Sabbath and Ecological Crisis: Inoperativity in Political Theology

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

SABBATH AND ECOLOGICAL CRISIS
INOERATIVITY IN POLITICAL THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the significance of ritual inoperativity for political theology. Drawing from representative interpreters of biblical/traditional sources, contemporary philosophical reflection, and practical analysis of rituals, this study argues that rituals such as Sabbath, vigil, shmita, and fiesta paint a unique image of human identity and authority in the world. This image is starkly opposed to the common political-theological framework in which God is defined through action, and human beings are similarly defined as action-producing beings. In contrast, ritual inoperativity depicts God’s identity and authority as one who gives rest or “lets be.” For this reason, human identity and authority should follow a similar model. This study argues that this perspective of political power could be enormously important for addressing the most significant political challenge in the contemporary world: climate change. It concludes by suggesting how a climate-healing Sabbath ritual could function
INTRODUCTION

What is the value of doing nothing?

Tersely put, that is the question this dissertation seeks to answer. Of course, “doing nothing” is a bit of an over-simplification. My focus is not on sloth, mindless wandering, or the various types of unproductive diversion that occupy human attention in all cultures. Naturally, anthropologists have a rightful interest in investigating such matters, and they are significant in their own way.¹ But my interest is in what I will call “ritual inoperativity,” specifically the kind that emerges in Jewish and Christian traditions, usually in the form of the Sabbath day (and similar and related phenomena such as the shmita or sabbatical year, night vigils and fiestas).²

To be more specific, what follows will focus on the value of such rituals for political theory. This could seem counterintuitive. To some, Sabbath is a private practice, interesting to researchers because of its “high cost” as a religious activity, but hardly overtly relevant to the political world.³ Although many theologians have recently paid attention to the influence of


² I will use the term “ritual inoperativity” or just “inoperativity” frequently in this dissertation, even though most of the time I will be talking about Sabbath in particular. The reason for this term is that I want to emphasize that the ritual qualities of Sabbath are not limited to Sabbath alone, but extend into other rituals. Furthermore, it is possible that the investigation of inoperativity developed here could be applicable to other religious rituals with which I am less familiar, such as those found in Hinduism, Buddhism, or Shinto.

³ On the significance of Sabbath as a “high cost” religious activity (that is, one which take up a large amount of time and commitment) see Karl G. D. Bailey and Arian C. B. Timoti, “Delight or Distraction: An Exploratory Analysis of Sabbath-Keeping Internalization,” Journal of Psychology and Theology 43, no. 3 (2015): 192-203.
doctrines on political paradigms, fewer have focused on how doctrines interact with rituals and practices that together correlate with political worldviews. This dissertation seeks to partly fill that void by offering a political theology of a unique category of religious activity, inoperativity. The following chapters will show how Christian and Jewish practices of inoperativity unveil a perception of God’s relationship to humans and humans’ relationship to each other that is politically weighted.

By “politically weighted” I refer to the fact that when we engage in particular religious practices oriented to God (or, as philosopher Jean-Yves Lacoste puts it, “the Absolute”) we are saying something about how divine authority functions (because the origin of the ritual is grounded in some kind of liturgy, or “service” to divine authority). We are also at the same time saying something about human identity, because rituals model how humans are supposed to exist in the world.

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4 I refer here to the burgeoning field known as “political theology.” Although there is extensive debate as to the precise definition of political theology, most theologians functioning in this area frame their work as a reaction to mid-twentieth century theorist Carl Schmitt’s claim that “all the modern concepts of the state are secularized theological concepts.” See Carl Schmitt, Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty, trans. George Schwab (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 36. This seems to imply that ways of thinking about God have direct impact on political concepts, and therefore that theological/ritual ideas are not isolated from political affairs but are the “code” underwriting them, even if covertly. Reflection on Schmitt’s work has led to recent developments of this idea from a variety of thinkers. See, for example, Hent De Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds., Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006); Paul W. Kahn, Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Saul Newman, Political Theology: A Critical Introduction (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), and Catherine Keller, Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Republic (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

5 The idea that attention to ritual is essential for political theology has been noted by John Thatamanil, “How Not to Be a Religion: Genealogy, Identity, Wonder,” in Common Goods: Economy, Ecology, and Political Theology, ed. Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, Catherine Keller, and Elias Orega-Aponte (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 54-72. Despite this recognition, subsequent essays in this volume pay surprisingly little attention to the significance of rituals. Perhaps this is a result of the bifurcation within the field of religious studies that apportions rituals to the anthropologists, and ideas/concepts to the theologians.
These two aspects of ritual—human identity and authority—are the centerpieces of politics. They also feed into each other with a kind of circularity. To know what human beings strive to be will convey important information about how they should be governed. Conversely, the type of authority exercised over human beings will influence their identity. What this means is that rituals reside at the roots of human conceptions of politics and government. Studying rituals of inoperativity such as Sabbath is therefore immensely important for framing any kind of political theology.

The central argument of this dissertation consists of two closely related points: First, I claim that certain rituals of inoperativity—primarily Sabbath—disclose a conception of God’s absolute power in which this power functions by passivity. In other words, rather than exercising control, God “lets be.” At first, this may sound like nothing more than standard modern deism—the enlightenment perspective in which God creates the world and then steps back to let it run itself. However, the difference is established by my second point: “Letting be” frames a key element of human identity as well. Humans participate in the inoperative authority of God by virtue of their status as imago Dei. This means that human beings are not defined by their production, or ability to manipulate and control the world. These concepts of identity and authority are latent within the Sabbath ritual (as well as the other analogous rituals I will analyze).

To explicate this understanding of inoperativity, I will draw on three primary approaches: biblical traditions, contemporary philosophy, and practical engagement with rituals. Of course, these categories overlap significantly (and the third obviously draws on the first two). However,
they provide unique angles for addressing the common question: How does doing nothing impact politics? These categories also correspond to the first three chapters of this dissertation.

Chapter 1 addresses the theology of inoperativity that arises from reflection on biblical traditions. In order to draw on this vast trove of resources (a historical/systematic task that could take volumes of its own) I will focus on the work of two theologians whose reflections utilize this material in related fashion. These are the Christian theologian Jürgen Moltmann and the Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel. Reflecting on texts from the Christian Old and New Testaments, and particularly on the Genesis creation stories, Moltmann arrives at a theology of the Sabbath in which God’s inoperativity forms the basis for the human *imago Dei*. Heschel, utilizing both biblical texts and concepts from rabbinic tradition, presents an image of Sabbath that curbs “spatial covetousness,” returning human beings from the realm of material production to the eternal utterance of time. Together, these thinkers lay a foundation for thinking of human inoperativity as a key to human identity through participation in divine inoperativity.

Chapter 2 investigates developments of this idea in contemporary philosophy, focusing in particular on two thinkers for whom inoperativity is a central theme, Jean-Yves Lacoste and Giorgio Agamben. Lacoste argues that through inoperative rituals such as the night vigil, human beings implicitly develop a conception of the Absolute as non-necessity, or excess of being. By these rituals, human beings exist with the Absolute in a state of rest. Agamben, probing the same idea from a more overtly political angle, differentiates between two types of inoperativity. A sovereign form of inoperativity maintains the apparatus of power, while another “messianic” inoperativity disables the categories that preserve power. Combined, Lacoste’s and Agamben’s
arguments show that inoperativity plays a major role in either maintaining or upending political structures.

Moving beneath the broad level of abstract reflection on inoperativity, chapter 3 evaluates two contrasting—though complementary—approaches to specific practices. The selected examples are early-twentieth century Jewish philosopher Rav Kook’s work on *shmita* (the sabbatical year) and contemporary Catholic theologian Roberto Goizueta’s approach to popular rituals in Latina/o religion. Kook’s advocacy for the *heter mekhira* (the partial suspension of the sabbatical year) demonstrates the practical idea that inoperative rituals must be able to suspend themselves to produce the context for freedom and greater inoperativity. In other words, they must be oriented toward an end or goal. Goizueta makes what initially appears to be the opposite argument. Focusing on Latina/o rituals such as the fiesta, Goizueta claims that inoperative rituals must not be framed as a form of *poiesis*, or productive action, but must remain *praxis*—a form of life in themselves. Despite the apparent contrast between these two practical angles, this chapter argues that they expose two sides of liberating ritual inoperativity. To create life, it must be truly inoperative.

Chapter 4 draws together the insights of the previous chapters into a political ethic of inoperative ritual, seeking to show the significance of inoperativity for the most significant political problem of the current age: climate change. This chapter shows that the climate crisis is intricately related to the two key aspects of political theology: identity and authority. The chapter subsequently argues that ritual inoperativity (specifically Sabbath) alters these conceptions dramatically. Through Sabbath keeping, human beings frame themselves as beings whose value arises from non-production, or from more-than-production. At the same time, they demonstrate a
type of authority over nature that models the divine “letting be.” A political/theological practice of Sabbath could therefore be enormously important for addressing climate change.

The concluding chapter moves into even more practical detail, outlining practical aspects (and challenges) of a potential “climate-healing Sabbath.” In order to be effective in addressing a broad-level ecological crisis, such a Sabbath must incorporate communal life as means for transforming conceptions of human identity. Communities must also practice it as an intentional act of authority defiance, understanding it as a ritual of resistance against the powers of perpetual production. This chapter also explores the real challenges a climate-healing Sabbath may face.

In the end, the research laid out here should give religious communities that practice Sabbath or other inoperative rituals a new impetus for celebrating these events. It may also give individuals or communities who have never considered inoperative rituals a greater appreciation for the beauty and power of doing nothing. What is written here should also stimulate more research into the significance of inoperativity. In addition to the boldly inoperative rituals such as Sabbath and shmita investigated in this research, further reflection will show that countless other practices within religions contain elements of intentional uselessness. Perhaps the research contained in this dissertation will help to remove the pejorative connotation of “useless,” revealing that after all, doing nothing is worth quite a bit.
CHAPTER I

BIBLICAL TRADITIONS AND INOPERATIVITY

JÜRGEN MOLTMANN AND ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL

To start exploring the implications of ritual inoperativity for political theology, it makes sense to begin with texts and their interpretations. Of course, this is not the only way a study of any given element in political theology could begin. It is not the case that texts are the sole foundation of religious communities and their practices. The situation may be rather like a circle or spiral, in which texts, communities, and practices mutually give rise to each other. One could begin with any of these three elements and move from there to exploring the others. However, because communities usually appeal to texts as the basis for their own self-understanding, it seems natural in a study on the theology of inoperativity to begin with textual traditions that deal with inoperativity.

Because this study focuses primarily on a shared Christian and Jewish ritual of inoperativity—the Sabbath—this chapter will address two important modern interpreters of the theology of the Sabbath from Christian and Jewish traditions, respectively. Why have I chosen to examine these thinkers, and not the numerous others? There are two reasons. Firstly and most straightforwardly, these two thinkers are unrivaled in the significance of their work on Sabbath in modern theology. Moltmann’s *God in Creation* and Heschel’s *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* contain classic treatments of Sabbath which other works often draw from. My investigation of these works reveals that these thinkers both offer mutually reinforcing political
theologies of Sabbath—grounded in somewhat similar ancient texts. This demonstrates a strong pattern of agreement between the two traditions on the political implications of inoperativity.

Secondly, political concerns are important for the works of both thinkers. Neither of them shies away from directly applying textual theology to political questions. Although, as we will see, Heschel was more politically active than Moltmann has been, both thinkers establish clear links between their theological ideas and their political problems. These links will be important for developing my own theory of how ritual inoperativity impacts political theology.

Although Heschel’s work predates Moltmann’s, in what follows I will address the latter first. Biblical and theological reasons ground this methodological choice. Moltmann’s work utilizes core texts (specifically the account of God’s rest in Genesis 2:1-3), that Heschel does not engage with formally, but rather assumes as crucial background. Heschel also utilizes elements from Jewish traditions that Moltmann does not use—so in a sense we can say that Heschel’s theology goes beyond Moltmann’s. My approach to each of these thinkers will be to first lay out essential aspects of their method for approaching inoperativity and how the concept of inoperativity plays a role in their thought. Subsequently, I will explore the ways in which their understanding of inoperativity impacts political-theological concepts.

Jürgen Moltmann

As one of the central figures in Protestant theology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Moltmann’s work covers vast categories. He is noted especially for his reflections on suffering and theodicy, ecclesiology, the doctrine of the Trinity, and ecology.\(^1\) Obviously all of

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these areas connect in various ways to political theology. As I will argue, a particular conception of inoperativity is at the core of Moltmann’s political theology. This notion enables him to redefine the nature of the person in crucial ways. In what follows, I will begin by explaining Moltmann’s method for interpreting Christian texts on inoperativity, after which I will be able to offer a brief account of how Moltmann understands inoperativity within his interpretive framework. This will provide critical background for an analysis of the political implications of Moltmann’s theoretical work.

Method

Moltmann approaches Biblical texts with an eschatological framework. In other words, he reads Christian texts (including the texts about the Sabbath) with a presupposition that they not only reveal truths about the human past, but also about the human future. This theme emerges early in Moltmann’s work, beginning with his groundbreaking *Theology of Hope*, in which he argues for the centrality of the future in Christian theology. Against previous theological trends from Schweitzer to Bultmann, which portrayed eschatology as an aspect of Christian faith that must be left behind, Moltmann places the vibrant expectation of the early Church at the foundational level of theological reflection. “The eschatological is not one element of Christianity,” he says, “but it is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new

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day.” As Richard Bauckham observes, this anticipation of a future world does not negate the significance of the present world in Moltmann’s thought. Rather, anticipation paves the way for improving the present world so as to lead it into its future.

This methodological emphasis on anticipation allows Moltmann to re-evaluate two concepts of tradition, at work in both progressive and conservative political philosophies. The first he calls the “classical” approach to tradition. In this approach, history looks backward to a primal authority invested in the “ancients,” whose wisdom and insight are unrepeatable. These traditions are like vaults of legendary artifacts—glorious but stale. Moltmann contrasts the classical tradition model with what might be called the “prophetic” model (though Moltmann gives it no title). This is the approach to tradition Moltmann finds in the literature of the Hebrew Bible. “In Israel,” says Moltmann, “it was not a primaeval mythical event that was handed down and called to mind in principio, but a historic event, and one which determined the nature, the life, the path and the history of Israel.” The people of ancient Israel looked to the past not to revere it or uphold it as the age of exaltation, but to see in it the anticipation of God’s actions in the future. Borrowing a term from Gerhard von Rad, Moltmann calls this “an eschatologizing of

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5 According to M. Douglas Meeks, it was precisely this tendency to give religion a “backward” stance that motivated Moltmann to formulate his forward looking theology of hope. See M. Douglas Meeks, *Origins of the Theology of Hope* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974.


7 As Jeremy Wynne puts it (summarizing Moltmann’s contribution), “Certainly the past remains important but only insofar as it speaks to us about the promise of God for tomorrow and thus turns one’s attention to the goal.
the way of thinking in terms of tradition.” Traditions, in this approach, are proclamations of past events that shake the present and pull in the future.

However, it is crucial to nuance what it means to herald future changes. Not all eschatological expectation is legitimately Christian, according to Moltmann. In his recent Ethics of Hope Moltmann delineates several categories of eschatological thinking that influence believers’ actions in perverse or (at least) less than ideal ways. These categories include “apocalyptic eschatology,” which morbidly delights itself with the destruction of the world, and also “separatist eschatology,” which laments the corruption of the world but seeks to pull away from the world rather than engage it positively. Both of these eschatologies result in what Charles Strozier calls “endism”—an apocalyptic tendency that directs all positive thinking to the end of time, and never within time itself. These views emphasize “waiting” for the future, rather than “hastening” the future.


11 Of course, Anabaptist theologians such as John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas would counter Moltmann by claiming that they are not passively waiting for the parousia of Christ, but are hastening its coming by living in communities that realize the future world in the present. Perhaps Moltmann overlooks tangible ways in which various Anabaptist activists have put themselves to work in transforming the world. For an account of the diversity of political approaches in one Anabaptist group see Ross Thomas Bender, The People of God: A Mennonite Interpretation of the Free Church Tradition (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1971).
Against these invalid or insufficient eschatologies, Moltmann posits “transformative eschatology.” He finds this model vividly displayed in Martin Luther King’s famous 1963 “I Have a Dream” speech, as well as in numerous other of King’s speeches. Obviously, King’s work was eschatological. The realities King envisioned in his speeches were incredible and improbable. But these improbable hopes did not result in passivity or foolhardy mania, but in diligent work to bend the future “arc of the moral universe” into the present. This attitude of “pulling in the justice of the future” is the type of thinking to which Moltmann gives the adjective “messianic.” According to this definition of this much-debated term, supposedly messianic concepts or practices can be tested in the present world by examining their ethical outcomes. Moltmann interprets the visions of second Isaiah, as well as Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, as rubrics for evaluating the merits of any messianic hope. Paraphrasing Isaiah and Amos’s famous “swords into ploughshares” text, Moltmann offers a neat formula:

The principle behind this ethics of hope is:
--not to turn swords into Christian swords
--not to retreat from the swords to the ploughshares
--but to make ploughshares out of swords.

12 Moltmann addresses King’s work in Ethics of Hope, 35-37.

13 Moltmann places all of King’s work in the background of future hope. He focuses especially on King’s use of the language of the Hebrew prophets, especially Isaiah: “In order that ‘all flesh’—that is, all the living—may see the glory of God ‘together’, the mountains must be made low and the valleys must be raised up, so that in human history equal living conditions for everyone are created, together with a life-furthering community of human beings with all living things on earth” (Moltmann, Ethics of Hope, 36). However, one could argue against Moltmann’s literal reading of King’s prophetic imagery. Perhaps King’s language was merely symbolic, and not truly contingent on a future realization of a messianic hope. Further research needs to be done to determine the role of the future in King’s work.

14 The term “messianic” can be incredibly problematic, partly because there is an enormous diversity of possible meanings for this term. Hence, it is important to specify what Moltmann means by it. He is specific in his definition: “By ‘messianic’ I mean in this connection a present already gripped and determined by the eschatological future” (Moltmann, Ethics of Hope, 38). In my own work, this is also the definition that I will use.

15 Moltmann, Ethics of Hope, xiii.
This is a transformative eschatology. The Christian who holds a transformative eschatology cannot let go of the reins of history, but neither can such a person operate them in the same way as a typical sovereign.  

We can summarize Moltmann’s approach to Christian sources by saying that Moltmann reads these sources in a transformative-eschatological way. In other words, he uses Christian texts to pull central ideas of how a Christian is to anticipate a new world. One of these central ideas is the concept of inoperativity.

Moltmann’s Understanding of Inoperativity

Due to the fact that, in Moltmann’s method, Christian traditions are not simply cultural artifacts but dramatic depictions of God’s role in the present and future, it should not be surprising that the Genesis accounts of God’s creative activity take a central place in Moltmann’s understanding of redemption and sovereignty. Here I will not evaluate all the details of Moltmann’s interpretation of the Genesis origin stories, or examine the exegetical work on which they are based. I only want to point out a few key aspects of Moltmann’s theology of creation that are relevant to his understanding of inoperativity.

Turning to Moltmann’s classic work *God in Creation*, we find the following striking observation: “It is impossible to understand the world properly as creation without a proper discernment of the Sabbath.” Moltmann bases this statement on the fact that in the Biblical account...
account of creation in Genesis, God performs the work of creation “for the sake of the Sabbath.” Sabbath is not an appendix to creation, or merely a symbol of creation. It is the future or *telos* of creation. The world exists for the purpose of Sabbath-keeping.

Moltmann argues that this concept of Sabbath in the creation texts portrays a vision of the God-world relationship that is much different from that of most modern theology. Because theologians and preachers have focused on the six days of creation and have neglected the seventh day, God has been viewed “as the one who in his essential being is solely ‘the creative God’ as Paul Tillich says.” If human beings are created in the image of this kind of God, then it follows that human beings are true to themselves only by creating. While Moltmann does not deny the value of human work and creativity, he argues that it is a travesty to reduce human existence—or the existence of nature at large—to creative production.

To show why this reductionism is problematic, Moltmann explores the implications of God keeping a Sabbath. This unusual theological idea communicates that God comfortably abides *with* and *alongside* creation, not merely *in front of* or *behind* creation. Moltmann uses these spatial prepositions to convey that God’s Sabbath is a communal rest. Sabbath is not God’s escape from creation. Nor is it a result of God’s being weary. It is instead a fulfillment of God’s goal to be present in the community of creatures. Moltmann struggles for language to describe this intimate process:

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By ‘resting’ from his creative and formative activity, he allows the beings he has created, each in its own way, to act on him. He receives the form and quality their lives take, and accepts the effects these lives have. By standing aside from his creative influence, he makes himself wholly receptive for the happiness, the suffering, and the praise of his creatures. . . The God who rests in the face of his creation does not dominate the world on this day: he ‘feels’ the world; he allows himself to be affected, to be touched by each of his creatures.\(^{21}\)

This language of affection and feeling connects Sabbath to Moltmann’s doctrine of the Trinity, in which God exists as mutual, egalitarian fellowship of Father, Son and Spirit. In the context of his theory of the Trinity, Moltmann observes that “fellowship does not subject but allows others to be themselves,” implying therefore “openness to one another, sharing with one another and respect for one another.”\(^{22}\) Following Karl Rahner, Moltmann dissolves any qualitative separation between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity, thereby indicating that the fellowship of God’s triune existence corresponds to God’s true inner nature.\(^{23}\) The upshot of this theological argument is that God’s fellowship existence is also the way God “rules” the world.\(^{24}\)

\(^{21}\) Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 279.


\(^{24}\) Moltmann is not alone in advocating for this view of God. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, in her monumental *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), has shown that a Trinitarian conception of God leads to a revised understanding of hierarchy as well. LaCugna’s work is heavily influenced by the Cappadocian Fathers, whose conception of the Trinity as mutual indwelling (*perichoresis*) seems to negate hierarchy. On this see Yves Congar, “La monotheisme politique et la Dieu Trinite,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* (1981): 3-17. Her insights also draw upon the work of theologians such as John Zizioulas, whose work also presents an understanding of personhood which is inherently relational, rather than static and self-enclosed (see John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985). See also Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 290. Other theologians who have made these connections include Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988); Juan Luis Segundo, *Our Idea of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1974); Margaret Farley, “New Patterns of Relationship: Beginnings of a Moral Revolution,” *Theological Studies* (1975): 627-46; and Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism, and the Christ*
Given this connection between the Trinity and Sabbath, we might say that for Moltmann, Sabbath is a window into the practical meaning of Trinitarian life—non-hierarchical being-with-others. Although Moltmann himself never connects God’s Sabbath-keeping with a Trinitarian concept of God, he confirms this correlation when he asserts that “creation is God’s work, but the Sabbath is God’s present existence. His works express God’s will, but the Sabbath manifests his Being.”²⁵ In other words, Sabbath is God’s way of being in relation to the world, a way of being that is intrinsically relational.²⁶

This type of inoperativity describes not only God’s being; it also describes God’s future for the world. Using language from Franz Rosenzweig, Moltmann affirms that Sabbath is simultaneously the “feast of creation” as well as the “feast of redemption.” The Jewish story of creation is for Moltmann a “prophetic tradition”—its point is not to recall a mythic legacy or provide a scientific account of origins. Instead, it charts a path for the future, awakening hope for God’s trajectory in history. As Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz points out, creation theology, for Moltmann, is essentially redemption theology.²⁷

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²⁵ Moltmann, God in Creation, 280.

²⁶ The idea that God’s being present with human beings is inherently relational and liberative is also central to the work of Elizabeth Johnson, who defines the divine name as “I shall be there, as who I am, shall I be there for you,” thus conveying that “to be mean to be with and for others, actively and concretely engaged on their behalf” See Elizabeth A. Johnson, She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 241.

destiny of the world. Moltmann suggests that the redemption of the world will occur as a repetition of the Genesis account:

Heaven and earth, the visible and the invisible, will be created anew, so that they may become the cosmic temple in which God can dwell and come to rest. Then the presence of God will fill everything, and the powers of chaos and annihilation will be driven out of creation. That is the all-pervading cosmic indwelling of God, the Shekinah. Towards that indwelling God’s creation Sabbath already pointed. The true creation is not behind us but ahead of us.28

On this account, the human celebration of Sabbath is an anticipation of a new world governed by a Sabbatical mentality.

What is this “Sabbatical mentality”? The key to answering this question is to recall that in Moltmann’s interpretation, God’s rest on the Sabbath is performed with human beings and the natural world. This distinguishes Moltmann’s God from the withdrawn God of deism.29 At one point, Moltmann points out that his idea of God’s Sabbath keeping has some commonality with the deistic notion of a God who creates the world and then retreats into inoperativity.30 This God gives space for the world by leaving the world alone. One might assume that a vision of a disinterested, withdrawn God would result in a politics of liberty, in which sovereigns would allow maximal freedom to their subjects. In many ways, this is precisely what the Enlightenment

28 Moltmann, Ethics of Hope, 129.

29 Of course, it is difficult to say that all deism portrayed God as physically “withdrawn.” Deistic theologians tended to place God at a distance from creation, but this did not necessarily imply that they viewed God as disinterested or uninvolved. One could argue that deism was an attempt not to describe God’s being, but to describe nature without the aid of God, and to describe religion without recourse to the supernatural. In this sense, it was a methodology more than a particular doctrine. For an example of this see John Toland’s classical work of deist philosophy, Christianity Not Mysterious (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984). Voltaire’s work also shows this tendency. See Voltaire, God and Human Beings, trans. Michael Shreve (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2010).

30 See Moltmann, Ethics of Hope, 232.
deists such as Locke and Jefferson were aiming at. Moltmann points out that a detachment between sovereign and subject can sometimes lead to exploitation of the latter by the former.

Moltmann carefully distinguishes the God of Sabbath from the deistic God. The God of Sabbath issues an invitation to the world to participate actively in God’s rest. The Genesis creation story thereby affirms the independent integrity and freedom of creation, but also seeks to draw it into the peaceful community of divine presence. The God of Sabbath is deeply enmeshed with creation, yet is not a coercive force within creation. A world governed with a Sabbatical mentality, then, is one where sovereignty is externalized (as in Hobbes) but neither arbitrary nor coercive (as is definitely not in Hobbes). Sabbath is a sovereign action of divine liberation.

Moltmann finds this liberating dynamic in Jesus’ healings on the Sabbath in the New Testament. By healing on the Sabbath, Jesus replicates the divine Sabbath keeping of Genesis by giving rest to ill persons. Although Christian interpreters have often depicted Jesus as offering a “higher ethic of love” that eliminated or subordinated the Sabbath command, Moltmann notes

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32 Moltmann shows how this relates to ecological concerns in *God for a Secular Society*, 76.

33 This, according to Poul Guttesen, is the hallmark of the “regime change” depicted in Moltmann’s vision of the new earth and also the central focus of the book of Revelation. See Poul F. Guttesen, *Leaning into the Future: The Kingdom of God in the Theology of Jürgen Moltmann and the Book of Revelation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009).
that Jewish rabbinic tradition agreed with Jesus that the “Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.” On this view, Sabbath and the love ethic are not opposed, but complimentary. Sabbath exists to liberate human beings from material constraints that suppress life. Because both Jesus and most Jewish traditions hold this point, Moltmann argues that Jesus’ Sabbath conflicts reflect an intra-Jewish interpretive situation, rather than a Christian-versus-Jewish situation.

However, this does not mean that Jesus’ Sabbath observance contributes nothing new to an understanding of inoperativity. According to Moltmann, what Jesus proclaims through his Sabbath behavior is not “a higher ethic” but “the imminent kingdom of God, whose unparalleled closeness he authenticates through the signs of the messianic age.” Moltmann cites Matthew 10:7-8, according to which Jesus introduced this messianic age with particular actions: “The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the kingdom promised to them.” By doing these actions on the Sabbath, Jesus takes the future-pointing trajectory of the Sabbath and brings it to completion. Thus, according to Moltmann, “Jesus never ‘transgressed’ the Sabbath commandment, and he certainly never made it ‘a matter of indifference.’” What Jesus did do was take Sabbath a step further than some of his contemporaries—he began to keep it as an anticipation of the kingdom of God, in which everything in the world would be put right, including blind eyes and crippled spines. This is

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34 See Moltmann, God in Creation, 291.
35 Moltmann, God in Creation, 291.
36 Cited in Moltmann, God in Creation, 291.
37 Moltmann, God in Creation, 292.
liberative inoperativity, because it is a herald of the kingdom which draws all nations into its jurisdiction, and is relevant to both Jews and Gentiles.\textsuperscript{38}

**Political Implications**

Once one realizes the significance of Sabbath in Moltmann’s theology, it becomes easy to find reverberations of Sabbatical logic in other places in his work. In the context of political theology, Moltmann’s vision of Sabbath as a depiction of the future world holds a direct connection to ethics, especially the area of human rights.

Moltmann’s interest in human rights might seem odd for someone so focused on eschatology. Rights-talk is usually associated with an emphasis on origins, because rights are often grounded in on accounts of societal development—even if they are intentionally mythical, such as Hobbes’ pre-Leviathan world, Rousseau’s world of the noble savage, or Rawls’ proto-historical “original position.”\textsuperscript{39} However, because Moltmann employs an anticipative

\textsuperscript{38} Moltmann seems to waffle between allowing for a Gentile “liberty towards the law” reflected in the Sabbath behavior of Jesus, and an opposite affirmation of the law revealed in that same behavior. Ultimately, I think he sides with the latter view, according to which Jesus was expanding and uplifting the Sabbath law. This is especially clear in the following paragraph: “Jesus preached no Gentile Christian freedom from the Sabbath. What he proclaimed was the messianic fulfillment of the Israelite ‘dream of completion.’ He did not profane the law and the cult. He did not abolish the Sabbath in favour of good works and good working days. On the contrary, he raised working days into the messianic festivity of life, of which Israel’s Sabbath is a unique foretaste. Jesus’ proclamation of the imminent kingdom makes the whole of life a Sabbath feast” (Moltmann, \textit{God in Creation}, 292).

eschatology, rather than simply a laissez-faire expectation of future change, what he says about the future also pertains to the roles and responsibilities of human beings now. This approach is parallel in many ways to a natural law ethic, only instead of “acting in accordance with their nature” human beings must “act in accordance with their future.” However, Moltmann insists that the future of human beings is also their true nature, because “the image of God is their real future.”

Because human beings are destined for perfect correlation to the image of God, they possess inherent and inalienable dignity. The image of God is therefore the ground of human rights. This is a common theological argument. Moltmann, however, revises it dramatically by pointing out that the image of God is not an aspect of inherent human nature, nor is it a mysterious future reality that was lost during the fall and awaits restoration. Rather, “the image of God is human beings in all their relationships in life.” Ton van Prooijen argues that Moltmann’s depiction of God’s resting has expansive implications in Genesis 2:1-3: “God also rests in his creation.” In other words, the image of divine rest is a functional depiction of God’s

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action in the world. The image of God means that human beings “are persons before God and as such capable of acting on God’s behalf and responsible to him.” Therefore, rest or inoperativity is integral to understanding how a human being exists as imago Dei. If denied rest, the human being is denied a fundamental aspect of the image of God, and is therefore denied a fundamental right.

For Moltmann, this means that human beings must not only be inoperative at times, but that rest must also become part of work. This point becomes clear in Moltmann’s discussion of “the right to meaningful work.” In his work On Human Dignity, this right is the first concrete human right he analyzes. Such privileging of labor-ethics initially appears odd, because most books on human rights begin with “the right to life” or “the right to avoid bodily harm.” Moltmann certainly values these rights, but his account focuses on work because—as shown above—rights are grounded in the human enactment of the image of God, which is a functional image. In order for human beings to manifest God’s image, they must be given the opportunity to act meaningfully (of course, a perceptive logician would immediately recognize that this presumes the rights to life and evasion of bodily harm—but those points would go without saying).

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44 Moltmann, On Human Dignity, 23.

What is “meaningful work”? Moltmann points out that much work is done simply for the sake of survival, to gather sustenance and construct shelter. Moltmann notes that it is possible to construe such work as neither fulfilling in itself, nor a particularly “creative” act—it simply continues biological processes. Especially in ancient times, human existence had to be “wrested” from a hostile environment, and as Moltmann puts it, “this struggle itself was not true life but only its precondition.” In many ancient cultures, this was the only definition of “work” available. Consequently, work was devalued, and those who did not have to work (such as rulers or elite classes) would intentionally avoid degrading themselves in “common labor.” Work was base, but rest was divine.

Moltmann points out that the Christian (and Jewish) Scriptures do not accept this paradigm. In Genesis, God’s creative activity does not reduce God’s position in the hierarchy of the cosmos, or make God less virtuous. Rather, God’s glorious identity is rooted in God’s willingness to work for human liberation. God’s work is noble, and human beings should model God in their work. However, for Moltman, God’s work can only be properly understood as virtuous when linked with God’s rest. This is because godly work is participation in the innate goodness of created being—goodness that can only be appreciated from the vantage point of rest. In this way, rest redefines the concept of “meaningful work”:

Work is thus meaningful not because it alone provides the meaning of life, but precisely because it is limited by the goal of rest and joy in existence. The Sabbath does not simply interrupt work. Rather, work is understood and defined through the Sabbath. There is more to this ordered relationship of work days and

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46 Moltmann, On Human Dignity, 38.

47 Per Moltmann: “Certainly, Yahweh is no subordinated worker-god. Rather, he is the slave-freeing God, as the first commandment states, ‘who led you out of the house of bondage’” (Moltmann, On Human Dignity, 40).
holidays than just mutual boundaries. Work day and Sabbath lie also on the same temporal level. They concern the same people. They are not divided between human beings and gods or between slave and free. Therefore, they also overflow into each other and affect each other.\(^{48}\)

God does not produce for the sake of production. God creates because God wishes to take joy in God’s creation. It is this joy that brings purpose and vitality to work, and without it work would be nihilistic endeavor, no matter how materially productive it might be. For this reason, as Darrell Cosden notes, Moltmann’s theology of work is deeply opposed to utilitarian reductionism.\(^{49}\)

Because God’s creation-work forms the model for human work, Sabbath also stands as the criterion for dignified human labor. It is not that human beings must have a Sabbath so that they can go back to productivity more effectively. Rather, work exists to make Sabbath more effective. Moltmann’s logic leads to an important ethical conclusion: “Therefore human work cannot consist only in acting for purpose and usefulness. It must also encompass freedom for self-presentation and thus playfulness.”\(^{50}\) In other words, human work must be Sabbatical as well as materially fruitful. As Cosden puts it, Moltman offers “a picture of work seasoned with the Sabbath; that is, a dynamic combination of the producing and presenting aspects of work.”\(^{51}\)

\(^{48}\) Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, 41.

\(^{49}\) See Darrell Cosden, *A Theology of Work: Work and the New Creation* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2004), 58-61. Cosden criticizes Moltmann’s anti-utilitarian perspective on work because it appears to leave aside the meaningful experiences human beings find in working for their own survival. Such work is “forced” in a sense, but it appears to be qualitatively different from labor that is forced by arbitrary rulers.

\(^{50}\) Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, 41.

Work, Moltmann says, should have “not only production value but also existence value.” Workers who absorb themselves in their own creative existence may find pleasure in their work, but if this work is incompatible with a sense of purpose for life as a whole (not merely the working parts), it is inhumane.

What does a truly meaningful, Sabbatical type of work look like? Obviously, such work must have purpose and constructive creativity. But beyond those basic criteria, according to Moltmann, such work must be free, because any type of work that a person is forced to do could not allow that person to model God’s free creation. No one, on this account, should be forced to work. The implications of this concept for service industries and forms of unpleasant labor (garbage collecting, sewage maintenance, etc.) would rattle the senses of most Western capitalists. Such societies take it for granted that people will not do sweaty, exhausting, or dirty types of work unless they are provoked by economic necessity. Although slavery is de jure banned in Western societies, these societies maintain many basic functions via circumstantially-forced labor, which is perhaps formally but not materially different from slavery.

A Sabbatical perspective on work would also mean forming communities in which productivity and work-success do not create hierarchy, as Meeks has pointed out. Such

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52 Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, 41.

53 Moltmann says: “No one *has* to justify himself through work. No one *has* to demonstrate her right to existence through work! No one *has* to realize himself through work. Were that true, then the unemployed would have no rights and the handicapped no reality. Only if this dehumanizing inward or outward compulsion to work is removed can there be a right to work for every person according to his or her abilities” (Moltmann, *On Human Dignity*, 54).

communities would counteract the tendency of production to create sovereign control. Of course, the extent to which they could impact the overall nature of sovereignty in a capitalist world remains open to investigation.

Summary

Moltmann’s theological reading of Sabbath-texts offers a view of inoperativity that reframes the person’s relationship to sovereign governance. Inoperativity, for Moltmann, represents the form of God’s sovereignty over history. On his account, inoperativity provides an eschatological key to understanding the future of the world, as well as a tool for bringing that world into the present. In anticipation of that world, Christians live in a Sabbatical way, and participate in politics and culture in which Sabbath is the aim. This leads to a politics of giving rest to human beings. The practical result, as I have briefly shown, is a different theological anthropology—one that impacts the politics of labor.

Moltmann’s work suggests that rituals of inoperativity can entirely reorient understandings of the person, altering typical conceptions of the person’s relationship to time. This anthropology is not only found in Christian texts. Similar concepts are also drawn from texts in the Jewish tradition by a thinker who—although he never engages Moltmann’s work—authors remarkably parallel insights.

Abraham Joshua Heschel

Writing to Jewish communities in the Western world (principally in America), Heschel seeks to present a religious philosophy that addresses the complexity of Jewish life in this diverse and ethically-ambiguous world. A significant part of Heschel’s religious philosophy connects to that unique one-seventh of Jewish existence, the Sabbath. Like Moltmann, Heschel
draws on the Hebrew Bible in his exploration of Sabbath. However, he also uses sources from Jewish midrash, rabbinical commentary, and other popular textual traditions. In what follows I will give a brief account of Heschel’s theological method, followed by an explanation of how Heschel understands the significance of Sabbatical inoperativity in the context of religious texts. Then, I will show how this understanding politically influences his anthropology.

Method

Heschel’s approach to Jewish tradition focuses on applying the philosophical meaning of ancient texts to modern life. Specifically, Heschel aims to identify ways in which Jewish sources speak to questions about the human person. Like Moltmann, therefore, Heschel employs a hermeneutic aimed at creating a practical anthropology. This point is essential for understanding how Heschel’s understands the meaning of inoperativity. Heschel draws from biblical and other textual traditions in order to articulate a view of inoperativity which is simultaneously a view of human nature.

Heschel’s understanding of inoperativity is found mainly in his book *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*. Despite its small size, this book holds mammoth status among modern theologies of Sabbath. Part of its uniqueness stems from its creative straddling of genres.

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56 As Shai Held points out, “the elemental link between the nature of the God we believe in and the vision of the good life we espouse is critical for understanding Heschel’s project as a writer and thinker.” Shai Held, *Abraham Joshua Heschel: The Call of Transcendence* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 7.

It is equal parts poem, philosophical treatise, midrashic interpretation, and theological exhortation. But what makes it worth attending to most of all is its attempt to place Sabbath squarely in the realm human self-understanding. Heschel does not argue for Sabbath-keeping as a response to divine command, although he does not oppose such purely religious approaches to Sabbath. Instead, he begins by interrogating human existence, exploring the complex relation between space and time in human life. His goal is to show how Sabbath connects to the lived reality of all persons, not just Jews (or Sabbatarian Christians). Specifically, Heschel connects Sabbath to human life under the sovereign hegemony of American capitalism.

Heschel’s understanding of the Sabbath pivots on the idea of an economic relationship between time and space. As he states at the beginning of *The Sabbath*, “In technical civilization we expend time to gain space.” Human beings, he argues, inhabit both time and space, but in the development of technical civilization we have placed primary value on space as the dimension of ultimate value. Time, rather than being appreciated for itself, is subjected to the purpose of space-mastery. In this way, human beings create a deep existential discordance: “Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things of space, becomes our sole concern.”

According to Heschel, this discordance has reached a point where human beings have lost an awareness of time altogether. Through our emphasis on the realm of space, through our building projects, artworks, bodily enhancements, and even literary pursuits, we have created a

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culture in which nothing matters without a spatial dimension. When time passes without a spatial accomplishment, we call this “time wasted,” because time’s only value is in service to space. Heschel calls this paradigm “thinginess.”\(^6^0\) Thinginess signifies the sense that time is merely the “shell” in which things exist, and thus is “unvaried, iterative, homogeneous.”\(^6^1\) Through our all-encompassing thinginess we who live in western contexts have—quite literally—lost track of time.

In contrast to the space-obsessed Western world, Heschel claims that the “Bible is more concerned with time than with space.”\(^6^2\) Heschel demonstrates this by referencing the Jewish yearly festivals and feast days, which commemorate spatial events (the Exodus from Egypt, for example), but do so by “hallowing” the specific times in which those events occurred.\(^6^3\) The Sabbath is the pinnacle of the various Biblical time-celebrations, not only because it occurs weekly, but also because it celebrates creation (“remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy . . . for in six days the Lord created heaven and earth . . .”). Thus, to the extent that the day “commemorates” something, it is existence itself, or rather “being as such” that is commemorated. “It is a day on which we are called to turn from the results of creation to the mystery of creation; from the world of creation to the creation of the world.”\(^6^4\) In his imperative

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\(^6^0\) “The result of our thinginess is our blindness to all reality that fails to identify itself as a thing, as a matter of fact. This is obvious in our understanding of time, which, being thingless and insubstantial, appears to us as if it had no reality” (Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 5).

\(^6^1\) Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 8.


\(^6^3\) Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 7.

to recall time as the commemoration of creation, Heschel seems to echo Martin Heidegger’s allegation that western philosophy has largely forgotten the significance of Being (in contrast to beings). Heidegger famously asserts that “On the basis of the Greeks’ initial contributions towards an Interpretation of Being, a dogma has been developed which not only declares the question of about the meaning of Being to be superfluous, but sanctions its complete neglect. It is said that ‘Being’ is the most universal and emptiest of concepts.” See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 2.

This parallel is significant, for although Heidegger argues that our obsession with the technical mastery of beings has drawn us away from the profound significance of Being as such, he offers no practical corrective to this modern tendency. Heschel’s concept of the Sabbath could very well be the practical solution to Heidegger’s philosophical problem—namely, that through the sacred time of Sabbath we come to truly understand Being.

Heschel’s understanding of the Sabbath as the antithesis of Western culture’s apotheosis of space is not merely philosophically important. At several points, Heschel asserts that our infatuation with space not only confuses our understanding of the world, but also dominates and oppresses our lives, for “six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space.” We are “captivated”—literally held captive—by the world of space, to the point where time frightens us. “Most of us seem to labor for the things of space. As a result we suffer from a deeply rooted dread of time and stand aghast when compelled to look into its face.” The perverse dynamic Heschel describes here is reminiscent of traumatic bonding—the infamous “Stockholm

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65 Heidegger famously asserts that “On the basis of the Greeks’ initial contributions towards an Interpretation of Being, a dogma has been developed which not only declares the question of about the meaning of Being to be superfluous, but sanctions its complete neglect. It is said that ‘Being’ is the most universal and emptiest of concepts.” See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 2.


