**Bestowal and Preservation of Sovereignty through Ritual**

The idea of a “good” king or emperor is a romantic and lofty ideal preserved through the ages in the songs of bards and court poets. Yet, how would one define a ruler as “good”? One could seek to elaborate upon the definition of good in the moral sense, highlighting the benevolence of the ruler in question, but one may also defer to other sensibilities in defining a ruler in such a way. To many, such as Carl Schmitt, an individual may only be defined as a good ruler when he is measured against the parameter that defines the station of the sovereign.

In the eyes of many within the philosophic milieu, Schmitt included, the sovereign is defined as “he who makes the ultimate or genuine decision” or rather, “he who decides the exception”, the latter being the parameter that ultimately makes clear the decision that the sovereign must make.[[1]](#footnote-1) Though defined by his ability to make decisions, a sovereign is both defined and considered as much more. To Schmitt, the ideal sovereign was Adolf Hitler, in whom Schmitt saw one willing to define the state of exception and from which the ultimate decisions regarding the fate of the Reich could then ultimately be made and passed. Though Hitler was indeed a leader and exemplified the sovereign decision, one can make the argument that he was simply dictatorial, an unrefined sovereign.

Sovereignty is much more than the description given by Schmitt as an individual who decides the state of exception against which the juridical system is judged and from said judgment the ultimate decision is thus made. A sovereign is verified by a tenuous connection in some way to the divine. Sovereign authority is ultimately granted by some connection to the divine and as such, it is passed down, preserved, and reinstated upon an individual by way of ritual practices that seemingly correlate across many cultures and religions.

Sovereignty as we understand it is derived from the divine, but it is not so much as a gift as it is an imitation of that highest, divine power and nothing less. Reflected in the profane realm, the rule of the sovereign is ultimate and can only trickled down from him into the ranks of his magistrates and officials. The sovereign eminence thus bleeds across the ranks, instilling each individual in this system of the sovereign with some of the sovereign’s power, going all the way down the ranks until only an iota of power is left in the lowest position in the hierarchy (Schmitt 6).

This hierarchy of sovereign power can be likened to the concept of an economy. Stemming from the Greek term “oikonomia”, which translates as a type of governance system based in the domestic context. The household, or “oikos”, exists as a system of complex relations by which the denizens relate to each other.[[2]](#footnote-2) Through a reflationary system in which masters and slaves, parents and children interact, one may see a mirror of the macrocosmic layout of government at large. This economy of interaction with differing entities that vary in influential power possesses small meaning when viewed on its own, but when viewed through a Christian lens, this economy, much like its relation to the macrocosmic government in whatever scenario the aforementioned economy exists, can further be compared to the universal economy of God.

Regarding the idea of an economy in a governing sense, the Stoics of Hellas envisioned a penultimate “force that regulates and governs the whole from the outside”.[[3]](#footnote-3) When applied to Christianity, one easily makes the correlation between the profane economy of a worldly government as having origins in the logos of the universe as created by God. In regards to the economy of the Christian God in which all aspects within creation are accounted for, the idea of a household economy ruled over by the patriarch of said home has been used as a frequent analogy. However, this fails to encapsulate the gravity of this divine economy. Rather, the economy as God is concerned is better likened to “activity ordered for a purpose”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

This ordered activity as mentioned by Agamben correlates directly to our profane governmental systems, which are seemingly inspired by this divine plan of ordering as laid out by God. Each individual has its place in an earthly government just as they do in the eyes of the forge master who wrought the universe out of the void. As part of this divine order, just as in the microcosm of the household, there must be a ruler that dictates all actions within this domain, set in place by a higher power than himself. Just as God governs the created realms in a liminality set apart from them, so too must a ruler, an entity possessing the power of the sovereign derived from divinity, rule over a government.

Part of what gives a sovereign legitimacy to rule and decide the fate of his people lies in is relation to the ultimate sovereignty belonging to the realm of the divine. The bishop Theophilus of Antioch describes the ruler, which in his case is the Roman emperor, as selected by the will of the divine and sharing of some of the divine’s characteristics. “The emperor is not God but a man appointed by God, not to be worshipped but to judge justly. For in a certain way he has been entrusted with a duty from God”.[[5]](#footnote-5) This idea of a divinely appointed ruler lends the sovereign legitimacy that enables him to both resemble and emulate the divine in the sense that the sovereign is the ultimate ruler both outside yet attached to the government and society as a whole and the sense that like God, the sovereign orders and decides upon the fate of his profane realm.

