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**Messianic Politics: Handle with Care**

**A Critical Consideration of Messianic Politics in Liberal Democracy**

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An abstract of  
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of the  
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## **Abstract**

### **Messianic Politics: Handle with Care**

#### **A Critical Consideration of Messianic Politics in Liberal Democracy**

By Sanghyun Park

This thesis is a study on messianic politics in modern liberal democracy. The first half of the work contemplates messianic politics and elucidates how it affects modern liberal democracy through “the state of exception (*Ausnahmezustand*).” The messianism is not merely an apolitical ideology but strong force that moves the wheels of history through the sovereignty generated by state of exception. The second half of the work discusses merit and demerit of messianic politics in liberal democracy. While messianism in liberal democracy act as an imaginative power of political and legal system, it has a danger of causing backslide of democracy. In the last two chapters, the author argues that political messianism in democracy should be dealt with cautiously in a manner not to destroy the public sphere.

Keywords: Messianism, Messianic politics, Paul, Ted Smith, Walter Benjamin, Giorgio Agamben, Jacob Taubes, Hannah Arendt, Steven Levitsky, Carl Schmitt, The state of exception, the state of emergency, Donald Trump, Geunhye Park.

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## 1. Introduction

Therefore, one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience.

Romans 13:5

Donald Trump was elected as the president of the United States on November 8, 2016. I heard the news of Trump's election while I was in the South Korean army. Since the election was important news not only in the United States but also in South Korea, all the news channels and internet news pages in Korea broadcasted the result of the vote in real-time. Like most news channels and political commentators in the United States, Korean people including me predicted that Hilary Clinton would be the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States. I remember the New York Times article that I read soon after the poll closed. Its title was "Hillary Clinton has a 95% chance to win." However, contrary to the expectations of the majority of political commentators in the world, Trump became the president of the United States.

Trump's win in the presidential election was a stunning upset. Most statistics and media in the United States confidently predicted that Hillary Clinton would be the next president. Their tone of arguments sounded like Hillary was already the president. In his newspaper article "Is the Election Over?" Michael Barbaro says that "The math is grim for Donald Trump: his rival Hilary Clinton, has 90 percent chance of winning as of Monday afternoon" and he argues that "It just keeps getting worse for Trump."<sup>1</sup> At the

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Barbaro, "Is This Election Over?," *The New York Times*, October 18, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/18/podcasts/is-this-election-over.html>.



last part of the article, he ends with a quotation from a Democrat pollster saying “It looks like Donald Trump isn’t even trying to win. He’s creating a rationale for why he’s going to lose.”<sup>2</sup> Now it is obvious that Trump did not need to create that kind of rationale.

Trump’s winning was not a big surprise to me since that kind of upset already happened in South Korea. When Donald Trump was about to be a president of the United States, Korean president Geunhye Park was about to lose her seat because of political scandal related to her friend, Soonsil Choi. The first week of November 2016, when Trump won the election, Park’s approval rate collapsed to 5%. Shortly afterwards, she was impeached for talking a bribe from major companies in Korea on behalf of her friend.

Geunhye Park and Donald Trump are totally different figures, but the way they fascinated people and the way they threaten liberal democracy in their countries are not altogether dissimilar. Four years before Trump’s election, Geunhye Park became a president in Trump style. Like Trump’s winning, Park’s winning was surprising upset to many political pundits. President Park, a daughter of former military president Junghee Park, was elected as president of South Korea in 2012. Political experts predicted that she would not be a president because of her relatively short career as a politician and Korea’s strong male chauvinism based in Confucian culture. Her opposing candidate Jaein Moon was a strong competitor since he is a famous pro-democracy activist and a civil rights lawyer. Moreover, other promising candidate, Cheolsoo Ahn, agreed on Moon’s single candidacy and supported his election campaign. Many expected that it would not be easy to win the election and that if Park did win, she would win by a narrow margin.

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<sup>2</sup> Barbaro.

Despite of all those obstacles, however, Geunhye Park became the first female president and the first president who succeeded her father with the largest number of votes in Korean democratic history. Only a tiny minority expected her overwhelming victory. She earned 51.6% of the vote, and this was the highest approval rate in Korean democracy history since the military dictatorship. Most of the political pundits in Korea did not expect this result just as many political pundits in America did not foresee the election of Donald Trump.

I am not trying to impugn the ability of political experts in two countries. I am not arguing that all the studies about political systems and statistics are irrelevant to politics. I am arguing that there is a reason that political pundits of the most developed country in terms of either democracy or media not only misunderstood the result of the election but also failed to understand their own country's politics. The Guardian's article about Trump's winning shows the reaction: "if we're so good at being pundits then why were we all wrong?"<sup>3</sup> Many journalists and media figures could not grasp the actual politics of the country, and this is the biggest problem of this incident. Their statistics and calculations were not wrong and they did their best. However, despite of all their efforts, they were wrong in comprehending the reality of politics beneath the numbers. As I show through two countries' elections, this kind of confusion is common in modern liberal democracy.

What made political experts misunderstand politics? Giorgio Agamben's examination of modern democracy deserves mention here. Agamben, an Italian

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Robbins, "This Is It: The One True Explanation for Donald Trump's Victory," *The Guardian*, March 31, 2017, <http://www.theguardian.com/science/2017/mar/31/this-is-it-the-one-true-explanation-for-donald-trumps-victory>.

philosopher and political theorist, points out that to think of government as simple executive power is one of the most consequential errors ever made in the history of Western politics.<sup>4</sup> Government—in other words, the political system that actualizes sovereignty—is not identical to politics as a whole. Agamben argues that it is necessary to ask “the central question” about government and its articulation in order to understand politics correctly.<sup>5</sup> Most political experts focused on the electoral system and the superficial data that described it. However, while they were concerned about those data, they failed to see the importance of the people who actually run the system and answer to those data. They did not show concern about the deep despair of retired workers in Taegu-Kyeongbuk area (an area in the southeastern part of Korea in which President Park earned her strongest support) and how great nativist fears had grown in Korea against Islam and Southeast Asian immigrants. They largely ignored those emotions as irrational biases. However, whether it is real or not, as long as the belief in something persists, it produces collective power and this collective power becomes the source of sovereignty. This power is fuel for the sovereignty that actuates political systems such as liberal democracy, the electoral system, and parliament.

The political pundits did not consider the source of sovereignty empowering the political system. They could not put those variables in their political calculation since those are not considered genuinely “political” matters. However, in modern democracy, the collective hopes and emotions that run through a certain group of people is surely political enough, more so than the approval rating charts. The amount of political

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<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Agamben and William McCuaig, *Democracy in What State?*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Agamben and McCuaig, 5.

funding, the support of congress members, and polls about approval rating: all these figures can show politics in part, but data about the electoral system cannot show the whole picture of politics. Trying to understand politics only as governmental power and the procedure of election is like studying the ocean without going below the surface.

Messianic politics, a particular form of populism, is playing a key role in liberal democracy today. Focusing on messianism is important, insofar as it helps to see the subsurface, sovereignty, that actually moves the surface of politics: government. When messianism forms itself in real politics, it makes people move towards its messianic vision. The question about messianism is one of the “central questions” that Agamben introduces. The concept lets us investigate the invisible flow of sovereignty that operates in visible political institutions. In this case a questioning of political messianism can be the crucial interrogation. The political messianism is not an archaic vestige of theology but a key to understand the politics of modern liberal democracy that forms and affects our life. It played a major role in the elections of the United States and South Korea, and expansion of anti-immigrant parties in Europe.

Messianism has both merits and demerits in terms of politics. It is advantageous inasmuch as it opens the possibility of genuine politics outside of the political system. Messianism is a hope for the future and it gives power to strive for it. It not only helps overcome despair and lethargy but also fosters participation in political issues with lively hope. Messianism allows people to see the unseen “coming kingdom” even though it looks impossible. Therefore, the messianic hope has been a source of the sovereignty that changes the president, law, and the political system as a whole. Paul of Tarsus, Walter

Benjamin and Giorgio Agamben saw the potentialities of messianism and this is the reason they all attempted to elucidate and utilize messianic politics.

However, at the same time, messianic politics can be dangerous since it is disposed to be violent. Since messianic politics is established on the hope for the new world, it inevitably calls for the revolution. The problem is, as Benjamin and Hannah Arendt argue, this revolution can easily become violent by overriding a political process. In *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt warns the risk of revolution for the “social question.” She argues that every attempt to solve the social question with political means leads to terror.<sup>6</sup> When messianism operates in the political sphere, it gains its impetus through what Arendt calls “social questions.” Poverty plunges people into a despair that there is no way to find a hope in this world. This kind of despair makes people seek a messiah and when they find that messiah, any kind of rage and violence can be justified in the name of the messiah.

An even bigger danger of messianic politics is that it can end the politics that operates in a liberal democracy. Since messianic politics strives to realize “divinely given law” in the earthly world, it does not allow space for discourse between different views. Ted Smith elucidates the potential vaporization of politics in messianic politics saying, “Politics- with words or with weapons- is just a means to make the world correspond to the standard set by code. When that correspondence has been achieved, and achieved so perfectly that it cannot be undone, politics come to an end.” Messianic politics does not require the discussion process since its highest heavenly constitutional law is already

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<sup>6</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution*, Pelican Books (New York: Penguin Books, 1973), 102.

proposed and enacted by the political “messiah.” Political messianism raises the peril of collapsing the space of politics that nourishes proper liberal democracy.

Messianism is a collective belief that emerges when a group of people face despair. It is impossible to banish messianism from the political sphere since it is basically a human condition. As it is impossible to eliminate belief from the heart, purging messianic politics is impossible. In the same manner, it is almost impossible to have complete control over messianism since the formation of messianism is not in the hand of any political leader or political institution but the messianic force itself. Even the leader who considers herself a political messiah, even the people who support her, cannot control their messianic force since it is not founded on a certain messianic figure but the belief of people. Therefore political messiahs, Genhye Park or Donald Trump, are neither the cause of messianic politics nor the result of it. They are just touchstones of despair that the society has.

In this thesis, I will first elucidate messianic politics historically and philosophically. By a critical reading of Paul, Walter Benjamin, Jacob Taubes, and Giorgio Agamben, I will show why messianism basically has a political connotation and how it opens the possibility of political imagination to people. Paul’s argument, language, and notions in *the Epistle to the Romans* predicate the messianic politics that became a force which not only empowers early Christians but also subverts the Roman Empire. I will show the political connotations of messianism through Taubes and Agamben’s commentary on Paul’s *Epistles to the Romans*.