68 Ibid., 5.
 Syndrome”—in which hostages become devoted to their captor. Western culture refuses to recognize that time is not the problem; it is the thinginess which perversely dominates our time that creates our angst. Heschel therefore argues that a life dominated by things is fundamentally inauthentic: “Things, when magnified, are forgeries of happiness, they are a threat to our very lives; we are more harassed than supported by the Frankensteins of spatial things.”

These “Frankensteins” hold power over us because we have turned them into idols, as Ken Koltun-Fromm argues in his reading of Heschel. According to Koltun-Fromm, the domination of “thinginess” distorts properly functioning human vision, forcing us to impute divinity to the spatial realm, and thereby legitimizing its totalitarianism. This distortion can be rightly labeled idolatry, because “idolatry arises from seeing divinity in physical things. The primitive gaze, as a mode of gaining technical control of space, stops at the object, as it were, and discovers God therein.” Koltun-Fromm argues further that Heschel’s work on the Sabbath must be seen as a critique of the latent idolatries of American Judaism, which experienced remarkable material advancement in the 1950’s. In Heschel’s perspective, Jewish Americans at this time were in danger of losing their spiritual foundations by installing property and currency as their paradigm for meaning. The Sabbath would stand as a guard against this subtle divinizing


72 “Jews could certainly enjoy the fruits of American capitalism, democracy, and geographical security, but they were to live among this material wealth as they searched for spiritual meaning in time. Heschel seeks to deflect an ‘enslavement to things’ that seduces Jews into desiring only physical delights, which blinds them to the ineffable splendors of spiritual moments” (Koltun-Fromm, “Vision and Authenticity,” 142).
of spatial reality—a seductive temptation to well-off Americans. The Sabbath would restore true spiritual vision by pointing through spatial reality to the ultimate significance of things.

Heschel’s Understanding of Inoperativity

Sabbatical inoperativity, in Heschel’s view, saves human beings from the tyranny of space by transforming our perspective on human nature. This seems like a lot to ask of a simple day-off work. Heschel is fully aware that institutions of regular rest from labor are not foreign to any culture, not even the blitzing business world of capitalist America. We must rest, or sacrifice our long-term productivity. Hence, we have company retreats, summer vacations, and bean-bags at Silicon-valley business headquarters. In this quotidian sense, therefore, one might say that nearly every healthy American practices Sabbath in some form. Heschel notes that Philo defended the Sabbath against its Roman detractors (who used it to inveigh against supposed Jewish indolence), by appealing to this utilitarian aspect of Sabbath. Philo argued that “a breathing spell enables not merely ordinary people, but athletes also, to collect their strength with a stronger force behind them to undertake promptly and patiently each of the tasks set before them.”73 Under this paradigm, in which the Sabbath is simply a weekly “breather,” Heschel’s lofty interpretation of the Sabbath seems unduly flamboyant.

Heschel responds to Philo’s trivializing apologetic for the Sabbath by pointing out that for Philo, “Sabbath is represented not in the spirit of the Bible but in the spirit of Aristotle.”74 Leisure taken for the sole purpose of enhancing labor is not wrong or unnecessary, but it is not

73 Philo, De Specialibus Legibus, II, 60 quoted in Heschel, The Sabbath, 14.

Sabbatical at all in Heschel’s sense. The Bible and Jewish tradition, Heschel argues, depict the Sabbath not as a means to an end (further work), but as an end in itself. “Man is not a beast of burden, and the Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency of his work,” Heschel asserts.75 Appealing to the biblical creation story in which the Sabbath concludes creation, Heschel argues that metaphorically and literally, the Sabbath is the “end” of creation.76 This is a point similar to Moltmann’s. Work serves to make way for rest; not the other way around. However, Heschel goes further than Moltmann: For the former, not merely work but all of time and even reality itself exists for the sake of Sabbath. In Heschel’s succinct words: “The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of Sabbath.”77

For a culture trapped in the domination of spatial things, this concept of Sabbath seems frustratingly backward, even nihilistic. How can activity (which is the only category of “the real” in a capitalist society) exist for the purpose of non-activity? Heschel’s answer is that the Sabbath is not the cessation of activity, but activity in a different mode; it is a celebratory construct; a “palace in time which we build.”78 We cease from spatial labor on the Sabbath because such labor is not the ultimate telos of human beings. The Sabbath thus asserts (or rather, assumes) that human beings are eternal in nature and that there is a “beyond” which human beings must experience and celebrate. Heschel’s understanding of the Sabbath thus seems to imply that although a human being could work endlessly in the spatial realm without Sabbath, such a person

75 Heschel, The Sabbath, 14.
76 Heschel, The Sabbath, 14
77 Heschel, The Sabbath, 14
78 Heschel, The Sabbath, 15.
would not attain the fullness of what it is to be human; she or he would lack “the climax of living.”\textsuperscript{79} Just as a queen does not receive her highest sovereignty until she moves into her palace, so human beings do not attain their full potential until they enjoy the Sabbath.

Because the Sabbath is where we encounter our ultimate purpose as eternal beings, Heschel notes that the goal of the Sabbath must permeate all of life. Throughout his book, he recounts the rabbinic tradition of “love for the Sabbath,” anthropomorphizing it as a bride and a queen, or even a king, which is long awaited and welcomed with jubilance.\textsuperscript{80} Such metaphorical improvisation is possible because the Sabbath cannot be seen as a parenthetical block of time, but as a venue for participating in humanity’s eternal being. Heschel explains, “To name it queen, to call it bride is merely to allude to the fact that its spirit is a reality we meet rather than an empty span of time which we choose to set aside for comfort or recuperation.”\textsuperscript{81} The custom of vigorous preparation for the arrival of Sabbath, of cleaning the house, cooking exorbitant meals, and dressing festively on Friday evenings (all practices still common in some Jewish and Seventh-day Adventist communities), reflects Heschel’s notion of the Sabbath as an exalted guest, or even a messenger or representative of the divine.

To welcome this divine guest, or to construct this “palace in time,” seems therefore to do more than exercise a religious ritual (if a “religious ritual” is defined as a means to a religious

\textsuperscript{79} Heschel, \textit{The Sabbath}, 14.

\textsuperscript{80} Heschel, \textit{The Sabbath}, 59.

\textsuperscript{81} Heschel, \textit{The Sabbath}, 59.
experience of some sort, the likes of which may vary between religions and cultures).\textsuperscript{82} Heschel’s framework indicates that the Sabbath is indispensible for all human fulfillment. It is not a culturally or religiously localized practice, as if it were merely “for the Jews” or “for the Christians”—it is the condition of the possibility of full humanity for everyone. As Morton Fierman observes, in his work on the Sabbath Heschel “has introduced to us a veritable prescription for living, an itinerary for life, indeed a spiritual map for humanity.”\textsuperscript{83} For Heschel, then, the biblical traditions of Sabbath thus present a theological anthropology—a way human beings are supposed to be in the world.

Thus far, Heschel seems to idealize anthropological concepts that Moltmann also uses. Human being should not exist as pure producers (\textit{homo faber}), but should exist as persons for whom production exists. However, Heschel takes the anthropological significance of inoperativity even further by defining elements that suggest ways in which human beings are supposed to exist as inoperative sovereigns. This is clear in several places in Heschel’s work. One of the most revealing is Heschel’s discussion of the Friday evening service called \textit{kabbalat Shabbat}. Heschel introduces this service with a striking claim: “The Sabbath is the presence of God in the world, open to the soul of man.”\textsuperscript{84} The Friday evening service, then, is the moment

\textsuperscript{82} Heschel explicitly contrasts the Sabbath with other Jewish rituals such as \textit{Yom Kippur}: “Unlike the Day of Atonement, the Sabbath is not dedicated exclusively to spiritual goals . . . Man in his entirety, all his faculties must share its blessing” (Heschel, \textit{The Sabbath}, 19).

\textsuperscript{83} Morton C. Fierman, \textit{Leap of Action: Ideas in the Theology of Abraham Joshua Heschel} (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), 177.

\textsuperscript{84} Heschel, \textit{The Sabbath}, 60.
when God’s presence enters the world. However, Heschel points out that the term *kabbalat Shabbat* has two meanings:

The term *kabbalah* denotes the act of taking an obligation upon oneself. The term in this sense has the connotation of strictness and restraint. Yet *kabbalah* in its verbal form means also: to receive, to welcome, to greet. In the first meaning it is applied to a law; in the second, to a person. The question arises, in what meaning is the word *kabbalah* used when applied to the word *Shabbat*?  

Heschel is here interrogating the very essence of Sabbath, which is also the essence of God. Because the Sabbath is divine presence, to understand what happens in the *kabbalat Shabbat* is to understand the nature of divine presence. So, then, is it a legal entity or a personal/spiritual entity? Heschel is clear:

The answer is, it means both; it has both a legal and a spiritual meaning; they are inseparable from one another. The distinction of the Sabbath is reflected in the twin meanings of the phrase *kabbalat Shabbat* which means to accept the sovereignty as well as to welcome the presence of the day. The Sabbath is a queen as well as a bride.

The Sabbath is legal, represented by the ruling sovereign or queen. At the same time, it is a bride—a personal presence. Here Heschel makes seismic theo-political claim: The Sabbath-keeper experiences God as a sovereign and as spouse. Perhaps one could collapse these two

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86 Although Heschel seems to identify Sabbath with divine being, he also guards against a “deification” of the Sabbath, or even a hyper-personification of the Sabbath as an “angel or spiritual person” (Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 60). How, then, could he call the Sabbath a queen or a bride? Heschel attempts to clarify, claiming that for the rabbis, “the idea of the Sabbath as a queen or a bride did not represent a mental image, something that could be imagined. There was no picture in the mind that corresponded to the metaphor” (Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 60). The Sabbath should not become an idolatrous image. Instead, it should represent an activity: being in the presence of God. Imagery of brides and queens should simply reflect what being in the presence of God would be like.

images into a concept of *bridal sovereignty*. The Sabbath keeper accepts God’s sovereignty in the same way as one would accept the intimacy of a romantic partner.

This intimate quality of divine sovereignty is Sabbatical inoperativity. If, according to Heschel’s analysis, the Sabbath is the day in which the eternal mode of existence prevails, and God is enthroned in the palace of time, the dynamics of Sabbath reveal the nature of divine sovereignty in an unparalleled way. God’s sovereign authority is typically grounded in both her creation and sustaining of the world; thus, Heschel argues that the Sabbath is the means by which God performs this sustaining task: “In the language of the Bible the world was brought into being in the six days of creation, yet its survival depends upon the holiness of the seventh day. Great are the laws that govern the processes of nature. Yet without holiness there would be neither greatness nor nature.”

Keep in mind that this is the holiness in which God does nothing. The dynamics of control and production are not at play. God simply exists with creatures in the mode of bridal companionship, and this is the nature of her sovereignty. Following the same logic, then, we could say that human beings are only truly sovereign over each other or over the world when they exist Sabbatically, in a state of inoperativity. Mutual companionship or “being-with” becomes the image that defines human sovereignty.

What does this sovereignty look like? Heschel’s bridal sovereignty image strongly emphasizes the concept of reciprocity. He uses a midrash featuring Rabbi Shimeon ben Yohai to make this point. The rabbi observed that the first six days of creation are an even number; they match each other in three neat pairs. Only the seventh day is left alone. Hence, “After the work

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88 Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 76.
of creation was completed, the Seventh day pleaded: Master of the universe, all that Thou has created is in couples; to every day of the week Thou gavest a mate; only I was left alone. And God answered: The Community of Israel will be your mate."\(^{89}\) Although it is certainly proper to speak of Israel needing the Sabbath, Heschel argues it is more primary to speak of the Sabbath needing Israel.

> With all its grandeur, the Sabbath is not sufficient unto itself. Its spiritual reality calls for companionship of man. There is a great longing in the world. The six days stand in need of space; the seventh day stands in need of man. It is not good that the spirit should be alone, so Israel was destined to be a helpmeet for the Sabbath.\(^{90}\)

The idea that Sabbath needs humanity should be read in the light of one of Heschel’s main overarching theological themes: God needs and craves humanity as well.\(^{91}\) This is not a dominating craving, but a craving for human liberation. The Sabbath is thus a moment of divine-human reciprocity.\(^{92}\) Once again, this same logic must apply to human beings. We are only sovereign when we exist with others in reciprocal, mutual relationships, in which we desire the liberation of others.

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\(^{89}\) Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 51.

\(^{90}\) Heschel, *The Sabbath*, 52.

\(^{91}\) This is the main emphasis of his work *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1955).

\(^{92}\) This reciprocity is particularly visible in the fact that Sabbath requires human action in order to exist, as Ron Feldman has noted. See Ron Feldman, “The Sabbath Versus the New Moon: A Critique of Heschel’s Valorization of the Sabbath,” *Judaism* 54, no.1(January 2005): 27-33. Feldman argues that Heschel’s emphasis on the Sabbath is not as helpful to environmental efforts as it might seem, because Sabbath is an artificial construct that does not depend on natural rhythms (unlike the New Moon, for example). Sabbath, according to Feldman, pulls the observer away from nature, rather than more completely enmeshing the observer with the natural world.
This idea that God exercises Sabbatical sovereignty by desiring human liberation
connects with one of Heschel’s main practical points about the effects of Sabbath on human
nature: it counteracts the oppressive effects of coveting. Reflecting on the Decalogue, one might
notice a disjunction between the Sabbath command and the later command to refrain from
coveting. Israel is told to “keep” the Sabbath day holy. Keeping, or guarding, suggests covetous
desire. But then, Israel is told, “you shall not covet.” In true rabbinic fashion, Heschel claims that
“we must seek to find a relation between the two ‘commandments.’”93 The interpretive synthesis
he presents is stunning. The Decalogue’s injunction against coveting pertains to things of space:
the text says “you shall not covet” your neighbor’s house, wife, servant, livestock or “anything”
belonging to the neighbor. However, the command itself seems pointless on its own, for “we
know that passion cannot be vanquished by decree.”94 Desires cannot be negated by will.

Heschel points out that “the tenth injunction would, therefore, be practically futile, were
it not for the ‘commandment’ regarding the Sabbath day to which about a third of the text of the
Decalogue is devoted, and with is an epitome of all other commandments.”95 Desires cannot be
negated; they can only be ousted from the psyche by other desires. The Sabbath command
provides the means by which the coveting command is to be executed, because it directs
covetous desire to time rather than space. Heschel writes:

Judaism tries to foster the vision of life as a pilgrimage to the seventh day; the
longing for the Sabbath all days of the week which is a form of longing for the
eternal Sabbath all the days of our lives. It seeks to displace the coveting of things

93 Heschel, The Sabbath, 90.

94 Heschel, The Sabbath, 90.

95 Heschel, The Sabbath, 90.
Why is coveting space problematic, but coveting time is not? As I have shown, space for Heschel is the realm of control and domination. Spatial entities control us, and we seek to control them in return. In our modern era we own technology, but we know that our technology also owns us. Covetousness of space is always connected to a drive for conquest and sovereignty—a nation seeks to preserve its sovereignty over land in order to prevent outsiders from using that land, or to manipulate the inhabitants of the land for particular purposes.

But covetousness of time is categorically different. To see why, consider the moral difference between the propositions, *I need you* and *I need time with you*. The first proposition is compatible with a variety of meanings, some of them potentially dominating (imagine a boss saying, “I need you . . . to do something for me”). The second proposition suggests a much different attitude. Presumably the speaker wants to elicit a response from the listener, perhaps to do something concrete such as take a walk by the lake or go on a shared vacation. But the key feature of the sentence is that it conveys a desire for the listener’s free response. The speaker does not want the recipient of the proposition to be forced to spend time. The speaker wishes for reciprocity—it is as if the speaker were saying, “I want to spend time with you, time that you also want to spend with me.” Of course, it is conceivable that the speaker could, out of frustration, seek to acquire the coveted time with the listener through manipulation or outright

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coercion. Survivors of sexual harassment know this all too well. But intrinsically, the wish itself conveys a craving for mutuality, expressed through the freedom of the other.

Heschel’s analysis of Sabbatical coveting suggests that this is how sovereign power works. If God covets the Sabbath, it is because God desires the freedom of God’s creation. God does not want to possess human beings, but to possess time with human beings. This God uses space, but does not covet it. This is how, for Heschel, God transcends creation.

Political Implications

Heschel’s theology of inoperative sovereignty has powerful implications in a Western capitalist world whose entire existence seems predicated on spatial covetousness. Sovereignty in this world focuses on matters of material acquisition, and the “state of exception” proclaimed in this world always pertains to spatial or material concerns. Thus, although Heschel’s Sabbatical understanding of the person may seem to be a theological abstraction, it is not without explicit political reverberations.

One of the central political areas in which Heschel applied his political theology was that of racial justice. In the 1950’s and 60’s, Heschel joined the fight for civil rights for African Americans, forming a friendship with Martin Luther King, Jr. and speaking openly about the “monstrosity” of racial inequality. Of course, Heschel’s primary ethical motivation for speaking on behalf of desegregation was the moral demand of equality. He argued that all human

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97 At the National Conference on Religion and Race on January 14, 1963, Heschel diagnosed the American religious condition: “That equality is a good thing, a fine goal, may be generally accepted. What is lacking is a sense of the monstrosity of inequality. Seen from the perspective of prophetic faith, the predicament of justice is the predicament of God.” See Abraham Joshua Heschel, The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1967), 93.
beings are created in the image of God, and thus deserve equal rights. But Heschel also recognized that America’s failure to provide equal rights stemmed from another political-theological problem: Spatial covetousness. Religious people in America had modeled themselves on a deity who made certain spatial claims but seemed oblivious to the realities of injustice in history. Against this theology, Heschel argued in his speech on “Religion and Race” that God’s creative sovereignty seeks human beings who will create righteousness in the temporal domain:

Life is clay, and righteousness the mold in which God wants history to be shaped. But human beings, instead of fashioning the clay, deform the shape. God needs mercy, righteousness; His needs cannot be satisfied in space, by sitting in pews, by visiting temples, but in history, in time. It is within the realm of history that man is charged with God’s mission.  

Americans, by preserving God’s sovereignty over space, but neglecting God’s concern with time, had created an idol useful to white interests. This spatially-covetous God could be confined to churches and synagogues and kept away from the struggles for racial justice in the streets of Selma or Birmingham. At the same time, such a deity could serve as the perfect model for the sovereign white segregationist. After all, the various forms of white racism—red-lining, hyper imprisonment of blacks, separate-but-equal schools—were (and are) the results of coveting spaces. The deity that was needed to protect these spaces had been euphemistically described by pro-segregationist preachers as far back as James Henley Thornwell and Robert Lewis Dabney as a “God of order” who monitored the use of these spaces and ensured white domination over them.  

Heschel, by contrast, believed in a God concerned with realities realized in history—

98 Heschel, The Insecurity of Freedom, 97.

righteousness, mercy, and justice. This God could neither be kept out of certain spaces (as apathetic white liberals who refused to assist in the civil rights movement tried to do), nor used as the pretext for spatial domination (as white supremacist Christians tried to do). In other words, this was the liberating God of Sabbath.

Another social issue Heschel addressed with a Sabbatical approach was the problem of (literal) space-domination. In the late 1960’s Heschel became skeptical of the billions of dollars spent on space research. He held no animosity to astronomy as such, and he faulted none of the scientists who sought to discover life on Venus or Mars, or stage multiple lunar landings. However, he recognized that the political urge for a conquest of space sprang not from mere curiosity and desire for wisdom, but from a claim to sovereignty. “We are exploring space,” Heschel said, “not so much to seek scientific truths or because we are motivated by ennobling philosophic insight, but largely because space exploration has political and military value for the state.”

Heschel noted that the Johnson administration planned to invest more than $5 billion in space research, but only $1 billion in the war on poverty. This arose from spatial covetousness, predicated on a theology of spatial sovereignty that was ultimately idolatrous, creating a type of science that had become a deity in itself. Heschel’s moral challenge to space research thus

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101 Heschel, Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, 218.

102 Heschel counseled clergy to challenge the immoral budget priorities of the U.S. government: “The conflict we face is between the exploration of space and the more basic needs of the human race. In their contributions to its resolution, religious leaders and teachers have an obligation to challenge the dominance of science over human affairs. They must defy the establishment of science as God” (Heschel, Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity, 217).
arose from a Sabbatical political theology—a vision of sovereignty which promotes not the grasping of more space, but the “letting be” of human beings.

Heschel’s Sabbatical political theology was perhaps most strikingly at play in his response to the Vietnam War. Heschel realized that this war emerged from spatial covetousness—the poverty and susceptibility to communism in South Vietnam had been produced by colonial exploitation.\(^{103}\) Moreover, Heschel observed that the American government refused to end the hopeless war in part because of national egoism: “Our government seems to recognize the tragic error and futility of the escalation of our involvement but feels that we cannot extricate ourselves without public embarrassment of such dimension as to cause damage to America’s prestige.”\(^{104}\) In other words, the war was maintained by a particular vision of sovereignty—and it was not Sabbatical sovereignty.

In speaking out against America’s corrupt violent and corrupt approach to sovereignty in Vietnam, Heschel at one point directly appealed to the biblical vision of sovereign power, using a passage that does not mention Sabbath, but directly displays its underlying logic:

> When President Johnson expressed to veterans his consternation at the fact that so many citizens protested against his decisions in Vietnam, in spite of his authority as President and the vast amount of information at his disposal, I responded, at the request of John Cogley of the *The New York Times*, that when the Lord was considering destroying Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham did not hesitate to challenge the Lord’s judgment and to carry on an argument with Him whether His decision was just. Can it be that the Judge of the entire universe would fail to act

\(^{103}\) “The more carefully I studied the situation in Vietnam, the more obvious it became to me that the root problem there was not the conflict between North and South Vietnam but the misery and corruption and despair of the population in South Vietnam, which to a large degree was brought about by colonial exploitation” (Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, 225).

justly? For all the majesty of the office of the President of the United States, he cannot claim greater majesty than God Himself.\footnote{Heschel, \textit{Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity}, 226.}

Here the sovereignty of the American government stands in sharp contrast to that of Abraham’s God—a deity who acts only for the sake of justice and mercy, not conquest. Notice that Heschel’s approach specifically models human sovereignty on its divine counterpart, but not in a way that uses the latter as a pretext for magnifying the former. Since God is a sovereign who curtails sovereignty by listening to Abraham, President Johnson should also curtail his own sovereignty and listen to criticism. Although Heschel does not mention Sabbath in this passage, his approach clearly proceeds from a Sabbatical political theology.

Summary

Heschel uses Jewish textual traditions to access a profound understanding of inoperativity—one that establishes an anthropology that counteracts the tendency for human beings to define themselves by spatial acquisition and spatial control. In Heschel’s view, Sabbatical inoperativity demonstrates that persons are meant to exist for and with others, as agents who exercise sovereignty through letting be. This theological anthropology is grounded in a view of God as one who also exercises sovereignty in a Sabbatical mode. God “lets us be” not—of course—as one who does not care about us (deism) but as a God who passionately desires human freedom.

The Sabbath textual traditions Heschel employs therefore establish an anthropology that opposes the “spatial covetousness” that marks many modern conceptions of the human being. Heschel’s own practical work in political activism reveals that his own opposition to spatial
covetousness was the basis for his prophetic critiques of racism, war, and economic injustice. For Heschel, this inoperative or Sabbatical mentality is how an authentic concept of political justice emerges from Jewish tradition.

**Conclusion**

Together, via their respective interpretations of Christian and Jewish textual resources, Moltmann and Heschel offer a powerful theoretical framework for understanding how inoperativity can inform political theory. They do so by each contributing elements of an inoperative anthropology—a way of viewing the human being that de-centers production and spatial acquisition. Because “the personal is political,” alterations in anthropology will also change politics in specific in possibly dramatic ways. Moltmann suggests one important way in which an inoperative anthropology grounded in biblical texts could influence a political paradigm—by changing the way we view labor. For his part, Heschel subtly applies his inoperative anthropology to a variety of issues, all of which he views as grounded in an anthropology of spatial covetousness. These issues include racial injustice, the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and even the immoral prioritizing of outer-space acquisition at the expense of America’s poor. At first glance, Heschel’s political views on these issues may seem to have nothing to do with Sabbath or inoperativity. But a close examination reveals that they are deeply intertwined.

Moltmann’s and Heschel’s work hints at a way forward between political paradigms of control and subjugation (often expressed as benevolent paternalism) on one hand and apathetic laissez-faire approaches on the other. A politics of inoperativity, grounded in a vision of God’s rest with human beings, suggests a politics in which human beings maximize the humanity of
themselves and others by working for the sake of being, rather than being for the sake of working. Both totalitarian and libertarian political paradigms seek to maximize material output as the ultimate aims of society. An inoperative politics, however, rests on an image of humanity in which persons exceed these production-oriented criteria. What this means in detail I will explain in chapter four.

There are key differences between Moltmann and Heschel, however; and these differences are illuminating. At a basic level, Heschel’s theology of Sabbath is more developed because he appeals to textual resources that Moltmann does not use (traditional Jewish sources). More importantly, however, there seems to be a massive difference in the way Moltmann and Heschel view temporality and the future. Heschel’s work does not appeal to any type of eschatology in explaining the significance of Sabbath. Heschel, as I have shown, views Sabbath as simply a “temple in time”—a way of seeing eternity in the present (although he does offer eschatological hints in his work, these strands of thinking do not play a major role). Moltmann, by contrast, centers Sabbath in eschatological time. Yet they arrive at similar views of the significance of Sabbath.

It is almost as if Moltmann moves toward the same view by approaching time from different vantage points. Heschel looks at the Sabbath and through it views eternity. Moltmann, with his future-oriented perspective, looks at eternity and through it views the Sabbath. Both thus end up seeing inoperative time as the way the world should be—a prescription for ethical politics.

The fact that two thinkers who operate with such different hermeneutics can arrive at similar interpretations of inoperativity suggests that there is an enormous potential for greater
interfaith dialogue on the meaning of inoperativity within Jewish and Christian traditions. One of the most glaring differences between Judaism and Christianity has to do with time and eschatology. Christianity asserts that the Messiah has come, and Judaism rejects this claim. Disagreements over the nature of the Messiah and the Messiah’s role in time are therefore at the core of the theological distinction between Judaism and Christianity. Nevertheless, Sabbath as “messianic time”—which is to say, time that pulls future justice into the present—could be a time in which the two communities experience the same phenomenon. Sabbath could be a theological and ritual meeting point for these communities, possibly a time for a shared existence. More research needs to be done on the interreligious significance of Sabbath for Jewish and Christian communities.

The fact that two thinkers from different traditions arrive at a similar political theology of Sabbath also suggests that inoperativity has a significance that transcends religious categories altogether. In the next chapter I will explore why this is the case, from a philosophical perspective.
CHAPTER II
INOPERATIVITY IN PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES
JEAN-YVES LACOSTE AND GIORGIO AGAMBEN

Thus far, we have seen that the religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity offer a rich field of reflection for the political meaning of inoperativity. However, inoperativity has not only been a conceptual resource for traditional theologians like Heschel and Moltmann. Modern philosophers, too, have pondered ways of thinking about human beings from the perspective of inoperative rituals. This chapter analyzes two key thinkers who utilize inoperativity as a central motif in their thought: Jean-Yves Lacoste and Giorgio Agamben. Both of these thinkers find inoperativity to be a central concept in creating a new form of political thought. Lacoste explores inoperativity “from below” by doing a detailed phenomenology of liturgical acts that involve non-action. Agamben, on the other hand, approaches inoperativity from an overarching standpoint that attempts to investigate “life” itself, suggesting that inoperativity could be a means of changing the political conceptions of life that uphold Western political theory.

The following discussion will explore Lacoste’s and Agamben’s contributions to a theory of inoperativity. Together, they offer mutually complimentary insights into inoperativity, with Agamben complicating a core idea Lacoste offers.

**Lacoste’s Phenomenology of Inoperativity**

Unlike Agamben, whose work spans vast categories and whose method is sometimes seemingly inscrutable (see below), Lacoste focuses intensely on the phenomenology of religious worship, or liturgy. According to Lacoste, liturgy displays inoperativity as one of its central
features. In the following three sections, I will outline the methodological background for Lacoste’s work on inoperativity, describe Lacoste’s understanding of inoperativity, and finally explain its implications for an understanding of Sabbath and sovereignty.

Method

The philosophical understanding of inoperativity Lacoste builds draws upon on a long lineage of continental thought. Several thinkers throughout the twentieth century use inoperativity as a key concept. Georges Bataille describes inoperativity as the self-limiting that sovereign powers must use in order to preserve power.\(^1\) Drawing on Bataille’s concept of inoperativity, Jean-Luc Nancy formulates a notion of an “inoperative community” based on the open space or “borderlands” between finite singular beings.\(^2\) Against the idea that community consists in an aggressive “coming together” of such beings through vigorous “political will” (as in various totalitarian movements), Nancy finds community as formed through the very absence of such efforts. This type of community arises as human beings let each other exist freely. The community dwells together without a telos or operative goal. This concept of inoperativity is radically expanded in a response to Nancy’s work written by Maurice Blanchot.\(^3\) Likewise drawing on Bataille, Blanchot, agrees with Nancy that community forms only through the

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absence of work, or inoperativity. However, Blanchot goes even further, arguing that the acceptance of being in a community is “bound to an equivalent refusal or rejection” of community, because to belong to a community “means nearly immediately to form a counter-group, to renounce it violently.”4 Blanchot implies that real community requires forceful distancing of oneself from others, not in order to truly become distant and lonely, but in order to preserve the space between persons and resist the urge to mindless conformity that simultaneously creates and destroys communities.

While these thinkers explore inoperativity by analyzing social interactions, Lacoste takes a different approach. His theory of inoperativity emerges from an account of human beings’ interactions with God in the context of worship. In his major work, *Experience and the Absolute*, Lacoste describes how inoperativity plays a central role in liturgical experience.5 Lacoste distinguishes liturgical experience from “religious experience,” which he claims is too easily categorized in post-Schleiermacher theology as simply a realm of feeling.6 Liturgy is an action, a structure of human involvement with the world. Religious experience tends toward an assessment of internal dispositions and psychological states, neither of which directly concern Lacoste. By focusing precisely on the liturgical, rather than the “religious” or “sacred,” Lacoste compliments and also distances himself from other phenomenologists of religion.7 In an

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4 Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, 12.


important essay, Lacoste argues that the human experience of God (in the phenomenological sense) is not what happens during transcendent experiences, because human beings do not grasp God immediately, but instead are placed before God—God is a “limit” of their experience.8

Because “liturgy” means being before the Absolute as the maximal limit of human experience, the word “worship” is not broad enough to encapsulate what liturgy means for Lacoste. He defines the term as “the logic that presides over the encounter between man and God writ large.”9 In other words, worship is not simply an isolated encounter with a numinous reality (a discrete worship-experience), but a confrontation of a person’s total self with the Absolute. By distancing himself from theologians of worship-experience (such as Schleiermacher or Otto), Lacoste intends to escape the type of theology that views human beings as living “shells” of monadic engagements with the divine. He also, like Jean-Luc Marion, wants to avoid depicting

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9 Lacoste, Experience and the Absolute, 2.
God as a phenomenon like any other. Lacoste follows Heidegger in understanding human beings as embedded in a world of action, even before they can isolate individual human experiences. “The world has already taken possession of Dasein prior to any conscious action or awareness,” Lacoste explains. For this reason, Lacoste strives to consider religious actions themselves, not merely the particular emotions or actions they evoke.

Because human beings exist in and through action, analysis of religious action reveals a unique form of existence as well. Looking at what people do in worship displays what they are. This logic is not merely confined to the human realm. In an analogical way, religious action speaks to God’s form of existence, because God’s being is disclosed in the human/divine nexus portrayed in liturgy. Indeed, as Kevin Hart points out, Lacoste follows a long stream of Catholic thought (influenced notably by Karl Rahner and Henri De Lubac) in which reality itself is “graced” such that all human experience is experience of God, though not as if God were a datum within experience. Hence, although the ostensible purpose of Experience and the Absolute, 11. Of course, this point is open to the objection that the world of action does impact “internal” experience, and so perhaps Lacoste is excessively one-sided and reactionary to focus heavily on action and not on traditional religious experience. Lacoste seems to anticipate this critique, and immediately grants it: “There is, of course, no being-in-the world that is not reflected in a consciousness.

10 For an example of Marion’s work in phenomenology that attempts to avoid this tendency see Jean-Luc Marion, Being Given: Towards a Phenomenology of Givenness, trans. Jefferey L. Kossky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).


12 Lacoste, Experience and the Absolute, 11. Of course, this point is open to the objection that the world of action does impact “internal” experience, and so perhaps Lacoste is excessively one-sided and reactionary to focus heavily on action and not on traditional religious experience. Lacoste seems to anticipate this critique, and immediately grants it: “There is, of course, no being-in-the world that is not reflected in a consciousness.

13 Hart writes: “To dwell liturgically is not just one option out of many for human beings; it is our essential possibility because—and here Lacoste is close to Henri de Lubac—we are always and already oriented towards God.” See Kevin Hart, “Religious Experience and the Phenomenality of God,” in Between Philosophy and
Absolute is highly philosophical, Lacoste cannot avoid raising theological questions also, because any attempt to understand the human act of worship will involve implications about the God who is worshipped. In Lacoste’s framework, this is the essential link between philosophy and theology. Both fields, he argues in his later work From Theology to Theological Thinking, are the results of the interpretation of life, and thus must inevitably coincide. To interpret lived experience is the purpose of phenomenology. But since lived experience unavoidably includes worship, phenomenology cannot elude theology (and vice versa). Liturgy is thus a datum meriting close theological evaluation, particularly because it is the locus of everything pertaining to what it means to be human, and also everything connected to what human beings can know about God.

As a microcosm of the totality of human existence, liturgy unveils much more about human existence than phenomenology has realized. Although liturgical activity encompasses only a small aspect of human life—perhaps taking up merely a few hours a week for even the

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15 At times, Lacoste seems to situate himself as a thinker aimed at a fusion of theology and philosophy (for example, in the first few chapters of Experience and the Absolute). However, at other points Lacoste indicates that he is looking to supersede the confines of either discipline, attempting to do something that cannot be easily categorized. This is especially clear in his La phénoménalité de Dieu: Neuf études (Paris: Seuil, 2008). Lacoste’s method here, as Joeri Schrijvers observes, involves asking not what God is (theology) nor how human beings know God (philosophy of religion) because neither of these pursuits are truly possible. Instead, the question for Lacoste is: What is a human being before God? That is to say, how does God appear to human beings? This sounds like an epistemological question, but it is not. God cannot be an object for epistemological analysis, because such analysis would presume to encapsulate and control the object of knowing. See Joeri Schrijvers, “God and/in Phenomenology: Jean-Yves Lacoste’s Phenomenality of God,” Bijdragen, International Journal in Philosophy and Theology, 71, no. 1 (2010): 87-92.
most religious people—its massive significance cannot be ignored. Liturgy reflects human beings greatest struggles to apprehend the beyond in their experience of reality. Because these struggles are never resolved, liturgy appears fruitless in certain respects. However profound their rituals may be, human beings never grasp the Absolute through liturgy. Perhaps the best analogy for this experience is one that Jean-Louis Chretien also employs to describe prayer: Jacob’s wrestling with the angel in the book of Genesis.16 Jacob does not win the wrestling match (he gets his hip dislocated—a fairly damning occurrence in any martial contest), and thus is not able to possess or control the divine. The worshipper encounters a simultaneous presence and distance of the divine.

For Lacoste, this distance from the divine is accompanied by a simultaneous distance from the world. Thus, though liturgy is a diversion from pressing worldly realities, it is nevertheless a diversion that does not hide us from the world, but expands the boundaries of our world. This is because the experience of the Absolute is not separable—but is distinguishable—from other categories of experience.17 We may encounter liturgical elements in many parts of our lives, but not in such a way that the liturgical element dissolves completely. Because of this uniqueness, liturgy distracts the human being from regular life, but not in a way that

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17 At one point, Lacoste distinguishes the presence of the Absolute from the presence of discernible objects by claiming that we encounter it not as a “presence” (as in the case of something that is “there”) but as a “presencing” (“en acte de présence”). See Jean-Yves Lacoste, Recherches sur la parole (Leuven: Peeters, 2015), 58. See also Jean-Yves Lacoste, Présence et parousie (Geneve: Ad Solem, 2006), 17-46.
impoverishes or negates the significance of that life. This element of Lacoste’s liturgical analysis is essential for understanding the role of inoperativity.

Lacoste’s Understanding of Inoperativity

According to Lacoste, liturgy is both useless and vital at the same time. “We have better things to ‘do’ than pray, and when we pray we actually ‘do’ nothing,” Lacoste admits. “But the world from which liturgy diverts us is not a world over which goodwill reigns, and, at bottom, it is this world from which we must take leave, in a meantime, so as to discover our responsibilities in the world.” The futility of liturgy is for Lacoste the essence of its importance, and what makes it fit strangely into an otherwise production-oriented society. Furthermore, grasping this futility is crucial because it is only way we can understand our being-in-the-world completely.

This essential uselessness of liturgy is what Lacoste calls “liturgical inoperativity.” He appeals to the phenomenon of the night vigil as an example. When keeping a night vigil, a worshipper is deliberately unproductive. Night is usually reserved for sleep, which is technically a form of productivity (because the worker needs sleep in order to continue working well). But, as Lacoste argues, the night vigil “is neither a time of salaried work (negotium) nor a time appropriate for leisure (otium), for which “free” days would be better suited than sleep-deprived nights.” By participating in a night vigil the worshipper acts in a strictly unnecessary way

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18 As Joeri Schrijvers notes, “Liturgical experience is constituted through an exodus from the Heideggerian world and earth. The liturgical reduction, then, places everything which keeps the human being at a distance from God (namely the world, the earth, and history) ‘there’ or existing only for God—coram Deo.” See Joeri Schrijvers, An Introduction to Jean-Yves Lacoste (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012), 143.

19 Lacoste, Experience and the Absolute, 73.

20 Lacoste, Experience and the Absolute, 80. Lacoste uses the term “leisure” here in a pejorative sense, to describe everyday human diversions. However, it is important to point out that worship itself can be a form of “leisure” as Josef Pieper points out. According to Pieper, there are legitimate forms of leisure focused on the construction of the genuinely human, as well as “sham forms of leisure with their strong family resemblance to want
(unnecessary from the perspective of being in the world). In other words, the worshipper simply exists in a state of nothingness, analogous in many ways to St. John of the Cross’s “nocturnal experience.”

This nothingness or lack of necessity in the night vigil is also displayed in the fact that, in Western society, such ritual activities are essentially free. That is to say, no one can be truly compelled by anyone—divine or human—to keep a night vigil or observe a religious activity of a similar type. Although Lacoste does not explore the phenomenological significance of religious freedom in *Experience and the Absolute*, his analysis seems to presuppose it, for the simple reason that a worshipper who was fulfilling an obligation to the deity by performing the liturgical act would be demoting the deity from a position as the Absolute to one in whom there could be deficiencies or dependencies. A liturgy done before the Absolute, then, cannot be conceived as a means to obtaining a divine return of some type, since the logic inherent in such an act would contradict the idea of an Absolute itself. This is why the idea that God needs or benefits from human praise is not a praiseworthy way of speaking about God. Similarly, compulsion from

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22 This is one of the odd factors about biblical poetry, which praises God and yet is “unnecessary.” Paul Ricoeur has noted this unnecessary element within the domain of parables as well as Psalms. See Paul Ricoeur, “Philosophy and Religious Language,” *Journal of Religion* 54 (1974): 71-85; and “Biblical Hermeneutics,” in *Semeia 4: Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Hermeneutics*, ed. John Dominic Crossan (Decatur, GA: Society of Biblical
human authorities to bow before the Absolute would be woefully self-defeating. In a strict sense, in order to maintain its integrity, liturgy must be without purpose—decidedly inoperative.

This sounds like an irresolvable paradox, and Lacoste struggles to articulate its meaning. What are the implications of the idea that the human relationship to the absolute is characterized by inoperativity? One thing becomes immediately clear: In liturgy the worshipper reveals that her/his being is not summed up by activity or production. Lacoste connects this existential reality with the language of rights:

> Once our inevitable allocation of work, whose distribution is necessary, foreseeable, and commonplace, has been completed, and once our daytime duties have been fulfilled, the decision to keep vigil proves that we remain in possession of a fundamental right: that of proving, by the content we give to our vigil (which we can spend doing philosophy, writing poetry, or praying—and many other things besides), the surplus of meaning we give to our humanity.23

For Lacoste, liturgy intentionally contradicts the tendency to sum up a person’s being by gauging that person’s productivity, suggesting that we have a “right” not to be defined in this way. In other words, human beings have a right to a “surplus” of meaning.24

Lacoste suggests that this surplus of being could stem from the very nature of the Absolute. Boldly, he claims that the non-necessity of the liturgy is “the same as that in which the Absolute is itself not necessary.”25 In other words, the God of the night vigil is not the God of

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23 Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 79.


necessary action (*actus purus*)—or, least, this God cannot be fully reduced to such action.\(^{26}\) At first glance, there appears to be irony in Lacoste’s use of the term “Absolute” to describe God, for if the Hegelian “Absolute” is anything at all, it is certainly necessary.\(^{27}\) But the paradoxical “unnecessary Absolute” captures a bold insight from the phenomenology of liturgy: The worshipper encounters God, but this God is not the static form of “pure actuality” often attributed to Neo-Scholasticism. This God is both less and more than pure actuality. Between the categories of “unnecessary” and “Absolute” is the “excess” of the inoperative God. Lacoste’s framing of the worshipper as existing in a state of excess is similar to Marion’s depiction of the subject as purely a “recipient” (*adonné*) of “saturated phenomena” that always overwhelm or exceed the subject’s intention.\(^{28}\) Perhaps the key difference between Lacoste and Marion is that the latter attempts to place the subject in a middle place between pure passivity and active engagement with the given, whereas the former places the worshipper in a position of pure passivity before the inoperativity of the Absolute.\(^{29}\) For Lacoste, there is no sense in which the

\(^{26}\) The idea that God’s being is unnecessary or “beyond the necessary” is a point Lacoste derives from Eberhard Jungel, *God as Mystery of the World*, trans. Darrell Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

\(^{27}\) Although what this means for Hegel can certainly be disputed. On the similarities and differences between Aquinas’s and Hegel’s understanding of the necessity and actuality of God see Emilio Brito, *Dieu et l’être d’après Thomas d’Aquin et Hegel* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1991), 114-133.


