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Caputo in a Nutshell:
Two Very Introductory (and Slightly Critical) Lectures

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Two Very Introductory (and Slightly Critical) Lectures

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Abstract

Originally presented at Monash University, the two lectures offer a very accessible introduction to a number of the major aspects of the work of John D. Caputo, perhaps/probably the most original and consequential postmodern philosopher of religion. The first lecture contextualizes the place of Caputo's thinking, contrasts his contribution to Mark C. Taylor's "a/theology", and examines Caputo's postmodern figuration of the "Kingdom of God". The second lecture focuses on Caputo's philosophico-theological rendering of four key Derridean themes: justice, forgiveness, the gift, and hospitality. Throughout the text, certain critical issues are raised, though the overall appraisal is one of affirmation and admiration.

Keywords: *Caputo, Derrida, deconstruction, justice, forgiveness, gift, hospitality*

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Lecture One: of Speaking in Looser Tongues

1. Introduction

Caputo was born in 1940 in the USA. I met him in 2001, and he is a more reserved person than his passionate, cheeky writings indicate (something that appears to have been the case with the likes of Nietzsche and Derrida). Caputo's engaging style – and increasingly courageous thinking – evolved with time – and tenure, i.e., academic job security: as he explains to us in "Loosening Philosophy's Tongue" (2002), his early books were written according to "academic protocol", and he amusingly notes he attempted to make his PhD "as boring as possible, with the understanding that this was the mark of seriousness" (Caputo, 2002: par. 7). His philosophical expression intensified – his tongue was loosened and even sharpened – with his exposure to the work of Derrida. I assume he was also spurred on by the friendship that developed between the charismatic atheistic Frenchman and the former member of a Catholic religious order.

Caputo's increasing deployment of deconstruction throughout the 1980s and '90s propelled both Derrida's and his own reputation, so much so that Carl Raschke (another very good philosopher of religion) introduces the above-mentioned interview by proposing that Caputo and Richard Rorty (the great postmodern pragmatist and another Derridean sympathizer) may be "generally credited with making the work of Jacques Derrida both accessible and respectable within the American philosophical community" (Caputo, 2002: par. 2). Exemplary in this regard is *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (1997), which features conversations with Derrida, as well an an eminently clear enunciation of deconstruction by way of "commentary". It is a highly recommended work: it really clarifies Derrida's position – and it is an enjoyable read, certainly not boring.

Of course, Caputo's profile has increased since the 1990s, so much so that he garners the attention of atheist-communist-psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek – one of the most decisive, confronting thinkers alive today, probably the funniest, and, in my opinion, perhaps the most interesting part-time philosopher of religion (refer to, e.g.,

Žižek, 2003, 2008, 2010). In fact, the two philosophers have been having a bit of a joust – a tussle that I will briefly recall in the second lecture. In the meantime, let us quickly track how Caputo got to his position of consequence and prominence, how he became a pioneer and prophet of deconstructive philosophy of religion and theology.

2. Caputo After Taylor

It should be mentioned straightaway that Caputo was not the first philosopher of religion to appropriate deconstruction: the first to gain attention from such an enterprise was Mark C. Taylor (born 1945), with his groundbreaking 1984 work, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*. I say "the first to gain attention" because previous work had come out, including the 1982 volume, *Deconstruction and Theology* (which features an essay by Raschke in which he comes to a similar conclusion to Taylor). Let us briefly approach *Erring* according to Caputo's assessment of it in the interview with Raschke, for it is a *relatively* accurate assessment – I will then propose where that assessment's deficiency lies. But let us first begin with some background. At the end of an early seminal 1966 essay entitled "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", Derrida speaks of a "choice" between the old way of seeking centres, foundations, origins, and ends, *or* the Nietzschean free-play of signifiers; Derrida himself says there is no need, today, to choose between the two but rather to attempt to think their "common ground" – the Derridean effort to think their common ground or non-ground being *différance* (though Derrida loves to play with play).

Taylor's *Erring* does not go for any common ground (assuming there is any) but rather favours the Nietzschean path – which, let us face it, is the more playful, enjoyable, outrageous (and perhaps truer) path – and comes up with quite a scandalous "a/theology" which destabilizes orthodoxy's prized centres of "God", "self", "history", and "book". For instance, the mainstream religious rationale is that the divine and the human self are unitary, unified, and self-possessed entities, exemplified by Augustine's representation of selfhood in his *Confessions*. Taylor's enterprise is a good thing, a very good thing, theoretically de-centering dominant (and domineering) concepts.

Nevertheless, I concur with Caputo when he says in the interview that "*Erring* is not the final word . . . about the relation of Derrida and religion" (Caputo, 2002: par. 11). This is a reasonable conclusion, for there is enough depth in deconstruction for us to keep having recourse to it as a resource for critical religious thinking for a long, long time – indeed, I would go so far as to say that it contains some perennial truths (as may be further indicated in the second lecture).

