CAPUTO ON RADICAL POLITICAL THEOLOGY

Calvin D. Ullrich

Caputo on Radical Political Theology

Calvin D. Ullrich

Temple Continental

Philosophers for our Time, Book 6

Sign up for our free newsletter at williamtemplefoundation.org.uk

Follow us on Twitter @WTempleFdn

Cover image from Pixabay

Previously released...

Falque on Christianity

Nikolaas Deketelaere

Serres on Education

Iris van der Tuin & Anouk Zuurmond

Stiegler on Technology

John Reader

Sloterdijk on Ecology

Tim Middleton

Schmitt & Peterson on Political Theology

Tim Howles

Download from the William Temple Foundation website

Authors

Calvin D. Ullrich is currently a postdoctoral researcher at the Ecumenical Institute, Ruhr-University Bochum, Germany. In 2019 he completed a dissertation at the University of Stellenbosch, South Africa, with extended research visits at the University of Tübingen and Christ Church College, Oxford. His work is situated in the contemporary turn to religion in continental philosophy and resulted in a monograph published with Mohr Siebeck: *Sovereignty and Event: The Political in John D. Caputo's Radical Theology* (2021). Expanding on several themes in this book, his present research intends to correct some of the enthusiasms for transcendence in continental philosophy of religion by refocusing attention on the embodied nature of religious experience. Following a recently approved funding grant from the DFG (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* / German Research Foundation, 2021–24), he aims to undertake an interdisciplinary project drawing on the phenomenology of embodiment, materialist studies, and philosophy of religion, to explore an original account of the 'religious body' that intersects with themes in theological anthropology. Apart from these research concerns, he also maintains an interest in the fields of political theology, public theology, and black theology.

Editors' Introduction

Philosophers for Our Time is a new series of short books from the William Temple Foundation that aims to meet two connected needs.

First, within academic theology there is a growing interest in a range of Continental thinkers, prompted, not least, by the so-called 'theological turn' that has taken place in various strands of recent philosophy. And yet, these thinkers can seem to be esoteric, voluminous and sometimes even openly hostile towards religion. *Philosophers for Our Time*, therefore, aims to demystify some of these figures by providing accessible introductions to their work: synthesising their most important ideas, defining their key terms and explaining why their work is relevant to current theology.

Second, our societies and our planet are facing some unprecedented challenges at the present time: from populist politics and technology takeovers to spiritual stagnation and climate catastrophe. And, of course, we all need to address the sort of world that is to follow the coronavirus pandemic, the Me Too movement and the Black Lives Matter campaigns. The philosophers that we consider in this series all have something prescient or profound to say about one or more of these contemporary challenges. As such, each book focusses on an individual thinker and an individual topic in order to offer a focussed account, not just of the philosopher themselves, and what they might mean for theology, but also of what they can contribute to one of the key issues of our generation.

It is our hope that these new resources will encourage you to read some of these philosophers for yourself, as well as setting forth new thinking on some of the most urgent topics of our time.

Tim Howles, Series Editor

Tim Middleton, Assistant Editor

Contents

Introduction

If the nineteenth century *fin-de-Siècle* was torn between moods of pessimism and utopian rebirth, then by the middle of the twentieth century and in the wake of two brutal world wars, it was surely the case that neither a grand narrative of religion nor materialism could possibly be sustained. Theological voices would grapple for a viable response 'after Auschwitz'[1] and continental philosophy would prodigiously attempt to rearticulate the foundations 'after metaphysics.' Then, just as democracy was emerging from the rubble of the Berlin Wall, echoed by the optimism of the secular academy, a somewhat unexpected thing happened at the edge of the new millenium: religion burst forth anew into the public domain. Immigration, fundamentalist Islam, and the Rushdie Affair, culminating in the events following 9/11, belied the supposed insularity of religion with respect to secular politics. On the one hand, theology would have to rethink its role in civil affairs, while on the other, philosophy would have to come to terms with the impossibility of preserving its own purely secular curiosities.

In this instalment of the *Temple Continental* series, I want to present the field of 'radical theology'. Radical theology is rooted intellectually in the historical milieu described above and is now fully recognised as an independent field of study.[2] It actively deploys and often deliberately blurs the boundaries between theological and continental philosophical sources, in order to respond to a diverse set of concerns—not least among them political. It will be beyond the scope of this short tract to provide a full catalogue of radical theology's influences or its contemporary

---

[1]   Theodor Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society", *Prisms* (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), 34.

[2]   See for example the extensive volume edited by Christopher D. Rodkey and Jordan E. Miller, *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

exponents. What I hope to achieve, rather, is a modest introduction through the vision of one of its more recent contributors, the American philosopher and theologian, John D. Caputo (1940–). In short, radical theology for Caputo resists the modernist dismissal of religion while also rejecting the assumptions of transcendental reason; it therefore attempts not so much to do away with theology, but to reinvent it by charting a course beyond confessional boundaries even as it draws upon them. My contention is that this reinvention of theology has political consequences which are important for theologians wishing to engage contemporary challenges.

