

Unlikely (Deconstructive) Theological Parallels: John Caputo and Rowan Williams

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Theology is something of a dirty word in today's academy. Concern for scholarly integrity, combined with scholarly skepticism, has rendered theology a problematic discourse. As history provides many examples of religiously-motivated violence, theology is seen as dangerous. The many examples of religion-based support for oppressive power structures reinforce the idea that theology does not speak with integrity. Finally, theology is unsuited for serious academic debates as it defends its claims with what is often thought of as an unquestionable revelation. Even 'postmodern' thinkers, though often critical of the modern unquestioning devotion to reason, nevertheless generally remain closed to traditional theology. Jacques Derrida is a good example here, as his work on deconstruction and religion reinvokes the Kantian "religion within the limits of reason alone." Despite his criticism of certain modern philosophical assumptions, Derrida agrees with the modern idea that reason is the sole arbiter of truth and as such "religion" can not legitimately be founded in anything but reason.

There have been many theologians, of course, who argue for the academic legitimacy of theology by taking more 'reasonable' approaches to revelation and a more revisionist approach to tradition. Despite the attempts of certain thinkers such as the largely British 'Radical Orthodoxy', there are usually understood to be two options: 'liberal' theology which attempts to accommodate tradition to reason and secular history and a more reactionary, 'conservative' theology which subordinates secular scholarship to tradition. As much as theologians attempt to overcome this divide, their efforts can generally be reduced to more nuanced articulations of this general theological divide; the theologian either attempts to rework the tradition or defends it.

The voice of theologian Rowan Williams is a rather surprising one, given the intellectual climate I have described. As I will argue, Williams' theological project puts an interesting twist

on discussions of the relationship between theology, tradition, and culture. To make this point, I will begin in a rather unlikely place, with philosopher John Caputo. Drawing on Caputo's development of deconstruction and his subsequent theological work, I will argue for a certain deconstructive moment within Williams' theology where God and revelation function to destabilize and deconstruct theology and Church, internalizing the structure and effects of deconstruction within itself. This theology that is both traditional and deconstructive blurs conventional categories, thus questioning normative paradigms for thinking about religious thought in the West today.

JOHN CAPUTO

To begin, I introduce Caputo's work, putting special emphasis on his debt to Derrida's deconstruction. In developing Caputo's deconstruction, I will be arguing for a certain 'theological turn' in his work which will open up richer possibilities for relating Caputo to Williams. In order to make this argument, I will begin with the 'early Caputo' and deconstruction, then move to his later, more theological works, and finally consider his project as a whole.

Derrida, Deconstruction, Early Caputo

Rather than attempting an exhaustive discussion of deconstruction and Caputo, I will instead limit myself, focusing on concepts important for the second half of this paper: 1) Caputo's focus on the "singular", 2) deconstruction as passionate, not nihilistic, including discussion of its relation to negative theology, and 3) the messianic and its relation to concrete

messianisms.

Deconstruction originated with Jacques Derrida as a way of reading texts that paid attention to that which the text marginalized, arguing that any text is only able to exist by pushing something to the margins. Deconstruction thus demonstrated the way in which texts are constituted through marginalization. Understood in this way, emptiness or space constitutes language, as words and texts do not directly refer to what they are ostensibly addressing, but are instead defined by what they negate. Also reacting against a reading of Hegel which emphasized identity before and over difference, deconstruction emphasized the absolute nature of difference as a way of drawing attention to the space between the material world and the language which attempts to describe it. Derrida emphasized the way in which language is not able to truly grapple with things 'as they really are' but is necessarily generalizing and distorting due to its representative or symbolic nature. Given this gap between reality and language, Derrida emphasized that 'everything is interpretation,' that there is no escaping hermeneutics. In order to drill this point home, Derrida developed a way of speaking about difference that made difference absolute. Derrida used the phrase *tout autre*, the wholly other, in order to communicate the inability of one's language to accurately represent some other, difference becoming absolute.¹ Furthermore, the other is often talked about as one to come, thus indicating that linguistic generalizations don't simply misrepresent certain entities, as if they were clearly identifiable and able to be demarcated from other entities, but actually affects our ability to recognize an other.

These critiques were for Derrida not simply or even primarily to be applied to individuals, but

1 The extent of this difference can be interpreted in two different ways. One could take Derrida's absolutizing of difference as an indication that there really is nothing one can say about the other, in which case charges of nihilism may not be far off. On the other hand, one can interpret this rather extreme language as an attempt to press home the point which is often forgotten, that one will necessarily be inaccurate in representing the other. On this perhaps more generous reading, deconstruction serves as a check to common-sense assumptions of the ability of language to represent what it claims to represent, trying to keep it open to the other.

were more obviously directed to systems of thought, institutions, political bodies, or, to use a broader term: structures. The term “structure” here is intentionally vague, as deconstruction may be applied to anything which organizes or interprets as any such move involves a level of generalization, a step away from the singular nature of reality, and thus must marginalize in order to be constituted. Deconstruction thus was often perceived as an attack upon texts and knowledge in general, and led to charges of nihilism.

John Caputo picks up on a more mature deconstruction, and in developing its ethical implications in *Against Ethics* is primarily concerned with resisting a formulaic approach to decisions. He consciously likens this resistance to Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel. Drawing on the idea of an uncrossable space between my own concepts and reality, Caputo emphasizes the way in which decisions cannot be made on any absolutely grounded, formulaic basis. Using the term “undecidability”, he wants to emphasize that there is a sense in which, whatever grounds we try and invoke to make a decision requires justification, and then justification for that justification, etc. Ultimately we can't make a decision by any grounds, as there are no completely defensible grounds upon which to make a decision. Another way of describing this is as an “aporia of judgement”, even though one must decide, must make a judgement, there are no completely defensible grounds from which to decide, to judge. One must thus make a leap in deciding.

Throughout *Against Ethics*, Caputo is greatly concerned with the singular, the marginal, due to the ease with which the singular is elided, the marginal is ignored. Caputo applies deconstruction in order to unveil the fact that ethics is faulty, that it cannot accomplish what it claims it can. By developing “the disaster” as that which exposes the necessary disorder which

underlies and undermines all ethics, Caputo attempts to draw our attention to the details, the fragments, the singularities, which cannot be seen by the grand edifice of Ethics, as Ethics is concerned with the general, with rules, with schemata. This concern with the singular—which is essentially an application of deconstruction's attention to the marginal—serves as one of Caputo's most basic commitments throughout this work, as well as throughout later books. This stance, described by Caputo as minimalism, “does not mean absolute simplicity but rather bewilderment before a tangled complex of events.”² For Caputo, if one attempts to stand before the world and describe it honestly, one would be unable to fit it into an Ethics, for which we may substitute any organizing structure, any paradigm, philosophical or otherwise. Deconstruction here is that which operates to unveil the necessity of any intellectual structure to marginalize in order to be constituted. Being more precise, the reality of the world which is made up of singularities will always leave an excess, an overflow of reality, which a structure cannot take into account. Thus a structure must marginalize, ignore the overflow, in order to exist. This is because of the basic deconstructive observation that in order for any structure to exist it must, by definition, marginalize, simplify, and/or distort something. Concern for the singular, then, could be designated as Caputo's primary operating principle (if he would ever agree to such a generalization).

This formulation of deconstruction as concern for the singular naturally leads into a discussion of deconstruction's passion. Derrida has repeatedly emphasized that deconstruction, contrary to charges of nihilism, is not a negative practice but is actually an affirmative passion. For Derrida, and Caputo has frequently defended him on this issue, deconstruction points out the contradictions within a structure, this is not a statement that structures are bad, but is instead an

2 Caputo, John. *Against Ethics*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1993, 222.

attempt to keep structures open to change so that the oppression they manifest against the other is minimized. Structures are in need of deconstruction when they become too rigid, when they close in on themselves, when they become stagnant. Thus deconstruction is affirmative, in Derrida's terms:

in a way that is not simply positive,...not simply a way of repeating the given institution....If an institution is to be an institution, it must to some extent break with the past, keep the memory of the past, while inaugurating something absolutely new.³

Deconstruction encourages a sort of repetition with difference, through its critique of structures' ability to comprehensively do what they set out to do, through its illumination of structures' inability to exist without marginalizing, deconstruction keeps structures from closing in on themselves, keeps them open such that they can continue to change. This is not to say that structures are bad, they are necessary; without repetition there would be nothing, but the repetition must be with a difference so that structures can change. Caputo also applies this to thinkers, leading to a common “yes, but” pattern in his discussion of thinkers. This requires that Caputo maintain a certain tension, he does not want one to slip too easily into simple acceptance of sources.

This openness is usually discussed through three interrelated concepts that attempt to describe what structures miss: “the other”, “justice”, and “the impossible”. These three concepts are the objects of deconstruction's passion. The *tout autre*, the wholly other, as mentioned above, is the way of expressing that the other is a singularity: I cannot really say anything about the other, instead I am saying something about myself, about a construction of my origin which is not the other. Deconstruction's passion, then, is in keeping structures open so that the other could

³ Caputo, John and Jacques Derrida. *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation With Jacques Derrida*. Fordham University Press: New York, 1997. 5-6.

be made manifest, so that the other could arrive. Thus the future tense, the hope for the other, for real contact with the other. This passion can also be described as a passion for justice, where justice—in contrast with concrete, universal, particular laws—is once again of an absolute, unrealizable, yet desired nature. Both actual contact with the other and justice are “impossible.” “The impossible” is not something which is simply impossible, impossible here is understood as being impossible given the conventional mapping of possibilities.⁴ The impossible is unexpected, unanticipated, as it lies outside the constructed realm of possibility. Using these terms, deconstruction shows how structures ignore the other and how laws ignore justice, and it does this by unveiling the instability of structures, thus attempting to keep them in a state of increased openness towards the other.

Understood this way, deconstruction has earned many comparisons with negative theology, comparisons which Derrida and Caputo have qualified. Negative theology is a strand, here within Christian theology, that has historically operated as a check to conventional cataphatic theology by attempting to unsay or negate any description of God, thus emphasizing the inability of humans to know God and God's transcendence. Caputo points out the differences: that negative theology attributes to its other (God) an excess of essence as opposed to a minimum and that negative theology, while linguistically denying its ability to know God nevertheless maintains some sort of inner, prelinguistic experience of God which produces certain definite knowledge about God.

Negative theology has a tendency to speak of God as an excess of essence—this voice is often referred to as hyperousiology—and is problematic for Caputo in that it reifies God in ways similar to ontotheology's study of God's Being. For Derrida as well as Caputo, negative theology

4 The distinction here will return on the topic of “miracles” versus “magic”.

speaking through this voice is really only illusory in its denials of God, for it actually acts as a “higher, more refined way of affirming that God exists, or hyperexists, or exists-by-not-existing, that God is really real or hyper-real or sur-real.”⁵ Thus when negative theology, speaking in this voice, says that it cannot speak of God's Being, instead of manifesting an actual inability to speak about God, it actually speaks quite fluently, it is able to affirm that it knows the object of its love and reflection. Caputo criticizes negative theologians for appearing to negate positive statements about God all the while retaining the ability, if called by the Church Authorities to account for these words, to affirm the traditional creeds. Thus Caputo and Derrida identify a tendency in negative theology to be a bit dishonest, to speak negatively of God but to secretly harbor some definite knowledge of what God is, where the negation is merely another, particularly strong way of expressing that characteristic of God.

This subtle, lurking certainty under the questioning rhetoric is also understood from the perspective of the inner experience of the presence of God to which negative theology refers. The negative theologian often retreats to a inner, mystical experience of God, using this experience as justification for both critique of elements of the Church and for defense of certain attributes of God. This further explains how negative theology, in denying God is actually reifying God, because the negative theologians draws upon a deep experience of unity with God. Thus when the negative theologian denies “God,” he or she is really denying all present understandings of God in order to more fully focus on this interior experience of God which lies beyond all language and concepts.