However, I am more wary of Caputo's more negative assessment of *Erring* as not being "the best" word about this relation (Caputo, 2002: par. 11): after all, maybe *Erring was* the best word that could have been said *at the time*, given that Taylor's book came out in 1984 when Derrida had not yet paid *too much* attention to things like religion and ethics and hospitality and so on, at a time when thinkers were exposing what *was not* common to deconstruction and religion, what they *did not* share. For its time, *Erring was perhaps* the best philosophical-a/theological word on the relations and non-relations of religion and deconstruction, given deconstruction was still in its "infancy".

This all changed, of course, in the latter-1980s – by which time Taylor himself became a bit disillusioned with deconstruction (returning to old favourites like Kierkegaard and Hegel) – for by the latter-80s, Derrida started paying more attention to the "Other" and "faith" and "religion without religion": in such a context, thinkers like Caputo enthusiastically started perceiving/interpreting deconstruction in a (more) theologically-affirmative key. Caputo produced a string of books tracing relations between deconstruction and ethics and religion, including *Radical Hermeneutics* (1987) and *Against Ethics* (1993), as well as his landmark text, 1997's *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* – another must-read. (When I met him in 2001, Caputo said that *Prayers and Tears* was his favourite piece.)

3. Caputo's Powerless, Kingdomless "Kingdom of God"

Deconstruction's "turn" to religion during the latter-80s was significantly driven by Derrida's attentiveness to Levinas and his fidelity to the Other. In his dialogue with Raschke, Caputo explains how the Levinasian-Derridean emphasis on difference, otherness, and singularity

has a biblical resonance: the New/Second Testament's "Kingdom of God" (*sic*: refer below) is all about a divinity that "has numbered every hair on our head, who has counted every tear, who does not allow the press of the ninety-nine to outweigh the infinite value of the one hundredth" (Caputo, 2002: par. 20) – all of these are well-known biblical references and stories.

The notion of the "Kingdom of God" is a theme that recurs throughout the dialogue between Raschke and Caputo. Before we continue, we should first note that the phrase "Kingdom of God" is problematic not only in terms of the gender-exclusive word "God" but also due to the monarchical-hierarchical nature of the phrase indicated by "Kingdom" (and a capitalized one at that), an issue that is insightfully raised by Raschke later on in the dialogue (par. 29) and acknowledged by Caputo who responds in his characteristically Derridean way by twisting the "Kingdom" into a "Kingdom *without* Kingdom" (2002: par. 31). Indeed, by the time Caputo's full-blown theological work, *The Weakness of God*, gets published (2006), he sometimes uses the slightly less-problematic substitute "reign".

So what is this "weakness" or "powerlessness" of which Caputo speaks? He wants to emphasize that it must not be interpreted as sheer impotence; he remarks: "So the 'power' here is precisely the power of powerlessness, which is the structure of the 'other' in Levinas, who comes to me from on high [and this could be divinity/people/creatures/other entities] just in virtue of the fact that [the Other] is laid low; the other's claim on me arises from [their] destitution" (par. 32). As he explains in more detail in *The Weakness of God*, "weak forces" like the call of the Other, or patience, or forgiveness, do not impose themselves with military or economic force (more talk of forgiveness and other weak forces in the second lecture) – and yet they are still forces, provocative, sublime (2006: 14-15).

Now, in the dialogue with Raschke, Caputo immediately connects such powerlessness with the *basileia* (kingdom), a *basileia* that favours the lame and the lepers and the poor (par. 33). So, Caputo's kingdomless "Kingdom of God" is very different from the kind of kingdom we usually envision – especially the world's royal and religious

kingdoms, armed with their armies and armies of dogmas, going about oppressing the world.

Now, what we see in this conversation between Caputo and Raschke is a kind of deconstruction-in-action when it comes to the binary "strong/worldly kingdom versus a divine/weak kingdom", though this deconstruction process does not occur neatly (i.e., it does not occur in successive paragraphs, which is fair enough, considering the deconstruction occurs in conversation).

A first move is a "strategic reversal" – what is a "strategic reversal"? The previously degraded term in this hierarchical dualism (i.e., the "Kingdom of God") now becomes the prioritized term; there is an inversion: the divine reign/domain/topos/*khora*, a place for fools and children, overruns worldly kingdoms with their glorification of power and wealth and so on. Such a reversal shakes the opposition, destabilizes it, deconstructs a hierarchy that is, after all, a violent construction – deconstruction thereby exposes how things might be otherwise, how things might be better, more just. I would propose that Caputo spends most of his time during this conversation on this first move because our hierarchical dualisms are so ingrained that what is required is a sustained treatment, a prolonged undermining.