In the third chapter, I will explain how political messianism produces political imagination for people. Messianism can be highly political even in modern liberal

democracy. Carl Schmitt, Benjamin, and Agamben introduce a notion they call “the state of exception (*Ausnahmezustand*).” Through this concept, they explain the mechanism of sovereignty and the way it wields its power behind the veil of law. Since messianism is a powerful factor that can either produce a robust sovereign power or negate all authority, leftist political thinkers such as Benjamin and Agamben have been persistently concerned about messianic politics. Through an examination of their argument and application of their argument to the Korean context, I will elucidate the possibility and capability of messianic politics in a liberal democracy.

Then in the fourth chapter, I will elucidate risks of messianic politics in liberal democracy. Through critical reading on Steven Levitsky and his notion of “backsliding democracy,” I will show how messianic politics can threaten liberal democracy. When messianic politics infiltrates a political system, it inevitably becomes problematic because of its own mechanism. Messianism has a tendency to provoke violence and aggression since messianism is a communal desperation towards established world order. When messianism associates with political institutions, the disappointment inherent in messianism gives rise to ideological conflict. In this case, messianism facilitates the polarization of society. Moreover, politically systematized messianism is likely to annihilate the space of politics that nourishes liberal democracy. Since political messianism does not need a process of “politics” but only a conviction, it does not tolerate other ideologies. I will establish why messianic politics should be treated carefully and show how it extinguishes the sphere of politics.

In the fifth chapter, I will elucidate the proper form of politics in modern liberal democracy through the scope of messianic politics. In order to upbuild liberal democracy,

messianism has an important role to play in the mind of people in the society.

Messianism allows people to see beyond the established law and system. This vision is important since it is necessary to liberal democracy to sustain its legal and political system in the flow of history. In this sense, messianism is a prophet of liberal democracy. However, when messianism engages with political institution, it could eliminate the politics through secular theocracy. To avoid this, neither proposing normative value nor political, legal restriction are ineffective since messianic politics inherently ignores established order. Preserving messianism as a state of “messianic hope” will be a promising possibility to sustain peaceful liberal democracy in terms of messianic politics.

In conclusion, I will wrap up my argument and illustrate a Christian response for messianic politics. Since Christians are messianic conceivers from the moment they believe Jesus Christ as a savior, Christians are “messianic experts.” Even though messianism is not Christianity’s exclusive property, Christian belief has inherent messianism. Their belief and confession are founded on messianism. However, Christians’ inherent messianic intensity can also aggravate the polarization of society. Through a reflection on Christian belief and messianic hope, I will elucidate one way in which Christian political theology can nourish liberal democracy today.



## 2. Messianic Politics

The term messiah is originated from the Hebrew word המשיח (*hamashiach*) meaning “the anointed one.” It indicates the king who will save the people and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. The term Christ, χριστός, is an ancient Greek translation of Hebrew word המשיח. This etymological history shows that the terms messiah and messianism are Judeo-Christian theological terms that have religious connotation. Messianism, belief in a messiah, does not itself have political meaning since it stems from an apolitical, other worldly hope for the messiah and a “coming kingdom.” Thus, messianism has generally been understood as a belief that abandons the reality of this world.

Messianism is, however, neither an abandonment of the reality of this world nor an apolitical religious thought. Jacob Taubes, a Jewish philosopher, argues that messianism can be highly political and it has been used as political force that changes human history. He even claims that because of this inherent messianism, “all the Christians concepts I know are highly political and explosive, or become so at a certain moment.”<sup>7</sup> In his commentary on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, *The Political Theology of Paul*, Jacob Taubes rediscovers a messianic politics. Through this work, Taubes illustrates how Paul’s other-worldly messianic vision creates a new political community that changes the course of history of “this world.”

Taubes argues that Pauline readers should be situated in Paul’s own historical, psychological, and political condition in order to understand his thought in the Epistle to

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<sup>7</sup> Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 71.

the Romans. He suggests readers change their image of Paul from a Christian apostle who cries out “Christ” on a pulpit to a “cocky” diaspora zealot who is more Jewish than any liberal and reformed rabbi today. According to Taubes, Paul’s goal in Romans is to establish and legitimate a new people of God. With this proclamation, he opens up a new interpretation of Paul that reads Romans from the perspective of political theology.

Taubes’ purpose is to regain Paul, usually considered a Christian apostle, for his “birthplace”, Judaism. He reads Paul in the light of the fact that he was a Jew who lived the age of colonization of the Roman Empire.

According to Taubes, Paul tries to establish a new kind of apostleship from the beginning of Romans. In Romans 1:1, Paul does not mention that he has “converted” to Christianity but instead he uses the term “called.” Taubes claims that this sentence informs readers about two things. First, this sentence shows that Paul sees himself as a Jew. Taubes explains that the language and structure of the sentence is similar to the style of Jeremiah 1:5. Paul posits himself as an extension of Jewish tradition through this passage. Second, his strategy is to emphasize he is not one of the apostles in Jerusalem but is an apostle with a different form of legitimacy. This legitimacy is the “obedience of faith” as Paul describes it, and Taubes argues that this is a polemical variant of the “obedience of laws.” This concept of the “obedience of faith” sounds like nothing special to readers familiar with a Christian way of reading. However, Taubes asserts that the contrast between “obedience of laws” and “obedience of faith” can be read in an entirely different way with an entirely different emphasis for the congregation in Rome, the heart of an “apotheosis of *nomos*.”

Taubes asserts that this new apostleship and the concept of obedience of faith should be read from a political theological view. In this view, Paul's salutation to the Romans is a declaration of war on the Caesar. The term "law" is a central term that functions throughout the entirety of Romans. Taubes claims that this term "law" and the concept of the "obedience of law" together are a compromise formula for the *Imperium Romanum*. Romans deified *nomos*, the law, and this law crucified Jesus. Paul's argument for replacing "obedience of law" with "obedience of faith" is, in Taubes's view, an attempt to turn Roman rule, adorned with a Greek-Hellenistic aura of *nomos*, to Jesus' *nomos*. Paul is arguing that the Roman Empire is not *nomos*, but rather the one who was nailed to the cross by *nomos* is the emperor.

Taubes presents Jewish liturgy and Talmudic exegesis to show how Paul's lines in Romans contain deeply Jewish messianic connotations. He gives the examples of the Yom Kippur liturgy, the most important liturgy in Jewish tradition, and *Berakhot*, a Talmudic prayer text. At Yom Kippur, Jewish people wear shrouds and gather in synagogues to seek atonement from God. Taubes elucidates that this is a wholly visible sign that reveals the underlying motif of Jewish messianic tradition, shifting eternity into temporal life. *Berakhot* is a Talmudic text that has a logic and rhythm entirely different from the text of Paul, since it is a prayer book. However, Taubes notes that this prayer only makes sense when the listeners face a circumstance of destruction. From Romans 8 through 13, Paul utilizes the same symbols of Jewish liturgy and allegories of sinful Israelites to cultivate his own image as a next-generation Moses. Paul's strategy is to juxtapose himself with Moses as an apostle who advocates to God for the sinned people.

This messianic community that utilized Jewish messianic symbol and liturgy became the seed of Christian community. (or a community that now we believe early Christian community) Taubes declares that the origin of Christianity is not in Jesus but in Paul. Paul's establishment of a new form of Israelite citizenship suggests submission to the ruling order through his blend of Jewish messianic *allegoresis* and typology. Romans 9 through 13 is full of characteristics belonging to the people of Israel. This new "all" Israel is not according to the flesh but according to the promise of God. Paul reforms not only theology but also the ontological imagery of the congregation with a new kind of union and legitimacy. They share in the apocalyptic-eschatological vocation of faith that they have received from Paul and from Jewish messianic tradition. Therefore, the revolution for Paul is an inner revolution that changes the way of looking at the world. Even though there is no point in any "earthly" revolution since the world is a transient place for Paul, Taubes views this as "political" since it bears immanent politics in it. Taubes concludes his exegesis by stating that "here comes a subterranean society, a little bit Jewish, a little bit Gentile, nobody knows, what sort of lowlifes are these anyway-for heaven's sake, don't stand out!"<sup>8</sup> This would be the best depiction of the form of Paul's imagined messianic community in Romans.

The strength of Taubes' analysis is its convincing explanation of Paul's strategy to establish a new Israel through Jewish liturgy and allegories. He shows how Paul's argument in Romans becomes a compelling incarnation of everyday practice of the faith community and not just parlor preaching. The concept cannot just be an action (*praxis*) and people cannot just change their identity to a new people through knowledge and

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<sup>8</sup> Taubes, 54.

ethical teaching alone. As Taubes explains, Paul's aim was the establishment of new apostleship and a new community that follows the law of faith. No matter how much Paul explains the formation of the new people of Israel, if there is no connection that helps actualize the idea in daily life, Taubes' argument will just be a simple guess. Taubes quotes Benjamin's *Origin of German Tragic Drama* here. Benjamin asserts that *sensus allegoricus*, an allegorical sense, is not only textual but a form of life. Benjamin and Taubes grasp the strategy of Paul to play with the embedded Jewish liturgy and allegories in the community received the Romans. From Romans 8 to 13, Paul masterfully uses the liturgy and allegories of Jewish tradition to envision and materialize the new people of Israel. This is a significant observation by Taubes, since this is the very point that creates Paul not only as a founder of the Christian church to come, but also as a revolutionary who subverts the Roman Empire through his exquisite use of messianism.

Taubes reveals that an otherworldly messianic vision really has the power to subvert empire. Even though Paul's messianic politics has long been forgotten since Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, it clearly retains its political potential. Moreover, Taubes' examination of Paul verifies that an apolitical, otherworldly vision can create political force in "this world." Paul's messianic vision does not illustrate political assertion. It never gives any claim about political system of this world. Since it is a messianism that denies established order, Paul's revolution is not a political revolt but an inner revolution. Even so, Taubes shows that how this inner revolution can generate political power that changes the Roman Empire. Ironically, Paul's messianic vision that commands avoidance of political revolution realized the genuine revolution of the Empire.

Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben also takes notice of the potential of messianic politics in Paul. His work is similar to Taubes, but it differs in purpose and perspective. In *The Time that Remains*, Agamben elaborates his concept of political theology through his commentary on Paul's Epistle to Romans. Ostensibly, Agamben's work seems like Taubes' *The Political Theology of Paul*. The organization of the book is similar to Taubes' work. As Taubes' posthumous work divides chapters into the lectures of each day, Agamben also develops the format of his book according to each day's lecture. Moreover, in the first day of his lecture, Agamben states that Taubes' work is an important turning point and he cannot begin his lecture without a dedication in memory of Taubes.<sup>9</sup>

Under closer examination, however, it is obvious that Agamben's intention is different from Taubes. It is true that Agamben and Taubes at first start from similar ground. As Taubes emphasizes the importance of the first phrase of *Romans* mentioning that "everything is already there,"<sup>10</sup> Agamben invests a whole chapter in an explanation of this phrase, stating that "understanding the incipit therefore entails an eventual understanding of the text as a whole."<sup>11</sup> They both proclaim that they are trying to bring back Paul's true messianic argument that has long been annulled and neutralized by the Western tradition. However, from the very first page of the first chapter, Agamben separates himself from Taubes and shows his intention:

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<sup>9</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 13.

<sup>11</sup> Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 6.

Not that one should conclude that there was something like a premeditated strategy of neutralizing messianism, but anti-messianic tendencies were doubtlessly operating within the Church as well as the synagogue, as various times and in diverse ways; nevertheless, the problem raised here touches on more essential matters. For reasons that will become clear over the course of the seminar, a messianic institution-or rather, a messianic community that wants to present itself as an institution-faces a paradoxical task.<sup>12</sup>

While Taubes focuses on Paul's characteristics as an extension of Jewish tradition, Agamben utters that he will touch on "more essential matters" regarding what he calls a messianic institution or a messianic community. For Agamben, this messianic community is not a religious community. He distinctly argues that Paul would have never dreamed of claiming a new religion but that he expected an imminent expiration of time.<sup>13</sup> Even though Agamben does not explicitly mentions what the messianic community is, it is not hard to see the parallel between Agamben's messianic community with "expectation of imminent expiration of time" and Walter Benjamin's "immediate Messianic intensity of heart."<sup>14</sup>

Agamben's messianic politics in *The Time that Remains* should be understood as a part of his larger argument about the problem of sovereignty and governance. Agamben's political theology mainly concerns the source of sovereignty and the way it is wielded in modern liberal democratic states. He argues that a preponderance of state and economic sovereignty destroys the popular sovereignty and that this is the biggest

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<sup>12</sup> Agamben, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Agamben, 2.

<sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 313.

problem of modern politics. From his early political theological work, *Coming Community*, to his more recent work in the *Homo Sacer* series, Agamben has been trying to show that the central mystery of politics is an ambiguity between sovereignty and governance. Since modern liberal democracy failed to explain the relation between sovereignty and governance, it failed to be genuine democracy that truly realizes popular sovereignty. In other words, Agamben is claiming that economic sovereignty and state sovereignty are deceiving people to believe that they have sovereignty so that the governance of liberal democracy today becomes just an illusion intended to confuse. Agamben's attention to messianic politics starts from this view. For him, messianic politics is a weapon of "the people" who have lost their sovereignty. His purpose in examining messianism is to produce a weapon for the people to fight against state and economic sovereignty.

Agamben's purpose is evidently revealed in his elucidation of the messianic *klēsis*, calling. He focuses on Paul's most rigorous definition of Messianic life in I Corinthians 7:28-32: "But this I say, brethren, time contracted itself, the rest is, and those weeping as not [*ós me*] weeping, and those rejoicing as not rejoicing, and those buying as not possessing, and those using the world as not using it up. For passing away is the figure of this world. But I wish you to be without care." Agamben asserts that, as Taubes mentions, this *ós me*, "as not" is the formula concerning messianic life and is the ultimate meaning of *klēsis*. This messianic calling is the "revocation of every vocation."<sup>15</sup>

Agamben explains this further:

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<sup>15</sup> Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 23.



The messianic vocation is not a right, nor does it furnish an identity; rather, it is a generic potentiality that can be used without ever being owned. To be messianic, to live in the Messiah, signifies the expropriation of each and every juridical-factual property (circumcised/uncircumcised; free/slave; man/woman) under the form of the *as not*. This expropriation does not, however, found a new identity; the “new creature” is none other than the use and messianic vocation of the old.<sup>16</sup>

He makes it clear that Paul’s messianism is not an establishment of a new “earthly” identity.

Agamben refutes Alan Badiou’s view to “consider Paul to be the apostle of universalism.”<sup>17</sup> In *The Foundation of Universalism*, Badiou argues that Paul’s project is to advocate a new identity. For Badiou, Paul is an inventor of a universal logic of sameness and equality through the division of the subject that is not a Jewish discourse nor Greek discourse, but is rather a Christian discourse.<sup>18</sup> By way of contrast, Agamben, reads Paul’s faith community as a community of “double negation.” The division of the law into Jew/non-Jew, in the law/without law, leave remnant on either side, which cannot be defined either as a Jew, or as a non-Jew. Therefore, for Paul, one who dwells in the law of the Messiah is the non-non-Jew and non-non-Gentile.<sup>19</sup> Since the people are a community that experienced division of division, and negation of negation, they are remnants. They are neither Jew nor non-Jew, and neither Gentile nor non-Gentile.

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<sup>16</sup> Agamben, 26.

<sup>17</sup> Agamben, 51.

<sup>18</sup> Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 109.

<sup>19</sup> Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 51.

Agamben emphasizes that this is a particular in a completely new way, not only in logic but also in ontology and politics.<sup>20</sup>

This community of messianic remnants is Agamben's main point that he claims as an essential matter in the first page of this work. Needless to say, these interpretations of the messianic calling, the "as not," and the community based on an anarchic identity correspond with Benjamin's assertion about, in Taubes' words, "nihilism as world politics."<sup>21</sup> Taubes and Agamben shares their origin with Benjamin's political messianism. While Taubes is focused on an investigation of Jewish origin of messianic politics of Christianity, Agamben applies messianism to the contemporary liberal democratic order. In other words, Agamben is drafting a political message intended to knock down his enemies, state and economic sovereignty. It is not hard to recognize that he participates in Benjamin's messianic imagination. For Agamben, messianic force has a potential to be a historical sequence that opens the chance for people to regain genuine sovereignty. In the closing phrase of the first chapter, Agamben professes that Paul's questions of messiah, conceived for his own age, have to be "our" questions as well.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in the last paragraph of the third chapter, he reminds readers of the close linkage between the concept of the messianic remnant and the problem of modern democracy's majority-minority dichotomy.<sup>23</sup> In messianism, Agamben sees the hope to regain the people's sovereignty that has long been taken by his enemy, economic and state sovereignty.

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<sup>20</sup> Agamben, 51.

<sup>21</sup> Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 70.

<sup>22</sup> Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 18.

<sup>23</sup> Agamben, 57.

Paul's political theology in Romans and its result in the history of Roman Empire shows the political significance of messianism. Messianism cannot be discounted as merely a religious thought. As Agamben explains, people with a messianic ontology conceive a very particular collective world view that allows them to see beyond the limitation of this world's order. This means that messianic politics is a powerful force that changes history in ways that matter not only to religious people in the New Testament living under the Roman Empire but also to secular people living in today's liberal democratic societies.

Agamben interprets and elaborates Walter Benjamin's aphoristic messages and attempts to apply them to the political context today. Agamben carries this out through modern application of Benjamin's argument about "the real state of exception (*Ausnahmezustand*)."<sup>24</sup> Benjamin introduces the concept of "the real state of exception" in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. He argues that our task is to bring about a real state of exception (emergency), and this will improve our position in the struggle against Fascism.<sup>24</sup> Benjamin does not, however, explain what exactly the "real state of exception" is. Agamben's ultimate objective is to complete Benjamin's unfinished job by connecting Benjamin to Paul through messianic politics. Agamben envisions the political aspect of messianism in the connection between messianic politics and the state of exception. Agamben's messianic politics is to bring about the "messianic state of exception."

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<sup>24</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, [1st ed.]. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 257.

### 3. The Messianic State of Exception

Even though Taubes and Agamben brilliantly explain the political aspect of messianism, it still seems peculiar to speak of messianism in “secular” liberal democratic society. Surely, Paul dexterously created a revolutionary, collective messianic ontology, which is now called Christianity, in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. However, can this messianic politics generate political force in a 21<sup>st</sup> century secular society? Since modern democratic countries take separation of religion and state for granted, there seems to be no place for messianism in the political system of liberal democracy.

Agamben elucidates how messianism generates political force in secular society through his analysis of the concept of the state of exception. According to him, sovereignty in the form of the state of exceptions still appears in secular liberal democracy. The state of exception is a concept that explains the border line between law and politics. Carl Schmitt, in his notable work *Political Theology*, argues that the sovereign is he who decides on exception.<sup>25</sup> Schmitt presents his legal decisionism to refute Hans Kelsen’ legal positivism. Kelsen and legal positivists argue juristic rationalism, that the legal system itself can anticipate the exception and can suspend itself through the rationale inherent in itself.<sup>26</sup> Therefore, Legal positivists claim that a general norm can sustain its own legal system by producing its legal ground from itself. However, Schmitt claims that the decision on the exception is a decision in “the true sense of the word” because a general norm, as represented by an ordinary legal

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<sup>25</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), 5.

<sup>26</sup> Carl Schmitt, 14.

prescription, can never encompass a total exception, and so the decision that a real exception exists cannot be entirely derived from this norm.<sup>27</sup> In other words, when the norm encounters the exceptional situation that any existing norm is applicable, it cannot produce a new norm on the basis of its own norm. In this exceptional state, there must be a new law because old laws cannot be applied to the unusual situation. Schmitt asserts that the decision maker that connects politics to the law *is* sovereignty.

In the category of the state of exception, law maintains itself in relation to the exception on form of suspension. For Schmitt, the state of exception is not an exception within the legal system but the situation resulting from its suspension.<sup>28</sup> Schmitt elucidates the relation between exception and rule in following passage:

The exception can be more important to it than the rule, not because of a romantic irony for the paradox, but because the seriousness of an insight goes deeper than the clear generalizations inferred from what ordinary repeats itself. The exception is more interesting than the rule. The rule proves nothing; the exception proves everything: it confirms not only the rule but also its existence, which derives only from the exception.<sup>29</sup>

Agamben elucidates Schmitt's passage by arguing that exception is not simply exclusion but it is a ban from legal structure, through which law preserves itself even in its own suspension, applying to what it has excluded and abandoned.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, for Schmitt and

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<sup>27</sup> Carl Schmitt, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 162.