\(^{29}\) Marion writes, “Reception implies, indeed, passive receptivity, but it also demands active capacity, because capacity (*capacitas*), in order to increase to the measure of the given and to make sure it happens, must be put to work—work of the given to receive, work on itself in order to receive.” See Marion, *In Excess*, 48. Marion’s insistence that experiencing the excess of the given requires work at first seems to contradict his idea of revelation as “pure given”—a point Shane Mackinlay argues is a major flaw of his work. See Shane Mackinlay, *Interpreting Excess: Jean-Luc Marion, Saturated Phenomena, and Hermeneutics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 19.
worshipper may grasp or actively engage the Absolute in worship. Worship is simply an experience of being before a phenomenon of overflowing grace. Lacoste sums up the theological implications of this understanding of liturgy: “Liturgy will perhaps be able to offer us the bread necessary to life. But it first offers us the wine of the kingdom.”

This “wine”—an unnecessary surplus—is not a side benefit or epiphenomenon of liturgy, as if the worshipper were truly aiming at some concrete social or psychological goal of worship but ended up with a happenstance ritual treat. This “wine” is a surplus of nothing—it is an experience of an absence. The worshipper does not experience a thing or element of sense perception upon which to act. One simply exists in a state of beholding, without grasping or

30 Although Lacoste seems to insist on this point, there is an obvious sense in which Lacoste would probably admit an active role for the worshipper in encountering the Absolute. After all, worshippers do show up to liturgies, and must actively choose inoperativity. Perhaps this is a way in which Lacoste might be led to agree with Marion’s claim for a level of activity in the reception of the gift (see footnote 29, above).

31 Lacoste, Experience and the Absolute, 82.

32 As Schrijvers notes, the one who prays (in Lacoste’s interpretation) “has an experience of ‘praying despite everything’ even if this prayer does not grant the one praying what he or she wants or desires.” See Joeri Schrijvers, “Introduction,” Modern Theology 31, no. 4 (October, 2015): 638-640. Schrijvers’s comment points to a challenge for Lacoste, which is how to explain forms of worship which seem to deliberately attempt to enact certain outcomes (the most obvious of which is the act of praying “for” something or someone). Lacoste’s analysis appears to suggest that these types of liturgy could only be idolatrous (because they would claim to grasp or modify the Absolute in some way), yet this is not how Christian tradition has understood them. Perhaps the only way to understand such liturgies is to frame them as attempts to align oneself with the Absolute, thus creating changes in the world, but not by virtue of productive operations.

manipulating that which is beheld. In many ways, this mirrors Aquinas’ vision of the ultimate end of human worship. Notwithstanding Aquinas’s description of God as pure act, his description of the ultimate goal of human existence in the *exitus-reditus* format of history is a form of inoperativity—the beatific vision—in which the human being accomplishes nothing except existing in the incomparable beauty and goodness of the divine.\(^{34}\) It would constitute an eisegesis to say that Aquinas depicts human beings as made to “do nothing,” but in a sense, this must be true.\(^{35}\) Lacoste merely adds a simple deduction: God’s being must also reflect this ultimate inoperativity.

The act of praising God in liturgy also reflects divine inoperativity. It is obvious that God does not need human adoration. Of course, there is always a luring superstition which asserts that praise will please the deity, resulting in various useful blessings. Yet in its institutionalized form, praise persists despite the fact that human beings recognize its uselessness. This parallels the fact that the early Christian movement recognized the ineffectiveness of temples in housing God, yet continued to pray at the temple.\(^{36}\)


\(^{35}\) William J. Hoye argues that for Aquinas, the purpose of the beatific vision is not one more dynamic action but rather the summing up of all action in the perfection of existence. This means that the human being in the beatific vision becomes united with God, not merely observing but participating in the divine existence. See William J. Hoye, *Actualitas Omnium Actuum: Man’s Beatific Vision of God as Apprehended by Thomas Aquinas* (Meisenheim am Glan: Verlag Anton Hain, 1975), 145-146.

\(^{36}\) See Acts 7:48-50 vis-à-vis Acts 2:46. The tension in these passages may not be as pronounced as it first appears. As Ben Witherington observes, Stephen’s speech in Acts 7:48-50 does not rail against the temple itself, but against a distorted view of the temple which made it a means to possess God’s presence. This critique of temple worship was not anti-Jewish, but well in line with the precedents of the Jewish prophets such as Isaiah and Ezekiel. See Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 261-263. See also Robert Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 93.
Political Implications

Lacoste does not immediately and seamlessly move into the social/political implications of inoperativity. His goal is simply to examine inoperativity at the heart of the phenomenon of worship. One looks in vain through Lacoste’s corpus to find the type of political speculations one might find in other thinkers such as Blanchot or Nancy.

Yet by making inoperativity central to the experience of the Absolute, Lacoste’s work entails a massive shift in the topology of political theology. This is because it relocates the fulcrum of God’s ruling action. Usually, theologies of divine action speak of God as acting upon the world as a moving agent, whether an unmoved one (Aristotle) or one who is moved upon by the world to some degree (process theology). These frameworks all raise the question of a “causal nexus” of divine action on the world. Deistic accounts of divine causality place this causal nexus far back at the beginning of creation, thereby shrouding it in mystery. Process theologians—for whom God’s action on the world is a present reality—find this question more pressing, and have offered interesting answers. Philip Clayton, to give one example, posits that God’s causal nexus on the world is analogous to that of mind on body. However, Lacoste’s image of an inoperative sovereignty points toward another option: God’s does not act “on” the world as a causal force. Rather, God “lets the world be” from a position at the borderlands of the world. God does not push the world from above, below, or behind, but accompanies the world as a liberating presence.


38 Christina Gschwandtner highlights Lacoste’s tendency to describe liturgy as a space where God freely makes Godself available, but always as One who respects the limits of the human world, even while subverting
God’s sovereignty as non-coercive accompaniment of the world is a political implication of inoperative liturgy that also emerges in a fascinating chapter Lacoste writes on monasticism and topology.\textsuperscript{39} This chapter discusses how inoperative liturgy seems to place a worshipper both within and without the world.\textsuperscript{40} A contemplative who sits in a cell establishes an attitude of distance from place as such, even while paradoxically inhabiting a very distinct and deliberate place. “By dint of consenting to be-there, the recluse actually disposes of place in order to be nowhere, or almost nowhere,” Lacoste observes.\textsuperscript{41} This image is reminiscent of the Jesus’ prayer in the Gospel of John, in which he spoke of his disciples being “in the world” but not “belonging to the world” (John 17:14-15).\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{39} The chapter is called “Place and Nonplace” in Lacoste, \textit{Experience and the Absolute}, 23-39.

\textsuperscript{40} According to Joseph Rivera, this in/out paradox that forms the core of Lacoste’s work. It is also, per Rivera, an experience that also reflects the nature of the Church, as well as the sacraments. Rivera faults Lacoste (as well as Marion and Henry) for using extra-worldly encounter “to minimize rather than celebrate the ineluctable tie Christ has to the world itself.” See Joseph Rivera, “Corpus Mysticum and Religious Experience: Henry, Lacoste, and Marion,” \textit{International Journal of Systematic Theology} 14, no. 3 (July, 2012): 327-349. Another thinker who has similarly argued that extra-worldly experience should not negate the connection of God to the world is James G. Hart, \textit{Who One Is: Book 2: Existenzen and Transcendental Phenomenology} (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), 544. Although I agree that Lacoste’s work can easily lend itself to this problematic interpretation, for reasons I will continue to explain I do not think that Lacoste’s point necessarily entails world-negation. Lacoste’s analysis portrays the human being in an unstable yet coherent place of encounter with a limit—one which ultimately directs the human being back toward the world.

\textsuperscript{41} Lacoste, \textit{Experience and the Absolute}, 27.

\textsuperscript{42} There may be something to this parallel, but not too exactly. Jesus is not talking about phenomenology. The term “world” has several meanings in the Johannine literature, some of which refer to groups of people (all people and some malevolent people, specifically) and others to ontological aspects of the world (“the things of the world” in 1 John 2:15). In part, then, John’s understanding of world could connect with Lacoste’s ontological definition of “world.” See Stanley B. Marrow, “Kosmos in John,” \textit{The Catholic Biblical Quarterly} 64, no. 1 (January 2002): 90-102. See also Bill Salier, “What’s in a World? Kosmos in the Prologue of John’s Gospel,” \textit{The Reformed Theological Review} 50, no. 3 (December 1997): 105-117.
According to Lacoste, this uncanny, dizzying form of inoperativity characterizes Christ’s incarnation as well. He points to countless liturgical icons or statues in which the infant Christ is depicted holding a globe in his hands, symbolizing the world or the universe.\footnote{Lacoste, \textit{Experience and the Absolute}, 25.} There seems to be a double paradox here, in that (1) Christ rules the world not as an adult, but as an infant and (2) that as an infant Christ was historically within the cosmos, and yet here Christ is depicted holding the cosmos from without. These combined paradoxes point toward a fascinating spin on the \textit{Christus Victor} atonement model: Christ conquers the world, but not as the stereotypical imperialist who expands the borders of his empire through violent domination. He vanquishes the earth not by pushing against its borders, but by negating the opposition between heaven and earth. To do this, he “infiltrates” the world, but not as a foreign invader. Entering the world as a fully human infant, Christ does not annihilate the powers that establish the “friend/enemy distinction,” but instead subverts the concepts of “within” and “without,” uniting mundane humanity with extra-cosmic divinity. The result is a political theology in which God’s governing force functions through passivity—what Lacoste’s commentator Kevin Hart refers to as a “kenotic existence”—and what I would call, in the context of sovereignty, a “letting be.”\footnote{Hart explores the theme of “ontological poverty” in Lacoste, which refers to the state of emptiness that the worshipper encounters before the Absolute. “We can properly dwell on earth only beneath the Cross, Lacoste insists, for it is there that the disappropriation of death and the disappropriation for God converge and diverge. To live merely marked by death is to experience poverty for nothing; yet to divest ourselves of everything so that we can live for God is to experience poverty as openness to everything.” See Kevin Hart, “Poverty’s Speech’: On Liturgical Reduction,” \textit{Modern Theology} 31, no. 4 (October 2015): 641-647. This “openness to everything” is the positive side of inoperativity that forms the key to ethics. It allows one to renounce the possession of works, and thus returning to their proper use. The result is a form of politics that renounces domination, a \textit{via crucis}. For a similar argument see Stanislas Breton, \textit{The Word and the Cross}, trans. Jacquelyn Porter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002). Obviously there is an enormous overlap here what we have seen Moltmann doing (especially in \textit{The Crucified God}), except that Moltmann pulls his argument from a dogmatic Christian narrative, rather than from phenomenology. My point is that both thinkers arrive at a complimentary place, even from such different angles.}
At this point, Lacoste’s notion of inoperativity might appear to be politically quietistic. The sovereign simply pulls back, creating tranquility in human affairs by doing nothing. Peace on earth comes through nothing happening. But this is not the case, according to Lacoste’s summary: “Pursued to its ultimate consequences, the liturgical experience prevents man from dwelling peaceably on the earth—but every form of liturgy must learn this lesson.” Lacoste points to the flip side of liturgical inoperativity: Although it accomplishes nothing (in the worldly sense of “use” as production), it is incredibly effective at disrupting and upending political processes within the world. Liturgical inoperativity makes the worshipper a foreigner within the world, and foreigners—by virtue of their very existence—change the dynamics of a society or nation. Because they put themselves outside the regular patterns of human existence, they form spaces of disjunction that neutralize the claims society typically makes on a human being. “He who prays is symbolically nowhere,” Lacoste emphasizes, and for this reason “he refuses to participate in the dialectics that make up history; and he declares the phenomenological ground of his historiality powerless to determine what he ultimately is.” Politics requires identification

45 Lacoste, Experience and the Absolute, 31.

46 Stephanie Rumpza observes that for Lacoste, “the symbolic activity of liturgy interrupts the closure of the world to make space for the eschatological arriving from beyond it. This symbolism does not work itself out by contradicting or destroying the structures of Dasein, but by ‘subverting’ them from within by a ‘a work of overdetermination’. The possibility of this overdetermination can only be realized at a certain cost: violence to the order that we take to be essential to humanity. When liturgy attempts to reject the closed-off structures of the world in order to place them before God, it can at most live these structures in a deliberate and marginalized way.” See Stephanie Rumpza, “The Ascesis of Ascesis: The Subversion of Care in Jean-Yves Lacoste and Evagrius Ponticus,” The Heythrop Journal 58 (2017): 780-788, 781. Rumpza’s use of the term “violence” to describe the effects of Lacoste’s liturgical reduction may be too strong, although to speak of “rendering inoperative” a structure does seem to imply a sort of violence.

47 Lacoste, Experience and the Absolute, 54.
with a certain place, time, and productive activity. Liturgical inoperativity takes the worshipper out of this matrix, and in doing so creates a governmental problem.

This problem becomes particularly clear when Lacoste raises the implications of inoperative liturgy for Hegel’s famous “master/slave” dialectic. For any dialectic of this sort to work, the master and slave must occupy distinct spaces. But what happens if those spaces are dislocated? This is another way of asking: What happens if master and slave keep Sabbath together? This is, after all, precisely what Exodus 20:8-11 and Deuteronomy 5:12-15 envision with their stipulation that “you . . . and your male and female slave” must rest. If we apply Lacoste’s logic to this mandate, we find that Sabbath does not merely provide a break for tired servants. By keeping Sabbath together, master and slave erode the distinction between them, and not only for the temporary moment in which they engage in the liturgy. Because they keep Sabbath with and before the Absolute, who is also inoperative, they show “their true face” through their rest. Sabbath, then, is not an exception to normal human life, but its governing principle. The master and slave cannot finish their Sabbath liturgy and continue life as usual. The suspension of normal social order made visible in the Sabbath will not let them “resign themselves” to the distinction between them; it will haunt the entirety of their social existence,

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48 The idea of the master/slave, or lord/bondsman dialectic can be found in G.W.F. Hegel, The Phenomenology of Spirit, trans. Michael Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), paragraphs 178-196. Hegel’s argument is that the master dominates the slave through superior force, yet is dependent on the slave for survival, and hence must grow to recognize the slave’s existence, despite simultaneously attempting to suppress and marginalize that existence. The dialectic is fundamentally about recognition and the struggle to achieve it. For an account of various theories of Hegel’s master/slave dialectic see Philip Moran, Hegel and the Fundamental Problems of Philosophy (Holland: Gruner, 1988). The most prominent theorist to emphasize the importance of the master/slave dialectic in history is Alexander Kojève, who postulated that history moves on the basis of the dialectic, and ends when the dialectic ends. This interpretation could suggest that a “Sabbath” is another term for the end of history, when master and slave keep Sabbath together. I do not have space to pursue this idea here, but it deserves further research. See Alexander Kojève, Introduction to the Reading of Hegel, trans. Raymond Queneau (New York: Basic Books, 1969).
restoring the dignity of the slave and stalking the conscience of the master. This type of reading suggests Sabbath could function as one option to the end of history, and the ambiguous “last man” heralded by Francis Fukuyama could potentially be a liturgical celebrant.49

This depiction of the resolution of the master/slave dialectic is radically different from Hegel’s. For him, the master attains a free, independent consciousness by subjecting the slave to labor, and the slave can only reverse this inequality by “doing”—actively reducing the inequality through productive action. “Through work,” Hegel says, “it (the servile consciousness) comes to its own self.”50 According to one interpretation, Hegel envisions a scenario in which the slave gradually overcomes the inequality simply by virtue of the fact that the slave holds access to the natural necessities of survival; the master is dependent on the slave in this sense.51 In another interpretation, the slave overcomes the hierarchy by actively resisting it, working negatively to topple it.52 Both of these interpretations have in common that the master and slave only achieve unity through exertion of force. Lacoste offers an alternative: the master and slave may rest together before God. This would not be a unity achieved through the harmonious functioning of

49 Of course, Fukuyama might argue that an era of liberal Sabbath-keeping and night-vigil attendance would not provide the \textit{thymos}, or sense of recognition that human nature craves. This passion for \textit{thymos} is what Fukuyama—following Kojève—claims is the root of the instabilities and contradictions of liberal capitalism. See Francis Fukuyama, \textit{The End of History and the Last Man} (New York: The Free Press, 1992). Notwithstanding Fukuyama’s cynicism, it is interesting to read the final chapters of his famous work with the question of inoperativity and ritual in mind. Could ritual have something to offer in addressing the angst of liberal democracy? This is an especially relevant question in light of the problem of climate change—a problem rooted in \textit{thymos} as well. The fourth chapter of this work will address this question in part, although I do not have the space here to bring Fukuyama into complete dialogue with a theology of inoperativity, as fascinating as that would be.

50 Hegel, \textit{The Phenomenology of Spirit}, paragraph 195.


a machine-like system, but through the peace of rest—submitting to the sovereignty of an inoperative God.

The result of this, of course, is an enormous political obstacle, insofar as politics is conducted on the basis of friend/enemy distinctions and up/down hierarchies. Because liturgy thrusts the worshipper outside of the regular order of human values, it gives the worshipper a perspective that relativizes the boundaries that establish political objectives. In consequence, the worshipper cannot return to life as usual. We could perhaps compare this interpretation of liturgical inoperativity to “stepping out of a game,” suspending its control over life and meaning, and enabling those who go back into the game to do so with fairness and justice.53

Of course, as Lacoste admits, there are dangers lurking in this politics of inoperativity. Such a politics can easily be conducted through the evasion of responsibility. One imagines politicians playing golf during national disasters or police officers standing by idly while the populace engages in violent outbursts. Could we not say that Pontius Pilate took a “Sabbath” by washing his hands and declaring “I am innocent of this man’s blood?” Indeed, per Lacoste, liturgical experience can furnish an alibi for those “who dwell on the world without respect for liberty, justice, and their promotion.”54 Do we truly want political leaders who keep Sabbath as such?

Lacoste refuses to offer a blithe, commercial-esque response to this objection. The danger of irresponsibility in political inoperativity is real. According to Lacoste, “we admit to having no

53 As Joseph Rivera points out, the liturgical reduction leaves one in a “fragile” and unstable place, because through liturgy one has renounced or bracketed the world, only to be faced once again with being in the world. See Joseph Rivera, “Toward a Liturgical Existentialism,” New Blackfriars 94, no. 1049 (2012): 79-96.

54 Lacoste, Experience and the Absolute, 66.
choice but to confess to a certain liturgical ‘unhappiness’ of consciousness.” By this term he refers to the phenomenon described by Hegel in which an “endless nostalgia” for an “unattainable beyond” creates an inability to realize the “peace of unity.” The theological temptation in the face of this objection is to deny that otherworldliness is an aspect of Christian liturgy, and Lacoste cannot do this.

However, Lacoste points toward an outcome of liturgical experience that forbids the worshipper from evading the obligations of justice. In liturgy, the worshipper discovers that “being-in-the-world and being-before-God are thoroughly intertwined.” Liturgical inoperativity causes a participant to become more fully human, not to escape from humanity. This is because, as Lacoste puts it, “liturgy is the remarkable regional experience in which we do not simply engage one characteristic of our being-in-the-world, but its reality in its entirety.” There is something like Nicholas of Cusa’s “coincidence of opposites” in the phenomenon of liturgy: The worshipper turns away from the world, and in doing so is confronted all the more directly

55 Lacoste, Experience and the Absolute, 67.

56 This point addresses a long-standing debate between Lacoste and Emmanuel Levinas. The latter argues that human beings are fundamentally oriented toward the infinite not through an orientation toward God (defined as the Absolute or infinite), but through an orientation toward the face of the other. Lacoste, obviously, posits liturgical experience as the site through which a human being encounters the infinite, without explicit ethical engagement. If what I argue here is correct, there is a sense in which these two perspectives are complimentary. The Absolute does reveal itself as utter limit, revealed in inoperative liturgy. Yet, this inoperativity thrusts the worshipper back into a sense of obligation to the other. For this reason, it is not incorrect to see the world of ethics and the world of inoperativity as mutually reinforcing. For Levinas’ views on ethics and the other see Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969); Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other, trans. Michael Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). For Lacoste’s arguments with Levinas see Being and the Absolute, 50, 71-72. As Robert Reed argues, Lacoste may have significantly overlooked the fact that his liturgical experience and Levinas’ ethical experience may be different ways of speaking about the same reality. See Robert C. Reed, “Experience and the Absolute Other: Why Lacoste Should Look Again at Levinas,” Journal of Religious Ethics 44, no. 3 (2016): 472-494.

57 Lacoste, Experience and the Absolute, 72.
with the world. Paradoxically, inoperativity could be necessary for genuine action in the world. Only from a standpoint in the margins can one truly act—and thus rule—within the world.

Rule from the margins is related in many ways to democracy, but the two are not identical. Democratic politics creates rule from the center, from figures and ideas grounded in the midst of a stable majority. An inoperative sovereign is not disconnected from majority interests, but is more concerned with “the least of these” in a given political scenario. Because this sovereign’s task is to “let be,” the sovereign focuses more on those who struggle for existence than on those whose existence is secure. To those whose interests’ “matter” from the perspective of power and prestige, actions done for the sake of such semi-existent persons may appear to be “nothing.” The inoperative sovereign may literally appear then to be “doing nothing.” Yet this is the result of encounter with Lacoste’s “Absolute”—the first shall be last, and the last shall be first.

Summary

Through a careful phenomenology of worship practices, Lacoste’s work offers a depiction of the human relationship to the Absolute as characterized by inoperativity. The worshipper simply exists before the Absolute—neither contributing productive work nor receiving tangible benefits. Although Lacoste does not directly seek to formulate a political theory of inoperativity, his understanding of liturgy straightforwardly creates a political application: the Absolute reveals itself in practices of letting-be. This reframes the way human beings see themselves in relation to production, and it also potentially transforms how human beings attempt to govern others in hierarchical relationships.
As I have shown, by describing liturgy as a site for a reframing of human relationships within hierarchies, Lacoste claims that he is describing not just parochial events (night vigils, religious holidays, etc.) but reality in its entirety. This suggests that inoperativity might not only describe sundry moments in human existence, but human life as a whole. This raises the question: May we speak of an inoperativity within human life itself? Could life as a whole enter into a Sabbath, whereby liturgy and reality coincide completely? What would be the impact of such a vision? In answering these questions, Agamben’s work becomes central.

**Agamben: Inoperativity as a Form of Life**

At the risk of sounding pejorative, one may describe the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben as a squirrelly thinker. His work fits broadly into the category of political philosophy, but he pilfers ideas from innumerable other disciplines, including ancient historical anthropology, literary theory, poetry, the Bible, and church history, and he moves from one discipline to another rapidly. The reason for this massive scope of Agamben’s investigations is that his topic is proportionally massive: He seeks to analyze “life” itself. Specifically, he wants to explore how human beings come to think about “life” in politically significant ways. In the course of doing so, the theme of inoperativity emerges repeatedly. This section first describes Agamben’s “method” for approaching inoperativity, and then assesses what an inoperative life would look like and what type of politics would arise from it.

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58 Thomas Carl Wall describes the structure of Agamben’s book *The Coming Community* as “crazy, slightly drunk (even as the thinking in it is precise and delicate).” See Thomas Carl Wall, *Radical Passivity: Levinas, Blanchot, Agamben* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999), 121.

59 I place “method” in quotes because Agamben does not have a clearly recognizable approach in the same sense that Lacoste does. This does not mean that Agamben fails to utilize a consistent, rigorous approach to philosophical problems. It does mean that his works tend to address issues in a less systematic way.
Method

It is not possible to give a firm, overarching description of Agamben’s method for describing inoperativity—if by “method” we mean a linear process of reflection. That being said, as Leland de la Durantaye observes, there is a “unity” to the various works Agamben has written.\textsuperscript{60} Ancient and early modern texts form the basis for many of Agamben’s works, and he examines them with the question of political ontology in mind: How to describe “life.”\textsuperscript{61}

Life, according to Agamben, may be categorized in two different ways (a distinction he draws from ancient Greek thought, specifically Aristotle): as \textit{zoe} and as \textit{bios}.\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Zoe}, the first form of life, refers to “bare” life, the life of a subsisting creature. It is characterized by an unadorned

\textsuperscript{60} According to Durantaye, “Agamben has written some 20 books on topics ranging from aesthetics to politics, poetics to ontology. This diversity of topic is coupled with a unity—albeit an evolving one—of method.” See Leland de la Durantaye, “On Method, the Messiah, Anarchy and Theocracy,” afterward to Giorgio Agamben, \textit{The Church and the Kingdom}, trans Leland de la Durantaye (London: Seagull Books, 2012), 49. This unity often revolves around drawing from ancient sources in order to demonstrate a trajectory in Western thought toward a particular political outcome. For example, by citing obscure ancient Roman sources in his \textit{Homo Sacer} series, Agamben hopes to point to seeds of totalitarianism rooted in the Western political mind. As Colby Dickinson and Adam Kotsko put it, “in \textit{Homo Sacer}, we learn that the entire history of Western political thought was always heading towards the horrors of totalitarianism.” See Colby Dickinson and Adam Kotsko, \textit{Agamben’s Coming Philosophy: Finding a New Use for Theology} (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 4. One could certainly argue that this method is speculative and arbitrary, and as scientific historical theory goes, this might be correct. However, Agamben’s approach utilizes ancient sources not so much as “proofs” for historical theorems as paradigms or case studies of recurring realities in history. In other words, it is not the case that contemporary sovereigns directly have in mind the ancient figure of the \textit{homo sacer} when making political pronouncements, but rather that they find themselves reenacting the underlying idea phenomenon of the \textit{homo sacer}.

\textsuperscript{61} Matthew Abott argues that Agamben’s work on poetry, language and aesthetics is not merely a critical investigation into the quirks of those disciplines, but a study of the political results of the question of human being, or what might be called a “political ontology.” See Matthew Abott, \textit{The Figure of this World: Agamben and the Question of Political Ontology} (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

functioning on the earth, prior to complex forms of socialization. Human beings are, in many ways, discrete biological systems, with certain basic needs and drives, summarized by social scientists in terms of the “Four F’s”: feeding, fighting, fleeing, and reproduction. However, human beings do not stay as such. We form another kind of life, designated with the Greek term bios. This is political life, life under law, corresponding to life within the polis for Aristotle.63 Bios arises from the making and enforcing of institutions of law, whether they be states, local governments, churches, universities, or social clubs. Much of Western political philosophy, from Hobbes and Rousseau up to Rawls and Nozick, seeks to describe how zoe should be transformed into bios—how human beings in a “state of nature” should form political institutions that establish laws, and thereby ensure rights.

Ultimately, these institutions become marked by the exercise of sovereignty. For Agamben, the sovereign is the one who guarantees that a person is more than merely zoe, but also bios. This creation and enforcement of a certain type of bios is what Agamben, following Foucault, calls “biopolitics.”64 In most Western states, this happens visibly in the process of citizenship. The United States, for example, was ostensibly founded on the premise of ensuring

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63 Agamben’s use of Aristotle on the differentiation between different forms of life is provocative, particularly since Aristotle is not often viewed as a thinker within the “social contract” tradition. On Agamben’s understanding of bare life and Aristotle’s categories see James Gordon Finlayson, “Bare life and Politics in Agamben’s Reading of Aristotle,” The Review of Politics 72 (2010): 97-126.

64 Agamben makes the argument that biopolitics begins with the “sovereign exception.” See Agamben, Homo Sacer, 6. Biopolitics often connotes forms of political power that rely less on overtly hierarchical systems and more on organizing life in such a way as to force human beings into certain political frameworks. This does not mean it is noncoercive or not truly sovereign. As Colby Dickinson observes, “Biopolitics . . . is little more than the force of sovereignty removed from a symbolic figurehead, such as kingship, and directed into a myriad of effects produced upon our biological bodies.” See Colby Dickinson, Agamben and Theology (London: T&T Clark International, 2011), 57. Although biopolitics is often depicted as a modern phenomenon, Agamben’s work roots it in the formation of the self that plays into every political engagement. “In other words, politics has always been biopolitics”—is the summary of Claire Colebrook and Jason Maxwell, Agamben (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 61. In many ways, these is a different way of stating what feminists proclaimed in the 1970’s: “the personal is political.”
“inalienable rights” to human beings, by granting these rights to U.S. citizens. As a citizen, I have the capacity to play a role in political action, through voting, petitioning elected officials, and taking advantage of those freedoms guarded for me by the government. The sovereignty of the U.S. government preserves these rights for me.

But even the briefest examination of political history reveals that no rights are ever always considered inalienable. The sovereign is also the one who declares the state of exception over who may be considered purely as bios, and there are many such states of exception.65 In most western countries, the sovereign stands under the authority of the law, but may paradoxically suspend the law when doing so is necessary to preserve the institution of sovereignty. Sovereigns usually describe these events as “states of emergency,” but such emergencies may easily morph into permanent conditions. An example of this would be Hitler’s suspension of the Weimar Constitution, which ultimately created his capacity as a dictator. Another example would be the U.S. government’s decision under George W. Bush to hold potential “terrorists” in detention centers such as Guantanamo Bay indefinitely without trial, thereby creating a clear violation of the writ of habeas corpus.66

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65 Here Agamben follows Schmitt’s understanding of the “state of exception,” with the key difference being that for Agamben, the state of exception morphs into a permanent feature of political engagement, because the state of exception is involved in the construction of the human person as such. In this respect one can see the influence of Arendt’s work on human existence in relation to power on his thinking. See Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958. For an overview of Agamben’s connections to Arendt see Anthony Curtis Adler, “Fractured Life and the Ambiguity of Historical Time: Biopolitics in Agamben and Arendt,” Cultural Critique 86 (2014): 1-30.

66 In-depth analyses of these examples (as well as other instances of emergency situations as opportunities for the exercise of sovereign power) can be found in Giorgio Agamben, State of Exception, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 3-22. On the significance of Agamben’s understanding of sovereignty for understanding these types of deprivations of human rights see John Lechte and Saul Newman, Agamben and the Politics of Human Rights: Statelessness, Images, Violence (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 49-76.
In the state of exception, the sovereign may categorize certain human beings as bare life, or at least on the border between *zoe* and *bios*. Agamben uses the ancient Roman example of the *homo sacer*—a human being who, according to ancient sources, “could be killed but not sacrificed” as the model of this atypical form of existence.\(^{67}\) The *homo sacer* was human, undoubtedly, but did not fall into the category of a fully human being who would thus be eligible for ritual death. Agamben’s modern example of a site where this reduction of life happens is the concentration camp, where persons live as human beings, but with their biopolitical humanity negated. Another modern example that could be added to Agamben’s analysis would be the condition of many refugees, whose native governments fail to provide them with adequate protections for their rights, but who are also denied entry into other countries.\(^{68}\) Such “stateless persons” become subhuman, but in a fascinating and disturbing way. We all recognize that they are human beings in their physical nature, but they lack the capacity for “life” in the sense that citizens possess it.\(^{69}\) Stateless persons are rendered inoperative, an inoperativity made visible in the vivid images of refugee camps at borderlands, where impoverished families mill about

\(^{67}\) See Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 3-32.


\(^{69}\) Here, as Lechte and Newman observe, we encounter a paradox: Bare life is not “real” life, but we cannot escape its call on us as life. Using the example of slavery in Aristotle’s *Politics*, Lechte and Newman write, “Not to be human in any way would make the slave entirely outside any possible status hierarchy. The natural slave, in Aristotle’s terms, must still be human, otherwise slavery has no meaning. The slave, in other words, has to be included as human, in order to be excluded from every existing form of social life.” See Lechte and Newman, *Agamben and the Politics of Human Rights*, 50. By positing *zoe* life “on the threshold” of human society in this manner, Agamben’s work differs from Arendt’s, who portrays the life of persons such as slaves as still having a place in society, without the freedoms and capacities of a full member. See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 177-179. For Agamben, by contrast, the slave or refugee dwells in an “exclusive inclusion” rather than a full exclusion or inclusion. He or she is part of the society by not being a part. A good example of this would be migrant workers, whose significance to their host country is often that precisely because they are not members of the society, they can be treated with measures to which citizens would not be subjected.
waiting to see whether they may be admitted into a new country. Many similar examples of biopolitical inoperativity could be adduced to these, including the conditions of minorities under racist voter-suppression laws, persons with disabilities, young children, and, in many cases, women.70

The typical neo-liberal response to these states of exception is horror at the flagrant violations of constitutional law they embody. It seems dramatically unfair to dehumanize certain arbitrary groups of people. According to this vein of thought, the sovereign must be held accountable for ensuring inalienable rights for those within the sovereign’s jurisdiction. However, under a biopolitical paradigm, it seems impossible to prevent the sovereign from ushering a permanent (or at least semi-permanent) state of exception, in which certain human beings are rendered inoperative as life on the threshold of zoe and bios. The distinction always sneaks in underneath every call for human rights. Agamben points to Aristotle’s analysis of slavery in the Politics, where the slave’s existence as threshold life used by the slave master is necessary for the latter’s fully bios-life: “The slave in fact represents a not properly human life that renders possible for others the bios politikos, that is to say, the truly human life.”71

According to Agamben, western political thought has taken for granted that the exemplary subject is bios-life, forgetting the existence of those human beings who reside at the threshold

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70 Matthew Abbott points out that for Agamben, the sovereignty of capitalism itself tends to produce subjected individuals whose insignificance reduces them to a form of inoperativity. See Matthew Abbott, “Glory, Spectacle, and Inoperativity: Agamben’s Praxis of Theoria,” in Agamben and Radical Politics, ed. Daniel McLoughlin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 27-48. This idea seems to cut against the popular mindset we have seen in Moltmann and Heschel, that modern capitalism creates a frenetic pace of activity. However, the paradox of capitalism could be that it produces both dizzying production rates as well as toxic unemployment and decadent lethargy. A similar thesis seems to be found in Benjamin Noys, Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism (Winchester: Zero Books, 2014).

71 Agamben, The Use of Bodies, 20.
between the two forms. These human beings are essential to the political order, as invisible as they often are. It is easy to forget, in a society without chattel slavery, that there are numerous persons whose practical existence is slave-like, in the sense that they cannot make free decisions about the type of labor they will do, and are often subjected to dehumanizing conditions while doing it. They are barred from fully bios-life, yet they enable that life to attain itself. As Colby Dickinson observes, this situation is marked by what could only be called “precariousness.” This precarious quality emerges from the fact that pursuit of ideal “human” goals only proceeds by diminishing certain human forms of life. Congress, one might say, could not run long without the capitol sewer-plumbers and sanitation workers.

For this reason, the solution to the problem of sovereignty cannot be an increasing emphasis on enhancing rights for bios-individuals. This standard liberal approach seems noble, but it inadvertently creates conditions whereby certain persons face a reduction of their humanity. To give one example, a policy to increase welfare benefits for citizens in order to preserve their rights to shelter and education is an admirable humanitarian idea, but it often leads to populist tendencies to keep poor migrants out of the country, lest they cripple extensive welfare provisions. Sovereigns preserve power by pitting the poor against the poor, as refugees become the nemeses of lower-class native citizens. Within the biopolitical paradigm, laws that

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72 Agamben makes a striking observation: “The anthropology that we have inherited from classical philosophy is modeled on the free man. Aristotle developed his idea of the human being starting from the paradigm of the free man, even if this latter implies the slave as his condition of possibility” (Agamben, The Use of Bodies, 20).

73 Dickinson comments on Agamben’s incisive recognition of the “contradictions and aporias” that lurk underneath political rhetoric of identity and territory: “The precarious position of the political thus comes to define its existence, and in some sense at least to legitimate its often (inherently) violent means. The ‘People’ of the polis are therefore wedded to the exclusion of certain forms of life (the ‘others’, the ‘enemy,’ those ‘people’ who are no part of the ‘us,’ or the always political ‘we’).” See Dickinson, Agamben and Theology, 58.
are founded on a *zoel/bios* distinction inevitably reinforce that distinction, forcing persons who live on the threshold or below it into a violent suppression, what I will call (using Agamben’s terms, though not his precise formulation) a “sovereign inoperativity.” This type of inoperativity maintains a stasis of hierarchy, ensuring that those who have the freedom of full humanity may continue in that role, while those who do not will remain in a perpetual state of subjugation.

What is the solution to the woes of the biopolitical paradigm? If simply attempting to extend the realm of *bios*-life and prevent sovereign inoperativity will not work, what other options do we have? Agamben has no thoroughly developed political proposal to offer. However, he does point toward a solution, and it is another type of inoperativity.

**Agamben’s Understanding of Inoperativity**

So far, I have referenced one type of inoperativity Agamben analyzes: Sovereign inoperativity. However, there is another type of inoperativity at play in Agamben’s thought, one that often appears when Agamben dwells on the category of the “messianic.” For this reason, it might be called “messianic inoperativity.” In what follows I will describe both of these forms of inoperativity, in order to show how for Agamben the second form is the remedy for the problems of the first.

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74 As mentioned in my discussion of the term “messianic” in connection to Moltmann’s work, it is important to clarify what this word means in the context in which Agamben and I will use it. Dickinson emphasizes that “(t)here are few religious terms that have received such heavy traffic in recent philosophical usage as ‘the messianic’” (Dickinson, *Agamben and Theology*, 86). According to Colebrook and Maxwell, Agamben’s understanding of the “messianic” “is drawn from Walter Benjamin’s attempt to think about a messianic event that is not some future fulfillment of this fallen world, and is instead the ‘happiness’ of this world lived elsewhere” (Colebrook and Maxwell, *Agamben*, 51). For further analysis of Agamben’s indebtedness to Benjamin see Adam Kotsko’s chapter “Reading the ‘Critique of Violence,’” in Dickinson and Kotsko, *Agamben’s Coming Philosophy*, 41-50. On Benjamin’s development of this and related themes see Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, ed. Marcus Bollock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2006), 250. I will explain below what a “messianic” understanding of inoperativity means in detail for Agamben. At this point, I will only point out that this specific understanding of the term entails that a “messianic” politics should not be confused with any particular dogmatic or confessional definition.
**Sovereign Inoperativity**

In his most explicitly theo-political work, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Agamben points out that in theological and monarchical tradition, the sovereign, or God himself, is permanently inoperative. Agamben finds this visible in the liturgical phenomenon of “glorifying God.” According to Christian tradition, God is infinitely perfect, the instantiation of glory itself. But if this is true, why glorify glory? The worshipper who proclaims “glory to God in the highest” therefore accomplishes nothing by worshipping (this was substantially Lacoste’s point, as we have seen). Glorification is essentially useless. What does this say about the nature of God’s being?

Agamben’s answer to this question is clear: the inoperativity of worship reveals the nature of pure sovereignty, which is itself inoperativity hidden behind glory. Agamben explains:

Inasmuch as it names the ultimate ends of man and the condition that follows the Last Judgment, glory coincides with the cessation of all activity and all works. It is what remains after the machine of divine oikonomia has reached its completion and the hierarchy of angelic ministries has become completely inoperative. While in hell something like penal administration is still in operation, paradise not only knows no government, but also no writing, reading, no theology, and even no liturgical celebration—besides doxology, the hymn of glory. Glory occupies the place of postjudicial inoperativity; it is the eternal amen in which all works and all divine and human words are resolved.75

Agamben argues that the ritual institution of Sabbath is a “grandiose image” of this divine inoperativity. He cites the first creation story in Genesis, in which creation climaxes not with the act of creating itself, but with God’s rest on the seventh day. Agamben quotes the Jewish philosopher Philo (“only God truly possesses inoperativity”) and the author of Hebrews, both of

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whom present an image of divine Sabbath-keeping. For Agamben, God’s Sabbath rest is the core of God’s sovereignty—which is hidden behind the veil of glory. As Agamben puts it,

(T)he center of the governmental apparatus, the threshold at which Kingdom and Government ceaselessly communicate and ceaselessly distinguish themselves from one another is, in reality, empty; it is only the Sabbath and *katapausis*—and, nevertheless, this inoperativity is so essential for the machine that it must at all costs be adopted and maintained at its center in the form of glory.\(^76\)

Simply stated, inoperativity is the stasis of sovereign rule—the essential “pointlessness” of sovereign power. If all things exist for God, then God’s rule over all things is a self-reflective circle. The humming of the universe has no external end. The great chain of being is immobile, and it is as if a permanent caste system is embedded in the cosmos, with God at the top, preserving a steady-flow of top down power throughout the system.

How can a totalitarian power be inoperative, and still be sovereign? Here it is helpful to think of the rule of medieval nobles and other ruling classes, who for much of history were set apart in the hierarchy by the privilege of avoiding labor—being inoperative. Their job was, in essence, to preserve the distinction between themselves and those lesser persons who were stuck lower in the hierarchy. The role of the throne in classical monarchy is immensely relevant in this regard. The one who rules does not engage in vigorous action, but simply sits adorned in majesty. Even today, the “effortlessness” of political leaders constitutes their ultimate panache. During a time of crisis, the president may appear before a camera, calmly addressing the people from a comfortable chair behind a desk. Just as God is the *unmoved* mover, the ultimate authority does not act but instead exists as the reason why others are forced to act. Through inoperativity, the sovereign remains *raison de etre* of the governmental apparatus.

\(^76\) Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 242.
Rituals of inoperativity, such as Sabbath, could be taken as tokens of sovereign inoperativity. To put it bluntly, the divine command to keep Sabbath could function as a reminder of God’s dominance. Perhaps some Biblical accounts would fit such a reading, such as the obscure story in Numbers 15:32-36, in which an unnamed Israelite is stoned for gathering firewood on the Sabbath (the execution is carried out in direct obedience to divine command, as if the sovereign deity himself were offended by the man’s act). If this is the case, it would also overthrow Lacoste’s affirmative framing of liturgical inoperativity, which he claims reveals the “non-necessity of the Absolute.” Rather than upsetting the idea of God as pure act, Lacoste’s night vigil would reassert the sovereign activity of God—only this time as the sovereign whose actions spring from a core of inoperativity. Rituals of inoperativity such as Sabbath would thus be a way in which the zoelbios distinction could be preserved.

Of course, this reading of inoperativity as an institution of divine glory is not the only interpretation of inoperativity and the creation story available. As we have seen in Moltmann’s work, the Sabbath of creation could also be the sign of God’s restful solidarity with creation—God’s symbol of creative freedom or “letting be.” Such a reading of Genesis might also harmonize better with modern science, which depicts the origin of the world less as an act of a cosmic magician and more as the outcome of free events. This leads us to the second type of inoperativity Agamben discusses.

**Messianic Inoperativity**

The concept of messianic inoperativity in Agamben’s work is tantalizingly vague. Agamben stimulates the reader with hints at its qualities, without ever summarily describing it. While describing the way Christian theology has understood sovereign inoperativity, Agamben
cites an intriguing passage from Augustine’s *De Civitas Dei*, where Augustine posits an “eternal inoperativity”: “After this period (the end of time) God shall be inoperative on the Sabbath, when he shall make inoperative itself that very Sabbath that we shall be.” Agamben comments: “Here, in a stuttering attempt to think the unthinkable, Augustine defines the final condition as a sabbatism to the nth degree, a making the Sabbath take rest in the Sabbath, a resolving of inoperativity into inoperativity.” Although Agamben never fully clarifies what this means, his language suggests a new type of inoperativity which is not the substructure of the glory of sovereignty. Rather, this inoperativity renders inoperative the very suspension of activity which constitutes sovereign authority.

