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Climate Emergency as Revelation: The Tragedy and Illusion of Sovereignty in Christian Political Theologies

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Abstract: In this article, the realities of the climate emergency reveal that human beings, especially those of us in the grips of capitalism, imperialism, and nationalism, have little control over nature and we are inextricably a part of nature. This revelation further exposes the tragedy and illusions of sovereignty, which is produced and maintained, in part, by Judeo-Christian scriptures and political theologies. While this revelatory event is disruptive, it also invites us to reimagine political theologies without the belief that sovereignty is existentially or ontologically necessary for political belonging. This includes embracing the revelation of the infinite, non-privileging care of a non-sovereign God for all creation.

Keywords: climate emergency; belonging; political theology; revelation; sovereignty



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1. Introduction

In the last several years, the discourse around climate change has shifted to climate emergency. There is growing realization of an existential threat regarding the long- and short-term impacts of climate change. At an international conference on climate change, a reporter cornered two scientists, wanting to know their thoughts about the causes of climate change and the possibility of effective responses by nations to slow or stop the destructive trajectory of climate change. The scientists looked at each other. One of the scientists turned back to the reporter and succinctly said, “We’re fucked” (Dufresne 2019, p. 93). I imagine that the “we” the scientist referred to is human beings. However, “we” are not alone. As Elizabeth Kolbert (2014) and Naomi Klein (2014) note, the earth is in the midst of a sixth extinction event,¹ which they and others call the Anthropocene Era²—an era of mass extinctions caused by human beings. Famed Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson (2005) predicts that by the end of this century, over half of all known species will be extinct, leaving a less biodiverse earth and the very real possibility of the eventual extinction of human beings.³

In this article, I consider the climate emergency as a revelatory event that exposes the tragedy and illusion of sovereignty, which is produced and maintained, in part, by Judeo-Christian⁴ scriptures and political theologies (and philosophies⁵). This revelatory event, while painfully disruptive, invites us to reimagine political theologies without the belief that sovereignty is existentially or ontologically necessary for political belonging. To make my case I first identify and discuss the meaning and attributes of sovereignty, as well as the negative impacts on subordinated and subjugated human beings and more-than-human beings. This sets the stage to argue that sovereignty is a central belief in Judeo-Christian scriptures and Western political theologies (and philosophies), shaping political subjectivities and relations. Put differently, I contend that scripture and political theologies operate as apparatuses⁶ that secure the belief in sovereignty vis-à-vis human dwelling as existentially and ontologically necessary. I then move to depict how our climate emergency reveals the tragedy and illusion of our belief in human and divine sovereignty. The last section depicts how this revelation, when acknowledged and embraced, renders

human and divine sovereignty inoperative, which invites forms of political belonging that affirm (1) the infinite, indiscriminate, non-privileging care of a non-sovereign God for all creation and, correspondingly, (2) the categorical political demand to care for all human beings, other-than-human species, and the earth.

Before beginning, it is necessary to offer five clarifications. First, theological renderings of the notion of “revelation” reveal varied characteristics of God with regard to creation and, in particular, human beings. While biblical revelations can be experienced as affirming and pleasantly appealing (e.g., God’s love for creation), they can also be understood as psychosocially disruptive and painful. A revelatory event is disruptive in that it can unsettle our unquestioned and unquestionable “normative” ways of being in the world, rendering inoperative⁷, in this case, human apparatuses of political belonging that depend on beliefs in human and divine sovereignty. In this article, it is the latter that is my focus. A second point concerns the traditional relation between revelation and sin. In one sense, the harm to human beings, more-than-human beings, and the earth by human participation in the construction of ecologically destructive systemic apparatuses such as capitalism, imperialism, and nationalism—which intersect with and depend on the idea of sovereignty—can fall under the heading of social sin, with some human beings bearing more accountability than others. However, my focus is not moralization but instead on depicting the tragic nature of the human theological and philosophical beliefs associated with human and divine sovereignty. Third, the general claims made regarding scripture and Western political theologies regarding the issue of sovereignty are intended to be heuristic rather than definitive or reductive about scripture or political theologies. A fourth and related clarification concerns the heuristic use of scripture to reimagine the revelation of a non-sovereign God. As Roland Boer (2009) notes, Ernst Bloch (and others; Benjamin, Adorno, Althusser, and Žižek) was “enthusiastic about the revolutionary possibilities of certain types of biblical myth” (p. 27). Thus, in critiquing and rendering inoperative scripture and political theologies vis-à-vis sovereignty, an emancipatory space is created wherein we reimagine human belonging in the Anthropocene Age. Finally, focusing on sovereignty is not meant to suggest that this is the only artifice that has moved us into the Anthropocene Age. Clearly, there are other social imaginaries (e.g., capitalism, imperialism) that have contributed to climate change and serve as obstacles to climate action.