<sup>29</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Agamben, *Potentialities*, 162.

Agamben, the state of exception is the fundamental structure of the law that sustains itself not only in the law of the Third Reich but also of the law of liberal democratic states today.

Schmitt use the word “rationalist”<sup>31</sup> when he refers to his opponents, legal positivists. For Schmitt, there is no rational or explicable ground for the decision of sovereignty. The decision made by sovereignty when defining the state of exception precedes all rational ground. The decision’s rationale is created after the state of exception in order to explain and justify the sovereignty. This is the reason why he argues that all significant concepts of modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts, not only because of their historical transfer from theology to the theory of the state, but also because of their systematic structure.<sup>32</sup> He sees the analogy between theology and miracle in the relation between law and the state of exception. Sovereignty is the one sitting on the throne of the earthly state just as God sits on the throne of heavenly kingdom.

Agamben and Benjamin agree with Schmitt’s insight on the concept of the state of exception and sovereignty. The state of exception is a method of the state to wield its sovereignty through its law. Schmitt, Benjamin and Agamben are arguing that even in democratic states, the state of exception sustains its law and sovereignty. In this sense, Benjamin argues that the state of exception in which we live is not the exception but the rule.<sup>33</sup> Thus, an investigation of the moment of exception and the procedure from politics to law reveals the one who possesses real sovereignty.

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<sup>31</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 14.

<sup>32</sup> Carl Schmitt, 36.

<sup>33</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations.*, 257.

While Agamben accepts the insight of Schmitt on sovereignty and the state of exception, he strongly opposes his argument about ownership of the sovereignty. Agamben criticizes the state of exception called for by the state. He claims that the state of exception marks a threshold at which logic and praxis blur with each other and a pure violence without *logos* claims to realize an enunciation without any real reference.<sup>34</sup> In this condition, human rights are easily violated and suspended by the authority. Agamben, with Benjamin, argues that people through messianic politics should claim this state of exception.

For Agamben, Paul is the pioneer of the messianic state of exception. Agamben elucidates that Paul is the origin of the messianic community. In the first chapter of *Romans*, Paul calls himself a *doulos* or servant. The term *doulos* has a predominately juridical meaning. Paul's use of the term is both technical and inventive; he makes reference to his profane juridical condition only to neutralize it. Through his use of this word, Paul becomes a messianic remnant by putting himself in the state of exception. For Paul, the messianic remnants are neither a numeric remainder or portion, as several theologians have thought, nor a community of elected people that survived the final destruction of peoples.<sup>35</sup> The messianic remnants are those able to call the state of emergency. Agamben reminds us that the Hebrew prophetic texts show that the messianic remnant is a concept that functions in a peculiar soteriological dialectic with legal connotations.

Agamben argues that messianic remnants, those who see the world "as not," are the people who should call for the state of emergency. Schmitt, Benjamin and Agamben

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<sup>34</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 40.

<sup>35</sup> Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 55.

all agree that the juridical-political exception is not mere exclusion but an inclusive exclusion, a seizing of the outside to resolve the *anomia*.<sup>36</sup> While Schmitt argues that one sole sovereignty should invoke that state of exception, Agamben asserts, in line with Benjamin, that the remnant should be the subject of the state of emergency. According to Agamben, Paul's messianic remnant is a radicalization of the condition of the state of exception, whereby it is applied in disapplying itself, no longer having an inside or outside.<sup>37</sup> Through linguistic investigation of Paul's focus on *nomos pisteos*, the law of faith, Agamben shows that Paul's justice without law, the messianic *καταργεσίς*, is not the negation of the law, but the realization and fulfilment of the law.

Agamben elucidates Paul's concept of states of exception further through an etymological analysis of the words *κατεχον*, *ενέργεια*, and *δύναμις*. In 2 Thessalonians 2:3-9, Paul mentions the messiah and the *κατεχον* "that is holding back messiah." Agamben's point is that Paul is referring to the condition of the law in messianic time, when the *nomos* is rendered inoperative and is in a state of *καταργεσίς*. Therefore, the *κατεχον* is the force, the Roman Empire as well as other constituted authority, and Paul's concept of exception is a messianic fulfilment of the law, rendering the law inexecutable. Paul is arguing that messianic revolution is the change from the obedience of law to the obedience of faith and, at the same time, from the law of actuality, *ενέργεια*, to the law of possibility, *δύναμις*. Agamben calls this reduction, from actuality to possibility, a messianic inversion of the potential-act relation. This is why Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:9 claims that "Power [potentiality] realizes itself in weakness [*dynamis en*

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<sup>36</sup> Agamben, 105.

<sup>37</sup> Agamben, 106–7.



*astheneia teleitai*].”<sup>38</sup> Messianic force is constitutively weak and, through this weakness, it can be effective and eventually become more powerful than any strong forces.

From this juridical point of view, Paul’s concept of *pistis*, faith, is rooted in the sphere of prelaw, where law, politics, and religion become tightly interwoven.<sup>39</sup> Through another etymological analysis, Agamben shows that there is a juridical connotation in the word *emunah*, faith, in Jewish tradition. Two covenantal laws, the law of faith and the Mosaic law, function together. The law of faith, which Paul also calls the “new covenant,” guides and inactivates the Mosaic law, the normative covenant, through the governance of grace. Thus, Paul’s messianic faith is not a belief “in” the messiah Christians think of today. Agamben claims that for Paul, belief in messiah and belief of messiah are one. *Emunah*, the Jewish concept of belief, is operating in Paul’s messianism. This is the reason Paul argues “Jesus Messiah” but not “Jesus is messiah.” The messianic faith is an experience of being beyond existence and essence.<sup>40</sup> In other words, messianic faith is an ethical, political, legislative, and practical totality; in light of this the total meaning of Paul’s statement in Galatians 2:20 reveals itself: “I do not live, but the Messiah lives in me.”

The messianic state of exception is the state of exception proclaimed by the messianic people. By commenting on Paul’s *Epistle to the Romans*, Agamben explains his own concept of messianic state of exception. The remnants, the messianic people of Paul, do not live by the law of Roman Empire. They are not deceived by Roman law, but see and follow the heavenly law of God beyond visible, earthly law. Even though they

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<sup>38</sup> Agamben, 97.

<sup>39</sup> Agamben, 116.

<sup>40</sup> Agamben, 128.

live in the earthly empire with its man-made laws, they see the heavenly kingdom; this belief in the heavenly kingdom allows them to think about a politics prior to the law. It creates the possibility to resist the established order and rule.

The notion of messianic remnants clarifies Agamben's purpose for messianic politics. Agamben's enemies are constituted authorities such as state power and behemoth multinational companies that utilize their sovereignty while lurking behind the law. Agamben thinks that these authorities disturb the development of a true politics of the people, and wield law to maintain their sovereignty through a persistent state of exception. Following the line of Michel Foucault, Agamben investigates the structure of modern liberal states that constantly produce exceptions to maintain its legitimacy.

*Homo Sacer: sovereign power and bare life* is Agamben's work that explains the category of remnants, the subject of the state of exception. *Homo Sacer* is a Latin term originating from archaic Roman law. The literal meaning of the word is the "sacred person," but he points out that this word shows the ambivalence of the notion of sacredness that most western philosophers overlooked. He quotes Sextus Pompeius Festus to define this word:

The sacred man is the one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide; in the first tribunitian law, in fact, it is noted that 'if someone kills the one who is sacred according to the plebiscite, it will not be considered

homicide.’ This is why it is customary for a bad or impure man to be called sacred.<sup>41</sup>

*Homo Sacer* is a being posited outside of the law even while it is needed for the maintenance of the law. Agamben explain this further:

Sacred man may be killed and yet not sacrificed, and whose essential function in modern politics we intend to assert. An obscure figure of archaic Roman law, in which human life is included in the juridical order [ordinamento] solely in the form of its exclusion (that is, of its capacity to be killed), has thus offered the key by which not only the sacred texts of sovereignty but also the very codes of political power will unveil their mysteries.<sup>42</sup>

They are the object of the state of exception, and the legal system of the state produces sovereignty by defining them as *Homo Sacer* or in Agamben’s term, bare life. The exclusion of sacred persons is not just an elimination of those people. State sovereignty needs that *Homo Sacer* in order to create legal justification for its use of power. Agamben argues that even in the modern liberal democracy, this category of *Homo Sacer* is created by state and economic sovereignties to wield and justify their own power.

Therefore, the sacred person— bare life, people inclusively excluded from the law— is not an archaic notion of the Roman law but a focal point of human politics. The

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<sup>41</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 71.

<sup>42</sup> Agamben, 8.

refugee camp, prison, any place where the law is suspended can be a place of *Homo Sacer*. Agamben gives examples of the camp in modern political systems:

We must admit that we find ourselves virtually in the presence of a camp every time such a structure is created, independent of the kinds of crime that are committed there and whatever its denomination and specific topography. The stadium in Bari into which the Italian police in 1991 provisionally herded all illegal Albanian immigrants before sending them back to their country, the winter cycle-racing track in which the Vichy authorities gathered the Jews before consigning them to the Germans, the Konzentrationslager für Ausländer in Cottbus/Sielow in which the Weimar government gathered Jewish refugees from the East, or the zones d'attentes in French international airports in which foreigners asking for refugee status are detained will then all equally be camps.<sup>43</sup>

For Agamben, all modern liberal democratic states have more or less the same problem of sovereignty. Even though it has a democratic constitution and rules that established on the constitutional ground, the sovereign power still requires the state of exception, in other words, bare life. Agamben here identifies “the inner solidarity between democracy and totalitarianism.”<sup>44</sup>

For him, the biggest problem of states of exception called by state and economic authorities is not their power that violates human life, but their concealment of

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<sup>43</sup> Agamben, 112.

<sup>44</sup> Agamben, 6.

sovereignty behind the law. Since people today are living in a routinized state of exception, people become insensitive to the problem of sovereignty. Messianism is important at this point since, from the juridico-political perspective, messianism is a theory of the state of exception: except for the fact that in messianism there is no authority in force to proclaim the state of exception; instead, “there is the Messiah to subvert its power.”<sup>45</sup> Therefore, a messianic state of exception is the state of exception called by “the people.”

