

## Article

# Biopolitics, Immunity, and Religion: A Brief Critical Reading of Roberto Esposito

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**Abstract:** In Western culture, it is possible to trace an archeology of the political as an effect of theological-political devices (essentially Christian-inspired). If we add to this the evolution of politics, in modern times, towards biopolitics, then this relationship focuses on very concrete topics. This is the case of the immunological process—from a personal, social, and philosophical perspective—thoroughly analyzed by the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito. In the context of his philosophical immunology, the place of religion is mainly archaeological and is interpreted critically: either as an immunization mechanism that results in self-immunization, destroying what it intends to defend; or in another way, from a perspective closer to the Christian tradition, as a “theological-political machine”, based on the “person” device, which ends up giving rise to binarisms that dissolve themselves into the One, by the domain of one of the poles. This article aims to critically analyze his position on both aspects, proposing a reading close to his thought but which is, at the same time, somewhat different. This proposal is directly inspired by neither a binarian nor an immunological, but rather a “ternary” trinitarian theology. The originality of the article lies in evaluating the place of religion within Esposito’s philosophical immunology—which has not been worked on—as well as in a critical discussion on his interpretation either of religion or of some theological-political devices; this critical approach is based on an alternative reading of the same topics.

**Keywords:** biopolitics; philosophical immunology; political theology; community



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## 1. Introduction

The Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito has developed a reflection concentrated on the category of politics, with a particular focus on biopolitics (Fulco 2021; Cacciari and Esposito 2013). As part of this reflection, he elaborated a proposal called, in his own nomenclature, philosophical immunology. In this approach, it is possible to think of a proper place for the religious dimension<sup>1</sup>, especially in its political articulation and political relevance. The present study intends to understand and critically situate, within this proposal, the place of religion, first of all, from the perspective of the “immunity” category. Furthermore, in his philosophical immunology, the reference to certain theological-political devices or *dispositifs* that influenced the Western world, and which are critically analyzed, occupies a prominent place, namely in the sense of discovering the place of the non-political dimension in the constitution of human communities. This dimension of Esposito’s proposal makes it possible to deepen the place of religion, namely Christianity, in a philosophical immunology, exploring the archaeological and genealogical significance of certain concepts which are from theological origin, like the concept of “person”, as well as their impact on the configuration of Western societies, namely in the political dimension. The study that follows, in addition to presenting some fundamental lines into Esposito’s thoughts, intends to critically analyze the way in which he situates the religious dimension and how he analyzes the effect of theological-political devices, advancing a proposal directly inspired by the Italian philosopher and his challenges, but with some significant changes.

To accomplish what it proposes, the article begins by presenting the philosophical immunology project, as developed by Esposito himself, based on a group of philosophers (1); afterwards, the way he understands the religious phenomenon within this immunology will be presented, drawing mainly on Derrida (2); then the subject will be deepened philosophically, exploring the way in which Esposito understands the genealogy of politics based on the effect of a certain “theological–political machine” (3); and finally, based on a revisitation of trinitarian theology, a critical reading of Esposito’s approach is sketched (4).

## 2. Biopolitics and Immunology

The period of the recent pandemic can be considered one of the most explicit global manifestations of the biopolitical devices described by Michel Foucault: firstly, the affirmation of politics as governability; and secondly, the expansion and concentration of government activities in the lives of subjects and populations, with a special focus on its strictly biological (or zoological) dimension, which Giorgio Agamben named, after Walter Benjamin, “bare life” (“*nuda vita*”) (Agamben 1995). Regardless of the different positions on that issue, either more radically or more moderately balanced for or against (with Agamben among those who were radically against, and Esposito among those moderately in favor) (Gesueli and Passos 2020), it is indisputable that it was a matter of revelation and, to some extent, the consummation of a paradigm which had been intensified by modernity. The protection and conservation of “bare life” became the central focus of political activity, namely through the classic mechanisms of disciplining individuals, population control, and the politicization of medicine (or the medicalization of politics). Of course, all of this raised more acutely the question of biopolitics that not only reduces politics to the protection of life before and after any other function in the constitution of the *polis*, but also reduces life to its purely biological—or even zoological (cf. Agamben 1995, p. 4)—dimension, transforming the pursuit of *salus* (salvation or health) into a pure concern for biological health and concentrating everything on health policy. The conflict of values, which we witnessed during the pandemic, was merely the clearest revelation of a state of affairs that has marked modern and contemporary societies, in which protection and security have become a primary concern<sup>2</sup>.

It is not my intention to discuss here the different perceptions of the concept of biopolitics (Marzocca 2020), from the most critical to the most receptive positions, and much less to debate the correct interpretation of Foucault’s proposal (Nancy 2020a). In this first step, I only intend to establish the relationship between the biopolitical process that clearly accompanied the pandemic—and which raises the question about the political paradigm that will succeed it—and the concept of philosophical immunology, in the sense of a reading that clearly combines the biological lexicon with the sociopolitical lexicon (in the sense of protecting life, in whatever form), in order to extract some ideas about the plural and diversified place of religion in a social context marked by all of these tensions, potentially collected in the concepts of exposure, contamination, and community, versus confinement, protection, and immunity.

One of Roberto Esposito’s most recent volumes, *Immunità comune. Biopolitica all’epoca della pandemia* (Esposito 2022) will serve as a guide. Here, Esposito presents different philosophical interpretations of reality (ontologies, anthropologies), according to the immunological paradigm, applying them to the post-pandemic situation.

Essentially, the main objective of this step is to think about religion in its relationship with the mechanism of conservation and protection of life, as the main task of the political dimension. A task that is carried out through the category of the body, as an organism that constitutes the horizon that makes life possible—and implies death—whether as a natural, biological (or zoological) body, or as a social or political body.