2. Sovereignty: Meaning and Attributes

Jean Bodin (1530–1596), a French jurist and political philosopher, was interested in explicating the nature of sovereignty, perhaps because of the political instability resulting from the Protestant Reformation. Of course, sovereignty and its varied forms had been discussed and argued since Plato and Aristotle (Grayling 2019, pp. 35–39), if not before. However, Bodin (2009) sought to identify its fundamental attributes. There are, for Bodin, four essential features of sovereignty, namely, supreme power (no superior), absolute, indivisible and perpetual. One can easily imagine these traits fitting best in relation to God, but, for Bodin, they are features of human sovereignty. The king has no superior (except God); is absolute in his rule; his power and rule cannot be divided; and his rule is perpetual, handed down to his sons (in rare cases, daughters). In the 20th century, German jurist Carl Schmitt (2005) picked up on Bodin’s work, pointing out that it is widely referenced in previous political philosophical works on sovereignty. Schmitt writes:

Bodin asked if the commitments of the prince to the states or people dissolve his sovereignty. He answered by referring to the case in which it becomes necessary to violate such commitments. To change laws or to suspend them entirely according to the requirements of a situation, a time, and a people. If in such cases the prince had to consult a senate or the people before he could act, he would have to be prepared to let his subjects dispense with him. Bodin considered this an absurdity because, according to him, the estates were not masters over the laws . . . Sovereignty would thus become a play between two parties. (pp. 9–10)

What Schmitt is pointing to is the idea of “the state of exception” as a central feature of sovereignty. “The sovereign”, he writes, “is he who decides on the state of exception” (p. 5). He adds, “What characterizes an exception is principally unlimited authority, which means the suspension of the entire existing [juridical] order. In such a situation it is clear that the state remains, whereas the law recedes” (p. 12). The law and the state, in other words, are subordinate to the absolute authority of the sovereign.

Philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2005) further clarifies the state of exception. “The state of exception”, he writes, “is not a dictatorship (whether constitutional or unconstitutional, commissarial or sovereign) but a space devoid of law, a zone of anomie in which all legal determinations—and above all the very distinction between public and private—are deactivated” (p. 50). One immediately can see the paradox here. For Agamben (1998), the “paradox of sovereignty consists in the fact that the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order. The sovereign, having the legal power to suspend the validity of the law, legally places himself outside the law” (p. 15). “The sovereign”, Sergei Prozorov (2014) remarks, “remains a borderline or threshold figure at the limit of order” (p. 99). As a threshold figure, the sovereign “is both the sign of the rule and the jurisdiction of law, and supervenes the law” (Brown 2001, p. 59). What is interesting and important here is that the sovereign possesses the supreme (legal) authority to set aside laws because they are given the legal power to determine the exception. Add to this the idea that the state of exception is at play in the very creation of the law itself. Put another way, the establishment of the law already reveals the state of exception. I stress here that the state of exception does not make the law invalid, but rather that in the exception, the law is simply not applicable. The law remains in effect, but is set aside.

Naturally, the sovereign need not act on the state of exception. It can simply be potential, which is nevertheless powerful. Prozorov (2014) writes, “even when exceptional or emergency measures are not actualized in policies, they remain potentialities of state action and may indeed be more effective as potentialities, capable of regulating conduct by sheer threat of their actualization” (p. 101). This is analogous to the U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS) having the power to audit someone but choosing not to exercise it. The threat of being audited motivates many people to make sure they pay their taxes.

Wendy Brown (2010), surveying classical theorists of modern sovereignty such as Thomas Hobbes, Jean Bodin, and Carl Schmitt, summarizes the core attributes of sovereignty: “supremacy (no higher power), perpetuity (no term limits), decisionism (no boundedness by or submission to law), absolutism and completeness (sovereign cannot be probable or partial), nontransferability (sovereignty cannot be conferred without cancelling itself), and specialized jurisdiction (territoriality)” (p. 22). Given this, I want to elaborate further on other attending features of sovereignty.

First of all, there is no such thing as a sole sovereign. Sovereignty exists because of the construction of social and political apparatuses that produce and maintain the idea of sovereignty and the belief in its necessity for political belonging and stability. Thomas Hobbes’ leviathan is, perhaps, the most obvious depiction of the absolute belief in the necessity of sovereignty—lest we sink into social chaos and brutality. The social contract citizens make with the all-powerful leviathan provides society with peace and stability so that citizens can, within limits, pursue their individual desires. The apparatuses that produce the belief in the necessity of a sovereign also reveal the presence of sovereign classes. A sovereign or leviathan, then, cannot exist without sovereign classes that support and advance supremacy, the state of exception, perpetuity, etc.

Another key feature of sovereignty’s state of exception is its dependence on force/violence or the threat of violence. Agamben (2005) addresses both law-making and law-preserving violence, and he asserts that what the “law can never tolerate . . . is the existence [of violence] outside the law” (p. 53). Violence outside the law “neither makes nor preserves law, but deposes it.” As I understand this, sovereignty accompanies and depends on legitimate violence exercised by the apparatuses that produce and maintain the sovereign. Sovereign violence is never outside the law, even though the law is set aside. Violence

outside the law is a threat to the sovereign because the sovereign and sovereign classes possess the sole legitimacy with regard to the exercise of political violence. To return to Hobbes' leviathan, the leviathan—a construction of human beings—retains the only capacity for legitimate violence.

Of course, history is replete with stories of violence perpetrated by those who question, reject, or rebel against the sovereign. Even those in sovereign classes can join in the violence to overthrow the sovereign. Yet, as Saul Newman (2019) notes, “[R]evolutions and counter-revolutions often share the same structure—both gravitate around sovereignty and both affirm its place of transcendence and authority. While counterrevolution safeguards the constitutional state order by suspending it in the state of exception—thus creating, artificially, a situation that resembles a revolution—a revolution destroys an existing constitutional state order only to erect a new one in its place. The core of sovereignty is retained in both” (p. 106). The violent overthrow of the sovereign simply shifts the legitimacy of violence to the revolutionary group. Sovereignty and political violence remain unquestioned and unquestionable.

