any role at all, since the nature of the correspondence belonging to the ῥῆμα τῆς πίστεως indeed indicates a performative self-reference:

"The experience of the word of faith thus does not entail the experience of a denotative character of a word, its referring to things, but an experience of the word's being near, held in the harmony between mouth and heart, and, by means of this *homologeîn*, the word becomes the deliverer of salvation. [...] When thinking of the nearness of the mouth and heart, we have to venture something like a performative efficacy of the word of faith realized in its very pronouncement."<sup>32</sup>

In his elaboration, Agamben makes use of a very particular point of Austin's account of performativity, namely, the fact that, in order to be really felicitous in its realization, the performative utterance should be linked to certain situation-related conditions, which are not linguistic and also concern, among other things, the personal qualities and functions of the individual who articulates the performative utterance. Here, not (only) is the content of the utterance as such relevant, but (first and foremost) knowing who is pronouncing the utterance and under which circumstances is likewise important. For Agamben, the performative power of Paul's ῥῆμα τῆς πίστεως paradigmatically exemplifies this situation-relatedness by addressing the first/second person perspective of the individuals involved (Paul and the addressed ἐκκλησία).

<sup>30</sup> In his interpretation of this term, Agamben especially refers to Rm 10:6-10. See AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 120-127 (*The Time That Remains*, 129-137).

<sup>31</sup> See AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 121 (*The Time That Remains*, 130).

<sup>32</sup> AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 122 (*The Time That Remains*, 131).

But in Agamben's reading of the ῥῆμα τῆς πίστεως one can notice a further performative aspect, which is consistently linked to the three basic notions of the Pauline messianism, namely, κλήσις, ὡς μή, and χρήσις. In fact, the performative nature of the ῥῆμα τῆς πίστεως indicates an original experience of language as well, namely, the messianic one, in which codified norms and related institutionalizations are suspended due to the transformation that defines the Pauline messianism and culminates precisely in this *performativum fidei*.

Under these circumstances, according to Agamben's account, the performativity of the messianic experience of language refers not only to the basic consistency (ὁμολογεῖν) between articulation of discourse and personal qualities, but also to the deactivation of the denotative or constative character of language. Otherwise put, the messianic experience of language also indicates an inner transformation of language, by which the normal denotative relation becomes inoperative. In fact, in the case of the denotative relation, language corresponds to things, so that the *dictum* and its external reference to the world play the central role. Therefore, in Agamben's general elaboration, and not only in reference to Paul's messianic experience, performativity essentially consists in deactivating the referential feature of language and in transforming it into a self-reference:

"what should be highlighted is that the self-referentiality of the performative is always constituted through a suspension of the normal denotative function of language. The performative verb is actually constructed with a *dictum* that, taken on its own, is of a purely constative nature, without which it would remain empty and inefficient. [...] It is this constative quality of the *dictum* that is suspended and put into question at the very moment that it becomes the object of a performative syntagma. [...] The performative thus substitutes normal denotative relations between words and deeds with a self-referential relation that, in ousting the first, posits itself as decisive fact. What is essential here is not a relation of truth between words and things, but rather, the pure form of the relation between language and world, now generating linkages and real effects."<sup>33</sup>

The essential distinction between the word of faith and the denotative character of sentences concerning deeds is emphasized by Agamben by also taking into account what he calls the "nominal sentence".<sup>34</sup> The belief in Jesus Messiah does not consist in a pure epistemic act of believing something about Jesus, this according to the predicative structure of scientific language (see the Aristotelian formula of λέγειν τι κατὰ τινος).<sup>35</sup> In fact, the apophantic features of language as well as the related traditional ontological framework do not play any role in the linguistic self-articulation of the Pauline πίστις. Consequently, the substance of faith or belief doesn't

<sup>33</sup> AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 123–124 (*The Time That Remains*, 132–133).

<sup>34</sup> See AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 118–120 (*The Time That Remains*, 127–129).

<sup>35</sup> See also AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 127 (*The Time That Remains*, 137).

refer to an expression of epistemic contents articulated in predicative assertions, which in turn are based on the use of the verb 'be'. So, according to Agamben, in Paul only the nominal sentence 'Jesus Messiah' is relevant, while the predicative sentence 'Jesus is the Messiah' is not. In Paul's experience of language and in his word of faith 'the Messiah' is not a predicate which can be attributed to the substance 'Jesus', but an inseparable feature of Jesus as such, apart from philosophical distinctions between essence and existence, or between predicates and subject.