In his previous book, *Communitas. Origine e destino della comunità*, Esposito had already addressed the philosophical dimension of the immunological paradigm, especially in Hobbes (Esposito 1998, p. 3). At the heart of modern political theory would remain precisely the search for protection, provoked by fear of the other human being (in reality,

as fear of the community), which would lead to the institution of the State as a protective social body, represented in the biological and political body of the sovereign (Leviathan). There, the political–religious dimension of the protective device is even more evident than what will happen in its subsequent biopolitical transformations, in which science (especially medicine) will progressively gain prevalence and where the relationship to an absolute sovereign is diluted (including in its configuration as sovereign state).

Esposito proposes a re-reading of certain landmarks of recent Western thought as a configuration of philosophical immunology, that is, of an interpretation of reality or the strategies of its control as essentially an immunological process<sup>3</sup>. According to him, Nietzsche was the first to establish a more explicit relationship between immunization devices and life, thus inaugurating a particular form of biopolitical reading. At the same time, Nietzsche also inaugurates what could be called immunological thinking, based on a fundamental contradiction between protection and threats to life, which makes the biopolitical process aporetic. According to him, the potency of life invariably threatens life itself, precisely because of its excess; however, by wanting to control this excess, because of a defense instinct, humans threaten their own lives: “To want to preserve oneself is an expression of an extremely painful state, of a limitation of the true basic instinct of life that tends to an expansion of potency” (Nietzsche 1967). The protection that controls vital power, in order to conserve it (namely through morality, law, religion, and subjectivism), invariably destroys it, in a nihilistic way. We are, in practice, facing the phenomenon of autoimmunity, which will accompany all immunological thinking.

Following Nietzsche, Heidegger applied the immunological reading to modern Western thought, insofar as it is interpreted as corresponding to an attempt to immunize the subject against the “threat” of the object; protection is mounted through Cartesian certainty, achieved by creating an image of the world as a representation of reality (Heidegger 1950). Here, too, the cure turns against the organism, through the effects of representative thinking, based on certainty and the idea of ownership of the subject over the object. The harmful, even destructive, effects of this immunological strategy became clear, for example, in Bruno Latour’s criticism of the so-called “asymmetric anthropology” (Latour 1991).

In a way that is possibly closer to Nietzsche’s intention, Esposito states that Freud also considers that resorting to law or morality protects each human being from the chaos of instinct, thus serving as an immunizing device; but, insofar as this protection provokes neuroses, it tends to liquidate life, precisely through its control. At the same time, in reaction to everything that limits them, brothers seek the father’s death as protection from an ancestral threat, except that the limiting effect of the dead father, in the imagination of the children who killed him, becomes even stronger than that of the living father (Freud [1927] 1960). In this sense, the ghost of violence remains alive in all immunization strategies, and it is stronger the more ghostly it is, that is, the less explicit and evident its permanent impact is.

It is precisely to the device of violence as control of violence itself that René Girard dedicates his attention, in his interpretation of the immunological devices of human societies. The scapegoat mechanism is thus interpreted as the basic scheme of all immunization, as a search for protection, in order to survive (personally and communitarian), in the face of the fatal outcome of the mimetic desire that marks every human relationship (Girard 1972). But violence does not solve the problem of violence. Autoimmunity is therefore a permanent danger that threatens to destroy the social organism, as a result of the protective mechanism itself. For Girard, Christianity introduces an unprecedented dimension—precisely as denunciation and the overcoming of the victimization and scapegoat scheme—and can be interpreted as the beginning of another solution. Religion, thus, could appear in a dialectical rupture with the mechanism of violence and its violent control, as we will see. To what extent this device can constitute an archeology for a specific mode of politics remains an open question. We will return to this subject later on.

Returning to Esposito’s reading, Niklas Luhmann would apply the immunity paradigm—as the inclusion of contradiction (possibly as violence or conflict) in the autopo-

etic process of each system—the social system as a whole and each subsystem (Luhmann 1984). In this sense, the immunization process is an endless and central process in all social systems. Its function is to manage insecurity, in the communicative process, as opposed to achieving stable and final security. Here, too, religion occupies a particular place, helping to manage contingencies within the system and the global contingency of the system itself, as well as the non-integrability of many of its elements. And here, too, this social “task” of the religious dimension can have effects on the political, given shape to the archaeological process of the theological–political devices.

Derrida explicitly explores the permanent contradictory process of reality, namely in the co-belonging of life and death. In this sense, all identity delimitations that distinguish the same from the other, the inside from the outside, the own and the strange, are strictly impossible delimitations, because they are invariably marked by their opposite. The process of deferring identities turns all intent of immunization into its opposite, which results in inevitable autoimmunity. The case of religious identities is one of the most obvious. In its own delimitation, religious identity destroys itself. The *indemne*, while sacred, is simultaneously life-giving and potentially life-destroying, without any possibility of overcoming this ambivalence (Derrida et al. 1996).

Finally, according to Esposito, Peter Sloterdijk’s entire work can be considered a philosophical immunology in the strict sense. It would be, in fact, the most complete proposal for philosophical immunology. The volumes of “spheres” approach the immunological periods as human protection strategies in relation to the outside of themselves: the Cosmos that surrounds and protects the Earth (within the sphere that it protects); the Earth as a globe, abandoned to itself (on the surface of the sphere, but within the history it protects); and the individual spheres or bubbles, in the era of the end of history and the end of community (total exposure, seeking protection in the individuality of each bubble). In contrast to this individualized immunity, there is the possibility of a single common immunity for all humanity (Sloterdijk 1998). From a biological perspective, this possibility is tested precisely as a result of the pandemic process—and this is one of the final topics of Esposito’s work, as indicated in the title. From a more properly social, even political and religious, perspective, this question remains open.

In all these approaches to the immunological devices present in human relationships, one can consider the claim of immunity from the perspective of subjects or from the perspective of communities. If it is true that, in a way, immunity takes place in relation to the community (possibly in the sense of radical individualism, or in its corresponding mitigation), in many other ways, it happens in the relationship between communities (in the sense of radical tribalism, or also in its possible mitigation).

