

WEAK THEOLOGY: A POSTMODERN ACCOUNT OF GOD

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“The weakness of God is stronger than men.” (1 Cor. 1:25)

“If you have understood, it is not God.” – St. Augustine

Do we not hear anything yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God?
Do we not smell anything yet of God's decomposition? Gods too decompose. God is
dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.¹

In 1882, the madman figure of Nietzsche's work *The Gay Science* proclaimed the death of God. I'm interested in exploring what postmodern philosophical theologians have to say about theism so many years after God's presumed death. In the postmodern schema, the death of God has much to do with interpreting Nietzsche's claim as an announcement and not a fact he draws from hard evidence.² Gianni Vattimo explains, "Nietzsche is not trying to say that God is dead because we have finally realized that 'objectively he does not exist' or that reality is such that he is excluded from it... The announcement of the death of God is truly an announcement."³ Theologian Karl Rahner suggested that a critical assessment of atheism is primarily and of necessity a struggle against the inadequacy of theism. This paper is about "the death of the death of God" and a philosopher John D. Caputo who attempts to construct an understanding of God and Her⁴ relationship with the world. Caputo describes God as an uncontainable and ineffable *event*, which stands in contrast to the name of God—an insufficient name—from our this-worldly perspective. In Caputo's book *The Weakness of God*, he does not make any attempt to uplift the concept of God to sovereign power uncontained by language, but argues that theology is a "weak" enterprise pointing to a "weak" God. What do we make of a philosophical theologian who denies the name of God,

¹ Walter Kaufmann (ed.), *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 95.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* [1886] (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Classics, 1972), 34.

³ Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 6.

⁴ I understand "he" as generic for male and female to be an effacement of the question of sexual difference, an investment in the phallogocentric covering of women under a presumed "generic" human, whereby women are linguistically *erased* as a "lack" in their relationship with a "neutral" male. I don't think God is either male or female. Yet I purposefully create space in my writing for the inclusion of both the "he" and "she" pronouns to refer to God because of the ethical implications that metaphors exert on religious communities as we try to express God theologically.

especially taking into account the assertion that God is a “weak force”? Is this person an agnostic, atheist, or maybe a “new atheist” like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris? Perhaps this thinker is more like a lyricist responding to the music of an event he experiences as real. This last depiction is what I think best describes someone like Caputo.

Caputo’s exercise in constructive theology depicts God as a call—a weak force—instead of a cause that is endowed with omnipotent metaphysical force. However, Caputo does not leave us with merely an impotent God having no claim on the lives of humans. The weak God and weak theology is a rejection of dogmatic, confessional, non-pluralistic, and intolerant conceptions descriptive of the modern intellectual tradition. The weak God invokes the world toward justice through love and forgiveness exemplified in the “the logos of the cross.” It is a paradox embodied in the “beautiful risk” of life, the dicey elements of creation, as Levinas might say, and the consequence of being in relationship as a world-body, the God-body. For Caputo, the paradox of a weak God exemplified in the suffering cross stands in contrast to strong theologies of glory.

This relationship between God and the world appears most like a panentheistic conception and resonates with the process theologians, Moltmann’s “suffering God,” kenotic theologians who emphasize the emptying of God, and evangelical open theists. A benefit of this model, and speaking now of Caputo in particular, is that it provides one answer to theodicy, the problem of natural evil, and human evil. God is not in a position to step in and prevent evil or to map out a plan in advance because God is not a cause in the universe. God is a lure, a call that urges us in a dance into the unpredictable. We, humans and all other life included, are partners in a dance with God. Peter Goodwin Heltzel writes, “Thus, the human community must take responsibility for gratuitous suffering in the world. The weakness of

God provides a more compelling theological basis for an ethic of hospitality and forgiveness.”⁵ I contrast Heltzel’s recommendation with acts of compensation that include retaliation, partisanship, and violent force. These acts are what Caputo takes away from the image of the strong God and, not to be mistaken as merely a passing point, one of the lasting impressions I hope this paper leaves on the reader.

Postmodern Background

Postmodernism is a family of thought where contradictions and major differences exist between theorists who self-identify with the label. Steven Best and Douglas Kellner describe two conflicting pictures of postmodern discourse. One view of postmodernism is predominantly positive. Liberating features of postmodern cultural forms are thought to include pop culture, *avant gardism*, the acceptance of multiple discourses, and an emphasis on difference, otherness, pleasure, and novelty. Negative perceptions of postmodernism include positing a crisis at the end of the modern world and threats of cultural decline, change, and instability. Both the positive and negative critiques of postmodernism respond to developments in contemporary capitalism, the expansion and production of new abundance and affluent lifestyle. This notes a contrast between new diversity and the decay of centralized value, along with a contrast between cultural conservation and *avant gardism*.