As crucial as strategic reversing may be, it is *a first move*. Now, the deconstructive process gets a bit trickier here, a little more complex. There are two (or at least two) somewhat heterogeneous or diverging ways to go from here. One path is to resolutely maintain a tension between the oppositions, privileging neither one nor the other, for resting with the reversal would simply produce another hierarchical opposition, just another unjust dualism which would require deconstruction. I would add – since Caputo does not elaborate here – that at least such a maintenance keeps oppositions in check, the one conditioning the other (and vice versa). And so, having sung the praises of the divine "Kingdom" (par. 31). Caputo himself immediately adds a caveat: "We maintain a tension between what is valorized, what has power, what is sacred, and, at the same time, what is out of power, outlawed, and outcast" (par. 32). I shall also return to the deconstructive imperative of "maintaining a tension" in the second lecture.

Very shortly after having mentioned the task of maintaining the tension, Caputo refers to another/the other deconstructive move: overcoming the binary. In the particular case of this-worldly and divine "kingdoms", what is needed is working out new or other way(s) of thinking and enacting things like "power" and "sovereignty". Having sung the praises of the divine reign or region, Caputo himself realizes that even the radical biblical logic of "Kingdom" must be undone: "The talk of a "Kingdom" to come, even an inverted, perverted and anarchic Kingdom, would be strategic since what would finally be envisaged is a radical community of equals, where no one is privileged" (par. 33).

Now, I will just introduce a question, a concern, that will be explored a little more in the second lecture: what is another name for "a radical community of equals" if not "communism" or "socialism" (or whatever one would like to call it)? Caputo considers himself no communist (refer to, e.g., his desire for a reformed capitalism in *After the Death of God*, 2007: 124-125). Now, Caputo's position here creates two problems. First, as a Derridean, he should be more sympathetic – more *explicitly* sympathetic (could he be a closet commie?) – to the idea of socialism: his comrade Derrida was sympathetic to Marx, perhaps/probably to a new Marxism (consider his 1994 book, *Specters of Marx*). Second, Caputo's own thinking draws him closer to this conclusion. I contend (as may begin to be evidenced here) that communism or a neo-communism is deconstruction's very logical conclusion. And perhaps Caputo gives way to this conclusion with time, for there is a radical strain in *The Weakness of God* (questions and issues we shall explore a little bit more in the second lecture).

What should be emphasized in the meantime is how Caputo himself recognizes that, according to deconstructive thinking, even a deconstructed "Kingdom" – one which is heralded in the good news of the Gospels – still is not good enough: what we need to do is overcome the very logic of "kingdom" altogether.

4. Does Caputo Hijack Derrida?

Now, when Caputo is first offering his version of the divine reign, Raschke responds by saying that Caputo perhaps is reading here

too much into Derrida (that such a link is "implicit" in Derrida rather than "explicit" [par. 21]), and this is a fair proposition – indeed, it may not even be "implicit", it may be subtler than that (like a trace or specter). This proposed critique – i.e., that Caputo appropriates deconstruction for his own vision of the divine "Kingdom" – may apply to much of Caputo's philosophical-theological corpus. And Caputo himself is acutely aware of this risk: in response to Raschke's remark, Caputo emphatically tries to distance himself from hermeneutically hijacking or colonizing the Frenchman: "I am not trying to appropriate Derrida or take possession of him, to plant the flag of religion on his shores and claim deconstruction for religion" (par. 24). In a quasi-Freudian fashion, we could perhaps propose that Caputo "protests too much". This excessive protestation appears to be exposed by Caputo himself, who immediately and blatantly confesses that he gets a buzz by claiming Derrida as a religious thinker (a buzz that is intensified by the masturbatory tone of his confession): "I admit that I am giving myself pleasure when I say that he [Derrida] is a religious thinker, that it all reminds me of the Kingdom of God, that he is a quasi-atheistic Jewish Augustine" (par. 25).

Caputo is, indeed, a pleasure to read (but not *that much* pleasure). He is (I think) a Catholic who sounds less and less like one, who sounds more and more heretical, a hereticism provoked by the fact that he is a thinker who often takes deconstructive thinking to the precipice of its logical and confronting conclusions (a point I will briefly explore at the end of the second lecture). I love the fact that Caputo outlandishly portrays a religious Derrida – even though such a portrayal may also be a bit of a betrayal. (But betrayal is not always cut-and-tried, e.g., have we not been too harsh with Judas?) I not only love how Caputo's religious retrieval of deconstruction might upset atheistic philosophers – who are often the majority in Western Philosophy Departments (and whose atheism is often just a reverse fundamentalism) – I *also* like the fact that Caputo provokes narrow-minded religious conservatives, and there are many. (I used to be one, too.) Of course, Caputo is fully aware of his target audience: his hope is that his reading of Derrida "comes close to getting Derrida right, to being sensitive to the complexity of his thought, and to making him more interesting to people of good will on both sides, without hoping to reach the extremists on both sides" (par. 25).