The prospect of a divinely appointed ruler, though a longstanding feature of many civilizations, can be scrutinized by many. Particularly questioned is the prospect of the divine interacting with a single man and giving him power above his countrymen. Though a lofty and prestigious concept, the divine attribute of sovereignty seems to be not so much granted by God as it is inherited from the long line of sovereign rulers that have preceded the current candidate for the divine’s blessing of legitimizing sovereign power. Through ritual practices across cultures, divine sovereignty is initially inherited, preserved, and passed down across the ages so that the power of the divine may be utilized in the form of one man on behalf of his subjects.

A primordial concept of divine sovereignty permeates the ritual practices that bestow it upon a human patron. Though undoubtedly such rituals originated before it, writings point to the rituals of imperial Rome as the primary progenitors of the sovereignty bestowing coronation rituals of the medieval and enlightenment ages that further diffused into the more benign ceremonies associated with the inhabitants of liberal democratic offices in the current era. Within the ceremony revolving around the appointment of the Roman emperor, one may find various prototypical material found in later ritual appointed to the Judeo-Christian God and adapted to this divinity’s concept of divine economy.

Before delving into imperial ritual, one must realize that by coronation or any similar rituals that grant a portion of divine power, the subject being honored by the granting of sovereignty is in a way the subject of a process of “othering”. The future ruler is effectively rendered into a state of liminality that sets him both part of and apart from not only his ministers and subjects but of the governmental system he sits at the head of. The ruler in a way becomes transformed into a “Homo Sacer”, or sacred man.

At first reading, comparing such a figure as the sovereign to that of a homo sacer may be a bit of a stretch, as the title itself was one given to rogues who were the perpetrators of heinous crimes within the bounds of Roman law. According to the Roman Pompeius Festus, “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”.[[6]](#footnote-6) This may raise many a question, such as “why would one compare a sovereign to a condemned brigand?”, but if one further observes the contexts of the Roman realm when this edict was published, one may see why such a comparison may be made. By the word “sacer”, the subject is deemed as having the quality of something “other” in a sense. Indeed, in the thought of the ancient world, particularly Rome, that which was “sacrum”, or made sacred, was destined for the gods. Just in the way that a condemned killer’s life is promised to the gods by way of execution, just so is a sovereign promised to the gods in a similar way.

Comparing a man who is held to be chosen or made elect in some manner by divine providence to a common criminal is a stretch for many, but within the term sacred there lies a duality which allows such a comparison to take place. When applied to a person or an object, the adjective sacred denotes a force that gives beings set apart from what has previously been consecrated pause, a force that leaves beings in awe or fear. There is a fickle character to that which is the notion of the sacred, the might of divinity at which profane humans tremble is similar to the aversion and occasional outright horror displayed when in the presence of that deemed unholy, superstitious, and taboo.

Paradoxically, just as good and evil oppose each other yet touch in the various pantheons of the human race, so too do the notions of sacred and unholy intermingle at their terminal ends. To Emile Durkheim, the two notions of holy and unholy, sacred and profane, are just two sides of the same coin. “There actually is a certain horror to religious aspect, especially when it is very intense; and the fear inspired by malignant powers is not without a certain reverential quality. The pure and the impure are therefore not two separate genera, but rather two varieties of the same genus that includes the same things”.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Through ritual, an individual is made separate from the community around him so that he may effectively reign as a sovereign, effectively placing this individual within the ambivalence of the sacred so that he may be looked upon with awe and fear, thereby ensuring a semblance of the obedience that is due to a god. By being made separate, the sovereign may dwell in the perpetuity between society and the divine force that has granted him power. As the bible states that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”, so too is the sovereign entity who is made to dwell in this liminality. In the sovereign government, there is the Law, and the Law is with the sovereign and the Law is the sovereign. This is made so by effectively “othering” him by way of ritual, so that the sovereign may essentially become the law and effect it upon his populace and realm.