In this process, we witness an insurmountable ambiguity of immunization—it does not close itself to the threat (although this may be, in the extreme, one of its paradigms), but integrates it in a controlled way (giving rise to hybridity rather than to tribalism). Instead of affirming a well-defined identity, with clearly delimited contours and which, at the same time, exclude what is different, the immunological device (as it happens in biology and medicine) does not allow identity definitions except in a hybrid form, as exposure to the outside of oneself—in fact, making the very distinction between inside and outside difficult, as is the case in the human body and all the fauna and flora that inhabits it.

At the same time, any immunological device is permanently exposed to the possibility of provoking the phenomenon of autoimmunity. On the one hand, the integration of the threat in itself can turn against the body, destroying what it intends to protect, especially if it happens in an uncontrolled way or in excessive doses; on the other hand, the radical pretense of protection by excluding the outside results, inevitably, in turning against what it protects, as with legalism, moralism, chauvinism, and all kinds of fundamentalism. That is, the body—individual or social—can succumb to excessive protection (in the tribal paradigm) or to excessive exposure (in hybridism). But whichever the case, one will only be able to protect oneself by exposing oneself.

### 3. Religion and Autoimmunity

As already seen, all these analyses could be applied by understanding the different manifestations of the religious phenomenon. On the one hand, because in all these processes religious convictions and practices are often involved—in some cases, as the main protagonists. On the other hand, religious practices, like all individual and social practices, are also marked by immunological devices.

Firstly, biopolitical practices have made the “religious” character of science more evident, especially in medicine and biotechnology. The distinction between health and salvation—*salus*—thus becomes very tenuous. Naturally, many immunological devices specific to biology and applied in medicine thus become permeable to a certain religious dimension, albeit metaphorically (Agamben 2020).

Secondly, reading the political dimension in immunological terms allows an extension to the religious dimension and respective practices, especially insofar as these also include clearly political aspects. I will, therefore, focus on interpretations of the religious dimension, in the context of biopolitical immunology.

The classic interpretation of religious experience as a process referred to as an untouchable dimension or reality can be included in this perspective (Derrida et al. 1996; Esposito 2002, p. 51). It would be about safeguarding an immune, inaccessible, transcendent, unspeakable scope, with effects on the possible immunity of its human representation; this is how the *Homo Sacer* is understood as an exception excluded from the social body (that is why he is immune), but which at the same time is included in it (even as the foundation of society). This dimension would protect humans in the same movement that it would enhance life. Freud, for example, is explicit when referring to it as protection from the fear of death. Of course, in the dialectic of immunology, as Nietzsche had mentioned, this protection devalues concrete earthly life (including “bare life”) and produces illusory images, which can become pathological and neurotic, nihilistic, even. The religious devices of sacredness can therefore turn against what they intend to protect.

One of the social, political, and even juridical configurations of this immunity is precisely the protection through law and through identity (*religio*) against the threat of the different, above all provoked once again by fear; the religious dimension thus constitutes a civil religion, in its function of controlling the contingency and the danger that accompanies it, with the respective fear (Lübbe 1986).

Interestingly, both the religion of untouchable (*indemne*) transcendence and the civil religion of immanent control were replaced in modernity by the alleged political or scientific self-immunization, maintaining remnants of transcendence and civil mystique, which seems to indicate a genealogical relationship between one another, regardless of whether this relationship is read in terms of secularization (Schmitt 1922; Esposito 2013). This more complex interpretation of the phenomena becomes explicit in more recent sociological approaches, overcoming the strict thesis of secularization (Costa 2019; Rosito 2017), as in Luhmann’s systemic perspective. Religion appears as a possibility for the system to survive, in the integration of what is different, what is uncontrollable, what is contingent; immunity (religious or otherwise) does not correspond to a protection that closes off, but to a permanent process of communication, which is synonymous with exposure and openness.

Derrida, for example, intends to do justice to this complexity, by initially conceiving religion as the construction of an unimpaired (sacred) sphere which, at the same time, saves (protecting) and threatens (forbidding); but the historical phenomenon of the Christian religion, for example, is something that includes its own contradiction (life/death; sacralization/secularization). Currently, this happens even in relation to its potential opponents or even competitors, such as technology and even capitalism. Nor does he forget the permanent danger of autoimmunity, whether from democracy or religion or even as an articulation between both, as explicitly happens with fundamentalism (Esposito 2022, p. 49).

Also, Esposito, by explicitly approaching the scope of religious experience, chooses the way proposed by Derrida, inspired by the distinction worked out by Benveniste between *sacer* and *sanctus* (*hieros/agios* in Greek). According to him, all religious experience has

two dimensions: a positive one, which saves (especially from death) and promises life (corresponding to the original sacred); the other one negative, as it establishes prohibitions relating to certain fields of existence, namely through the law (corresponding to the holy, as distinct from the profane). “On the one hand, the sacred can be referred to a situation of vital fullness, and also of expansion of the one or those on whom it is directed” (Esposito 2002, p. 52)<sup>4</sup>. “This first positive side. . . is however matched, in apparently contrastive terms, by another semantic cadence of a negative type. Both the Greek *hagios* and the Latin *sanctus*. . . allude, in fact, to the prohibition regarding something that is forbidden to contact with men and, in broader terms, to the law that sanctions this separation” (Esposito 2002, p. 53)<sup>5</sup>. The immune function of the first dimension consists of the protection it promises; that of the second consists of the exception it establishes.