Despite these two critiques, Caputo argues that “deconstruction desires what negative

5 Caputo, John. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1997, 7.

theology desires and it shares the passion of negative theology—for the impossible.”⁶ By this he means that negative theology through negation works towards 'describing' a God that is impossible, that cannot Exist, much as deconstruction works through a kind of negation to 'describe' or 'gesture towards' the other, or justice, the impossible. Negative theology is another structure, one which deconstruction seems to attack, but this attack is really a push for negative theology to purge itself from what Caputo sees as the infection of Greek metaphysical influence with its primary concern for essence. Instead, Caputo pushes negative theology to refine its negation into a true passion for the impossible. Caputo also develops this same point by referring to Augustine's question “What do I love when I love my God?”. He wants to emphasize the probing effect of this question as a question. Negative theology attempts to answer this question too quickly. Through deconstruction, “Derrida wants to hold the hand of negative theology to the fire of its word...that it does not know what is happening.”⁷ By insisting that negative theology dwell in its denial, in its questioning, Caputo wants to insist that it follow through on the implications that it doesn't *really* know for sure what it is talking about, that it cannot answer the question. True faith comes when one has no certainty, it is “a certain resolve to hold on by one's teeth,”⁸ to push on without reason to. There is a certain in-between position, a place of tension, that Caputo is describing, for negative theology is to remain in its questions, in its unknowing—otherwise it becomes ripe for deconstruction—but on the other hand it is not to give up hope and walk away in despair. When one stays in this location, one maintains an opening to and passion for the other, justice, and the impossible. Were one to lose faith, one would lose the passion for the impossible, the affirmation, and thus would fit the nihilistic caricature of Derrida which has

6 Ibid., 3.

7 Ibid., 12.

8 Ibid.

haunted him. Deconstruction finds its affirmation in both its passion for and faith in justice and the impossible.

We can further refine this idea of a “location” which deconstruction pushes negative theology towards by expanding on Caputo's understanding of Derrida's “religion without religion” or “messianic.” For Derrida and what I am calling the 'early Caputo', deconstruction's work with negative theology is but an example of how religions have a passion for justice and the impossible which tends to get buried by other tendencies within religions. For instance, Caputo often criticizes the Religious Right, arguing that its emphasis on security, prosperity, and holiness overwhelm its ability to aid the poor. This passion for the impossible is, in a rather precise sense, the only positive or *affirmative* aspect of religions (in that it is the passion for the impossible, the affirmation of the other). Derrida thus developed an idea he termed “desertification,” an analytic tool through which, in theory, the extraneous parts of religions could be deconstructed and removed in order to demonstrate the universal, passionate, affirmative core of all religions. He termed this core “the messianic” due to its passion and hope for the impossible. Actual, historical religions, termed “messianisms”,⁹ would be, in a sense, abstracted through this process, their determinate content removed in order to reveal the structure of the messianic, the universal structure of passion for the impossible which could be found in all messianisms.

Despite describing the process of desertification, Derrida remained conflicted about the exact relationship between the messianic and determinate messianisms. For him there are two possibilities: 1) “the universal messianic structure is the condition of possibility for the

⁹ I should note that messianisms are not merely religions, but can apply to other systems which have this passion for the coming of the other, such as Marxism.

determinate messianisms,” or 2) “the messianic structure is only produced because of the irreducible events of revelation that have preceded it.”¹⁰ Thus Derrida sees this relationship as either one where religions are examples of this “quasi-transcendental” structure that all religions can be reduced to, or where religions are absolute events in and of themselves and can at most gesture towards certain shared features. The related, more practical question (one which may or may not be directly tied to the previous question) is whether one can jettison the messianism once arriving at the messianic, which transcends the messianism, or whether one requires the determinate messianism to live the messianic, as the messianic only exists in its concrete occurrences, thus somewhat decreasing the content and force of the messianic.¹¹ Caputo, conceptualizing the relationship somewhat differently by drawing on the Heideggerian notion of “formal indication,” argues that the messianic is another messianism, given that it still has certain, albeit minimal, content: concern for justice, hospitality, and democracy. Thus the messianic for Caputo is a sort of messianism “with a deconstructive twist.”¹² It is perhaps the most refined messianism.

Forcing this undecided stance for Derrida and Caputo is that each option brings with it an associated problem. If one follows the first understanding, there is always the risk of the messianic slipping into the position of transcendental universal. As an abstraction of singular religions, it would be a prime target for deconstruction as it is committing the same marginalizing generalization that deconstruction would expose in any other structure. On the other hand, the necessity of determinate messianisms in the second understanding requires that

10 The “events of revelation” here being determinate messianisms.

Smith, J.K.A.. “Determined Violence: Derrida's Structural Religion.” *The Journal of Religion*. Apr., 1998. 204.

11 The precise relationship between these two issues is somewhat ambiguous in Caputo's discussions of Derrida, the two sets of options generally getting drawn together into one tension.

12 Caputo, John. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1997, 142.

one at least tentatively, provisionally approve of religions with their content, creeds, rituals, and beliefs. The risk of such content, which has been a strong concern for both Derrida and Caputo, is that the content of religions is something which is possessed, something which must be defended, and thus something which inevitably risks leading to violence. As J.K.A. Smith describes Derrida, “determinate, content-ful religion always ends up in war, precisely because of its determination to guard the contents of its positive revelation.”¹³ This may represent something of an overstatement, suggesting that determinate religion *inevitably* leads to violence, whereas Caputo would say that determinate religion inevitably *risks* violence. Nevertheless, Caputo still wants to minimize violence. Even when Caputo describes the messianic as a messianism, he does so as an effort to minimize the content associated with the passion for the impossible in order to minimize the chances of violence arising from the defense of the messianism. He is pushing for a way of accessing the messianic passion with minimal content in the messianism.

Throughout these early works, *Against Ethics* and *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, Caputo writes primarily as a philosopher looking to rethink . In the next section, I will examine later works where he moves towards a more explicitly theological idiom.

Caputo's Theological Turn

Since roughly the turn of the century, Caputo has explicitly come to write in a more theological voice and while he does not decisively break with his previous work in terms of style or content, he has increasingly addressed Christian theology in his work. In exploring this development, I will argue that deconstruction comes to relate to religion as essentially a regulative mechanism and will discuss the way this is manifest in 'weak theology.'

¹³ Smith, J.K.A.. “Determined Violence: Derrida's Structural Religion.” *The Journal of Religion*. Apr., 1998. 207.

Part of this move to more theological language can be attributed to a development in Caputo's understanding of the relationship between the messianic and determinate messianisms. In the last section I argued that Caputo seemed to believe that one could live the messianic without a messianism. In response to challenges to his book *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*—ranging from Caputo's relationship to Aquinas and Augustine to charges that deconstruction discourages charity—raised in a symposium at the Institute for Christian Studies and published with responses in *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*, Caputo clarifies that he must “refine” his earlier position and states that he does not think that “the messianic can exist as such, that it can assume a real form as such, that it can define the lives of real people, of socially, historically, politically situated communities, not as such.”¹⁴ Instead of being some difficult but livable position, Caputo indicates that the messianic is not something which can be lived on its own. Instead, “The messianic always comes embedded in a concrete messianism.”¹⁵ Thus Caputo seems to be resolving for the second of the two options I argued for in the previous section, that the messianic can only be lived or worked towards through determinate messianisms.¹⁶ As I discussed in the previous section, this way of

14 “Hoping in hope, hoping against hope.” *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*. Essay written in 1999, book published in 2002. p. 127. Caputo also repeats this sentiment, that he does not “think religion can exist without institutional form, without determinate historical structures” in an interview conducted in 2005: “From Radical Hermeneutics to the Weakness of God: John D. Caputo in Dialogue with Mark Dooley,” ed. Ian Leask, *Philosophy Today*, 51:2 (Summer, 2007): 216-26. Within this later work, Caputo often speaks of “religion” in general, such that it is functionally equivalent to “messianism.” It is unclear to what extent “religion” for Caputo includes all world religions, as his examples deal solely with Christianity and the term “messianism” is deeply embedded within the Western monotheisms.

15 *Ibid.*, 128.

16 This leaves open the question of to what extent there really is an identifiable something in common between the messianisms. As Caputo's interest seems to largely revolve around Christianity, he does not explicitly do the work of identifying the messianic features of other religions or comment on the extent to which such work could be done. The most that can confidently be stated is that Caputo identifies the messianic as a longing or hope for the impossible and as a response to the call of justice, both of which are not mysterious cores of “True Religion” but are identifiable only as the structure of the messianism. If a religion does not possess these two characteristics, Caputo's logic would suggest that they are not truly messianisms, or that other forces within the religion have overwhelmed the messianic impulse.

conceptualizing the messianic risks violence from messianisms defending their claims to truth. Caputo responds by developing resources for keeping religions focused on the messianic and thus resisting the threat of violence from within a messianism. This demonstrates a more refined interest in what religion after deconstruction would actually look like.

Focus on the messianic is maintained by this formulation: “the messianic can always take another form.”¹⁷ By indicating that the messianic is present (at least potentially) outside of one's own religion, one is constantly aware of the non-absolute nature of one's truth claims. Religions are thus unable to claim that they have definitive or final truth, as the core of the religion, the messianic, could always exist in some other form. As Caputo puts it:

what “deconstruction” does is keep the future open, and, by exposing the concrete messianisms to danger, protects them against themselves. I do not see how anything is safe, how any body of beliefs or practices, how any institution, of any sort or whatever sort, is safe, unless it exposes itself to the danger of deconstruction.¹⁸

Deconstruction is dangerous because it forces religions to recognize their own provisional nature, their status as not final, contingent. To a religion used to claiming to be possessor of Truth, this recognition is a danger. For Caputo, unless a religion opens itself to this recognition of the non-absolute nature of its truth claims, it will always be under a second and greater danger of losing the messianic and slipping into violence. This danger operates at a number of levels which Caputo never specifies. I would suggest that this danger could be violence towards: 1) to other religions, 2) to the marginal, the oppressed, those who are scapegoated, and perhaps most profoundly 3) to the messianic impulse within the religion itself. Explaining 3), Caputo seems to recognize the messianic as a tendency within religions which serves the good, which is

¹⁷ Ibid., 127. Though Caputo never explicitly states it thus, it would seem that these other forms would be other religions and also certain ideologies, as Caputo considers Marxism a messianism.

¹⁸ Ibid.

admirable, which works towards justice. Violence is another tendency within religions which works directly contrary to the messianic and as such constitutes the greatest threat to the religion itself, since a religion which does violence is, in a sense, subverted from within such that the messianic is oppressed, hidden within the religion such that it no longer can truly be called a messianism. Though Caputo does not develop this himself, it would follow from his arguments that the messianic can be effectively eradicated through the practice of violence by the religion. This would suggest that Caputo is increasingly considering himself inside religion, attempting to keep it true to itself, rather than acting more like Derrida as a secular commentator on religion. Whatever the ultimate victim of this violence, it is safe to say that, for Caputo, the only way for a religion or any structure to be safe from the threat of itself turning into a violent structure is to open itself to this “danger of deconstruction.”

On his description, there always exists an urge, one to which theology usually succumbs, to accumulate power (he describes theology as “rouged and powdered,” looking to attract power). In the most extreme picture of this strong theology, which on Caputo's account has dominated history, God has power, represents Truth, and in some way or another communicates this Truth and either gives followers power or summons them to find the power to defend the Truth. It is in this moment, in the belief that one's group possesses absolute Truth and must thus defend it absolutely, that Caputo sees the group losing the messianic, instead risking violence, the near-inevitable escalation to physical harm and oppression, to war. Even when theology has stayed away from this most militaristic of understandings, it still conceptualizes a God Caputo calls “strong,” a God with power and Truth and even if this God is declared as loving peace, there remains a 'strong' content associated with the religion, beliefs and practices, which are held

to be ordained 'from on high.' Thus, Caputo argues, even if a religion vocally rejects violence, when it claims to have some Truth, some absolute revelation, there will always be the inclination to defend that belief, and such the defense is always tempted to violence at the expense of the messianic.

Instead, when theology is exposed to the “danger of deconstruction,” one gets a “weak theology” and the associated “weak God.” In *The Weakness of God*, Caputo contrasts the weak theology he is advocating with the strong theology that has dominated religious traditions. He uses the concepts of 'name' and 'event' to elucidate this distinction. As he puts it, the name of God “harbors an event” and “theology is the hermeneutics of that event.”¹⁹ 'Event' as used by Caputo is markedly different from the general use of the word, and since he does not give examples of events, I'll take some time to summarize his definitions of what he means by the term. To draw on a concept from the previous section, events are singularities, they are occurrences of the impossible which Caputo longs for, and as such they possess a certain uncontainable nature. The name of an event is a signifier, it points to the event, but, as a linguistic construction, is unable to fully express the event it gestures towards, and as such there may be a number of names that can be applied to any given event.

The name is that which can lead to violence. Since the name is a function of our language, the name is able to accumulate power, it is able to rally an army, whereas the event is in a fundamental way unable to be represented, and thus is unable of exerting any strong force. The event, rather than gathering power, opens up the future, by its excessive nature it makes possible a break with the conventional. As Caputo puts it, “a theology of the 'event' is inevitably a thin thing, taking the name of God as the name of a call rather than of a causality, of a

¹⁹ Caputo, John. *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2006, 2.

provocation rather than of a presence or a determinate entity.”²⁰ The point of a weak theology is not to know some entity and how that entity acts but is to make the individual open to the call and to fill one with passion. Caputo does not spell out what precisely this means, whether the call is some subtle inner voice or moral longing, if there is some still, small voice which one could identify as God's, or if this is a call heard through reading biblical texts.

