

PETER GOODWIN HELTZEL
New York Theological Seminary

THE WEAKNESS OF GOD

A review of John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006). ISBN: 0-253-34704-1.

AFTER OVER FOUR DECADES of reinvigorating English language Continental philosophy of religion, John D. Caputo has boldly offered a volume in constructive theology. In many post-structural circles “God” has come on hard times, but Caputo sets out in this massive volume to save the name of God from its cultured despisers. Caputo begins his theological meditation with the final words of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), read by his son at his graveside. Caputo’s theology is a postmodern expansion of St. Paul’s proclamation of the “weakness of God” (1 Cor. 1:29) refracted through St. Derrida notion of the “weak force” of the unconditional that lacks sovereignty.

Framing himself as a postmodern anarchist, Caputo tries to get to “the root” of the doctrine of God and the reign of God. In Part I of the book he disputes the notion that an omnipotent God is the *arche* of the cosmos, arguing instead that God is a weak force that brings form to indeterminate and uncertain elements that are redeemed through the powerless power of God’s son; God is a call rather than a cause. In Part II he argues that the Kingdom of God is not a rule of Holy law, but a sacred anarchy that is embodied in works of love, forgiveness and hospitality.

Immediately Caputo launches a frontal assault on the Christian doctrine of omnipotence (Part I, Chapters 1-4). The doctrine of God’s omnipotence has been understood in classical theology as an affirmation of God’s almighty sovereign power. It received special creedal placement in the first article of the baptismal creed, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth.” Within the story of creation, omnipotence is seen as supremely illustrated in God’s creating the world out of nothingness (*creatio ex nihilo*). In contrast to this notion of a fully sovereign God, Caputo argues that God is not omnipotent, but “a weak force.” Weakness describes the lack of physical or metaphysical force that God is endowed with. Caputo’s primary thesis is that God is an indeterminate weak force that nevertheless still lays an unconditional claim on the lives of all humans.

Caputo's argument for the 'weakness of God' is also an argument for the weakness of theology. He rejects the traditional confessional postures of churches across the ecumenical spectrum that he sees as confessional, doctrinal, metaphysical and militant. In their place he advocates for a weak theology that is non-confessional, non-dogmatic, pluralistic and tolerant. In formulating his "weak theology," Caputo is indebted to Vattimo's notion of "weak thought" which is an Italian postmodern response to the imperial pretensions of strong thought in a more explicitly modern metaphysical mode. As Caputo puts it, weak theology is not a "sorry spinelessness," but a robust non-foundationalist, non-fundamentalist bearing testimony to God as a coming event of justice (301). The weakness of God is an expression of God's vulnerable love and faithful justice in contrast to an almighty warrior who massacres all enemies.

In the spirit of Stanislas Breton, Caputo frames his argument Christologically through the Pauline trope, "the logos of the cross," (*logos tou staurou*, 1 Cor. 1:18). Following Martin Luther's theology of the cross, Caputo finds the helpless, human body of Jesus crucified on a Roman cross as the greatest symbol of God's powerless power (41-54). Luther's theology of the cross (Jesus descending from heaven to die for the sins of humanity) is a contrast to a theology of glory (Humanity ascending to heaven through their own good work). Caputo's theology of the cross represents a crucifixion of metaphysical theology with universalistic soteriological implications. For Caputo, the underlying logic of the cross exposes divine weakness as well as critiques "strong" theological proposals that are based on Greek metaphysics. Weak theology provides a new basis for humans to embrace the paradoxes of the "risky business" of life.

In a delicate dance with Catherine Keller's notion of *creation ex profundis*, Caputo imagines creation as a concert of fluid and free-floating forces that shape pre-existent elements into a new and good life. Like unto the Derridean *khora*, the pre-existent elements are "mythologemes" of uncertainty and undecidability (72). They bear prophetic testimony to the open-endedness and riskiness of material, human and divine life. Caputo is inspired by the "beautiful risk" of creation as the right way to think about the God-world relationship with the two partners functioning interdependently as the ebb and flow of two salsa dancers. Caputo also embraces Keller's affirmation of God the Creator's maternal character as a form of defiance to dry constructs of divine patriarchy.