In a different distinction, namely that established by Levinas between sacred and holy (Levinas 1977), or by Jan Patocka between sacredness and responsibility (Patocka 1981; Derrida 1999), the religious dimension that protects and that forbids would still be completely on the side of sacredness; the dimension of sanctity or responsibility would be placed on the side of human freedom, which corresponds to a requirement posed by the exposure to the other, who contaminates. “There is religion, in the literal sense of the word, from the moment when the secret of the sacred, the orgiastic or demonic mystery would be, if not destroyed, at least dominated, integrated and finally subject to the sphere of responsibility. The subject of responsibility would be the subject who was able to subject the orgiastic or demonic mystery to himself. . . Religion is responsibility, or it is not. His story only makes sense in a transition to responsibility” (Derrida 1999, pp. 16–17)<sup>6</sup>. Instead of immunizing, the religious dimension would be the process of exposing the human to the outside of itself. In this sense, the religious only protects, to the extent that it exposes; hybridity would be an identity constructed on the basis of non-identity.

It is likely in this sense that Girard interprets Christianity as a critical break in the mechanism of immunization of violence through violence—it would be, therefore, a kind of counter-religion, opening up to another way of being. Strictly speaking, Esposito also allows for this interpretation, insofar as he bases community—as opposed to immunity, which he exhaustively explores in his emblematic work *Immunitas. Protezione e negazione della vita*—on the process of permanent exposure to what is different (Esposito 2002). The fact that this community mechanism is not explicitly related to a theological–political or religious device does not prevent this reading from being carried out. In this sense, Esposito’s proposal about community can help us go beyond his strict interpretation of the religious phenomenon.

Religion, instead of protecting from fear (of death or of the other), through an identarian confinement defined using a set of properties, would constitute a demand for exposure, in the recognition of the absolute non-absoluteness of oneself and the community and in the assumption of a responsibility; it would, therefore, be a way of being that lays beyond fear and beyond oneself (individually and as a community). This would correspond to the recognition of an excess of exteriority and the consequent impossibility of ownership; it would be, therefore, exposure to death (as finitude or a limit) instead of protection from death; of the integration of death not as an act of killing, of giving death, sacrificing what is different, but as an act of dying, of giving one’s life as a sacrifice/gift of oneself (Derrida 1999).

From the point of view of the social body, the paradigm of hybridity (corresponding to the device of exposure) would overcome the paradigm of tribalism (corresponding to the device of appropriate identity). At the same time, the danger of autoimmunity, either as overexposure or as overprotection, is permanent. On the one hand, the ghost of dissolution looms over the social body due to the absence of contours; on the other hand, over the same body looms the danger of destruction by expelling the other from himself or the other in himself, to the extreme of *thanatopolitics* or *necropolitics* (Mbembe 2019).

It is in this reformulation of the possible (archaeological and genealogical) place of religion in the constitution of the immunity and community process (also in its political

dimension) that we find clues to the second level of a critical debate with Esposito, equally in an archaeological perspective of the political in articulation with a theological dimension, which in his case leads to the search for an origin prior to the political, in the realm of the non-political (Esposito 2012; Rosito 2015, p. 141). To what extent this scope touches even more closely on a theological archeology of the social body and the relationship between subjects is something that remains open for now.

#### 4. The Theological–Political Machine

In a work published in 2013, entitled *Due: la machina della teologia politica e il posto del pensiero* (Esposito 2013), Esposito dives directly into the debate of a theological archeology of political power which, in part, also extends to a political archeology of certain theological concepts. In this regard, it is not exactly original, since the discussion on the relationship between theological concepts and political concepts—with their respective paradigms—is very old, having found in the work of Carl Schmitt, and in the debate it triggered, possibly one of its most explicit symbols (Schmitt 1922). Esposito’s originality lies in the way he reads all Western history, namely its political dimension, as triggered by a very specific theological–political device, which is precisely the device of *person*.

While possibly not being an exclusively theological device—perhaps not even an originally theological one—its appropriation by theology, carried out specifically by Christianity, explicitly transformed it into a historically and conceptually significant one. Strictly speaking, its Greek origins in the theatrical mask (*prosopon*) and its Roman origins in the scope of law reveal it as a device that leads to a dual—possibly dualistic—understanding of all reality. Between the individual and his mask, in fact, such a distinction was established whereby the device of the mask resulted in transforming the individual, adding an identity that he did not previously have. Between the “bare life” of his being as a biological body and his identity as an actor, there is a duality that separates and, at the same time, merges, but this fusion consists of the body’s absorption by the new identity of the actor. Personhood would always be something added to the previous assumption, which absorbed this same assumption, roughly in the sense of *Aufhebung* in the Hegelian dialectic.

This process is even more explicit in Roman law, insofar as it divides humans between persons and non-persons, through the device of the legal person (*persona*). The dimension of the person is, in reality, functional (as in the case of the mask), and does not coincide with the bodies of the humans in question (as realization of “bare life”); however, it becomes the central modality of the qualification of humans, at different levels, from the maximum personalization of the *dominus*, to the depersonalization of slaves, placed at the level of things.

The structural scheme of the theological–political device itself corresponds to a relationship of permanent tension and, at the same time, of unavoidable union between the theological and the political: “Whether on the historical level or on the conceptual level, the two poles of the theological and the political relate themselves in the continuous attempt to overcome themselves alternately” (Esposito 2013, p. 41). The result of this type of relationship has become so impactful that even the current work of deconstruction is always already within it, which makes it difficult to analyze it. “The fundamental obstacle to penetrating the horizon of political theology resides, in short, in the fact that we are already inside it” (Esposito 2013, p. 12)<sup>7</sup>.

For this very reason, Esposito refers to the whole process as the Heideggerian idea of “machination”, since the process happens as an impact of the theological–political “machine”. Strictly speaking, the fundamental structure of this machine cuts across different dimensions, starting with the very dual-unitary relationship between the theological and the political: “The thesis I advance is that such an exclusionary assimilation procedure is the fundamental provision of the ‘theological–political machine’. This works precisely by separating what it declares to unite and unifying what it divides, through the submission of one part to the domain of the other” (Esposito 2013, p. 45)<sup>8</sup>.