This peculiar experience of language belonging to the word of faith and connected to the Pauline πληροφορία is consistently linked to the just mentioned nominal sentence. Since there is here no distinction between substances and qualities, between existence and essence, the experience of the nominal sentence is based on an absolute positing, i.e. not on a relative positing, which takes place in and through the connection between a substance and its predicates, or between essence and existence. In the final analysis, the absolute positing belonging to the nominal sentence of the word of faith cannot mean a belief in the fact that Jesus is the Messiah, but only in Jesus Messiah, where the relationship to Jesus is characterized by a full adhesion.<sup>36</sup>

The qualitative transformation of language belonging to messianism is, for Agamben, the fundamental aspect one should see in the nature of the performative. Here one can notice some basic analogies between messianism and performativity. Messianism does not introduce new contents into the world, but it operates a radical transformation in the way in which one experiences his own factual situation. In a very similar way, the performative does not introduce new *dicta*, but it operates an internal transformation of language and its *dicta* due to a fundamental transition from an external reference to an operative self-reference. In both cases, the described transformation is based on a peculiar dialectic between operativity and deactivation: the operativity of the messianic experience consists in the deactivation (or revocation) of the factual worldly situations that are experienced on the basis of the ὥς μή; the operativity of the Pauline πίστις consists in deactivating the νόμος on the basis of the καταργεῖν; the performativity of language refers to the deactivation of the pure denotative relation on the basis of an operative self-reference.

In all cases, according to Agamben's very consistent reading, deactivation does not at all mean a pure elimination, but rather a transformation of the worldly situation, of the νόμος, and of language, respectively. This very important point could also be reformulated by saying that the qualita-

<sup>36</sup> This full adhesion expressed in the Pauline πληροφορία and articulated in the absolute character of the nominal sentence expresses, for Agamben, the concrete meaning of the Pauline sentence: ζῶ δὲ οὐκέτι ἐγώ, ζῆ δὲ ἐν ἐμοὶ Χριστός (Gal 2:20). See AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 87 and 120 (*The Time That Remains*, 91 and 129).



tive transformation concerning world, law, and language disempowers one-sided, codified, and rigidified experiences of them. If we want to draw consequences from Agamben's approach, we could also say that the revolutionary character of the Pauline messianism especially concerns its revocation of world, law, and language, inasmuch as it enables us to free ourselves from the pre-existing, codified, and normal givens.

Summarizing the main points concerning the role performativity plays in Agamben's reading of the Pauline faith, one could also stress two strongly interconnected aspects, namely, performativity as consistency (*ὁμολογεῖν*) between articulation of discourse and personal qualities, i.e. between mouth and heart, and performativity as a self-referential character of language, which includes the suspension of its denotative features.<sup>37</sup> In the final analysis, the Pauline *ὁμολογεῖν* expresses exactly these two aspects of the messianic performativity belonging to the word of faith.

However, in introducing the notion of performativity into his interpretation of the Pauline faith, Agamben does not confine himself to a mere application of this concept on the basis of a pre-established formulation. On the contrary, with his introduction and use of performativity he tries to develop a deeper account of it and to put it into a larger philosophical context, one which refers especially to performativity as a primordial character of human experience and culture. It makes sense to focus on the main aspects of his approach to this theme, especially on the intriguing relationship between the juridical sphere and religious experience.

According to Agamben, performativity is not merely a feature of a certain type of utterances. Performativity refers to a primordial power of human language, which especially emerges in the sphere of law. In this case, the specific function of language is not to express facts or to refer to facts, but to produce them:

"the *dictum* is itself a *factum*, and as such, obliges those among whom it was uttered. This means that the performative bears witness to a phase in human culture in which [...] language does not merely refer to things on the basis of a constative or truth relation, but through a very particular kind of operation, in which the word swears on itself, it itself becomes the fundamental fact."<sup>38</sup>

In the course of these considerations, Agamben argues that the denotative relation between language and world is a derivative one, inasmuch as it follows from the disruption of the above-mentioned primordial performa-

<sup>37</sup> AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 125 (*The Time That Remains*, 134): "As is the case with every linguistic act, so too with Paul does the word of faith rise forth to go beyond the denotative relation between language and the world, toward a different and more originary status of the word. In the same way, for Paul, *homologia* does not consist in a relation between words and things, but in the language itself in the nearness between mouth and heart."