A related feature of sovereignty and violence is that it is founded on relations of subordination and, more often than not, subjugation. All residents are subordinate to the sovereign, including those of the sovereign classes. Residents who disobey or reject the sovereign are subject to the sovereign's disciplinary apparatuses. For Hobbes, citizens willingly accept subordinate status for the sake of the political security and stability that are needed for the freedom to pursue their individual desires. Indeed, most people internalize the beliefs that subordination to the sovereign is natural or existentially necessary. There are also numerous examples in history of sovereigns and their sovereign classes subjugating people (e.g., enslaving people, jailing dissidents, terrorizing persons, colonization).

Relations of subordination also point to the hierarchical nature of sovereignty, which is accompanied by beliefs in exceptionalism and beliefs in superiority and inferiority. To exercise the state of exception necessarily accompanies the belief that sovereigns (and sovereign classes) are exceptional (in their beingness). The apparatuses that produce and maintain sovereignty also carry this belief in exceptionalism, which is buttressed by the social, economic, and political privileges that accrue to the sovereign and elite sovereign classes. This exceptionalism is joined to the beliefs in the superiority of the sovereign and sovereign classes and the inferiority of non-sovereign classes.

One might question this by suggesting that democracy as the rule of the people is egalitarian, thus eschewing relations of subordination and beliefs in exceptionalism, superiority, and inferiority. First, the notion of democracy retains the belief in sovereignty as necessary for ordering political belonging. In a “democracy” the “people” have supreme power, exercise the state of exception, legitimate the use of political violence, and the indivisibility of the people's rule. If everyone is sovereign, then no one is subordinate, exceptional, and superior. Of course, reality reveals something different. In one of the earliest democracies—Athens—it is clear that adult male citizens were the sovereign class, while non-citizens (barbarians) and women were constructed as subordinate and inferior classes. This group of men exercised the state of exception and political violence by sentencing Socrates to death for corrupting the youth. Leaping to the 21st century and the putative U.S. democracy, sovereign elites (political and economic classes) believe and act out their exceptionalism and beliefs in their superiority. People of color, poor persons, incarcerated persons, and immigrant persons without documents are examples of those deemed to be inferior, especially in relation to white citizens (see Desmond 2016; Wilkerson 2020).⁸

Implicit in the attributes of relational subordination/subjugation, violence, and beliefs in exceptionalism, superiority, and inferiority are two other features of sovereignty, namely, instrumental knowing and relating. The obvious and egregious illustration of instrumental knowing and relating is found in the term “bare life”, which, for Agamben, refers to persons “caught up in the sovereign ban . . . stripped of all protections and abandoned to the force of law” (Prozorov 2014, p. 102). Stated more starkly, “The sovereign sphere is the sphere in

which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide” (Agamben 1998, p. 83). That is, “it is the sovereign who, insofar as he decides on the state of exception, has the power to decide which life may be killed without the commission of homicide” (p. 142). All of this comes across as pretty drastic and dramatic, perhaps referring to a tiny segment of the population that have committed crimes, but this is not the case. Bare life can be seen in instrumentalizing African Americans (Alexander 2010; Anderson 2016), and is produced by apparatuses that deny or disrupt the distribution of the resources needed to live well (Fraser and Honneth 2003). An example of this is the rise of the “Black Lives Matter” movement, which rose in response to the killing of African Americans by police (an apparatus of sovereign’s violence)—killings that are not considered to be homicides. Instrumental knowing and relation are also evident in innumerable examples of how, in a market society, those who are employed are constructed in terms of the demands of the capitalistic system (global sovereign) and those who are poor (Marx’s reserve army of labor) are disparaged and denied resources, which undermines their well-being (Lukács 1968). An additional example of the instrumental knowing and relating vis-à-vis sovereignty is the categorization and objectification of so-called illegal immigrants who are residents of the society without rights of citizenship.

The final attribute of sovereignty, which is tacitly evident in the discussion above, is its inherent exclusivity. This exclusivity can be seen within the borders of a nation. The sovereign and the sovereign classes exclude or restrict non-sovereign classes from participating in public spaces of speaking and acting together. Ancient Athens excluded women and resident “barbarians” from engaging in political spaces of speaking and acting together. Today, voter suppression laws, laws regarding those who have committed felonies, and immigration laws exclude millions of persons from political spaces. Sovereignty is also exclusionary when it comes to those who reside outside the boundaries/borders, which are constructed by the sovereign and the sovereign classes. Wendy Brown (2010), for instance, notes the proliferation of nation-states that are building walls to ensure the exclusion of those deemed to be threats (e.g., U.S. southern border wall, Israel’s wall separating themselves from Palestinians).