The ritual in question is one of acclamation, and was performed for both the Pagan and Christian emperors of Rome and Constantinople. Just as a sovereign is suspended between realms as it were, the ritual itself is a “suspension of the normal” and serves to effectively fixate the sovereign candidate in his rightful place.[[8]](#footnote-8) The acclamations that took place within the confines of the ritual matrix were verbal and somatic in nature, consisting of exclamations lauding the soon to be sovereign and gestures of raised hands in his honor.[[9]](#footnote-9) Within the earlier incarnations of Rome, such as its republic era, these acclamations were piled upon athletes, actors, magistrates, and victorious generals and were kept with the transition to the imperial state, being heaped upon the emperor in triumph and at his coronation ceremony as a fixture.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The acclaiming of the emperor was mass assent to his reign, but such acclamations could be of a negative nature. In a strange cycle, the will of the assembled mass, be it the assembled consuls and demi-sovereigns that ultimately decided who would fill the role of emperor, or the will of the undiluted masses, would empower the sovereign in question. The assent of the assembled throng as empowering the sovereign still exists to this day to varying degrees, but it is a tenuous path. To many sovereign-centric thinkers such as Carl Schmitt, the assembled masses can hamper or even halt the sovereign’s ability to decide the state of exception and subsequently to make the ultimate decision. This liberal democratic setting is commonplace today, although in dire times, a sovereign power is able to suspend the law and maintain its abilities in deciding the exception and executing the decision.

These acclamations played a key role in the ritual in which the emperor is crowned and fixated in the liminality of his station. The ceremony itself was headed by a ritual specialist, an outside guiding force for the future emperor that was a high priest of the imperial cult in the Western Empire and an orthodox priest in the Eastern Empire after the split. This master of ceremonies. The emperor is led by the master of ceremonies through the ritual grounds peopled by the dignitaries and magistrates that will make up the emperor’s retinue. Throughout this whole process, the master of ceremonies not only guides the emperor but guides the assembled throng, commanding them to acclaim the sovereign. When commanded to acclaim their future ruler, the assembled masses respond with “many good years!” multiple times and at multiple points throughout the imperial procession.[[11]](#footnote-11)

In the Eastern imperial context, the procession led by the emperor and the master of ceremonies proceeded through the ritual grounds to the location of one of the emperor’s seats, the cathedral of the capital. The retinue proceeds to enter the cathedral, blessing themselves in the name of the divine Lord which will impart his sovereign power upon the sacralized imperial candidate. Upon passing through the portal of the cathedral, the future emperor dons his ritual raiment and proceeds through the cathedral to the altar, close by to which lies the imperial seat.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Along the way, the emperor lights candles and prays with the assembled mass, led by the patriarch of the church, who pronounces a blessing over the emperor and then over the crown the emperor will wear, seeking to draw the power of God into the imperial trappings of the sovereign. After completing the ritual incantation, the patriarch places the blessed crown upon the emperor’s head. With his countenance complemented by the imperial crown combined with the rest of his regal trappings, the emperor then proceeds to his throne upon which he seats himself, subsequently to receive prostrations from his subjects and ministers in addition to other gestures of fealty such as the kissing of his knees.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The many forms of acclamations present in the coronation of Western and Eastern emperors of Rome began in the Western republic and continued to the point where they disseminated into the rituals of the Catholic and Orthodox churches. “The acclamation, which promiscuously united heaven and earth, angels and functionaries, emperor and pontiff, was destined to play an important role at the point where profane power and spiritual power met”.[[14]](#footnote-14) Within these churches, the acclamations reserved for the emperor began to be used in more religious sense, to present acclaim to the divine emperor of the universe. This serves to reflect how the sovereign appointed through ritual is in a sense an emanation of god in the mundane sphere of existence.

All the different aspects of the imperial coronation ritual are varying forms of assent to be directed at both the emperor and the religious aspects surrounding and interpenetrating the ceremony. The proclaiming of well wishes towards the emperor, the participation in prayer led by a high priest of some sort, and the gestures of fealty performed to the new sovereign not only symbolizes the collective notion of the people’s assent regarding the new emperor, but also to the divine that backs the emperor and grants him a portion of its power. The divine, summoned through and empowered by the acclaim of the masses, imparts its sovereign power into the emperor.