While this relationship of excluding unification, based on a previous dualistic division, is worked on by other genealogical approaches to the relationship between theology and politics—namely, in Schmitt’s case, through the idea of sovereignty and the corresponding separation between friend and enemy—what Esposito proposes is different, finding in the category of person, as transformed from the Greek theater and Roman law, the fundamental device for the functioning of this “theological–political machine”.

At this level, Trinitarian theology (based on the concept of person) itself works as a theological–political “machination”, contrary to what Erik Peterson defended, who based the impossibility of any political theology on Trinitarian monotheism (Peterson 1935). In fact, for Esposito, the Trinitarian device constitutes a highly influential supreme example of the device of division—in this case, between Father and Son—which leads to an excluding unification, insofar as the monotheistic principle (concentrated in the Father) absorbs in the unification what was divided, subjugating the other end of the pole (the Son), resulting in a contraction of “the triadic formula in a dual module, centered on the hierarchical relationship between Father and Son”<sup>9</sup>. This module manifests itself in a “functional distinction between the First person, holder of sovereign power, and the Second, delegated with the effective government of humans” (Esposito 2013, p. 113)<sup>10</sup>. Thus, the application of the same “machination” of the dual-unitary relationship is verified. “As in the case of the dual nature, divine and human, of Christ—or the relationship between soul and body in every human being—a duality tends towards unity, through the submission of one part to the dominion of the other” (Esposito 2013, p. 117)<sup>11</sup>.

Now, in line with this mechanical structure, the theological–political device of the person, through its “machination” throughout Western history—within which we find ourselves—contributed to an extreme opposition between person and thing. It is true that, throughout history, we have witnessed a kind of universalization (namely with Kant) of the person status which, at a certain point, stopped dividing humans—unifying them, precisely, in the subjugation of the non-personal dimension (impersonal) to the personal one. But, by universalizing this application to humans, the division shifted to the relationship between person and thing, between the personal dimension and the impersonal dimension. This same division is unified, to the extent that the impersonal dimension is subjugated to the personal dimension, the latter dominating the other, as happens in the aforementioned “asymmetric anthropology”. At the same time, from a strictly political point of view, this paradigm based on the device of person results in a global practice “that unifies the world in the form of its division” (Esposito 2013, p. 262)<sup>12</sup>, namely in the field of the so-called sovereign debt of some nations in relation to others, or even in the field of personal debts.

In order to overcome this “asymmetrical anthropology”, as well as the political effects of the entire corresponding device, which are expressed in the political form of the bipolar division, Esposito’s deconstructive process leads him to the discovery of another possibility, also present in the history of Western thought, namely following the tradition of Averroes, Giordano Bruno, and Spinoza, with its repercussions on Schelling, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Deleuze. This is the lode of a thought of the impersonal: “This, moreover, is the destiny of the thought of the impersonal—not to oppose frontally what a long tradition has defined as a person, or even a subject, but to make it rotate on its axis, until deactivating its excluding power” (Esposito 2013, p. 262)<sup>13</sup>.

At the same time, overcoming the paradigm of the person would allow for overcoming the duality between persons and things, which tends to divide reality in a problematic or, at least, ambiguous way, including the hybrid modalities that personalize things and reify persons. “If there is a postulate that seems to organize human experience from the beginning, it is that of the division between persons and things. . . The life world is cut by a dividing line that divides it into two zones defined by their reciprocal opposition” (Esposito 2014, pp. VII–VIII)<sup>14</sup>. For Esposito, the overcoming of the theological–political ties of the West would allow a simultaneous overcoming of this division and the respective subjugation from one side to the other.

Of course, it would be possible—for example, if we concentrate on the relationship of this modality of thought with Spinoza—to also link the category of the impersonal, as an alternative to the device of person, with a theological–political machine, possibly closer to a pantheistic or even cosmotheistic interpretation of reality. Jan Assmann, for example, brings his deconstruction of monotheism as a theological–political device closer to this cosmotheistic approach which is, therefore, no less a “theological–political machination” (Assmann 2003).

Esposito intends the device of person to be strictly theological–political and, therefore, inseparably linked to the religious dimension of the human being, even if only in an archaeological way, no longer explicit and often not even perceptible. The category of the impersonal, which is opposed to it, would be due to the activity of thought and, therefore, to another “machine”: “Averroes, Bruno and Spinoza, although in different ways, separate the purpose of religion, oriented towards social cohesion, from that of philosophical research, oriented towards the knowledge of truth” (Esposito 2013, p. 174)<sup>15</sup>. But the issue will not be as simple and as alternative as that, since an archeology of power based on theological–political devices is equally possible in a context where the device of person is absent. The aforementioned thinkers can also be placed within a theological–political vein that is very specific and that is dominant in certain cultural traditions, as is the case of many East Asian cultures, or even of ancient Egypt (Assmann 2000).

Perhaps because he senses the near impossibility of leaving the interior of a theological genealogy of the political, or of a political genealogy of the theological, Esposito attempts, in almost all of his work—which is, strictly speaking, a political philosophy—to identify the non-political origin of the political dimension—which could also be equivalent, in our case, to a possible non-theological origin of the theological dimension that accompanies politics.

From the point of view of the deconstruction of the political dimension towards the non-political, as possibly being more original, the central question posed is the possibility of the existence of a politically non-representable dimension, namely through the mechanisms of power. This dimension of the unrepresentable would therefore be prior and subsequent to all representation, namely through theological–political devices or “machines”. It is, therefore, about “critically determining the threshold of irrepresentability of Good, or Justice, by power. From this point of view, power is always characterized by conflictual terms and, therefore, situated within precise limits, which precisely trace the line of the non-political” (Esposito 2012, p. 50)<sup>16</sup>.

Strictly speaking, if the logic of theological–political machination intends to tame the community process itself, through mechanisms of power of which the concept of sovereignty is one of the most representative, then politics—which is always theological–political—already constitutes a process of immunization relative to the community’s own role, which would take place especially in exposure to the other (Rosito 2015, p. 143).