Recent French theories embodied in individuals such as Michel Foucault are revolts against Cartesian rationalism and heavily critique theoretical reason of the Enlightenment stripe in favor of promoting social change. Foucault argued that the “givens” of reality are actually contingent, socio-historical constructs and, according to Best and Kellner, “Draws

⁵ Peter Goodwin Heltzel, “The Weakness of God,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 6 no. 3 (Fall 2005), 99.

upon an anti-enlightenment tradition that rejects the equation of reason, emancipation, and progress, arguing that an interface between modern forms of power and knowledge create new forms of domination.”⁶ A world let loose from a systematic and strong divine hold—a world conceptualized by thinkers such as Caputo, Deleuze, and Catherine Keller—is also a space that does not resonate with reason as reductive, hierarchically structured, and universalizing.

It’s important to shed light on the contrast between strong theology and weak theology by focusing on the role of hermeneutics. What is so problematic about a strong conception and what elements of postmodern thought gear a philosopher like Caputo toward the weak conception? The answer comes when we realize that questions about God are just as much questions about the world and anthropology. I think it’s important to understand the intellectual climate and recent hermeneutics Caputo draws from in order to grasp what he thinks about the world, humans, and God.

Historically, hermeneutics has referred to the task of interpreting facts with certitude in the notion of truth as correspondence. A movement emerged in hermeneutics in the last half of the 20th century that suggested that interpretations are responses to contingent questions and the value of interpretations lies in their function as a coherent picture. Philosopher Gianni Vattimo refers to hermeneutics as a “nihilistic vocation” held in tension by the relationship between linguistics (Gadamer) and ontology (Heidegger). The new starting point of the theory of interpretation includes a disclosure of how we experience the world. “This notion of interpretation” follows from a shift, albeit an overhaul, in the conception of truth, as suggested by Jeffrey W. Robbins: “The phrase *weak thought* refers to

⁶ Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1991), 34.

the gradual weakening of being that has transformed contemporary philosophy from its former obsession with the metaphysics of truth to its current and more limited understanding of itself strictly as an interpretative exercise.”⁷

The role of language in postmodern thought and poststructuralist thought is fundamental to understanding why Caputo insists on the distinction between *name* and *event*. Ferdinand De Saussure argued that in language the relationship between signifiers and the signified is arbitrary, and that signs only have meaning in relation to each other. Jacques Derrida drew from this concept to argue that in language there is only *difference* and not an absolute identity between signifiers and the signified. At the heart of existence is not “essence” but difference. This comes from two concepts: (1) “to defer” or put off, which is what happens to meaning in language in a relational system where signs themselves don’t have essential meanings; (2) and from “differ,” or to be unlike and not identical. The underlying implication is that meaning isn’t found within signifiers but exists only in networks of objects, practices, and people that suggest and apply meaning.

The name or designation “God” is treated in postmodern thought as all other concepts, what Deleuze refers to as a denotation and Benveniste calls indexicals. Deleuze’s idea of denotation refers to the relationship between a proposition (a concept or proper name is a proposition) and the event or state of affairs that the proposition points to.⁸ Propositions mean that we don’t interpret truth as it presents itself to us in pure transparency, as though an accurate reading of reality is structurally and constitutive of the human makeup. Rather, we try to convey our best attempt to name objects and events yet fail each time.

⁷ Jeffrey W. Robbins, ed., *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 16.

⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 12-15.

Distinction Between the Name and the Event

Now that I've laid out important aspects of the intellectual context Caputo draws from, I'll briefly go through eight distinctions he makes between the name and the event. His project has everything to do with these terms and how they relate to each other.

Uncontainability: Names signify what cannot be contained conceptually. Asserting the uncontainable is not simply that we see through a glass darkly lit, but we have before us a prism that *turns on itself* so brilliantly and quietly that we sense the whoosh and the glow, but we can hardly say that we view, understand, or handle it. Rather, it moves our hearts and responds to our hands, but we are not privileged to say more than proposals of a promise elicited by the movement.

Translatability: Names try to translate an inner “essence” of that which they point to—as when blue points to the blue-ness of blue. The *name* blue tries to convey the happening of blue. The *event* blue is blue happening.

Deliteralization: Names are like reductions, whereas events are of poetic nature—depicting, tracing, coping with the force of the happening, finding points that open the event, and refusing ontological containment. Deliteralization breaks down the essentializing tendency of names.

Excess: The event interrupts against a horizon of experience, overflowing and outdoing what we expect it to do. Caputo writes, “But if it is nothing absolute, an event is an excess, an overflow, a surprise, both an uncontainable incoming (*l'invention*) on the side of what philosophy calls the ‘object,’ and something that requires a response from us, soliciting an expenditure without an expectation of return on the side of what philosophy calls the

‘subject.’”⁹ Experience of the event occurs against the horizon of possibility, but the event overflows into a zone of the impossible in terms of the human perspective. It is always more than we imagine it to be.