Paul’s messianic state of exception is a revolutionary political declaration for early Christians in Rome. They are *Homo Sacer* prohibited and abandoned by the Roman law. To these excluded people, Paul illustrates a new form of ontology, messianic remnants. This messianic ontology allows early Christians to see beyond the Roman law and allows them to see hope for the future. Their number is trivial compared to other people, and their power is tiny when placed before Rome. However, they never lose their hope, and they finally change the Roman Empire to a Christian Empire.

As Paul’s messianism shows the heavenly law beyond the Roman law, Agamben expects a messianic state of exception to show the people today to see a possibility beyond the established authority and order. If people fail to see the irony of sovereignty, that it has to constantly create the state of exception in order to maintain itself, then it becomes impossible to even start the resistance against the sovereign powers. It is important to discern the problem of sovereignty in order to fight it, and messianic hope opens the sight to see the unseen possibility outside the law.

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<sup>45</sup> Agamben, 40.

In this sense, Paul's terminology of the law of actuality, *ἐνέργεια*, and the law of potentiality, *δύναμις*, is applicable to the messianic state of exception in modern liberal democracy. Our "actuality" is a life under the state of exception called by the authority. Agamben sees this as "the law begins to coincide with life" and, once it has become the pure form of law in a state of virtual exception, it lets bare life subsist before it.<sup>46</sup> The problem of law is that it makes people regard the established order, the actuality or *ἐνέργεια*, as taken for granted. It destroys any potentiality for change in the minds of the people. However, the messianic state of exception penetrates the illusion of the established order and allows them to think about possibility, *δύναμις*, prior to the law. Messianic politics thereby enables genuine politics prior to the law.

Messianic state of exception is an argument about ontology. It is an ontology that can cut the knot that binds sovereignty to constituting power.<sup>47</sup> Being a person with political messianism means being able to think a constituting power wholly released from the sovereign ban.<sup>48</sup> It gives eyes to see the invisible strings that controls the legal system. In her ability to see the concealed source of power of sovereignty, messianic person have possibility to develop genuine form of politics that can regain sovereignty from state and economic authority.

Benjamin elucidates the messianic state of exception further in his notable work, *Critique of Violence*. Benjamin defines two forms of violence: mythical violence and divine violence. Mythical violence is a violence wielded by the established sovereignty. He explains mythical violence as follows:

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<sup>46</sup> Agamben, 38.

<sup>47</sup> Agamben, 40.

<sup>48</sup> Agamben, 40.

For the function of violence in lawmaking is twofold, in the sense that lawmaking pursues as its end, with violence as the means, what is to be established as law, but at the moment of instatement does not dismiss violence; rather, at this very moment of lawmaking, it specifically establishes as law not an end unalloyed by violence, but one necessarily and intimately bound to it, under the title of power.<sup>49</sup>

The mythical violence exerted by sovereignty has two functions. It preserves law by using violence on the violator of law, and the very moment of the violence is a law-making moment since the violent force itself becomes the content of the law. The force and violence of mythical violence becomes one through violence itself. Therefore, Benjamin claims that “law making is power making” in the system of mythical violence.

Divine violence is a violence that calls a halt to mythical violence. While mythical violence is exerted by the system to sustain itself, divine violence manifests itself as law destroying violence.<sup>50</sup> It destroys the boundaries set by mythical violence. It is a lethal violence without spilling blood. Benjamin is explaining the messianic state of exception through the notion of divine violence.

Agamben and Benjamin have an optimistic vision about messianic politics. Their understandings of messianism are based on philosophical and historical investigation, and their purpose is to show the direction for a future politics. In terms of their purpose to resist against the established order of authority, messianic politics is surely a promising way to go. Benjamin brilliantly grasps an important characteristic of messiah, saying that

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<sup>49</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 295.

<sup>50</sup> Walter Benjamin, 297.

“The messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as subduer of Antichrist.”<sup>51</sup>

However, this aphorism not only shows the potential of messianic politics but also foreshadows the danger embedded in messianic politics. It is true that messianic politics have great potential to change to established system. It is also true that messianic politics allows people to see the vision of the higher law and have hope in a hopeless situation. Then, what aspect of messianic politics is problematic? When does messianism become dangerous to not only to “antichrist” but also to the society as a whole?

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<sup>51</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations.*, 255.



#### 4. Risk of Messianic Politics

In *How Democracies Die*, Steven Levitsky warns that democracy can collapse by itself through its own “democratic procedure.” He argues that there is a tendency to believe that democracy can only die at the hand of guns. Cold war, coups d’état, and nuclear war are typical images of democracy destroyers. Levitsky partially agrees with this view since it is true that democracies in Argentina, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Ghana, Greece, Guatemala, Nigeria, Pakistan, Peru, Thailand, Turkey, Uruguay and (more recently) Egypt all died this way.<sup>52</sup> However, Levitsky claims that this is not the only way that democracies die.

According to Levitsky, there is a more gentle and gradual way to destroy democracy. Democracy may not only die because of nuclear missiles launched by a hostile country or generals who want to assume power, but also by the hand of legitimately elected leaders. This process can be accomplished quickly, as Hitler did in 1933 Germany, but Levitsky argues that more often, democracies erode slowly, in barely visible steps.<sup>53</sup>

He gives the example of Venezuela’s Hugo Chávez. Chávez was a political outsider who railed against what he cast as a corrupted governing elite, promising to build a more “authentic” democracy that used the country’s vast oil wealth to improve the lives of the poor.<sup>54</sup> In Levitsky’s evaluation, Chávez tactfully seized on the anger of ordinary Venezuelans, many of whom felt ignored or mistreated by the established

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<sup>52</sup> Steven Levitsky, *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown, 2018), 3.

<sup>53</sup> Levitsky, 4.

<sup>54</sup> Levitsky, 3.

political parties.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, he also shows that Georgia, Hungary, Nicaragua, Peru, the Philippines, Poland, Russia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Ukraine also lost their democracy through this “democratic backslide” towards authoritarianism.

The biggest problem of democratic backsliding is that it is hard to identify the actual moment of democracy’s destruction. When democracy is about to collapse by the outer force (outside of its own system), by war or by coups d’état, the threat and danger is relatively obvious. It allows the state to fight against the challenge. However, this internal backslide is different. Levitsky elucidates this:

Because there is no single moment—no coup, declaration of martial law, or suspension of the constitution—in which the regime obviously “crosses the line” into dictatorship, nothing may set off society’s alarm bells. Those who denounce government abuse may be dismissed as exaggerating or crying wolf. Democracy’s erosion is, for many, almost imperceptible.<sup>56</sup>

The most significant features of the endogenic erosion of democracy is that it is an invisible threat. In this case, there is no way to see the democracy’s time of death and it is too late when the end of democracy is noticeable.

Levitsky’s concern is that American democracy seems also somehow vulnerable to this form of regression. He argues that Trump’s election is a failure of not only Hillary Clinton and Democrats, but also Republicans and American democracy as a whole. He argues that it is not the biggest disaster in the history of the United States and reminds

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<sup>55</sup> Levitsky, 3.

<sup>56</sup> Levitsky, 6.

readers that American democracy survived the Civil War, the Great Depression, the Cold War, and Watergate. He anticipates that American democracy will be able to “survive Trump” as long as “unwritten democratic norms” of democracy reinforce the constitution.

Therefore, keeping authoritarian politicians out of power is necessary to protect democracy.<sup>57</sup> It does not mean that certain parties or candidates should be banned from standing for election. The effort to protect democracy should be carried out at the normative level and for Levitsky, the most striking feature of authoritarian politicians is their use of populism. He even argues that populism is a “litmus test” for authoritarianism. Levitsky elucidates populist politics:

Populists are antiestablishment politicians—figures who, claiming to represent the voice of “the people,” wage war on what they depict as a corrupt and conspiratorial elite. Populists tend to deny the legitimacy of established parties, attacking them as undemocratic and even unpatriotic. They tell voters that the existing system is not really a democracy but instead has been hijacked, corrupted, or rigged by the elite. And they promise to bury that elite and return power to “the people.”<sup>58</sup>

Levitsky defines populists as antiestablishment politicians that deny the established order and parties.

Levitsky’s claims that risk of a backsliding democracy is a problem of political procedure or the authoritarian characteristic of the populist politician. He makes recourse

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<sup>57</sup> Levitsky, 24.

<sup>58</sup> Levitsky, 22.

to elected autocrats in many different countries and explains their characteristics. He explains political procedures that allow Alberto Fujimori, Donald Trump, and all the authoritarian politicians in democracies to become dictators and destroy their democracy. However, it seems he does not explain how and why populist politicians become authoritarian. Modern liberal democracy is basically populism, and there are no politicians in democracy who do not use populism. Is he arguing that any form of populism is dangerous? Levitsky's argument seems ambivalent at this point since he does not elucidate the difference between the populism of authoritarian leaders and that populism commonly tapped into by "good" democratic leaders.

Furthermore, Levitsky does not mention why and how populist politicians become authoritarian. He just argues that it has to be stopped because it is dangerous. While I broadly agree with his view about dangerous features of populism, his argument sounds self-contradicting since all the elected politicians in democracy tap into populism. Modern democracy is basically a populist political system in which all the candidates, all the elected leaders utilize populism; there is no problem in populism itself. No one can win the popular election unless they attract the people. Since Levitsky argues that populism is dangerous without distinction of various forms and aspects of populism, he lumps different aspects of populism together. In one sense, he seems to argue that "my populism is good, while your populism is bad" when he argues that populist politicians are dangerous. Even though his message is compelling, this ambivalence makes his argument vague and impractical.

The questions that have to be asked to clarify this matter are; what kind of populism? and, what form of populism is dangerous? Messianic politics explains the

missing part of his argument about the risk of populism. Messianic politics is a form of political populism. As Taubes, Benjamin, and Agamben show above, messianic politics has great potential for giving hope to people in hopelessness through messianic ontology. It allows the messianic people to see a better form of world outside of the visible order. It helps the people to transcend the actuality and imagine the possibility of the different world. However, vision and power of messianic politics does not guarantee the peace and prosperity of the state when it comes into the “real politics.” Rather, it is highly likely to be destructive and violent since it is inherently the force that destroys the existing law and order. While the term populist politics does not have a connotation of destruction, messianic politics inherently means destruction. Therefore, messianic politics explains the problem more clearly.