In the first chapter I provide a biographical sketch and trace the philosophical influences which have led to Caputo's transformative approach to continental philosophy of religion. In the second chapter, I turn to some of his more recent publications that associate him with discussions in contemporary theology, drawing attention to some of his conceptual innovations, including his notion of Events, God's weakness and insistence, and finally theopoetics. My constructive move in this booklet is to suggest that while Caputo's relevancy for philosophy of religion is now commonly held, he is often overlooked as a dialogue partner for contemporary politics. This argument is not immediately clear or without its own difficulties, but when one places what I will call Caputo's own radical political theology into relief with the political theology of Carl Schmitt (1888–1985), then I think there are interesting openings and possibilities for theological and philosophical thought. This will be the subject of the third chapter. Finally, in the conclusion, I ask what challenges still remain for Caputo's radical theology and its relation to the political.

Chapter 1

Who is John D. Caputo?

1.1 Biography

John D. Caputo (1940–) was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, into the conservative Catholic world of pre-Vatican II. Young and impressionable, the importance of religious devotion and piety meant that after high school he would begin his novitiate with the Catholic Order, Brothers De LaSalle. He spent three years in formation before a disagreement with his monastic superiors, who regarded his desire to study and teach philosophy as a departure from his religious vocation. In an early display of irreverence, Caputo decided, ignoring their advice, to enrol in an MA course at Villanova University, a private Catholic research university, before going on to complete a doctorate at Bryan Mawr College in 1968 on Heidegger and Aquinas.[1]

Following several visiting professorships at Duquesne, Fordham, and the New School for Social Research, Caputo would subsequently teach philosophy at Villanova University in Pennsylvania for the next thirty-six years, holding the David R. Cook Chair for Philosophy, and organising the widely regarded *Religion and Postmodernism* conferences from 1997 to 2003. He took an early retirement in 2004 to become the Thomas J. Watson Professor of Religion and Humanities, and Professor of Philosophy at Syracuse University in New York. His formal retirement began in

---

[1] For more on Caputo's early life, where he goes by "Jackie" and then "Brother Paul", see Caputo's characteristically witty but honest autobiography, *Hoping Against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

2011, but he remains prolific in his writing: publishing—in addition to his numerous essays—fifteen books and ten edited volumes with at least another ten very successful theological texts in the last decade alone. While he has limited his international travel, he continues his editorship of the Fordham University Press *Perspectives in Continental Philosophy* series, maintains academic speaking engagements, and also finds himself preaching in the odd church pulpit.

Caputo is most well-known for his religious reading of Derrida. However, his philosophical and theological expertise also includes the writings of Augustine, Aquinas and Meister Eckhart, as well as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and of course, Heidegger. Stylistically, Caputo's work can be considered through a number of distinct phases, from the more erudite and formulaic nature of his early academic material, to the accessible flare and jocularity of some of his later theological texts. The effective combination of these styles brings to the fore a sophisticated analysis and creativity of thought, conveyed with a lucid clarity of prose that draws a wide readership of both academic and lay alike. There is also a performative quality to his later work, typical of postmodern hybridity, that generates a sense of seduction and whimsy in his prose. This sometimes has the effect of appearing indulgent, but astute readers will see that behind all the twists and turns of phraseology lies a nuanced and careful reader of texts, as well as a deeply sensitive but nonetheless bold provocateur.

1.2   Caputo the Heideggerian

As his biography suggests, Caputo was from early on interested in the relationship between the supposedly secular nature of philosophy and the religious character of theology. For him, it was philosophy that provided a way to limit some of the dangers he saw in his own Catholic theological heritage. During the 1950s and 1960s Catholicism was dominated by neo-scholastic Thomism, especially through the work of Étienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain. In general, Caputo was frustrated at Catholicism's metaphysical and speculative nature. For him, metaphysics got in the way of real thinking, it closed down and put to a halt thought about God, as it assumed a starting point that was not open for questioning. For Caputo, Truth with a capital 'T' is assumed in metaphysics, and those who have a privileged access to it are able to enforce its boundaries.

Caputo subsequently became interested in the work of the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger. In his first two books, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (1978) and *Heidegger and Aquinas* (1982), he drew on the mysticism of the medieval theologian Meister Eckhart as well as Heidegger's later writings in order to criticise the metaphysical structure of Aquinas's thought and its presentation in contemporary neo-Thomism. According to him, Heidegger's radical philosophical approach of hermeneutic phenomenology implied an explanation of life as always-already interpretation. Whereas Scholastic metaphysical ontology failed to think critically about the origin of concepts like *existentia* or *essentia*, the analytic of *Dasein* pointed to itself as the horizon for its own *Existenz*. As finite creatures, we are conditioned by the facts that make up our 'being-in-the-world'; we do not have a birds-eye-view and cannot assume to have 'pure' access to truth. In Heideggerian terms, we are anchored by our 'facticity of being.'

These significant pieces of scholarship firmly established Caputo's credibility as a major philosopher in the Heideggerian tradition and also as a reader of the scholastics. But while this critical Heideggerian impulse certainly influenced his resistant posture toward theology (not least Heidegger's decisive critique of 'onto-theology'), it might be more precise to say that it provided him with a certain 'desire' for thought; one that would serve as a kind of methodological 'prolegomenon' to his philosophy of religion.[2]

Two subsequent texts, the widely acclaimed *Radical Hermeneutics* (1987), and then *Demythologizing Heidegger* (1993), were important moments of reckoning in this development. In the former, Caputo attempted to put Heidegger into productive tension with the growing influence of the post-structuralist movement, though not without also registering what he began to see as the limitations of Heidegger's philosophy—thanks in no small part to French revisionary studies which linked the German thinker to Nationalist Socialism.[3] In the latter text, Caputo made his own philosophical break with Heidegger by locating a 'mythological operation' in the thinking

---

[2]   See Calvin D. Ullrich, "On Caputo's Heidegger: A Prolegomenon of Transgressions to a Religion without Relgion" in *Open Theology* 6 (2020): 241–255.