This exposure is, so to speak, the index of reference to the unrepresentable Justice, whose representation through power is already always the result of a problematic machination and which must be constantly deconstructed. In this sense, the issue of biopolitics and immunity—as opposed to community—intersects with the theological–political device of person, insofar as this reduces everything to the dimension of someone’s power over others, through the division introduced by the notion of person. The impersonal dimension would thus open up not only to the non-political dimension, but also to the communitarian dimension, in overcoming all immunizing machinations, including those of religion, in the strict sense, as a place of the *indemne*, understood as salvation or protection.

## 5. Some Critical Questions

If, in fact, the root of community—overcoming immunity—is exposure to the other (person?), including the otherness of the irrepresentability of Justice by power, how can it be identified with the impersonal dimension? Does the reduction to the immanent field of pure impersonality, as a differential continuum, not imply the impossibility of real

difference and, therefore, of alterity? But if there is no otherness, how can there be exposure to the other?

It is true that the relationship to alterity can be immediately understood in terms of hierarchical or dialectical duality. Another use of Trinitarian theology can be elucidative here, in the possible continuity of a theological archeology of the political. In fact, Esposito's approach to the "theological-political machine" according to this Trinitarian model is based on its tendentially *subordinationist* interpretation which, in fact, predominated in history. Or else, it was dissolved into the *modalist* interpretation, which completely annuls the difference between Father and Son and, therefore, the duality into the One. At the outset, resorting to the category of the impersonal would end up being very close to the modalist reading of Trinitarian relationships which, in reality, would not be relationships, as they do not know true alterity but only a monist whole or totality.

As it happens, in traditional Trinitarian theology, despite the predominance of these two extremes, neither of them was considered correct by patristic theology and councils, since the one hierarchized the relationship, through the mechanism of unification through exclusion, and the other annulled the relationship, through the mechanism of its reduction to a pure One. But does this not imply the search for an intermediate possibility—as was the case throughout the history of Trinitarian theology—and for a theological device that allows the interpretation of community as exposure to the other and not as immunity from the other? Incidentally, this device includes the use of the "third" as an essential dimension, formulated in the person of the Spirit (Duque 2023). The third dimension is precisely the one that prevents the binary reduction of the relationship and, therefore, the rigorous application of the "theological-political machine" as described by Esposito.

Also in the explicitly Christological dimension, the relationship between divine nature and human nature, if seen from a simply binary perspective, would end up implying the absorption of the latter by the former, as is the case in all versions of Docetism. But the person of Jesus is conceived as a conjugation without division—despite the distinction—between humanity and divinity, which do not constitute a division of the single personal being, and for that reason, His unity cannot be conceived as an absorption of one by the other. Here too, the dimension of the Spirit—strictly speaking, the condition of the possibility of human mediation of the divine—can be read as the third dimension that prevents the monism of impersonal unity and the dualism of division that leads to unity through the exclusion of the other. "Orthodox" Christology (as expressed in the Council of Chalcedon) does not correspond to the way in which Esposito presents the functioning of the person's theological-political device. At the same time, its solution, by resorting to the impersonal dimension, does not do justice to what the Christological formulation intends either. What could the third dimension mean by overcoming the excluding duality of the binary relationship?

Esposito, in this and other contexts, explicitly explores the dimension of the third person (Esposito 2007). However, the tendency is to identify, in a total and radical way, the third dimension with the non-person and, therefore, with the field of the impersonal. It is difficult, however, to understand this identification, as the dimension of the impersonal would end up absorbing all other dimensions, removing all meaning from the distinction between first, second, and third—or even between me, you, and he/she. If the third dimension can be understood—as in the case of Trinitarian theology—as a personal dimension, which annuls the binary relationship between first and second (between me and you, between Father and Son), then it could be the index of another understanding of the political—not necessarily as non-political, but in a very specific sense—which always implies an opening up of the dual dynamics of power beyond themselves.

Rosito, in his reading of Esposito's political theology (Rosito 2015, pp. 141–53), essentially focuses on his work of deconstruction, which would result in the annulment of the theological-political device itself and the recovery of the impolitical dimension, as previous and fundamental for interhuman relations, namely in communitarian dynamics. Saidel also highlights Esposito's tendency, in search of the impolitical, considering his position

explicitly against political theology: “And if there is an element that philosophically and politically connotes the impolitical perspective, which is neither apolitical nor antipolitical, it is the opposition to any form of theologization of politics—which in many cases is the mirror effect of the politicization of theology” (Saidel 2016, p. 1). Being a correct reading of Esposito’s more explicit position, I think it is possible to find elements in his own work that allow us to imagine another theological genealogy of the political dimension.

The discussion should focus on the proposal to overcome the reduction of plurality through an immunological absorption into the One (even if it happens through a previous binary division), which Esposito considers to be the inevitable result of theological–political machinery. I do not consider that the solution presented by Esposito—the way of impersonality, explored from the action of thought, according to a tendentious monist paradigm—is fully inappropriate, as it could be considered a way that would eventually make it possible to think about the plurality of reality, particularly in its communitarian configuration (and even in politics). A pure monist solution in order to safeguard the plurality of reality could be questionable (how could monism be plural?), but I do not intend to deepen this discussion here. I only propose that a theological–political genealogy exploring either ternary devices—such as the reference to the “third person” without canceling its personalist configuration as Esposito does—or pneumatological devices (as the basis of a communicational understanding of reality) can allow an interpretation of the political similar to that proposed by Esposito. In this case, to achieve the same purpose—and make the same legitimate criticism of some theological–political devices—it would not be necessary to completely abandon the scope of theological–political devices, nor to deviate into the realm of the impolitical and impersonal, as Esposito intends (Esposito et al. 2012).