Thus far I have focused primarily on sovereignty and its relation to human beings and their political belonging. I want to extend these attributes of sovereignty to our relations to more-than-human species and the earth. Colby Dickinson (2015), referring to the work of Giorgi Agamben, contends that in Western political philosophies (and their affirmations of sovereignty), there is a “deep ontological rift . . . between animal and human” (p. 173). Agamben (2004) writes:

It is as if determining the border between human and animal were not just one question among many discussed by philosophers and theologians, scientists and politicians, but rather a fundamental metaphysico-political operation in which alone something like ‘man’ can be decided upon and produced. If animal life and human life could be superimposed perfectly, then neither man nor animal—and, perhaps, not even the divine—would any longer be thinkable. (p. 92)

The ongoing drive in the West to differentiate between human beings and animals, which is a project of philosophy, theology, and some of the sciences, leads to “a radical and total discontinuity between human and nonhuman” (Kompridis 2020, p. 252) and, consequently, privileging human beings over all other species—anthropocentrism. In short, these political theologies and philosophies produce the belief in the sovereignty of human beings over other-than-human beings and the earth. Human beings have supreme power. We believe we are superior and exceptional (anthropocentrism). Our power vis-à-vis other species and the earth is absolute. We exercise “legitimate” violence toward other species who are deemed subordinate and can be legitimately subjugated for human benefit, which accompanies a disavowal of the singularities and needs of other species and the earth. If other species and the earth are considered in terms of the political, it is almost always instrumentally for the sake of human political belonging, which also means that the needs of other species are considered to the degree that they benefit human beings.

Evidence for this abounds: factory farming, the use of other-than-human beings in scientific experiments, the removal of, if not extinction of species for the sake of human land use, mining operations such as mountain top removal, which also undermines the well-being of local human beings.⁹

In summary, sovereignty comprises a number of interrelated features. Jean Bodin identified four features, namely, supreme power (no superior), absolute, indivisible, and perpetual. An aspect of supreme power is the sovereign's state of exception, which entails the capacity to decide to set aside laws. Sovereignty and the state of exception are founded on political violence or the threat of political violence, which is part of possessing supreme power. I also noted that a sovereign exists by virtue of sovereign classes and the attending apparatuses that produce and maintain a belief that sovereignty is existentially necessary for political belonging. Included in this are the beliefs in superiority and exceptionalism of the sovereign and sovereign classes, as well as the inferiority of subordinate and subjugated others (which includes other species). Three other attending features I identified were exclusivity, objectification or instrumentalization, and the disavowal of the needs and singularities of othered human beings and other species and the earth.

3. Sovereignty, Scripture, and Political Theologies

Carl Schmitt believed that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts" (Brown 2010, p. 59). Similarly, Wendy Brown (2010) notes that "sovereignty, secularized for political purposes, does not lose its religious structure or bearing, even as it ceases to have the direct authority of God at its heart" (p. 70). In the West, this religious structure is rooted in Judeo-Christian scriptures, which are foundational for the construction of political theologies. The stories in scripture consistently and unquestioningly affirm the ontological sovereignty of God. The attributes of sovereignty are clearly present in the belief that God is sovereign over all creation. God is superior, all creation is subordinate. God's power is absolute, indivisible, and eternal, which is evident in the creation stories, as well as miracle stories. That is, as part of God's absolute power, God can exercise the state of exception, setting aside natural and divine laws. Having heard the laments of the Israelites in Egypt, for example, God performed a series of violent miracles, killing untold numbers of Egyptians and devastating the land. More miracles took place during the Israelites sojourn in the desert, and when it came to entering the promised land, God, the ultimate sovereign, commanded the Israelites, in what today we would call ethnic cleansing, to remove the inhabitants—apparently setting aside previous commandments regarding killing, coveting, and stealing. God's exercise of the state of exception also means that God's political violence, whether performed through miracles or commanded, is legitimate. We read, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen 18:25). This means that God's commands are unfailingly just and those who obey the divine sovereign do right, which accompanies absolute disavowal of the suffering inflicted on subordinate and subjugated othered human beings, other species, and the land. The sovereign and those who obey the sovereign's order to kill are without remorse. It is also important to note that the stories in Genesis and Exodus are devoid of the voices of those who were subjugated. Harm inflicted on othered human beings, othered animals, and the earth goes unremarked. The silence reveals the din of the sovereign's commands and a disavowal of the singularities, needs, and sufferings of subjugated others.

The attributes of divine sovereignty are also evident in God's relation to the Israelites as the chosen people. By virtue of God choosing the Israelites, they retain the belief in their exceptional status, which is reflected in their God-given "right" to inhabit the promised land. Of course, this exceptional status comes with the demand to obey the covenant and God uses political violence or the threat of physical violence to punish those who resist. Consider that the Israelites (read men), who were subordinate to God, were repeatedly called a stiff-necked people, usually by God (Ex. 32:9, 33:3, 5; 34:9; Deut. 9:6, 13; 10:16). Synonyms of stiff-necked are obstinate, headstrong, strong-willed, obdurate, and bull-headed. This suggests that not everyone was happy to submit to divine or a

human appointed sovereign. The response to obdurate Israelites entailed varied forms of punishment (or threat of punishment) by God—political violence. Of course, the ultimate exercise of political exclusionary violence toward members of the community was death or bare life. God, for instance, commanded Moses to kill those Israelites who had rebelled by fashioning a golden calf (Ex. 32:25–29). Absent in the narrative is Moses' hesitation or remorse, which again points to the state of exception, righteous violence, and bare life (killings were not considered sacrifices or homicides).