[3]   In particular, the well-known studies by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *La fiction du politique* (1987) and Jean-François Lyotard, *Heidegger et "les juifs"* (1988). These were followed importantly by Victor Farías', *Heidegger and Nazism* (1989).

of Being, one that was guilty of essentialising history.[4] Here, as well as in *Radical Hermeneutics*, one could already see Caputo's philosophy of religion taking shape in what he called an 'ethics of dissemination', drawing heavily on the phenomenology of alterity (Otherness) in the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida.

1.3   Caputo the Derridean

Caputo learned from Heidegger the project of 'overcoming metaphysics', but also that every epoch defines for itself the possibility of what can be thought. It is unsurprising that in the epoch of Nietzsche's 'death of God', the task of thought leads him to think 'God' after god, since the 'closure of metaphysics' does not necessarily mean the closure of God. In addition to gleaning a sensitivity for reading texts and the instability of interpretation, Caputo's 'turn' to Derrida (and Levinas) can be seen as a move beyond Heidegger (and his apparent ambivalence towards theology) and towards post-metaphysical thinkers who are intentionally explicit about the theological.

To understand Caputo's Derridean contribution to the field of continental philosophy of religion, and later radical theology, we must briefly make a detour through Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction. Derrida's work is notoriously demanding not only for its philosophical complexity but also for its idiosyncratic style (which, as we have already seen, Caputo also 'performs' in his own writing). At its heart is a philosophy of language that extends into ethics, politics, and religion. It will be Caputo's novel contribution to bring deconstruction into Christian theology, articulated in his most important work, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (2006).

In a series of early texts, Derrida argued that the history of Western philosophy is guilty of prioritising speech (*logos*) over text or writing.[5] The spoken word, unlike the errors susceptible to writing, can be directly understood; its meaning is self-evident, unobscured, and immanently present to itself. Derrida called this assenting tendency toward 'ideality' in the history of Western thought, 'logocentrism', and its immediacy, the 'metaphysics of presence.' However, if one analyses this more closely, one sees

---

[4]   See Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger*.

[5]   All published in 1967: *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, and *Speech and Phenomena*.

that meaning is dependent on all other kinds of contingent factors or contexts. In the language of Saussurean semiotics to which Derrida was responding, not only is the meaning of 'Signs' established by a differential structure between Signifiers (the combinations of letters or sounds that make up the word 'tree', for example) that refer to a Signified 'thing' (the concept of 'tree'), but also that the Signified 'thing' is itself made possible by a differential structure. If a Signified can be constructed by a series of textual differences, then it can also be 'de-constructed', which is just another way of saying that what it 'means' is never final—whence Derrida's infamous formulation: "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" (there is no outside-text).

In more common parlance, deconstruction is therefore about demonstrating how things, texts, institutions, religions, beliefs, systems, etc., do not have stabilised meanings; that it is 'impossible' for them to be stabilised on account of their differential structure. The charge of linguistic idealism and a nihilistic play of infinite deferrals is frequently registered here, but deconstructionists will argue, as does Caputo, that Derrida is not intent on denouncing meaning as such, but only in showing that it is inevitably caught up in an excess, or an impossibility that it cannot contain and which is always to-come.[6] One can now see why this deconstructive impulse becomes so magnetic for Caputo, because it destabilises the relationship between philosophy and theology, and opens a space to think 'God' or 'religion' beyond such modern distinctions.[7]

Now, Caputo can think about philosophy and theology in a hermeneutical and phenomenological mode, rather than in a metaphysical or speculative one. On the philosophical level, the hermeneutic loss of meaning as well as its creative effulgence resists an austere pessimism in favour of a deeper respect and obligation toward otherness (the 'event' of excess, the structure of difference). In Caputo's *Against Ethics* (1993), for example, the religious resonance of this obligation gets felt in Kierkegaard's famous retelling of Abraham and Isaac in the 'suspension of the ethical'.[8] In God's commandment to Abraham to kill his son Isaac, the ethical moment

---

[6]   See Caputo's lucid commentary, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997).

[7]   For an accessible account of how Caputo understands 'postmodernism', see John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), 49–55.

[8]   Caputo's text, unbeknownst to him, appeared just before Derrida published his own reading of Kierkegaard later that year. See Derrida's, *Donner la mort* (1993).

which tries to rationalise this injunction is suspended, while the real moment of the religious demands a confrontation with the abyss; an incommensurable call that places Abraham into the accusative (*Me voici*: 'here I am, Lord'), face to face with the Absolute.[9] This 'apophatic hermeneutic' in the movement of the ethical to the religious, is later identified by Caputo with the apophatic gesture in negative theology, without which 'we cannot trust any discourse that is not contaminated' by it.[10] Via these disturbances between the limits and boundaries of philosophy and theology, Caputo's novelty is then to suggest that these movements of deconstruction are themselves structured like a quasi-religion without religion.

Keeping the development of these philosophical influences in mind, let us now turn to some of the substantive concepts that Caputo develops in his iteration of radical theology.