Such a self-negating dialectic of inoperativity seems to shed additional light on Agamben’s exploratory inquiry near the conclusion of *The Kingdom and the Glory*: “Is it possible to think inoperativity outside the apparatus of glory?” Agamben leaves this question without a solid answer, but he points to the Jewish and Christian concepts of eternal life and a messianic age as starting points. As is clear from Augustine’s text, the messianic age is a future time when inoperativity will itself become inoperative—the glory will no longer shroud the sovereign deity’s dominant inoperativity, but will be borne by all the blessed in the form of the *stephanos*, or crown of righteousness. However, Agamben points out that for Paul, the messianic age is not merely future, but extends into the present through Jesus Christ. “This life,” Agamben argues, “is marked by a special indicator of inoperativity, which in some ways anticipates the

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sabbatism of the Kingdom in the present: the hos me, the ‘as not.’”80 In a sense, just as for the author of the book of Hebrews (who claims that “today” is the time to enter God’s Sabbath rest in Hebrews 4:7–8), the ultimate, non-sovereign inoperativity of the Sabbath is available now. This tension between the already and not-yet is a direct result of the work of the Messiah.

Agamben further elaborates:

In the same way that the Messiah has brought about the law and, at the same time, rendered it inoperative (the verb that Paul uses to express the relation between the Messiah and the law—katargein—literally means ‘to render argos,’ inoperative), so the hos me maintains and, at the same time, deactivates in the present all the juridical conditions and all the social behaviors of the members of the messianic community.81

The Messiah does not suspend law altogether. That would constitute a sovereign form of inoperativity, or the Schmittian state of exception. The Sabbath, understood as a divine command to suspend action in deference to the authority of the Deity, would constitute such a state of exception. But this is not what the Messiah does. The Messiah suspends the law of suspension itself, refusing to negate it, but behaving as if it were not a sovereign authority. Agamben tries to describe this mysterious existence: “To live in the Messiah means precisely to revoke and render inoperative at each instant every aspect of the life that we live, and to make the life for which we live, which Paul calls ‘the life of Jesus’ appear within it.”82 This is Agamben’s interpretation of what Benjamin called “now-time” (jetzeit), a time of “emergency” that counteracts the permanent state of emergency called by the sovereign.83 Such a messianic form of inoperativity

80 Agamben, The Kingdom and the Glory, 248.
81 Agamben, The Kingdom and the Glory, 248.
82 Agamben, The Kingdom and the Glory, 248.
83 Benjamin writes: “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight. Then
does not create a new form of dominance or sovereignty, but creates the possibility for a new political order. In Agamben’s words, “The messianic life is the impossibility that life might coincide with a predetermined form, the revoking of every bios in order to open it to the zoe tou Iesou.”

What does a messianic type of inoperativity look like? How does it differ from the hegemonic Sabbath of sovereign inoperativity? Agamben offers no precise answer. In a sense, because it is characterized by potentiality—a “still to come” element—a messianic inoperativity is impossible to fully articulate. Nevertheless, since the messianic future also extends into the present, some notion of a messianic inoperativity should be available for reflection. Agamben posits a decisive hint: messianic inoperativity is a form of praxis that reveals and enables basic, common human being—what Agamben calls “the Whatever” or “Whatever being,” which also correlates with what he calls a “form of life.”

In his later work, Agamben harnesses the term we will clearly see that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism.” See Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in Illuminations, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 253-264 (quote taken from thesis VIII). On Benjamin’s attempt to create a “state of emergency” opposed to the sovereign state of emergency see Michael Löwy, Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History, trans. Chris Turner (New York: Verso, 2005).

84 In The Use of Bodies Agamben comments (in the context of a discussion of slavery in Paul’s thought): “The Pauline ‘as not,’ by putting each factual condition in tension with itself, revokes and deactivates it without altering its form (weeping as not weeping, having a wife as not having a wife, slaves as not slaves). That is to say, the messianic calling consists in the deactivation and disappropriation of the factual condition, which is therefore opened to a new possible use. The ‘new creature’ is only the capacity to render the old inoperative and use it in a new way: ‘if one is in the messiah, a new creature; the old things have passed away, behold they have become new’ (2 Corinthians 5:17).” See Giorgio Agamben, The Use of Bodies, 56.

85 Agamben, The Kingdom and the Glory, 248-49.

86 See Giorgio Agamben, The Coming Community, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 4-5. According to Wall, “There is nothing mysterious, magical, or ineffable about the Whatever. It is as common as can be. It is the most common. It is not representable or thematizable, not because it is withdrawn, silent, negative, or removed, but because it is too common.” See Wall, Radical Passivity, 123. Wall’s understanding of this “Whatever” or passivity in Agamben points toward a form of life without predicates or
“use” to describe this type of praxis. In *The Use of Bodies*, where Agamben places inoperativity in the category of *use*, he attempts to explain the complicated relationship between inoperativity and potential:

Use is constitutively an inoperative praxis, which can happen only on the basis of a deactivation of the Aristotelian apparatus potential/act, which assigns to *energia*, to being-at-work, primacy over potential. Use is, in this sense, a principle internal to potential, which prevents it from being simply consumed in the act and drives it to turn once more to itself, to make itself a potential of potential, to be capable of its own potential (and therefore its own impotential).^87

Later in the same context Agamben claims that the inoperative work “will expose in the act the potential of acting.”^88 But how exactly does it do this?

In *Nudities* Agamben includes an essay on “The Glorious Body” that sheds light on this question. Drawing from the ongoing medieval-to-modern theological debate over what the post-resurrection human body will be like, Agamben asks a probing question: What would be the significance of the reproductive and nutritive organs in a glorious body which will need neither sexual activity nor sustenance? For an answer, Agamben turns to the Angelic Doctor: “Aquinas’s strategy is clear: to separate organs from their specific physiological functions. The purpose of each organ, like that of any instrument, is its operation; but this does not mean that if the operation fails, then the instrument becomes useless (*frustra sit instrumentum*).”^89 Even by doing nothing, the bodily organs function as a “display”—they reveal the virtuous or “glorious”

^87 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 93.

^88 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 94.

capacity corresponding to their form. For this reason, according to Agamben, “the glorious body is an ostensive body whose functions are not executed but rather displayed. Glory, in this sense is in solidarity with inoperativity.”

90 Here, completely deactivated sexual organs correspond to the glorious inoperativity of the sovereign Sabbath. This is the inoperativity of sovereign power.

After discussing the obvious aspects of the glorious body, Agamben quickly moves into an articulation of the other type of inoperativity—the messianic form. He makes a crystal-clear exposition of the distinction between the two types:

Glory is nothing other than the separation of inoperativity into a special sphere: that of worship or liturgy. In this way, what was merely a threshold that granted access to a new use is transformed into a permanent condition. A new use for the body is thus possible only if it wrests the inoperative function from its separation, only if it succeeds in bringing together within a single place and in a single gesture both exercise and inoperativity, economic body and glorious body, function and its suspension.

91 The type of inoperativity that that Agamben seeks is not the type that freezes into glory, but rather opens up potential for new use. In the case of the sexual organs, this new type of inoperativity corresponds to sexual pleasure without procreative ends; and in the case of the human body as a whole, it corresponds to dance, in which regular, goal-oriented movement is translated into “pointless” movement which exceeds the natural potential of the body as such.

92 Neither non-procreative sex nor dance are opposed to natural movements in a direct, agonistic

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90 Agamben, Nudities, 59.

91 Agamben, Nudities, 101-102.

92 In Agamben’s words: “This is precisely what amorous desire and so-called perversion achieve every time they use the organs of the nutritive and reproductive functions and turn them—in the very act of using them—away from their physiological meaning, toward a new and more human operation. Or consider the dancer, as he or she undoes and disorganizes the economy of corporeal movements to then rediscover them, at once intact and transfigured, in the choreography” (Agamben, Nudities, 102).
way (contra some natural-law theologians), but they suspend “from within” the natural trajectories of the body in order to create new, “playful” possibilities.\textsuperscript{93} This is why in \textit{The Time That Remains}, Agamben argues that in Paul’s writings, the significance of Christ’s work is a “messianic inversion of the potential/act relation.”\textsuperscript{94} Paul’s messiah renders the works of the law \textit{katargoumen} (inoperative) he “gives potential back to them,” and in doing so preserves them (in a different way).\textsuperscript{95} Here Agamben builds upon and extends similar insights made by Jacob Taubes about how the “messianic” element of Paul’s thought inserts relativity into the Jew/Gentile distinction.\textsuperscript{96} The Messiah is therefore not anarchic in such a way as to remove governmentality and prepare the way for fascism, as Mitchell Dean critically suggests.\textsuperscript{97}

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\textsuperscript{93} Agamben explicitly refers to the significance of “play” in this respect in his work \textit{Infancy and History}, trans. Liz Heron (New York: Verso, 1993), 70. Kevin Attell argues that play, for Agamben, points to a type of activity which escapes both sacral as well as practical economic significance, pointing to a more basic level of being. See Kevin Attell, \textit{Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction} (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 260-61.


\textsuperscript{95} See Agamben, \textit{The Time That Remains}, 99-101.


\textsuperscript{97} Sharply critical of Agamben’s discussion of inoperativity in \textit{The Kingdom and the Glory}, Dean writes, “we might ask whether it makes sense for all ‘profane powers,’ including those of public bureaucracy and states, ‘to be deactivated and made inoperative’ (p. 166) when they form an important limit to the glorification of the economy and the civil havoc this wreaks. Was it not, after all, the collapse of state authority and a ‘transcendent’ sovereignty in the face of the anarchic spiralling (sic) of an economy in crisis that prepared the way for fascism, as Agamben himself indicates?” (Mitchell Dean, “Governmentality Meets Theology: ‘The King Reigns, but He Does Not Govern,’” \textit{Theology, Culture, and Society} 29, no. 3 (2012): 145-158, 157). I submit that Dean misunderstands Agamben’s proposal. Agamben wishes not for complete deactivation in the sense of a sovereign state of exception, but for a suspension of the state of exception itself.
Messiah’s goal is to create a new potential for life at the threshold of distinctions, not simply to annihilate currently existing order.98

What, then, is the solution to the problem of sovereign inoperativity? It is the type of inoperative praxis which upends from within the old model of glorious sovereignty displayed through sovereign inoperativity. Messianic inoperativity does not negate the law or make it obsolete. Rather, it is a force of praxis that opens up new potentialities for inoperativity (here one cannot help but think of Jesus’ attitude toward the Sabbath described in the Gospels—a theme I will return to in chapter 4). In this sense, this type of inoperativity could be “liturgical”—but in a way that circumvents the tendency to loop inoperativity together with glory, in the way seen in the liturgy that Agamben analyzes in The Kingdom and the Glory. Messianic inoperativity is certainly a religious ritual, but also at the same time a political “founding” act—or perhaps a

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98 In The Open, Agamben describes how the “anthropological machine” that governs political life may be rendered inoperative in a way that is profoundly nonviolent—he uses the example of lovers in a Titian painting, who display a “neutralized” relationship—neither fully human nor animal but without work (senz’opera). See Agamben, The Open, 85-87.

99 The qualification “from within” is main feature of Agamben’s understanding of inoperativity vis-à-vis political structures, and it is also an element of Agamben’s philosophy that is contested by his critics, particularly Ryan Hansen. According to Hansen, Agamben’s messianic inoperativity (particularly as elucidated in his Agamben’s study of Paul in The Time that Remains) stays within a plane of pure immanence, meaning that the messianic force opposes current powers of sovereignty within this plane. Hansen, by contrast claims that the Pauline approach to the messianic force is rather an “apocalyptic” one, entailing a transcendence that constitutes “the fullness of Christ” that “fills all things.” For Hansen, this means that Paul’s politics is not competitive in the way Hansen understands Agamben’s interpretation of Paul. For Hansen, “The end of one age and the other and of the other age exist on the same plane in a non-competitive transcendence, such that the old is opened up and made porous to the new, non-antagonistically.” See Ryan Hansen, “Messianic or Apocalyptic? Engaging Agamben on Paul and Politics,” in Paul, Philosophy, and the Theopolitical Vision: Critical Engagements with Agamben, Badiou, Žižek, and Others, ed. Douglas Harink (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 217-218. Although Hansen’s claim that Paul posits a “transcendence within immanence” of the messianic force seems true, his claim that this does not involve a competitive relationship between the messianic force and sovereign power does not seem accurate with regard to Paul. The “principalities and powers” of the present age are clearly an enemy for Paul, entailing a confrontation between the immanent-and-transcendent power of the messianic and the sovereigns of the world. Hence, although Agamben’s “flat” reading of Paul may not be accurate, the results he deduces from it could be.
deconstructive act. It is similar to religious rituals heralding redemption—in that it points toward a world made new—but it is a ritual of redemption accomplished through what is truly “profanation,” as Dickinson points out. Paradoxically, it “functions as a state of exception without any form of sovereignty being associated with it.” Inoperative rituals such as Sabbath could function as forms of political/religious “gesture”—a nonviolent praxis pointing to a different way of being human. Lacoste’s liturgical inoperativity thus still has value for subverting sovereignty—but only as a practice that undermines sovereignty’s attempt to preserve itself through glory-veiled stasis.

100 Dickinson points out that for Agamben, “politics would seem to be an almost religious ritual of sorts, a continuous reenacting of the exclusive inclusion performed upon the self in order to constitute some sense of sovereign being in relation to the others (both persons and animals) surrounding this newly formed humanity.” See Dickinson, *Agamben and Theology*, 72. My argument is that the messianic Sabbath is an analogous religious ritual to this founding act, except that it obliterates the distinction created by the “exclusive inclusion.” Perhaps one could call it an “anti-religious” ritual, in this sense.

101 Dickinson calls Agamben’s contemplation of the human being as completely inoperative a “profaning gesture” (Dickinson, *Agamben and Theology*, 140). In a sense, a “profaning gesture” is precisely what I am arguing inoperative rituals may be. Agamben’s concept of profanation does not point to a derogatory act, as in what English speakers might call “profanity.” Rather, profanation involves rejecting the sacred/non-sacred binary that parallels the *bios/zoe* binary, and that takes part in the machine of biopolitics. In this sense, it is similar to what Harvey Cox called “profanity”—a type of mundane existence lived without reference to any higher goal or other world. See Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 60-61. The difference between Cox’s notion of “profanity” and Agamben’s “profanation” is that the latter is not a rejection of a sacred identity or external purpose, but an attempt to move beyond the boundary between the two. By extolling profanity and rejecting supra-mundane realities, Cox in effect remains within the binary. Nevertheless, there is something in Cox’s attempt to advocate for a mundane life (which he believes secularization provides) that is reflective of what Agamben aims at. On the role of gesture more broadly see footnote 103 (below).


103 “Gesture” as such is a repeated theme in Agamben’s work. It refers to a more basic, primal communication that does not succumb to the rigid differentiations and stratifications inherent in language. For an overview see Anthony Curtis Adler, “The Intermedial Gesture: Agamben and Kommerell,” *Angelaki* 12, no. 3 (2007): 57-64. See also Alastair Morgan, “A Figure of Annihilated Human Existence: Agamben and Adorno on Gesture,” *Law Critique* 20 (2009): 299-307. On the significance of gesture as an alternative to forms of violent signification in Agamben’s philosophy see Dickinson’s chapter “Gestures of Text and Violence,” in Dickinson and Kotsko, *Agamben’s Coming Philosophy*, 51-65.
Political Implications

In order to understand what Agamben’s messianic inoperativity means for politics, we must return to the *zoe*bios distinction at the heart of his political philosophy. Keep in mind that—as tempting as it is—simply attempting to preserve human beings’ claim to bios is unlikely to be a workable method around the problem of sovereignty. Ritual inoperativity, on the other hand, could point to a different solution altogether. Understood through a messianic lens, inoperativity could be a way to deactivate the distinction between *zoe* and *bios*, enabling human beings to escape either classification.

This “crossing out” of the biopolitical divide would lead not to a type of bestial life (pure *zoe*), but to a life without the need for the divide, a life divorced from identity, or rather a connection to identity that Agamben calls an “intimacy without relation.” Thus, the political implications of Agamben’s inoperativity hint at a destabilized state of existence, in which life is liberated from the constant attempts to pin it down into categories. Agamben’s work suggests that a political breakthrough could be reached if human beings could frame themselves neither as elevated into bios, nor as debased into *zoe*, but as caught precariously in an indefinable state, characterized by the “potential” as opposed to the “actual.” The type of political ethics this type of framework would entail is best captured by a literary figure Agamben finds himself drawn to: Melville’s Bartleby the scrivener, who could write but “would prefer not to.”

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104 According to Agamben, “Form-of-life is this ban that no longer has the form of a bond or an exclusion-inclusion of bare life but that of an intimacy without relation.” See Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 236.

of inaction—one that rejects a vision of how human beings are supposed to be. It involves looking at other persons without expectation, simply allowing them to exist in their potentiality.

All these ideas sound serene and nice. But the main problem with Agamben’s political vision is how to think about it practically. This problem itself is, in a certain sense, indicative of the type of political program Agamben seeks to avoid. The word “practical” connotes creating or producing in action a theoretical vision; and how does one create or produce a political framework that aims at the cessation of creation and production? (I will return to this problem in relation to the work of Roberto Goizueta in chapter three.) One could easily imagine asking Agamben, “Could you describe practical ways of putting into action your political program of inoperativity?” and hearing him reply, “I would prefer not to.”

As delightfully truculent an answer as that would be, it would not do justice to Agamben’s own thought. Clearly, he has described a political problem, and has attempted to envision a solution. Although his “inoperative” philosophical perspective resists incorporation into a political paradigm (he might point out that a “philosopher king” could easily turn totalitarian), it is important to reflect on the political outcomes of what a practical inoperative “form of life” might look like. To do so, I think it is essential to point to specific practices or rituals that create the type of inoperativity Agamben characterizes as messianic, or a bringing in of the time that remains.

Obviously, Sabbath is one such ritual, yet strikingly, the actual practice of Sabbath keeping and the ancient literature around it does not appear as often in Agamben’s writing as one might expect, with the exception of *The Kingdom and the Glory*. (I may be speaking too soon; I have a strong hunch that Agamben may yet publish a book-length work on the Sabbath in the
future.) Matthew Abbott does see a repeated exaltation of the “refusal of work” in Agamben’s writing—a tendency Abbott thinks calls for a “practice of inoperativity” which is not simply inert but is also creative.¹⁰⁶ This could be a consequence of Agamben’s own oversight, possibly connected to his tendency to focus on Christian sources rather than Jewish ones. It could also spring from the fact that Sabbath as an institution has a fundamental ambivalence about it. There are, as we saw in *Kingdom and the Glory*, two different theological types of “Sabbath” in Agamben’s thought. The one, corresponding to sovereign inoperativity, is a Sabbath of stasis or actuality. It is the rest of the king for whom all reality exists and to whom all creation gives glory. On the other hand, there is the messianic Sabbath, the Sabbath of potential and liberation. Perhaps Agamben fears that Sabbath as a ritual drifts too quickly toward the sovereign form of inoperativity?

Such fears, if they exist, would not be without warrant. The political history of Sabbath observance in the West (particularly in Protestant Christianity) is littered with examples of coercive “rest” imposed on persons not as liberation, but as a fixed form of life to which they must correspond as a divine obligation.¹⁰⁷ It is legitimate to hold reservations about Sabbath entering politics. Seventh-day Adventists have long worried that Sabbath-keeping will become a

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¹⁰⁷ This was the approach to Sabbath made infamous by Puritan practice in North America. According to Michael Borg’s assessment, the purpose of Sabbath in the minds of Puritan theologians such as Nicholas Bownde was to provide space for glorification of God. Summarizing Bownde, Borg concludes that “unhindered worship is the basis for rest in the fourth commandment.” See Michael Borg, “The Morality of the Sabbath,” *Puritan Reformed Journal* 6, no. 1 (2014): 227. See also Nicholas Bownde, *Sabbathum Veteris et Novi Testamenti* (London: Feli Kyngston, 1606). For an overview of Sabbath theology among the Puritans see James T. Dennison, Jr., *The Market Day of the Soul: The Puritan Doctrine of the Sabbath in England 1532-1700* (New York: University Press of America, 1983).
locus of control and persecution by religio-political powers. Nevertheless, it is obvious that Sabbath was originally not intended to play such a role, and was instead aimed at being a messianic force. Therefore, the political question that confronts us in response to Agamben’s work is: How do we encounter a truly messianic Sabbath? In other words, how do we keep Sabbath as a source of potentiality, rather than as a means of inducing a hierarchical stasis or coercion?

The answer to this question will form a large part of chapter 4. For now, I will point out that such a Sabbath must be able to suspend itself. As Agamben says, it should be a “sabbatism to the nth degree,” one in which Sabbath itself takes rest in Sabbath. For this reason, Sabbaths that are enforced by legislative authority could never be messianic Sabbaths. If a ritual is observed because it is commanded, this will run the risk of making it a mechanism of hierarchical stasis. Sabbath must be a time of “weakness”—ritual that by its essential nature could never be enforced. It would constitute what Paul Griffiths calls a “quietist” political institution.\(^{108}\) To give a concrete illustration of this, it would be absurd for legislatures to mandate Sabbath observance with so called blue laws that forbid work on Saturday or Sunday, because in order to enforce such commands it would be necessary to make police officers work extra to enforce them. For this reason, the legal prescription to keep the Sabbath is a law that, in Agamben’s terms, can only fall into the realm of “use” or “play.” It could constitute what

\(^{108}\) Griffiths argues that Agamben’s understanding of “law that suspends itself” points to a form of activism that is “quietist” in the sense that it call for no enforcement of “realistic” political ends, but simply a type of suggestion. See Paul J. Griffiths, “The Cross as the Fulcrum of Politics: Expropriating Agamben on Paul,” in Paul, Philosophy, and the Theopolitical Vision, 179-197. The main challenge I find with Griffiths’ quietism is that it seems to convey a sense of dispassion, which is unfortunate.
Agamben scholar David Kishik might call an “art” that is also “a potent form of insurgency.”

Sabbatarians may insist that Sabbath be made into law, while—with no inconsistency—holding that such a law must never be made obligatory for the public.

Another political element of truly messianic political inoperativity, per Agamben, is that it would need to gradually negate its own boundaries. This suggests that any religious ritual that insists on its own separation from normal or “secular” time could never qualify as a messianic Sabbath, because messianic inoperativity could not abide by any hard distinction between sacred and secular. Agamben, unlike philosophers such as Gianni Vattimo or theologians such as Harvey Cox, is not a proponent of secularizing tendencies—but not because he seeks to uphold the category of the “religious” or against the “secular.” On the contrary, his thought leads toward a negation of the division itself. Sabbath should neither be sacred nor secular. It should, on this account, reject the categorization. For Agamben, the keeping of Sabbath would emerge conjointly with the rise of a new type of life, one that is neither zoe nor bios, neither “worldly” nor “heavenly” but in the space of negation between them. It would be a Sabbath of the threshold. Paradoxically, then, Sabbath would cease to exist if a truly Sabbatarian humanity emerged, because Sabbatical time would be indistinguishable from normal time.

The politics of this Sabbath would also need to focus on transcending or “overlooking” the binary oppositions that inhere to typical ritual institutions of time. Rituals tend to be sites of

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109 Kishik finds in Agamben’s work a pursuit of the type of destabilizing poetry that Plato once deplored. Art, in the form of Sabbath, could be a force that does nothing (it is purely aesthetic) but also upends the political order. See David Kishik, *The Power of Life: Agamben and the Coming Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 12.

110 On Vattimo’s understanding of “weak thought” (which parallels Agamben’s project in many ways) and its connection to secularization see Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D’Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
contention and dispute in religious communities. They are places which harden and preserve their identities. Sabbath, of course, is a classic example of this. But the type of Sabbath Agamben’s work points toward would consist in a collapse or re-division of these divisions. It would therefore require a type of collaborative or ecumenical quality. This would not be a collaboration based on confessional insouciance—the unfortunate connotation of Agamben’s concept of “the Whatever” celebrated by Wall.\footnote{Wall’s understanding of “the Whatever” may sound dismissive or excessively nonchalant toward individuality, but in fact the purpose of this form of life is to highlight the particularity or singularity of persons. See Wall, \textit{Radical Passivity}, 125.} It is not a matter of making ritual differences easily negotiable. Rather, this dwelling between identities in ritual would celebrate and applaud these differences, while inhabiting a space of openness toward the plurality of ways in which inoperativity can be explored. I will return to this theme in chapter 4.

Summary

Agamben’s distinction between different forms of inoperativity adds a unique vantage point for understanding the significance of inoperative rituals. If, as Agamben argues, some forms of inoperativity can reinforce forms of domination, it is essential to make a careful analysis of any form of inoperative ritual, to ensure that participating in it does not unwittingly cause us to fall into such political traps.

At the same time, Agamben’s rich characterization of messianic inoperativity points to an enormous significance behind ritual that perhaps even Agamben has himself has not yet realized. This significance will become clearer as we move through this investigation.
**Conclusion**

Lacoste and Agamben together offer a rich depiction of inoperativity as a political concept that destabilizes Western concepts of sovereign power. Lacoste explores inoperativity from the local vantage point of liturgy. In the act of worship, according to Lacoste, the human being confronts the Absolute not as an active force, but as inoperativity—that which “lets be.” Liturgy thus opens up a relationship to sovereign power characterized by a liberating inoperativity. Masters and slaves who engage in liturgy together find their relationship fundamentally changed because their locations in the hierarchy are relativized. Sovereigns find themselves moved to positions in the margins.

Agamben’s work builds on and problematizes this framework by revealing that there are different types of inoperativity at work in liturgy. There are sovereign Sabbaths and messianic Sabbaths. The former reinforce the zoë/bios distinction, by hardening the division between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. These distinctions require maintenance by force, and the sovereign Sabbath may be inflicted on a population by authorities with vested interests in “law and order.” In this way, inoperativity can take the form of a quietness and “order” imposed by a brutal, unchallenged regime.

Or, Sabbath can take the form of a messianic inoperativity, a law that suspends itself. Inoperativity, framed this way negates the distinctions that turn into mechanisms of control and domination. A Sabbath of this sort would “dissolve” into a new type of human life. This Sabbath corresponds to the type of inoperativity Lacoste observes in the night vigil.

Before constructing a political paradigm built on a practice of inoperativity, it is crucial to ask how religious practices of inoperativity actually “function”—that is, how experiences of
inoperativity practically lead to political frameworks. The thinkers explored thus far make helpful theological and philosophical points about the nature of inoperativity in relation to politics, but their work falls short of this ultimate end. Hence, we turn to two thinkers on inoperativity for whom practice is the major concern.
CHAPTER III
INOPERATIVITY AS PRACTICE
RAV KOOK AND ROBERTO GOIZUETA

The challenge with abstract reasoning about inoperativity is that it can cause us to forget that political theology emerges from the life of communities. Theories about ritual can never emerge fully formed \textit{ex nihilo} from the minds of genius theologians. Just as doctrinal beliefs must arise from liturgical actions (\textit{lex orandi, lex credendi}), any theory of inoperativity must pay close attention to the ways in which religious traditions practically engage with inoperativity.

For this reason, this chapter addresses this practical element by examining two forms of inoperativity celebrated by Jewish and Christian traditions, respectively: \textit{shmita} and \textit{fiesta}. Why do I choose to focus on these two rituals, as opposed to the more commonly recognized observance of the weekly Sabbath? Although the weekly Sabbath is obviously a communal activity, it is easy to drift into an individualist perspective on how it is celebrated. \textit{Shmita} and \textit{fiesta}, on the other hand, are strikingly communal activities, impossible to theorize about without reference to persons engaging with each other. I focus on these two rituals in order to highlight the ways in which inoperativity creates overtly political realities. The insights garnered from this exploration will be relevant to understanding the more common and widely-known weekly Sabbath, which I address in the next chapter.

To draw insights about the practical political theology of these two rituals, I will examine the works of two thinkers who provide classic treatments on their political significance. Rav Kook, a Jewish mystic and philosopher, is known for authoring a central text on the Sabbatical
year. Roberto Goizueta, a contemporary Christian theologian, reflects extensively on the popular Latino/a practice of *fiesta*. My approach in this chapter will be to offer an overview of each thinker’s method for addressing these practices, followed by an assessment of the political implications of their work. I will conclude with a comparative summary. As I will show, the practical results of inoperativity articulated by each thinker provide crucial resources for understanding why inoperativity deeply changes contemporary notions of sovereignty.

**Rav Kook**

Because of his breadth of interests and his diverse roles as rabbi and scholar, Kook’s work covers enormous conceptual territories.¹ For the purposes of this chapter, it is primarily his short *Introduction to Shabbat Ha’aretz* (the Sabbath of the land) that will occupy my attention.² Despite its brevity, this work contains dense reflections on the meaning of the *shmita* for the Jewish people’s self-understanding—reflections that also build on the concept of Sabbatical sovereignty I have introduced above. In order to understand the political implications of Kook’s approach to *shmita*, it is necessary first to give a brief account of the nature of the institution, and explain how Kook became involved in an important historic controversy about it.

¹ For a more expansive biographical account of Kook’s life see Yehudah Mirsky, *Rav Kook: Mystic in a Time of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

Background of *Shmita*

The first references to *shmita*, or the Sabbatical year, are found in Exodus and Leviticus. These passages articulate how the people of Israel should relate to the arable land they find when they enter Canaan:

For six years you shall sow your land and gather in its yield; but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the poor of your people may eat; and what they leave the wild animals may eat. You shall do the same with your vineyard, and with your olive orchard (Exodus 23:10-11).

The purpose for this command is directly humanitarian: The land should not be cultivated “so that the poor of your people may eat” along with the wild animals. A similar rationale is articulated in Leviticus 25, with an accent on God’s possession of the land. Of course, this raises numerous interpretive and historical questions. Specifically, how does not cultivating the land help the poor to have more food? One would assume that if the land were not cultivated the poor would have *less* to eat rather than more. Such considerations have led scholars such as Leon Epsztein to posit that “the land could not have been left fallow. It was cultivated, but once the harvest was reaped, it was not taken in; the corn was left spread on the ground to be there for those who needed it.”

Norman Habel disagrees, arguing that the text clearly points to a cessation

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3 The Leviticus passage reads: “When you enter the land that I am giving you, the land shall observe a Sabbath for the Lord. Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a Sabbath of complete rest for the land, a Sabbath for the Lord; you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine; it shall be a year of complete rest for the land. You may eat what the land yields during its Sabbath—you, your male and female slaves, your hired and your bound laborers who live with you; for your livestock also, and for the wild animals in your land all its yield shall be for food” (Leviticus 25:2-7).

of agriculture in every respect. The latter position is also affirmed by John Dominic Crossan who points out that Josephus records an absence of sowing in Israel during the seventh year. I do not have space here to delve into the question of how the shmita was practically conducted in ancient Israel. Here we must only observe that shmita emerged as a means of communal justice. The purpose of the command is to restore community by leveling inequality, both at the human/human level as well as the human/animal. This is an important point for understanding Kook’s approach to shmita.

Obviously, among Jews not residing on land in Israel, shmita was not widely practiced. However, toward the end of the nineteenth century when Jews began returning to Palestine and commencing agricultural activity, the question of how and whether to implement shmita became a central issue. Within the state of Israel, this debate continues to this day. This controversy over an ancient Jewish practice is the context in which Kook’s contribution emerges.

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7 For an account of the various parties arguing for and against sundry details of shmita practice in modern Israel, with particular reference to political challenges to shmita, see Amihai Radyzner, “Israeli Legislation as Both Halakhic Problem and Its Solution: The Complicated Case of Heter Ha-Mekhira,” Jewish Studies 14 (2018): 1-35. It is important to note that the following investigations of shmita in this chapter are not meant to resolve the ongoing questions about how shmita should or should not be observed in the land of Israel—questions that are outside my scope of scholarly expertise as well as outside my religious confession. My goal through this investigation is simply to draw from Rav Kook’s understanding certain principles for understanding the practical role of inoperativity within communities. Whether Kook’s specific recommendations for shmita hold to be applicable today is another question altogether.
Method

In 1904, Kook—an accomplished philosopher and Talmudic scholar—accepted a position as a rabbi in the newly formed Jewish community in Jaffa, Palestine. Immediately he was caught between two opposing groups of Jews, with different philosophical frameworks.\(^8\) The first was known as the Old Yishuv who consisted primarily of orthodox Jews who had sojourned to the land of Israel for the purposes of piety—to pray, study Torah, and generally lead a traditional Jewish life.\(^9\) They put little effort into the economic development of the area, relying more on charitable contributions from European Jews. The other group was the more secular Zionist pioneers also known as the New Yishuv, who were intent on building up local Jewish institutions within the land. They focused on establishing a strong agricultural presence in the area.\(^10\) The New Yishuv disdained their counterparts as hyper-religious loafers, while the Old Yishuv branded their opponents as shameless, ritually lax yuppies. It was a volatile situation.

Kook sat uneasily in the middle. He appreciated the New Yishuv’s enthusiasm for economic development and their commitment to the long-term success of the Jewish homeland. At the same time, he recognized the importance of maintaining the traditions that would sustain Jewish identity, and prevent the type of toxic nationalism that a purely secular mentality could produce. Kook believed that a healthy soul for the Jewish nation could only be formed by

\(^8\) For an account of Kook’s ongoing arbitration in this situation see Jacob B. Agus, *High Priest of Rebirth* (New York: Bloch, 1972).

\(^9\) According to Mirsky, the Old Yishuv was marked by two facets: “enthroning Torah study at the very pinnacle of religious life, and hastening the Messiah’s advent by human action.” See Mirsky, *Rav Kook*, 45.

\(^10\) For an account of the various aspects of New Yishuv activism see Mirsky, *Rav Kook*, 46-47.
drawing the two philosophies together. This became his life-long project, to which he applied all the powers of his mystical imagination.

This imagination was informed by the Lurianic Kabbalah, which most scholars believe was the “backbone” of Kook’s worldview. This framework of Jewish mysticism was named after the distinguished Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-72) who taught that the universe was pervaded with “sparks” of divine light which are the remnants of an explosive event at the beginning of creation. According to Luria, infinite divine energy was poured into vessels which could not hold them and shattered. Although the sparks can be found everywhere, they are usually shrouded by kelipot, shells of darkness that hide the divine energy. The aim of Jewish spirituality, in this paradigm, is to liberate the sparks. Because of the ubiquitous character of these sparks, anyone who seeks to unveil them must never hide from any source of spiritual truth, whether it be religious or secular.

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12 Luria’s work builds on earlier forms of kabbalah based on the Zohar and the works of mystics such as Azriel of Gerona and Moses Cordovero. Isaac Luria himself wrote nothing, but his ideas were carried on through his disciples. For historical background descriptions of the kabbalah and specifically the Lurianic variety, see Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995). For a detailed account of Luria’s life and work see Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).


14 As David Shatz observes, this hermeneutic of synthesis is central to Kook’s approach to every aspect of theology. In a Jewish version of the Christian patristic idea of “plundering the Egyptians,” Kook sought to derive the best aspects of any philosophy into his work. “Kook,” Shatz notes, “exhorts Jews to open themselves to the realm of general culture, confronting and engaging the full range of secular teachings and disciplines.” See David Shatz, *Jewish Thought in Dialogue: Essays on Thinkers, Theologies, and Moral Theories* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 93.
Kook applied the logic of this Kabbalistic paradigm to his understanding of Jewish existence. The Jewish people, he believed, had the purpose of extending love to all people as part of the project of revealing divine light. This purpose entailed the rejection of a certain type of exclusive sovereignty:

As long as each one exalts himself, claiming I am sovereign, I and none other—there cannot be peace in our midst . . . All our endeavors must be directed toward disclosing the light of general harmony, which derives not from suppressing any power, any thought, any tendency, but by bringing each of them within the vast ocean of light infinite, where all things find their unity, where all is ennobled, all is exalted, all is hallowed.\(^{15}\)

This preference for universal harmony as a replacement of individual sovereignty is a direct outcome of Kook’s Kabbalistic mysticism. A genuine awareness of the divine sparks in all human beings must preclude a sense of opposition in human relationships (what Carl Schmitt would call “the friend-enemy distinction”). Furthermore, this harmonious replacement for standard sovereignty could only result from a type of universalism—a “letting be” of all things, and thereby releasing the sparks within them.\(^{16}\)

This was not universalism in the cosmopolitan sense. Jewish identity was important, specifically because the clearest radiance of truth was found in the Torah, held by the Jewish


\(^{16}\) It is important to note that in the Kabbalist texts from which Kook draws his inspiration, the concept of unity (*yichud*) is preeminently revealed in the Sabbath. This unification is modeled on divine unity, and it draws earth toward heaven. Norman Lamm summarizes this dynamic: “The unification within God on the Sabbath is reflected in a corresponding unification within man on the Sabbath. To this day Hasidim, who follow the Sephardic version of the liturgy, recite, on Friday nights, the passage from the Zohar beginning *ke’gavna* . . . . ‘even as they unite above in the One, so is there a unification below . . . one corresponding to one . . .’” See Norman Lamm, “On the Unity Concept,” in *Essays on the Thought and Philosophy of Rabbi Kook*, ed. Ezra Gellman (New York: Herzl Press, 1991), 21-22.
people. According to Gershon Winer, for Kook, “Jewish nationalism is elevated to universal significance.”\textsuperscript{17} This Jewish identity could not be closed-minded, and it always had to maintain a consciousness that it was for-others, tasked with liberating the divine light in all people.\textsuperscript{18} This Kabbalistic mysticism also forged a deep sense of hope in Kook’s approach to Jewish life. The sparks, after all, could not stay hidden forever. And \textit{shmita} would be one of the ways in which they would finally emerge.

\textit{Kook’s Understanding of Shmita}

The situation that provoked Kook’s writing on the \textit{Shabbat Ha’aretz} was an aggressive dispute between the Old and New Yishuv on what to do with agricultural projects in Israel every seven years. The argument kicked off in 1888, when the New Yishuv realized that their survival within the land of Israel depended on continuing to profit from the land during the Sabbatical year. They asked several significant European rabbis (most notably Yitzak Spektor) about how to resolve the problem, and were told that it would be acceptable to work the land during the \textit{shmita}, as long as the land was sold to non-Jews.\textsuperscript{19} At the end of the shmita year, the land would

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\textsuperscript{18} David Shatz explains Kook’s connection of Jewish nationalism with universalism in the following way: “Each nation has its distinctive talents, he explains; but the talent distinctive to the Jews is their capacity to absorb, synthesize, and transform the best elements in surrounding cultures. Israel is, thus, ‘the quintessence of all humanity.’ The mission of the Jews in history is to exercise their talent for integration and creativity and then to bring to the outside world the new product they have fashioned. Only in that way will Israel be able to execute its sacred task; to elevate all of humanity and all of existence” (Shatz, \textit{Jewish Thought in Dialogue}, 93).

\textsuperscript{19} More specifically, according to Michael Nehorai, the \textit{heter mekhira} contained two stipulations: “(1) That the land be sold to a non-Jew by way of circumvention, as we are accustomed to do with unleavened bread on Passover; and (2) that all manner of agricultural work—to begin with—be done by non-Jews, and that even in a situation of duress all modes of work that are biblically prohibited should not be done by Jews.” See Michael Z. Nehorai, “Halakhah, Metahalakha, and the Redemption of Israel: Reflections on the Rabbinic Rulings of Rav Kook,” in \textit{Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Jewish Spirituality}, eds. Lawrence J. Kaplan and David Shatz (New York: New York University Press, 1995), 128.
be sold back to the original Jewish owners, at a modest gain to their non-Jewish partners. This compromise, known as the *heter mekhira*, triggered caustic debates between the traditional orthodox Jews, and the New Yishuv. The former alleged that this was nothing more than a faithless abandonment of Jewish tradition, while the latter insisted that it was unavoidable if Jews wanted to maintain a space in the land.

The debate over the *heter mekhira* continued to grow in intensity every seven years, becoming especially vehement in 1909-10, when the Jewish agricultural establishments had grown in size, and could by no means survive a complete cessation of labor for the entire year. It was in this context that Kook wrote his *Introduction to Shabbat Ha’aretz*, in which he argued in favor of the *heter mekhira*. Kook openly admitted that this provision was innovative, without solid backing in *halacha*. His publication of this work marked a change in perspective—while living in Europe, Kook had initially opposed the *heter mekhira*. However, he argued that the renovation of the Jewish homeland was itself an unprecedented, revolutionary event, requiring unprecedented measures to sustain its existence. If Jews halted their agricultural production

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20 As Asher Cohen and Bernard Susser observe, this meant that the sale of the land was essentially “fictitious,” since the sale involved an agreement that the land would be bought back after the *shmita* year. On the technicalities of this process see Asher Cohen and Bernard Susser, “The ‘Sabbatical’ Year in Israeli Politics: An Intra-Religious and Religious-Secular Conflict from the Nineteenth through the Twenty-First Centuries,” *Journal of Church and State* 52, no. 3 (2010): 454-475. The fictitious nature of the *heter mekhira* is part of what made the practice so controversial among more traditional Jewish settlers in the land of Israel.

every seven years, the entire project would fall apart, and thus a degree of *ormah*, or *halachic* ingenuity, was necessary.\(^\text{22}\)

Naturally, Kook’s pro-*heter mekhira* stance earned him harsh criticism from the members of the Old Yishuv. One of his most prominent adversaries was Rav Ya’akov David Wilovsky, rabbi of Tzfat. Wilovsky claimed that the “compromise” inherent in the sale of the land to non-Jews was really no compromise at all, and that it was simply an act of disobedience to the clear *shmita* directive.\(^\text{23}\) In response, Kook continued his insistence that the provision was necessary for the survival of the agricultural industries. At bottom, the debate was less about *shmita* specifically and more about the legitimacy of the secular Jews who formed the greater part of the New Yishuv. Wilowsky and his allies saw these newcomers as heretics, whose attempt to dodge an explicit Torah commandment should be recognized as blatant unfaithfulness.\(^\text{24}\) Kook, on the other hand, approached the New Yishuv with a mentality informed by his Kabbalistic predispositions. There were sparks of divine holiness in these secular Jews, Kook believed, and

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\(^{22}\) The concept of *ormah* is a complicated issue in the study of Jewish practice. Some Jewish scholars have translated it “deviousness,” giving it the connotation of illicit play in the loopholes of Jewish law. It has a long history, particularly in the form of small concessions given by *halachic* interpreters to carry out compromises such as permitting the sale of leavened bread to non-Jews during Passover, so as to prevent financial losses by Jewish bakers during this time. Other scholars have defined *ormah* as ingenuity in the face of difficulties, necessary and admirable. On the application of *ormah* to *shmita* see Cohen and Susser, “The ‘Sabbatical’ Year in Israeli Politics,” 457-458. On the role of *ormah* more broadly see Elana Stein, “Rabbinic Legal Loopholes: Formalism, Equity, and Subjectivity,” Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2014.

\(^{23}\) See Mirsky, *Rav Kook*, 75.