While God's sovereignty is unquestioned and unquestionable, things become more complicated when it comes to human beings and the Israelites in particular. First, it is important to mention that in Genesis (1:26, 28) God gives human beings dominion over nature. Indeed, God as sovereign has created animals and plants for use by human beings. Of course, one may interpret dominion to mean that God commands human beings to care (stewardship) for nature and for other animals. Even if this is correct, a belief in human sovereignty over nature is retained and has been a pervasive feature of Western political philosophies and theologies, leading to the ontological rift mentioned above.¹⁰ It is more complicated when we turn to sovereignty among the Israelites. Initially, the Israelites viewed God as their sovereign, which meant that any leader (e.g., Moses) appointed by God was subordinate to the sovereign, though not sovereign himself (see [Walzer 2012](#), p. 53). As noted above, in terms of the state of exception, this meant that the Israelites could exercise political violence at God's command. This arrangement, though, proved to be unsatisfactory for these "stiff-necked people." After defeating the Midianites, the elders asked Gideon to be their ruler. Gideon responded, "I will not rule over you, and my son will not rule over you; the Lord will rule over you" (Judges 8:23). Gideon was adhering to the traditional story that God is the only sovereign. Later we learn that the desire to be ruled over by a king continued. The elders of Israel asked Samuel to "appoint for us a king to govern us like other nations" (1Sam. 8:5). God commanded Samuel to go to the people and warn them of the consequences of having a human as their sovereign. Samuel told them that:

These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. (v.11–17)

As Samuel predicted, a human leviathan possesses the state of exception, establishes relations of subordination and subjugation, and rules through actual or threatened political violence. The elders remained adamant, perhaps because having a king would result in the elders' elevation to the sovereign class. God, we read, accepted and fulfilled their request, though God remained sovereign.

Christian scriptures also repeatedly affirm the sovereignty of God, though I will qualify this below. Jesus, as the son of God, tells Pilate that his kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36). The kingdom of God is referenced throughout the Gospels, which only reinforces the idea of God's sovereignty. Perhaps, though, the revelation of the incarnation is a different kind of sovereign God than that of Jewish scriptures, namely, the sovereignty of God's love for all of humanity. Yet, if we turn to the last canonical text, we see an orgy of political violence in heaven and on earth. There is no spoiler alert here since it is fairly obvious how this story of political violence will end. God, the absolute sovereign, prevails by way of violence, leading to a new heaven and a new earth.

The sovereignty of God is lauded in Christian rituals, in the hymns people sing, in sermons, etc. Roman Catholics, along with other denominations, celebrate Christ the King Sunday. Even the monarchical structure of the Roman Catholic polity parallels and looks to the sovereignty of God for its legitimacy. Add to this the innumerable theological texts over the centuries that overtly proclaim God's sovereignty. My point here is threefold. First, scripture, Christian rituals, theologies, and, often, Judeo-Christian polities unquestioningly proclaim the sovereignty of God/Jesus Christ. Second, all of these serve as apparatuses to produce and maintain the idea of and belief in God's sovereignty, as well as the sovereignty of human beings over more-than-human species and the earth. Put another way, these apparatuses produce a belief, often unstated, that sovereignty is necessary for maintaining the polis/ekklesia. Without a leviathan, whether that is God or God's representative on earth, life would be nasty, brutish, and short. Third, scriptural stories of sovereignty, whether human or divine, possess the attributes identified above.

4. Climate Emergency and Revelation of Non-Sovereign Humanity and a Non-Sovereign God

At the beginning of this article, I mentioned Naomi Klein's (2014) and Elizabeth Kolbert's (2014) survey of the data about climate change, as well as E. O. Wilson's (2005) prediction that at least half of all known species will be extinct by the end of this century. When considering the present and future realities of the climate emergency, it is, in my view, an obfuscation to simply say that climate change is caused by human beings, as if all human beings share equal responsibility. It is instead more important to identify particular systems and apparatuses constructed by human beings that lend themselves to harming other human beings, other species, and the earth, and to consider how these apparatuses deflect accountability for the consequent harm. Jason Moore, for instance, coined the term "capitalocene age" to highlight the role of capitalism in climate change. Capitalism, however, is not simply an economic system. It is inextricably tied to political systems, which created (Woods 2017) and maintain it (Brown 2015). Western imperial nation-states, also, were and are largely responsible for globalizing capitalism (Klein 2007). The apparatuses of capitalism, imperialism, and nationalism are intertwined. One thing that binds them together is the notion of sovereignty and its attending attributes. For instance, capital is sovereign in that it rules over workers and nature, though regulations and protections mitigate some of capitalism's excesses. In addition, capitalism as sovereign is produced and maintained by sovereign political classes (Piketty 2014, 2020; Reich 2007; Woods 2017), who make laws that legitimate the dominion of capitalists. Moreover, the sovereign political classes of imperial nation-states are sovereign over subordinate and subjugated countries. The intersection and interplay of these apparatuses produce and maintain the belief in individual sovereignty over "nature", as well as the belief that the sovereignty of these apparatuses is necessary for human life and political belonging. This belief in the necessity of sovereignty is noted in Frederick Jamison's (2016) remark that "it is easier . . . to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" (p. 3 or nationalism).