Messianic politics achieves positive forms in the political sphere through populist politics. In Levitsky’s elucidations about Hugo Chávez, Alberto Fujimori, and Donald Trump, the rhetoric and imageries commonly used by populist politicians are typical of political messianism as well. They claim that they are representative of new era and they attack the established order for oppressing their people. Populist politicians present themselves as saviors come from nowhere. They claim dichotomous confrontation between old system and the new world to come. Benjamin brilliantly grasps an important characteristic of messiah saying that “The messiah comes not only as the redeemer, he comes as subduer of Antichrist.”<sup>59</sup> The first and foremost characteristic of messiah is not a savior but a destroyer.

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<sup>59</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 255.

South Korean former president, Guenhye Park can also be listed in that line of political messiahs. In 2012, Park became a president with a number of votes unprecedented in Korea democracy history since the 1986 constitutional amendment. She presented herself as an unconventional rebel who could subvert the political-economic establishment. Her relatively short career as politician, her irrelevant university major (Park's major in university was electronic engineering which is very unusual for politicians. Most of Korean politicians' degrees are in law, administrative science, international relations, journalism, or business administration) and her silent and abstinent character (which is also unusual to politician in Korea) became reasons to believe that she was the right person to bring the new world. She defined the human rights movement, and president Moon's party as *Gangnam Jwapa*, "champagne socialist." She claimed that she would change the whole system of the country that established politicians had made.

Park's message fascinated marginalized people in terms of age, gender and economic issues. She received support from older generations, women, and low-income electors within South Korea. In research carried out after the presidential election, 65.7% of people whose household income is under \$24,000 a year, which is very low in South Korea, answered that they voted for Park.<sup>60</sup> Park also received strong support from female voters. The female group's voter turnout of the 18<sup>th</sup> presidential election was higher than male group. 76.5 % of female voters came to the ballot box while only 74.8% of male voters showed up to polling places.<sup>61</sup> This was the first time in South Korean election

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<sup>60</sup> 강신구, 강원택 외 8 명, 한국유권자의 선택 (서울: 아산정책연구원, 2013) 101. (Choice of Korean Voters)

<sup>61</sup> 김형준, "여성 유권자의 정치 성향과 투표 행태 추이에 대한 고찰: 2012 대통령 선거를 중심으로," *The Women's Studies* Vol. 86, no 1 (2014): 81.

history that female voter's turnout rate was higher than male voters. Park received support from 53.8% of women, which is higher than her overall votes, 51.6%.<sup>62</sup> Elderly generation over 50s also played major role in election of Park. 65.8% of 20s, 66.5% of 30s and 55.6% of 40s voted for Moon but more than 62.5 % of 50s and more than 70% of 60s supported Park.<sup>63</sup> Park was largely supported by “oppressed people” in South Korea.

Park professed herself as the only person who can bring the establishment into judgement. Park roused the anger of neglected group of people such as Southeast province retired workers and made them to believe that she is the terminator of the old system. Her relatively brief political career became her weapon to say that she was different from meretricious politicians. Her message and vision were strong enough to compel people to the voting booth. She successfully captivated the public with a messianic vision.

Messianic politics actualized in liberal democracy is a politics of populist revolution. The goal of messianic politics is to bring the heaven in this world. In order to bring the messianic kingdom, it urges people to sacrifice the established order. This “secular” messianism has enough power to stop the existing state and economic sovereignty as Benjamin and Agamben expect. Through this state of exception called by “the people,” messianism takes over sovereignty from the established order and produces another form of sovereignty.

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(An Analysis on Female Voter's Disposition and Tendency)

<sup>62</sup> 김형준, 82.

<sup>63</sup> 신지홍, “방송 3 사 출구조사,” *연합뉴스*, December 19, 2012,

<http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/bulletin/2012/12/19/0200000000AKR20121219096200001.HTML>

(Three Channel Exit Poll)

There are three reasons messianic politics is a threat to modern liberal democracy. To begin with, as Levitsky is concerned, any form of legal or procedural attempts of liberal democracy to stop authoritarian backsliding can be neutralized by messianic politics. Messianic politics is another form of the state of exception. The sovereign powers that state law, congress, and even constitutions wield over people, come from what Agamben calls “routinized states of exception.” However, once a messianic politics takes form in real politics, it creates own sovereignty and incapacitates the legal procedures of modern liberal democracy. Since the juridical system cannot sustain itself without its sovereignty, it is impossible to expect those systems to stop the political messiah. In the name of high approval ratings, the legislature and the judicature will become compromised and, as Levitsky warns, there is no time of death of a democracy in this case.

Moreover, messianic sovereignty tends to be violent and aggressive since it is a popular sovereignty that is fueled by the despair and terror of oppressed people. Messianism starts from the rejection of the world. Thus, it is more likely to be associated with marginalized people in the society. As messianism become messianic politics in liberal democracy, it unavoidably forms in the people who believe that they are marginalized. This kind of populism inevitably involves the “social question” and gives this matter “extreme urgency” that justifies any violence of “the poor.” This becomes what Hannah Arendt calls “politics of necessity.”

In *On Revolution*, Arendt argues that “all modern revolutions are essentially Christian in origin” even when their professed faith is atheism since their arguments supporting their claims usually point to the clearly rebellious nature of the early Christian



sect with their stress on the equality of souls before God, their open contempt for all public powers, and their promise of a Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>64</sup> Through identification of messianic politics, Arendt compares the French and American Revolutions. She explains why the French Revolution became violent and eventually ended in failure with its messianic character.<sup>65</sup> She argues that the social question should not be the ground of politics since it justifies any form of violence in the name of necessity with extreme urgency. According to her, the French Revolution walked a “foredoomed path” since it asserted the extreme urgency of human necessity.<sup>66</sup> The French revolution always takes precedence of the necessity of the poor over the building of freedom. This gives the poverty problem the highest priority that can override any other issue including freedom and the human life. Arendt points out that both violence and necessity are forces in motion and drag everything and everybody into their streaming movements.<sup>67</sup> Those movements justify any form of violence in the name of the poor. Therefore, Arendt argues that every attempt to solve the social question with political means leads to terror.<sup>68</sup>

Lastly, messianic politics ends the space of politics that nurtures the modern liberal democracy. As Levitsky argues, democracy is reinforced by “unwritten democratic norms.”<sup>69</sup> Properly working modern liberal democracy is like a swan smoothly floating on the surface of water. It looks calm and peaceful but under the water, it is working hard to maintain itself. The political system of democracy is just a surface

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<sup>64</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 16.

<sup>65</sup> Arendt, 16.

<sup>66</sup> Arendt, 102.

<sup>67</sup> Arendt, 104.

<sup>68</sup> Arendt, 102.

<sup>69</sup> Levitsky, *How Democracies Die*, 8.

and under the surface, diverse communities and individuals create and regulate sovereign power through consideration processes not only through “political organizations” but also through diverse spaces that allow free and respectful discourses. Any place where two or three are gathered in the name of “we” can be this space from home, school, church, temple, sports stadium and even social media. Sovereign power that moves it comes from the outside of the political system, and the proper form of sovereign power can only be produced through properly formed public space that allows freedom of speech and mutual respect.

In messianic politics, this place of the public is not allowed. Messianic politics is a politics of god. Since the kingdom of god, the perfect heaven has already come, there can be no alternatives or different view. Messiah is the lawgiver and any attempt to deny the god given law becomes blasphemy. Arendt identifies this problem in the French Revolution, through arguing that “the words the people (*le peuple*) are the key words for every understanding of the French Revolution.”<sup>70</sup> Maximilien Robespierre and his Jacobin Club put up the banner of “the people (*le peuple*).” Those people are the misfortune (*les malheureux*), marginalized and oppressed mass of the poor (*les misérables*).<sup>71</sup> This very definition of the word was born out of compassion and becomes the only legislator of French Revolution. Robespierre insisted that laws should be promulgated “in the name of the French people,” instead of “the republic.”<sup>72</sup> They do not need the procedure of the public to create the law since the law is already there with the people. Individuality and plurality dissolve into “the people” and any attempt to go

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<sup>70</sup> Arendt, *On Revolution*, 65.

<sup>71</sup> Arendt, 104.

<sup>72</sup> Arendt, 65.

through political procedures is frustrated in the name of the need of the people. Messianic politics evaporates the public space that is necessary for the promising liberal popular democracy.

In Geunhye Park's presidency, she abused her authority and power to maintain her presidency and cover up the corruption. She ordered National Intelligent Service (NIS, similar to C.I.A in America) and Defense Security Command (DSC, similar to Office of Information for the Armed Forces in the U. S. Army) to monitor and control the opposite parties. N.I.S. and D. S. C. inspected government opponents and made a blacklist. She abused police force to arrest "dangerous groups" from the Korean Railway workers union to the Society of Korean Poets.<sup>73</sup> Many of those governmental actions could be considered violation of fundamental human rights, but the legal system did not properly work. Some of judges, prosecutors, and senior civil officers were demoted or removed from their seat for insubordination of president's order. Despite of all those incidents that threatened democracy, President Park's approval rate remained stable because of "the concrete supporters."

"The concrete supporters" is a sarcastic term that is used by Park's opponent parties and media to degrade Parks supporters. Before the scandal come out into the open in October 2016, Parks approval rate hardly ever dropped under 35% regardless of any political, economic or diplomatic issues. Even Sewol Ferry disaster, a tragic marine accident that happened in April 16 2014, could not reduce her approval rate distinctly. Park and her government failed to save the situation. 299 passengers, including 247

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<sup>73</sup> 정용하, "한국자유민주주의에서 민주주의 결핍에 대한 지표적 분석 : 박근혜정부의 전반시기를 중심으로," 한국 민족문화 Vol. 58 (2016): 396.

(An Analysis on the Deficits of Democracy in the Park Geun-Hye Government)

Danwon high school students and teachers, were dead. Park neither convened National Security Council nor gave the initial directive to the relevant ministries until the ship completely sunk. Her first response came at 5:15 in the evening and it was seven hours after the sinking of the ship. Even though media and opposite parties intensely criticized poor and inept handling of rescue operation, Park's approval rate maintained higher than 40%.

In 2015, a year after the Sewol disaster and a year before the Scandal was exposed, CBS news, one of the progressive media channels in Korea, wrote an article entitled "Why is President Park's Concrete Approval Rate Unshakable?" In the article, editorialist Youngcheol Kwon analyzes that the President has unmovable supporters consisting of over-50 age group, female house maker group, and low-income group.<sup>74</sup> Because of their strong, stable, and unquestioning support, no political party, no media, and no democratic check procedure could not function properly until Park lost her messianic force by the exposure of scandal.