So, taking into account Caputo's love of scandal and a penchant for hermeneutically "baptizing" Derrida, we must not thereby reject Caputo's religious re-translation of deconstruction. Indeed, one of Caputo's great talents (apart from his eloquently passionate and playful expression, not to mention his skill for exposition) is that the links he makes between deconstruction and religion – particularly subversive biblical themes – are *not overly* strained: as I hope to show through these lectures (especially the second one), these links are rigorously reasonable, especially since Derrida himself began to delve more and more into ethical and religious questions.

5. How to Speak of the Divine (When the World Does Not Want to Listen?)

"Loosening Philosophy's Tongue" also explores the problem of how to speak or write about religion's object (a suitably multivalent term), and how to reach the broader public. Caputo offers a number of options, and addresses each of them. He begins with reference to the way of silence, but immediately explains that universities would not be impressed with staff submitting a blank publications list, where the ivory tower's implicit or not-so-implicit imperative is "Publish or Perish". Caputo also thinks academics are unlikely to write parabolically (i.e., writing in parables). He muses that academics will most probably keep writing books for each other. He thinks – and hopes – that texts will become more transdisciplinary, more "unclassifiable", which will make them "more interesting" (par. 26). Caputo acknowledges that his own works might be scandalous within academia but do not cause street riots, given that such texts are not really socially provocative.

Caputo also goes down a more ambiguous, undecidable path, one that is ironic or embarrassed or confessional or all of the above, by stating: "If *Prayers and Tears* could get on to Oprah's list, would that make a difference? Are we prepared to say that is what we want?" (par. 34). Well, that would be one way of getting the good news and the good truth of philosophy of religion out there, beyond stuffy lecture halls and musty libraries.

I would also add that such thinking's relevance to the wider community, to the world, is much more than a question of style and accessibility: I propose that the core conundrum here – i.e., how can philosophy of religion and theology get beyond the ivory tower and be *relevant* and even actually affect the world? – is tied to the content of much/most of such theory: to what extent do they have any positive, programmatic content? To what degree do they really seek change? To what magnitude do they demand transformation? (I will just let these questions "hang", since addressing them will divert us from our present task.)

Of course, we must also acknowledge that, no matter how provocative and enjoyable and positively ethical-political today's and tomorrow's books on philosophy of religion may be, we nonetheless live in an incredibly apathetic world, so we students and thinkers of faith face an incredibly daunting battle. How to speak of the divine in thoughtful ways when the world does not want to listen? Consider how, as has rightly been pointed out (by Žižek, I think, and perhaps/probably others), one of the most shocking things about 9/11 for us Westerners was that there are still people out there who are actually willing to die for a Cause – which of *us* are willing to do *that?* We are too cynical and self-absorbed to do anything like that. And on that absorbing and semi-cynical note, I end my first lecture.

Lecture Two: Caputo's Love of Impossibles

1. Introduction

The text that we shall now focus on is the third chapter of Caputo's *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* (2007), entitled "A Prayer for the Impossible". Caputo begins with a word or two on hermeneutics: "hermeneutics" is an expansive term which can signify acts of interpretation or the study of interpretative acts – the term is being used here by Caputo in the first sense. Caputo begins by explaining that his interpretation of the "kingdom of God" is a deconstructive interpretation. He figures deconstruction in this particular text as "the hermeneutics of the kingdom of God" (Caputo 2007: 58). This, by the way, contrasts with Mark C. Taylor's claim that "deconstruction is the

hermeneutics of the death of God" (1984: 6). Who is right? In Derridean fashion, we could advance the thesis that there is no need to choose here; in other words, perhaps we should *maintain the tension* and propose that deconstruction might be both, somehow, im/possibly, that is, deconstruction as the hermeneutics of the death *and* kingdom of "God." (Aspects of this abyssal question may be partially clarified as I proceed, but a comprehensive encounter here would divert us from the aim of expositing a number of key Caputocean themes.)

I should also quickly say a thing or two about the meaning of the title of the chapter, "A Prayer for the Impossible". Caputo uses the idea of "prayer" for a number of intertwined reasons. To begin with, prayer is something that one *does* rather than it being "a thing"; it is a call, a call to the divine – and this, you will recall, resonates with the notion that "weak" forces such as forgiveness and patience call us, invite us, provoke us. Furthermore, a prayer has to do with hope in/for the future as well as recalling the past, remembering, memory – themes much beloved by deconstruction.