The realities of climate change reveal that human beings, especially those of us in the grips of capitalism, imperialism, and nationalism, have little control over nature and we are inextricably a part of nature. Yes, we obviously do have some control, and many of us have used this control to exploit other-than-human beings and the earth for our short-term benefits; yet, we are not sovereign over the earth. Climate devastation, in other words, demonstrates that the earth is not subordinate to human beings and we cannot subjugate the earth without undermining human and other-than-human existence. We are limited in knowledge and in our ability to manage the earth and the climate. Of course, some scientists and engineers are seeking to develop macro geoengineering solutions to mitigate the destructive aspects of climate change. Meanwhile, human sovereignty with regard to capitalism, nationalism, and imperialism remains unquestioned and unchanged by billions of people. The claim here is that although we can continue to try to control,

subjugate, and subordinate other species and the earth, climate change reveals the tragic and illusory nature of this belief and the actions that stem from it. In short, human sovereignty and its attributes are illusory precisely because the likely possibility of human extinction demonstrates an end to human political power, whether it is understood as necessary for human belonging or in relation to other species and the earth. Extinction, in other words, negates any relation of subordination and subjugation, as well as any belief in human superiority and other-species inferiority.¹¹ Jonathan Schell (2020) summarizes this well, remarking, “If we conquer nature, we will find ourselves among the defeated” (p. 19; see also Wallace-Wells 2020).¹² Moreover, we will have defeated ourselves by refusing to let go of our belief in sovereignty—both human and divine.

Perhaps a religious reader will concede that human beings are not sovereign over nature and that the belief in human sovereignty over nature has led to ecological disasters, yet continue to affirm God’s sovereignty. The climate emergency as a revelatory event may show human hubris, ignorance, and greed, but it does not, in and of itself, negate God’s sovereignty. My response to this is to first note how persistent the belief in the idea and necessity of a sovereign God is. Maybe we feel a need to believe that, despite the mess many of us have created and despite the possibility of human extinction, God is and will be in control, enacting miracles when needed. This said, the climate emergency as a revelatory event cannot definitively reveal the non-sovereignty of God, but it can invite us to imagine a non-sovereign God, and, for Christians, a non-sovereign Christ (Caputo 2006). Put another way, the climate emergency can move us to realize that the idea of sovereignty and the belief that it is necessary for human dwelling are strictly speaking human constructions, which ultimately say nothing about God or Being. Second, if one can argue that political belonging does not depend, necessarily, on human or divine sovereignty, then would we really need to believe in the sovereignty of God? Or, relatedly, does our “belonging” to God and belonging to each other (polis) require belief in God’s sovereignty? More specifically, can we turn to scripture for help in considering a non-sovereign humanity and a non-sovereign God? Moreover, what would human dwelling or belonging mean without a sovereign or sovereign classes—divine or human? Will all of this result in changing how we relate to each other, to other species, and the earth?

As to the question about scripture and sovereignty, Jacob Taubes (2004) provides an interesting and important interpretation of Paul’s epistle to the Romans (see also Crossan 1995, 2007; Horsley 2003, 2011). Commenting on Taubes’ work, Hartwich et al. (2004) write that the Epistle to the Romans was “directed against Rome and relativizes Rome’s world imperialism . . . and directed against Jerusalem in that it relativizes the limits of Israel’s self-definition, which are founded on *nomos* and *ethnos*” (p. 117). Stated differently, Jesus “frees himself from the determination of *ethnic* ties and the Roman idea of empire” (p. 119; emphasis mine) as a condition of belonging vis-à-vis the *ecclesia* or polis. Hartwich et al. explain further that Paul, from Taubes’ perspective, “doesn’t oppose a political theology of the Torah to the Roman *nomos* of the earth in order to establish a new national form of rule. He fundamentally negated the law as a force of political order. With this, *legitimacy is denied to all sovereigns of this world, be they imperial or theocratic*” (p. 121). The Epistle, then, “undermines the function of the law as ordering power, be it in the context of political order, church order, or a natural order” (p. 122). The messiah does not and cannot represent or legitimate institutions of earthly sovereignty nor political violence used to establish belonging. Instead, the messiah “can only make them irrelevant and ultimately replace them” (p. 142). I add here that this new political order of love of neighbor and enemy is further understood as based on the revelation of Jesus as the incarnation of the infinite, indeterminate care of a non-sovereign God (Caputo 2006). Put another way, political dwelling vis-à-vis the *ecclesia* is not dependent on relations of subordination/subjugation or beliefs in superiority and inferiority, which are inherent in any iteration of sovereignty. Likewise, the *ecclesia* does not rely on the threat or use of political violence to order belonging and cooperation. That said, Hartwich et al. (2004) point out that the “position of Paul doesn’t imply any positive political form” (p. 121), though, the

principles of dwelling are identified, namely, care, mercy, compassion, and forgiveness.¹³ They continue by arguing that the “ecclesia understands itself, not as an autarchic polis that separates itself militantly from other communities, but as a new universal world order” (p. 130). “The new political order”, they continue, “is constituted by love in its two forms: love of neighbor (inward love) and love of enemy (outward love)” (p. 130).