Messianic politics has a potential to destroy liberal democracy. As Arendt explains, its revolutionary nature can subvert the order and rules of democracy. When messianism positively advents in real politics, it forms as a directed and focused hatred and despair of the people who believe that they are oppressed and marginalized. As Jacobins did, those messianic people justify their action in the name of their provision as given by nature. For them, it is an actualization of potentiality and fulfilment of history.

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<sup>74</sup>권영철, "[Why 뉴스] 박 대통령 콘크리트 지지율 왜 흔들리지 않나?," *노컷뉴스*, August 25, 2015, <http://www.nocutnews.co.kr/news/4462852>.

In this way of thinking, there can be no alternatives. It inevitably becomes violent authoritarianism.

Moreover, the risk of messianic politics can threaten the modern liberal democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Levitsky points out, America, one of the most developed democratic countries in terms either of history or of norms that empower a democratic system, faced a challenge to its democracy in the last presidential election. Levitsky argues that even the most democratic political system can break down not by outer factors but by its own “backsliding phenomenon.” Messianic politics is not only a matter of religious traditions, but also a form of politics that can bring about destruction of democracy.

## 5. Preserving Hope for the Messiah

Messianism is a strong force that moves human history. It has both merit and demerit in terms of politics. In order to contemplate the merit and demerit of messianic politics clearly, the notion of politics in liberal democracy has to be defined properly, since politics is a term that is frequently misunderstood and distorted in many ways. Agamben states that to think of government as simple executive power is a mistake and one of the most consequential errors ever made in the history of Western politics.<sup>75</sup> He argues that “our Western political system” should differentiate between a “form of constitution” and a “form of government” to understand politics properly and clearly. In other word, modern liberal democracy tends to consider only a “form of constitution” as a politics. The larger issues about ethics, norms, and life pass unnoticed as apolitical matters, while issues about the political institution and its sustenance are generally recognized as the object of politics. However, it is important to understand those broader politics in order to understand not only pros and cons of messianic politics but also modern liberal democracy.

In this sense, Claude Lefort’s definition of “the political” clarifies the proper meaning of politics in liberal democracy. Lefort claims that before we attempt to answer that question, we must first define our terms.<sup>76</sup> He differentiates the modern notion of politics and “the political.” The modern notion of politics indicates function of a subsystem and its institutions in a larger society. “The political” is a broader term that

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<sup>75</sup> Agamben and McCuaig, *Democracy in What State?*, 4.

<sup>76</sup> Claude Lefort, “The Permanence of the Theologico-Political?,” in *Political Theologies Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 150.

refers to the principles that produce the social whole. “The political” engages with “primordial reference to the mode of institution of the social.”<sup>77</sup> The modern notion of politics only shows the operation method of established sovereignty. Therefore, whether the view of modern notion of politics is correct or not, it only shows the vestiges of sovereignty’s wielded power. Politics is a set of different principles that produces the social whole and a promising political system is dependent upon the success of securing the sphere of politics that Lefort defined as “the political.” In liberal democracy, genuine politics should refer to this broader sense of politics since those subsystems and small institutions in a larger society formulate democratic norms that sustains democratic political system.

The democratic values and norms of the larger society is a necessary condition of peaceful sustenance of liberal democracy. In terms of maintaining and securing this ecosystem of democracy in the larger society, messianic politics plays a significant role. Ted Smith, in his work, *Weird John Brown*, elucidates how messianic politics can nourish politics in liberal democracy. He argues that messianic politics has two different features in term of politics. According to him, messianic politics involved with political institutions, in other words, narrow notion of politics, eliminates the ecosystem of politics that sustains liberal democracy. Ted Smith elucidates the vaporization of politics in messianic politics saying, “Politics- with words or with weapons- is just a means to make the world correspond to the standard set by code. When that correspondence has been

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<sup>77</sup> Lefort, 151.

achieved, and achieved so perfectly that it cannot be undone, politics come to an end.”<sup>78</sup>

Smith explains that this is how politics is destroyed by theocracy.

This is the reason why Benjamin points out that messiah cannot take any “historical” role in terms of politics in his *Theologico-Political Fragment*. He argues:

Only the Messiah himself consummates all history, in the sense that he alone redeems, completes, creates its relation to the Messianic. For this reason nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic. Therefore, the kingdom of God is not the *telos* of the historical dynamic; it cannot be set as a goal. From the standpoint of history, it is not the goal, but the end. Therefore the order of the profane cannot be built up on the idea of the Divine Kingdom, and therefore theocracy has no political but only a religious meaning.<sup>79</sup>

Benjamin asserts that the order of profane cannot be built on the idea of divine kingdom, messianism. Any attempt to build something upon messianism in terms of politics will only strengthen the destructive force of messianic politics. It inevitably becomes authoritarianism.

On the other hand, when messianic politics engages with larger society as an indicative role that negates the established order, it enables nourishing politics through showing the possibility to break the existing codes. In this case, law is already fulfilled to messianic people so there is no need to seek to establish a law. This “already fulfilled law” in the heart of messianic people allows them to have messianic ontology that opens

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<sup>78</sup> Ted A. Smith, *Weird John Brown: Divine Violence and the Limits of Ethics* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015), 121.

<sup>79</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, 312.



the possibility of politics. This messianic ontology that enables to see the law beyond the existing law also helps to interpret the Benjamin's notion of divine violence. Smith explains:

The fulfilment of the law does not undo the desire for politics, for politics, as Aristotle saw, is not just a mean to other ends but a constitutive part of human flourishing. Politics continues as collective deliberation about the nature of free and faithful response. And because the fulfillment of the law manifests itself in this age as divine violence, politics proceeds with new freedom. The richest forms of political life are possible only when people are free to do more than conform their societies to preexisting codes, whether those codes claim to be set by earthly or divine powers. The fullness of political life requires a freedom of the other side of binding code. Because people are born into a world already ordered by codes of many kinds, some kind of emancipation is necessary for political life to begin. The divine violence of the higher law does this work. It does not bring politics to an end; it makes politics possible.<sup>80</sup>

This form of messianic politics brings about a genuine political revolution that is necessary to liberal democracy. It breaks the settled code by making people to think about the better alternative to follow the "higher law" in their daily life. This empowers and sustains democratic norms and imageries that democracy needs to not only maintain but also develop itself.

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<sup>80</sup> Smith, *Weird John Brown*, 121.

Messianic politics nourishes liberal democracy when it influences politics in a broader sense as an indication of a “higher law.” It opens the possibility of politics and a better alternative for existing law and order. Messianic politics is a hope of liberal democracy that shows the way of history to liberal democracy. However, as messianic politics engages with politics in a narrow sense, the modern notion of politics, it becomes a horrifying authoritarianism that wields the worst form of mythical violence. It is secular theocracy that eliminates liberal democracy by its own hand. Therefore, in order to maintain liberal democracy, it is important to nourish the messianic politics in the sphere of “the political” while keeps it from getting into political system.

In terms of keeping messianic force from threatening democracy, Agamben argues politics as a “pure mean.” In *Means without End*, Agamben proposes to see the politics as a medium. He asserts that “politics is the sphere neither of an end in itself nor of means subordinated to an end.”<sup>81</sup> According to him, politics is the space of a “pure mediality” without end intended as the field of human action and of human thought. In this case, law cuts loose from violence through what he calls, “the messianic fulfillment of law.” In this status, Agamben claims “humanity will play with law just as children play with disused object, not in order to restore them to their canonical use but to free them from it for good.”<sup>82</sup> Agamben expects the person in this “messianic law” will not utilize violence for the law because the law is not a mean to realize particular goal but just a pure mean like toy. As no one try to hurt somebody with toy, people would not make the law as a mean to fulfill their needs.

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<sup>81</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 117.

<sup>82</sup> Agamben, *State of Exception*, 64.

While Agamben's argument is theoretically appealing, it would not be effective in terms of lessening the destructive aspect of messianic politics. People who crave for messiah are not choosing to conceive messianism but are trying to find a hope from outside while they are in miserable, hopeless situations. Having messianism is not their choice but inevitable consequence of desperate situation. In a sense, it is rather a human condition. To think of politics as a pure mean would not be helpful. It would be like telling people who are struggling with starvation to play music to the beat of their rumbling stomach and to think of that hunger as a play. People fascinated by messianism would not be affected by Agamben's claim.

Similarly, Arendt's measure for the politics of necessity is pointless. Arendt claims that politics should not connected to the social question since it becomes violent and destroys the space of politics. While her observation brilliantly explains the risk of messianic politics, her solution for the risk sounds meaningless since it lacks understanding of people's motivation to engage with messianic politics. When people face an imminent danger to lose everything, messianism becomes the last resort of their hopeless circumstance. They would not listen to Arendt's warning saying stop following the false messiah because that messiah is their only visible hope. For the people who are taking part in the politics of necessity, Arendt's claim would have no power of purchase.

Levitsky offers a more procedural solution to control the destructive force of political messiah. He argues that "although mass responses to extremist appeals matter, what matters more is whether political elites serve as filters."<sup>83</sup> Levitsky puts emphasis on the role of political parties as "gatekeepers" of democracy. In other words, his solution is

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<sup>83</sup> Levitsky, *How Democracies Die*, 20.

focusing on the narrow sense of politics, political institutions. It is true that political parties have an important role in liberal democracy. However, if political elite and parties take on too much of a role in popular democracy, it will stiffen the broader sense of politics. This will lead the liberal democracy to aristocracy. (Japan is a good example of this case). Even though Levitsky's argument is compelling, in order to nourish genuine liberal democracy, the solution for the threat of destructive political messiahs should engage with foundation of politics, the people.

Messianism is a collaborative hope towards the future. As humans cannot live without hope, popular democracy cannot endure without messianic politics. Messianic politics that engages with "the political" gives hope to people and shows the vision for the better world to them. Since it offers a chance to think about new order and world, messianism functions as a waymark of liberal democracy. Messianic politics is a necessary condition for the nourishing liberal democracy since it constantly offers potentiality to actuality. Realization of true liberal democracy is only possible through people who have firm messianic hope for the better future. Messianic politics is unshakable hope that serves society and its members. In order to sustain and develop modern liberal democracy, this messianic politics in "the political" should be encouraged and nourished.