---

[9] John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 9–12.

[10] John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 23.

Chapter 2

Caputo's Radical Theology

In *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (1997)—one of the foundational texts for the field of continental philosophy of religion—the ground is prepared for Caputo's radical theology. Caputo rehearses key religious motifs in Derrida's oeuvre ('the messianic', 'gift', 'apocalypse', 'confession') to speak of an 'experience of an event' as the 'quasi-transcendental' condition for a certain faith without dogmatic content. Contrary to how Derrida was being read, Caputo offered for the first time a seemingly 'positive' reading of deconstruction, one that would suggest the latter was itself structured religiously.[1] For Caputo, at the core of a radical theology is an 'event' that inspires a certain passion, commitment, desire, and 'promise' for the wholly Other, and which, in virtue of its non-realisability, does not collapse into a violent construal of religious belief.

One example will be useful here to highlight some of the tensions involved in Caputo's rendering of a religion without religion. An important notion, derived from Derrida, is that of 'the messianic', which can be described as an analogical paradigm for the Messiah's arrival. The deconstructive reading denudes the biblical form (messianism) and focuses on the messianic structure: i.e., the experience of 'expectation' for the coming Messiah but without the assurance of the arrival. The implication being that the possibility of harnessing political-religious zeal is circumvented by this deferral. However, a question emerges for radical theology concerning where the priority lies;

---

[1] An exception here would be the important work of Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (London: Blackwell, 1992).

is the emphasis on the messianic or on the messianism?—the latter being the concrete religious faith from which the messianic takes its shape. For Caputo, it would seem that the emphasis falls to the former, the messianic, the religion without all the messy stuff of religion.

On the one hand, the dialectic of memory and hope from the Judeo-Christian archive has clearly been carried over into the idea of the messianic, while on the other hand, this 'coming' now assumes a new significance, because it speaks to a more 'just' faith that does not have security about whether the Messiah will arrive. Here the messianic, as the structure of experience of faith, what Derrida called '*foi*', is not purified of content as if it did not at all draw upon the determinate tradition ('*croyance*'). The messianic as a general structure therefore still bares the marks or traces (its prophetic character or concern for the other) of the conditions, contexts and revelations of historical messianisms, without which it would simply be another determinate creedal entity vying for religious adherence. The contested nature of this tension is felt throughout Caputo's theological texts.

2.1   The Weakness of Events

If *Prayers and Tears* performed what phenomenology would call a 'reduction' (*epoché*) of religious experience given in deconstruction, then Caputo's two major theological texts, *Weakness of God* (2006) and *The Insistence of God* (2013), perform a reduction of God and theology to the 'event' going in the name of God, now marking the explicit turn to his radical theology. To briefly recap: deconstruction is an activity that takes place amid our constructions and meanings, exhibiting their instability, revisability and susceptibility for unexpected change. Caputo calls the unexpectedness of deconstruction an 'event', and if we 'apply' it to theology this event not only disturbs theology but might also be a condition for it to produce something new.

In Caputo's first explicit theological work, *The Weakness of God*, he makes a useful distinction between what he calls 'names' and 'events.'[2]   Names are unities that gather meaning to themselves, bringing ideas together into nominal wholes that can

---

[2]   John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

be processed and understood. They can also dangerously sediment into layers of power and prestige over time. Events on the other hand are what names try to contain; they are 'weaker' and uncontainable, escaping the container of the name. In ordinary English, the word 'event' evokes an occurrence of something 'happening', like a sporting event. But Caputo uses the word differently; he says that events are not what happens, but what is going on in what happens. They are not really 'things' at all, and if they were, then one could 'name' them and they would no longer be events. One can, instead, think of events as a kind of destabilising co-efficient that provokes and haunts names. Events 'arrive' or 'break-in' unexpectedly into the present as unforeseeable and unimaginable happenings. There is a structural relation between events and names, where one cannot 'exist' without the other. Events are promissory in nature, eager for a future for the name, but also promising that the name will always be revisable. Since the character of the event can never be known in advance, there is no guarantee that the future of the name won't also be a threat. And yet, without this risk—the unforeseeable openness to the event—names could not get going, since they exist as approximations to the events they are trying to name.

How is this quasi-structure of the name-event mapped onto a radical theology?

For Caputo, God has been the site of a privileged and powerful name (read in the sense of Heidegger's critique of onto-theology). He is the quintessential 'strong' name that is never changing, sempiternal, and sovereign; the plenitude of all Being. Caputo puts a twist onto what we think of this 'name' by arguing that there is something contained in the name 'God' that is like an event, something that is going on in this name. The Christian New Testament narratives are exemplary in this regard. Caputo references St. Paul the Apostle in 1 Corinthians 1:25, where he says that 'the weakness of God is stronger than human strength'. Theologically, the Gospels witness to this weakness in the fragile incarnated life, brutal murder, and miraculous resurrection of Jesus, which takes place in service of a radical message of freedom and justice—the kingdom of God. The standard Pauline reading, however, turns this sacrificial testimony of the crucified Jesus into a declaration of God's ultimate saving strength—that is, a suppression of the event. For Caputo, on the contrary, the weakness of God, the event going on in the name of God, must go all the way down,

by which he means that it is not for some greater conditional display of God's saving power, but that it is the brute fact of Christ's murder which 'calls' unconditionally on us for a response.[3]