This characterization implies a certain distance between the name and the event similar to that between singular reality and language. An event is a place, however, where the impossible, contact with the other, is actualized. Caputo stresses an awareness of this distance that carries with it a certain impetus to think differently about the distance, to replace the name with a 'poetics,' a non-literal description which, rather than trying to comprehend the event, to get at its *logic*, to gain conceptual mastery over it, instead attempts to get at the *heart* of the event, to respond passionately to it, to trace its trajectory and effects, to describe and allow the individual to share its passion. Language can never fully describe, whether through literal terms or not, the event, but a poetics, Caputo seems to say, can point towards the event, can make one receptive to the call. As the event can never quite be pinned down with language, there will always be a certain excess, a certain breach of any attempt to comprehend the event. The truth of the event is not of a propositional nature, but is poetic, such that “it wants to become true, to make itself true, to make itself come true.”²¹ In a certain sense the event as poetic has only the power of a call, and the truth of the event is the truth of the world being called into existence. There is a certain sense of risk with events, as their overflow may be for good or evil and we do not know what we are being called to, but either way the event is the truth or singularity which in a sense 'lies

20 Ibid., 8.

21 Ibid., 118.

behind' the name. Facing the truth of the event, then, requires a certain courage, as one is uncertain of the outcome, of the future which will be inaugurated by the event.

An illustration of how Caputo might view Jesus will help illustrate this distinction. Of course, given my account of Caputo's event, it would be impossible to say precisely what the event behind the name of Jesus is, the best one could do is try and trace its poetics. The event contained within the name "Jesus" would likely have something to do with freedom from laws and requirements, with a vision of the world as it could be (referred to as "the kingdom of God/heaven") with justice, with inspiring a passion to care for the least fortunate and an open hospitality to those who need care.

The job of a weak theology is to expose the passionate event contained within the name of God; to translate this into terms previously used, weak theology (deconstruction) acts on the name of God (religions), thus poetically pointing towards the event contained within (the messianic), all in order to make one receptive to the call of justice and to fill one with a passion for the impossible. Caputo's work here, then, despite the minor modifications in his understanding of the relationship between the messianic and messianisms, is still consistent with his previous work. It maintains the same intense interest in justice, in the impossible, which has characterized Caputo's earlier work. It would be a mistake to assume that Caputo's focus on religion is that merely that of a secular theorist, commenting from the outside in order to minimize religious violence. Instead, particularly within the past ten years, Caputo has written as one who is (almost) on the inside, as one filled with passion. His remarks against violence stem less from a popular interest in peace and more from the danger violence poses to the passion for the impossible which has filled him.

In addition to this modified understanding of religious truth claims, Caputo also wants to rethink conceptualizations of God's sovereignty. He describes a weak theology of the event such that it effectively undermines claims to God's sovereignty thus also, Caputo argues, leading to a reduction of violence and increased sensitivity to the messianic. If we take seriously the claim that God is really an event which is imperfectly described by a name, and if that event could be translated into countless other names, then the event itself cannot ever really be fully expressed in language and any name we do give to the impossible (God) lacks stability.²² Caputo wants to encourage this instability, this play, in order to think about God in such a way that does not ascribe independence or power to God but instead thinks of God as possibility, as a call to justice. Caputo argues that the sovereignty ascribed to God underlies the sovereignty of the state, that the model of God as Father supports patriarchy, and that notions of God as universal King of Truth function as a condition of possibility for religiously motivated oppression. If, on the other hand, God was thought of as a weak call with endless potential for renaming, it would require a certain unnatural leap in order to believe that one must defend this call as there really is not much to defend. Thus he hopes to diminish actual violence and oppression in the world by speaking about God in different terms.

If weak theology were compared with deconstruction in the previous section, here we have a more specific and internal critique: instead of having deconstruction act on religions in general from the outside by a theorist in order to demonstrate an intellectual point, in his later work, particularly *The Weakness of God*, Caputo is focused specifically on Christian theology

²² Once again, Caputo never specifies what the event might be which is harbored in the name of God and never indicates whether religions are founded around events, if events continue through religions, and what the relationship might be between the events of different religions. His emphasis on longing for the event would suggest that events are never contemporary with the individual, that they are either remembered or promised, but he does not spell out this relationship.

and is pushing (Christian) theology to find the resources within itself to carve away the trappings of power that come with the name of God in order to expose the event within. In applying deconstruction, his value for the messianic, and his work keeping negative theology in the question, Caputo is using deconstruction as a sort of regulative mechanism for religion. The theology which is properly regulated will be, on Caputo's account, a weak theology. On this understanding, Caputo's earlier work on the voices of negative theology serves as a certain example and forerunner to what is here a more general theology but which nonetheless is regulated by deconstructive weakness.

This may suggest that Caputo is attempting to make a correction in Christian thought on God, but in *The Weakness of God* and several other books he attempts to describe in thicker terms what would life under such a weak theology might look like. The next section will consider the thicker description of Caputo's overall project and the questions that arise from it.

Two Interpretations

Given the questions I raised about Caputo's work: the details of what precisely counts as an event, the place of the event within religions, the applicability of his analysis to other world religions, and on violence overcoming the messianic in religions, one could interpret Caputo's theological project in two general ways. On one hand, Caputo, primarily in *The Weakness of God*, is setting out some sort of description of what a theology that 'properly' reflects the messianic and a religion that 'properly' pursues justice and resists violence would look like. On this reading, Caputo has in mind a sort of ideal weak theology that he is trying to promote, he is more like the Augustine of *The City of God* than of *Confessions*. If this is the case, one would

expect a certain degree of cohesion within his work, and his books for the popular audience would be seen as applications of his overall program. This understanding, however, raises many questions for Caputo, both about specific details of his work which I noted and some apparent contradictions or inconsistencies within his overall project. I will explore these larger issues in this section.

A more sympathetic reading of Caputo would emphasize his role as a Kierkegaardian *Extra-Skriver*—a “supplementary clerk” who collects fragments and writes to fill in gaps—or the Augustine of the first ten books of *Confessions*: gathering fragments, exploring his passions, looking to see what he can see, and offering critique from his vantage point. This reading views Caputo's project as more modest. It does not ask questions about the practical applicability of his ideas or the comprehensiveness of his project; instead of attempting to outline a comprehensive program he is trying to describe a vision, a possible world, not as an end point but as a corrective. As I will describe, this notion of vision, functioning more like the kingdom of God than a *Church Dogmatics*, allows one to explain many of the questions the first reading would pose and allows for a more consistent interpretation of Caputo overall. In order to make this point, I will first discuss Caputo's work with the Creation narratives as an example of his work with a Kierkegaardian fragment. Second, I will consider Caputo's writing on miracles and magic, how it could lead to a charge of inconsistency, and how the second reading avoids this accusation.

In *The Weakness of God*, Caputo draws on Catherine Keller's work on the Genesis creation narratives. Caputo argues against *creatio ex nihilo* in favor of a more deconstructive view of creation from chaos. He writes that he is covering this topic as a way of defending his

weak God from the objection that God as Creator, as understood in an *ex nihilo* reading of Genesis 1, can hardly be considered weak. Caputo wants to head off this challenge by articulating an alternative understanding of God as Creator. He opens by referring to Keller's analysis of the Hebrew of the opening verses of Genesis, arguing that the world in these verses is described not as a "formless void" with connotations of emptiness and lack. Instead, she argues that "*tohu wa-bohu*" and "*tehom*" can equally describe the world as an untamed, wild, chaotic place, teeming with unrealized, unimaginable possibility. On this reading, God's act of creation is one of bringing to life potential which was already present, of calling forth order and shape. As God is working here with a preexisting material, attempting to call it into productive form, there is also a certain resistance within the material of creation, thus making creation something of a risky venture. God on this account is not omnipotent but, as God is working with chaotic material, has the more limited power to call into being but not enforce the call. Caputo sees his reading "delimiting the later power-metaphysics of creation and making room for chance and happenstance."²³ This reading then serves to introduce a real need for faith—the grasping even without reason kind of faith which Caputo is passionate for—by reinforcing Caputo's earlier assertions about the weakness of God.

While Elohim, "God" of the first narrative, may work with chaotic material, the world still responds to the call and in the end is pronounced "good." Caputo reads the second narrative, with Yahweh as "God," as a check to this rather rosy picture of the universe. The second story emphasizes misfortune. Similar to Caputo's discussion of the disaster in *Against Ethics*, in the Yahwist creation narrative the created seems to be constantly choosing evil over that which God desires. Caputo portrays the Yahwist God as the insecure parent whose constantly misbehaving

23 Caputo, John. *The Weakness of God*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2006, 64.

children cause such exasperation that serious punishment is called for. That said, Caputo does not want to let these stories separate too far, but instead wants to keep them together and in sequence. He affirms that the riskiness implied in the chaotic nature of the *tohu wa-bohu* in the first narrative is realized in the second, but the second is tempered by the pronouncement “good” from the first. Given that creation does not stay “good” for long, Caputo argues that “the result is that the “good” becomes in part descriptive and in part prescriptive; in part a judgement of what Elohim has done, and in part a promise of what is possible, of what he has in mind of creation. Good—now let's hope it works.”²⁴ Thus Caputo is shaping his reading of the creation narratives such that they support his emphasis on faith despite reasons not to; he argues that humans are asked to repeat God's “good” with one of their own, thus forming a statement of faith, of hope. This interpretation of creation reinforces Caputo's conception of the name of God “in terms of the Hebraic model of the call calling rather than the Hellenistic model of a cause causing...of a primordial promise rather than a prime mover.”²⁵ He is attempting to sketch a portrait of a universe the fate of which is not sealed, of a God who calls, and of a humanity which can respond to the call in order to help fulfill the promise that the world is “good.” Life thus becomes a “beautiful but risky business,”²⁶ something which is radically uncertain and yet hopeful.

One could read this line of argument from Caputo as a defense of a program, as an attempt to defend his view of God with an account of Creation. This is a perfectly valid interpretation, but one could also read Caputo as attempting to elaborate on a vision, a vision of a weak God. In order for him to communicate this deeply subversive and unconventional view of God, he elaborates on how it would apply in the context of Creation. As such, he is seizing upon

24 Ibid., 71.

25 Ibid., 94.

26 Ibid., 61.

linguistic fragments (translations of *tohu wa-bohu* and *tehom*) via Keller in order to more fully describe this vision.

What truly separates these two interpretations of Caputo is the question of how attached Caputo's project is to its rather (post)modern, scientific assumptions about the universe and how internally cohesive it is. Caputo develops a distinction between miracles and magic later in *The Weakness of God* as he attempts to apply his weak theology to scripture. In discussing the many stories of miracles in the Bible, the reason for this distinction is to “provide an interpretation of these miracle stories that neither reduces them to supernaturalism nor inflates them into a metaphysical tour de force.”²⁷ As he describes them, magic is that which simply cannot happen, it constitutes a shortcut, an exception to the difficulty of actual existence. As such magic treats God as a sort of all-powerful machine such that, if one could just do the correct actions or hold the correct beliefs, the God-machine could be manipulated into providing the desired outcome. A miracle, on the other hand, is “an event of the impossible” which contains “head-turning and astonishing power to make things new, to transform our lives, to give us hope where there was despair, love where there was hate, companionship where there was only solitude.”²⁸ In a sense, then, the truth contained within a miracle story is a truth about human nature, not about a historical supernatural occurrence. The power of a miracle is the way in which it transforms lives by calling out with hope and love. With magic, one is convinced of a certain supernatural occurrence and is encouraged to repeat certain actions through which one hopes to repeat the desired outcome. A miracle, on the other hand, does not ask to be repeated but to be lived out, to be enacted. Thus, rather than one being encouraged to actions which need not be related to the

27 Ibid., 238.

28 Ibid., 238-239.

desired outcome, one is called to take action to bring about the promised world.

As Caputo puts it, “the miraculous has the structure of what is called in deconstruction *the impossible*; magic is a cruel trick that is simply impossible.”²⁹ It seems that Caputo's issue with interpreting miracle stories as historical accounts of things that could actually happen is that such an understanding doesn't make sense to the scientifically-informed ear. This raises the question of weak theology's connection to Western (post)modernity. One might rightly ask what difference there truly is between “the impossible” and the “simply impossible.” Given that definitions of the supernatural are products of modernity, one might ask if Caputo's weak theology applies outside this limited context. If Caputo is laying out a program, it seems that this program is severely limited, only making sense to a broad but not universal audience. If, on the other hand, Caputo is attempting to provide a corrective, is attempting to speak against a religious attitude which encourages prayer at the expense of concrete action, his overall project becomes much more intelligible and consistent, as the comments attempt to correct rather than set forth a program.