The theological (in this case pneumatological) dimension could, in this sense, be close to the “impolitical” (but personal) and allow another path for the theological–political “machine”, namely as political pneumatology. On the one hand, the “third” (even in a personal meaning, as in the case of the Holy Spirit) allows the overcoming of the binary and, ultimately, totalizing dialectic, which would affect the theological–political machine analyzed by Esposito<sup>17</sup>; on the other hand, from the point of view of the theological genealogy of the political dimension, the place of the people is explored, more than the dynamics of sovereignty: “God is present in the people, to the extent that He places Himself ‘between’ the people. God is, therefore, ‘in the middle’, making himself middle, that is, *medium* of communication and social interaction” (Rosito 2015, p. 181)<sup>18</sup>. However, God is not directly between the people, but precisely mediated by interactions that constitute the people, that is, these interactions function as if God did not exist (*esti Deus non daretur*), but even so, in relation to theological–political devices. A political paradigm thus becomes evident based on the multiple interactions of pluralist societies and not on the dialectical relationship between sovereign and subject, which would lead to the totalitarian imposition of an absolute sovereignty.

Esposito himself resorts to central elements of Christian theology to identify parallels with his proposal for understanding the human community. In the search for clarification of the *munus* of community, the reference to the Christian *koinonia* becomes explicit: “What one participates in is not the glory of the Resurrected, but the suffering and blood of the Cross (*I Cor, 10,16; Phil 3, 10*). There is no possibility of appropriation: ‘taking part’ means anything but ‘taking’; on the contrary, losing something, diminishing oneself, sharing the lot of the servant, not the master” (*Phil 3, 10–11*). His death. The gift of life—offered in the communitarian supper archetype” (Esposito 1998, pp. XVIII–XIX)<sup>19</sup>. Will we not find here another possibility of being a person, not identifiable with the duality that leads to the domination of one over the other? And is it not also a theological archeology of another political model? In this sense, it seems that, based on the references contained in Esposito’s work, it would become possible to follow different ways from those that he himself proposes, in his criticism—not just in his deconstruction—of the dominant “theological–political machine”. A final question takes up the meaning attributed to the religious dimension. At the end of his analysis of theological–political “machining”,

Esposito suggests: “The biblical figure of liberation from all debts, no longer confined to the sabbatical year, could become the mirror, philosophical and political, in which political theology glimpses the unprecedented possibility of its own dissolution” (Esposito 2013, p. 266)<sup>20</sup>. But will it be possible, precisely from this perspective, to speak of a complete dissolution of all theological–political devices? What is the foundation, the genealogical archeology of this practice of debt forgiveness which, in fact, does not unite humanity through the dualistic division? Is not the very reference to the one God the origin of the notion of a common humanity? (Cohen 1935).

In this sense, religion would not simply be a source of protection and immunization of communities and subjects—in dialectical opposition to the other—but exposure to otherness, with all the resulting insecurities and contaminations. This would correspond, precisely, to the paradigm of *communitas*, in Esposito’s sense, as a relationship of exposure of singularities, in the realization of the common *munus*, and not to the paradigm of *immunitas*, as an exception or refusal of this *munus*. Analyzing the theological genealogy of both paradigms allows us to deconstruct the processes that led and continue to lead to different, possibly antagonistic, political models, such as the model of absolute sovereignty—immune and immunizing—or the model of a pluralist community, which liberates each subject for the communitarian relationship “between” humans. At the same time, we could think of a genealogy in a reverse sense and, as such, imagine equally different—and perhaps antagonistic—paradigms of religion.

## 6. Conclusions

The discussion about the place of religion—understood as a multifaceted phenomenon beyond concrete religious traditions—in the context of a philosophical–political immunology focuses on the understanding of the religious phenomenon as a process of protection or immunization (which would end up resulting in potentially destructive autoimmunity) or, alternatively, as a process of exposure to the other human, to the other of the human being, or even to a transcendent alterity, because it can never be dominated by mechanisms of appropriation. Esposito opts for the first hypothesis in his interpretation of religion. But his philosophy of community provides elements that prefer the second interpretation, more appropriate to many aspects of the religious phenomenon.

Applying this criticism of the immunological paradigm to a certain theological genealogy of political systems, we can consider that, according to Esposito, the main effect of a “theological–political machine” based on the device of *person* would result, precisely, in the immunization of one of the poles of the resulting binary structure, through the absorption and annulment of the other pole. In other words, the immunological structure of theological–political origin would be based on the binary division of all reality—namely, between person and non-person, between human and thing, between friend and enemy, between indigenous and foreign—and would inevitably lead to the dominance of one over the other, as a protective process.

In order to overcome this binarization of reality and consequent reduction into one of the poles—finally into the One as a totality—Esposito proposes an interpretation of reality in impersonal and impolitical terms, based on an immanent monist paradigm, in which the dynamics of permanent exposure constitute the flow of reality

In this article, a ternary understanding of reality was proposed, based on a possible Trinitarian and pneumatological theological genealogy, in which the reference to a third dimension annuls the dual binarity criticized by Esposito. Without that, one of the poles absorbs the other into a uniform whole. The main thesis argues that only this ternary dynamic allows for the real exposure of differences and, therefore, a communitarian dynamic—also political—that overcomes attempts at immunization, which end up being fatal for subjects and institutions.

This thesis, however, does not directly intend to be neither a proposal for political theology—which would be possible, from a strictly theological perspective—nor a proposal for explicitly theological politics. Therefore, a new theocratic paradigm, or a new civil

religion, that sacralizes the political structure itself is not recovered. The proposal remains at the level of genealogy, that is, by understanding how certain theological–political devices can be effective from a political—and possibly also religious—point of view without being directly applied. In this sense, what is under discussion are not the directly political consequences of a given religious belief, which would imply the direct involvement of a reference to God’s sovereignty within the scope of politics (either directly, or through the mechanism of representation).