A note must be made of the efficacy of mundane acclamations made by the people towards the sovereign and the supernatural acclamations in the form of liturgy and prayer made toward the divinity. The sovereign is intrinsically tied to the divine by way of ritual, and this association is in a way a mirror of both the realms of the profane and the divine as far as the two entities are concerned in regards to their “well-being”. What I mean by the term well-being is the capacity for both entities to function by way of continued ritual, as the two beings are in fact sustained by such rites of acclamation.

The statement has been made in regard to such maintenance rites that “prayer- even when it takes the form of praise or a hosanna- is, above all, an oral rite and therefore, like all rites, an “effective act” that concerns sacred things and acts upon them”.[[15]](#footnote-15) Incantations such as these that are classified as effective acts serve to empower the character of the divine and the sovereign, and in essence serves to sustain their efficacy by way of the collective will of the subjects. In a drastic example, one may postulate that the energy of what Durkheim labels as “collective effervescence” seemingly bleeds beyond the psyche of the assembled throng to amplify the efficacy of the deity and the spark of the deity that resides within the sovereign figure that lords over them.

Despite the ethereal and transcendent nature of the divine and its position as the lord apart from the realms, it can indeed be brought low and effectively killed off in a sense, still existing as it is tied to yet set apart from its creation, but rising again in the minds of its mortal subjects in varying incarnations. This fate, while at the moment seemingly inconceivable for the Abrahamic deity fixed firmly in the minds of believers across the world, can indeed befall it if a great number of those believers were to either die or stop believing and performing effective acts for it. The same rules apply for the earthly sovereign as those mandated for the divinity, since a portion of its essence can be said to reside in the sovereign and as such, the two can be said to share a similar fate in the broadest sense of the phrase. What would befall the divine sovereign would conversely befall his earthly servant if the effective acts in his servant’s name are invalid or tainted by unbelief is his ability to rule.

Just as the divinity and the sovereign may be invalidated by lack of effective acts performed in their name, so too may they be born from them. The coronation ceremony in which the sovereign is bestowed with divine authority and from which he derives power is effectively a birthing act for him. The magistrate or general that he was previously effectively dies and he is reborn anew as emperor or king by the effective acts performed by his subjects simultaneously directed at both him and his divine patron.

The effects of inception and renewal for the divinity and his earthly sovereign agent are particularly noted in the ancient Vedic religion, with the Brahmin class dedicated to the preservation and rebirth of the Devas and their chthonic counterparts, the Asuras. “The gods, like the demons, are born from sacrifice, it is thanks to it that they have ascended to the heavens. They gather around the sacrifice; they are a product of it and they share it among themselves, and it is this distribution that determines the way in which they share the world. Moreover, sacrifice is not only the author of the gods, it is a god itself, or rather, the god par excellence”.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Such a statement may lead one to dwell upon the whole concept of the coronation ceremony. Do all of the participants participating in this “birthing” ceremony for the sovereign manifest a divinity apart from the one being invoked and temporarily swell within him and share in the sovereign presence along with their imperial candidate? Regardless of whether or not the ritual in itself is a manifested deity that imparts its presence to all who participate in it, the postulation may be made that the subjects expressing acclaim to the future sovereign are indeed empowered and participate in the bestowal of authority and glory upon one within their midst. Further, the infusion of divine authority within the body of the sovereign in a way serves as a continuous reminder to the people of the oikonomia in which their God has placed them, as the glory of the deity that instills in them fear has been imparted to their new leader, and is felt when they look upon the various symbols that adorn his regal countenance.

This power is present in the ruling figure as long as he remains living and visible to his subjects. Said power is preserved not only through the continued approval of the people, but from physical symbols that help denote the station of emperor. In a way, the coronation ritual never really ends since many symbols present in the ritual remain on the sovereign’s person whenever he faces his people, thus reminding the masses of the divine power that has granted the sovereign its authority.