The programmatic interpretation of Caputo also risks presenting him as one whose vision is betrayed by its enactment. When reading Caputo this way, it would seem, both in general and in this particular example, that he has a pretty good idea of what religion should be. He is able not only to specify a certain structure of messianic hope, but also characterize what a religion which is properly receptive to the messianic call would look like. It just so happens that such a proper messianism would look very Western and modern (if modified by a certain Judaic and deconstructive twist). The more serious challenge posed by such a reading is the fact that it answers with some confidence the question “What do I love when I love my God?”. As I argued

²⁹ Ibid., 239.

with negative theology in the first section, Caputo would be intensely critical of any group which claimed to have some privileged conception of God, whether it be through some special revelation or poststructural analysis. Very similar to the problem raised with the messianic as universal transcendental, such a conception of religion would be a prime target for deconstruction. Thus, Caputo as setting out a theological program would betray its own deconstructive roots.

The visionary interpretation avoids these challenges by treating Caputo's project as one with more modest aims. If Caputo is understood less as a marketer of sort of Hegelian System and more as a Kierkegaardian *Extra-Skriver*, his work on specific topics becomes less an attempt to defend an interpretation and more an attempt to articulate a challenge to structures by paying attention to the singular, to the marginal, to the other. In this sense he is not motivated by some grand Theory of the Universe, he is not trying to develop a system. This is not to say, of course, that he does not evaluate. However, rather than his evaluations being of a comprehensive nature, they are simple, more modest applications of his basic, passionate commitments to the other, justice, and the impossible. Passion, indeed, becomes a key evaluative concept for him; as he puts it: "My cardinal distinction is between the salty and the saltless, which is how I mark off the different ways of loving God."³⁰ His criterion for evaluating religions then is the degree to which they inspire a passion for justice which inspires changing action. If we understand saltiness as Caputo's criteria, and his critique of magical, supernatural understandings of miracle stories as critiques directed against specific instantiations of a hermeneutic which produce saltless effects, then the question remains alive. On this account, Caputo is attempting to articulate bits and pieces of answers, not to provide the definitive Answer. One can then understand his many

30 Caputo, John. *On Religion*. Routledge: London, 2001, 26.

critical and constructive remarks as clinging more closely to his fundamental commitment to remaining in the question. This interpretation of Caputo gives his work a more modest tone, helps it stay truer to its aims, and allows it to retain a more open posture towards others attempting to hear the call.

This leaves certain questions unanswered, however, for what might such others look like? While it seems obvious that one could give due attention to the singular and cultivate a passion for justice, could one open one's religion to the “danger of deconstruction” without explicit mention of deconstruction? How would such a religion function, how would its theology maintain such an internal threat? The second half of this paper will attempt to answer these questions by looking to theologian Rowan Williams as an example of one who maintains a “deconstructive” stance on these issues but who arrives at them through radically different means. Analyzing Williams from this perspective will unveil the surprising aspects of his theology.

ROWAN WILLIAMS

In this half of the paper I will attempt to demonstrate how Williams' theology is 'deconstructive' in a profound way even as his theology remains much more traditional than Caputo's weak theology, thus creating a surprising perspective. After introducing the deconstructive parallels between Caputo and Williams, I will more fully analyze the way in which Williams' theology treats God and scripture as deconstructive entities, where dispossession

and self-critical analysis is fundamental to the Christian experience. I will then conclude with a comparison of the way in both thinkers treat negative theology, dogma, and religious pluralism, concluding that Williams maintains near-identical positions with Caputo on these issues.

Deconstructive Parallels

In order to begin, I will investigate the parallels between deconstruction/weak theology as articulated by John Caputo and the 'deconstructive moment' within theology of Rowan Williams which I am defending. Broadly speaking, I will consider these parallels as they apply to the way both thinkers develop their thought, the effects of this thought, and some general rhetorical commonalities.

In an interview in 2002, Rowan Williams described the power of theological mentor Donald McKinnon's "sheer inarticulateness."³¹ As Williams explains, the point of such inarticulateness, particularly in lectures on theodicy, was to impress upon his students the "intractability, the reality of the problem,"³² to emphasize the difficulty of reality in order to prevent students from seeking quick, trite solutions. Indeed, facing the problem of evil, "the last thing you should do is look for theological solutions."³³ Instead, a proper theological response would be "to know why it's not answerable."³⁴ In a sense, giving an answer, explaining the suffering of another, invariably minimizes the magnitude of the problem, it fails to sufficiently engage with suffering.

This theme continues in Williams' own work, specifically his reading of Augustine and

31 Cunningham, David S., and Rowan Williams. "Living the Questions: The Converging Worlds of Rowan Williams." *Christian Century* 119.9 (2002): 19.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

John of the Cross in *The Wound of Knowledge*. These figures for Williams emphasize the difficulty of fitting the world into neat categories and articulate the uncertainty of the human condition. Augustine echoes Gregory of Nyssa as a figure who engages profoundly with “the oddity of the world, its irreducibility to the tidy patterns of logic,”³⁵ and John voices “the Christian suspicion of conceptual neatness.”³⁶ The world is a messy place, and given the Christian experience of God dying on a cross, any attempts to order the world too easily can only be seen as eliding this foundational, difficult experience. If one probes deeply enough, it seems, one will find the world to be a place that resists easy categorization. This suspicion of organizing, logical structures resembles Caputo's foundational existential commitments to singularities.

In *Against Ethics*, Caputo's primary goal is to maintain a stance before events which “lets them be, lets them go, without imposing grand and overarching schemata upon them, without simplifying them.”³⁷ As I discussed, Caputo arrives at this sort of statement for decidedly philosophical reasons—*tout autre est tout autre*, concern for singularities, the distortion inevitable in use of language and categories. The end result is a reluctance to construct schemata, to force the incredible complexity of things as they are settle into simplifying categories. As Caputo describes his philosophical approach, “minimalism means having been cut off from a guiding star,”³⁸ and though Williams would phrase it differently—he would suggest that any simple attempt to interpret using “a guiding star,” God, presupposes that we can possess God, and thus it is not God we are talking about but ourselves—both are making similar statements about what can be known, about conceptual limits. In a similar example, for Caputo “there is no

35 Williams, Rowan. *The Wound of Knowledge*. 2nd ed. Cowley: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990, 87.

36 Ibid., 189.

37 Caputo, John. *Against Ethics*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1993, 222.

38 Ibid., 233.

meaning *to* events overall.”³⁹ For Williams there may be an overarching meaning, but any expression of that meaning would necessarily be suspect, it would need to be held loosely. Once again, both seem to be operating from similar existential locations, their perspectives on the human condition demand silence in the face of tragedy and disaster.

Williams' discussion of Mark's trial narrative clearly identifies God in this space of silence. In discussing why Jesus only identifies himself as the Christ when arrested and before the High Priest, Williams claims that “Jesus breaks his silence at this moment in the trial because only now can what he says be heard.”⁴⁰ Williams emphasizes the amount of emptying that the narrative has forced on the reader at this point; now, emptied of ideas of transcendence, of power, the reader is forced into the realization that “God's voice here is supremely a voice at midnight, audible only when the language of this world has fallen away once and for all around the figure of the prisoner on trial.”⁴¹ Thus Williams sees God speaking only in the midst of suffering, when all answers have ceased their attempts at legitimacy. The trial narrative then paves the way for this divine speech; it overwhelms our ideas of divine transcendence, of power, of godliness, forcing us into a place of silence from which we can hear. If we consider the 'theological' Caputo, we see that Mark's trial narrative is operating on the reader as deconstruction would. Indeed Williams describes the gospel story as “itself an indispensable agent”⁴² not merely a paradigm, thus forcing the necessity of undergoing a process. The narrative thus acts as deconstruction would: it shows us the provisional status of our answers, undermines their claims to naturalness or objectivity (deconstructs them), forces us to admit their weakness, thus pushing us to realize the weakness of our own position so that we might hear the voice of God, whether it be God as

39 Ibid., 234.

40 Williams, Rowan. *Christ On Trial*. Eerdmans: Cambridge 2000, 8.

41 Ibid.

42 Williams, Rowan. *Resurrection*. 2nd ed. Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, 2002, 43.

Jesus for Williams or God as weak call for Caputo.

Williams' suspicion of neat answers and the need for silence means that, ultimately, “the outcome of the Christian enterprise is uncertain.”⁴³ Of course, Williams is quick to provide that there is a place for Christian hope, for faith in a redeemed future, but “faith does depend upon an ability at least to 'entertain' the Augustinian picture, an ability to see the world as unclear and the human spirit as confused and imprisoned in fantasies.”⁴⁴ There is a tension here: on one hand God is to be found in the overlooked, the outcast, and any tendency to resolve the world too quickly into a “bland assurance” which elides the darkness of the world will also elide God. One could say that faith which avoids doubt, which claims to have 'the whole picture,' is not really faith. As Williams puts it on the subject of prayer, the Christian must insist “on the need to press on in darkness and formlessness, in an absence of obvious meaning (let alone of gratification).”⁴⁵ On the other hand, Williams rejects despair, he does not allow us to declare our situation hopeless or allow the easy answer of resignation, for eventually Holy Saturday passes and we find Jesus risen from the tomb, giving hope. This sort of 'faith without assurance' or 'faith in spite of' is eerily similar to the call of the impossible in Caputo. In the same way, Caputo affirms both of the creation narratives in order to support a position which is able to honestly grapple with the disaster even as it remains hopeful. More explicitly, as he says in *On Religion*, “Faith is not safe.”⁴⁶ In other words, faith which has assurance is not faith, real faith is faithful when there is no reason to be faithful, it holds on with its teeth. Though he may be giving this sentiment a somewhat stronger expression than Williams, both see true faith defined by its faithfulness through deep engagement with the horrors of the world which should cause despair.

43 Williams, Rowan. *The Wound of Knowledge*. 2nd ed. Cowley: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990, 81.

44 Ibid., 95.

45 Williams, Rowan. *Resurrection*. 2nd ed. Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, 2002, 85.

46 Caputo, John. *On Religion*. Routledge: London, 2001, 33.

This state of faithfulness is intimately tied to a state of perpetual judgement. Williams, in discussing the blame for the crucifixion in Matthew, concludes that each believer is charged by Christ to “hold still” in vulnerability, to receive judgement such that “faithfulness to him is going to be bound up with the whole diverse process of keeping myself 'in question.’”⁴⁷ Williams is not simply talking about some historic moment of empty silence after which we can move on to happier, more existentially satisfying places, but is describing a God who is perpetually haunting, who continually questions. Once again, Caputo closely parallels Williams, here with his insistence that a religion following a weak theology always keep itself exposed to the “danger of deconstruction.”⁴⁸ As with the previous comparisons, Caputo and Williams arrive at their conclusions for different reasons. For Williams, the believer must be held in question for authentic experience of God, while Caputo argues for the constant threat of deconstruction in order to keep institutions open and focused on the messianic.⁴⁹ Despite their different paths, however, the acts of keeping the Christian “in question” and a church institution exposed to the “danger of deconstruction” operate in remarkably similar ways and with similar results.

Moving to examine how these considerations affect humans relations, I turn to *Christ on Trial* where Williams discusses the concern for the outsider raised by Luke.

The outsider's very presence puts a question that reminds me that my account of things, my way of making the world all right and manageable, is not only an incomplete enterprise, but may be an enterprise that is keeping out God because it lets in the subtle temptation to treat my perspective *as if it were* God's.⁵⁰

47 Williams, Rowan. *Christ On Trial*. Eerdmans: Cambridge 2000, 36.

48 Caputo, John. “Hoping in Hope, Hoping Against Hope: A Response.” *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*. Routledge: London, 2002, 127.

49 While the phrasing may suggest that Williams is primarily interested in individuals and Caputo in institutions or communities, it is based on the focus of specific articles only. Williams is also exhibits a tremendous deal of interest in the communal (the Church is, after all, a community), and Caputo in different works focuses more on the individual (particularly in earlier works such as *Against Ethics*). Both could be said to operate at both an individual and communal level.

50 Williams, Rowan. *Christ On Trial*. Eerdmans: Cambridge 2000, 65.

If one allows oneself to truly engage with “the outsider”—one who is excluded, minimized, or oppressed—one is forced to question the worldview that allows one to make the world intelligible. The outsider's experience does not contain some hidden core of truth which I am to incorporate into mine, but my answers fail when applied to the outsider. The outsider acts something like 'the other' in deconstruction; in order for my worldview to be constructed, it must necessarily push the stranger to the margins, to sweep the experiences of the stranger under the rug. Confronting the stranger, then, forces me to realize the limited scope of any answer. The subtle point here is that any answer we give to the problem of suffering, any explanation we offer for suffering, assumes a God-like perspective, it assumes that there *is* an answer, an explanation, to the problem. Part of a genuine Christian experience for Williams involves a displacement from the answers we might have, a recognition that our answers cannot adequately address the problems of the world. This is essentially the recognition that I am not God, thus my answers are necessarily provisional and limited.