<sup>38</sup> AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 124 (*The Time That Remains*, 133).



tivity.<sup>39</sup> Within the framework of this tension between the denotative and the performative, Agamben tries to re-read the Pauline relationship between πίστις and νόμος, connecting them with two different experiences of language. Against this background, Agamben argues that in Paul πίστις and νόμος essentially refer to two opposing tendencies:

"The first, which Paul calls *nomos*, attempts to encapsulate the excess by articulating it in precepts and in semantic contents. The second, which coincides with *pistis*, is oriented, on the contrary, toward maintaining it open beyond any determinate signification. It follows that there are two ways to go beyond the denotative function of language toward the experience of its event. The first, according to the oath paradigm, attempts to use it as a means to ground contract and obligation. For the other, however, the experience of the pure word opens up the space for gratuitousness and use. The latter is an expression of the subject's freedom [...]; the former is the expression of his subjection to a codified system of norms and articles of faith."<sup>40</sup>

It makes sense to reformulate in a more pointed and perspicuous way the very important consequences Agamben draws from his account of the Pauline opposition between πίστις and νόμος and also from the primordial performativity belonging to human language.

Agamben's conception of performativity seems to imply essentially two basic, strongly interwoven perspectives. According to the first perspective, which basically is historical, the primordial performative sphere of human language undergoes essential separations, for instance between denotative and performative (in the narrow sense), or between religion and law, or between language and things. Considered as a whole, this process essentially is degeneration. The second perspective is dialectical and alludes to the two above-mentioned experiences of word or language. On the one hand, the word of the νόμος implies a rigid codification of norms and dogmatic contents, so that the primordial performative power of language is markedly reduced. In this case, one could also speak of an objectification and dogmatization, whereas one can notice what Agamben calls the "juridicizing of all human relations in their entirety",<sup>41</sup> in reference to the phenomenon of the institutionalization of human life. On the other hand,

<sup>39</sup> In this regard, the conceptual framework of Agamben's considerations is very close to Heidegger's approach to the question of truth and language within the context of the history of metaphysics. In fact, for Heidegger as well, the denotative function of language and the related conception of truth as correspondence follow from a derivative experience. According to Heidegger, the primordial nature of language and truth exhibits what one can consider a performative character, which is essentially linked to the dynamics of being as event (*Ereignis*). The derivative, metaphysical conception of language and truth (denotative function of language, truth as correspondence) is unilateral and inauthentic, following from a disruption of the original sphere of the relationship between human existence and being as event. See for instance HEIDEGGER, Martin: *Unterwegs zur Sprache*. Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann 1985, 81–146.

<sup>40</sup> AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 125 (*The Time that Remains*, 134–135).

<sup>41</sup> AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 125–126 (*The Time That Remains*, 135).

the *performativum fidei* and the messianic point to an experience of language that essentially exceeds the scope of any objectification, dogmatization, and institutionalization, whereas the word of faith is not of denotative nature and cannot be reduced to the juridical performative. Otherwise put, the word of faith is neither the denotative utterance concerning deeds in the world nor the juridical form of performative, which “posits itself as fact”.<sup>42</sup> Here Agamben sees a pure potentiality of saying, which “also exceeds the act of saying itself, the performative power of language”,<sup>43</sup> and turns out to be a radical freedom from mere states of facts and also from states of law.

### *Abstract*

*The author intends to demonstrate the fruitful and original character of Agamben’s reading of Saint Paul, focusing especially on two themes, namely, messianism and performativity. Even if Agamben explicitly uses performativity only in the last part of his book on Paul, upon closer consideration one can provide evidence of the fundamental thematic and methodological role performativity and related conceptual frameworks (e.g. operativity, activation etc.) play, more or less implicitly, throughout his interpretation. So the author explains why and how Agamben’s interpretation places special emphasis on Paul’s messianic experience of language and also what role the performative character of faith plays within this experience.*

<sup>42</sup> AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 126 (*The Time That Remains*, 136).

<sup>43</sup> AGAMBEN: *Il tempo che resta*, 127 (*The Time That Remains*, 137).