And what about Caputo's much-beloved and much-recited recollection of the phrase "*the* impossible"? Caputo reminds us once again that Derrida's definition of deconstruction as "the possibility of *the* impossible" is, according to Derrida himself, deconstruction's "least bad definition" (2007: 62). What, then, does this phrase mean? It does not mean that deconstruction loves what is simply logically contradictory – though it certainly appears to enjoy what is confounding to conventional logic: paradoxes, aporias (binds/deadlocks), etc. – but rather that it loves what is absolutely unexpected and unconditional. (Once again, perhaps one need not choose here: perhaps deconstruction loves *both* logical contradiction *and* the unconditional.) Caputo provides a few examples of "*the* impossible" (for it is many): the impossible might be the "democracy to come" or the Christianity stirring within its concrete historical manifestations (Kierkegaard's name for the latter is "Christendom" – which is a very worldly "kingdom"). And Caputo elsewhere theologically fortifies this love for the impossible by citing The Gospel of Matthew 19.26: "with God all things are possible". For Caputo, then, deconstruction may be considered "a kind of passion or

prayer for the impossible, or as an affirmation of the 'undeconstructible'" (2007: 63).

Let us, then, look at four such impossibles: justice, the gift, forgiveness, and hospitality. These are ideal figures when it comes to thinking religion in a deconstructive key, but also eminently useful and practical in our everyday existence rather than being abstract and mystifying, for these are things we do and/or strive to do, experiences or events with which we can identify, face, and struggle with, "ordinary" experiences whose extraordinariness is obscured by their everydayness.

2. Justice

Caputo begins by noting that Derrida's 1989 essay "Force of Law" is "the best place to start with the more overtly religion-friendly accenting of deconstruction in Derrida's writings" (Caputo 2007: 63). Now, as Caputo eruditely explains, in that decisive essay, Derrida distinguishes between "justice", which is "undeconstructible", and "law", which is deconstructible. Law constructs what is legal, and can legalize what is unjust. However, Derrida is not simply dismissing the law in his deconstruction of it: without law, justice is, as Caputo puts it, "just a dream . . . without force"; the thrust of Derrida's argument is that justice is just an "unconditional demand" that calls for forceful law to become more just, to answer to the call and demand for justice (2007: 63).

Caputo stresses a further difference between the law and justice: even though laws are "universals" (i.e., they are supposed to apply to everybody, equally, no matter what your social status), justice "is sensitive to the singularity of the situation, to the idiosyncrasies and differences" (2007: 65). This makes much sense: the deconstructibility of the law and the "incessant calling" of justice can account for the fact that the law is (and should be) ceaselessly expanding, taking account of more and more contexts and singularities.

This emphasis on the singular, on the individual, reverberates with the emphasis on singularity in deconstructive thought *and* a deconstructive "Kingdom of God", where such a topos has a special place for the individual, the outcast, the excluded, every tear, every hair,

etc. – Caputo adds biblical motifs like "the widow, the orphan, and the stranger", "the lost sheep", and "the lost coin" (more biblical stories) to his arsenal of the singularities beloved by divinity (2007: 65).

After briefly contrasting the forces of law and justice – the former being "strong" and the latter "weak" – Caputo gives his Derridean account of justice further religious reinforcement by citing what deconstructive and prophetic voices share, of their common call for justice, for their call for inclusion of those who are usually excluded by the powers-that-be (and, I would add, the rest of us, who sheepishly follow the powers-that-be).

Caputo goes on to discuss the various aporias associated with law and justice, but I would like to conclude my discussion of the Derridean thinking (and love) of justice with a couple of questions. The first lies with the very question of deconstruction's "sensitivity" to singularity. To be sure, such sensitivity is a good thing – we must continue to be sensitive to singularities, particularities, exceptions – all good things that can get lost or forgotten or denied by the universal. However, deconstruction risks being over-sensitive to such good things, thus risking privileging the particular above the universal. In other words, the Continental-theoretical reclamation of otherness and differences risks eclipsing the Enlightenment accomplishment – which certainly is not complete – of advancing universal values and the universality of Reason. (Once again, a massive topic, one which is also suspended [in both senses].)

Now, Caputo has eloquently explained during his dialogue in *With Gifted Thinkers* (2009) that the contemporary Continental-philosophical emphasis on singularity presupposes universality, that is, having passed (through) philosophical modernity which calls for universal rights and Reason, postmodern theory reclaims what is different and other, re-tightening the tension between singularity and universality. Nonetheless, Caputo humbly recognizes that what is also needed now is a reclamation of universality (and he cites Alain Badiou in this regard, and we can also include Žižek in this list). So, in a way, the stress on singularity may be considered a kind of strategic reversal. Of course, the ultimate situation should not be one in which the spotlight

switches from one party to the other but where the two polarities (i.e., singularity and universality) should be held in tension. Which can be tricky.