Giorgio Agamben (2013), who is familiar with Taubes’ work, provides a philosophical view of this form of political belonging without sovereignty. In the coming community, he argues, human beings can “co-belong without any representable condition of belonging”, “without affirming identity” (p. 5). According to Agamben, “What the State (or sovereign) cannot tolerate in any way is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that human beings co-belong without any representable condition of belonging” (p. 5). Using Agamben’s notion of inoperativity, identity that is rooted in and dependent on sovereign apparatuses (Jewish or Roman in the case of Paul), is deactivated with regard to who belongs and who merits care. It is possible to hear echoes of Agamben’s coming community in Galatians (3:28 NRSV): “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ.”

Taubes and Agamben envision political belonging that does not depend on the belief in the necessity of human or divine sovereignty. As a result of shedding this belief, interhuman relations are altered, as well as the possibility for more just and caring relations between human beings, other species, and the earth. First, let me return to Agamben and sovereignty. Above I noted Agamben’s contention that Western political theologies and philosophies produce and maintain an ontological rift—“a radical and total discontinuity between human and nonhuman” (Kompridis 2020, p. 252). This ontological rift privileges human beings over all other species.¹⁴ Agamben (2004) asserts further that when we render these apparatuses of sovereignty inoperative, it will “show the central emptiness” of the proposition that human beings are superior and privileged beings (p. 92). Rendering these apparatuses inoperative creates space for relating to other species and earth in ways that respect the singularities of other species and the earth.

The coming community, then, establishes belonging that does not depend on a sovereign state constructing and legitimizing particular identities vis-à-vis belonging. Those human and other-than-human species that are present belong and, therefore, are due care—a categorical demand to care for all who belong. At the same time, the deactivating apparatuses that produce a belief in human sovereignty over other species, makes possible the realization that other-than-human species are necessary for human belonging—the very existence of a polis depends on a biodiverse earth. Lest one believe that this is an unattainable utopian idea, we need only turn to the Norwegian town of Longyearbyen¹⁵ that requires no visa to belong and is not “ruled” by an individual or a group.¹⁶ It is a town without visas and there are over 50 nationalities represented. It is an inclusive community that seeks to care for and respect its residents—human and other-than-human (and the earth). I add that in the last 30 years, there has been a growing trend toward creating eco-villages throughout the world (U.S., Chile, Canada, Japan, etc.),¹⁷ where people live in cooperation with nature. These eco-villages are diverse, but they are not organized by apparatuses of capitalism and nationalism or the attending illusions of human dominion, exceptionalism, superiority, and entitlement. There are also efforts by some Christian communities to find ways for more sustainable living. “Eco-Church” was started by the Diocese of London in 2016 and now has over 1500 member churches. In the U.S., Robert Shore-Goss (2016) has been the senior pastor of MCC United Church of Christ in California since 2004. During his pastoral leadership, he and other pastoral leaders have listened to congregants and facilitated the congregation’s discernment about climate change and how to respond (see also, Antal 2018; Spencer and White 2007). This said, it is not entirely clear that these Christian communities, while ecologically minded, have shed beliefs that are embedded in scripture and theologies regarding human and divine sovereignty. Nevertheless, they are pursuing forms of political dwelling that take into account the needs of other human beings, other species, and the earth.

If climate change is a revelatory event that invites human beings to render inoperative the apparatuses that produce and maintain beliefs in human sovereignty, then this event may similarly disclose the revelation of a non-sovereign God's indeterminate, and infinite care of all creation—not simply privileging human beings. Given this, we may turn to scripture and the revelation of Jesus Christ, not as a confirmation of divine or human sovereignty, but rather as the possibility of belonging based on non-sovereign care for all those who reside, which today includes the recognition of other-than-human species and the earth as the material foundation of human belonging and flourishing.

5. Conclusions

Albert Camus ([1947] 2002) remarked that “[W]hen an abstraction starts to kill you, you have to get to work on it” (p. 69). In this article I have claimed that climate change reveals that sovereignty is the abstraction that is killing us and millions of other species. To “work” on this abstraction includes first acknowledging it. Only then can we begin to envision how we might live and relate to each other and other species without this abstraction. As Clayton Crockett (2012) suggests, “We need to experiment radically with new ways of thinking and living, because the current paradigm is in a state of exhaustion, depletion, and death” (p. 165). I also argued that the revelation of climate emergency invites us to reimagine the Christian revelation as one that invites believing and living together without the apparatuses of human and divine sovereignty. It is altogether another question whether this will be enough.