\(^{24}\) Of course, not all the criticisms of the *heter mekhira* (a topic which continues to be debated in Israel to this day) are rooted in biases on the part of traditional Jews against secular Jews. Many of the arguments against the practice were rooted in other concerns, such as a desire to create greater community reliance. Daniel Feldman describes a long list of pro and con arguments that continue to recur in discussions about the *heter mekhira*, including the concern that the sale of the land would constitute a violation of the prohibition in Deuteronomy 7:2 of selling land to non-Jews. See Daniel Feldman, “A Brief Overview of Some of the Issues Related to the *Hetter Mekhira*,” 18-19.
this divine essence must be allowed to emerge. Ousting them from the holy land by forbidding them an essential compromise with the *shmita* mandate would only set back the progress of the divine light.

At this point, it might seem that Kook had little use for the *shmita*, at least as opposed to agricultural prosperity. Indeed, this was the reaction of his opponents. But nothing could be further from the truth. The primary purpose of Kook’s *Introduction to Shabbat Ha’aretz* was to magnify the importance of *shmita* in the consciousness of both secular and orthodox Jews. In line with this aim, the text presents itself as a lyrical celebration of the transformative potential of *shmita* for the life of the Jewish people. Kook attempted to combat a tendency on both sides of the *heter mekhira* debate to view *shmita* as a purely dogmatic issue, either to be dispensed with or defended viciously. By contrast, Kook saw the *shmita* as a creative institution, which should be cherished and nurtured so that it could eventually take root in Jewish society, and from there transform the world. *Shmita* was not simply a religious obligation, but an instrument of change (*teshuvah*) that would renovate human existence. It would do so by offering a different vision of sovereignty in Jewish life.

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25 David Krantz also points out that “Kook’s *shmita* workaround of *heter mekhira* may have been a pragmatic solution that overpowered his idealistic perspective on *shmita*. Since the public did not absorb Kook’s idealistic introduction on *shmita*, and simply focused on the workaround, *heter mekhira* combined with the Talmudic rulings to strip *shmita* of nearly all its components.” See David Krantz, “Shmita Revolution: The Reclamation and Reinvention of the Sabbatical Year,” *Religions* 7:8 (2016): 10. For this reason, Krantz’s view is that Kook’s aspirations to see *shmita* revived were a failure. However, one this does not discredit the legitimacy of those aspirations—it simply points to the communicative inadequacy of Kook’s expression.

26 For Kook, *teshuvah* (often translated “repentance”) was both change in actions and change at a higher level—the mystical soul. Both of these needed to work together to create genuine transformation. See Lawrence A. Englander, “Rav Kook’s Understanding of *Teshuvah*,” *Judaism* 34, no. 2 (1985): 211-220.
From Kook’s perspective, the opposing camps within the Jewish people had approached the *shmita* debate with an end of using it (or not using it) to establish their own individual sovereignty. The Old Yishuv wanted to reinforce the sovereign power of tradition in Jewish life, while the New Yishuv wanted to dispense with religious institutions such as *shmita* so that they could pursue economic advancement, resulting in a form of financial sovereignty. Although Kook sided with the New Yishuv on the specific question of the *heter mekhira*, he wanted to challenge their paradigm. Kook was not generally lax in his interpretation of *halacha*. He grounded his willingness to compromise not in an insouciant attitude toward the institution, but in a firm belief in its spiritual power. He believed that in the process of fiercely debating the technicalities of the *shmita*, both sides could lose sight of its medicinal purpose for the soul of the people.

What was this healing purpose? Kook provides a handy formula: “What the Sabbath does for the individual, *shmita* does for the nation as a whole.” Just as the Sabbath sustains the individual laborer’s life and well-being, the Sabbatical year sustains the core of Jewish identity in its collective life. For Kook this identity was not ethnic, nor was it simply a set of dry traditions tied to a set of textual interpretations. Rather, this identity was found in divine imitation, a “godly” life. Kook emphasizes that “the light and salvation of each person depends

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28 Kook, *Introduction to Shabbat Ha’aretz*, 95.

29 As Avinoam Rosebak points out, Kook’s holistic approach to halacha focused on not merely applying the rules, but accessing the spirit of the precepts so as to “wake amidst the sleeping,” creating a different spiritual
on the depth of this imprinting awareness that the value of life is in its godliness.”

This godliness, springing from divine light, is the core of Jewish existence: “The essential quality of the Jewish people’s collective soul is its divine nature.” This is what *shmita* would exemplify, restore, and preserve.

How would the Sabbatical year bring out the divine nature in the Jewish people? Kook explains:

This national treasure that is imprinted deep within us, the image of a world that is good, upright, and godly—aligned with peace, justice, grace, and courage, all filled with a pervasive divine perspective that rests in the spirit of the people—cannot be actualized within a way of life that is purely secular. Such a life, full of frenetic action, veils the glory of our divine soul, and the soul’s clear light is blocked from shining through the overpowering, mundane reality. The impulse toward growth and self-realization needs space to come to fruition.

Here Kook gently chides the secularists of the New Yishuv for envisioning a collective existence marked by ceaseless production. Such a “purely secular” development would make the pioneers outlook. In this sense, although Kook was strict in his observance, he was the opposite of a legalist. See Avinoam Rosenak, “Hidden Diaries and New Discoveries: The Life and Thought of Rabbi A.I. Kook,” *Shofar* 25:3 (2007): 11-147.

30 Kook, *Introduction to Shabbat Ha’aretz*, 89.


32 In a sense, one could call Kook’s framework a type of “mysticism of the state,” since he believed that the “collective soul” of the Jewish people was incarnated through their presence in the land of Israel. At the same time, he did not dissolve the personal element from this collective soul—the individual mystic played a crucial role in the building up of this soul. The result is a tension in Kook’s thought between the world of the nation as a whole and the individual thinker. On the complexity of this tension see Ben Zion Bokser, “Rav Kook: The Road to Renewal,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Thought* 13, no. 3 (1973): 137-153. The idea of the collective soul and its relationship to the individual was also carried on by Rav Kook’s son, Zvi Yehudah Kook. For an overview of the idea of the “collective soul” in Zvi Kook’s work, and its relationship to that of his father, see Uriel Barak, “The Collective Soul: Some Remarks on R. Zvi Yehudah Kook’s Readings of the Maharal of Prague and R. Avraham Azulai,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 24 (2016): 300-317.

33 Kook, *Introduction to Shabbat Ha’aretz*, 93.
unchallenged sovereigns over the land, and perhaps even over certain sectors of the middle-eastern economy, but the result would be a loss of the Jewish soul—the element of “peace, justice, grace, and courage.” The practitioners of this form of sovereignty would find themselves increasingly alienated from each other and from their land. The type of harmony that characterizes the gentleness and kindness of the divine life would be impossible. Only through *shmita* could the Jewish people cultivate a national identity marked by these qualities.

Ultimately, for Kook, this identity would transform the Jewish conception and enactment of sovereignty. Although Kook does not explicitly discuss the question of sovereignty in philosophical terms, his assessment of the purpose of *shmita* is deeply interlaced with this question. In a context in which traditional orthodox Jews were attempting to force their will on their neighbors, and pioneering secular Jews were attempting to force economic prosperity, Kook observes that the *shmita* challenges human notions of forcefulness altogether:

> On the shmita, our pure, inner spirit may be revealed as it truly is. The forcefulness that is inevitably part of our regular, public lives lessens our moral refinement. There is always a tension between the ideal of listening to the voice inside us that calls us to be kind, truthful and merciful, and the conflict, compulsion, and pressure to be unyielding that surround buying, selling, and acquiring things. These aspects of the world of action distance us from the divine light and prevent its being discerned in the public life of the nation.\(^{34}\)

Keep in mind that the “pure, inner spirit” is the essence of the divine sparks. Its qualities are those of God. The style of existence displayed in *shmita*, therefore, reveals God; and the celebrants of *shmita* model the divine existence through the ritual. Shmita would transform their souls after the divine pattern.

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\(^{34}\) Kook, *Introduction to Shabbat Ha’aretz*, 96-97.
This, obviously, raises a question that would have almost certainly run through the minds of Kook’s more traditional Old Yishuv critics: If shmita is effective in changing the soul of the people, why not start observing it right away? Why permit the heter mekhira to hamper the people’s embrace of godliness, preventing the transformative effects of this Sabbatical ritual? Kook’s answer is that doing so would destroy the original purpose of the shmita, which was to restore the people’s connection to the land and create community. Because of economic circumstances, the rabbis who instituted the heter mekhira “realized their historical obligation to smooth the path of the new settlements and, as much as possible, not to let the mitzvot that are connected to the land be obstacles.”35 If the shmita was a suspension of activity to make way for life, in this case the people needed a “suspension of the suspension” in order to fulfill the intent of shmita. This dynamic is precisely what Agamben calls the “Sabbath of Sabbath.” For Kook, the only way to preserve the Sabbatical sovereignty of the shmita is to cancel the sovereignty of shmita.

Paradoxically, Kook even argues that the lack of observance of shmita can be a way to preserve its memory and significance. “Since the evasion is carried out according to the prescriptions of the law, it constitutes a remembrance of the precept so that the law will not be forgotten, and when the time comes again for them to observe the biblical law, all the laws will be known.”36 The point was to study and celebrate the principles of shmita, as well as enact any parts of the relevant halakha that were within the grasp of possibility. Doing so would gradually

35 Kook, Introduction to Shabbat Ha’aretz, 137.

36 Kook, Introduction to Shabbat Ha’aretz, 59. As cited by Julian Sinclair, 60.
renovate the vitality of the collective Jewish soul, making possible a progressively greater celebration of shmita. The Jewish people should not treat shmita as a dogmatic dictate that must be served as if it were a slave-master. The shmita was made for liberation; thus the people should—in this case—liberate themselves from it, temporarily.37

As the people gradually adopted this Sabbatical spirit into their collective soul, even without practicing every shmita precept, Kook believed the rigor of shmita observance would increase. Over time, the divine light accruing every seven years in the spirit of the people would grow, reaching the Kabbalistic equivalent of a “critical mass.” The result would be the yobel, or year of jubilee, which, according to the Talmud, could only occur when all the inhabitants of the land of Israel were living there.38 In Kook’s paradigm, the yobel would fundamentally alter the entire category of sovereignty for the Jewish people. This is visible in the biblical discussions about the yobel’s impact on property and labor. As land and slaves returned to their owners, domination of one person over others would entirely cease. A new world would be created. Kook is eager to emphasize, however, that the yobel would not be a sudden, cataclysmic operation:

This freedom does not erupt like some volcano; it emerges gradually from the inner holiness. It is not a radical exception to the regular social order but flows from within it, nurtured by the life of the shorter, preceding periods until, reinforced by the revelation of our choices for good, it has the power to repair past injustices.39

37 This did not mean that settlers in the land of Israel must utilize the heter mekhira. As Simcha Raz notes, Kook “made sure that those farmers who wanted to adhere to the laws of Shemittah would be able to do so, not letting anyone force them to rely on the heter. He even urged farmers to refrain from working the land, if they could afford to do so, and he set up a special fund to assist them.” See Simcha Raz, Angel among Men: Impressions from the Life of Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook (Jerusalem: Kol Mevaser Publications, 2003), 31.

38 Talmud Bavli, Arakhin 32b. As cited in Kook, Introduction to Shabbat Ha’aretz, 111.

39 Kook, Introduction to Shabbat Ha’aretz, 59.
For Kook, *yobel* cannot become a pretext for procrastination about dealing with injustice. Rather, a *yobel* would not even be possible unless Israel embraced the *shmita/yobel* spirit into its regular existence, allowing the form of sovereignty entailed by these *mitzvot* to display itself. The people could not attain this outcome by forgetting *shmita*, but neither could they attain it by a haphazard enforcement of the command, such as the opponents of the *heter mekhira* were trying to do.

Kook’s endorsement of the *heter mekhira* is thus not an example of a type of “antinomianism” that Dov Schwartz ascribes to Kook. As Rosenak argues against Schwartz, Kook’s willingness to suspend *shmita* was not because of a disdain for laws and principles, but because of a view that those institutions did not exist for their own sake, but for the benefit of humanity. In Kook’s mind, inoperative ritual was still commanded and necessary. But it had to render itself inoperative in order to become more fully operative.

**Political Implications**

In Kook’s mind, those who favored an immediate enforcement of *shmita* were themselves falling victim to the type of perverse theo-political sovereignty that *shmita* was intended to counteract. Kook corrects their error when he justifies the *heter mekhira* with the

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40 See Dov Schwartz, *The Religious Genius in Rabbi Kook’s Thought: National “Saint”*? trans. Edward Levin (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2014), 129-135. Schwartz finds numerous examples of antinomianism in Kook’s aphoristic, spiritual writings. In the reading posited by Schwartz, Kook sees the saint as someone with a certain “double life,” with a bifurcation between holiness and everyday existence (yet one that is dialectically overcome). Schwartz argues that this “provides an opening for antinomianism” in which the saint can set aside the Torah commandments (132). This may be true with regard to the personal psychology of the saint, but it seems to have little connection to the significance of the *heter mekhira* for Kook. His argument, as I have noted above, was not that the *shmita* ought to be left behind in favor of a higher holiness, but that the *heter mekhira* was the only way to fully realize the end purpose of the *shmita*.

41 According to Rosenak, “It is the fate of *zaddikim*, in Rabbi Kook’s view, to observe the commandments in great distress, not for the sake of their inherent vitality but for the sake of the world and of society and for educational purposes.” See Rosenak, “Hidden Diaries and New Discoveries,” 122.
observation that “God does not make tyrannical and unreasonable demands of His creatures.”

At the root of the traditionalists’ insistence on rigid adherence to the shmita mandate was a failure to understand the sovereignty of the God who gave the mandate. The people’s relationship of sovereignty toward the land would parallel God’s relationship of sovereignty toward them. Forcing Jews to keep shmita, endangering their capacity to live in harmony with each other and to survive in the nascent Jewish homeland, would reflect an image of a sovereign deity who exercised unilateral power over others without concern for their freedom.

Kook’s understanding of the political logic behind the heter mekhira is inseparable from his mysticism, as Abraham Shemesh has pointed out in an important article. Kook believed that shmita was part of a restoration of the people’s “inner character” and that its political function was tied to this mystical goal. Because the mystical reality of a transformed soul within the Jewish people could not be imposed from outside, neither could shmita. Hence, according to Shemesh, Kook promoted the heter mekhira as a way to draw non-Jews and secular Zionists into a collaboration—one that would eventually result in a full observance of shmita. This mysticism originated in “a combination of the sacred and the mundane” ultimately aimed at a

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42 Kook, Introduction to Shabbat Ha’aretz, 137.

43 Shemesh emphasizes that Kook’s insistence on the heter mekhira, as well as his nuanced views on other administrative questions in the land of Israel, “derives from his grasp of Zionism as a sign of the coming of the Messiah. He perceived the development of the country by the pioneers, despite their being non-observant, as a deep human partnership in the universal cosmic process of bringing the redemption.” See Abraham Ofir Shemesh, “‘For the Public’s Improvement and for the Benefit of the Town:’ Correspondence Between the Rabbi Kook and Residents of the Moshavot in Eretz Israel on Ecological and Environmental Matters,” Modern Judaism 38, no. 1 (2018): 58.

44 Shemesh points out that Kook’s concern for Muslims and a desire to draw them into mutual community in the land of Israel could also have been a factor in his promotion of the heter mekhira. See Shemesh, “‘For the Public’s Improvement and for the Benefit of the Town,’” 59.
type of inoperativity with practical value. If one believes, as Kook did, that the right form of inoperativity arises from a fundamental focus on human well-being as part of larger whole in which ritual and ecological concerns play a part, it makes sense that inoperativity must sometimes suspend itself in order to fulfill its broader function. The sovereignty of shmita must be the authority of a deity who mystically transforms the soul, rather than coercively commands it. As Tamar Ross notes, this same mystical idea of “the intrinsic value of noncoercion” was evident in other policies Kook commended, such as his methods of addressing heterodox members of the community. The kabbalistic idea of sparks within each person that need only to be flamed into action sets the stage for a mode of interpersonal ethics in which “letting be” becomes the paradigm for politics as a whole.

45 See Shemesh, “‘For the Public’s Improvement and for the Benefit of the Town,’” 59.

46 Ross analyzes Kook’s various statements encouraging toleration for non-believers and “heretics” in the land of Israel, finding that Kook’s toleration was grounded in his mystical approach to halacha. According to Ross, Kook believed that “although the natural instinct of the national spirit is to assert its authority whenever signs of spiritual disintegration become apparent, such authority can be effectively imposed only when the nation’s powers are at the height of their perfection.” See Tamara Ross, “Between Metaphysical and Liberal Pluralism: A Reappraisal of Rabbi A.I. Kook’s Espousal of Toleration,” Association for Jewish Studies Review 21, no. 1 (1996): 81. In other words, until the people of Israel had arrived at a place of full spiritual elevation, exercising censure and discipline toward heretics had no place, because they would not accept such correction. Instead, wayward Jews should be loved and drawn into a position whereby the “sparks” within them could alight, drawing them toward that perfection of soul that the halacha aimed at. Only at that point could public discipline have any value (of course, by that point it would also not be necessary). In this sense, Kook’s politics was always “mystical”—directed toward a “letting be” of the Jewish soul within the nation.

47 The influence of kabbalistic mysticism on political theory is not something that appears only in Rav Kook’s work. Shaul Magid finds it also in the American Jewish Renewal movement, which used kabbalistic concepts to help articulate a politics of pluralism, in a way that parallels Kook’s approach. See Shaul Magid, “Pragmatism and Piety: The American Spiritual and Philosophical Roots of Jewish Renewal,” in Kabbalah and Modernity: Interpretations, Transformations, Adaptations, ed. Marco Pasi, Boaz Huss, and Kocku von Stuckrad (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 357-387. Interestingly, according to an argument by James McBride, the influence of kabbalah (particularly the idea of the sparks or orot) is also a prominent influence on Walter Benjamin’s political theory (who is also an enormous subsequent influence on Giorgio Agamben—as argued in chapter two of this work). See James McBride, “Marooned in the Realm of the Profane: Walter Benjamin’s Synthesis of Kabbalah and Communism,” Journal of the American Academy of Religion 57, no. 2 (1989): 241-266. This lineage should not be surprising, given the conceptual link between the inoperativity of kabbalah that emerges in Rav Kook’s political theory and the “messianic inoperativity” of Agamben.
The type of sovereignty Kook envisioned through the suspension of *shmita* is also one in which the rights of poorer persons are central. This connects to the central meaning of *shmita* in the original Biblical texts, as noted above. In Kook’s time, it would have been possible for wealthy pioneers in the land of Israel to practice *shmita*.\(^\text{48}\) In such situations, it is easy for the privileged to project their own capabilities onto others. This logic often plays out whenever the rich look on persons under economic duress and condescendingly exclaim, “If I were in their place, I would . . .” while being grossly under-informed about all the factors that create financial insecurity. At the core of Kook’s vision of sovereignty is an awareness of the struggles of the less-fortunate. For Kook, sovereignty requires the ability to place oneself in the position of those whose lack of privilege hinders their ability to carry out tasks that seem easy to members of higher classes. By making the observance of *shmita* contingent on the financial ability of all the Jews in the land of Israel, and simultaneously working for the eventual restoration of *shmita* observance, Kook essentially argued for a campaign for economic equality. In a way that parallels the Christian “preferential option for the poor,” Kook’s *shmita* formulated a key principle of sovereignty—no action that fails to account for the interests of the poorest in the land holds validity.

In a sense, then, Kook’s *shmita* was the political kernel from which a much larger socio-political plant was supposed to emerge. Metaphorically, through the *heter mekhira*, Kook wanted

\(^\text{48}\) Feldman sees in Kook’s defense of the *heter mekhira* a concern to prevent something like a spiritual inequality emerging in the land of Israel. Wealthy farmers would have spiritual access to the soul-reviving powers of *shmita* because they could afford to take a year off. On the other hand, “on a spiritual level, there is the concern that non-observant farmers will cease to have any connection to shemitta, were the heter to be unavailable.” See Feldman, “A Brief Overview of Some of the Issues Related to the *Hetter Mekhira*,” 27.
to bury this seed in the ground, enabling the transformative power dynamics of a Sabbatical logic to germinate. This would happen as the people who worked the land during the \textit{shmita} year anticipated fervently the arrival of the ultimate year of rest, and finally the jubilee year. They would study \textit{shmita}'s meaning, and “learning itself leads to action . . . “from one year to the next, more and more people will be caught up in enthusiasm.”

The result would be a “butterfly effect” on Jewish institutions of sovereignty. Kook believed this political dynamic proceeded from the essential uniqueness of the Jewish people, and that this was the gift Jewish existence could give to the world.

What does Kook’s theological analysis of the Jewish Sabbath of the land in Palestine in the early twentieth century offer for Christians attempting to develop a political theology of inoperativity in America and elsewhere in the West in the twenty-first century? Here I can offer a few observations that could be helpful.

First, Kook’s work suggests that a practice of ritualized inoperativity—deliberately doing nothing as an imitation of divine existence—can directly alter a people’s conception of sovereignty, and thus their politics. Christians in the West may not find \textit{shmita} a useful ritual for this purpose, but the idea itself could be pivotal (as I will argue in chapter five). According to Kook, ritualized inoperativity can dampen the spirit of material acquisition and ceaseless production that marks Western (and especially American) attitudes toward land. In the United States, land is the site of competition and relentless grasping for power. The values of \textit{shmita} could upend this paradigm.

\footnote{Kook, \textit{Introduction to Shabbat Ha’aretz}, 139.}
Second, Kook’s understanding of *shmita* depicts a type of sovereignty which can suspend itself for the sake of human well-being. Through the *heter mekhira*, Kook wanted to suspend various aspects of *shmita* observance, not to abolish *shmita* but to bring its intended purpose to fruition. This may also be connected to what Lawrence Kaplan describes as a process of “affirmation and negation” that is a key feature of Kook’s understanding of holiness.⁵⁰ Faith, according to Kaplan’s reading of Kook, is a phenomenon that opens itself by being suspended—as Kook claims happened during the *Aqedah*.⁵¹ As I noted above, this is exactly what Agamben calls the “suspension of suspension” or a “negative dialectic.” In this political framework, sovereign power freely destabilizes itself.

Third, Kook’s understanding of the *heter mekhira* is also a site for fruitful interreligious cooperation. In order for this exception to *shmita* to work, Jews needed to work together with non-Jews, by selling the land to non-Jews during the Sabbatical year. Since, according to Kook, the *heter mekhira* was ultimately a way for *shmita* to gradually realize itself, non-Jews were helping Jews to carry out their religious practices by participating in the *heter mekhira*.⁵² Kook’s theology of *shmita* thus offers an example of how religious rituals can open themselves to a broader community of different religious faiths. For Christians living in the religiously diverse

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⁵¹ Kaplan claims that for Kook, the *Aqedah* was God’s suspension of the faith-command for Abraham to become the father of many nations, and yet it was through this suspension that the fulfillment of the command took place. The same is true for other forms of faith, per Kook. See Kaplan, “The Love of God in Maimonides and Rav Kook,” 233-236.

⁵² This point was made eloquently in a discussion I had with Prof. Devorah Schoenfeld of Loyola University Chicago, to whom I am indebted for it.
West, this is instructive. Such communities should consider how their own practices of inoperativity can suspend themselves (if necessary) to affirm the well-being of others. For example, this is why a mandatory Sunday law (such as the much disputed “blue laws” of nineteenth century America) would not be an appropriate way to display the sovereign inoperativity of a Christian Sabbath.

Finally, Christians in the Western world can learn something from Kook’s ideal of gradual spiritual development in communal life. Although Christian theologians such as Martin Luther King have vilified the “fallacy of gradualism” that postpones and ultimately derails urgent social changes, there is something to be said for Kook’s long-term view of how shmita would take hold of the Jewish collective soul and bring about a new form of ethical existence. Although history often seems to change in sudden spurts, these developments could also be the product of slow moving shifts. Kook’s believed that “the mitzvot of today are a means to the higher ethics of the future, which will reach beyond Judaism toward all humanity and even to the animal and natural worlds.”53 One does not have to embrace all the metaphysics of the kabbalah to see that this vision is deeply resonant with a many Christian visions of ethical change. This does not mean that Christians should stall on important social justice issues. It does mean, however, that they should invest in simple actions that could transform the “soul” of their communities. For example, by embracing forms of ritual inoperativity, Christians could induce

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these types of long-term shifts in spiritual mentality, grounded in a vision of the inoperative sovereignty of God.54

The idea of a long term, inner change in a collective consciousness does raise the question of whether Sabbath (like shmita in this case) should be understood as an interruption of a social system, or simply as one beneficial component within it. Although Kook does not directly address this question, it seems that his answer might be “an interruption, but one that can interrupt itself.” As I have argued above, Kook did not understand the heter mekhira as a diminishment or abandonment of the shmita, but as a suspension of shmita on the basis of its own principles. The original goal of shmita was harmony between the people and the land, achieved through the elevation of the poor. As such, shmita must interrupt any economic structure that would hinder this outcome. The heter mekhira would be simply a way for this interruption to gain a foothold within society.

Kook’s vision of shmita thus gives us an applied example of what Lacoste’s inoperative resolution to the master/slave dialectic might look like. By gradually building rest into their societal development, Kook believed the Jewish people would be able to reorient themselves toward sovereign power and the drive toward coercive political subjugation that undergirds it. Kook’s understanding of the politics of inoperativity differs from Lacoste’s in that the former focused on explicitly on communities engaging together in inoperative rituals, while the latter

54 The question, of course, is how to prevent this approach from drifting into dangerous gradualism. Although Kook does not answer this question, I could venture a guess as to what he might say. Because the heter mekhira was the only option available for low-income Jews wishing to survive in the land, Kook advocated it as the one possibility for moving closer to a full shmita observance. The principle he advocated therefore seems to be that one should always take any positive steps available. This would not lead to apathetic gradualism, because that approach is characterized by a refusal to take every opportunity available.
focuses on individual relations to the Absolute, but the dynamic is the same. Kook’s shmita would halt the competitive master/slave dialectic by providing a means for the community to exist together in a state of inoperative harmony.

This harmony would not be achieved by a sudden, totalitarian imposition of the inoperative ritual. Such a form of inoperativity would have constituted a revival of sovereign power, as Agamben’s work emphasizes, and would have driven poor farmers into a greater state of destitution, forcing them into a position of zoe life. The heter mekhira thus functions as a concrete example of how Agamben’s “suspension” of the machinery of modern politics might work. The shmita—operating through the suspension of itself via the heter mekhira—would interrupt the political system, but not in a way that mimics the mechanism of sovereign power.

This interruption would finally take the form of an ultimate collective Sabbath, the fifty-year jubilee, or yobel. Because Kook is primarily concerned with social relationships among Jews in the land of Israel, his work tends to focus on this collective Sabbath. However, this work presupposes an understanding of the Sabbath’s impact on individual personal existence, for “the personal is political.” How we live together as political communities is inseparable from how we live as individuals within families. For these reasons, Kook’s vision of the collective Sabbath is intimately related to the more “individual” weekly Sabbath. The insights Kook offers for understanding the significance of the shmita and yobel, and their partial suspension in the form of the heter mekhira, are applicable also to understanding smaller-scale forms of inoperativity.

Summary

The Sabbath of the land is for Rav Kook an experience that transforms the community’s attitude toward themselves, each other, and the world at large. His hope was that, as the Jews in
Israel continued to strive for a greater celebration of this form of ritual inoperativity, they would find themselves increasingly blossoming into the spirit of the yobel, or jubilee. To make this happen, however the ritual needed to suspend itself as a way to create the practical outcome for which the ritual was originally intended. In exactly the way that Agamben envisions a “Sabbath of Sabbath,” Kook’s promotion of the heter mekhira thus describes a process through which the shmita would accomplish its goal through a type of self-reduction, or what Agamben might call “poverty.”

This notion that inoperativity has a “goal” raises questions. Kook’s work, as well as that of several of the thinkers we have examined thus far, advocates that inoperative ritual must have a purpose, or function. Naturally, this is important for my overall argument, which is that inoperativity may play a key role in political transformations. Nevertheless, as I have already hinted in this work, the idea that inoperativity “functions” or has a practical purpose, appears paradoxical, if not contradictory. We now turn to a thinker who analyzes a different form of inoperativity, and argues that it in fact has no purpose whatsoever.

**Roberto Goizueta: The “Useless” Fiesta**

The Catholic theologian Roberto Goizueta writes from a distinct practical vantage point: the experiences of Latina/o communities in the United States. Such communities—finding

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56 I use the term “Latina/o” to describe a group that is also sometimes titled “Hispanic” or, more recently “Latin@” or “Latinx.” The use of these terms seeks to avoid the gender specificity of “Latino.” My use of “Latina/o” rather than “Latinx” merely arises from the fact that, as Orlando Espín observes, “it reflects the more common pronunciation and usage” (though unlike Espín, I place the a suffix before the o, to avoid privileging the male gender). See Orlando Espín, “Introduction” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology*, ed. Orlando O. Espín (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 9. Roberto Goizueta tends to use variations on “Latina/o” as
themselves often displaced—seek survival through the affirmation of human relationships.

Goizueta’s work reflects on the various ritual and philosophical approaches Latino/a Catholics have devised to address this need. One of these approaches is a distinct understanding of inoperativity.

To explain how Goizueta develops his view of inoperativity (though he does not use this term), I will first provide an overview of his methodology, then give an account of his understanding of inoperativity, and finally reflect on its political consequences.

Method

Goizueta’s theological method emerges from several sources. The first is his locus theologicus within U.S. Latina/o communities. Goizueta recognizes that all theology results from dialogue with the theologian’s personal background and life experiences, and that no theologian can interpret a doctrine or text apart from these personal factors. Hence, his work is a reflection of his own experience within the odd setting of U.S. Latina/o culture. This culture is not homogeneous or easily categorized, since cultures designated “Latina/o” or “Hispanic” may arise from diverse locations. Furthermore, the social categories bearing these titles display immense internal variation in culture, religion and race. This means that persons lumped into the “Latina/o” box by the larger Anglo-American society may actually display a much more complex, hybrid identity—what Goizueta and other theologians sometimes refer to as mestizaje.

well, although he often uses “Hispanic.” I admit, however, that the term “Latinx” could more adequately include non-binary individuals, and that perhaps a linguistic move in this direction should be taken.

or “hybridity.” Goizueta himself is an immigrant from Cuba, who has spent much of his time among Mexican communities in the U.S. This unique and complex identity is the site from which Goizueta speaks.

Despite the immense variation within Latina/o communities, Goizueta focuses on a common element that seems pervasive in these communities, and that influences his thinking prominently. This is the importance of popular religion, especially within Catholicism. As a precise term, “popular religion” is difficult to define—a challenge Goizueta understands. At first, the term can seem to indicate religion that is “popular” in the sense of common, well-liked, or trendy, in a way analogous to “popular music.” This is not the sense in which Goizueta uses the term. The popular religious elements in Latina/o Catholicism can be either widespread or parochial, and may be well-known or somewhat hidden. In Goizueta’s theology, therefore, “the

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58 A number of theologians have evaluated the significance of mestizaje in contemporary theological perspectives on Latina/o theology. This concept is not without controversy. In the 1970’s Virgilio Elizondo celebrated the term as a description of the Latina/o reality on which theology should build. See Virgilio Elizondo, Mestizaje: The Dialectic of Cultural Birth and the Gospel (San Antonio: Mexican American Cultural Center, 1978). See also Justo González, “Hispanics in the United States,” Listening: Journal of Religion and Culture 27, no. 1 (1992): 7-16. More recently, theologians such as Néstor Medina have cautioned that mestizaje can be a term that unhelpfully masks experience of indigenous peoples who found their identities erased through colonization, and may also be a term that washes over the realities of racism and religious conflict within Latina/o communities. See Néstor Medina, Mestizaje: (Re)Mapping Race, Culture, and Faith in Latina/o Catholicism (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009). See also Carmen Nanko-Fernández, Theologizing en Espanglish: Context, Community, and Ministry (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010). A similar critique has been offered by Jean-Pierre Ruiz, who focuses on the parochial focus of mestizaje in Elizondo’s work (who developed the idea with specific reference to Guadalupe), and questions how it can incorporate the hybridity of the broader Caribbean-American framework. See Jean-Pierre Ruiz, Readings from the Edges: The Bible and People on the Move (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 18-22. Carmen Nanko-Fernández surveys a number of the problems with the term mestizaje as an all-encompassing term to describe Latina/o hybridity, and points toward a few new scholars such as Robyn Henderson-Espinoza who are attempting to re-describe mestizaje as a place of “in-betweenness.” See Carmen Nanko-Fernández, “Lo Cotidiano as Locus Theologicus,” in The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology, ed. Orlando O. Espín (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 15-33.

adjective (popular) refers to the socio-historical fact that these religious symbols, practices, and narratives are of the people.” In other words, the popular religion of Latina/o Catholicism emerges directly out of the everyday experiences of marginalized and diverse communities.

A major aspect of popular religion is the importance of sacramentality within its theological framework. Goizueta points to the research of scholars such as Orlando Espín and Mark Francis, who have shown that the Catholicism of Latina/o Catholics stems from Iberian traditions that predated modern Catholicism. This type of Catholicism was more “medieval” in character, which means that it did not display the focus on conceptual and doctrinal specificity that characterized the Catholicism of the counter-reformation. Hence, Latina/o Catholics are more apt to see God within their symbols, rather than ascribing merely descriptive significance to these symbols. This will become important for understanding the significance of inoperativity.

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60 Goizueta, Caminemos con Jesús, 21.


62 Goizueta argues that within the devotional framework of Latino/a popular religion, practices are embedded within a community’s social and religious life. These practices are seen as “giving” life to the community. This helps to prevent the type of “shopping around” for religious practices that makes them expendable carriers of meaning. The rituals of Latino/a Catholicism thus have a deep connection to the enchanted world of medieval Catholicism which much of Northern-European and American Catholicism has lost, largely as a result of nominalism. See Goizueta, Christ Our Companion, 72-84. See also Vincent J. Miller, Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture (New York: Continuum, 2004). On the influence of nominalism on changing attitudes toward symbol and religious life see Louis Dupré, Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). The sacramental vision present in Goizueta’s work holds much in common with the theological trajectory advanced by Karl Rahner—a point true also of several other Latino/a theologians, including Miguel Diaz. Rahner’s theology exemplifies the Jesuit approach which “seeks to find God in all things,” including the realm of human culture. See Miguel H. Diaz, On Being Human: U.S. Hispanic and Rahnerian Perspectives (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001).
within Goizueta’s thought, because the sacramentality of inoperative practices is important for understanding their political implications.

Much of Goizueta’s work can also be understood as a constructive critique of certain strands of liberation theology. Goizueta agrees with the fundamental trajectory of liberation theology—identifying Christ with the poor and the marginalized. “For Christians,” Goizueta says, “the significance of the crucified and risen Christ is precisely that God is found, in some special way, among those people who continue to be crucified today—the poor, the hungry, the naked, and the outcast.”\(^6^3\) Gustavo Gutierrez famously formulated this method in liberation theology by claiming that theology is a “critical reflection on praxis” and that theology could only be verified by “orthopraxis.”\(^6^4\) This procedural prioritizing of praxis characterizes liberation theology pervasively, although defining the relationship between theology and praxis is not without difficulty, as shown in a key study by Clodovis Boff.\(^6^5\) Goizueta, for his part, provides a


\(^6^5\) Boff agrees that praxis holds priority in theology, but he insists that this praxis must itself be subject to ethical evaluation on the part of theology. Without this dialectical relationship between the two, praxis becomes arbitrary and open to corruption. Boff is scathing in his assessment of theologians who are content to posit liberative praxis as a self-evident axiom: “It may be that there are political situations that are so urgent that they dispense us from all rigor of thought and make a very direct appeal for indignation and action. Still, when an individual or group is satisfied with crying, ‘Praxis, praxis!’ or ‘Political action, political action!’, thinking that thereby something has been done, we must recognize that this individual or group has scarcely gone very far, in terms of either theory or praxis. If truth be told, this is the road leading directly to that impatient, truncated form of pragmatism called ‘doing something.’ Such an attitude satisfies neither the imperative of genuine political efficacy, nor that of ethical
detailed assessment of the role of praxis in theology, and this is where his views on the nature of inoperativity become important.

Goizueta’s Understanding of Latina/o Inoperative Praxis

Commenting on liberation theology’s reinstatement of praxis at the heart of Christian faith, Goizueta asks a simple question that has easily been overlooked: What is praxis? Both liberation theologians and their critics often assume that praxis is simply “doing something,” and that the point is to figure out how to do it. But this level of analysis is insufficient, because there are a variety of ways of understanding what “doing” means.

Goizueta observes that Karl Marx, whose work has had some influence on liberation theology (though not as much as some critics have maintained), defined praxis as making or production—useful activity. This type of activity is the central hallmark of human nature. “In creating an objective world by his practical activity, in working-up inorganic nature, man proves

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himself a conscious species being,” Marx says.\textsuperscript{67} By production, a human being gives form to substances, and concomitantly gives form to him or herself.\textsuperscript{68} The result is that, when human beings produce goods to be sold on the market, the very selves of the producers are being sold. This is the core of what Marx calls alienation.\textsuperscript{69} Implicit, then, within Marx’s critique of capitalist structures is an anthropology in which “the human person is \textit{homo faber.”}\textsuperscript{70}

However, according to Goizueta, this definition of praxis as production is not the only definition available. Goizueta points to Aristotle, who makes a key distinction between \textit{praxis} and \textit{poiesis}. The latter term refers to production or making—“human action whose end is \textit{external} to itself.”\textsuperscript{71} Praxis, for Aristotle, refers to behavior aimed at internal ends—that is, action done for its own sake.\textsuperscript{72} Goizueta uses several analogies to illustrate the difference between praxis and poiesis. Someone who makes a guitar engages in poiesis, because the object

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\textsuperscript{68} Marx puts it very straightforwardly: “He (the human being) begins to distinguish himself from the animal the moment he begins to produce his means of subsistence, a step required by his physical organization. By producing food, man indirectly produces his material life itself.” See Karl Marx, \textit{Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society}, ed. Loyd Easton and Kurt Guddat (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 409 (as cited in Goizueta, \textit{Caminemos con Jesús}, 81).


\textsuperscript{70} Goizueta, \textit{Caminemos con Jesús}, 82. To make this observation, Goizueta draws on Kostas Axelos, \textit{Alienation, Praxis, and Techne in the Thought of Karl Marx} (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1976). Goizueta also employs a critique of Marx’s utilitarian anthropology found in Hannah Arendt, \textit{The Human Condition} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

\textsuperscript{71} Goizueta, \textit{Caminemos con Jesús}, 83.

\textsuperscript{72} Goizueta draws this distinction from an analysis of Aristotle’s \textit{Politics}, 1.4.1254 and his \textit{Nichomachean Ethics} 6.4.1140. See footnotes 12-14 in Goizueta, \textit{Caminemos con Jesús}, 83.
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created is intended for another purpose (playing music). Someone who plays the guitar on the other hand, engages in praxis, because the act of musical production is an end in itself (unless, of course, the player attempts to use the guitar music only to accomplish some other end, such as earning money). Another, subtler analogy Goizueta uses is the distinction between “making a house” and “making a home.” Someone who fixes boards together with concrete creates a space that will be used for another purpose: living. This externally-oriented act is poiesis. However, the persons who eat, sleep, and enjoy themselves within the house engage in praxis. Their living is an end in itself. 

Modern Western society, in Goizueta’s evaluation, has largely neglected Aristotle’s definition of life-as-praxis in favor of the Enlightenment perspective of life-as-production—the view that Marx also adopted. The result has been a tendency to instrumentalize human persons, to depict their value in terms of their ability to transform their world. Of course, Marx deeply opposed the reduction of human beings to work-objects. Yet he could not avoid the influence of production oriented thinking, even in his opposition to the inevitable exploitation that resulted from such thinking. The same thing is true of liberation theologians influenced by Marx, according to Goizueta. Although he agrees with the work of pivotal figures such as Gustavo Gutierrez and the Boff brothers in restoring the primacy of praxis into Christian theology, Goizueta argues that this concept has been built from an Enlightenment utility mold. Liberation

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theology, by focusing on transforming the world, runs the danger of assuming that human beings are defined by their capacity to effect changes in sociopolitical systems.

Goizueta affirms the importance of transforming the world. He applauds efforts to remove oppressive powers as one of the central features of the Gospel. But his recognition of the subtle instrumental anthropology lurking within liberation theology leads him to the following critique:

My own experience in Latino communities, such as San Fernando, has also led me to question . . . any emphasis on the social transformative dimension of human action which would make this dimension itself foundational. In these communities, I have witnessed a type of empowerment and liberation taking place which, at least initially and explicitly, seems to have relatively little connection to any social or political struggles. Indeed, in many cases, empowerment and liberation are not explicit goals at all. Seemingly, the only explicit goals are day-to-day survival and, especially, the affirmation of relationships as essential to that survival. This affirmation is manifested in all those seemingly insignificant ways in which we love, care for, and embrace other persons. Central to the struggle for survival and relationships, moreover, is the community’s life of faith, which also, at least on the surface, seems little related to social transformation.74

Goizueta’s focus on the everyday aspects of life is built on this fundamental point. This insight is also the foundation for his work on the rituals and celebrations of popular Catholicism, which could otherwise be derided as useless folk mythology. Participants in a via dolorosa reenactment, for example, do not follow the footsteps of Christ in order to accomplish something, such as illustrating the liberative significance of the cross. Their action is an end in itself.75 Of course, a via dolorosa procession in a Latina/o community may have the byproduct of

74 Goizueta, Caminemos con Jesús, 88.

75 Speaking of a participant in one of these reenactments, Goizueta sums up his point: “God is revealed in the doing, in the active participation, in the hammering of the nails. It is in the act of walking alongside Jesus and all the others on the Via Dolorosa, and in the act of hammering the nails into Jesus’ feet, that this man encounters God—in the most concrete, physical way possible. The only end, or goal, of the man’s action is simply the action itself” (Goizueta, Caminemos con Jesús, 103).
signaling a theopolitical point—such as Christ’s presence with the “crucified peoples of history” (Ellacuria)—and thus contribute directly to transforming the world. But this is not the point. The ritual aims at nothing other than itself. Such activities are intended to draw the participant into a physical, tangible relationship to God and community, and thus construct an intrinsically-good concrete way of being in the world. Goizueta therefore categorizes these rituals as having an “aesthetic” value, using this term to refer to the non-instrumental goodness of unity-with-difference, connected to the U.S. Latina/o experience of *mestizaje*, or “empathic fusion.”