By identifying 'God' with an 'event' or a 'call', and not with a name, radical theology resists the temptation to decide on naming the caller of the call. For it is the undecidable nature of the caller, the very withdrawal of 'its' identity, which places the responsibility for a response on us. Far from seeing this non-coercive undecidability as 'weak' in the sense of ineffectual, it is precisely from this place of a wholly different order of signification that a force is released: a non-violent, non-coercive force. In this postmodern *theologia crucis*, we might say, Caputo writes that 'the force of the event that calls to us and overtakes us in the name of God arises crucially from the cross, where all the lines of force in Christianity intersect (cross)'.[4] This is what 'weak' theology is all about for Caputo: this 'weakness of God' is signified in the crossing-out of the God of metaphysics on the cross, where the death of Jesus gives way to a different sense of divinity: 'the genuine divinity of Jesus is revealed in his distance from the request for magic, in his helplessness, his cry of abandonment, and above all, in the words of forgiveness he utters'.[5] This is no valorisation of weakness or suffering, but rather a call for protest and justice in the face of powers of suppression, one that lays claim on us to respond to it unconditionally.

---

[3]	Apart from Derrida's usage of 'weak force', Caputo is also drawing on the 'weak thought' of the Italian philosopher, Gianni Vattimo. See Gianni Vattimo, Peter Carravetta (trans.) *Weak Thought* (New York: SUNY University Press, 2012).

[4]	Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 42.

[5]	Ibid.

2.2 God's Insistence

The rhetorical effect of Caputo's radical theology, as articulated in *The Weakness of God*, may lead us to assume a kind of two-worlds theology, an effervescent plain of events with no material substrate. While this is certainly debateable,[6] what is clear in *The Insistence of God* (2013),[7] his follow-up book, is that Caputo wishes to remedy this reading by arguing that the event of God does not 'exist' on another ontological plain, but that it 'insists' in this world. God, as an 'insisting' event, does not 'do' anything in terms of causal agency, but is a condition of restlessness that calls for existence in this world. Caputo had called this position weak theology's hyper-realism: to treat God as an 'event' is not to make a metaphysical claim, as in theological realism, nor is it to introduce an idealistic anti-realism, as in a Feuerbachian or Freudian projection, but it is rather to imagine a wholly different future of the real, that is crucially to be made real through our works of love, hospitality, justice, and forgiveness. God's insistence calls for an unforeseeable future or a 'dangerous memory' of the past, disclosing another way for the world to be.[8]

The 'life' of radical theology, which has often been accused of religious abstractionism, can be read in Caputo's presentation of its relation to 'confessional theology'. In the same way as he had clarified in *Prayers and Tears* that the messianic is not like a determinate religious belief with its own tradition (*croyance*), so too radical theology is not a set of doctrines or beliefs that are expressed in a confessional community. Far from a rival body of beliefs, radical theology gives articulation to the insistence of 'events' that are getting themselves heard in confessional theology. Radical theology haunts confessional theology, like a 'spectral shadow and an actuality' and it only 'exists' as the 'becoming radical of confessional theology'.[9] The latter occurs when confessional theology starts to pay attention to the events in its own tradition, those

---

[6]   Variations of this issue were already raised after Caputo's *Prayers and Tears*, but again more recently in a volume edited by J. Aaron Simmons and Stephen Minister, see *Reexamining Deconstruction and Determinate Religion: Toward a Religion with Religion* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2012).

[7]   See John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).

[8]   See Johann Baptist Metz, D. Smith (trans). *Faith in History and Society* (New York: Crossroad, 1980), 109–115.

[9]   Caputo, *Insistence of God*, 61.

moments and movements that are always trying to 'twist' free from the strictures of the tradition. In such cases, it may be that confessional theology no longer looks how it once did; the more it responds to events, the more it changes.

Thus, in radical theology, as Caputo puts it, the kingdom '[...] does not exist; it insists. The coming of the kingdom is not to be confused with a past, present, or future-present state of affairs. It is not an existent, past, present or future. The kingdom does not exist; it calls. The kingdom is the folly of an unconditional call—a call to live unconditionally, to offer unconditional mercy, hospitality, and forgiveness'.[10]

2.3 The Hermeneutics of Theopoetics

A final aspect of Caputo's radical theology, on which both the 'weakness of events' and the 'insistence of God' depends, is its mode of articulation. Since theology as we know it is still keyed into an exclusive discourse, some kind of repetition or reformulation will have to occur. One can sense this in the sometimes frustratingly ambiguous locutions of Caputo's or Derrida's writing. But such performativity is deliberate, as it seeks to challenge the assumptions of representational language in which much theology is still implicated. The task of his radical theology is, thus, to write itself without repeating the same metaphysical gestures, by not speaking of God in terms that elevate a metaphysical reality (*logos*), or even in the negations of apophatic theology where one cannot say anything of God (as important as that may be),[11] but rather in a poetics that elicits an affirmation of life as a wholly different way-of-being.

Here the discourse of theology undergoes a hermeneutical reduction in order to express the 'events' that it attempts to contain. This reduction migrates its discourse from the *logos* of the divine Being (theology) to the poetics of the event (theopoetics). Theopoetics, then, is what we might call Caputo's 'methodology'—it is the way

---

[10] John D. Caputo, *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2016).