Caputo's "God without Sovereignty" will find sympathy among a growing group of theologians in a number of different pockets, including the "suffering God" theologians (e.g., Jürgen Moltmann), analytic philosophers doing kenotic theology (e.g., C. Stephens Evans), non-dogmatic theologians (e.g., Jeffrey W. Robbins), and evangelical open theists (e.g., Clark Pinnock);

however, his constructive doctrine of God will meet resistance in other quarters. Fundamentalist and neo-evangelicals will be disconcerted by his call for “radical uncertainty;” Eastern Orthodox will be appalled by his rejection of Byzantine metaphysics; the Radical Orthodox will see weakness as another expression of postmodern nihilism; and the Holy See, symbolized in Caputo’s texts by the ubiquitous Inquisitor, will see Caputo’s rejection of *arche* as a rejection of the authority of the church. However, these critical responses are sure to engender a set of important theological debates, exactly where they should center—on the doctrine of God.

In addition to the dialogue begun with process theologians like Catherine Keller, one of the most promising dialogues to emerge from Caputo’s “weakness of God” theory will be critical dialogue with neo-Barthians. While today’s neo-Barthian theologians will initially be intrigued by Caputo’s “theology of event,” given Barth’s own emphasis on the Christ event, closer inspection of the differences between the two will provide an important set of issues to discuss: First, Caputo’s concern is with the name(s) of God more than the Word of God. The Word of God theology of Luther and Barth is deeply tied to the person of Jesus Christ and Nicene Trinitarian doctrine. For Caputo the name of God is “a signification or an interpretation, not a substance” (181). Caputo’s theology of the divine names of God is tied to the coming event of justice rather than the Triune communion of love disclosed in the person of Jesus Christ. Second, Caputo focuses on the weakness of God with an absence of reflection on the divine decision to create and redeem in the context of the Reformed doctrine of election. Third, Caputo defends a trans-religious monotheism, while Barth argues for the uniqueness of God’s revelation as the Triune God.

The conspicuous lack of reference to the Trinity throughout the volume exposes a Unitarian tendency in Caputo’s doctrine of God. This is a serious weakness in his proposal because he is not able to access the growing body of Trinitarian resources to discuss these problems. In particular, debates in Cappadocian studies focused on their understandings of *arche*, *ousia*, *hypostasis*, and *koinonia* would greatly enrich his discussion. While these tropes are precisely the type of Greek metaphysics that Caputo is deconstructing, if not running from, a growing group of theologians see a reinterpretation, not rejection of these patristic concepts as an important theological step forward.

Jürgen Moltmann and Sarah Coakley provide two important theological proposals on divine weakness that build on patristic power discourse, providing a more nuanced reading of the traditional theology. In *The Crucified God* Moltmann explains how divine suffering reveals God’s love. Moltmann reinterprets omnipotence in the Reformed tradition through the idea that God voluntarily restrains divine power in the act of creation and

incarnation. While Caputo mentions Moltmann briefly (36, 85, 181), a more detailed discussion of his “voluntary restraint” model of power would strengthen Caputo’s alternative proposal for “otherwise than power.” Inspired by Gregory of Nyssa, Sarah Coakley provides a feminist argument for a mystical submission to God’s superabundant power and love, providing a more nuanced embrace of God’s triune omnipotence.

One of the benefits of Caputo’s theory of God’s weak power is that he is able to respond to the problem of natural and human evil. God according to Caputo’s view is simply not in a position to intervene in human affairs: “God does not prevent evil in advance, nor can God, *pace* Peter Damian, retroactively remove evil after the fact” (181). Thus, the human community must take responsibility for gratuitous suffering in the world. The weakness of God provides a more compelling theological basis for an ethic of hospitality and forgiveness.

Caputo’s theory of the weakness of God is a living demonstration of the emerging vitality of postmodern theology. Caputo is more persuasive as an apologist (trying to save the name of God from postmodern dismissal) than as a dogmatician (trying to save the church from its oppressive almighty Triune God). Caputo has played a strategic role in the ‘theological turn in phenomenology,’ and now through his own postmodern theology he is playing a vital role in the theological turn within post-structural studies. Caputo’s bearing testimony to God in these philosophical discourses exposes his evangelist’s heart. Caputo believes in God and that these theological beliefs matter in the way that we relate to each other in the world. He has creatively and insightfully given theology a new form that can speak to postmodernists and the emerging church.