This inoperative quality to Latina/o Catholic ritual becomes even clearer in an essay Goizueta writes on Latina/o celebrative practices, or “fiesta.” Goizueta begins his analysis of fiesta by repeating his earlier criticisms of liberation theology’s focus on externally-oriented praxis. However, when he begins discussing the new paradigm of popular religion in Latina/o

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76 For his concept of the aesthetic Goizueta draws on the Mexican philosopher Jose Vasconcelos, who opposed positivistic, regulatory organization of society favored by Mexican dictator Porfirio Diaz. According to Vasconcelos, rejection of aesthetic values tended to create a culture in which human beings were treated as numeric entities, valuable only for their material output. This framework created unity, but it was unity of number rather than unity of harmonious mixture, or *mestizaje*. See Jose Vasconcelos, *Obras Completas* (Mexico: Librerlos Mexicanos Unidos, 1958), 4:16. Goizueta employs Vasconcelos as an example of a distinctive value of the aesthetic in Latino/a thought. He then applies this to rituals: “The symbols and rituals of popular religion are prime examples of the intrinsic value of beauty, and, hence, the intrinsic value of human life as beautiful, i.e. as an end in itself, for the goal of the community’s participation in the stories, symbols, and rituals of popular religion is nothing other than that participation itself. The goal of the interaction among the participants, and the interaction between them and Jesus, Mary, and the saints, like that between Juan Diego and *la Morenita*, is nothing other than the interaction itself—which is to be enjoyed and celebrated” (Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús*, 102).


78 However, Goizueta is more temperate here, arguing that liberation theology was “initially inattentive” to the “importance of celebration, ritual, popular religion and family life in the ongoing struggles of the poor” (Goizueta, “Fiesta,” 87). He notes the work of such liberation theologians as Gustavo Gutierrez on the importance of quotidian, domestic life, citing works like that of Gustavo Gutierrez, *The God of Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991).
theology, he quickly adds that “by retrieving the central theological significance of popular religion, U.S. Latino/a theologians are also responding to this new reality, not by rejecting liberation theology, but by adopting, adapting, and helping to deepen the groundbreaking and radical insights of liberation theologians.” 79 In other words, Goizueta does not want to choose between “useless” popular religion and “useful” liberation. His goal, as he states clearly, is to show how the “useless” popular activity of fiesta “is a principle form of cultural resistance,” because of the new form of anthropology it introduces. 80

How does a fiesta establish a socially-transformative and yet useless praxis, one that defines a new anthropology? Goizueta answers this question by giving a detailed explanation of the philosophy of fiesta. He begins apophatically. “The fiesta,” Goizueta says, “is not a party.” 81 Although the fiesta does involve pure enjoyment, displayed in merriment of various kinds (music, food, and dancing), it is also a serious act of commemoration. It is a way of being together as a community—not simply a way to fulfill oneself as an individual partier. As Goizueta puts it, “The fiesta is, at the same time, play and work.” 82

The “work” that is part of a fiesta is not merely the physical labor involved in setting up the amenities for revelry. It is the aspect of intentional community construction involved in the recreation. Goizueta points to research done by Ronald Grimes on the fiestas of Santa Fe, in which participants were asked if they could use music other than mariachi for the events. The
response was emphatic: “The fiesta would no longer be a fiesta.”

The quintessence of the fiesta is creating and drawing together a community, and this requires culturally authentic elements—in this case, mariachi rhythms. This authenticity is part of the “job description” of a fiesta.

At the same time, Goizueta says, a fiesta is not work, defined as production. Using Aristotelian terminology, it is praxis, not poiesis. According to Goizueta, the inherent “uselessness” of this praxis enables those who participate in the fiesta to experience life as a gift, not a human-made construct.

What we are receiving and responding to is the gift of life, not in a sentimental sense, but in an ontological sense: we know that whatever ‘we’ do, make or achieve is ultimately gift; we know that whatever relationships we construct are grounded in the prior constitutive relationship with the One who has loved us first; we know that who we are is not dependent on what we do, make, or achieve; we know that life—all of life—is gift before it is an ‘object’ that we work upon, mold, transform, or liberate.

This mentality, fostered through the ritual inoperativity of fiesta, is itself both the condition of true liberation and the reality of that liberation. In other words, fiesta is an act of resistance because it creates a different world within the present world. Goizueta calls this aspect of fiesta “life in the subjunctive,” meaning that it provokes the participant to act “as if” the world had been restored to a condition of perfect community, without hierarchy. Quoting Victor Turner, Goizueta suggests that during the fiesta, “it is as though everything is switched into the subjunctive mood for a privileged period of time.”

The action of fiesta pulls future expectation

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out of its distant, hazy mirage and places it squarely within the community’s life. In this sense, the subjunctive mood of the fiesta is a practical enactment of Moltmann’s future “anticipation.” The eschatology Moltmann speaks of in abstract terms is carried out regularly in the jubilant celebrations of Latino/a communities. In other words, Goizueta’s fiesta ties together the eschatological vision of Moltmann’s understanding of divine inoperativity with the liturgical encounter of Lacoste’s liturgical inoperativity, creating Agamben’s inoperative “form of life” through the community-transformation Kook longed for. Of course, this carries enormous consequences for political theology.

Political Implications

It is not hard to see that politics is deeply melded within the rituals of the Latina/o communities Goizueta describes. However, in order to understand this political framework it is important to emphasize that fiesta/inoperativity does not simply “carry” political meaning for Goizueta, as if it were a symbol to which a community describes particular meanings. Goizueta observes that is popular among scholars trained in a Northern European “nominalist” tradition to analyze the practices of other cultures by searching of conceptual significance lurking behind the practices, and then to connect such significance to various political causes. For example, one could interpret the appearance of the Virgin of Guadalupe to Juan Diego as a story symbolizing the affirmation of lower-class Latina/o identity. On such a reading, according to Goizueta, “what matters is not Juan Diego but ourselves, our own need for identity, our own sense of dignity, our own need for hope and liberation.”

86 Goizueta, Christ Our Companion, 90.
Goizueta opposes this abstract form of interpretation. He points out that for the Latino/a Catholic communities that celebrate the story of Juan Diego and Our Lady of Guadalupe, these characters do matter. Similarly, the political meaning ascribed to fiesta is not the point. Of course, Juan Diego and fiesta do carry political meaning—Goizueta does not deny this. But this meaning cannot be separated from the form of the symbols. Goizueta explains that “the poor do not find meaning and hope in the religious practices themselves, but in the particular person of Jesus Christ, Guadalupe, and so forth.”

The rituals of fiesta and other devotional practices must be interpreted sacramentally, in such a way that the truth of the symbol and its form are not separated.

This makes an analysis of the political implications of Goizueta’s fiesta-inoperativity tricky, because the one thing we must not do is suppose that we can draw out a functional telos from behind the form of the ritual. We must not look for any implicit political goals hidden within the matrix of Latino/a popular Catholicism. Doing so would be like asking a person, “What are the political goals behind your existence as a human being?” The question is absurd because it fails to acknowledge that people do not live for political transformations; they engage in political transformations in order to live.

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87 Goizueta, Christ Our Companion, 91.

88 Goizueta’s understanding of the sacramental symbol in which both form and content are not separated is closely tied to Karl Rahner’s similar articulation of the meaning of the symbol. Rahner offers an analysis of symbolism that retrieves something like the medieval holistic approach, though with a modern form of argumentation. See Karl Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” in Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations IV (New York: Crossroad, 1966), 244. On the medieval understanding of symbolism see Gary Macy, “Demythologizing the Church in the Middle Ages,” Journal of Hispanic/Latino Theology 3, no. 1 (August 1995): 27. See also Thomas F. O’Meara, Theology of Ministry (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 115-116.
How, then, may we speak of “political implications” to Goizueta’s understanding of inoperativity in Latina/o rituals? The answer to this question emerges from understanding the inherent relatedness and communal vision that are central to rituals in Latina/o popular religion. Goizueta and other scholars such as Ada María Isasi-Díaz note that inherent within the linguistic and cultural epistemic outlook of Latina/o persons in the United States is a different way of understanding the self and the self’s social role. Goizueta emphasizes that “for U.S. Hispanics, there is no such thing as an isolated individual who is not intrinsically defined by his or her relationship to others.”

This sets the Latina/o perspective at variance with the typical Anglo-American perspective on the self, which tends to isolate the individual as the basic unit of meaning within social relationships. In an individualistic framework, “politics” signifies something individuals do, or choose not to do, depending on their own life choices. Activities may be “political” if they are explicitly focused on political aspects of the self, which can be donned or discarded at will. However, because of its understanding of the person as intrinsically relational, the Latina/o perspective seems much more in line with the aphorism, “the personal is

89 Goizueta, Caminemos con Jesús, 50. Isasi-Díaz highlights the fact that in the Latino/a perspective, “community is not something added on, but a web of relationships constitutive of who we are.” This is revealed in simple elements of the Spanish linguistic world, such as the fact that the Spanish word for raising children—criar—derives from the same root word as crear, denoting “to create.” Isasi-Díaz similarly points out that the Spanish word individuo carries a negative connotation of one who is selfish or puts oneself outside the bounds of community.” See Ada María Isasi-Díaz, En la Lucha/In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 171.

90 It is important to observe that Goizueta does not deny the significance of the individual (and individual rights) in Latino/a thought. One must not move from an extreme individualism on one hand to a mindless collectivism on the other. Goizueta proposes a Latino/a model in which the individual exists as a locus of self-interpretation, but is always embedded in a social/communal world. This differs considerably with the Anglo-American framework, in which the individual opts in an out of social matrices at will. On the meaning of individualism in Anglo-American culture see Robert N. Bellah, et al., Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 142-147; and the various essays in David Milligan and William Watts-Miller, eds., Liberalism, Citizenship, and Autonomy (Aldershot: Avebury, 1992).
political.”91 By engaging in communal acts such as fiesta, the person may not add an explicitly political dimension to her/his activity, but that is because the political is not a “meaning” that the activity carries, but is already a constitutive element of the act itself. The inoperativity of ritual, in the Latina/o framework, is political insofar as it is a form of life that is a politics of its own.

The intrinsic nature of politics in ritual helps to explain why Goizueta does not address specifically the challenge fiesta presents to manifestations of sovereign power. Doing so would imply that fiesta is simply a tool for accomplishing a political purpose, rather than being a form of politics itself. In this sense, his reluctance to make political applications to inoperative rituals is similar to Stanley Hauerwas’s insistence that “the church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic.”92 Hauerwas does not imply that social transformation is undesirable—only that it must arise from a living witness—a concrete exemplification of the reign of God in a particular community. For Hauerwas, thinking about the community’s life as an instrument for political change risks neglecting the cultivation of those unique qualities of the community that make political change possible. Likewise, for Goizueta, thinking of Latina/o popular Catholicism as a political tool devalues the particular lives whose very being creates political change.

91 On the significance of the “personal” aspect of community relationships for politics, especially within the Latino/a context, see Michelle Gonzalez, “When We Don’t Choose Our Friends: Friendship as a Theological Category,” *Theology Today* 69, no. 2 (2012): 189-196.

92 Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 99. By making this bold claim, Hauerwas is attempting to articulate a vision in which the church offers an eschatological “foretaste” of the world to come, by incarnating “kingdom values.” In this sense, his view is similar to Moltmann’s (and also Goizueta’s). However, Hauerwas differs from Moltmann and Goizueta in that he attempts to present the church’s ethical practices as self-contained, rather than spilling over into the wider world (Moltmann’s “beating swords into ploughshares”). Goizueta, for his part, does not seem to see any need to isolate Latino/a Catholic rituals and culture from “worldly” rituals and culture, and in fact sees blending or mestizaje as an integral part of these rituals. More research needs to be done on the comparison of the ecclesial ethics of these thinkers.
Rather than making fiesta-inoperativity a political tool, Goizueta’s perspective entails that there is a politics within the ritual. What does this politics look like? Goizueta makes a number of observations that help us characterize it. One such statement is his declaration that the fiesta is a time of “sweet disorder,” and a “liminal event.” It is a time when hierarchies of power are overturned. For example, in the quinceañera a young girl—typically an otherwise unprivileged member of society—receives royal treatment and is the subject of celebration. At a broader level, this type of ritual displays what Mikhail Bakhtin calls the “carnivalesque”—a celebratory upheaval in which societal classes are flipped. Such a time of dramatic social change could signal a new way of social and political existence.

How does sovereignty function in this type of inoperative politics? Goizueta’s work seems to suggest that it functions through the quality of the aesthetic. In Christ Our Companion, Goizueta attempts what might appear to be a disjointed theological move: Bringing the practices of Latino/a popular religion into dialogue with the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar.

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93 See Goizueta, “Fiesta,” 93. As a caution against Goizueta’s optimistic view, it is important to keep in mind Laura Hernández-Ehrisman’s observation that fiesta-type practices “often stigmatize groups of low social status rather than offer a critique of social power.” See Laura Hernández-Ehrisman, Inventing the Fiesta City: Heritage and Carnival in San Antonio (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008). She makes this observation with regard to practices in the San Antonio carnival in the early 1900’s in which native groups were induced to act out stereotypical indigenous practices as a way to mockingly contrast them with more “elevated” Anglo-American life. Her cautionary note thus suggests that fiesta is easily co-opted by powers of oppression—a point that complements Goizueta’s analysis.

94 For a description of this ritual see Almudena Ortiz, Fiesta de Quinceanera: Queen for a Day (M.A. Thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1992).

latter claims that the beauty of divine revelation is located within the form of this revelation itself: “The content does not lie behind the form, but within it.” Goizueta claims that this is exactly the viewpoint on which Latino/a popular religion bases itself. Because the form of Christ is that of a crucified person, it is within the form of the lives of poor, marginalized communities that the beauty of the revelation of Jesus Christ appears. The rituals that sustain these lives do not give rise to some sort of alternative construction of meaning (poiesis), but are the meaning of Christ’s beauty. In Goizueta’s summary, “if the great Swiss theologian thus bemoaned contemporary Catholic theology’s inability to see the form, U.S. Latino/a theologians are today articulating a theology that, grounded in Latino/a popular Catholicism, suggests that the poor are indeed able—and have always been able—to see the form.”

Here Goizueta makes a key point: If the beauty of the form of Christ is revealed in the lives and communities of crucified (and resurrected) persons, the type of power that this beauty possesses must never be coercive or controlling.

To assert that Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life through any type of coercion is impossible without thereby denying in practice what one claims to be asserting in theory. If the truth of Christ is indeed beautiful, it can only attract and compel from inside, through the inherent power of the crucified and risen Christ as he is present today in the world, in Scripture, in the church, and especially in the concrete lives of Christians.

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96 Hans Urs von Balthasar, The Glory of the Lord, Vol. 1, Seeing the Form (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 151. For an analysis of Balthasar’s concept of “seeing the form” that is also influential on Goizueta’s thinking see also Michelle Gonzalez, Sor Juana: Beauty and Justice in the Americas (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003), 177.

97 Goizueta, Christ Our Companion, 112.

98 Goizueta, Christ Our Companion, 120.
The inoperativity of Latina/o Catholic rituals thus suggests an aesthetic politics—or a politics of beauty—in which the model of sovereignty is a divine figure whose radiance reveals itself in the simple splendor of communities coming together in celebration. Thus, returning to the question of sovereignty, we could say that an inoperative sovereign creates a governmental model whereby justice emerges *through* the inherent goodness of human lives. That is to say, justice is the “letting be” of human beauty.

**Summary**

Goizueta’s work suggests that without rituals of pure inoperativity, social justice activism can forget the basic goodness and eschatological significance of communal life itself. Furthermore, excessively focusing on ends-oriented activism can easily sideline those persons whose existence seems to have little to do with changing the world. For example, the *abuelitas* Goizueta describes as being at the center of the home community may not have the time or physical ability to engage in political campaigning. Nevertheless, their day-to-day life—focused on survival and forming familial community through rituals of celebration—can itself be a form of politics.

**Conclusion**

How does Goizueta’s emphasis on the self-fulfilling nature of inoperative ritual relate to Kook’s argument that ritual serves an end outside of itself? At first, these seem to be opposing paradigms. Kook claims that inoperative ritual must at times suspend itself in order to make way for a new form of life, which is the intended product of the ritual. Goizueta claims that inoperative ritual *is* life. Yet, on closer examination, these different perspectives on the practice
of inoperativity are two sides of the same coin. Kook did not argue that *shmita* was only a tool for producing a new form of life. Rather, *shmita* was the key element in that life—one which needed to be suspended in order to fulfill itself. This point harmonizes perfectly with Goizueta’s argument that inoperative ritual needs to be identified with life itself. In both perspectives, the end result is a framework in which particular practices embody a distinct type of political existence.

Perhaps we could say that Goizueta and Kook guard against different—though related—challenges inoperative practices encounter. Kook was responding to the danger that inoperative practices could destroy life by making it subservient to the sovereign control of a unitary force. This force was the top-down authority of the deity. Goizueta, on the other hand, responds to the danger that inoperative practices may unwittingly destroy life by being co-opted by a different type of sovereign power—that of the market. For Goizueta, inoperative rituals must challenge the tendency of market-based political paradigms to define the human being as *homo faber*, and therefore as a tool to be managed at will by powers operating in permanent states of exception. Kook wanted to protect inoperativity lest it be used to serve religio-political ends. Goizueta sought to guard inoperativity against being employed by economic-political ends (which are also, of course, religio-political).

Both Kook and Goizueta provide practical analyses of inoperative rituals that display the main features of inoperativity we have charted in the previous two chapters. Kook and Goizueta illustrate how rituals of inoperativity point toward the type of anthropology Moltmann and Heschel find in Jewish and Christian texts. In *shmita* and *fiesta*, we find a conception of human nature in which the value of human persons exceeds activity and productivity. In addition, these
rituals offer a glimpse at a practical application of the philosophical perspective on power articulated by Lacoste and Agamben. Kook’s *shmita* and Goizueta’s *fiesta* demonstrate how inoperativity creates an alternative approach to human community, characterized by a state of harmony, replacing the competitive and coercive trajectories of politics.

At the same time, Kook’s and Goizueta’s analyses show us that inoperative rituals are not easily practiced. As the complex debates around the *heter mekhira* illustrate, applying rituals of inoperativity to actual political problems requires nuance and an in-depth awareness of the theology behind the ritual. Goizueta would also admit that extending the type of inoperative existence of fiesta into all aspects of everyday life in Latina/o communities is likewise challenging. For Jewish communities in early twentieth-century Palestine as well as for Latino/a communities in twenty-first century America, there was and is an ever present possibility that inoperativity might slip into its opposite, either as a tool for serving a controlling deity, or a tool for pleasing market gods. Nevertheless, Kook’s *shmita* and Goizueta’s fiesta convincingly demonstrate that a particular concept of ritual inoperativity is a viable tool for theo-political thought. In the following chapter, I will show in more detail how this type of inoperativity might “work.”
CHAPTER IV
THE CLIMATE-HEALING SABBATH
A POLITICAL ETHIC OF INOPERATIVITY

Throughout the preceding chapters, we have examined different building blocks for constructing a political theology of inoperativity, drawn from three central sources for thinking theologically. At this point, the stage has been set for developing a political ethic of inoperativity. In other words, we may now articulate how religious practices of inoperativity can play a role in shaping the way we live as political actors. The goal of the following chapter is not to establish a precise political program for using ritual inoperativity in activism or legislation—that would fall well outside the boundaries of this work. Instead, my purpose will be to establish a framework for thinking about engaging in ritual inoperativity in an explicitly political way.

I will use the weekly Sabbath as a key example of ritual inoperativity in this chapter. I will do so because the weekly Sabbath is one of the most widespread and recognizable forms of inoperativity, and also one that—if practiced—takes up a considerable amount of time (one-seventh of existence). As noted in Heschel’s and Moltmann’s work, there are numerous ways in which Sabbath may impact political life—far too many to address here. In order to keep the following exposition brief, I will develop the following theological paradigm of Sabbath against the background of one specific political problem: climate ecology. Unfortunately, Sabbath is no panacea for the troubling dilemmas associated with climate change. But it does offer a helpful paradigm for approaching the problem, one that has been noted by thinkers such as Moltmann,
Recently, several Jewish thinkers have issued calls to consider Sabbath as a response to climate change, as is visible in the “Green Sabbath Project,” which has also drawn participation by members of clergy from a variety of traditions. As far back as the early 90’s Jewish thinkers such as Vicky Joseph recognized the value of traditional Sabbath practices for ecology. I will speak more about these proposals at the end of this chapter and in the next.

Before showing the significance of Sabbath for addressing this issue, it is important to identify the core of the problem. As with any political crisis, there are background paradigms that form the structure for climate change. Understanding the elements of this background will pave the way for demonstrating how inoperativity in the form of Sabbath provides a solution. Thus, before drawing on the descriptions of inoperativity as developed in the previous chapters to suggest a Sabbatical ecological ethic, I will first offer a brief description of the conceptual substrata from which the climate challenge arises.

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1 At the end of his work on Sabbath in creation, Moltmann famously noted—in connection to the problem of pollution in general—that Sabbath could be “a day when we leave our cars at home, so that nature too can celebrate its Sabbath.” See Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 296. Perhaps due to the fact that—in the late 1980’s when Moltmann was writing—climate change was only beginning to emerge in the popular consciousness as the massive problem that it is, Moltmann left this provocative idea undeveloped. Laura Hartmann has seized upon this idea and developed an “ecological spirituality” based on Sabbath practices connected to using fewer resources. See also Laura M. Hartmann, “Christian Sabbath-keeping as Spiritual and Environmental Practice,” *Worldviews* 15 (2011): 47-64. Other important thinkers who have connected Sabbath to the task of environmental action include Richard Lowery, *Sabbath and Jubilee* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000); and Ched Myers, *The Biblical Vision of Sabbath Economics* (Washington, DC: Tell the World, 2002).

2 The Green Sabbath Project seeks to unite members of different religions in a collective effort of “doing nothing” as a response to climate change. See www.greensabbathproject.net. Much of what I will argue is complimentary to this movement, as will be seen in the concluding chapter.

Background: The Nature of the Problem

Strong scientific consensus suggests that present levels of carbon emissions will result in temperature increases with disastrous and possibly irreversible long term effects.\(^4\) Climate change is, of course, a global phenomenon, but it does not impact everyone equally. People living in places such as North America are unlikely to see significant problems, aside from occasional coastal relocations due to rising sea levels and somewhat unpredictable weather.\(^5\) However, in equatorial regions—particularly coastal arid ones—climate change will lead to famines, increasing storms, and other natural disasters.\(^6\) These could trigger political upheavals such as mass migration, increased class stratification, and violent conflict.\(^7\)

Halting the devastation of our earth is not easy, for hosts of immediate political reasons, deftly explained by James Gustave Speth and Naomi Klein.\(^8\) All these reasons arise from cultural

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\(^6\) For vivid accounts of the disastrous outcomes of these impacts see Elizabeth Austin, Treading on Thin Air: Atmospheric Physics, Forensic Meteorology, and Climate Change: How Weather Shapes Our Everyday Lives (New York: Pegasus Books, 2016).

\(^7\) These inevitably tragic political outcomes of climate change have been documented by many scientists, but see especially Gar Lipow, Solving the Climate Crisis through Social Change: Public Investment in Social Prosperity to Cool a Fevered Planet (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2012). On the particular problem of migration as a result of population displacement see Melissa Fleming, “Climate change could become the biggest driver of displacement: UNHCR chief,” United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees, http://www.unhcr.org/4b2910239.html.

\(^8\) See James Gustave Speth, The Bridge at the End of the World: Capitalism, the Environment, and Crossing from Crisis to Sustainability (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008); Naomi Klein, This Changes
factors. The surface-level political problems are rooted in deeper philosophical conceptions.

Although the complexity of the cultural factors that have unleashed climate change could take volumes to describe, I propose—for the purpose of the present argument—that there are two primary categories, human identity and authority. These two categories are closely related, and they correspond precisely to what Pope Francis, in his recent encyclical on “care for our common home” refers to as the: “the place of human beings and of human action in the world.”

Identity

Human beings have always struggled to describe their identity in relation to the earth. For much of Western history, human beings have widely considered the earth an object to be mastered and controlled. A strict stratification of human/nature has held sway at least implicitly in political thought. Those of us living in Europe and North America (with the exception of indigenous persons) have inherited a paradigm of human identity, whereby the human is defined

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See Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), 101. Commenting on Pope Francis’s approach, Mark Shiffman observes that this obsession with using the natural world is rooted in a conception of human identity as a power holder: “The problem is not simply that the extent and scope of our power have outstripped our wisdom and virtue. The problem rather is our fundamental understanding of what the power that we are developing is, over what we develop it, and how and why we develop it. Since such power is a human attainment, and its development is a human activity, the root problem turns out to be at the same time a faulty sense of who and what we are as human beings—a faulty sense that both grounds and is reinforced by our technocratic relationship to nature.” See Mark Shiffman, “The Other Seamless Garment: *Laudato Si’* on the Human Relationship to Created Nature,” in *Care for the World: Laudato Si’ and Catholic Social Thought in an Era of Climate Crisis*, ed. Frank Pasquale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 94.
by use of the earth for human ends. This paradigm requires a careful maintenance of the binary between \textit{zoe} and \textit{bios}, and a sense that \textit{zoe} must increasingly be corralled and altered. Not surprisingly, as human beings have attained unparalleled mastery over natural phenomena, we have used this power to engineer the potential for our own demise.

Under this same heading is a conception of productivity as the end goal of human life. If human beings must find their ultimate fulfillment in making or production, it seems inevitable the natural world must constantly feed this fundamental human need. Ceasing or cutting back on production would, in this paradigm, be an anti-humanitarian measure. Because we tend to think that the endless employment of nature is essential to who we are, we struggle to justify any effort to do nothing in the face of nature. Efforts to stop climate change thus run against our basic sense of human dignity.\textsuperscript{10}

An illuminating example of this can be found in the “Cornwall Declaration on Environmental Stewardship,” produced by the Cornwall Alliance, a group of conservative evangelical, Catholic and Jewish leaders that denies human-produced climate change.\textsuperscript{11} In this chapter, I will refer frequently to the Cornwall Declaration for several reasons. First, it is an ecumenical and interreligious document, drawing together signatories from Catholic, evangelical Protestant, and Jewish traditions. Second, although it is not officially binding on the members of any of these traditions, it represents the views of key thought leaders. Third, it is one of the few

\textsuperscript{10} This plays a key part in the fascinating psychological phenomena associated with climate-change denial analyzed in George Marshall, \textit{Don’t Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change} (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

ethical statements offered by religious leaders that directly opposes a movement to address climate change through concerted action (in most cases, it is safe to say, Christians of this stripe often ignore the problem or offer only a brief nod to climate-skepticism).  

The primary thrust of the document is that human beings are valuable because of their capacity to “develop” resources and “enrich” creation. The document asserts that human beings display the image of God by being “producers.” Although part of the document is nobly concerned with preventing harmful outcomes for the poor that might result from economy-slowing ecological policies, it is clear that a key rationale behind the opposition to such policies is a motive to protect the identity of human beings as a producers and modifiers of nature.

A marked contrast to this approach can be seen in Pope Francis’s *Laudato Si*, which does not deny the role of human beings as producers, but seeks to curb a “misguided anthropocentrism” that defines human beings by technological accomplishment. The contrast between the two documents demonstrates that a pivot point in the contemporary ecology debate lies within our anthropology. This strongly suggests that if we want to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, we will have to directly face our own conception of ourselves in relation to the world. We may, for brief intervals, slow down the problem of climate change by discovering more efficient ways of expanding our domination of nature, or protecting ourselves from the most

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12 The influence of the thinkers behind the Cornwall Declaration cannot be understated. Laurel Kearns points out that the Cornwall Alliance is a group that supports many (or possibly most) anti-green movements within conservative Christianity in the United States, including the “Resisting the Green Dragon” series. See Laurel Kearns, “Religious Climate Activism in the United States,” in *Religion in Environmental and Climate Change: Suffering, Values, Lifestyles*, ed. Dieter Gerten and Sigurd Bergmann (London: Continuum, 2012), 132-151.

13 See “Concerns” 1 and 2 of “The Cornwall Declaration.”

14 See Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’,* 115-121.
imminent problems we have created. But these efforts will ultimately fail if we do not fundamentally change who we think we are. Sabbath, I argue, can play a significant role in this change.

Authority

Climate change taps into an ongoing difficulty Westerners face regarding authority. This challenge is linked to the problem of identity because in a capitalist society, private property creates sovereignty. We think of ourselves as “owning” portions of the earth, and thereby possessing the authority to act as we wish in our respective domains. “Sovereign is the one who decides in the state of exception,” and the one who decides is the one who owns the property in which the exception occurs. Any pact or international agreement to reduce emissions levels may be perceived as a threat to local sovereignty over natural resources.

This problem also emerges in connection to how to prevent people from using resources that seem to be freely available to them. If human beings are in sovereign control of the materials earth gives to them, how can anyone intervene in the ways private individuals choose to utilize these materials? How do we ethically call a halt to the exploitation of earth, especially when it appears that some people rely on this exploitation in order to survive?

This authority challenge appears in the Cornwall Declaration as well. The authors repeatedly appeal to human “dominion” over earth, and emphasize that humans should recognize “their proper place in the created order.”15 Although the authors assert that this dominion should be “caring” and should take the form of stewardship, there is a clear indication that the authors

15 See “Concerns” 2 and 3, and “Beliefs” 3 in “The Cornwall Declaration.”
perceive human manipulation of creation to be an essential aspect of the human role in the world. Since human beings are rightful bearers of authority over the earth, any attempt to curtail this authority interferes with a divine commission. Hence, the authors “aspire to a world in which liberty as a condition of moral action is preferred over government-initiated management of the environment as a means to common goals.” In this perspective, government regulation is problematic not merely for practical reasons (concerns about mismanagement, etc.), but because it prevents the free exercise of divinely-granted authority.

In this approach, authority functions through a hierarchical system of control, characterized by a need for humans to extract resources from that which is beneath them. This contrasts sharply with the vision articulated by Pope Francis, who argues that in past Christian tradition, “what was handed on was a Promethean vision of mastery over the world, which gave the impression that the protection of nature was something that only the faint-hearted cared about.” Against this framework, the Pope longs for an anthropology in which human beings are in authority over nature, but this authority takes the form of self sacrifice and “openness to others.” Once again, the cavernous contrast between the Cornwall Declaration’s approach and that of Pope Francis serves to emphasize the importance of conceptions of authority in addressing climate change.

16 See “Aspiration” 4 in “The Cornwall Declaration.”


18 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, 119.
Responding to the concerns of the authors of the Cornwall Declaration is tricky, because in many situations there seems to be an inverse relationship between the amount of authority each individual human being holds over the natural world and the amount of authority human beings have over each other. In other words, the “liberty” of human beings may be in tension with the “liberty” of nature. Freed from the tethers of government regulation, human beings may place nature in enormous, oppressive bondage. However, excesses of government regulation may place human beings in oppressive bondage as well. Therefore it is not enough merely to insist on the freedom of nature or the freedom of human beings. A political ethic for climate change must consider how the types of authority corresponding to these freedoms relate to each other.

As with the problem of identity, the issue of authority in relation to climate change could take volumes of its own. I cannot attempt to solve it here. I will argue, however that Sabbath could play a key role in a solution.

**A Sabbatical Ethic of Identity and Authority**

Our perspectives on identity and authority are integral parts of our “social imaginary”—the set of ideas that form the unquestioned background for how we think and act. Trying to address climate change without changing this social imaginary will only result in short-term solutions. In the following sections, I will explore how a particular practice of Sabbath—

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19 Thus far in history, we have not yet seen an “ecological totalitarian government” that forces its citizens into conditions of grim hardship in order to protect the environment, and thus it seems that climate skeptics who fear this type of outcome may be propagating baseless fears. Nevertheless, such a totalitarian government is certainly possible, and at least at a theoretical level, an ethicist must take it into consideration.


21 For this reason, Sallie McFague has called for a change in spirituality in order to address the problem of climate change. McFague’s proposal is to focus on emulating the self-emptying lifestyles of certain saints—those who lived out a counter-consumerist “kenotic” way of life. See Sallie McFague, *Blessed Are the Consumers:*
grounded in the biblical, philosophical, and practical perspectives developed in previous chapters—can dramatically alter our social imaginary. In what follows, I will draw on the biblical, philosophical, and practical insights of the thinkers examined in chapters 1-3 in order to articulate how this Sabbath might address human identity and authority.22

Sabbath and Identity

In general, human beings separate themselves from the earth by actions. One could argue that the primary relationship in all of human life is that between activity and passivity. The latter we associate with nature, whose patterns and rhythms seem not to lead to any particular goal, but only to a continual repetition of the same. We do not know if mosquitoes or elk think about their “life span” and what they want to accomplish in it, but certainly the clouds around New York and the redwoods of California seem oblivious to such questions. By contrast, human beings indicate that they are “above” nature through their construction projects, scientific developments, and manufacturing of surplus goods. This is a key part of the “technocratic” paradigm Pope Francis analyzes in *Laudato Si*.23

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22 I must continually emphasize that using Sabbath to address these issues will not result in a perfect solution to the problem. A situation as complex as climate change cannot be handled with simplistic, one-dimensional approaches. My recommendation of Sabbath observance is predicated on the notion that Sabbath can be one helpful tool to use in this case, not the only tool.

23 As Pope Francis puts it, “this paradigm exalts the concept of a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object.” See Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’,* 106.
As Lynn White famously observed, the idea that human beings are above nature and are obliged to dominate it has deep, tenacious roots in the Christian tradition.\textsuperscript{24} Popular understandings of Genesis 1’s injunction to the primordial couple to “fill the earth and subdue it” often confirm this anthropocentric/dominant anthropology. By placing human beings in a separate category from nature, the stage is set for an oppressive relationship. This imperative within the creation story has often been used as a pretext for human oppression of nature, although this is hardly the only or most straightforward reading of what “fill and subdue” might mean, as several scholars have pointed out.\textsuperscript{25}

Nevertheless, it is fascinating that the first creation narrative ends with God keeping a Sabbath. This suggests that Sabbath could fulfill a key role in changing conceptions of human identity, and thus impacting the paradigm that has lead to earth’s oppression. We can see this impact first from the Biblical angles discussed in chapter 1.


\textsuperscript{25} Most persuasive among these scholars could be Richard Bauckham, who points out that the command to fill the earth and subdue it is not an imperative that sets human beings apart from nature, but is part of humanity in which humans are similar to animals: “When humans obey the command to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the Earth and to subdue it, they are not imitating God in a unique way but behaving like other species. All species use their environment and, though agriculture is unique to humans, it can be seen as a peculiarly human extension of the right of all animals to use their environment to live and to flourish.” See Richard Bauckham, \textit{The Bible and Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation} (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 19. On the idea that “filling and subduing” do not justify coercive control see also Douglas John Hall, \textit{Imaging God: Dominion as Stewardship} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); Norman C. Habel, “Is the Wild Ox Willing to Serve You? Challenging the Mandate to Dominate,” in \textit{The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions}, ed. Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 179-189; and Peter Harrison, “Having Dominion: Genesis and the Mastery of Nature,” in \textit{Environmental Stewardship: Critical Perspectives, Past and Present}, ed. R.J. Berry (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 17-31.
Biblical Approaches to Inoperative Identity

As we observed in our analysis of Moltmann’s and Heschel’s readings of Sabbath traditions, there is an anthropology latent in Jewish and Christian Sabbath texts. This is evident in the fact that the Jewish and Christian Scriptures do not simply mandate Sabbath without explanation. The Sabbath command in Exodus 20:8-11 points backward to the creation story as its rationale. This creation story leaves us with an image of God and human beings resting together in a state of mutual respect.

What does this mean for human identity vis-à-vis nature? Here Moltmann’s emphasis on humanity as *imago Dei* becomes paramount. Often the idea of the *imago Dei* can be portrayed as an identity marker of separation. The animals and plants, for example are not made in the image of God, but humans are. This grounds humanity’s right to rule over the earth. But if human beings exist as images of a Sabbath-keeping God, this relationship is much more complicated than it initially appears. Through the Sabbath, God’s relationship to earth does not feature constant production and development, but a state of letting be. Therefore, the Sabbath keeping of humans must take a parallel form. By resting on the Sabbath, human beings adopt the identity of God in relation to the world. Their being in the world mirrors God’s being. As Moltmann puts it, “His (God’s) works express God’s will, but the Sabbath manifests his Being.”

As we saw in chapter 1, Moltmann uses this view of God to provide hints at an anthropology in which human beings do not form their identities through activity in nature, but through a type of inoperativity that blends with human action in the world, providing it with a

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telos or self-fulfilling goal. In this anthropological framework, human beings display their purpose in the world by resting with God. As described in chapter 1, this does not mean that humans ought to do nothing, but that their activity ought to be pervaded with rest as its goal and criterion for meaning. For Moltmann, this leads to a direct political ethics of labor in which work does not create human identity but emerges from it.

Heschel reinforces this same idea with his interpretation of the Jewish perspective of Sabbath as a counter to spatial covetousness. He argues that “Judaism tries to foster the vision of life as a pilgrimage to the seventh day; the longing for the Sabbath all days of the week which is a form of longing for the eternal Sabbath all the days of our lives. It seeks to displace the coveting of things in space for coveting the things in time, teaching man to covet the seventh day all days of the week.” This perspective moves the locus of human identity from the conquest of things to a form of existence for its own sake—a restful being with God. Heschel draws on Jewish textual traditions that personify this rest as a “queen”—a sovereign figure who arrives in a distinctly non-imperial way. For Heschel, this translates into a politics of spatial “letting be,” changing the anthropology that underlies racism and economic mismanagement.

What would be the potential outcome of this type of Sabbatical thinking for the current ecological crisis? Moltmann and Heschel’s work suggests that Sabbath keeping could counteract the tendency to identify human beings with the effects they produce in nature. Industrial culture and the economy it produces mirror the identity that human beings create for themselves. If we are what we do, it becomes imperative for human beings to do more and more to alter our world

27 Heschel, The Sabbath, 90.
to suit our desires. Rest, as the biblical traditions depict it, is the fundamental antithesis of this trajectory. By purposefully resting (and not resting merely to prepare the way for more work), Sabbath-keepers articulate a view of human identity that slows the perpetual motion-machine of the modern western world. For this reason, if westerners adopted a biblical-Sabbath anthropology, the identity framework that founds the climate change problem would be undercut.

This transformation of identity on a biblical Sabbath model would also alter the way the image of God is understood in documents such as the Cornwall Declaration. As noted above, the authors of this document often use the biblical language of human “dominion” to justify a fundamental human need to produce value in the world. In this approach, to “fill the earth” through production is the practical application of being in the divine image. What this approach easily forgets is that the God of the Genesis story is portrayed as culminating the creative project with Sabbath rest, indicating—as Moltmann and Heschel argue—that God’s way of being in the world is characterized by Sabbath. God does not dwell with creation as a productive force, but as the power of letting be. Because human beings should strive to display the divine image, they should imitate God’s restful coexistence with nature.

This biblical understanding of human identity would also change the way we view the standard of human progress. If we define ourselves as actors and producers, we logically come closer to our ideal the more we act and produce. “Progress” toward the human ideal then means endlessly increasing activity. But if, as Moltmann and Heschel argue, God’s being with the earth must be understood sabbatically, the ideal of human progress would be realized not by doing more, but by doing things differently. In other words, ethics based on this anthropology would have us ask ourselves, “Does X (course of action) lead to greater rest or capacity for rest?” This
would dramatically change the common western assumption that every opportunity for economic development is necessarily a boon.

Understood this way, Sabbath would also point western culture toward a re-evaluation of material “needs.” It has been pointed out that if everyone on earth attempted to use as many resources as residents of the United States do, earth’s resources would be forthrightly depleted. The problem is that developed economies such as that of the United States view constantly increasing production as a “need.” (If there is any doubt about this, consider what would happen if a U.S. politician running for office were to say that “our economy is growing fast enough.”) This political problem is built on a perspective of human identity that Sabbath, understood through the biblical lens of Moltmann and Heschel, could help to change.

**Philosophical Approaches to Inoperative Identity**

The philosophy of inoperativity articulated by Lacoste and Agamben also addresses the ecological problem of human identity. Although Lacoste examines the ritual of the night vigil rather than Sabbath, his phenomenology suggests that being inoperative before God expresses a different vision of the human person’s role in the world. As we have seen, the individual who keeps the night vigil “does nothing” and yet in doing so exists in a reciprocal relationship to the Absolute. The absolute is inoperative, and those who enter into liturgy emerge inoperative as well, for liturgy is not a circumscribed zone of human life, but integral to being human. Lacoste thus helps us envision a “Sabbatical end of history” in which the identity recognition of master

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28 According to the official statistics of the University of Michigan’s Center for Sustainable Systems, the United States in 2018 contained about 5% of the world’s population, and used 17% of the world’s energy. Contrast this with China, which in the same time period comprised 19% of the world’s population and used 22% of the world’s energy. See University of Michigan Center for Sustainable Systems, “U.S. Environmental Footprint,” css.umich.edu/factsheets/us-environmental-footprint-factsheet.
and slave—self-oriented *thmos*—is achieved not through relentless competition, but conjoined inoperative worship.

Agamben’s philosophy leads to a similar identity framework, approached from the binary perspective of *zoe* and *bios*. Against standard political theories that seek to define how societies should structure *bios* life and exclude *zoe*, Agamben grasps for a way to suspend these categories, or to express a human identity on the threshold between them. The resulting anthropology would characterize human beings with a type of passivity before nature. The world of humans and the world of nature would dwell in a space of non-differentiation. Perhaps the best image for capturing this type of existence is Sabbath.

From the perspective of Lacoste’s and Agamben’s depictions of inoperativity, a ritual such as Sabbath would suggest that human beings need not aspire to an absolute identity built around action. Their key insight is that humanity can fully “be itself” without relying on functional operations as a means of preserving the category of the human. This is crucial, because in the western world, reversing climate change may require doing what—under a production oriented paradigm of human identity—are fundamentally “anti-human” or even “inhumane” measures. This is why voters are unlikely to approve of policies that could slow the economy in order to reduce carbon emissions. Cynics might point to greed and short-sightedness as explanations for this democratic phenomenon—and they would be partially right—but there is also an identity issue lurking here. Human beings strive to achieve Absolute being through constant activity in the world. They desire to separate themselves from nature in order to exist as *bios* life. Asking them to desist from the activities that enable these identities can be nearly unthinkable.
This is where a ritual such as Sabbath becomes important. Sabbath could enable human beings to exist together with an inoperative identity. In other words, by keeping Sabbath together, human beings could create an identity that suspends the categories of master and slave, or *zoe* and *bios*. Sabbath would direct human beings back to materiality in fresh ways. As Sigve Tonstad observes from the perspective of Christian church history, “disparagement of the Sabbath, as in the writings of Origen, went hand in hand with repudiation of the body and neglect of the Earth.”²⁹ Earth-connectedness and Sabbath are closely tied together, because the latter provides the identity formation which enables the former.

The phenomenon of vehicle-driving provides a vivid example of how identity and action could be altered by Sabbath. In many parts of the Western world—especially the United States—driving a car is one of the central ways in which human beings establish their identity. This goes beyond the simple status question of what kind of car one drives. By driving to work, human beings increase their sense of a separate identity from nature and from lower life forms (those unfortunate human beings who do not work or must take public transportation to work). In some cases, longer and more expensive commutes indicate a more important identity, such as in cases where one owns a home far out in the suburbs and works in the metropolitan center. In these contexts, to drive is human.