This question of privileging one side over the other also applies to the coupling law-justice: has Derrida – and Caputo – set up a hierarchical dualism here? – justice over law? That is a good question. But Caputo does maintain the tension: I recall that he explains that, without law, justice is "just a dream". One could argue whether he maintains the tension *often enough*, whether he sometimes loosens his philosophical tongue just a little bit too much whenever he is taken up in passionate rhetorical rapture. We should also insist that justice is not a pole in a dualism. We could say here that any dualism in this regard is that of the law and the unlawful. Justice, on the other hand, is unconditional, differing from dualisms in which each side has its own set of conditions. For instance, as I explained earlier, any "kingdom" – even the "Kingdom of God" – has its conditions, even though they may be noble conditions (such as the last now being first, and so on). Justice, on the other hand, is unconditional; it exceeds the lawful and its conditions. We could add: justice is what makes the law more just, it is what the law strives after; the law strives to do justice to justice.

3. The Gift

Derrida made of the gift a philosophical issue, a conundrum, an aporia. Very briefly: on the one hand, the gift is meant to be unconditional – that is the very idea or definition of the gift; on the other hand, when we give a gift we get something in return (be it gratitude, a return-gift, or even hostility). Hence, the gift is paradoxical, marked by both excess (unconditionality, linearity) and exchange (conditions, circularity). (All of this is clearly explained in Manolopoulos' *If Creation is a Gift.*)

Unsurprisingly, Derrida is often interpreted or misinterpreted as asserting that the gift is thus impossible. Caputo clarifies: even though the gift is/becomes enclosed in the economy of exchange (thus risking a blurring of the distinction between the gift and a transaction), we still gift (perhaps impossibly, somewhat aporetically). Of course, the logic of

exchange is so dominant today (i.e., in an age of triumphalist capitalism). For without excess, without the gratuity in/of the gift, the circle of exchange would close in on itself, producing a hellish world where every exchange is in risk of being reduced to a transaction (that is, triumphalist capitalism). But one should *nevertheless* emphasize that exchange need not necessarily be a bad thing *when* it is held in tension with excess (and thus each "conditioning" the other). For if/when there is a kind of sheer excess or gratuity, when there is only *take* rather than *give-and-take*, what we end up with is ecological crisis; Creation is merely consumed by humanity; there is no exchange – or perhaps its "highest"/noblest form, *reciprocity* (and there is certainly very little letting-be, which may be rendered as a form of exchange-without-exchange). (Once again, this is all comprehensively explained in *If Creation is a Gift*.) And so: too much excess = no reciprocity; too much exchange = the reduction of everything to transaction.

Once again, the Derridean aporetics of gifting has resonances for philosophy of religion and theology. Caputo explains that an awareness of the gift's excess acts as a form of resistance against the kind of religious logic – the *predominant* religious logic – which emphasizes or focuses solely on a give-and-take attitude, whereby what I do is done for the sake of celestial reward or compensation. Caputo calls such a rationale "a spiritual capitalism" and "an investment mentality" (2007: 72). Such a religious rationale is today personified by the "gospel of prosperity" in which preachers preach that your religious devotion will bring you divinely-sanctioned wealth – both in this life and the next. By contrast, Jesus teaches that praying and fasting and alms-giving should be done *in secret*, and this may be construed deconstructively in terms of resistance to the expectation of returns (Caputo cites Matthew 7.21-28, but I think the correct text is Matthew 6.1-18).

4. Forgiveness

The third figure of "*the* impossible", of an impossible common to the Bible and deconstruction, is forgiveness. When you rigorously think about it, genuine forgiveness – like genuine gifting – requires no condition, which is possibly impossible. Caputo explains: "the only thing that can be truly forgiven is the unforgivable; the only condition under

which true forgiveness is possible is when forgiveness is impossible" (2007: 73). Caputo recalls the occasional news story in which a murderer is forgiven by the deceased's loved one(s). How is that possible?

Caputo states that such impossible forgiving contrasts with "theological traditions" – I would expand this to include mainstream Judeo-Christian traditions – that "behave like bankers" when it comes to forgiveness, setting conditions for it. (One immediately recalls here the extreme case of the Catholic practice of selling indulgences, one of the provocations for the Lutheran Reformation.) Caputo cites four such conditions: "an expression of sorrow, the intention to make amends, a promise not to repeat the offense, and a willingness to do penance" (2007: 74-75). Meeting such conditions "earns" forgiveness – but this goes against the very idea of forgiveness, which should be unconditional.

Like unconditional impossible gifting, unconditional forgiveness finds its exemplar in the New/Second Testament with Jesus. The Christic imperative of loving one's enemies requires that we forgive the unforgivable – somehow, impossibly. Caputo's unthinkable conclusion nevertheless demands to be thought: "we often speak of things that are unforgivable – the Holocaust, say, or atrocities of American slavery or of apartheid, or the several attempts at genocide we have witnessed in the past century. But would not such unforgivable things be the very subject matter of genuine forgiveness?" (2007: 74). Caputo also notes that the mad logic of genuine forgiveness also goes to the heart of the meaning of Christ's death: according to such a reasoning, this event would not be construed as a "ransom" to pay for our sins, to "balance the books" in heaven. Like the parable of the prodigal, the counter-reading of such events is that love does not count or account – it forgives, unconditionally. If such a thing is possible.