The way that this realization is practically lived out is through an increased ability to “allow the stranger to go on being the stranger, rather than becoming a failed member of my world or an incompetent speaker of my language.”⁵¹ Part of a Christian engagement with the stranger is the ability to resist assimilating the stranger, thus allowing an opening where one can learn from the stranger and, by association, God. The parallels to Caputo's comments on the other, the *tout autre*, are unavoidably obvious. Williams does not develop “the stranger” here to be “wholly other,” and Caputo in general is concerned, particularly in *Against Ethics*, with philosophical argumentation on the nature of phenomenology and minimizing metaphysics, not

51 Ibid., 61.

on any sort of theology.⁵² Nevertheless, when looking at the form of their remarks, both Caputo and Williams treat the other in much the same way, admitting a respectful distance and resisting the urge to assimilate.

The effects of this deconstructive moment also extend to Christian conceptions of love. Williams' description of the command to love is “not...a benevolence towards all and a generalized wish for their welfare, but an entirely costly *disponibilité*, availability in service which gives no room to the superficial interests of the ego.”⁵³ Love is thus not some general, universal sensation, but a orientation which requires potentially costly action in particular situations—“availability in service” here operates as a disposition which interacts with individual encounters and specific needs. This resembles Caputo's discussion of obligation and justice in *Against Ethics*, particularly in its attention to the needs of the singular other. As I noted, Caputo's development of the singularity of obligations and the cost they demand from us draws upon deconstruction's overall 'passion' for the singular. Justice is separated from law because of its ability to 'see' individual singularities, it deals in proper names.⁵⁴ Thus, much as love for Williams is concerned with costly expression towards individual needs, justice is concerned with acting on obligations towards particular singularities.

There is also a strong similarity between the effects of deconstruction on texts/institutions for Caputo and the effects of Jesus' death and resurrection on Christians for Williams as articulated through an atonement theory inflected by Rene Girard. Williams develops his atonement theory through the opening chapter of *Resurrection* by examining the preaching of the gospel in the opening chapters of Acts. His fundamental observation is that the Christ who is

⁵² I will return to this issue in the next section and make a more complete analysis of the relationship between 'the other' and 'the stranger.'

⁵³ Williams, Rowan. *The Wound of Knowledge*. 2nd ed. Cowley: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990, 23.

⁵⁴ Caputo, John. *Against Ethics*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1993, 87.

proclaimed risen is being preached as the same Jesus whom the crowds had crucified. Paralleling James Alison's appropriation of Girard, Williams develops Jesus as the figure of pure victim who is able to break the oppressor-victim cycle.⁵⁵ By breaking the usual, worldly scheme of violence endlessly begetting more violence, Jesus enabled “creative action, the transformation of the human world, the release from the pendulum swing of attack and revenge.”⁵⁶ It is precisely in this moment, in the creative potential of Jesus as pure victim, that Williams resembles Caputo. In Caputo's deconstruction the call of the impossible functions to spur us on to work towards the impossible, it gives us hope which drives action. In relation to the world, the impossible is just that, impossible; it cannot be anticipated because it is not within the realm of possibility. It would not be a stretch to say that the transformed relations enabled by the pure victim are an example of the impossible. By definition, the pure victim is outside the horizon of possibility and opens up new ways of living, just as the impossible does.

Finally, there is a strong similarity in the rhetoric of Williams and Caputo, specifically about figures from the tradition they are drawing upon and about the necessity of tension. In both cases, what appear to be mere rhetorical commonalities indicate deeper parallels in the way these figures think. As I mentioned earlier, Caputo is perpetually saying “yes, but” to his philosophical predecessors, particularly Levinas, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard, in addition to his appropriation of Augustine. Caputo talks about a tendency with these figures to resist a certain trajectory of thought which Caputo wants to draw upon with another Caputo wants to ignore. This impulse is often identified, particularly in Levinas, with the thinker being “too pious,” such that

55 To explain this point further, Jesus is the pure victim in that he did not answer the violence done to him by oppressing others, the usual scheme of worldly relations. His resurrection indicates that he was possessor of power to avenge his oppression, yet he did not. Thus he indicates the possibility of transformed human relations, rather than inverting the oppressor-victim relation with new oppressors and victims he transcended it.

56 Williams, Rowan. *Resurrection*. 2nd ed. Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, 2002, 9.

deconstructive impulses are resisted by an impulse for more conventional concerns. Something similar is going on in Williams. As Williams works through the history of Christian 'spirituality' in *The Wound of Knowledge*, he often comments on the ways the historical figures he is working with in some way resist the inertia of the God they are describing. Thus in a preliminary section, Williams remarks that: "Much of the history of early Christian thought is the record of efforts to domesticate the alien God of Gethsemane and Calvary, the God whom Paul and Ignatius, men very close to the edges of human experience, had so joyfully embraced."⁵⁷ Williams here is primarily reacting against the tendency within Christian thought to deemphasize or deny the darkest, most human parts of Jesus' life—particularly the realness of Jesus' suffering on the cross—in order that Jesus fit better into prevailing, and largely Greek, thought on the divine. Later, when discussing the relationship between Gregory of Nyssa and Evagrius/Nazianzen, Williams repeats his earlier sentiment. "Here again, in the fourth as in the second century, we may see Christian thought retreating from the strangeness of its own implications into a comfortable metaphysical harbor."⁵⁸ In this case, the tension is over Gregory's assertion that one must descend into the darkness of unknowing in order to meet God, a move resisted by these thinkers for whom, following the Greek philosophical tradition, lack of knowledge—ignorance—was an evil to be overcome. Thus in Williams, as with Caputo, there is a sense in which his reading of historical figures identifies a certain deconstructive movement which is resisted by a less radical impulse, for instance, piety for Caputo and Greek philosophy for Williams. The more subversive trajectory is associated with God/deconstruction while the other is seen as resisting this trajectory due to its preoccupation with more conventional discourse.

57 Williams, Rowan. *The Wound of Knowledge*. 2nd ed. Cowley: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990, 32.

58 Ibid., 76.

Tension is the other major parallel in the rhetoric of Caputo and Williams. Caputo rarely makes an absolute statement. His constant flow of “yes, and” or “no, but,” while arising from attempts to avoid dialectics, takes the form of holding many thoughts or actions which might appear contradictory on the surface in tension with one another. This is also a major theme of Williams' theology. For instance, on the tension introduced by the experience of God, he states that there is in Christian language “an unending flow back and forth between speech and silence.”⁵⁹ Christian discourse is only truly itself as it moves between—or, to use a very Caputan phrase, occupies the space between—speech and silence. A similar strategy is demonstrated throughout the collection of his essays gathered in *Wrestling with Angels*. In 'Hegel and the Gods of Postmodernity,' for example, Williams reads Hegelian dialectics in a way that views the dialectical process as preserving complexities rather than, as deconstructive critiques have charged, level them with a simplifying *Aufhebung*. Another example requires only the title of the essay: “Religious realism!: on not quite agreeing with Don Cupitt.” One could hardly imagine a phrasing more emblematic of Caputo's own work!

Theological Paradigm and Transcendence

Drawing primarily on Williams' *On Christian Theology*, I will more fully flesh out Williams' theology and demonstrate its deconstructive core. I will argue that Williams is not simply a 'liberal' theologian incorporating deconstructive concerns into an otherwise traditional theology, but offers a profound blurring of theological categories, of 'liberal' and 'conservative'.

In locating this deconstructive moment, of central importance will be Williams' discussions of God, particularly of how God effectively deconstructs the theological enterprise

⁵⁹ Williams, Rowan. *Resurrection*. 2nd ed. Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, 2002, 66.

and the Church. In order to demonstrate this, I will examine differences between Williams' theology and what I might term 'popular' theology.⁶⁰ At a popular level, theology is usually understood as a privileged discourse, it is able to speak with God's authority due to its mastery of revelation which allows theology to possess certain truths not otherwise available to human beings. This understanding is often tempered with certain constraints which attempt to keep theology from 'putting God in a box,' but a generally strong understanding of the truths communicated through revelation allows theology, on this understanding, something of a firm footing from which to speak of at least certain truths.

Williams' theology differs subtly from this understanding of theology. For instance, he gives credence to the philosophical skepticism of theological discourse stemming from the 'masters of suspicion' that any theological attempts to speak from a divine or 'total' perspective destroy conversation, to forestall challenge, and thus are implicated in human power structures. Thus theology, on Williams' telling, is in a rather tough position, as it is attempting to speak of the divine but whenever it attempts to make truth claims about such total subjects it inevitably becomes unbelievable to a critical philosophical perspective. This tension is not new, and perhaps the classic response to this tension is Karl Barth, who argues that theology only escapes philosophical challenges due to God's grace.

Williams, however, takes a different tack. He identifies this central tension, the inability to speak of the 'moral universe,' here meaning universal morality or the human condition, with credibility, as “very nearly true” and as “essential for anyone wanting to talk theology.”⁶¹ He agrees that theology must avoid “the attempt to take God's point of view.”⁶² Theology thus avoids

⁶⁰ By this term I refer to the understanding, both widespread among laypersons and, at differing levels, amongst theologians, that theology to a certain extent is able to speak with God's voice.

⁶¹ Williams, Rowan. *On Christian Theology*. Blackwell: Oxford 2000, 6.

⁶² Ibid.

the problem of credibility, but is left requiring a more complicated, subtle way of articulating claims about the moral universe. Williams suggests that theology must show “*in its workings* what is involved in bringing the complexity of its human world to judgement before God; not by seeking to articulate or to complete that judgement.”⁶³ Theology does not articulate judgements about the moral universe, but instead demonstrates what living under judgement might look like. Williams is thus trying to articulate some sort of third space for theology to position itself in, compromised neither by complicity in human power structures nor by the arrogance of assuming a divine voice, but a position which does not afford a totalizing perspective in favor of one that does not “move too far from the particular, with all its irresolution and resistance to systematizing.”⁶⁴ Theology attempts to describe the world of human relationships while demonstrating in *itself*, through its practices and communal life, what the judgement of God looks like. That is, theology for Williams exhibits in its practices and communal, sacramental life how the judgement of God affects the workings of a community. The space of theology, then, is not one of authority but is indeed profoundly weak as it is constantly under the judgement of God and the human particulars it is trying to talk about. The judgement of God is manifest in a perpetual self-questioning state as theology attempts to examine its own methods and conclusions, searching itself with an eye to the divine.

It would be easy to lament this weakness, but Williams does not. He develops the theme of judgement in a theological idiom in the beginning of his book *The Wound of Knowledge*. He opens describing “spirituality” as the task of engaging the “questioning at the heart of faith,” a questioning each believer must undergo as “the questioning involved here in not our

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

interrogation of the data, but its interrogation of us.”⁶⁵ This seems to be a simple statement of the theme I identified above: the process of being under question is a key, ongoing aspect of the Christian faith. This constant questioning which is spurred on by the “intractable strangeness of the ground of belief.”⁶⁶ Combining this strangeness with the complexity of human life, the spiritual life is a “complex, demanding, and far-reaching matter.”⁶⁷ This complex situation, however, is not some unfortunate consequence of human sin or finitude, but instead creates “a possible theater for God's creative work.”⁶⁸ Developing the difficulty of theology from this theological perspective as opposed to the more philosophical challenges mentioned in *On Christian Theology*, it appears that the theological reason for this reflexive, self-critical understanding is the strangeness of the God who is revealed to us and, far from being a concession, it viewed as opening up space for God to work. (This idea will return when we consider revelation.)

The judgement of God, then, has the goal of keeping theology from closing in on itself, of keeping conversation open. As Williams puts it,

It is, in other words, essential to theology that theologians become aware of how theology has worked and continues to work in the interests of this or that system of power. To acquire such awareness is neither to dismiss theological utterances clouded with this particular kind of ambiguity as worthless, nor to entertain the fancy that there could be a theological discourse with to trace of 'interest'....The critique thus developed has to be related afresh to the fundamental story of belief, rather than staying at the level of reductionist secular suspicion, however crucial a tool this is in alerting us to the problem.⁶⁹

Williams identifies a “reductionist secular suspicion,” as just as totalizing a view as that of the 'popular' understanding of theology I mentioned before. Theology must understand how it has

65 Williams, Rowan. *The Wound of Knowledge*. 2nd ed. Cowley: Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990, 11.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid., 12.