Maintaining democratic ecosystem in "the political" is also important in terms of keeping political messiah away from the sovereignty. As Agamben and Levitsky explain, there is no way to prevent the advent of a political messiah when it emerges in liberal democracy through messianic state of exception. Popular democracy is intrinsically vulnerable to a political messiah. If people start to follow the genuine political messiah, it

is almost impossible to stop the messiah legally or procedurally since the people become the source of sovereignty in this messianic moment. In this sense, the problem is not the messiah but the messianic people. For instance, Geunhye Park, was not an exceptionally brilliant politician. Even though majority of South Korean people supported her, she had many flaws as a politician in modern democracy. Park was not a good demagogue. She was not good at manipulating the public. She did not like being physically affectionate in public. She even shook off her supporter's hand in front of TV camera. She was not good at speech. She rambled and repeated herself when she talks without script. In the TV debate before the presidential election, she was completely beaten by other candidates. Above all things, she did not have sense of sympathy and she could not hide it in front of the public. All her features do not correspond to the virtue of a popular politician. However, despite of all those flaws, Park became a president by the power of messianic politics. Even though she could not finish her service because of the political scandal, it was not because people repudiated her but because of an accidental exposure of the scandal. Her presidency was not sustained by her ability but by a messianism of the people. Therefore, the problem of political messiah is not a question about the leader but a question about the people who want to see the messiah.

To respond to the messianic question with a normative, theoretical answer is meaningless. For the people in the messianic state of exception, giving a normative direction would not be helpful. For their danger is imminent and grave, and there is no theory to stop them. Messianic people go against the norms not because they do not know what is right and what is wrong, but because they think oppressors set the norms. Telling

them what is right and what is wrong cannot help to stop the advent of political messiah at all.

The more practical and effective way to restrain the advent of the political messiah is to strengthen the basic unit of liberal democracy and exchange meaningful relationship with the people there. Family, school, community baseball team, church, and even social media, all these small groups and relationships are important since they are part of “the political” in liberal democracy. Strong bonds from the basic level of the society prevent people in the society from thinking that they are “marginalized.” The term “marginalized” in politics is not a fixed notion to certain group or people. If a group of people thinks that they are being shunted aside by the rest of the society, they are the marginalized people in terms of politics. If this marginalized groups grow, this causes polarization of the society. This polarized community is a perfect alter for the political messiah. Levitsky warns that “the weakening of democratic norms is rooted in extreme partisan polarization.”<sup>84</sup> The way to overcome this is to be with all the different people in the society through all those groups that considered as “apolitical.” This apolitical practice through apolitical groups is, ironically, the most important practice in term of “the political” since it changes hope for the political messiah that destroys the liberal democracy to genuine messianic hope that nourishes liberal democracy.

In order to make liberal democracy viable, messianic hope should be preserved in the space of the political. Messianism is sustenance of liberal democracy that renews the law and political system toward feasible alternative. It allows a democracy to see beyond given circumstance and order. If people have no messianic hope in terms of politics, there

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<sup>84</sup> Levitsky, 9.

will be no possibility to change the political system in accordance with the situation of the people. Society without messianic hope is a society that has no way to accept the genuine voice and need of the people. Therefore, preservation of messianic politics is the most important goal for preservation of liberal democracy. The question is what kind of messianic politics to preserve.

## 6. Christians, Messianic Experts

Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.”

John 18:36

Messianism is not Christians’ exclusive property. Messianism is an intensive hope for the future and this form of belief can be found in non-Christian civilizations and religious traditions. Messianism should be understood as a characteristic on human society. However, Christians have advantage over the others in terms of engaging with messianism. All Christians are born with messianism, live with messianism and die for messianism. Christian faith is itself a messianic faith and Christians empower their lives with messianism every day. Since Christians are familiar with issues about messianic politics, Christians are more sensitive and more responsible to messianic politics. Therefore, Taubes claims “All the Christian concepts I know are highly political and explosive, or become so at a certain moment.”<sup>85</sup> Christians are, by the roots, people of messianic politics. The question is, how to manage the explosive potential of messianic politics for the peaceful prosperity of liberal democracy?

The messianic familiarity of Christians induces them to involve with messianic politics in liberal democracy more actively. This was featured the most prominently in the Park’s presidency and impeachment. South Korean Christian communities were in the

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<sup>85</sup> Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 71.



spearhead of issue about Park's impeachment in both sides. Conservative pastors and lay Christian groups participated in Park's supporter group, Tagukki Boodae (meaning 'The Army of Tagukki'; Korean national flag). It was not hard to see the cross and the Star of David (this also used as a symbol of conservative Christian in Korea) in Park's supporter rally. Several mega-church pastors even showed an alignment with conservative movement in sermon which considered as inappropriate action to religious person in Korean culture. The Christian Council of Korea, one of the biggest Christian consultative groups, held public prayer service at the Seoul Plaza to "protect" president.

On the other hand, other Christians also passionately engaged with opposition movement. The Catholic Priest Association of Justice has always been in the front line of protest movement. Most of the Protestant presses fiercely criticized Geunhye Park. Progressive Christian nongovernmental organizations participated in the "Candlelight Rally" that protested against the president. They both fought on the front lines on different Christian sides. Christian Today, the largest Christian newspaper in Korea wrote an article titled "Christians divided into 'Tagukki' and 'Candlelight.'" in February 26, 2017. In the article, the reporter interviewed Christians in both sides and ended up the article with a question asking "What is the responsibility of the church for this division?"<sup>86</sup>

Christians are messianic expert and this allows Christians to be sensitive about the social issues with messianic intensity. However, engaging with social issues with messianism always pose a growing risk that Arendt called "politics of necessity." As

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<sup>86</sup> 김진영 "'태극기'와 '촛불'로 갈라진 그곳의 기독교인들," 크리스천투데이, April 4, 2018, <http://www.christiantoday.co.kr/news/297794>. (Christians Divided into 'Tagguki' and 'Candlelight')

messianism has revolutionary aspect, this can make Christians' action and reaction about the social issue fierce and radical. This could endanger not only the effort for the better world but also the society as a whole since this aggression cause animosity between different groups in democratic society. The messianic intensity inherent in Christianity could facilitate polarization of society that causes the backslide of democracy.

In terms of messianic politics in liberal democracy, the first priority of Christian should not be a making a moral judgment but to be the bridge between the good and bad. I am not arguing that discerning right and wrong is unimportant. Discerning right and wrong is always important. Actively responding to moral issues in society is everlasting duty of Christians. However, Christian should be careful of judging others since the messianism inherent in humanity is strong enough to destroy not only the evildoers but also the liberal democracy as a whole. The pressing need for the liberal democracy today is not discerning the righteous people and wrong doers but embracing polarization between two different righteous people. (or could be two different wrong doers) Therefore Paul, an ancestor of messianic politics claims that “do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart” (1 Corinthians 4:5).

Ted Smith, in his essay *The Mark of Cain*, elucidated the meaning of the mark of Cain in the Old Testament from the political theological perspective. Through the work, he clarifies that the mark that God gives to Cain has a political implication. He claims as follows:

The mark of Cain legitimates nothing. It does not offer justification for Cain's crime – not even the retrospective, pragmatic justification of a certain sort of

realist. The mark rather denounces Cain's crime for the violence that it is. The mark of Cain therefore refuses legitimacy to recapitulations of Cain's crime. But refusing the legitimacy of Cain's violence does not mean endorsing violence in the name of vengeance for Abel. On the contrary, the mark directly forbids righteous vengeance against Cain.<sup>87</sup>

Cain committed homicide but God gives him the mark and orders people to spare his life. God even declares "whoever kills Cain will suffer sevenfold vengeance." Through this reading Smith argues that the mark of Cain does not authorize particular political acts but negates the certain kind of act.<sup>88</sup> This kind of negation make messianic politics possible and safe without destroying liberal democracy. Nothing can be "legitimated" in the name of messiah but only "negated."

Christians do not know when their messiah will come. Christians do not know where their messiah will be. Christians do not know how messiah will come. We can only ensure that we do not know about coming of messiah since God declared that "you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." (Matthew 24:42) To put it the other way, all Christians surely know the one thing that the throne of true messiah is always empty in this world. No messiah in this world is the true messiah. Thus, for Christian, no laws, no political parties, no moral values can occupy the throne. The only thing that Christians can do with messianic urgency is to negate the other urgency.

In order to sustain a peaceful liberal democratic society, Christians should act as shock absorbers of society. Christian should negate all false messiahs that argue they

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<sup>87</sup> Ted Smith, The Mark of Cain, 25. (Unpublished article)

<sup>88</sup> Smith, 26.

have “messianic urgency.” Christian messianism should be applied negatively. It should be a shield that prevents any attempts to “utilize” messianic politics, or to “imbue” earthly matters with messianic intensity. Such false messiahs only end in theocracy. Proper, safe use of messianic force happens not through building earthly kingdoms but through breaking them. When Christians can completely negate the throne of earthly messiahs, the true messianic kingdom will come.

The crucifixion of Jesus is not only the culmination of Jesus’ ministry but also the core of Christian political theology. Since Jesus’ messianic teaching illustrating the kingdom of God is not an escapism that denies earthly politics, but a real teaching fully engaged with the political world, his death on the cross also should be understood politically. The goal of Jesus’ ministry in “this world” was not to draw the attention of the public or rally political influence. When Jesus was dying on the cross, his last word was, “It is finished.” Why does he say that it is completed? In terms of political order, he never changed anything politically. He laid aside any form of political resistance and just added his name to the long list of people killed innocently by this worldly authority. Viewed with a “modern notion of politics,” Jesus died for nothing and he could not achieve anything politically. However, it is undeniable that Jesus largely influenced the course of history through the people who changed their view through him: his disciples.

Jesus’ last word shows that his ultimate purpose of politics was not to teach the right way or exercise the power of “right” people but to make people love each other. For him, any political order or law could not be prior to his new commandment of love for one another. This love that loves even the enemy is not just a moral teaching but a necessary condition of politics. In order to maintain liberal democracy and preserve

messianic hope from its own destructive force, Christians should remember the political meaning of the cross. Our obligation is not found in any law or moral rule but in love for others. Nothing is more urgent than this love for the others. Jesus shows this to every Christian through his crucifixion. Therefore, Christians should not be bothered by different moral views but should be bothered by people who make that difference a reason to hate, thereby destroying sound politics. Jesus calls us to be the salt and light of the world. In modern liberal democratic society, being salt and light means being a person with messianic hope for society, with passionate love that can even love the those who hold opposite political views.

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