Once more, as beautiful and uplifting and even "true" as the biblical-deconstructive thinking of forgiving may be, I propose that we should not fall into the trap of rejecting outright the contrasting position of counting or accountability. In other words, we should maintain a tension. We recall that Derrida himself recognizes – and Caputo acknowledges this, too – that economic exchange is not the devil incarnate in the world. Once again, the idea of reciprocity may perhaps

"soften" any harsh logic of exchange or mercantilism. Furthermore, a critical theological response to the absolute forgiveness desired by deconstruction may be found in a quote from the purported lips of Jesus: when Peter asks whether an offender should be forgiven seven times – which is quite a lot – the Jewish carpenter replies "seventy-seven" times (a footnote in the *New Revised Standard Version* states that it could even be "seventy times seven" times: 490 times): now, this is perhaps an impossible amount of times, but the thing to note here is that there is *nevertheless a limit*.

I thus think there *should* be a limit to forgiveness, for if there is no limit, how can there be any room for justice, including justice in the form of punishment? When a murderer is forgiven by a slain's loved one(s), should not the murderer nevertheless be punished if found to be accountable (i.e., sane, wilful, etc.)? And once again, we also recall here that justice and vengeance are also biblical motifs. I am not sure whether Caputo or Derrida would object to my counter-argument; and perhaps they would even concur with me when proposing that the significance of the hyperbolic logic of absolute forgiveness – like the gift and its relation to exchange – is that it keeps open the space of forgiveness, of mercy, a space that is at risk of being eclipsed by any excessive justice or over-zealous vigilantism, so that we – each individual, each society – may be more forgiving than a cold retributive rationality demands.

5. Hospitality

The fourth figure of the impossible, of the impossible event that calls, is hospitality. Once again, even though "hospitality" seems like a simple enough concept and experience – one tries to be hospitable as possible, and one is often on the receiving end of it. Which is nice. But when one deconstructs hospitality, the very idea of hospitality, one finds an impossibility at its heart. Caputo notes that when we invite or welcome the Other, the Other is usually friends and family. At this point, Caputo refers to "reciprocity" (albeit in a perhaps narrower or less-forgiving sense than my affirmative figuration of it): "when we actually offer hospitality, whom do we typically invite? Our friends, of course, those whose company we enjoy and from whom we can expect reciprocity (the circle of exchange), or else people whose favor we are

currying . . . which means tightening the circle of the same, not welcoming the other" (2007: 75-76).

In other words, hospitality is *typically* a conditional hospitality. Its conditionality is exposed by the very fact that it often involves *invitation* – which sets provisos. Derrida, on the other hand, perceives that genuine hospitality transgresses the circle of the same/familiar, extending it to the stranger. Genuine hospitality welcomes the stranger, who could harm/murder the host. Deconstruction insists that there can be no absolute safety when it comes to absolute hospitality, for it is unconditional. So true hospitality is risky – but what is not risky? Caputo expresses it nicely: "There is always a risk in everything worthwhile. We are always put at risk whenever we welcome someone, just as we are put at risk whenever we love or trust or believe in someone, and the greater the love or hospitality, the greater the risk" (2007: 77).

Once again, the Derridean thinking of hospitality resonates biblically. There is the story in Luke 14.12-13, where Jesus purportedly declares: "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind". Impossible, indeed. (Of course, to illuminate the "inescapability" of economy, I should mention that this beautiful series of verses closes with an economic sentiment: "for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14.14b) – Caputo does not highlight such verses, which would complicate his edifying, inspirational argument.

6. General Critical Remarks

My first and "narrower" problem with Caputo is that, as radical as his critical religious theory may be, he still clings onto existing institutional forms of religion: he might consider himself a heretic (at least a little bit of a heretic, perhaps a heretic rhetorically), but a heretic is only the other side of orthodoxy, only its reversal or subversion, rather than any truly radical-deconstructive move beyond received religion. We must therefore ask: would a truly deconstructive faith subscribe to conventional religious organisation? Admittedly, in *What Would Jesus*

Deconstruct?, Caputo singles out a *better* version of institutional Catholicism: he cites the admirable work of a pastor in a Catholic church in a grungy part of Philadelphia, noting how such a church actually administers to the poor and the homeless and addicts and so forth – citizens of the "kingdomless kingdom".

I guess that is a start, but such a church still belongs to a religious institution that may have gone about the work of the "Kingdom" to a certain extent, but such loving work has been overshadowed by the Church's collusions with the power-hungry kingdoms of the world (not to mention their own sins, including: its patriarchalism; its puritanism; its hoarding of wealth rather than sharing it; pedophilia and its cover-up; and so on). And such collusion, I should stress, does not *just* apply to the Catholic Church or to Christendom. Religion has a lot to answer for. Of course, we should also note that Caputo admirably cites an alternative "church": a loose gathering of believers that meet in a Belfast pub. Which sounds good – but once again, does it really change things? The dominant and domineering tradition remains.