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Notes

- ¹ There is considerable debate about the idea of a sixth extinction event and, if so, what date is to be used to mark the beginning of this event. See Northcott (2017) and Nichols and Gogineni (2020).
- ² Scientists Crutzen and Stoermer (2000) coined the term “Anthropocene Age” to indicate that we are now out of the Holocene Age.
- ³ The scientific data regarding global warming is mountainous and easily attainable, which is why I have decided not to take it up here. I am presuming that readers are already acquainted with some of the research since it is part of the news nearly every day. However, for those who may be interested in some of the recent research, I suggest the following websites: Sixth Assessment Report (ipcc.ch) accessed 8 February 2022; NASA: Climate Change and Global Warming accessed 8 February 2022.
- ⁴ The use of this appellation is simply to identify the scriptural sources used for some of the beliefs associated with the notion of sovereignty that emerge from Western Christian political theologies and philosophies. To use an alternative term, such as Abrahamic scriptures, would incorrectly imply my familiarity with Islamic scriptures and political theologies.
- ⁵ The idea of sovereignty is not simply a concern of political theologians. Secular political philosophers have, since the Enlightenment, argued about various iterations of sovereignty being necessary for political dwelling. While this paper concerns political theologies that promulgate notions of human and divine sovereignty, I contend that the climate emergency reveals the illusions and tragedy of sovereignty promulgated by Western political philosophies.
- ⁶ For Giorgi Agamben (2009) the term “apparatus” refers to “a set of practices, bodies of knowledge, measures and institutions that aim to manage, govern, control, and orient—in a way that purports to be useful—the behaviors, gestures, and thoughts of human beings” (p. 13). Referencing Foucault, Agamben writes that “in a disciplinary society, apparatuses aim to create—through a series of practices, discourses, and bodies of knowledge—docile, yet free, bodies that assume their identity and their ‘freedom’ as subjects” (p. 19).
- ⁷ For Agamben “inoperativity” means to deactivate the functioning of apparatuses, which does not mean that these apparatuses do not continue to operate or do not continue to have effects (Prozorov 2014, pp. 31–34).
- ⁸ Let me complicate this a bit further. Western nations affirm democracy, yet, in reality, democracy is mostly a mirage—a seemingly unattainable ideal. Wendy Brown (2015), in a nod to Agamben, notes that “capital takes shape as an emerging global sovereign. Capital alone appears perpetual and absolute, increasingly unaccountable and primordial, the source of all commands, yet beyond the reach of *nomos*. Capital produces life absent provisions of protection and ties of membership, turning population around the world into *homo sacer* (bare life)” (p. 64). More particularly, “states are subordinated to the market, govern for the market, gain and lose legitimacy according to the market’s vicissitudes” (p. 108). Taking this further, Sheldon Wolin (2008)

argues that the dominance of neoliberal capitalism has resulted in an inverted totalitarian system in which the state is used to legitimate and extend the power of the market (the new sovereign with political and economic elite sovereign classes), through legal privatization of previously public institutions, deregulation, austerity measures, and the expansion of money's influence in the political process. Moreover, non-state institutions such as corporations, think tanks, lobbying groups, etc., (sovereign classes) work closely with the state to deregulate and privatize the common. Inverted totalitarian systems, Wolin argues, project power inward by "combining with other forms of power, such as evangelical religion, and most notably encouraging a symbiotic relationship between traditional government and the system of 'private' governance represented by the modern corporation" (p. xvi). The accumulation of the various forms of power means there is no clear leader or sovereign of the system, as there would be in a totalitarian system (p. 44). In totalitarian states, there is a dictator who is sovereign, while in inverted totalitarian societies there are many leaders from different parts of society (e.g., political, economic, religious—sovereign classes) who support and shape the totalitarian system. Because there is no clear, single institution or person involved in using the state, it becomes impossible to locate the leaders who are responsible, heightening a sense of helplessness and futility among many citizens. I would add that while the center of power is difficult to locate, citizens may continue to believe in democracy and believe that the power resides in traditional government institutions and in the democratic citizenry when, in fact, it is diffused over a wide area and subservient to the needs of the market god (Cox 2016).

- ⁹ Of course, one can cite numerous examples of human beings caring for other species and the earth, but the long history of human sovereignty over "nature" and systemic disavowal of the singularities and needs of other species are evident in the destructive realities of climate change.
- ¹⁰ It is not simply theology and philosophy that affirm human sovereignty over nature. Devout Anglican, philosopher, and scientist Francis Bacon (1561–1626), for example, claimed that "the practical aim of improving humanity's lot [depended on] the increased understanding and control of nature" (in Grayling 2019, p. 197). There are numerous instances of scientists tacitly claiming sovereignty over other animals and the earth (e.g., experimenting on other animals, developing technologies for fracking, mountain top removal mining, etc.).
- ¹¹ The possible extinction of human beings does not mean "nature" is sovereign. Applying the notion of sovereignty to nature is a category mistake. Sovereignty is a human concern and pertains only to human beings.
- ¹² Alan Watts (1957) also points out Western preoccupations with conquering nature, as if nature is an object to serve the needs of humanity or that "nature" can actually be conquered (pp. 174–75).
- ¹³ Arendt (2005) argues that, because of human limitations and failings, forgiveness is necessary for a viable polis.
- ¹⁴ Philosophers Deleuze and Guattari (2003) agree with Agamben's claim, arguing that "We make no distinction between man and nature . . . man and nature are not like two opposite terms confronting each other . . . rather they are one and the same essential reality" (pp. 4–5). These philosophers argue that the ontological rift is a human construction and one that is, in the end, deadly for human beings and other species. Interestingly, earlier echoes of this are evident in Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1849) writings about nature.
- ¹⁵ <https://en.visitsvalbard.com/visitor-information/destinations/longyearbyen> (accessed on 28 July 2021).
- ¹⁶ Another illustration is noted by Bryant Rousseau (2016), who points out that New Zealand has two representatives in Parliament whose duty is to represent the lands and rivers of particular areas of the country. Granted, New Zealand is a democracy, which still retains the notion of sovereignty. Yet, there is a realization that nature and other species are integral to the political well-being of the people and therefore need to be represented.
- ¹⁷ Ecovillages: definition, examples and characteristics—Iberdrola accessed 11 February 2022.

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