68 Ibid.

69 Williams, Rowan. *On Christian Theology*. Blackwell: Oxford 2000, 8.

worked in the interests of power structures in the past in order to further examine itself in the present, without any hope of being able to completely eliminate the effect of power structures on theology. His way past this bind is to study Church history with penitence, looking for places where theology gathered power to itself or reinforced existing oppressive power structures rather than expressing God's power or giving power to those receiving the theology. This questioning, within the edifice of theology itself, provides a theological articulation of secular suspicion, thus operating as a sort of self-reflexive check. Theology cultivates this attitude towards its own language through the relationship between the theologian and God. As the primary expression of this relationship, prayer for Williams is “precisely what resists the urge of religious language to claim a total perspective: by articulating its own incompleteness before God, it turns away from any claim to human completeness.”⁷⁰ Prayer, when understood as this type of contemplative discipline, requires theologians to live with the constant dispossession of their language. The experience of prayer requires the same dispossession and self-critical reflection as theology, the practice of this dispossession in prayer aids the theologian in maintaining the same attitude in theology. Thus theology is characterized not as a science seeking to clarify and explain but as a suspicious practice that 'probes' places where religious speech and practice move towards the totalizing perspective of 'ideology.' Thus keeping itself 'under judgement', theology renounces access to a totalizing perspective. In this way prayer “preserves conversation between human speakers,”⁷¹ it is not allowed to close in on itself and thus attain a sort of (onto)theological totality. Instead, theology as understood by Williams will constantly be engaged in 'conversation' with humanity.

70 Ibid., 13.

71 Ibid.

Williams' understanding of this conversation contains many rich insights, but before considering them it will be instructive to take a few steps back and consider his position on revelation, particularly when it is understood as one half of a conversation and prayer as the other. Once again, Williams is opposed to the 'popular' understanding of revelation as a sort of unquestionable Truth or ultimate authority. Instead Williams sees revelation as something that is experienced, as an address or call prior to any action on our part inaugurating the revelation.⁷² It is that which enables creative action. Williams draws on work by Paul Ricoeur that links this type of conception of revelation with the 'poetic referential function' of language. Ricoeur defines this poetic function (which has nothing to do with rhyme or meter) as that which “escapes the definition by adequation as well as the criteria of falsification and verification” which are the characteristics of the “descriptive referential function” of language.⁷³ The poetic function of language then is not that which attempts to describe 'the world as it is' as scientific or philosophical language would, but instead refers to 'the world of the text' that is made manifest. This manifestation is not something which is subject to the rules of falsification and verification, for it functions in an entirely different way. This poetic function of language is similar to Caputo's 'poetics' in describing the event. In both cases, language is attempting to describe a world which is not but could be and thus opens up possibilities for creative potential. As the world being described is not identical with the world as it is, if one were to try and make the manifested world of the text actual, to bring its features into reality (which may or may not be possible), such action could potentially be radically creative as the goals encouraged through the

72 To say that revelation is 'experienced' is not, for Williams, to identify it with a sort of Schleiermacherian personal 'religious' or 'mystical' experience. While the effect of the (biblical) text on the reader is of immense importance to Williams, he possesses a subtle distaste for appeals to interior mystical feeling. Experience as I use it in this paper refers to the former understanding, that of undergoing a text, not a personal interior feeling.

73 Ricoeur, Paul. “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation”, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. with an introduction by L.S. Mudge. London: 1980, 102.

manifestation of the world of the text could break with the current actual world. The poetic function of language does not pronounce a text that seems to describe the impossible, by which I mean either “the impossible” or the “simply impossible,” as wrong, and by understanding a text as poetic one is able to manifest and thus more seriously consider possibilities which might otherwise seem impossible.

As revelation is necessary in creating the possibility for creative potential, it would be accurate to say that the theologian is dependent on revelation, on scripture. This notion of text as creative, however, radically changes the way this dependence is understood. Given that the 'work' is external to the reader and that language operates as poetic reference manifesting a possible world that allows creativity, Ricoeur formulates a non-heteronomous dependence. He describes this less as “a will that submits” than as “an imagination that opens itself.”⁷⁴ He wants to describe one's relationship to the manifest world of a text as dependent in that the text provides a source for creative inspiration, not a prescriptive rulebook or blueprint. He thus avoids traditional, problematic conceptions of heteronomy, instead conceptualizing dependence with an eye to creativity. This philosophical description of the relationship between text as manifestation and the reader allows Williams to describe revelation as that which “manifests an initiative that is not ours in inviting us to a world we did not make.”⁷⁵ The point here for Williams is that revelation and scripture allow and encourage creativity.

This manifest world closely mirrors the call of the impossible for Caputo in that it is concerned with opening up lanes for creative action that break with conventional considerations of 'the impossible' or 'the way the world is.' For Williams, revelation “is essentially to do with

74 Ibid., 117.

75 Williams, Rowan. *On Christian Theology*. Blackwell: Oxford 2000, 134.

what is *generative* in our experience.”⁷⁶ This is the understanding of revelation which undergirds Williams' comments on the creative nature of the narratives of Jesus' life that I discussed in the previous section. Now, however, we can spell out a bit more clearly what it means to say that the Church is under judgement, or that Jesus is the pure victim, who alone “is capable of creative action.”⁷⁷ The world made manifest through revelation—that is, the kingdom of God—given that it is radically different from the world we inhabit, will necessarily spark questions when considered. It is thus that revelation is able to “initiate new possibilities of life.”⁷⁸ The collision between the world of the text (the Kingdom of God) and this world opens up a potential for this world to change, much as the call of the impossible functions for Caputo, particularly in *The Weakness of God*, to prompt transformative action.

Williams' emphasis on time spent in reading reinforces the sense that Williams' treatment of revelation provides resources for creativity which resembles Caputo's call of the impossible. Williams insists on a diachronic reading of scripture, a way of reading that is sensitive to “the experience of reading the text...as a movement through time.”⁷⁹ This type of reading demands a close attention to the different voices of a text, and thus provides the rich potential for readings conditioned by critical scholarship, as such work, by uncovering additional strands of the narrative, can actually “enhance the diachronic nature of the reading by offering different trajectories through the same fundamental movement.”⁸⁰ Thus this way of approaching scripture, even though it is described as “literal” by Williams, maintains a sensitive ear to the work done in critical modes, it continues a sensitivity to the particular, the singular, to different, competing

76 Ibid.

77 Williams, Rowan. *Resurrection*. 2nd ed. Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, 2002, 9.

78 Williams, Rowan. *On Christian Theology*. Blackwell: Oxford 2000, 134.

79 Ibid., 46.

80 Ibid., 51.

voices. For Williams, “the world it opens to us is one of uneasy relationships and discontinuities.”⁸¹ The diversity of this text, then, is powerful in that it does not make interpretation an easy thing, thus building on the complexity, and thus creative potential, of the work of the theologian. This echoes a common point for Williams, difficulty and complexity are not problems to be overcome but resources which allow deeper engagement with reality. This is similar to Caputo's attention to the singular, represented through the impossible, in that contact with reality requires difficulty. The unity of the Bible, for Williams, is present (only) in a (somewhat) unified Christian identity, in that Christians are those who are formed through encounter with the stories of the Bible.⁸² Williams' sensitivity to the diverse voices in the text further exemplifies an attention to the particular which recalls a Caputo's attention to the singular.

At this point, we can return to the conversation between theology and culture, which is most certainly not one-sided. Far from being a morally instructive interaction where theology expresses the divine law, this conversation is for Williams an aspect of the self-critical location of theology and a source of judgement. This conversation is a risky affair, as the theologian attempts to describe human affairs and situate them within a Christ-centered story. This suggests a relationship between theology and 'culture' in which the speech of the theologian is being tested:

The Christian...will frequently find that he or she will not know what to say. There can be a real sense of loss in respect to traditional formulae—not because they are being translated, but because they are being tested: we are discovering whether there is any sense in which the other languages we are working with can be at home with our theology.⁸³

81 Ibid., 53.

82 These comments hint towards questions of pluralism and its limits, questions which will be considered in the next section.

83 Ibid., 38-39.

The theologian thus is being measured by how well he/she is able to apply theological language to describe the rest of the world, in all its specificity and messiness. As mentioned earlier, theology is deeply tied to the particular, and it is with respect to its integrity in describing the particular that theology is judged. The conversation, then, is a risky and challenging affair. There is no simple Truth to be proclaimed, instead, truth is something which arises, in a sense, through this discourse; it is negotiated. This conversation is not one which is attempting to reach some teleological end-point, as if Truth will or could somehow be possessed. Instead, it is within the process, that of openly engaging with human stories and attempting to speak theological language into those stories, that truth is found. In this sense, truth is less a proposition and more a process.⁸⁴

To more fully examine this notion of truth, or meaning-making, as the product of negotiation where the focus is on practical considerations, I want to expand on my treatment of 'the stranger' in the previous section and further explore the relationship between 'the stranger' and 'the other'. I had previously remarked that, despite many apparent similarities, 'the stranger' and 'the other' are quite different. Expanding this point will help illuminate Williams' relationship to deconstruction and his more general theological commitments. Underlying this difference between stranger and other are two different conceptions of 'difference.' In several essays collected in *Wrestling with Angels*, Williams questions what he describes as the Derridean concept of difference and defends an interpretation of Hegel that sidesteps the accusations that, for him, difference is only to be found through a prior and deeper identity.

84 This comment suggest 'process theology,' and while Williams would likely be sympathetic to many of the goals of process theology, my comment here is not meant to refer to 'process theology' as a theological movement but simply to the idea that truth for Williams is always something being strived for, never achieved.

Williams argues that Derrida's interpretation of Hegel sets up something of a straw man. On Caputo's account of Derrida's reading, the Hegelian dialectic does not adequately acknowledge difference, as any difference is automatically sublated into synthesis. Identity is thus prioritized over difference to the extent that Derrida argues that the difference is consumed by identity. The antithesis is simply a contradiction which is eradicated by the subsuming synthesis. On Williams' reading, however, the end of the dialectic is more of a limit, an intersection at infinity, and as such it is never realized and can only be talked about in oblique ways. There is never a final, unopposed synthesis. Borrowing from Deborah Chaffin, Williams argues that Hegelian dialectics attempt to “challenge the all-sufficiency of the polarity of simple identity and simple difference” and to move beyond “the plain opposition of positive and negative (presence and absence).”⁸⁵ Thus, as opposed to the Derridean Hegel who is treating difference as something that can simplistically be reconciled with identity through the synthesis, the Hegel Williams is arguing for actually treats identity and difference as complicated, as they are only contained in a “structured wholeness”⁸⁶ through a nuanced understanding of each; difference is not lost in synthesis. Further, when this is deployed, it is “inseparable from the process of a corporate making of sense.”⁸⁷ One only uses dialectics when attempting to communally understand the world. Thus Williams is not looking to Hegel just for an intellectual strategy for conceptualizing difference, but is attempting to use him to describe actually instances of communal meaning-making.

Williams contrasts the common postmodern interpretation of Hegel as subordinating difference to identity with a Derridean “refusal of relations between the same and the other.”⁸⁸

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid., 30.

87 Ibid., 31.

88 Ibid., 78.

Williams argues that this Derridean conception of difference, if “strictly maintained” leads to “another kind of reduction to the same,”⁸⁹ only privileging difference before identity. Such an absolute difference creates an other that cannot be thought. Derrida, on Williams' reading, emphasizes difference to the extent that everything becomes difference, thus turning difference into the ultimate similarity between all entities, a sameness emblemized by '*tout autre est tout autre*.' As such, Williams sees “the idea of an absolute otherness is fundamentally confused”⁹⁰ as it posits something which cannot be thought. Since an absolute other cannot be thought, it is impossible to talk about it, to think about it, and as such it is impossible to say what the existence of such an other could mean. The two extreme positions Williams presents as the options Derrida is considering could be characterized as either a difference through transcendent identity, or identity through transcendent difference. Williams even suggests that this “absolutizing of the other...can work to reinforce a sameness *more* enclosed than Hegel's (or Hegel's, at least, as understood by so much of modernity and postmodernity).”⁹¹

Williams' dissatisfaction with these two understandings of difference is that neither

allows easily for a difference that is both simultaneous and interactive, a difference that allows temporal change, reciprocity of action, and thus avoids the two different but depressingly similar varieties of totalization that might be implied by the polar models we began with.⁹²

In both models, there is no real difference which can be worked with; there is no difference which can be overcome. Williams is seeking, in a sense, a way of conceptualizing difference that makes possible the description of ordinary, everyday linguistic exchanges where there is both understanding and misunderstanding. In short, he seeks an articulation where meaning is

89 Ibid.

90 Ibid., 36.

91 Ibid., 79.

92 Ibid.

negotiated. The *tout autre* is so wholly other that it is difficult to imagine how an account of daily encounters which absolute difference in this way would work. As Williams puts it,

For all the fascination in postmodernity with difference (however spelled)...the perspective here in fact sidesteps the practical constructions of difference with some elegance. By absolutizing the other, otherness becomes un-thinkable; the laborious process of evolving a practice in which my desire, my project, redefines or rethinks...is avoided. The other becomes an area of something like sacred terror, not the occasion for a developing and often deeply ironic self-articulation, and the discovery of a way of transcending scarcity.⁹³

Thus a Derridean conception of difference fails to meet Williams' demands for a theology shaped by practical concerns. In response, and through a detailed argument based on the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Williams argues for a theological concept of difference that stakes some sort of middle path, arguing that a Christian conception of a God—as both entirely other than Creation and yet in a sense analogically related to it—allows for a concept of difference that can naturally be applied to the Church's attempts to relate to the world in reforming human relationships.