[11] The similarities between deconstruction and the apophatic of negative theology are still hotly debated. For an updated discussion, see David Newheiser's, *Hope in a Secular Age: Deconstruction, Negative Theology, and the Future of Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

we talk when we try to describe the events that are going on in theology; it is the
poetical discourses that take place in the biblical narratives, which are not trying
to say something about how reality is but are trying to respond to a call and give
expression to God's weakness, disclosing a new reality. Theopoetics is also not an
aesthetic ornamentation of theological language (theo*poetry*), but a way to poeticise
on behalf of the events that contradict the logic of the world. It is not concerned with
the 'where' or the 'when' of another world, but rather with the 'how' that negotiates
this world and the kingdom of God:

> the logic of the world and the poetics of the kingdom do not describe
> two different places . . . or this world and the other behind the clouds,
> except poetically, differentiating two orders of signification that contend
> with each other in the only existing world we know.[12]

One might say that there are two gestures involved in radical theology's theopoetics.
The first is observed in the scandalisation of the logic of theo-*logy* where the name of
God is no longer a metaphysical being or an object of faith, but rather an emblematic
name for an event or a call whose provenance is constitutively concealed.[13] The
second gesture is the site of 'symbolic space' that gives life to this scandal, namely,
the 'constellation of idioms, strategies, stories, arguments, tropes, paradigms, and
metaphors' found in the New Testament narratives of the kingdom of God.[14] The
paradoxical reversals of this *an-archic* kingdom, or what Caputo likes to call 'sacred
anarchy'—the first shall be last, the love of enemies, the priority of the sinner, raising
of the dead, and so on—are impossible injunctions, the truth of which lies not in
their historical accuracy but in their poetical efficacy to confound this world and to
re-create it otherwise.

To illustrate a practical instance of what Caputo means by radical theology's theopo-
etics, one can take the example of Jesus' words from his sermon in Galilee, where he
says:

---

[12]   Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 107.

[13]   The philosophical background to this point can be found in Martin Heidegger's discussion
       in §57 of *Being and Time*. See Martin Heidegger, John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson
       (trans.) *Being and Time* (London: Blackwell, [1962] 2016), 319.

[14]   Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 106.

> And why do you worry about your clothing? Consider the lilies of the
> field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even
> Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God
> so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is
> thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little
> faith? (Matt 6:28-31).

The conventional reading of this text is to gloss God's kingdom in terms of a divine
economy, where God's faithfulness sounds like a bizarre economic model, one that
asks us not to prepare for the future. But a theopoetic reading sees this text as a
symbolic poetic discourse expressing a radically new ontology, a new mode of being-
in-the-world that does not displace our cares and worries, but where an 'event' of the
Kingdom of God is calling for a new-world in which all are clothed and comforted. A
theopoetic reading highlights the insistence of God in a 'kingdom of sacred anarchy',
one that is not dominated by a hierarchal logic but by a paradoxical a-logic of the
cross that cries out in protest.

Chapter 3

Caputo's Radical Political Theology

Having addressed Caputo's philosophy of religion and how it ultimately culminates in his radical theology, the argument I would now like to make is that the latter can be understood as a radical political theology if juxtaposed with the political theology of the controversial German jurist, Carl Schmitt. While the extent to which Schmitt has influenced theology proper remains a disputed topic, he nonetheless stands in an important counter-tradition to contemporary political theology. Mapping this opposing trajectory will not be possible here (although see previous *Temple Continental* tract: *Schmitt and Peterson on Political Theology*), but since Schmitt has become an essential point of reference for ongoing debates in political thought (not least in the late work of Derrida), Caputo's radical theology is well situated to make a novel contribution. In this closing chapter, then, I begin with a short excursus into Schmitt's theory of sovereignty and political theology, followed by an argument about how Caputo's radical theology deconstructs the 'sovereign God' of Schmitt's thought to become a radical political theology.

3.1 A Political Theology of Presence: Carl Schmitt

The material reflecting on the work of Carl Schmitt has proliferated in recent years. His insights into Weimar constitutionalism, his critique of liberalism and his theorisation of the political, have garnered a wide reception of scholarship across the political spectrum. But his rendering of political theology is important for our purposes.

The Schmittian refrain that 'all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularised theological concepts', makes the descriptive claim that there is a homologous correspondence between the social structure of a particular age and its metaphysical self-understanding.[1] More plainly, theology in some way informs the structural formations of modern life. The fact that these concepts are called theological is intended by Schmitt to signal the imposition of a critical field onto modern political concepts, to revive their proper meaning over and against a shallow disenchantment. Within the realm of the juristic, which was Schmitt's immediate area of concern, the chief exemplar of this is the notion of sovereignty: 'sovereign is he who decides on the exception'.[2] Here the absolute state/Führer—like God's miraculous powers of suspension of the laws of nature—can suspend legal norms in a state of emergency in order to act decisively, and from here it is a short step for such authority to turn into unchecked absolute power.

A prior theoretical delineation which gives the possibility for this absolute authority, is the political distinction between the 'friend' and 'enemy'.[3] Schmitt understands politics to be at its most fundamental about struggle and enmity; a clear demarcation of an enemy is necessary, for only through it can 'friends' be found. Schmitt's '*Kampf*' philosophy opposes the liberal optimism of human nature and instead develops the Christian concept of sin to argue, along with Hobbes, that without a clear enemy from which to differentiate groups, chaos will ensue in 'the war of all against all'. His pessimistic anthropology and its methodological connection to sin becomes cynical when no immediate enemy exists, since an enemy must then be created; without it the very notion of politics, according to Schmitt, is lost.