Against this backdrop, consider the sabbatarian practice of not driving cars (most commonly followed by orthodox Jewish communities). Of course, if widely practiced, such a ritual would reduce carbon emissions significantly. At a deeper level, the action would suggest that Sabbath is a day on which we refrain from exercising difference over the earth. By walking

wherever we need to go, we would signal a type of passivity, akin to Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to.” Not only would this directly slow climate change, it would also help develop a Sabbatical mindset that questions the necessity of a separate identity vis-à-vis nature, the framework that created the problem in the first place.

**Practical Approaches to Inoperative Identity**

Although Kook and Goizueta do not seem to directly analyze a paradigm of human identity, we do find in their approach a practical perspective on how inoperativity could inform such a paradigm. In the case of *shmita*, Kook emphasized that the purpose of the ritual was to allow the “soul” of the nation to display its divine qualities: “On the *shmita*, our inner spirit may be revealed as it truly is,” Kook said. The purpose of the practice was thus to display a *shmita*-people, whose identity was marked by rest-giving and fellowship. This was why the partial suspension of *shmita* through the *heter mekhira* was so important. The ritual needed to be used to create a society of rest-giving and a sovereignty of “letting be,” and in order to fulfill those goals, the ritual needed to be capable of inoperativity in itself.

Goizueta formulates his approach to identity from a much different angle. Rather than examining inoperative ritual as a means to construct a particular political result, Goizueta’s method finds a human identity *within* the ritual. Recall that for Goizueta, “The fiesta is, at the same time, play and work.” In other words, fiesta *is* a human identity, lived in a subjunctive attitude toward a just world. The rituals of fiesta accomplish nothing, but in doing so they fulfill

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31 Goizueta, “Fiesta,” 91.
their purpose of allowing human beings to flourish. Inoperative ritual, in Goizueta’s paradigm, is a way to view human joy in existence as an intrinsic end, one that requires no external accomplishment for its own validation.

This type of inoperative praxis—manifested in fiesta or Sabbath—is creates a different approach to human identity than found in either capitalism or socialism. Goizueta agrees with Marx that the rituals of modern capitalism alienate human beings by instrumentalizing them, but he also points out that Marx’s solution falls into the same trap: “What Marx—like all modernity—failed to appreciate is the ambiguity inherent in any notion of human praxis that defines it in terms of production, even if what is being produced is ‘the just person’ or ‘the just society.’”

The type of praxis Goizueta calls for—and finds in Latina/o communities—is a genuinely “aesthetic” praxis, characterized by communal indwelling or accompaniment, with no end outside itself. To recall Goizueta’s analogy we explored in chapter 3, this is the difference between building a house (poiesis) and making a home (praxis). The latter celebrates life and the home environment not as a means to further development or conquest, but simply as inherent goodness. Rituals focused on this type of life are the only kind that can avoid reducing human identity to productivity—the very conceptual framework that has created the climate problem.

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33 Goizueta’s recommendation of totally inoperative ritual (“aesthetic praxis”) may therefore point to a third political route between the horns of the capitalism vs. socialism debate in ecology. If Goizueta is right, and both capitalism and socialism structure human identity as productivity, simply replacing a vicious capitalist economy with a socialist one will not provide a long term solution to our ecological crisis. What is needed instead, according to Goizueta, is a type of popular religious praxis oriented toward “the practical, performative, and participatory affirmation of community as the foundation of all human activity.” See Goizueta, “Rediscovering Praxis,” 64. Like fiesta, Sabbath also performs this role.
Taken together, Kook’s and Goizueta’s perspectives on inoperativity suggest that a cohesive approach to human identity in response to climate change must utilize practices that improve the world (Kook’s concern), but do so by being intrinsic ends (Goizueta’s concern). In other words, we must use particular rituals to address climate change, but we must not make this ecological goal something external to the ritual. The ritual must be a way of being on earth, not simply a tool or gimmick for fixing a problem. The climate problem requires solutions that arise from the depths of everyday human life. We must actively change destructive political structures by living a different kind of politics.

The practical benefit of a weekly Sabbath as a ritual for addressing climate change is precisely that it is a ritual that blends with human life. Because it occurs every seven days, Sabbath has a unique capacity to influence the way we live our lives on the other days. Sabbath is also a ritual that points toward the domestic sphere, re-centering human attention on those elements of life that are seemingly unrelated to industry and therefore forgotten by the modern production-identity paradigm. This domestic focus is something Sabbath holds in common with Latina/o popular religious rituals, which are also centered on the home, as Miguel Díaz observes. By celebrating the common, domestic Sabbath as the highest ideal of human life, one

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34 Commenting on Goizueta’s attempt to formulate a theory of praxis that is truly inoperative, Diaz points out that “the modern reductionistic understanding of the human person as an agent of history (homo faber) and the identification of such agency with public places, leaves little room for the home. Home is the place of feeling, aesthetics, and empathic love, the public is the place of production and accomplishment.” See Díaz, On Being Human, 37. Díaz shows how Latina/o popular religion changes the locus of human identity from the purely productive sphere to the domestic sphere, creating empowering implications for marginalized persons such as women, the elderly, and others. I would add that inoperative practices such as Sabbath have a similar effect, and that a framework of home-oriented identity could be essential for addressing our ecological crisis. The type of exploitative economic behavior that continues to ravage our planet emerges precisely because we fail to see human beings as residents of a home (earth), instead viewing them as players on a vicious, competitive battlefield. We will need an identity change in order to see earth as “our common home” as the English subtitle of Pope Francis’ Laudato Si’ calls for.
acquires a new identity—that of a Sabbath-keeper or sabbatarian, which is a way of saying “one who lets be.” This identity change signals an enormous difference between keeping a Sabbath and simply taking time off from work in a casual way. The latter might be an eco-friendly thing to do, but it signals no direct intention to allow freedom to the earth. Vacations and days at home are largely amoral practices, in that they make no direct statement about the goodness or badness of any given lifestyle or identity. Sabbath-keeping, on the other hand, is a straightforward claim that doing nothing can be good, that ceaseless production is not an absolute human ideal.

The weekly Sabbath may thus be “life in the subjunctive,” as Goizueta might put it. It is a practice aimed at a particular goal (changing the “soul” of a people, to use Kook’s language), but that is because it makes a claim about the intrinsic value of the kind of life it embodies. In the context of climate change, this type of identity-transforming ritual is essential, because moral exhortations alone are unlikely to be effective in changing entrenched patterns of behavior. Climate activism often resorts to fervent appeals for action—or work—to address the impending catastrophe. Such appeals are noble and understandable. However, they remain trapped in an anthropological framework in which the human being is defined by labor or production. Under this paradigm, it will be impossible to effectively urge human beings to stop the constant exploitation of Earth’s resources. What we need now is a celebration of truly “aesthetic” praxis—a genuine “accompaniment” of our planet. For centuries Western culture has viewed the planet as a house that needs building through productive mechanisms of control. Now we need to transition toward viewing it as a home for dwelling. Given the severity of the problem—many scientists are convinced it is already too late to avert massive disasters—we need now more than
ever to find the *t'shuvah* Kook longed for, accomplished through inoperative rituals that alter our innermost being.

Sabbath and Authority

The climate change problem is connected to the issue of authority in several ways. At one level, there is the question of human authority over nature. Like all creatures, human beings exercise some level of control over natural processes. Aside from a few highly romantic naturalists, most people agree that human beings must “govern” nature to some extent.

Furthermore, most agree that humans should manage nature in a non-exploitative way. Even the authors of the Cornwall Declaration use words such as “care” and “stewardship” to describe their ideal human-nature relationship. Clearly, though, such noble language does not go very far in describing the extent of human authority over the earth. At what point should we curb our impulse to grab more power over nature?

Another aspect of the authority problem is human-to-human authority. It seems hard to address climate change without talking about coercion in some form or another. Part of the reason certain emissions-reduction agreements have failed to gain the acquiescence of important countries such as the United States is that there is no one to leverage force strong enough to make these nations join and keep the agreements.  

Within individual nations, coercive power seems necessary to keep corporations and individuals compliant with restrictions. The problem of curbing climate change has led some to argue that only a revival of some form of socialism

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can lead to success. Such speculations cause others to fear the potential of a planned economy with no place for market freedom.

The problem of authority—its limits, ideal qualities, and methods of enforcement—is too broad to adequately address here. My goal is to show instead how Sabbatical inoperativity, understood in the frameworks developed in the previous three chapters, can point toward a type of human authority that could be helpful.

**Biblical Approaches to Inoperative Authority**

From the perspective of traditional Christian and Jewish texts, Sabbath is deeply connected to sovereignty. The first Genesis creation story shows God resting after the completion of creation, indicating that rest is an integral part of God’s being. If, in Christian and Jewish theologies, God is sovereign, God is such as one who rests. As noted above, this idea has enormous implications for understanding human identity in the world, because human beings are intended to bear the image of God, being in the world as God is. Correspondingly, it carries great weight for a concept of human authority. If human beings have authority over creation, this authority must be enacted in a “Sabbatical” manner.

But what does that mean? Here it is helpful to recall Moltmann’s understanding of work, analyzed in chapter 1. For Moltmann, work and Sabbath must be understood in the light of each other. Moreover, the relationship between them is teleological. Work exists for the purpose of

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36 Naomi Klein observes that “there is a clear and compelling relationship between public ownership and the ability of communities to get off dirty energy. Many of the countries with the highest commitments to renewable energy are ones that have managed to keep large parts of their electricity sectors in public (and often local) hands, including the Netherlands, Austria, and Norway” (Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 99). Antipathy toward socialism is a major impetus behind the climate change denier movement, as observed by Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2010), 5, 25-26. See also Riley E. Dunlap and Aaron M. McCright, “Organized Climate Change Denial,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Climate Change and Society*, ed. John S. Dryzek, Richard B. Norgaard, and David Schlosberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 144-160.
Sabbath. Moltmann asserts that “work is thus meaningful not because it alone provides the meaning of life, but precisely because it is limited by the goal of rest and joy in existence. The Sabbath does not simply interrupt work. Rather, work is understood and defined through the Sabbath.” As we saw in chapter 1, Moltmann deduces from this axiom that work must always be exercised for the purpose of liberation. It follows from this that the work of governing the earth must also be carried in the same way.

Heschel’s observations on the sovereignty of Sabbath follow a similar trajectory, though—as we saw—Heschel also draws on additional Jewish Sabbath traditions. Like Moltmann, Heschel depicts the days of the week as existing for the purpose of Sabbath, thus making all human activity conducted on those days point toward Sabbath as its ultimate fulfillment. Heschel adds imagery from Jewish tradition depicting Sabbath in starkly personal and political terms: “The distinction of the Sabbath is reflected in the twin meanings of the phrase kabbalat Shabbat which means to accept the sovereignty as well as to welcome the presence of the day. The Sabbath is a queen as well as a bride.” As argued in chapter 1, this metaphor of Sabbath as queen and bride indicates accepting Sabbath as a model for private and public existence. As Heschel argues, to live in the Sabbath is to live for the sake of time, rather than merely for space. To exert sovereignty in a Sabbatical way is therefore to reject the spatial covetousness that Sabbath, in Heschel’s understanding, is so firmly against. Sabbatical authority would be a liberating authority that “lets” space be.

37 Moltmann, On Human Dignity, 41
38 Heschel, The Sabbath, 62.
How would such an authority work in the context of climate change? One way to understand such authority was briefly introduced in the discussion of Jesus’ healings in chapter 1. According to Moltmann, Jesus celebrated the meaning of Sabbath in his controversial Sabbath healings. Moltmann does not elaborate in great detail on the significance of these healings, but they are important for understanding what Sabbatical authority might look like.

To understand why, one must understand the meaning of “healing” in the Gospels. Of course, this is a topic which is much too large to address in full here. Certainly there are numerous facets to the healings of Jesus. However, some key scholarship on the subject of healing is particularly useful. To illuminate what Jesus was doing through his miracles, scholars sometimes make a key distinction between disease and illness, a conceptual binary first formulated by Arthur Kleinmann. Diseases are bodily malfunctions that impair physical health, resulting from pathogens, chemical imbalances, or toxins. Modern medicine, as a rule, attempts to cure diseases. Illnesses are sharply different, even though they are closely related. An illness is

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39 For an overview of the miracles that addresses the numerous facets of the healings see Jeffrey John, *The Meaning in the Miracle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).


41 According to Kleinmann, “Disease refers to a malfunctioning of biological and/or psychological processes, while the term illness refers to the psychological experience and meaning of perceived disease. Illness includes secondary personal and social responses to a primary malfunctioning (disease) in the individual’s physiological or psychological status.” See Arthur Kleinmann, *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture: An Exploration of the Borderland between Anthropology, Medicine and Psychiatry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 172.
a broader form of social or political toxicity that often gives rise to disease. You cannot cure an illness with a drug or surgical procedure. Illnesses can only be cured by changing a person’s social standing or personal circumstances—through an act of social authority.

According to scholars such as Pilch and Crossan, Jesus’ healing miracles addressed illness, not disease. Of course, this could be a misleading distinction, because the two categories feed into each other. But thinking with these two categories is helpful because it is necessary to see the broader social implications of Jesus’ healings. It appears that Jesus performed some type of symbolic actions which effectively changed the social status of the persons suffering from illnesses. In other words, healing was an authoritative act that changed the social status of the persons Jesus encountered. For example, by touching people with skin diseases or women with menstrual disorders, Jesus was exercising a power to transform their socially-imposed lack of dignity.42

By performing these healings on the Sabbath, as Moltmann observes, Jesus was indicating that Sabbath is a day of healing, and that the authority of Sabbath exists for the purpose of healing. Since healing was not merely the removal of disease but more properly a social-structural transformation, this would indicate that the authority of Sabbath works to restore health by placing human beings and nature in dignified relationships to each other.

In the context of ecology, the authority of Sabbath would consequently work to “heal” the earth by restoring its dignity, as well as that of those who live on it (especially those

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42 This aspect of the healing stories is noted by Wendy Cotter, especially with regard to the story of the blind beggar Bar-Timaeus and the various stories of leper-healing. See Wendy Cotter, *The Christ of the Miracle Stories: Portrait through Encounter* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 19-75.
marginalized persons who are often the first victims of ecological crises). In answer to the question, “how much authority do human beings have over the earth?” the answer would be, “that authority which is necessary to restore and preserve the dignity of the earth.” In other words, just as Jesus did not use his Sabbatical authority to subjugate those beneath him, human beings who live sabbatically will not seek to subjugate the earth, but will respect its dignity and independence.

The idea of authority-as-healing directly challenges the interpretation of human dominion offered in the Cornwall Declaration. Although the authors use the language of “stewardship” to describe human sovereignty over nature, this concept implies the management of private property, used for the benefit of the owners. “We aspire to a world in which the relationships between stewardship and private property are fully appreciated, allowing people’s natural incentive to care for their own property to reduce the need for collective ownership and control of resources and enterprises,” the authors assert. Here, authority functions in a relationship between a user (humanity) and the thing used (the earth). Much like the benevolent paternalism of some slave-masters over their slaves, there is an element of “caring” here, but it is caring for the purpose of extraction of benefits.

A Sabbatical approach to authority is much different. As understood by the Jewish and Christian traditions Heschel and Moltmann draw from, and as articulated through image of healing, such authority must work to restore the inherent dignity, well-being, and independence

of earth. On this basis, we should approach climate change with a healing mindset, treating the planet with the same sovereignty Jesus used in healing lepers and demon-possessed persons.

On the same note, this approach mandates that human-to-human authority should be carried out with a similar approach to dignity and freedom. This means that efforts to address climate change should consider how those most threatened by the crisis can be aided. Climate change policies should be aimed at increasing the freedom of these marginalized persons. This will mean reducing the freedom of those who exploit the environment, but only insofar as is necessary to create a situation of “letting be” between humans and nature.\(^44\) In the final, concluding chapter, I will suggest ways in which a Sabbath that illustrates this healing authority could function.

**Philosophical Approaches to Inoperative Authority**

The concept of inoperativity developed in chapter 2 adds important dimensions to a theory of human authority. As we saw, Lacoste’s phenomenology of worship depicts human beings in an inoperative relationship to the Absolute. If liturgy is the model for how the Absolute is sovereign over the worshipper, Lacoste envisions a type of sovereignty characterized by openness between them. Worship accomplishes nothing, indicating that the deity worshipped transcends the boundaries of human action. For this reason in liturgy, a person “refuses to participate in the dialectics that make up history.”\(^45\) Master and slave, in Lacoste’s framework, may rest together, pointing to a Sabbatical kind of existence in which hierarchy subverts itself.

\(^{44}\) This type of Sabbatical “force” would be analogous to Civil Rights legislation in the US, which created freedom for racial minorities, but only by reducing the freedom of those who would seek to operate on racist principles.

\(^{45}\) Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 54.
Agamben develops this approach in a similar yet different way, focusing on the “biopolitical machine” which functions through a hierarchical separation between zoe and bios. Sovereign authority, for Agamben, declares a distinction between these forms of life and preserves the domination of one over the other. The type of inoperativity Agamben characterizes as “messianic” would suspend these categories, creating a “division of the division.” It would create a space for “whatever” being—ontology of the human and the natural that would not collapse them together, but would not insist on the strict classifications that classical western theological approaches have long cherished. Human authority would no longer base itself on the enforcement of divisions. Using Agamben’s work, I have argued that Sabbath could create a space for this imagery of the human to be realized.

Building on the approaches of Lacoste and Agamben, it seems that a Sabbath could create dramatic alterations in the entire debate over human authority in relation to climate change. The reason for this is that Lacoste and Agamben challenge the conceptual field in which this debate is carried out. To see why this is the case, consider once again the Cornwall Declaration. The authors of the document repeatedly use the preposition “over” to describe the relationships between God, humans, and the earth. The document’s summary statement of beliefs begins by asserting the following: “1. God, the Creator of all things, rules over all and deserves our worship and adoration.” At first glance, this theological and liturgical assertion seems to fit oddly in the flow of the document. What does “worship and adoration” of God who is “over all” have to do with ecological policies?

46 The Cornwall Declaration, belief 1.
The answer quickly becomes apparent when we read the next few lines, one of which begins, “Men and women were created in the image of God, given a privileged place among creatures, and commanded to exercise stewardship over the earth.” Once again, notice the key preposition “over.” The document’s argumentation appeals to a hierarchy of being, in which God rules over humans who exist for God’s glory, and humans rule over nature. Nature is to humans as humans are to God. Authority, in this scheme, is a function of these strict categories, which are preserved through the mechanism of glory.

What happens if these categories are rendered inoperative through a “messianic” Sabbath? Such a time would challenge the hierarchical designations of “divine,” “human,” and “natural.” As tools of language, these designations would still exist. Humans would not become indistinguishable from frogs. What would change is the significance of these designations for authoritative governance. Frogs would not exist for the glory or utility of humans. The connection between them would be a space of “letting be.” In Agamben’s terms, there would be “intimacy without relation.”

This philosophical Sabbath might sound like it would result in an apathetic approach to nature, but the result could be a greater appreciation for the natural world. This type of appreciation would be different from the typical approach of romantic “nature appreciation,” which tends to posit nature as a separate, discrete object, living out an identity beneath human

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47 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 236.

48 A small scale study of individuals asked to take a “technology Sabbath” by disconnecting themselves from phones and internet during a twenty-four hour period revealed that this Sabbath had the potential to increase a feeling of “connectedness” to earth. See Lisa Naas Cook, “Restoring a Rhythm of Sacred Rest in a 24/7 World: An Exploration of Technology Sabbath and Connection to the Earth Community,” *The International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society* 5, no. 4 (2015): 17-27.
beings. We confine nature to parks and forest preserves, separating our “natural” worlds from our properly “human” worlds. The inoperative Sabbatical mindset, by contrast, would suspend the categorization. This would create a perspective about nature that creates a different kind of “closeness” or authoritative nexus between the human and the natural.

To give a personal illustration of this, when I moved from rural Michigan to Chicago, I took it for granted that I was leaving “nature” behind to move to the city. But, as I currently sit looking out the window at my surrounding urban landscape, I realize that nature is not separable from the human. The greenhouse gasses emitted in Chicago will not stay in Chicago. The city’s atmosphere is the world’s atmosphere. Human beings cannot claim separate spaces that do not impact nature, and then engage in biopolitics from a distant vantage point. Sharon Delgado calls this orientation shift “awakening to who we are,” and claims it is a crucial precursor to any ecological change.

Notice, it is significant that I did not come to this realization until I looked out my window. That is to say, I did not come to terms with my overarching position of unity with nature until I was inoperative. Only in a time of passivity before the world could the carefully-constructed classification system monitored by biopolitical management dissolve. Without a

49 McFague calls this an “inner/outer” split: “We do not think, deep down, that we are really and truly interrelated and interdependent with all other life-forms and that their health determines our own” (McFague, Blessed Are the Consumers, 23).


51 This suggests that Sabbath is a type of contemplation leading directly to action (political critique of power structures). The nexus of contemplation with critiques of hierarchical power has been explored by mystical theologians, especially Richard Rohr, who argues that “being centered in God” through contemplation provides the only accurate awareness of power dynamics. See Richard Rohr, “Mending the Breach: Inner and Outer Worlds,” in Grace in Action, ed. Terry Carney and Christina Spahn (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 182-187. Another thinker who directly linked contemplative awareness of inoperativity to a critique of contemporary political systems was
Sabbath, the pace of frenetic human activity encourages a latently top-down hierarchical perspective of authority over nature.

This is true even for those whose occupations or lifestyles put them in direct contact with the natural world. For example, many people, frustrated by life in artificial urban landscapes, relocate out of the city into rural areas, seeking greater “closeness” with nature. Such efforts, admirable as they sound, often entail modifications to the natural world that may be more damaging to the earth than actions carried out by typical urban dwellers. An American in a rural home might use larger amounts of fuel to heat a larger living space, or drive longer distances in a larger vehicle for commuting. The constant work necessary to maintain a rural life may paradoxically cause a person to authoritatively dominate nature, rather than appreciate it.

This suggests that the solution to the cold-hearted attitude displayed by human beings toward nature—a sinister mindset easily blamed for climate change—might not be countered simply by increasing romantic appreciation of nature, but rather through the openness of Sabbath.\(^52\)

Thomas Merton, who castigated the outlandish pace of modern capitalist life for its emphasis on use of persons, even in recreational contexts: “Why then aren’t we happy? Because of our servility. The whole celebration is empty because it is ‘useful’. We have not yet rediscovered the primary usefulness of the useless . . . Yes, we still try with all our might to believe in joy, since Madison Avenue tells us to. But we know that Madison Avenue itself is not convinced. The fruit of our servility is the despair that no one can admit—unless of course he is a monk or a beatnik.” See Thomas Merton, *Confessions of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 282-3.

\(^52\) Fritjof Capra and David Steindl-Rast point out the importance of this observation, emphasizing that nature cannot be appreciated only from the intellectualized, distant vantage point, which has a tendency to reinforce the human/nature distinction. Rather, what we need is what Agamben’s language might call a “threshold” experience: “You realize that your clean concept, your clean observation, is impoverished in that it artificially abstracts you from the complicated truth of your being caught in a web of interconnections.” See Fritjof Capra and David Steindl-Rast, *Belonging to the Universe: Explorations on the Frontiers of Science and Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1992), 160.
Practical Approaches to Inoperative Authority

As the most cursory observation of political life will show, authority functions through rituals. Particularly in religious contexts, rituals serve to magnify the authority of the deity and remind worshippers of their subservient place before the deity. (This is in part why Lacoste’s analysis of the inoperativity at the heart of liturgy is so groundbreaking.) As shown above with reference to Agamben’s work, a ritual that commands inoperativity may be a further instance of sovereign authority, or it may be “messianic” event—a ritual that brings about a suspension of sovereign authority.

As shown in chapter 3, Rav Kook and Roberto Goizueta represent two different but complimentary approaches to the second type of inoperativity. Kook’s understanding of the authority of shmita gives a practical example of an authority structure that can suspend itself. The heter mekhira was not a means of stifling shmita, but of bringing it to its ultimate fulfillment by making space for the flourishing of the people and the land. Through its suspension, shmita would reveal that its authority did not exist for itself, but for the sake of “use.” According to Kook, using the authority structure in this way would culminate in a mystical transformation of the soul of the nation. By advocating for the heter mekhira, Kook gave an illustration of the early Jewish and Christian idea that “the Sabbath was made for human beings, not human beings for the Sabbath.” Ritual authority always has an extrinsic purpose.

Goizueta offers a much different perspective, which at first seems to contradict Kook’s. For Goizueta, ritual is an end in itself. One does not “use” a fiesta to make the world a better place. Of course, as argued in chapter 3, there is no contradiction here. Goizueta cautions against the use of a ritual to create change only in order to preserve the inherent inoperativity of the
ritual. A ritual functions by allowing the participant to simply experience the new world of justice and peace that is being created. For this reason, the authoritative power of the ritual does not operate to accomplish an external purpose (even though, at a larger level, it does, because it restructures human being in the world).

Combining the insights of Kook and Goizueta, one could argue that the authority of inoperative rituals such as Sabbath for addressing climate change works through an affirmation of the intrinsic value of a certain kind of life. This type of ritual would draw together the main ideas we have seen in the biblical traditions and philosophical analyses examined above. A sabbatical authority would create ways of being in the world that are healing and restorative precisely by appreciating the intrinsic value of people and the earth—not seeing it as a means to something else that is valuable for human beings. Such an authority structure would use neither human beings nor nature, and precisely by doing so it could practically be “used” to create a more just, sabbatical world.

The weekly Sabbath is the ideal ritual for addressing the authority problem in ecology because it practically suspends the means-end structure of most forms of authority. Sabbath, as a space for letting things be, imposes only that type of authority that is necessary for preserving the inoperativity of everyone (and everything) involved. One does not keep a Sabbath “for” the Earth, as if Sabbath were simply a means to ecological prosperity. At the same time, however, it would not be Sabbatical to deny the earth the capacity to have a Sabbath. In this way, Sabbath challenges us to find a type of life in which all can rest, without coercion or force.

A key factor in creating this Sabbatical approach to climate change is the importance of community. This is a central feature of the type of inoperativity Kook and Goizueta develop, and
one without which no true Sabbath is possible. The reason Kook supported the *heter mekhira* was that it protected the viability of the community. The reason Goizueta argues that *fiesta* is an end in itself is that it arises in and through community. Without a communal context for inoperative rituals, the authority behind them can easily become distorted into a sovereign power over others. If I tell someone that he or she may not drive a car on a particular day, I impose my sovereign authority on that person. If the person cannot survive without driving on that day for economic reasons, my sovereign power puts that person in danger. If, however, we are part of a care-giving community with a common inoperative ritual, the authority of this ritual may take the form of a permission: You do not *need* to drive on a particular day, because it is not necessary. In other words, the community creates a form of life that enables earth-benefiting behavior, rather than prohibiting earth-harming behavior.

The creation of communities of this type is an important and highly overlooked contribution to efforts for combating climate change. In a largely individualistic society—such as the United States—habits of moral restraint are difficult to develop outside of communities in which those practices are workable.\(^{53}\) This is why moral exhortations about using less in order to halt climate change do not go far unless they are given in contexts where a community is present to help carry them out.

At the same time, communities themselves cannot be formed without shared rituals that enable them to live life together. This is a major part of Goizueta’s argument. Here a ritual such

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\(^{53}\) This is a key point of communitarian ethicists, who argue that without social structures for moral values, such values are largely irrelevant to human functioning. See, for example, Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), and more recently Jonathan R. Wilson, *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World: From After Virtue to a New Monasticism* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2010).
as Sabbath becomes pivotal, because it contains a form of life that may inherently oppose climate change, and it also helps to structure a community that (un)works together to accomplish the same goal. This is the same dynamic that motivated Kook to defend the heter mekhira. Ultimately, Kook wanted to see the land governed in a fully Sabbatical way, in which it would gain complete rest every seven years. But in order to make that happen, a community needed to flourish within it, and this required a “suspension of the suspension.” The authority of shmita could only work through community.

Along the same lines, an ecological Sabbath ritual needs community in order to realize itself. However, there is a benevolent, gracious circularity in this type of ritual. Sabbath can only be kept through communities, but Sabbath-keeping also draws communities together and holds them in place (through shared space, food, accountability, and so on). It thus contains an authority structure within itself. In this way, Sabbath mirrors the reality of divine grace in Christian tradition, which requires an active response by the human subject, but is itself also the source of that response. This is perhaps why the author of the book of Hebrews uses Sabbath as a model of “entering” God’s grace. Like Jesus’ healing acts, which “commanded” individuals to be made whole, Sabbath manifests an enabling authority. To borrow a phrase from Augustine, it “grants what it commands.”

Hebrews 4:9-11 reads: “Therefore, a Sabbath rest still remains for the people of God. And whoever enters into God’s rest, rests from his own works as God did from his. Therefore, let us strive to enter into that rest, so that no one may fall after the same example of disobedience.” Usually, “Sabbath rest” is understood as a metaphor for salvation in this passage. However, Erhard Gallos argues that an actual reference to Sabbath-keeping as a practice may be referred to as well. See Erhard Gallos, “Katapausis and Sabbatismos in Hebrews 4,” Ph.D. diss. Andrews University (2011).

Commenting on this famous theme, Stephen Duffy observes that “grace in Augustine’s theology does not merely teach us what must be done; it enables us to do it.” See Stephen J. Duffy, The Dynamics of Grace: Perspectives in Theological Anthropology (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 97. Duffy goes on to
At this point, a question still remains: Even if Sabbath is an authority of letting be that works to create healing through a new evaluation of humans and earth, does it nevertheless involve some type of coercion? Before concluding with a brief description of a climate-healing Sabbath based on these ideas, it is crucial to answer this question.

**Sabbath Politics and Coercion**

As mentioned above, it seems impossible to address the problem of climate change without some type of coercive politics. Human beings do not naturally stop using earth’s resources, and our near-sightedness about the climate problem only adds to our inherent cupidity. If, as argued above, Sabbath may be crucial in changing our views of human identity and authority, we might ask whether it must be used to force people to stop.

Clearly, as seen in chapter two, such a Sabbath would not fulfill the requirements of Agamben’s “messianic” Sabbath. It would constitute an act of sovereign power, leading not to genuine rest but to the tense peace of hegemonic control. The Sabbath rest that brings in a transformed soul may only be offered and freely chosen. That being said, there is a way in which I will argue it is possible for Sabbath to be understood as a politically-applicable command, coming from a sovereign power.

This sovereign enforcement of Sabbath is necessary in the following sense: we must view Sabbath as an absolute divine requirement. At first, this stipulation appears to contradict what was argued earlier—that Sabbath should not justify itself as an operative worship practice

argue that in Augustine’s thought, grace functions as a power that enables freedom. And this freedom, paradoxically, functions through a type of inoperativity: “Movement from velleity to true freedom (posse) is not attained by an assertive clenching of fists and a stiff upper lip, but by letting go. Vulnerability, powerlessness is at the heart of the power that is freedom.” (Duffy, *Dynamics of Grace*, 100).
directed to God. But there is a fruitful paradox here. It is true that Sabbath does nothing for God. At the same time, God needs and commands our Sabbath. The paradox emerges from the fact that a Sabbatical God needs and desires our freedom and the freedom of the earth. And without divine command, this freedom will not exist, because others will attempt to take it from us or from the earth.

We see this paradox in the story of the Exodus from Egypt, specifically in the ongoing debate of Moses with Pharaoh. As Walter Brueggemann points out, this narrative is the essential background for understanding Sabbath, which is why Brueggemann claims Sabbath must incorporate, or be viewed as, a form of resistance. According to the narrative, the Israelites “groaned under their bondage” working for Pharaoh, and God “heard . . . and God knew” (Exodus 2:23-25). The story establishes that God’s concern for Israel motivates God to seek their freedom. Yet, when Moses and Aaron speak to Pharaoh on God’s behalf, Moses’ argument is perplexing:

Afterwards Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Let my people go, that they may hold a feast for me in the wilderness.’ Pharaoh answered, ‘Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and I will not let Israel go.’ They replied, ‘The God of the Hebrews has come to meet us. Let us go a three days’ journey in the wilderness, that we may offer sacrifice to the LORD, our God, so that he does not strike us with the plague or the sword.’ The king of Egypt answered them, ‘Why, Moses and Aaron, do you make the people neglect their work? Off to your labors!’ Pharaoh continued, ‘Look how they are already more numerous than the people of the land, and yet you would give them rest from their labors!’

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56 Obviously, the connection is also made in Deuteronomy 5. Brueggemann emphasizes that the authority of the God of Sabbath is expressly contrasted with the Egypt experience. See Walter Brueggemann, Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 2-10.

57 This is a major feature of the Exodus narratives outlined by Sigve Tonstad, who calls them a “program of freedom.” See Sigve Tonstad, The Lost Meaning of the Seventh Day, 82.
Even though God’s purpose in sending Moses and Aaron is to free Israel from sovereign oppression, they do not make a humanitarian case for this cause. Instead, they confront Pharaoh by telling him that Israel has a strictly theonomous, or divinely-ordained obligation to cease working.\(^{58}\) Israel must hold a “feast” in the wilderness. The word for feast here (\textit{hagag}) is the same word used to describe the mandatory religious festivals such as the feast of unleavened bread, Pentecost or “the feast of harvest” (\textit{Shavuot}), and the feast of booths (\textit{Sukkoth}).\(^{59}\) These feasts were times of inoperativity, of rest.\(^{60}\) As the prophets noted, they had a humanitarian purpose, without which they would be worthless. However, Moses and Aaron do not specify this, even implying that God will punish them for failing to rest. Why?

One explanation is that Moses and Aaron are bluffing. Perhaps, as Nahum Sarna argues, this so-called “feast” is simply a cunning way to sneak out of Egypt, and claiming divine authorization for this “feast” gives weight to the argument.\(^{61}\) (Perhaps a good analogy for this would be the strategy of avoiding a troublesome social engagement such as an office party by erroneously claiming that one’s spouse would be unhappy if one attended.) There is some truth...

\(^{58}\) As Cornelis Houtman observes, “Moses and Aaron mean to say that they make the request only for religious reasons, that they are under enormous pressure and have no option but to ask Pharaoh for permission.” See Cornelis Houtman, \textit{Exodus}, vol. 1, Historical Commentary on the Old Testament (Kampen: Kok Publishing House, 1993), 466.

\(^{59}\) On these see Exodus 12:14, 23:16, 34:16, Deuteronomy 16:13, 31:10, and Leviticus 23:34. It is unclear what kind of festival Moses and Aaron are referring to in their command to Pharaoh.

\(^{60}\) As Leviticus 23 makes clear, there were different gradations of rest involved in the feasts. Sabbath and the day of atonement (\textit{yom kippur}) were days of “complete rest” in which no work whatsoever could be done. On other holy days, such as the first day of the feast of unleavened bread, no “heavy work” was to be done (Leviticus 23:8). The same was true of the fiftieth day of Pentecost (Leviticus 23:21).

\(^{61}\) Sarna concludes that “undoubtedly, the formula is a stratagem designed to outmaneuver the pharaoh’s intransigence, the only device available to a helpless people, wholly subject to a tyrant’s will.” See Nahum M. Sarna, \textit{Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel} (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), 55.
to this explanation. The overarching goal of the engagement with Pharaoh was not to merely take a religious vacation in the wilderness, but to actually escape from bondage. Nevertheless, what Moses and Aaron say regarding the feast in the wilderness is not false.62 Israel is called to celebrate festivals—but their feasting and their escape are one and the same. This is why the Sabbath becomes a permanent sign of Israel’s liberation. As Goizueta would likely point out, the Sabbath and the feasts were analogous to fiesta—not a means to liberation, but the reality of liberation itself.

Because God demands Israel’s relief from oppression, God demands a feast. The divine imperative is needed because without it Israel will stand alone against the domineering power of Pharaoh. By appealing to divine authority, Moses and Aaron change the dynamics of the dialogue. It is no longer the Israelites against Pharaoh; now, as Carol Meyers observes, “God and Pharaoh are in a power struggle.”63 If Moses and Aaron had said, “Our people are tired and need a break,” their case would have gone nowhere. As the passage shows, even with their appeal to divine authority Pharaoh still detects the ultimate aim and responds accordingly: “Why, Moses and Aaron, do you make the people neglect their work? . . . you would give them rest from their labors!” Pharaoh has no interest in relieving the Israelites—overwork is built into his economic system. Only the intervention of what Benjamin would call “divine violence”—a Sabbath of forced inoperativity—will counter his oppressive sovereignty.64

62 Even Sarna admits that “strictly speaking, the pretext that is given to the king is the truth, for earlier, in the encounter at the Burning Bush, God had told Moses that when He freed the people from Egypt they would worship God at that site” (Sarna, Exploring Exodus, 55).


64 Benjamin contrasts “mythical violence,” which preserves the power of law in a bloody way, with “divine violence, which is done for the sake of the living. The worker’s strike may be a form of this violence, for although it
For this reason, inoperativity can and should be a matter of divine command. The “pharaohs” of the modern world—the capitalist imperatives to ceaseless production and consumption—do not respond to private, personal resolutions. Saying, “I need rest” will not carry weight against a system that tells me what I need. In a heavily market-controlled, social media-driven society, human beings cannot step outside the matrix of operative processes at will. Even vacations become alternative means to further economic boons—as well as exhausting ways of personally fulfilling one’s production-oriented identity, while leaving an enormous carbon footprint. Only explicit reference to sovereign authority enables inoperative individuals to confront this system with a different form of life.

The primary way this happens is through community. Inoperativity that takes place only in individual spaces could succumb rapidly to market forces and the pressures of employers and competitive associates. This is why Sabbath should be practiced in a community that provides accountability and motivation. Sabbath-keeping communities are the means by which Sabbath “functions” politically, defending the rights of those persons denied inoperativity through Pharaoh-like forces. Such communities also offer a corrective to the wider world, challenging it with the liberative implications of Sabbath. By incarnating a divine imperative to *stop*, a Sabbath keeping community becomes, in Carl Raschke’s phrase, “a certain agency that has the force of God behind it.”

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community Raschke proposes, because his community is visibly “operative,” while this is a community that does nothing—or lets be. Nevertheless, the Sabbath-keeping community is clearly an “insurrectionary force” in the sense that it creates a break in the standard political framework.

In this sense, we may posit the necessity of a sovereign authority that tells Pharaoh-type oppressors to permit rest for human beings and the earth. This Sabbatical sovereignty is different from other kinds of sovereignty because instead of initiating a rupture in the political order for the sake of increased covetousness of space (Heschel), the Sabbatical sovereign opens potential for human beings and the earth to simply be. Any sovereign power who inhibits human flourishing through the command of a state of exception is thus not a Sabbatical sovereign. The types of authoritative commands issued from a Sabbatical sovereign must take the form of permissions—cessations of activity for the sake of letting people free.

How would this logic of sovereignty apply to the situation of climate change and the calls for authority needed to curb it? If inoperativity is necessary for halting the steady progression of global warming, a Sabbatical authority would look for ways to enable people to be free for rest. Forcing people to rest would not work. An effort to construct any type of “blue laws” shutting down businesses on certain days would only harm those businesses and the people working for them, as well as poorer people struggling to survive in neighborhoods where such businesses

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66 Raschke draws on an interpretation of Augustine’s *Civitas Dei* to argue for a type of church that constitutes itself as an alternative, “insurrectionary” force that interrupts the politics of the state. This community is represented by “the saints.” As he puts it, “We live at a time when the baton of political theology passes to the saints, the revolutionary saints, the Christian insurgents, the visible signs of the operative and indefensible force of God” (Raschke, *Force of God*, 169). Although Raschke denies that this mentality leads to any form of “triumphalism,” it is difficult to see how such an insurrectionary force will not lead to a mirror image of the state force it aims to interrupt.
operate. The inoperativity that would result would be a minor inconvenience to wealthy people, but would come at a cost to the most vulnerable.

By contrast, a Sabbatical authority would “let be” by focusing on first providing people with the means necessary to rest. An economy that requires many single-parents to work multiple jobs per week in order to survive, curtailing the possibility of meaningful rest, is inadmissible. A Sabbatical approach to climate change would thus begin by asking what could be done to ensure that the poorest and most vulnerable have access to the resources they need for well-being.\textsuperscript{67} Only after this step is taken could there be any hope of terminating or reducing behaviors that require greenhouse gas emissions. Authority would exist not to make such people rest, but first to assert that they \textit{must be permitted} rest.

This distinction between forcing rest and allowing rest is vital, but it might seem to collapse upon close investigation. Like Moses and Aaron before Pharaoh, Sabbath-keepers today may validate their climate-protecting inoperativity by claiming that God requires a Sabbath—that they are commanded by divine authority to rest. The important point is only that the command ultimately translates into an authoritative intervention on behalf of the poor. Here it is vital to recall that in both versions of the Sabbath command legislated in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, the imperative to provide rest is directed explicitly to those who own “gates,” property, servants, and livestock. The authority of Sabbatical politics leverages itself first on people who hold power over others.

In the context of climate policy, this would validate what some economists call “selective degrowth”—methods of reducing greenhouse gas emissions that may reduce economic gains, but do so in a way that improves the well being of poorer individuals within the grand scheme.68 For example, climate change policy can begin by reducing work in certain toxic, high-end fields (such as oil refineries) and open up other work areas that benefit poorer communities, such as investing in building newer, energy-efficient infrastructure.69 The “rest” of this economy would not be imposed on those for whom unemployment is particularly harmful.70

Sabbath changes authority structures by orienting them toward permissions—maximizing the freedom of those oppressed by sovereign powers. In answer to the question of whether Sabbath may be politically imposed in order to address climate change, we may answer “yes and no.” No, Sabbath cannot be legislated as a ritual in which all must participate. This would violate its essence as an institution of freedom. On the other hand, yes, those who would forcefully maintain a state of perpetually accelerating activity must be forced to provide rest for those who work. This means that although no one may be coerced into resting on the Sabbath (just as no


69 Phaedra Ellis-Lamkins advocates for this type of effort: “We need Congress to make the investments necessary to upgrade and repair our crumbling infrastructure—from building seawalls that protect shoreline communities to fixing our storm-water systems. Doing so will create family-sustaining, local jobs. Improving our storm-water infrastructure alone would put 2 million Americans to work. We need to make sure that people of color are a part of the business community and workforce building these new systems.” See Phaedra Ellis Lamkins, “How Climate Change Affects People of Color,” *The Root*, March 3, 2013.

70 One of the ways this would be possible would be through closely studying the needs of people in impoverished economies. Any policy aimed at providing rest for such people would need to begin by providing the basic needs of such people. On this see Felix Rauschmayer and Ines Omann, “Well-Being in Sustainability Transitions: Making Use of Needs,” in Syse and Mueller, *Sustainable Consumption and the Good Life*, 111-125.
one may be “coerced into being human”), coercive force may be employed to prevent authorities from suppressing the Sabbaths of others. This provides a “Sabbatical” ground for challenging economies in which constant work is necessary to survive. For example, a business that pays a wage so low that two such jobs would be necessary to survive (or maintain a family) in a particular city or region could be directly suppressing the Sabbath-keeping of others. Legislation aimed at addressing this problem would be “Sabbatical.” The Earth’s Sabbath may also be infringed upon in similar ways, and warrant interventions (such as restricting the use of certain kinds of motor vehicles or limiting emissions at certain times). I will speak more about this in the next chapter.