When Hegelian dialectics are deployed, they are “inseparable from the process of a corporate making of sense.”⁹⁴ Thus Williams is not looking to Hegel just for an intellectual strategy for conceptualizing difference, but to describe actual instances of communal meaning-making. As such, there is a necessary aspect of “labour” involved, of an involvement in a process. Drawing on Gillian Rose's interpretation of Hegel, Williams agrees with her bold conclusion that, in Williams' words,

every moment of recognition is also a new moment of salutary error to the extent that it is the taking of a *position*. The truth lies in the 'system', which is *not* the theory that the mind can possess at one moment, but the entirety of the path, the

93 Ibid., 55.

94 Ibid., 31.

project, of critical dissolution of the positional and partial definition.⁹⁵

It is in this sense that truth for Williams is negotiated, as any particular position one takes within a negotiation is necessarily in error, as there is always some difference to disturb that position. I would suggest that this understanding of Hegel fits well with a certain understanding of the passion which motivates Caputo and deconstruction. One could read deconstruction such that the point is not to definitively state the absolute nature of difference, leading to Williams' critique that one would be unable to speak. Instead, deconstruction can be understood as a certain reminder for us that that language's representations are not absolute or objective. It functions as a regulator, to keep language, institutions, or, in this case, positions, from closing in on themselves, from thinking they can assimilate everything. Thus, passion here is a desire to keep language in play, to keep structures from closing in on themselves. The characteristic which makes the dialectical system 'true' is not that it is capable of reaching its teleological goal, that it would be able at some point to reach the definitive synthesis, but that through the process each synthesis, each position, is able to become more comprehensive—not in the pejorative sense meant by Derrida, where comprehensive means destruction of details and difference—but in the sense that each position is able to more fully recognize the complexities of reality and thus is able to, through the labor of this process, to do justice to complexity and difference. As opposed to a strictly Derridean concept of difference which essentially shuts down any labor, any work, as difference becomes effectively insurmountable, Williams' concept of difference allows one to work in a never-ending project of reconciling difference and identity.

Having considered Williams' criticisms of a 'deconstructive' conception of difference, I want to return to Williams' discussion of the stranger to suggest that Williams' vision of

95 Ibid., 61.

difference is motivated by a desire to be able to interact with real human conflict and oppression. Williams identifies God with the stranger. Thus he states that, "God's transcendence is in some sense present in and with those who do not have a voice...God appears in and through the fact that our ways of arranging the world always leave someone's interest welfare or reality out of account."⁹⁶ Far from being a simple inversion of power structures, such that the 'preferred position' is that of outcast, Williams seems to see the entire point of God's manifestation in the stranger, as mentioned in the last section, as a questioning which disrupts our conventional way of ordering the world. Drawing upon previous work on the topic of creativity then, we could say that Williams sees God manifest in the stranger such that the stranger breaks down our stale ordering of the world, thus opening it up to new creative possibilities.

The point here is that difference is that which allows for real conversation, for an acknowledgment of limits, and thus of real openness to conversation from which real change is possible. This change, however, is only possible for Williams when both individual and community are under judgement, as judgement creates the openness that is required for creative change. When examined in this light, Williams' conception of difference, given its marked disagreement with that of Derrida, nevertheless maintains the same overall goals as deconstruction, keeping institutions open to the margins in order that they might stay fluid, be able to change, and remain open to that outside of itself. In this sense, then, the general theological project of Williams can be said to be deconstructive. Further, this deconstructive mode of thinking theologically—manifest through an attachment to theological instability or displacement—operates as a core principle of Williams' theology, pushing him to view discourses outside theology as locations for testing, a creative rather than strictly didactic view of

96 Williams, Rowan. *Christ On Trial*. Eerdmans: Cambridge 2000, 54.

revelation, and an attitude towards difference that pays attention to particulars while also allowing for a process of negotiation towards truth.

Potential Challenges to Williams' Theology

I will now turn to certain challenges Caputo would likely have for Williams, investigating how Williams would respond in order to more fully elaborate on the ways in which he is performing the messianic in his theology. The specific issues I will address are: 1) negative theology, Does Williams avoid Caputo's twin critiques of negative theology?, 2) dogma or doctrine, commitment to the tradition and the associated authority, Does commitment to traditional doctrine overwhelm the impulse to self-deconstruction within Williams' theology?, and 3) pluralism, Does Williams' commitment to Christian truth overwhelm his ability to expose Christianity to “the danger of deconstruction”?

Negative Theology

It will be helpful to examine how Williams' position on negative theology measures up to Caputo's critiques of it. As a reminder, Caputo qualifies comparisons between negative theology and deconstruction through two criticisms: 1) the denials of God's being can be dishonest when the theologian 'really knows' what God is like, and 2) the common retreat to prelinguistic, interior experience as unchallengeable proof of God's being or characteristics. Instead, Caputo wants to refine negative theology, to insist that it not too quickly answer its own questions, that it cannot say with full confidence that it knows what it is talking about, in order to advance faith as “a certain resolve to hold on by one's teeth.”⁹⁷ As a summary, Caputo is suspicious of negative

⁹⁷ Caputo, John. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1997, 12.

theology when it seems that nothing is really in question.

Negative theology is acutely important for Williams' theology, as “a theology of the risen Jesus will always be, to a greater or lesser degree, a negative theology, obliged to confess its conceptual and imaginative poverty—as is any theology which takes seriously the truth that God is not a determinate object in the world.”⁹⁸ While articulating the importance of negative theology and the otherness of God, this statement alone does not remove Williams from Caputo's critiques. At other places, however, Williams is quite critical of just the sort of negative theology which Caputo is critiquing. For him, negative theology is “obliged to be not only critical of the Church's language and practice but also self-critical, suspicious of its recurring temptation to theoretical resolution and conceptual neatness.”⁹⁹ It is not enough that negative theology critique the way the Church at large operates, but it must itself be critical of its own tendencies to resolve, to think it has completed its critiques, to think that it has fully and unproblematically articulated the situation of the Church and theology before God. Thus negative theology is required to never settle, to never consider certain elements of its theology above question. Further, for Williams God is the name of an action and as such God is “specified in the flux of interpretation and action in the community's life—not in the definition of a concept.”¹⁰⁰ As such, it is fundamentally impossible for God to be described by theology in any essential way, all that can be said concerns activity and as such “does not easily lend itself to conceptual tidiness.”¹⁰¹ While Williams does not push the unknowing of negative theology so far as Caputo would, he does avoid the sharp tip of Caputo's first critique against negative theology.

On the second critique, in his discussion of Luther in *The Wound of Knowledge*, Williams

98 Williams, Rowan. *Resurrection*. 2nd ed. 2nd ed. Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, 2002. 84.

99 Williams, Rowan. *On Christian Theology*. Blackwell: Oxford 2000, 146.

100 Ibid.

101 Ibid.

also rejects 'mystical experience' as a source of knowledge about God. He agrees with Luther that "knowledge is a historically conditioned affair" and that, by implication, one must "reject the idea of privileged authoritative propositions delivered from religious illumination."¹⁰² This formulation allows Williams some latitude with experience of God in general, but it does specifically rule out any knowledge coming from such experience. Indeed, he goes so far as to say that "the real and absolute transcendence of God can only be understood in circumstances and experiences where there are no signs of transcendence, no religious clues."¹⁰³ Williams here is pushing just as far as Caputo, real understanding of God is to be found when there is no evidence that God can be found, just as real faith can only be had when there is no reason to have such faith. While Williams may still have a certain tension with Caputo on the first point, on this second one he pushes just as far as Caputo would.

Dogma

Caputo has never had patience for "dogma." In his early work, he aligns himself with Derrida, finding the content of religions troubling, and in his later work he routinely has little patience for dogma. For him it is a pejorative understood as tenets that are: 1) uncritically accepted and 2) presented from a supposed epistemologically privileged position. Caputo would also be skeptical of dogma or, less pejoratively, doctrine that is held too firmly since such doctrine would not be exposed to "the danger of deconstruction." I will take up this last challenge in my discussion of pluralism, but for now I will turn to Williams' discussions of dogma, to see if 1 and 2 apply. In doing so I will work both from his explicit work on dogma in

102 Williams, Rowan. *The Wound of Knowledge*. 2nd ed. Cowley: Cambridge, MA, 1990, 158.

103 Ibid.

general, and his specific work with the doctrines of the Incarnation and *creatio ex nihilo*.

In his article “Beginning with the Incarnation,” Williams responds to R.C. Moberly's writing on “The Incarnation as the Basis of Dogma” and uses it as a point of departure from which to engage the topic of dogma more generally. By “dogma” Williams seems to mean something like a position taken in relation to an issue, as he identifies “any definite answer” to the question of who Jesus Christ is as “dogmatic.”¹⁰⁴ Rather than the common understanding of dogma which Caputo uses, Williams seems to indicate something more similar to common usage of doctrine. As he works towards a definition, he says that “dogma reflects a commitment to truth ...not a theoretical construct, but the abiding stimulus to certain kinds of theoretical question.”¹⁰⁵ The reason for dogma and the debates, both historical and contemporary, surrounding it is a commitment to truth, a sense of the importance of correctly articulating correct answers. And the point of this commitment to truth is not to create a seamless “theoretical construct,” to build an integrated systematic theology, but to articulate truths which are able to transform lives. Reminiscent of his commitment to practical issues in his work on Hegel, Williams goes so far as to say that “dogma will be misunderstood to the extent that it has ceased to connect with any awareness of a new identity and a new historical humanity formed in confrontation with the story of Jesus.”¹⁰⁶ Williams rejects thinking dogma as abstract truth statements where the stress is on getting them right, as if there are benefits to the 'correct' theoretical constructions. Instead he focuses on the ability of dogma/doctrine to facilitate encounter with Jesus.¹⁰⁷ As he puts it in *Christ on Trial*, “the job of doctrine is to hold us still before Jesus.”¹⁰⁸ In a way that would be

104 Williams, Rowan. *On Christian Theology*. Blackwell: Oxford 2000, 79.

105 Ibid., 80.

106 Ibid., 82.

107 At this point, given that Williams uses dogma and doctrine in different works to mean essentially the same thing, I will begin to use the terms interchangeably.

108 Williams, Rowan. *Christ on Trial*. Eerdmans: Cambridge 2000, 37.

rather surprising, given that doctrine is usually thought of as abstract and only minimally connected with real life, Williams connects doctrine to people's experience of Jesus.

Dogma facilitates encounter with Jesus by forcing one to grapple with the strangeness of Jesus, much as the language “hold us still before Jesus” suggests. Doctrine does not facilitate easy comprehension of the stories of Jesus, its goal is not to simplify, or make morals easier to digest. Instead, “there is an aspect of dogmatic utterance that has to do with making it harder to talk about God.”¹⁰⁹ For Williams, when dogma is understood correctly, it facilitates a closer engagement with the event of Jesus. Thus dogma helps to reinforce the difficulty, the strangeness, of the biblical texts. Williams' discussions of scripture are always sensitive to the way in which these narratives, both through their repetition in Christian life and their presence in Western culture, become familiar and understood. He is always attempting to make the story fresh again, to reengage the reader with the impact, the strangeness, of the story. Dogma is a way of assisting in working towards this impact as it reminds us of the complex, strange nature of Jesus. Given that many doctrines go against common sense, Williams is trying to stress that these doctrines arose in the context of people struggling to make sense of their experiences of God and, as a result, real contact with those doctrines should reawaken a sense of the struggle through which they were created.