Therefore, even if a reader is not fully persuaded by Caputo’s doctrine of God, there is much to be learned from his meditations on the Kingdom of God (Section II, Chapters 7-12). Caputo interprets the kingdom of God as a field of weak forces for justice. This anarchic field of reversals and displacements challenges traditional hierarchies of the church and the world. Through holy disarray, the high and mighty are displaced by the least among us. Virtues of weakness, like forgiveness and hospitality, are what reign in this kingdom. Forgiveness is an example of weak force because it represents an ethical claim made upon us not a physical force. By refusing to trade strong force for strong force, the weakness of forgiveness can break the deadly cycle of physical retaliation. Conceived as community of weakness, the kingdom stands in mocking defiance to the sheer strength of empire that seeks to engulf it. The powerless power of the kingdom becomes the earthly and human correlate of the weakness of God. The weakness of the kingdom is a cry out for the event of justice to be ushered in.

Jesus both teaches and embodies the spirit of sacred anarchy that animates the kingdom of God. Caputo's Jesus is an icon of the invisible God, not an idol of Greek metaphysics, the creeds and councils. Through shaking up the religious and political systems of his day, Jesus demonstrated that an ethic of hospitality and forgiveness demands a radical openness to the claims and concerns of the other. This colorful portrait of Jesus and the Kingdom of God is a good warning to some traditional constructions that interpret Jesus and the Kingdom in masculine, militaristic and capitalistic categories. With liberation theologians before him, Caputo reminds us that Jesus is in solidarity with the excluded and marginalized.

By not thinking about God as a sovereign power or metaphysical force, but instead as a weak force that presents an unconditional claim upon us, Caputo hopes to provide the kingdom of God with theological resources to subvert the sovereign aspirations of nation-states, global economic systems and religions that often legitimate their power projects "in the name of God." Caputo's argument rests on the assumption that if theological content is strong or thick this necessarily leads to militancy and violence in the world. Thus, the theological answer to gratuitous suffering is to construct a weak theology that is better able to promote peace and justice. However, a God of transcendent love and justice who is defiantly opposed to sin and suffering provides a better theological basis for the earthly struggle for peace, justice and love.

Caputo transforms theology into a more pure, a more formal, and more abstract theology. However, the problem is that as one moves away from the concreteness of the incarnation, Pentecost, and the authority of the church and scriptures, one moves away from some of the most important resources that the church has to work for justice in the world, the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the church. Thinking about the church as communion of love and justice that reflects, in a certain sense, the love and justice of God's nature as Trinity provides a more communitarian way of thinking about the Christian life than following a vague call from a 'God' who is an indeterminate weak force.

Ironically, Caputo's theology of weakness moves toward a non-dogmatic Unitarian universalism. Every human feels an unconditional call from a weak force with many names, including God. The structure of this unconditional claim is by nature universal. Many ecumenical forms of Christianity think that God does call humanity through the very structures of creation accessed through experience and rationality. This call is indeed "weak," but is rendered vivid in Christological and pneumatological terms according to confessional location. Caputo's theological strategy is to aggressively move beyond confessional differences and orthodoxies through developing a vague, theological universalism based on his own radically hermeneutical

phenomenology. While Caputo's theology is Christocentric and Pauline, he does not continue this logic toward a more robust Trinitarianism. His radical monotheism prevents a deep engagement with the real theological difference that exists between different Christian communions, as well as the particular "theological" positions of other religious traditions. If Caputo develops the Trinitarian nature of God in the future he will have important resources for addressing the problem of religious pluralism in an age of global violence and empire.

With a liturgical cadence of conversation, prayer and then silence, *The Weakness of God* reads like the pensive meditations of a devoted monk, full of reverence, love and imagination. Whether God is strong or weak or both, theologians, weak and strong, can and should join together in the struggle for love and justice. God has called. The Kingdom has called. Caputo has heard the call and his theology is an embodiment of the event of justice. In this way he honors his father, mother and friend(s). If only we can too.

PETER GOODWIN HELTZEL is Assistant Professor of Theology at New York Theological Seminary.