Evil: Broadly speaking and considering more than the event of God, unfolding in time is the only sure thing we can expect events to do. We cannot anticipate exactly how the unfolding occurs and, for better or worse, such novelty allows for disappointment. Caputo writes, “The event is not an essence unfolding but a promise to be kept, a call or a solicitation to be responded to, a prayer to be answered, a hope to be fulfilled.”¹⁰ The event prevented or ignored is like “ruined time,” which is how Caputo describes evil—refusing metanoic time as transformation toward justice through forgiveness and hospitality.

*Beyond being*¹¹: The event is not the content of a name or an entity sheltered against our perception. Caputo explains, “By the same token, the event of theology could also be called a deconstruction of the name of God, insofar as deconstruction is the deconstruction of the conditioned name in order to release the unconditional event that is sheltered by the name.”¹² One can always deconstruct the name of God, but the event of God is “undeconstructible.” Events occur to us and come to us. By the time they arrive the bearer of the experience comprehends it through conditions of the intellect, which means that the event

⁹ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹¹ Paul Tillich followed a similar vein of thought as Caputo when he wrote about the inadequacies of ontological arguments and proofs for the existence of God: “The arguments for the existence of God neither are arguments not are they proof of the existence of God. They are expressions of the *question* of God which is implied in human finitude. This question if their truth; every answer they give is untrue. This is the sense in which theology must deal with these arguments, which are the solid body of any natural theology. It must deprive them of their argumentative character, and it must eliminate the combination of the words “existence” and “God.” If this is accomplished, natural theology becomes the elaboration of the question of God; it ceases to be the answer to this question” (Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Volume One, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951, pp. 205-6).

¹² *Ibid.*, 6.

has already undergone analysis and parameters drawn. Analysis is about the name of God, but theology and tears issued in prayer are a response to the event that moves us in ways one cannot analyze. Think in terms of music. A piece of music being analyzed or studied is like handling the name, while the music that happens and moves a person is the event. I pray in a similar way that God happens to me as when music happens to me, the ascent of my mind-body to a stirring I cannot capture but only experience. Music is not scales, bars, or eighth notes. The event of music happens. The name of music is denoted on sheet music. It's on the tip of my tongue but I cannot accurately utter the truth it preserves within itself.

Truth: Facing this event is a matter of prayer and humility, not epistemology or beginning from positive epistemic status, because the truth of the event is uncontainable, open-ended, and unforeseeable in its movement. The truth is that the world-body is deep with possibility for the future, a risk that does not allow for opting out. This also means that our choices impact each other and future generations beyond our imagination. Deconstruction is an exercise in interpretation with ethical consequences. Deconstruction is not a thing in itself—it is a description of what happens on a moment-by-moment basis and always implies reconstruction (deconstruction, reconstruction, and then deconstruction, etc). Caputo relates truth, deconstruction, and the role of faith when he writes:

“Religious faith, I would say, is an instantiation of a deconstructive situation in which we are asked to affirm, to make an act of faith, and to make an act of faith which is motivated by love, by the love of justice and what is to come, that mourns for the dead, that hopes for the future...It [deconstruction] has not come into the world to tell humankind what to do. It is a kind of salutary description of the conditions under which we act, but that is all.”¹³

Time: The time of the event is transformational and *metanoic*. This emphasis on change asks that we heed the request to forgive and heal, not with an expectation to literally

¹³ John D. Caputo, in James H. Olthuis (ed.), *Religion with/out Religion: The prayers and tears of John D. Caputo* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 164.

change what occurred in the past or to release potentialities. Rather, the time of the event is metamorphic not hylomorphic. Hylomorphism refers to the unity of the corporeal and spiritual in an entity. Hylomorphic time would refer to changes or released potentialities in an entity. But metamorphic time differs in that it does not rely on the metaphysics of presence or substance—it presumes anti-essentialism by emphasizing shocking mutability in the present order.

This last point leads me to a difference between negative or apophatic theology and weak theology. Caputo completely releases God from the order of being. By now it may be evident how deeply he challenges the West’s love of philosophies of presence, metaphysics of substance, and natural theology. Even Caputo’s background as a Catholic won’t allow him to say with Aquinas that God is not essence but the act-of-existing experienced through the effects of the natural order. Recall that Aquinas regards God as the First Cause and Caputo denies that the event of God is a cause but, rather, a call or lure.