I would contend that a truly deconstructive faith would not subscribe to conventional religious organisation or even to newer forms of ecclesial faith. Caputo's own deconstructive logic should lead him to the desert or *khora* of an undogmatic faith unbound by received religious doctrine and practices. Caputo does not seem to push deconstructive to its radical "conclusion" or "end" (if it has any). If Caputo *really* is a Derridean, if he *really* is a Christian Derridean, should not he mirror the Frenchman's position on faith, which is so much more ambiguous, more undecidable, nicely expressed by the sentiment that he "quite rightly passes for an atheist"? (1993: 155) – for to "pass for" can mean "to feign". Likewise but obversely, should not Caputo cheekily-yet-forthrightly confess that he "quite rightly passes for a theist"?

We now come to my second basic and broader critique of Caputo: his apoliticism, his theology's political impotence. There is often a tendency to downplay deconstruction's radical political edge – even by the likes of Derrida (though we recall he produced the Marx-friendly *Specters of Marx*): I submit that if we press deconstruction to its logical political conclusion, we may find that there is an ethically *destructive*

element to deconstruction. Now, "ethically destructive" may sound like a contradiction (which would not automatically be excluded by deconstructive thinking), but this train of thought has been wonderfully explored by Žižek, who employs and deploys phrases such as "ethical violence" (2004) and "political love" (2010), Žižek brilliantly arguing that the latter phrase's biblical name is *agape*. So, *if* deconstruction loves justice and all these good things, then it should not just be restricted to delicately decoding and destabilizing hierarchical dualisms: it should also be deployed in the service of *destroying* destructive traditions and structures (such as – but obviously not limited to – institutional religions) driven by hierarchical logics. For the love of impossibles, should we not deconstruct, destruct, and construct something akin to Caputo's "kingdomless kingdom", a "radical community of equals"?

Of course, you may rightly ask: what has religion got to do with politics? I would say: *a lot, perhaps everything, certainly very much*. I would say that religious kingdoms have been in cahoots with or have even expressed themselves as political kingdoms in mainly oppressive ways. One may counter that believers should just try to "witness" to the world, or even just keep one's faith "private". Obviously, the faithful could just sit around waiting for divine intervention whilst the world goes to hell. Which might happen – considering the possibility that the divine may be too weak to save us.

Caputo himself is not unaware of deconstruction's radicality – he himself is sometimes tempted to be more radical: he sometimes makes allusions to radical politics, to a radical political philosophy of religion or a revolutionary theology. I noted in the first lecture that, in "Loosening Philosophy's Tongue", Caputo recognizes that a deconstructive-biblical "kingdom" would be "a radical community of equals, where no one is privileged". In other words, deconstruction's political conclusion is communism. And in *The Weakness of God*, there are some further allusions to a radical politics: indeed, he explicitly mentions that beautiful word, "revolution" (2006: 31, 34, 52), and at other times he uses motifs that allude to the revolutionary, such as deconstruction bringing a "sword" (2006: 32) – borrowed, of course, from the Bible.

But Caputo does not develop these crucial points. I propose that if we take deconstruction to its logical conclusion, if we propose that deconstruction is not just descriptive but contains a prescriptive current (which is certainly a controversial proposition), then deconstruction strives for political emancipation, for justice, for "a community of equals". And one may be surprised to find that there is biblical backing here; the Book of Acts speaks of an early faith community in which "no one claimed private ownership . . . but everything they owned was held in common" (Acts 4.32; also refer to Acts 2.44-45).

Thankfully, philosophers of religion and theologians are beginning to re-think politics in a more progressive and emancipatory direction. Although it is in its infancy – and like a foetus, something monstrous in the eyes of conservatives – political philosophy of religion and Marxist theology will hopefully do its bit for the transformation of the planet. That is why Žižek has an axe to grind with Caputo: a leading religious thinker should *not* be content with the kind of reformed capitalism (what I call "Caputolism") which Caputo advances in *After the Death of God.*

7. Loving Caputo

Despite the problematic aspects of Caputo's work, he is nevertheless a thinker we should cherish – and I certainly do: he makes sense of obscure and ostensibly convoluted philosophical and religious theory, showing how the controversial Continentalists actually speak *much* truth (though not the whole truth); he has "baptized" deconstruction for the religious and the restless; he hass loosened philosophy's and theology's tongue – and encouraged us to loosen and sharpen our own; he's deflated monotheism's old ontotheological god with his persuasive and even somewhat strong case for a weaker deity; and perhaps most importantly for a hedonist like me, he has made the task and honor of thinking divinity *enjoyable*. I conclude the lecture on that joyful note.

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