A last element emerges from his understanding of history.[4] For Schmitt, the archetype for the friend-enemy distinction was the cosmic dualism between God and Satan, or the battle between good and evil. Since this apocalyptic ending to human history is an eschatological reality, the battle must commence in the here and now. This did not mean that Schmitt lusted after blood and war, but rather that order needed to be

---

[1] Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 33.

[2] Ibid., 5.

[3] Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, 26.

[4] See Matthias Lievens, "Carl Schmitt's Concept of History" in *The Oxford Handbook of Carl Schmitt*, eds. Jens Meierhenrich and Oliver Simons (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 401–425.

maintained by staving off those forces (enemies) that would compromise it. Resisting the ideology of history as inevitable progress, Schmitt opted for a 'decisionism' that treated history as a series of events consisting of struggles between entities. A biblical figure often cited in his oeuvre is that of the *katechon*, or 'the restrainer'.[5] This figure, appearing in Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, is described as the one who will restrain the eschatological enthusiasm of the believers waiting for Christ. But for Schmitt, the *katechon* is also an agent of God in history designated with the task of restoring order amid chaos, and for him this was none other than the option of the total state itself.

Schmitt's political theology has several features, all of which deserve further extensive treatment. But what we can see from this brief sketch is the following: Schmitt anchors his political theology in a theory of sovereignty presented from a voluntarist deity who acts omnipotently, unilaterally deciding who gets to be a friend and enemy. Moreover, within this ultimately metaphysical schema, the *katechontic* figure functions to preserve the present by ensuring that the openness of history remains inaccessible. In short: what we have here is a dangerous 'political theology of presence'.

3.2   Radical Political Theology

It should be immediately obvious that Caputo's vision of radical theology challenges this construal of political theology with its notions of weakness, God's insistence, and theopoetics. The concept of the sovereign God which unifies Schmitt's political theology can be understood as the capacity to decide on the exception and to make an exception of oneself. This essential dictum of modernity, what Derrida had called its 'unavowed theologism', indicates a continuous movement from the Sovereign God, to the sovereign State or the people, and then to the sovereign individual. The task for a radical political theology, then, is to think of a God without sovereignty.

---

[5]   See Felix Grossheutschi, *Carl Schmitt und die Lehre vom Katechon* (Berlin: Duncker und Humboldt, 1996); Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander and eds. Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 103; see also Michael Hoelzl, "Before the Anti-Christ is Revealed: On the Katechontic Structure of Messianic Time" in *The Politics to Come: Power, Modernity and the Messianic*, eds. Arthur Bradley and Paul Fletcher (London: Continuum, 2010).

A radical political theology that consists of a God without sovereignty is not without a 'certain' rulership however. For this would be 'a rule' according to an unconditional event 'which of itself lacks force or worldly power, lacks an army or an armature, the material means to enforce its will, that is, to forcibly bring about what it is calling for'.[6] By treating the kingdom of God as an event, God is re-conceived as a weak force withdrawing from the plane of being to the order of the event. Thus, a God without sovereignty is nonetheless a God who is always 'to come', who has no sovereign power but who makes an unconditional appeal. Theopoetics is the activity of trying to articulate the unruly disruptive forces taking place in the midst of this withdrawing appeal, which is not strictly anarchic, but rather a 'sacred anarchy'. This foolishness is the Christian *kerygma* for the world.

Again, apodictic statements about whether God exists are not the concern here, but rather the 'how' and the 'where' of God's existence, that is, God as a critical irruptive force calling into question within the structures of the status quo. Radical political theology points to God's 'insistence' in the midst of the nobodies—the *ta me onta*—who suffer and therefore disclose the always immanent spirit of divine contradiction (the a-logic or rather theo-political-logic of the cross) in an oppressive world. A radical political theology is a pragmatic and prophetic call for a transformed world, for a new 'world-picture, a world-praxis, a world-formation, a world-creation, and event of poieisis [...] [or] a form of life'.[7] The reconfiguration achieved through radical political theology's theopoetics alters political reality as it calls upon the imagination to conceive an alternate way of being-in-the-world. This stands in contrast to Schmitt's vision of an ordered totality governed by an *arché*, whether hierarchical or autarchical (self-governing). Radical political theology, on the other hand, re-visions a future of metamorphic potentiality, the reality of which is not ascribed to an existing political project, but arises as a response to an obligation through the 'doing of God' (theo*poieisis*) in concrete acts of charity, liberation, and healing.

Radical political theology deploys the discourse of theopoetics to manifest a 'meta-noetic' potentiality of an event that calls for an impossible ethical-political alteration of all human sociality in the present, the efficacy of which is produced and stimulated

---

[6]   Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 27.

[7]   Caputo, *Insistence of God*, 94.

by this symbolic and imaginative discourse. Far from creating an exception out of
the material realm, this radical form of anarchic political theology is designed to em-
phasise that all there is, is matter, and if theopoetics gives voice to a different order
of signification, it is then up to us to respond—to be the 'coming' of the messiah and
take responsibility for 'the rigors and demands of the *à venir*'.