Implications of Weak Theology

I noted earlier that the weak God invokes the world toward justice through love and forgiveness exemplified in the “the logos of the cross.” I want to return to the cross and a vision of *hieranarchy* inspired in that moment (*hieranarchy* is a delightful spin on “hierarchy” and “anarchy”). Much of Christian doctrine tends to root the glory of the cross in the idea that divinity was made human and sacrificed, steeping low to raise humanity up, and making an atonement in blood. There is another conception of power in this picture, but not the kind that defers rewards or change until the future. There is power in bringing injustice to

light, declaring words of forgiveness, and changing the current scene of the universe by opening up spaces of possibility towards renewal from the bottom up. Caputo writes:

“The call, the cry, the plaint that rises up from the cross is a great divine ‘no’ to injustice, an infinite lamentation over unjust suffering and innocent victims...God withdraws from the world’s order of presence, prestige, and sovereignty in order to settle into those pockets of protest and contradiction to the world...I am trying to displace thinking about God as the highest and best thing that is *there* by starting to think that God is the call that *provokes* what is there, the specter that haunts what is there, the spirit that breathes over what is there.”¹⁴

There are many dissections and implications in Caputo’s thought that I find significant and helpful as both an academic interested in hermeneutics and a person of faith interested in a critical and involved orientation toward the “worldly” end of the presumed divide between the religious and secular. The fear that settled on me when I first began studying postmodern thought and poststructuralist thought is the sense of nihilism that follows the threat of once firm foundations. Many people operate with great faith in a singular grand narrative, one that opens with a vivid beginning and ends with a reassuring rescue toward sanctuary. Much meaning can be found here. But this also presupposes certain hearty metaphysical assumptions, foundations that are swiftly undercut by recent radical hermeneutics. Is it necessary that the loss of foundations imply the loss of meaning in the narratives formerly supported by such foundations? Is empty nihilism the only thing postmodern believers are left with?

There is another way that I’ve come to understand these concerns and it leads right into the lap of paradox, which is a dynamic and somewhat fractured place to exist. However, I think our lives are more riddled with paradox than one could ever estimate. I come to the notion of paradox by first denying that there are “two worlds” or competing power dualisms, such as God and the world or the religious versus secular. Following Caputo’s suggestion, “I

¹⁴ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 44-5.

do not distinguish between two different worlds but two different logics, the logic of the mundane constituted economies and the logic of the event that disturbs them, and I see in Jesus of Nazareth an exemplary embodiment of the logic or paralogic of the gift, who told paradoxical parables about and who was himself a paradoxical parable of the kingdom of God, which he opposed to the economy of the “world.”¹⁵

Structure is inscribed to the flux, fracture, and becoming of the world. We mistake the world for the structures we apply, which, when it comes to ethics can be another wielding of power defeating power based on “structured” and essentialized identity politics. What I hope the reader will take away from the foregoing intellectual offering is that we not mistake forced structure and “obvious” appearances within our theological narratives for the brewing event of God that does not want to contain us but release us in the most responsible way as protagonists of justice, where “weakness reigns” and creates “holy disarray.” Caputo notes, “The kingdom of God obeys the law of reversals in virtue of which whatever is first is last, whatever is out is in, whatever is lost is saved, where even death has a certain power over the living, all of which confounds the dynamics of strong forces.”¹⁶

American philosopher Richard Rorty wrote a book titled *Achieving Our Country* (1998). I really like the title of this book. But only because it leads me to wonder what a spin-off titled “Achieving Our Religion” might say—to achieve religion as though it is something we aim toward in contrast to a constitutive element of our existence. What explanations or motivations undergird such an undertaking, for an individual or community to achieve religion? For some it means implementing a moral practice expressed through Protestant

¹⁵ John D. Caputo, in Jeffrey W. Robbins, ed., *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 82.

¹⁶ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 14.

capitalism of the American strand. For others it means achieving justice in *this* world. But to say achieve religion must be different from achieve a kind of order because according to Derrida and Caputo religion cannot be contained by order, assuming that it is out of our hands and something that we succumb to, not something we implement. To achieve a vision of how things ought to be in the social, moral, and political sphere is thought to occur by obedience or submission to a necessary locus of order. This is not so if we accept hieranarchy. The vision that we succumb to is a picture drawn by human hands, which include the various names of religion. Caputo urges us to consider “religion without religion,” arising from something more profound that cannot be uttered. The event that sparks religious expression and gives rise to the various names of religion is a call or lure, a promise that urges us toward hospitality and forgiveness. This requires taking paradox seriously, especially the paradox of love, and become like a child to understand “blessed are the weak” in the Kingdom of God. We entertain questions such as “what is religion?,” “who or what is God?,” and “what ought I to do in response to God?” So what exactly is that quiet question before these questions that Caputo insists happens? What a strange idea, a question that happens and not just a question posed. Remember Augustine’s question, “*What do I love when I love you, my God?*”

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