The physical trappings and accomplishments of the regal serve to remind the subjects of the sovereign of his station and power, but simultaneously they also convey a force that compels the masses of the nation to honor their ruler. This desire can be described as a certain glory that compels the amassed with a combination of fear and awe often reserved for the numinous. Yet, this glory is not of a divine nature, it is purely an external manifestation and imitation of the glory of the divinity that grants the ruler authority. “The glory of kings and princes, which mortals so value and desire, consists in external things, in the splendor of the courts, in the magnificence of their palaces, in military power, and the like.”.[[17]](#footnote-17)

These things associated with an earthly sovereign are necessary to maintain and build his glory and are minor extensions of the coronation ritual which bound the sovereign to the divine in the first place. The divine, particularly in Christian thought, is believed to be solely composed of glory that self-creates, this is what makes and defines the divinity. Subset within the divine oikonomia of the Judeo-Christian God upon which the governance systems of the Occident since the conversion of the Roman Empire, is a smaller oikonomia in which the glory of God is consistently recycled and replenished by the will of everything within the oikonmia of creation in the form of both conscious and unconscious worship. In this way, the glory of God is replenished in an inoperative sense, that is to say, the energy of the glory of God is self-replicating without the expenditure of energy unlike that displayed by mortal sovereigns in maintaining their glorious aspect.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Despite the glory of the divine being “inoperative and self-replicating in its nature, it is further bolstered by ritual; prayers and hymns dedicated to God serve as the “physical trappings” of the Emperor of the Universe, just as the crown, robes, and scepter of the emperors and kings serve as symbolic manifestations of the divine glorious countenance and serve to replicate and perpetuate earthbound glory to manifest awe and attract fealty. Generated in the coronation of the sovereign and living within the symbols of his station, the glory of the divine is made manifest in the sovereign, but much like the divinity that imparted this glory and authority to him, this glory must be regenerated by acts and the will of the people. Once again, consistent acclaim by the masses, manifested in public displays and in a religious setting serve to empower both entities and help maintain their authority.

Through a combination of visible symbols and the effective acts of ritual performances, both the sovereign power on earth and the patronizing divinity that has imparted its power to it, both entities are sustained and their rule is maintained. However, both beings have the potential to expire in some way. The earthbound sovereign being is constrained by the prospect of physical death despite the bestowal of divine authoritative power while conversely, whatever façade the divinity has taken may itself perish if effective acts are not performed and directed at it. Despite this though, the divinity will never truly perish, it will still exist as an authoritative force in the universe, it shall simply be in between guises. That being said, the sovereignty that it imparts to the earthly ruler can be preserved for future rulers that will take the previous one’s place upon his death, primarily in the form of the physical insignias of sovereignty associated with the ruler, even the empty throne that remains upon his death can be said to preserve the echoes of the divine sovereignty that suffused the now perished rulers body that subsequently had been imparted to these physical constructs.

The echoes of sovereign authority and glory that remain in the physical symbols of the ruler’s station are made manifest in the “cult of the empty throne”.[[19]](#footnote-19) Just as the glory of god is said to be inoperative and self-replicating, so too are the remnants of that glory and authority in a way self-replicating. By the people of a nation acknowledging that these authoritative remnants remain in the “undying” emblems of office, said authority and glory is preserved and thus imparted to the next occupant of the throne and wearer of the crown. The trappings of earthly power such as the crown and the throne began to be worshipped in a small sense as being representative of the idea of a sovereign, which thus becomes a notion worthy of receiving effective acts just as the physical sovereign and his divine patron would be.

The gravity of the empty throne is stated by Picard; “the value of the throne never appears with as much force as it does when said throne is empty”.[[20]](#footnote-20) This statement highlights the intrinsic eschatology present in such a display, an eschatology that is fulfilled only with the selection of a new recipient for the authority and glory of the deity. This eschatology is brought to fruition in the preservation and warding of the empty throne and the trappings of regality, all of which will be bestowed upon the new ruler, bringing the cycle to fruition until it must begin again with the death of the next sovereign.

Effective acts; rituals and liturgies, present a way in which the authority and glory of the divine and of the sovereign may be nourished, perpetuated, and preserved so that their affects may be both felt and utilized by nation and sovereign to thus allow for effective rulership. By the attempts to preserve and perpetuate glory and authority in both the sacred and the profane realms, the divine and its authority are thereby fed and preserved, thus allowing for the appointment of sovereign power, the transfer of the divine sovereign power to the ruler, and the subsequent preservation of said power by way of symbolism and the continued performance of effective acts. As such, sovereign power on earth is assured and thus backed by the divine, assuring the prevention of disorder and empowering the earthly sovereign to utilize his powers should the spectre of disorder begin to loom.

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