What is under discussion is a better understanding of the functioning of certain theological–political devices, regardless of the beliefs of those involved. In this case, it is argued—in a certain, although not total, divergence with Esposito—that the effect of theological–political devices does not need to be overcome, in the sense of an absolutely impersonal and even impolitical scope (which could lead to a new version of totality, even without the mediation of dialectical binarities). It is possible, while maintaining awareness of the effect of certain devices—this time, the device of the “third”, taken from Trinitarian theology and from the reference to the Spirit—to meet a paradigm that interprets non-binary reality not as a uniform totality, but as a plurality of permanent exposures of singularities, especially in the context of freedom. And this may correspond to another way of understanding the political, beyond the idea of sovereignty. This other way, however, also reveals a certain theological–political genealogy.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I often use the expression “religious dimension” to refer to a phenomenon of human experience—on a personal and social level—that cannot be reduced to its articulation in concrete religious traditions or communities (usually called religions).
- <sup>2</sup> The article focuses on Esposito’s contribution to a theory of immunization, and not on the political and philosophical discussion on the different ways of interpreting the pandemic and facing it. On this subject, you can see: (Agamben 2020; Nancy 2020b; Erber 2020; Žizek 2020; Lévy 2020; Esposito 2020).
- <sup>3</sup> Here these authors are synthetically presented, as important precursors of a philosophical immunology as developed by Esposito. For this reason, the respective theories of different thinkers are not deeply explored.
- <sup>4</sup> “Da un lato il sacro è riferibile ad una situazione di pienezza, e anche di espansione, vitale di colui o di coloro sui quali esso si dirige” (my translation).
- <sup>5</sup> “A questo primo versante positivo. . . fa però riscontro, in termini apparentemente contrastivi, un’altra catena semantica di tipo invece negativo. Sia il greco *hágios*, sia il latino *sanctus*. . . alludono, infatti, al divieto rispetto a qualcosa che è proibito al contatto con gli uomini e, in termini più ampi, alla legge che sancisce tale separazione” (my translation).
- <sup>6</sup> “Il y a religion, au sens propre du mot, à partir de l’instant où le secret du sacré, le mystère orgiaque ou démonique seraient sinon détruits, du moins dominés, intégrés et enfin assujettis à la sphère de la responsabilité. Le sujet de la responsabilité serait le sujet qui a pu s’assujettir le mystère orgiaque ou démonique. . . La religion est responsabilité ou elle n’est pas. Son histoire n’a de sens que dans un *passage* à la responsabilité” (my translation).
- <sup>7</sup> “L’ostacolo di fondo a penetrare nell’orizzonte della teologia politica sta, insomma, nel fatto che ci troviamo già al suo interno” (my translation).
- <sup>8</sup> “La tesi da me avanzata è che tale procedura di assimilazione escludente sia la prestazione fondamentale della ‘machina teologico-politica’. Essa funziona precisamente separando ciò che dichiara di unire e unificando ciò che divide mediante la sottomissione di una parte al dominio dell’altra” (my translation).
- <sup>9</sup> “. . . nella dogmatica trinitaria si può ravvisare una tendenza. . . a contrarre la formula triadica in un modulo duale, incentrato sul rapporto gerarchico tra Padre e Figlio” (my translation).
- <sup>10</sup> “. . . distinzione funzionale tra la Prima persona, titolare del potere sovrano, e la Seconda, delegata al governo effettivo degli uomini” (my translation).
- <sup>11</sup> “Come nel caso della doppia natura, divina e umana, di Cristo—o del rapporto tra anima e corpo in ogni uomo—una dualità tende all’unità attraverso la sottoposizione di una parte al dominio dell’altra” (my translation).
- <sup>12</sup> “. . . che unifica il mondo nella forma della sua divisione” (my translation).

- 13 “Questo è, del resto, il destino di un pensiero dell’impersonale—non opporsi frontalmente a ciò che una lunga tradizione ha definito persona, o anche soggetto, ma farlo ruotare sui suoi cardini fino a disattivarne la potenza escludente” (my translation).
- 14 “Se c’è un postulato che sembra organizzare l’esperienza umana fin dai suoi primordi, è quello della divisione tra persone e cose. . . Il mondo della vita risulta tagliato da uno spartiacque che lo divide in due zone definite dalla loro opposizione reciproca” (my translation).
- 15 “Averroè, Bruno e Spinoza, sia pure in forme diverse, separano la finalità della religione, rivolta alla coesione sociale, da quella della ricerca filosofica, tesa alla conoscenza della verità” (my translation).
- 16 “. . .determinare criticamente la soglia di irrepresentabilità del Bene, o della Giustizia, da parte del potere. Da questo punto di vista, il potere appare sempre caratterizzato da termini conflittuali, e quindi situato dentro limiti precisi, che tracciano appunto la linea dell’impolitico” (my translation).
- 17 For a more in-depth analysis of the recourse to the category of the “third” as overcoming any reduction to the totality of the One, even through a merely binary contraposition, see (Duque 2021).
- 18 “Dio e presente presso il popolo in quanto si colloca ‘tra’ il popolo. Dio sta dunque nel ‘mezzo’ facendosi esso stesso mezzo, ossia *medium* della comunicazione e dell’interazione sociale” (my translation).
- 19 “Ciò cui si partecipa non è la gloria del Risorto, ma la sofferenza e il sangue della Croce (*I CorI, 10,16; Fil 3,10*). Viene meno qualsiasi possibilità di appropriazione: ‘prendere parte’ vuol dire tutto fuorché ‘prendere’; al contrario perdere qualcosa, diminuirsi, condividere la sorte del servo, non quella del signore (*Fil 3, 10–11*). La sua morte. Il dono della vita—offerta nell’archetipo comunitario della Cena” (my translation).
- 20 “La figura biblica della liberazione da tutti i debiti, non più confinata nell’anno sabbatico, può diventare lo specchio, filosofico e politico, in cui la teologia politica intravede la possibilità inaudita del proprio disfacimento” (my translation).

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