Williams only sees dogma, properly understood, as emerging in the context of practical debates. Thus he points out that, “we do not find in the early Church debates over the truth and falsity of a phrase like *verus Deus*, *verus homo* in isolation, but a number of conflicts turning upon and issuing in a set of liturgical and disciplinary conventions.”¹¹⁰ Arguments over this

109 Williams, Rowan. *On Christian Theology*. Blackwell: Oxford 2000, 84.

110 *Ibid.*, 89.

phrase—“fully God, fully human”—are not made in order to justify some abstract theological concept, or as isolated attempt to 'get things right.' Instead, such debates arise through actual, practical conflicts over what may be said liturgically within the Church or what specific devotional practices can be encouraged. Williams pushes this point further by looking at how patristic doctrinal formulations are used, arguing that “every reasonably sophisticated Christology in the history of Christian doctrine has in practice exercised great flexibility as to the status and 'register' of agreed formulae.”¹¹¹ Not only is doctrine developed in the context of practical debates, but specific doctrinal formulations themselves, while not simply discarded, are deployed with a degree of flexibility, such that there remains a certain creative potential with the theologian working from them. Thus Williams argues that generally, theologians used classical doctrinal formulations such as *verus Deus, verus homo* in order to work “with what the formulae have made possible rather than with a notion that they have closed the debate for ever.”¹¹² Much as Williams' way of reading scripture emphasizes the creative potential introduced, a similar principle is at work with doctrinal texts. Dogma for Williams is about helping people to engage with the fundamental, strange, unsettling stories of faith and about creating a tradition which enables new, creative doctrinal formulations

This phrasing may suggest that Williams would endorse new theologies that radically break with tradition. Exploring his work with *creatio ex nihilo*, however, will reveal that Williams' notions of creativity emphasize uncovering radical implications of traditional formulas instead of inventing entire new theologies. In his article “On Being Creatures”, Williams responds to many new developments in creation theology, particularly certain feminist readings

111 Ibid.

112 Ibid., 90.

of Genesis that move in similar directions to those of Catherine Keller. They see traditional *creatio ex nihilo* as founding and supporting patriarchy and are thus trying to articulate alternatives. While sensitive to their concerns, Williams suggests that the patriarchal implications of *creatio ex nihilo* would be erased if one examined the doctrine carefully in order to tease out why it was formulated as it was and what its radical implications would be for theology today. This is an example of a common theme through Williams' work, a preference for reexamining the traditional doctrine instead of inventing a new idiom, particularly when the new idioms has difficulties and the old idiom has not had its potential exhausted.

Williams thus begins to reexamine the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* drawing out its radical implications. In its “classical sense,” the doctrine focuses on the *ex nihilo* part of creation and thus on God's total otherness and independence from creation. This independence does not see God as another (incredibly strong) power working in this world. God did not exert power over the world in order to shape it, but spoke it into being by “free utterance.”¹¹³ Since God has no needs, it is not as if humans can compete with God, and God's power “cannot be invoked to legitimize earthly power.”¹¹⁴ God does not need human structures to accomplish anything, as everything that exists only through God's free act of speaking it into existence. Building on this, Williams draws up the “fundamental dependence” humans have on God, trying to think about it in terms of dependence on that which enables us. This is similar to Ricoeur's arguments for a non-heteronomous dependence: not “a will that submits” but “an imagination that opens itself.”¹¹⁵ The point Williams is trying to make here is that, contrary to the modern ideal of autonomy, Christianity speaks to the basic human need to be in relationship by being concerned

113 Ibid., 73.

114 Ibid.

115 Ricoeur, Paul. “Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation”, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. with an introduction by L.S. Mudge. London: 1980, 117.

with a certain brand of dependence. Expressed in the creation story, his dependence forms the grounds for “an act of trust.”¹¹⁶ His point is that God is so beyond human power struggles that the understanding that such a God wills us into being is actually an incredibly liberating affirmation. Far from being a resignation to a totalitarian power, Williams describes God, entirely based on *creatio ex nihilo*, as a liberating transcendent, for by realizing God's complete lack of need and God's affirmation of the world, we realize that we are free because nothing we do can take away this affirmation. And since this original act is one of a “generosity that finds joy in being for the other,”¹¹⁷ we too are pushed to be joyfully generous towards the other. Of course, this shared status of all humans has immense implications for generosity and nonviolence towards other humans.

All this is to show that Williams is able to examine a traditional doctrine, that of creation from nothing, and to draw out its radical implications. As he puts it:

My arguments in this chapter has been that we are badly in need, not so much of a re-working of the doctrine of creation designed to eliminate what some have seen as the morally or spiritually damaging effects of believing God to be absolutely prior to and other than the world, as of a retrieval of the radical implications of such a belief for an understanding of our liberty before God.¹¹⁸

He is sensitive to the injustices which prompted the alternative creation theologies. However, rather than quickly abandoning this apparently harmful doctrine, as if its full import has already been spent, he reexamines it in order to see if it can be understood in a somewhat creative way which avoids the negative effects.

This emphasis on creativity means that doctrine never completes its task. “If we want to be faithful to the fundamental impulse of dogmatic speech, we may well, I believe, have to say

116 Williams, Rowan. *On Christian Theology*. Blackwell: Oxford 2000, 72.

117 Ibid., 76.

118 Ibid., 77.

that the classical dogmatic tradition has served to keep the essential questions alive.”¹¹⁹ For Williams, the correct theological attitude towards dogma is to see it as that which maintains certain questions in order to continue exploration of the “creative radicality of the person of Jesus.”¹²⁰ Dogma thus means nearly the opposite for Williams than it does for Caputo. While the classical dogmatic utterances, if understood correctly, do hold a privileged position for Williams, this privileged position is that of a human formulation that avoids temptations to settle Jesus into neat categories. Dogma for Williams is not to be uncritically accepted but is to be worked with and developed. In a sense, Caputo's accusations against dogma do, to an extent, apply to Williams, as Williams does not seriously question dedication to the tradition, to the classical doctrinal formulations. Nevertheless, the way in which Williams respects the dogmatic tradition does not close out critical reflection but encourages it. Furthermore, recalling that Christian discourse, including dogmatic utterances, are to be tested against the world in such a way that may leave the theologian speechless, it seems that Williams is, at the least, doing dogma in a very different way than Caputo understands it.

Pluralism

Expanding Williams' position on pluralism will allow for additional exploration and questioning of the relationship between dedication and questioning of the tradition. For Williams, the three common options for interfaith dialogue—exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism—all have their failings. Exclusivism, where Jesus is the only legitimate path to truth, rules out dialogue in principle. Inclusivism, where other religions are alternative expressions of Christian

119 Ibid., 92.

120 Ibid.

truth, attempts to claim ownership all over all good aspects of other religions while rejecting the bad. Pluralism, where various religions are equally valid paths, is unable to muster actual critical dialogue as all it can muster is unquestioning approval. Williams affirms the necessity of real dialogue in our pluralistic world. With all its religious diversity, Williams seeks a way for different religious traditions to share in ways that respect the integrity of each other and yet are able to ask critical questions, thus unveiling possibilities that each tradition may be unable to meet certain questions even as it also finds its answers blessing others.

Williams is impelled to interfaith dialogue because Christianity has not been able to universally convince that it presents the most comprehensive source of religious meaning. He remarks that Jews have not agreed that Christianity is a legitimate replacement for Judaism. In keeping with the relationship between theology and society as one where theology is tested, rather than placing the blame on the stubborn, sinful nature of those who resist, Williams identifies Christianity itself as the reason for this lack of universal acceptance. However, rather than seeing this as the result of some sort of failing by the Church, instead the refusal of Jews “to grant that the meanings of Israel are contained and subsumed in the Christian institution...is essential for the truthfulness and faithfulness of the Church, tempted as it is to claim a distorted kind of finality.”¹²¹ The fact that Jews do not accept the validity of Christianity as a replacement for Judaism is a good thing as it prevents Christianity from claiming a totality of religious meaning. Williams' point is that Jesus, whose history “enacts a judgement on tribalized and self-protecting religion,”¹²² opens up a renewed understanding that God is free to operate beyond the limits of any given religion. In a near-paradoxical way, the refusal of Jews to accept Christianity

121 Ibid., 102-103.

122 Ibid., 104.

helps drive home the judgement of Jesus on “tribalized” religion. This understanding is fundamentally one of “dispossession” in that the True God is not the God of any individual community or sect, but is in fact present in the abrogation of these “tribalized” religions. My earlier arguments on Williams' discussions of Jesus lead up to this fundamental point. For Williams, Jesus demonstrates that God is outside of religious establishment and provides a way, through the story of Jesus' weakness, to engage with God. Thus, to return to Judaism, the claim of the Christian is that that Christian story “is the most comprehensive working-out of this moment of dispossession—a religious tradition generating its own near-negation, holding in precarious juxtaposition the faithfulness of God and the alienness and freedom of God.”¹²³ The key point for Williams is that this claim, that the Christian story of God through Jesus is in some way the most comprehensive, is a debatable claim. Thus, though the Christian believes that the story of God through Jesus is able to speak to human experience with unique comprehensiveness, other religions will rightly challenge this claim, the opening the door to real dialogue.

Returning to the questions from Caputo, Williams' is maintaining a certain tension between, on one hand, respect for tradition and commitment to Christianity and, on the other hand, a critical attitude towards Christian truth claims and an ability to engage in open and productive dialogue outside the Church. This tension is an option which Caputo's strong-weak dichotomy does not anticipate. His rhetorical dichotomy between strong and weak theology contrasts a strong God who is has power and thus is 'for' the religious community with a weak God who has only the power of a call and thus cannot really be 'for' any community which exists. Strong theology encourages confidence in its answers, sees itself as having some privileged

123 Ibid.

relation to truth, while weak theology realizes that the messianic could always have appeared differently. Williams maintains strong commitment to a particular tradition, but the tradition is to be critically examined, creatively elaborated, and then tested against the world. Williams' God is powerful, yet that power is not a power that supports or attacks other powers of the world; it is a power that is manifest through weakness, a power that is only known through stepping into weakness. Thus Williams manages some configuration which retains certain characteristics of both of Caputo's categories.

Still, Williams does retain a commitment to a tradition, and one could ask if he truly exposes it to the “danger of deconstruction.” Has Williams in fact managed to incorporate a deconstructive impulse within his theology in such a way that ones' commitment to the tradition cannot be questioned? To phrase this differently, if theology was to attempt to apply dogma, the Christian story, to the world, what if the world does not accept the Christian story as applicable? In this failing, it seems clear that Williams would not take the easy option of blaming society, but it is unclear if he would trace the failing to the classical dogma or the theologians' interpretations, applications, and presentation of it. Of course, it is doubtful that any such clear-cut situation would actually exist, but as a hypothetical, in order for Williams' theology to mesh with Caputo's vision, one could argue that he would need to be able to acknowledge that the Christian tradition could fail and thus would need to be discarded.

Conclusion

Rowan Williams manages to draw together many characteristics which one rarely finds in

the same theologian. I developed John Caputo's work on religion, from his early emphasis on the singular, the call of justice, and the messianic, to his later theological work on weak theology where deconstruction functions as a regulative mechanism, arguing that he interpreted as an *Extra-Skriver*, critiquing various facets of religion in order to keep it focused on the messianic. I then applied this analysis to Rowan Williams, demonstrating how the fundamental tenets of Christian faith function for him to deconstruct human religious conceptions and expectations of God in order to meet Jesus in weakness and unknowing. This analysis of Williams left questions over the precise extent to which religions need to expose themselves to the "danger of deconstruction." Does Williams' commitment to the Christian tradition manifest a core of religion which is not exposed to deconstruction, thus risking the religion's commitment to the messianic?

I would suggest that it does not. In addition to the rather obvious way in which the impulse to self-critique keeps theology dedicated to the messianic and resists violence, Williams is actually an excellent though unexpected example of precisely that which Caputo as *Extra-Skriver* is attempting to encourage. Though manifest in a much more traditional, orthodox way, Williams' theology is self-critical and remains focused on the difficulty of reality to such a degree that Caputo, I imagine, could hardly not approve.

Williams thus accomplishes something rather surprising in contemporary Western religious thought. His theology, operating in a deconstructive manner while articulating this deconstruction from traditional sources, provides an interesting twist on the conventional labels of 'liberal' and 'conservative' theology. While it may be too bold to say that Williams' theology *overturns* these paradigms for thinking about religion, it certainly *questions* the ways in which theological options are constructed. For the theologian, in what ways might Williams' theology

open up new avenues for thinking about the often strained relations between reason and revelation, science and religion? How else might theology function deconstructively, in what other contexts—Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant—might tradition be reexamined to bear surprising new fruits? For the 'secular' academic, in what ways may the modern antagonism between reason/science and revelation/tradition reflect in scholars' description of theology? How may scholarly descriptions of both classical and contemporary theology remain blind to certain unexpected configurations of supposedly antagonistic elements? What other theologians may be operating in surprising ways, only requiring a suitable lens to bring the surprise into focus?

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