Conclusion

Caputo has always been weary of writing a politics or constructing a political theory. Nonetheless, in a recent interview with Clayton Crockett he admits to this political impulse: 'everything I have written about for the last twenty-five years has to do with weak theology and the weakness of God, everything I write is political–in a 'nascent' way'.[8] In this tract I have attempted to draw out this political element in what I call Caputo's radical political theology. By first foregrounding Caputo's theological-philosophical development, and then delineating his radical theology, I have suggested that the latter becomes political especially when juxtaposed to Carl Schmitt's political theology.

The future of a radical political theology still rightly remains open. Perhaps Caputo will himself write a radical political theology explicitly, or perhaps it will remain 'to come'. However, there are several questions which can still be usefully posed. First, the question still remains over what I would call an 'effective politics', that is, what corresponding political praxis might accompany this vision of Caputo's radical political theology? I have attempted to answer this elsewhere by means of radical democratic theory's 'politics of resistance', or what I call the movement from 'theopoetics to theopraxis', though there are surely still more interesting connections to be explored here.[9] Secondly, while Caputo has begun to make gestures in this direction, one could still ask how a radical political theology maps onto contemporary challenges facing us regarding the ecological crisis? Third, while Caputo has also recently begun to bring his radical theology into a timely conversation with liberation

---

[8]   B. Keith Putt (ed.) *The Essential Caputo: Selected Writings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019), 39.

[9]   Calvin D. Ullrich, "Theopoetics to Theopraxis: Toward a Critchlean Supplement to Caputo's Radical Political Theology" in *Forum Philosophicum* 25 no.1 (2020): 163–182.

theology, since it is at heart a prophetically therapeutic discourse on the hermeneutics of existence, one could still ask if it remains, as yet, still somewhat devoid of the 'flesh' of embodied life. In my reading, the future of Caputo on radical political theology will have to revolve around these questions.

Glossary

Events: For Caputo, events are informed philosophically by the thought of Martin Heidegger, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida. Events, unlike our ordinary day usage, name an excess, an uncontainability, and an unconditionality; they are that which cannot be 'contained' by names. For Caputo, God should be thought of not as a 'name' to which theology has assigned a supreme power and privilege, but rather as an event.

Weakness: By referring not to 'God' but to the 'event' going on in the name of God, Caputo is assigning God (as well as theology) a certain 'weakness.' But Caputo does not mean weakness in the sense of weak-kneed, indecisive, or anaemic. Instead he means what St. Paul called God's folly or the 'weakness of God', that is, the 'logic of the cross'. The weakness of God is the strange logic of the cross that doesn't rule with power and might, but confounds the wisdom of the strong and stands in solidarity with the weak. Caputo draws the language of weakness not only from the New Testament, but also from Jacques Derrida, who references Walter Benjamin's 'weak messianic force', and the Italian philosopher, Gianni Vattimo, who has developed what he called 'weak thought' (*pensiero debole*).

Theopoetics: Theopoetics is the discourse that gives articulation to radical or weak theology. Unlike theology with its concern for the Being of God, theopoetics is the collection of metaphors, metonyms, narratives, allegories, songs, poems, parables, and rhetorical strategies used to expose us to the event. The gospels and the utterances of the kingdom are good exemplars of theopoetics, for they are not so much conveying to us any propositional truth, but rather the paralogical truth of the event.

Bibliography

Where to start

Some of Caputo's recent, shorter theological texts are much more accessible and require neither a significant understanding of postmodern philosophy, nor specific foreknowledge of the contemporary debates in continental philosophy of religion. A number of secondary sources also offer introductory summaries of Caputo's work for orientation:

- Caputo, "Spectral Hermeneutics" in John D. Captuo, Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007)

- Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Baker Academic, 2007)

- Caputo, *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (Salem, OR: Polebridge, 2016)

- Katharine Sarah Moody, "John D. Caputo" in Christopher D. Rodkey and Jordan E. Miller, *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

Relevant Literature

Those interested in Caputo's earlier work can delve into those titles noted in chapter one. Below are books central to his theological project:

- Caputo, *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997)

- Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006)

- Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013)

- Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos: A Theology of Difficult Glory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019)

Digging Deeper

Caputo's work has evoked immense debate with several critical volumes (often containing responses from Caputo himself) that appeared after his reading of Derrida in *Prayers and Tears* as well as his later theological material. More constructive monographs have also attempted to elicit some of the creative potential of his thought:

- James Olthuis (ed.) *Religion With/Out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo* (London: Routledge, 2002)

- Mark Dooley (ed.) *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus* (New York: SUNY Press, 2002)

- Neal DeRoo and Mark Zlomsić (eds.) *Cross and Khôra: Deconstruction and Christianity in the work of John D. Caputo* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2010)

- Katharine Sarah Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity: Deconstruction, Materialism, and Religious Practices* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015)

- Calvin D. Ullrich, *Sovereignty and Event: The Political in John D. Caputo's Radical Theology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021)

Thank you for reading.

Philosophers for our Time is a series of 'Temple Tracts' from the William Temple Foundation – short, free-to-download books presenting engaging analysis on key debates in religion and public life. Find out more and download the other books at williamtemplefoundation.org.uk/temple-tracts.

Sign up for our free newsletter at williamtemplefoundation.org.uk. Follow us on Twitter @WTempleFdn.

©William Temple Foundation 2022