The question of whether force may be used in Sabbath taps into an ancient, ongoing tension in theology between divine grace and human works. If Sabbatical “force” is ultimately the work of divine grace, one must ask what role humans play in experiencing this grace. Stephen Duffy argues, along with most liberation theologians, that grace can be understood personally, socially, and at a transcendent level. Sabbath clearly is a form of grace that operates at all levels, including the social/political. However, this means there must be the possibility of a type of “political Pelagianism” in Sabbath-keeping in which human beings attempt to force a Sabbatical reality into existence, apart from grace. Duffy argues that it is possible to think of

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71 I make this statement with a tentative “could be” because there might be mitigating factors explaining the low wage. For example, the wage might be low because the overall economy is depressed to such an extent that this wage is the highest the employer could conceivably pay. This could occur in a region undergoing a natural disaster such as a drought or famine, or recovering from war. In these types of emergency situations, a low wage might not be directly anti-Sabbatical.

72 See Duffy, Dynamics of Grace, 366.

73 I use the term Pelagianism here in a loose sense, since the proper definition of the term is slippery. Historically, Pelagianism referred to the teachings of the eponymous layman whose ideas found expression in works
grace working “through” human actions for liberation (which would include Sabbath). This makes applying the term “Pelagian” to specific patterns of action incredibly difficult. Still, it seems clear that human beings can oust grace from Sabbath by forgetting that it is an institution of letting-be, a force of passivity, the ultimate goal of which is freedom. In the context of combating climate change, Sabbath is simply one way human beings and Earth can dwell together freely. There is a continual tension in this freedom between grace and human response. This is why a coercive effort to Sabbatically liberate those who are controlled by the sovereign domain of “thinginess” must constantly be vigilant lest it slip into a sovereign, dominating mode itself.

The way to avoid this negative form of sovereignty in Sabbath is to constantly keep in mind the nature of Sabbath itself—rest. This means focusing our attention on providing rest for those suffering the most from the ravages of industrial human activity. There is a sovereignty involved in Sabbatical political theology, but it is a sovereignty exercised for the poorest of the
earth, and thus for the earth itself. As Delgado observes, “Justice for people and justice for the earth go together.”

Conclusion

The type of inoperativity charted in the first three chapters of this dissertation holds immense significance for addressing political challenges. This chapter has shown how inoperativity could confront one central political problem—that of climate change. Our current ecological impasse emerges from human concepts of identity and authority; and Sabbath-keeping has the potential to alter these concepts by creating a different form of life. This type of Sabbath abrogates human identity distinctions vis-à-vis Earth, and reorients our concept of authority from coercion to “letting be.”

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the idea that Sabbath may play a role in addressing climate change is hardly one that I have pioneered. Several contemporary Jewish thinkers have issued calls for an implementation of Sabbath as an ecological form of healing. In the latter part of the last century, Norman Lamm exhorted ecologists to envision the ideal human future as a time of perpetual Sabbath, grounded in a distinctive “Jewish eschatology” which would be “not a progressively growing technology and rising G.N.P., but a peaceful and mutually respectful coexistence between man and his environment.” Jeremy Benstein has urged that Sabbath might create a counteracting spiritual force to human control of nature, realized

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75 Delgado, Love in a Time of Climate Change, 142.

through purposeful non-intervention in the world. David Seidenberg has called for a Sabbath understood through the uniting impulse of kabbalistic tradition. Through this lens, he frames it as a “rehearsal for living sustainably and justly in relation to the Earth and all her species. When one rests on Shabbat by refraining from all the categories of work defined by rabbinic tradition, one effectively relinquishes the power to manipulate the environment.” Seidenberg thus finds Sabbath to be the climax of human-nature unification which he grounds in kabbalistic teaching. At a more practical level, prominent Jewish historian and activist Jonathan Schorsch, to give one example, has argued that a traditional rabbinic form of Sabbath observance could be utilized across monotheistic traditions as a time of earth-rest:

In theory, more maximal Shabbat observance could produce a 14.3% (one-seventh) reduction in carbon emissions without additional spending, new technologies, or unintended environmental consequences— one day out of seven where emissions are nearly eliminated. Observing a truly full weekly Shabbat, “doing nothing,” as it were, offers an effective action that one can take now to help heal our environment. Since the heavily environmentally damaging “developed” world is made up mostly of monotheists, the impact of eliminating most emissions once weekly would be particularly important.

By a “more maximal Shabbat observance” Schorsch means a form of Sabbath-keeping governed by rabbinical principles (particularly the prohibition on making a fire on the Sabbath). These are guidelines that many Reform Jews and Christian Sabbath observers do not follow. Admittedly,

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77 See David Benstein, The Way into Judaism and the Environment (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing), 182-188.


the practical possibilities Schorsch envisions are highly idealistic, perhaps absurdly so (though he is aware of this). Nevertheless, his proposal offers something lacking in many texts of religious ecological ethics: a concrete plan of action. Sermons, religious education courses, and small-group consciousness-raising studies can only go so far in fighting a nemesis as far-reaching as climate change. Sabbath offers an approach that, as Schorsch notes, impacts one-seventh of human existence.

Of course, these outcomes are far from guaranteed, because the way religious rituals are practiced often differs greatly from the ideal. It is not clear if sabbatarian communities, even “maximal” ones, will choose to find in their ritual the ethical significance I have described here. Part of this challenge arises from the fact that ecologically-friendly Sabbath practices can hit practical roadblocks because they may require enormous life changes in order to maintain longstanding traditions. For example, many orthodox Jewish congregants refrain from driving on the Sabbath because this violates the principle of not lighting a fire on the Sabbath. But these communities also have a longstanding tradition of attending synagogue on the Sabbath. This necessitates living within walking distance of the synagogue. However, if another religious community were to advocate not driving on the Sabbath (when this has not been a traditional requirement of this community before), this would only be possible if congregants who live far from the synagogue/church/meeting house ceased attending, or moved closer to the building. It is highly unlikely that communities would make such a massive change. I will try to partly address these and other practical challenges in the next chapter.
Also, in the United States at least, there is a strong taboo against recognizing the political ramifications of religious rituals, or even the overlapping concerns of ritual and politics. Part of this taboo arises from the positive caution we found in Goizueta’s work against making religious rituals instruments or political tools. Still, it is important for theologians and ethicists to recognize that Sabbath has the capacity to help meet the challenge of climate change.

The analysis I have offered here could also be applied to other rituals of inoperativity. I have chosen Sabbath because of its historic, central significance in both Judaism and Christianity, as well as the time commitment involved (one-seventh of human existence). But other practices such as fiesta, the Christian and Jewish holidays, or Muslim times of prayer or fasting (such as Ramadan), not to mention various meditative or celebrative practices in eastern religions, traditional European religions, and indigenous American and Australian religions also say a great deal about human identity and authority, and could be immensely relevant to the problem of climate change. Of course, the contributions offered by each ritual would not be the same as those of the Sabbath, but—as we have seen with shmita and fiesta—the differences could be complimentary.

Although the value of Sabbath as a climate-healing practice should be clear, I have not said much about the specific elements of such a practice. In the concluding chapter of this investigation, I will briefly lay out a few such elements, which correspond to the two facets of the climate problem analyzed here: identity and authority.

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80 On occasions when teaching undergraduates, I have pointed out the political significance of a religious idea or practice, only to have students react in disbelief that politics and religion could have anything to do with each other. As popular as political theology may be in certain sectors of the academy, my sense is that the basic premise of political theology is still very foreign to many people at the non-specialist’s level.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

THE CLIMATE HEALING SABBATH

The paradox at the core of this dissertation—that ritual inoperativity accomplishes something immensely significant—should be clear at this point. If a ritual such as Sabbath can dramatically alter human conceptions of identity and authority, this constitutes nothing less than a transformation of political theology, inasmuch as political theory as a whole centers on conceptions of human identity and authority. Furthermore, given that the current ecological crisis emerges precisely from difficulties in these areas, Sabbath seems never more relevant than now. Therefore, at the very least, if one adheres to a theological method based on “critical reflection on praxis,” this type of ritual should become a central object of reflection.¹

Notwithstanding these enormous implications, a glaring problem may immediately come to mind: Many sabbatarians (though certainly not all) seem oblivious of the possible import of their ritual for addressing our current climate problem. While no statistical research has been done on the attitudes of Sabbath-keepers to environmental degradation, it would be surprising if

¹ Naomi Klein seems to indirectly call for a ritual such as Sabbath to address the current crisis, because of the lack of spiritual resources she finds available in the western world: “(T)he challenge goes deeper than a lack of institutional tools and reaches into our very selves. Contemporary capitalism has not just accelerated the behaviors that are changing the climate. This economic model has changed a great many of us as individuals, accelerated and uprooted and dematerialized us as surely as it has finance capital, leaving us at once everywhere and nowhere. These are the hand-wringing clichés of our time—What is Twitter doing to my attention span? What are screens doing to our relationships?—but the preoccupations have particular relevance to the way we relate to the climate challenge . . . Just when we needed to slow down and notice the subtle changes in the natural world that are telling us that something is seriously amiss, we have sped up; just when we needed longer time horizons to see how the actions of our past impact the prospects for our future, we entered into the never-ending feed of the perpetual now, slicing and dicing our attention spans as never before.” See Klein, This Changes Everything, 158-159.
such practitioners were likely to make any explicit connection between their ritual and what is perhaps the most significant political problem of our age. For most, Sabbath is a personal thing.

Of course, a major part of the purpose of this dissertation has been to challenge the traditional standpoint that Sabbath is merely personal. From biblical, philosophical, and practical angles, we have seen that ritual inoperativity holds the potential to challenge political attitudes. Sabbath issues a soft-spoken, yet powerful summons to re-think what a person is and how a person should interact with others. It takes great mental agility to avoid thinking of these issues as political. Still, the fact that Sabbath-keeping seems practically bracketed from politics is a challenge. This challenge suggests a need to think about what a properly political Sabbath might look like, especially one that is kept with the problem of climate change in mind.

This task is even more necessary because of the problem of authority and coercion raised in the previous chapter. If, as I argued, Sabbath may be seen as a divine imperative (of the same type as the injunction to Pharaoh to “let my people go”) we must ask, how is this imperative enforced? If sabbatical authority works through healing, how is this healing performed? A full exploration of the practical application of Sabbath to the current ecological crisis is outside the scope of the present work. Empirical research would need to be conducted in which communities actively orient their Sabbath-keeping towards the climate problem, and the process and effects of this Sabbath-keeping would need to be documented. For now, my purpose is to suggest features

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of a climate-healing Sabbath which would make the idea reasonable. As observed in the previous chapter, many of my ideas are not new, but have already been suggested by Jewish practical thinkers. I aim to build on their insights by framing this type of Sabbath observance in an explicitly political/theological mold.

Keeping in mind the characteristics of inoperativity charted throughout this dissertation, I will end with a few brief proposals for a type of Sabbath practice that could heal structures of ecological illness based in negative attitudes toward human identity and authority. Following a structure corresponding to the previous chapter, I will suggest practical ways Sabbath could impact identity formation, and then show how this would impact conceptions of authority.

**Remapping Identity through Sabbatical Community**

The goal of Sabbath, as developed in this dissertation, is not merely to take time off, but to develop a sabbatical “personhood” or identity. This means adopting a framework in which a human being is not reducible to a producer things and a manipulator of nature, but someone whose living is good in itself, as a form of *praxis*. The question is, then, how do we create such an identity?

Human beings exist as social beings, and our conceptions of ourselves are molded by what we do collectively. A Sabbath that would have the capacity to heal our frameworks of

See also the example of the Eco Synagogue research project discussed below in the section on “practical challenges.”

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3 This is a relatively uncontroversial perspective on human conceptions of identity, although it is possible to argue that human beings may conceive of themselves as “selves” without reference to others. For an overview of the communitarian versus individualist conceptions of selfhood see John V. Canfield, *Becoming Human: The Development of Language, Self, and Self-Consciousness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
identity would need to be grounded in groups of human beings who share the same vision.\(^4\)

Without this communal element, a politics of Sabbath would be impossible. As Lacoste noted, master and slave must engage in inoperativity *together* if there is to be some type of political impact. This is not easy in cultures where religious rituals increasingly adopt a private, personalized character—where we say, “my Sabbath,” for example. Nevertheless, we must resist this religious privatization. Sabbath cannot be just any day that I choose to take time off. It must be a day in which human beings together seek to live a certain type of life.

To create this communal style of Sabbath, different communities would need to develop a format of ecumenical and/or interreligious engagement in Sabbath-keeping. That is, they should strive to find a way to celebrate this ritual together. This is easier said than done, largely because different communities celebrate Sabbath on different days, and as noted above, it is crucial that Sabbath not be seen as just *any* day. Such confessional differences have historically produced immense dissension among Christian denominations, with different groups attempting to persuade other groups that their day is the right one. The solution to this problem is not to insist that Sabbath is a flexible arrangement, because that would lead to the privatization and personalization that de-politicize Sabbath and render it impotent for creating healing. A better approach would be for communities in which Sabbath is unimportant to join with other communities that already have deeply-established traditions of Sabbath rest. For example, in a town where Mennonites keep Sabbath fervently and regularly, it might make sense for another

\[^4\] Robert Johann has gone so far as to argue that any practice aiming to have a moral effect must have a community as its locus, otherwise it becomes morally inert. See Robert O. Johann, “Person, Community, and Moral Commitment,” in *Person and Community: A Philosophical Exploration*, ed. Robert J. Roth (New York: Fordham University Press, 1975), 155-175.
Christian group that does not concern itself with Sabbath to begin practicing it in conjunction with the Mennonite community (or any other community present that devotes itself to Sabbath). As a general rule, at least in the western world, Jewish communities have put more work into developing practical Sabbath-keeping approaches, and it is particularly important for other traditions to dialogue with them as they develop their practice.

When a group of people is formed who share the same motivation for developing an inoperative identity, they should begin practicing Sabbath in a way that affirms their harmonious relationship with nature, characterized by letting-be. For example, drawing on the common-meal tradition (which is a key part of Christianity, and also other religions), communities might practice a Sabbath in which they join together to eat food prepared from meatless or vegan sources or food that is sourced locally. The key to such a sabbatical ritual would be to characterize it not as a heuristic tool (although it would have that function) but as a way of living together—the point of life itself. In this way, sabbatical harmony with nature would not be the

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5 Here we cannot avoid commenting on the aged and ongoing Saturday vs. Sunday debate within Christianity. What to do when certain communities feel equally adamant that one of these days should be celebrated and not the other? Although this is a complicated issue, a healthy compromise may not be as difficult as one might think. Scholarly consensus at present indicates that both days originally held significance for many early Christians, with Saturday being the day of rest and Sunday being the “Lord’s Day”—or day of the Lord’s resurrection. The Lord’s Day was “actually a day of worship for centuries before it became a day of rest” observes Horace T. Allen, building on the classic study of the Lord’s day by Willy Rordorf. See Horace T. Allen, Jr., “The Lord’s Day as Anticipation and Promise in Liturgy and Word,” in *Sunday, Sabbath, and the Weekend: Managing Time in a Global Culture*, ed. Edward O. Flaherty and Rodney L. Petersen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 98; Willy Rordorf, *Sunday: The History of the Day of Rest and of Worship in the Early Centuries of the Christian Church* (London: SCM Press, 1968). Perhaps, given this ancient distinction between the purpose of the two days, Sunday could become a day of liturgy (which is not necessarily restful, as any clergy person will readily aver) and Saturday could become the day of rest? Such an approach might not work in all contexts—particularly where Sunday-worshipping communities already have long-running practices of rest on Sunday—but it could be helpful in others.

6 This should be done while avoiding the problem of appropriation that may emerge in Jewish-Christian relations. What this means is that although Christians may learn about Sabbath keeping from Jewish communities, they should not seek to mimic the practices of Judaism in a way that suggests supercessionism or disrespect for the particular origins of these practices.
exception but the norm. In other words, the community leaders should emphasize that abstinence from earth-harming activities on the Sabbath is not a type of “fast” or periodic withdrawal from regular habits, but an attempt to live a new identity with new habits, and gradually to make the rest of life conform to the new identity.

Several Jewish practitioners have considered approaches to Sabbath keeping that could reframe human identity in relation to the earth. Dan Fink argues that a key Sabbath practice vital to creating an improved ecological awareness is actually physically spending time in nature. Fink cites precedents from early traditions in which rabbis would greet the Sabbath outdoors, in fields. He also points to a kabbalistic tradition that commands that Sabbath be welcomed in an open territory. Although this type of practice may not be helpful in areas with cold seasons or heavily urbanized areas, it could be useful in areas where access to nature-immersion and appreciation are possible. As a further development of this idea, churches or synagogues located in areas with fragile or threatened ecosystems could conduct their Sabbath communal meals out-of-doors in these settings, as a way of resting in solidarity with the earth.

Another way communities could begin to foster a different type of human identity through Sabbath would be by explicit acts of rest-giving. In many Western cultures, rest is associated with increased consumption—long distance vacations, trips to amusement parks, recreational boating. Although it is indisputable that these activities are therapeutic and “restful” psychologically, they are forms of rest-taking, in that they benefit the consumer at the cost of

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increased strain on earth’s resources—a point also made by Pope John Paul II in *Dies Domini*.8

These kinds of rest give rise to entire markets—the recreational and tourism industries—that play a major role in increasing greenhouse gas emissions. They craft identities focused on production—the production of fun. They also create and maintain hierarchies between people groups, with wealthier and otherwise privileged groups gaining access to the most pristine recreational opportunities, and their poorer counterparts being left out.

By contrast, the healing Sabbath takes a different therapeutic approach. The emphasis of this kind of rest is on enabling whole communities and the environment itself to join in rest. This would mean finding ways to intentionally reduce consumption of fossil fuels on the Sabbath, by refraining from driving cars, or avoiding fuel-powered transportation entirely. The common meals eaten within communities could also be forms of rest-giving, especially in contexts where poorer members of the community might not have the resources to purchase more expensive locally-grown food.9 In areas where the climate is (already) warm, religious meetings or other events could be held outside, obviating the use of electricity for indoor lighting and air-conditioning.

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8 See John Paul II, *Dies Domini* (The Holy See: Papal Archive, 1998), 82. As Donald Conroy observes, “Leisure and recreational activities are healthy for the human psyche; that is a given. But self-centered pleasure-seeking activities which ignore the human impact on others and on the environment at large can clearly contribute to the degradation of other persons, societies, and the delicate ecosystems which sustain life.” See Donald B. Conroy, “Sabbath in an Age of Ecology within an Emerging Global Society,” in *Sunday, Sabbath and the Weekend*, 169.

Cultivating a rest-giving identity would also mean extending the reach of Sabbath outside of the boundaries of the local Sabbath-keeping community. This does not mean promoting Sabbath-keeping in an aggressive, evangelizing sense, but rather offering rest as an opportunity. For example, Sabbath keepers could use Sabbath-time to bring climate-friendly, healthful food to homeless or low-income communities whose diets might otherwise consist of heavily processed food. In cities, rest-giving could involve providing public transportation passes to those who need them. Volunteer groups could assist in “greening” houses in older neighborhoods, by installing solar panels and adding insulation. Other volunteers could refurbish bicycles to provide for lower-income individuals who might want to use this supremely ecologically-efficient mode of transportation, but not have the finances to acquire it.\(^{10}\) This would be “work” in the traditional sense, but it would be the same type of work that Jesus engaged in by healing on the Sabbath. As in Rav Kook’s understanding of the heter mekhira, these would be forms of activity that prepare the way for greater inoperativity.

If communities embraced these practices, the hoped-for end result would not merely be the formation of “eco-friendly” clubs or churches, but assemblies of those who seek to define human beings differently. Presently within the western world there are socialist and free-market based organizations that seek to combat climate change through activism and “development.” While not condemning such organizations and their efforts, the purpose of a sabbatical community would be to find a different framework of existence altogether, a framework that

\(^{10}\) In my experience working with homeless persons in Chicago, I have noticed that there are many individuals who would like bicycles for transportation, but are unable to afford them. A further structural problem that compounds this issue is the absence of bike lanes on most urban roads. Part of healing the earth could involve advocating for increased bicycle accessibility in these areas.
embraces human inoperativity in relation to earth. The activist approach and the inoperative approach are distinct, but not incompatible. In fact, one could argue that they may mutually support each other. Only when human beings properly understand their identity can they work to establish a social/political system that conforms to that identity.11

Remodeling Authority through Sabbatical Resistance

Once human beings grasp their inoperative identity through Sabbath, the question becomes how to preserve and protect that identity. This leads us to the issue of authority. As argued in chapter 4, Sabbath presents a different approach to authority—one oriented away from control and toward “letting be.” A climate-healing Sabbath would need to articulate this model of authority. In the context of the climate change problem, this type of authority manifests itself in sabbatical resistance.

At first, this may sound like another way of describing coercive activism. Resistance may be an effort to gain power over others. Even when the resisters are oppressed persons who seek justice, there is always the possibility that once they gain a position of authority, they may cling to power for its own sake and become as dominating as the system they replaced. The sovereignty of Sabbath, as argued before, is different. Sabbath opposes any type of controlling power, even to the point of suspending itself when necessary. This means that sabbatical

11 This connects to Rav Kook’s idea of a type of “soul” that is nurtured by inoperativity and enters into other aspects of human life. Following a similar line of thought, Michael Fishbane argues that “this mode of intentionality and attachment to God throughout the Sabbath day is not for itself alone. It must also serve lived life. One enters the Sabbath rest in order to cultivate a mindfulness of inaction that can gradually suffuse one’s entire consciousness (a kind of supernal soul added to our nature); and one may therefore hope to return to the workweek with this divine gift in one’s heart.” See Michael Fishbane, Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 127. Although Fishbane does not express it explicitly, I find that his theology of Sabbath also embraces the paradox that I have articulated in this dissertation regarding Sabbath observance. That is to say, Fishbane argues that Sabbath is a complete “divestment” of labor and a form of total inaction, yet it is also a time of “intentionality” that produces specific results in transforming human beings.
resistance is not an effort to make others keep a Sabbath. Although it might be tempting to think that government enforcement of a universal Sabbath would do wonders for ecology, such a political move would violate the essence of the day.

The authority of sabbatical resistance is thus not the same type of authority that Pharaoh and his deities exercise. The sabbatical deity and the powers of Egypt clash precisely because their visions of government and authority are so radically different.\(^{12}\) This needs to be clearly emphasized, lest an image of “green totalitarianism” come to mind, in which religious authorities take it upon themselves to force everyone to rest, thus wreaking havoc on independent industries and poorer persons who must work extended hours in order to make a living.\(^{13}\) Authorities must be pressured to allow others to rest, in the same way that they must be pressured to allow freedom of speech or religion or other fundamental human rights. If resting is a fundamental part of being human, there is no value in forcing it on people. The only imperative is to make it

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\(^{12}\) As mentioned in the previous chapter, Brueggemann is clear about this. Speaking about the identity of the sabbatical God, Brueggemann points out that “this is the God ‘who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.’” Thus the Sabbath commandment is drawn into the exodus narrative, for the God who rests is the God who emancipates from slavery and consequently from the work system of Egypt and from the gods of Egypt who require and legitimate that work system. It is, for that reason, fair to judge that the prohibition against the ‘the other gods’ in the first commandment pertains directly to the gods of Egypt (see Exod. 12:12) and other gods of the same ilk in Canaan, or subsequently the gods of the great empires of Assyria, Babylon, or Persia. In the narrative imagination of Israel, the gods of Egypt are stand-ins for all the gods of the several empires. What they all have in common is that they are confiscatory gods who demand endless produce and who authorize endless systems of production that are, in principle, insatiable. Thus, the mention of ‘Egypt’ brings the God of Israel into the orbit of socioeconomic systems and practices; and inevitably sets this God on a collision course with the gods of insatiable productivity.” See Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, 2.

\(^{13}\) Along these lines, it deserves reiteration that the Sabbath commandments are always addressed to those who own slaves, property, and livestock—not to those who work for such individuals. Thus the commands are about the human responsibility to give rest, not force other people to rest. As Brueggemann observes, the command of Sabbath is to “sponsor a system of rest that contradicts the system of anxiety of Pharaoh.” See Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance*, 30.
available. Of course, doing so will inevitably create a clash of values with a system bent on continuing activity.¹⁴

What, then, does sabbatical resistance look like? At its core, it is the same activity mentioned above that fosters a sabbatical identity: rest-giving. Those who are keeping a climate-healing Sabbath must look at the world and ask themselves, “In what ways are people or the Earth being barred from rest? How can that rest be restored?” The authorities in whose hands Earth’s well-being lays—the fuel companies, transportation industries, and conglomerates of diverse markets—do not readily surrender permission for earth’s rest. A Sabbath that aims at healing will make space for resisting the agendas of these authorities.

In part, resistance to these ecological Pharaohs is already built into the structure of Sabbath, in that simply by doing nothing one is defying the ceaseless market imperative to spend more. From the perspective of a Marxist analysis, in which capitalist economies inherently oppose any types of inoperativity and seek to fill time with as much production as possible, the simple act of doing nothing must invite some type of inherent opposition, if only through social disapproval.¹⁵ On this account, we could say that many sabbatarian communities engage in acts

¹⁴ The fact that within the context of modernity every economic system has been focused on ever-increasing productivity indicates in my mind that the potential for a green totalitarianism which uses Sabbath as a coercive force is virtually nonexistent. Communist systems, though predicated on a philosophy which seeks to escape labor oppression, have been just as focused on increasing production and dominating the environment as capitalist systems. It seems straightforwardly evident that any economic system driven by acquisitiveness will find no space for rest, and thus will have no interest in enforcing a Sabbath. I mention the potential for a sabbatical totalitarianism only to allay the fears of those who have mentioned such a theoretical possibility, specifically many Seventh-day Adventists, beginning with their founder Ellen G. White. On this see Dennis Pettibone, “The Sunday Law Movement,” in The World of Ellen G. White, ed. Gary Land (Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing, 1987). On the various ways in which a type of totalitarian Sabbath has been predicted by Adventists see Reinder Bruinsma, Seventh-day Adventist Attitudes toward Roman Catholicism, 1844-1965 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1994).

¹⁵ According to Ana Levy-Lyons, “Marx describes how technology, rather than freeing us from labor, creates an increasingly frenetic pace of work—the need to milk more and more value from a human hour in order
of resistance to ecological devastation without even being aware that they are doing this. For example, despite the large influence of the pioneering Jewish ecology movement, it is probably safe to say that most Orthodox Jewish communities do not walk to synagogue Saturday morning with the conscious awareness that their refusal to drive constitutes an affront to the schemes of ExxonMobil or BP, even though if everyone followed their example by not driving on Saturday these companies would certainly feel a punch.

In more intentional ways, Sabbath could function as a boycott of activities and products that prevent Earth’s rest. As mentioned above, the communal gatherings could feature food drawn from sustainable, climate-friendly sources, which would reinforce the notion that Sabbath is a day for creating rest not only for ourselves, but also for our atmosphere and the various ecosystems that sustain it.16 If done well, such communal meals would also have the effect of showing that a sustainable diet can be both enjoyable and conducive to the highest levels of human flourishing. This is immensely important in combating culturally-induced assumptions that certain products (such as meat) are commodities that humans cannot live without, or at least not live comfortably. By providing people with concrete examples of climate-friendly living, a communal Sabbath would accomplish much more than simply telling congregants to “eat

16 Arguing from the common meal tradition of Eucharist described in 1 Corinthians 11, Michael Northcott argues that just as the first Christians protested the Roman economy through their eating, modern Christians should eat in a common way that challenges the western economy of earth devastation. See Michael S. Northcott, *A Moral Climate: The Ethics of Global Warming* (London: Dartman, Longman and Todd, 2007), 232-266.
Sabbath keepers could also make their practice a form of resistance by publicizing it—
making it a time of “conspicuous nonconsumption.” It would be a time of “living ‘as if.’”
By showing the world the value of inoperativity in the fulfillment of human life, Sabbath-keepers
would present a clear challenge to the dominant system.

Beyond boycotts, sabbatical resistance also allows for confronting powers that enforce
the consumption status quo. The Climate-Healing Sabbath could be a day in which communities
could mobilize to protest new drilling and fracking operations, or the construction of new natural
gas pipelines. The rationale for this resistance is not that oil companies need to keep Sabbath.
Rather, the point is that such organizations must not prevent others from keeping Sabbath. By
continually ravaging the Earth they are causing it to face a never-ending strain, which also results

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17. This is an important point, because some research published by a group of Dutch scientists suggests that public efforts to cajole meat-eaters into eating less meat because of climate change may actually have an adverse affect, by causing them to dismiss climate science entirely. These researchers argue that efforts to reduce meat consumption should be multi-leveled (including references to health and overall well-being). It seems that a helpful part of such an approach to reducing meat consumption would be providing an experiential awareness that a meat-free diet can be easy and satisfying. See Joop de Boer, Hanna Schosler, and Jan J. Boersma, “Climate Change and Meat Eating: An Inconvenient Couple?” *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 33 (2013): 1-8.

18. This calls to mind Goizueta’s “life in the subjunctive” as well as the litany of practices Anne Marie Dalton and Henry Simmons describe in their chapter “Living ‘as if,’” in *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope* (New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 105-126.

19. It is significant than in his ground-breaking work on nonviolent resistance as a response to climate change, Kevin O’Brien emphasizes that one of the most important features of successful nonviolent resisters (here he focuses on the examples of John Woolman, Jane Addams, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King, and Cesar Chavez) is “joyful living”—“we need to enjoy good food and good jokes.” See Kevin J. O’Brien, *The Violence of Climate Change: Lessons of Resistance from Nonviolent Activists* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017), 198, 200. Any movement that seeks to resist a negative way of life by providing an alternative must demonstrate the attractiveness of that alternative, or face popular extinction.

20. This raises the question of whether faith communities should focus on global issues (campaigning for international treaties, for example) or address their attention to more parochial aspects of the ecological crisis (protesting the practices of a local company). Although I do not have space to fully address this issue, I can point to the work of Michael Northcott, who has argued that faith communities work best when they address local issues, not to exclude broader problems, but to appeal to their most immediate range of influence. See Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 323.
in a restless existence for people living in climate-affected areas. Using Sabbath as a time for opposing the politics of climate-oppression is thus not an act of “using religion to meddle in politics” or violating the separation of religion and state. It is just the opposite. By their aggressive and uninhibited domination of nature, western corporations are violating the Sabbaths of others. How can an indigenous community in the Amazon find rest or keep a Sabbath when it has been displaced because of deforestation or water pollution and its members have been forced to work long hours in factories or in the same industries that destroyed their community? How can refugees from a catastrophic draught in northern Africa be able to keep a Sabbath when their very survival is at stake? Privileged westerners cannot keep a Sabbath authentically while forgetting the plight of these other communities.21

Incorporating resistance into Sabbath observance may not mean directly engaging in acts of civil disobedience or political campaigning on the day. There is a delicate balance to be aspired to here. This balance hinges on the paradox of inoperativity—it does nothing and yet accomplishes something. Although rest-giving is a key part of Sabbath, and this means that Sabbath keeping should confront that which opposes rest, the seduction of “functionality” may be difficult to resist if activism becomes the primary purpose of Sabbath. Sabbath-keeping communities may decide that resistance should be something that happens on other days of the

21 Theologians such as Jim Antal and Larry Rasmussen have argued that earth and its resources should be viewed as “sacramental” in a proper sense. See Larry Rasmussen, Earth-Honoring Faith: Religious Ethics in a New Key (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 257; Jim Antal, Climate Church, Climate World: How People of Faith Must Work for Change (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 110-111. Under this logic, acts of defamation to the Earth are anti-religious acts. Under the same logic, any acts that systemically prevent Earth from resting, or keep it in a state of ceaseless activity, are similarly anti-religious. This is an important point, because in a real sense, the imperative to constantly increase production and nature-domination is also a religious imperative, arising from the religious structure of capitalism. The ecological crisis of global warming is thus a religious conflict writ large. The question of how to resolve this conflict deserves greater attention than I can give it here.
week. Resistors may reference Sabbath as a reason for a particular policy of letting the Earth rest, as did a community of Scottish Presbyterians who led a campaign against a new quarry that was to be built on their island of Harris in the Hebrides. Sabbath itself may not be used as a challenge to ecological destruction, but it could serve as a motivation for it.

The key to maintaining the legitimacy of this challenge would be to insist on the significance of this Sabbath as an end in itself. We return here to the caution that emerged in our analysis of Goizueta’s work: Sabbath functions to heal the planet, but only if it insists on being truly inoperative. While emphasizing the purpose of Sabbath as resistance to carbon emissions and other forms of ecological exploitation, we would need to remember that Sabbath is always only about living a fully human form of life. Resistance plays a role in this, but it must never take center stage, or turn us away from the basic practices of eating, celebrating, and resting together. The idea of Sabbath as resistance is to complete these practices by generating the anti-oppressive impulse that is already contained within them.

Realistic Challenges

The idealistic practical framework I have articulated here is not without its potential problems. Certain Jewish communities have already put “boots to the ground” (to use an admittedly faulty metaphor for Sabbath) in developing an ecologically friendly Sabbath practice, and future efforts in this endeavor need to take their experiences into close consideration. Jewish

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22 According to Michael Northcott’s description of the situation, a company (Redland Aggregates) sought to obtain a license to build a “mega-quarry” on the island, but were opposed to local residents who claimed that the expansion of the industry in the area would disturb their Sabbath rest (their branch of Presbyterianism focuses extensively on strict Sabbath-keeping). Although Northcott reads the scenario as an endorsement of local, or parochial, methods in ecological resistance, it could also serve as an example of the power of rest-giving as a tool in resistance. See Michael S. Northcott, Place, Ecology, and the Sacred: The Moral Geography of Sustainable Communities (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 87-97.
thinkers have also developed practical ways of using Sabbath to create an environmental awareness that extends beyond the day itself. As already noted, at the end of the previous chapter, it is tricky to develop a Sabbath practice that is ecologically powerful but also practically realizable.

One of the key areas of difficulty arises from the use of technology. In a popular article, Yonatan Neril extols the benefits of refraining from technology use on Sabbath:

Shabbat offers great potential to reduce consumption and thereby benefit the natural world. The act of shutting off a computer or car for a day contains environmental meaning far beyond the energy saved from not using these devices for one day. The deeper significance of the act centers on the reorientation that can occur from outward focus to inward focus, from reading from screens and Blackberries to reading from scrolls and books, from communicating via technology to communicating face to face.

There does seem to be immense potential for a change in worldview resulting from a technology-free day. However, as western culture’s social life continues to be embedded in technological systems, fully removing oneself from technology may seem practically impossible, if other aspects of Sabbath are to be maintained. To point out one instance of this, if Sabbath is to be kept “together” in social solidarity, this requires clear communication and careful orchestration.

Today, we accomplish all these tasks through technology. If, for example, I live in an upstairs apartment and I wish to have a group of friends come over for a Sabbath dinner, the only way

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23 See, for example, Lydia Roussos, “Sustainable Shabbat Ideas Can Help Environment All Week,” *The Wisconsin Jewish Chronicle*, March 31, 2008, https://www.jewishchronicle.org/2008/03/31/sustainable-shabbat-ideas-can-help-environment-all-week/. Based on my own survey of research, the majority of practical reflections on how Sabbath observance can be implemented with an ecological mindset within Judaism have been written at the popular level. To my knowledge, no official or academic publications have been written on how to develop a Sabbath for climate change within Judaism.

they may be able to contact me to open the door is through cell-phone texting. In an urban setting, almost any group activity requires technology if it is to be carried out smoothly. Sabbatarians who have reasonably close immediate family may seek to spend Sabbath only with their family, and this might be easily facilitated without cell phones. But for most single adults, a technology-free Sabbath will be an isolated Sabbath. For such persons, a conflict emerges between the identity-forming impact of togetherness in ecological Sabbath-keeping and the identify-forming benefit of abstaining from technology.

Another problem concerns the nature of communal Sabbath meals. Again, Jewish communities keeping Sabbath in an ecologically-friendly manner have already thought through how such meals may be conducted. The Jewish environmental organization Hazon has published a booklet giving recommendations on creating a practical form of communal meal which is also earth-friendly. The authors go through recommendations of eating lower on the food chain, choosing local produce, and being cautious of what types of dairy products and eggs to use (if they are used at all). However, there are areas of potential difficulty that arise throughout the booklet. One of them concerns the use of dishes. In order to avoid waste, washing dishes seems like an obvious choice (in order to refrain from using disposable plastic). However, washing dishes with hot water may violate a key Sabbath proscription for some Jewish communities.


27 The problem with dish washing for more traditional forms of Judaism is that it often involves hot water, as well as the use of dish rags or sponges (however, washing with cold water with wire brushes may be acceptable.
Furthermore, washing dishes hardly seems restful, and leaving dishes in the sink for hours until after Sabbath may create unnecessary stress. The Hazon authors therefore recommend using compostable dishes and related items. But they note that these may only be eco-friendly if a composting facility is available, and not all biodegradable items are regulated; thus companies might not be honest about their products’ level of biodegradability. Thus, although the idea of an ecological Sabbath meal may seem easy, the reality can be different.

The problem of a Climate-Healing Sabbath meal has also been addressed by a Jewish association of environmentally-concerned synagogues called Eco Synagogue. A group of 25 synagogues affiliated with this organization who met together in May of 2018 decided to perform a case study to discover how smoothly a “Green Kiddush” meal could be carried out. The participants focused on the basics of climate-friendly food—vegan/vegetarian items, locally-sourced whenever possible, use of glassware rather than disposables. Overall, their report deemed the event a success. However, they were honest about the difficulties. These included the fact that because no absolute “mandate” had been given to any of the families who brought food, they could not prevent a family who wanted to bring fish dishes from doing so. Sometimes arranging items with a low-carbon footprint meant driving more to bring them to the synagogues, for some communities). See https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1232465/jewish/Can-I-wash-dishes-on-Shabbat.htm.

28 See Hazon, Hosting a Sustainable Shabbat Dinner, 12.


30 This is a micro-level example of the problem of authority and coercion in Sabbath keeping. Because Sabbath rest is a free decision, communities can only offer so much demanding accountability to those who wish to keep Sabbath in a less environmentally friendly way. Thus it seems that before existing sabbatarian communities can move toward more overtly earth-healing Sabbaths, there may need to be extensive educational work done in the community, perhaps both at a theological and scientific level.
a defect the organizers admitted with admirable candor. Another challenge the organizers discovered was that not necessarily all vegetarian “green” food is particularly sustainable. A centerpiece of most vegan meals is avocados, and unless one lives in warm locales with avocado orchards nearby, avocados will almost always require extensive shipping.

There are numerous other complexities that could be described with keeping Sabbath with positive ecological intent. Many of these difficulties seem like minor issues, but the plethora of them means that tough decisions will need to be made by communities who wish to create such a Sabbath practice. The point of citing these is not to cast a dim light on my proposal, but to recognize that practicing this type of Sabbath in the current world will require ongoing dialogue and innovation.

As I assess these challenges, two major pitfalls seem possible. One is excessive laxity about the importance of insisting on earth-healing practices. When hard changes need to be made and complexities arise, it may be tempting to cut corners. This is where a strong sense of tradition may be helpful. The other, opposite pitfall would be a tendency toward judgmental behavior and a hard-line stance on miniscule matters that could divide communities. It seems evident that if a form of inoperativity that can address climate change is to gain wide acceptance, it will need maximal unity and collaboration among people of different traditions. In particular, because Jewish sabbatarians seem to have done the most extensive groundwork in practically enacting ecological Sabbath practice and negotiating the difficulties thereof, Christian sabbatarians—who seem to be lagging behind here—ought to pay close attention.
Conclusion

The Climate-Healing Sabbath would cultivate an inoperative human identity as well as a “letting be” model of authority through community engagement. By dwelling with others who celebrate praxis—the innate goodness of life—Sabbath keepers would challenge the standard mindset that gives rise to climate change. Rituals of rest-giving and resistance would gradually create a sabbatical world within the present world. This type of Sabbath is consistent with the paradox of inoperativity: It aims at doing nothing, but in the process accomplishes significant political goals.

Such a Sabbath might look something like the following. The beginning of the day would be occupied with rituals that emphasize solidarity and togetherness. For Christians, this might include liturgies, sermons, and prayers that draw on ecological themes of wholeness and the common good, directed toward faith in a better world. Special care should be taken to ensure that congregants find this to be a time of joy and hope, even in the face of ecological crisis.31 These rituals would be followed by (or integrated with) acts of resource-sharing, such as through common meals. Here coordinators would emphasize the rest-giving and resistance aspects of eating, using sustainable food items and making the food freely available to all who wish to participate.32 After this, participants could spend time focusing on outward-directed rest-giving,

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31 Of course, there are different kinds of hope. The type of hope emphasized here would not be the type that looks forward to a new earth as a unilateral act of divine intervention, but a hope that summons human beings to live the new earth now. As Jonathan Moo and Robert White point out, the biblical type of hope is always linked with practical love. See Jonathan A. Moo and Robert S. White, *Let Creation Rejoice: Biblical Hope and Ecological Crisis* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2014), 167.

32 Even though adding a charge to the common meal would make funding it easier, this would take away from the rest-giving aspect of the ritual. Furthermore, outsiders and persons from low-income backgrounds (the homeless, single-caregiver families, youth, the elderly, etc) should be particularly welcome to participate, especially since these are people for whom climate-friendly food may be least available.
through acts of resistance to ecological domination. This would be an appropriate time for
demonstrations, protests, and other public activities raising awareness of those who are kept from
rest because of human activity. This would also be a good time for practical acts of mercy like
those mentioned above, such as repairing bicycles, tending community gardens, distributing
climate-friendly food, or otherwise acting on behalf of those negatively affected by climate
change. Such acts would not initially seem inoperative, but they would constitute a “suspension
of the suspension,” paving the way for rest for others. The day would conclude with more ritual
celebration, expressing joy and thanks for the goodness of life. The core theme of the day would
be an interwoven thread of gratitude and expectation. Leaders should emphasize that the day is
not a duty to be fulfilled, but an expression of the pinnacle of human existence.

As emphasized above, the day would also need to be carried out in conjunction with other
communities. For Sabbath to gain wide acceptance, some level of visibility and opportunity for
mimesis would be necessary. Sabbath, like most rituals, thrives on collaboration and cooperation.
Western culture, however, tends to privatize and individualize rituals. It is imperative for
communities to devote themselves to creating community across boundaries on Sabbath. Jewish
communities should be particular reference points to this end.

Of course, the concepts behind a Climate-Healing Sabbath are applicable in other rituals
besides the traditional Jewish or Christian Sabbath. One can easily imagine the same ideas
entering into rituals surrounding Ramadan, Christmas, or Easter. As long as human beings come

33 See examples of these types of actions in Roger Gottlieb, A Greener Faith: Religious Environmentalism
together in a spirit of genuine inoperativity, devoting themselves to a practice of uninhibited “letting be,” the potential for political healing is present.
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