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Book Review: What Would Jesus Deconstruct?

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Finally, some brief comments ought to be made about Ron Hill’s capable illustrations that occur every few pages. The *Armchair Theologians* series has used Hill’s work for all of its volumes, and the cartoon content is technically proficient and communicative, standing halfway between a Sunday comic strip and a political cartoon. In its favor, it does create a sort of ironic dialectical mixture of subtly and crassness that may have given Barth a chuckle (for example, the inconspicuous presence of the Isenheim altarpiece in the cover art in contrast with the illustration featuring Barth driving a bulldozer labeled “Theological Reform, Inc.” on page 76). But in a more serious vein, I wonder if some of the more irreverent moments ultimately hinder the stated goal of the book. Given the concerns Barth himself had about idolatry and theological precision, is it really fair to his program to feature repeated caricatures of God the Father as a jolly senior citizen or a smiling Jesus impaled on the cross saying, “Don’t I seem dependable?” This is not a critique of the book per se (or even the cartoons—which are very amusing), only a question about whether the medium so employed does justice or violence to the person we are attempting to take seriously.

But these concerns are slight in light of the greater value of the book and could be raised in theory about any attempt to transpose a theological symphony into a single melody line, as must often be done to help the novice enter an otherwise overwhelming experience. There are hard questions at stake here, questions that juxtapose education of the laity, historical research methodology, and “high-end” theological reflection. I do not pretend to have the answer on how all of these can be merged into a single composition. It takes courage and wisdom to write of such matters for the “average Christian;” the risks of misunderstanding are high and the ultimate benefits hard to measure. But the task is vital. Barth knew well enough that theologians do not exist for their own incestuous dialogue but to serve the church and to be vehicles by which God’s people might hear anew the Word. Franke, Hill, and the *Armchair Theologians* series clearly recognize this truth and seek to embody it in this latest installment in the series. So to that end I applaud them for their ongoing efforts to navigate this “impossible possibility.”

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In the latest volume in Baker Academic’s series The Church and Postmodern Culture, John Caputo proclaims the “good news of postmodernism for the church,” according to which deconstruction is best understood as “the hermeneutics of the kingdom of God” (pp. 26, 58, 84, 113). The early chapters of this book display Caputo’s expertise as one of America’s foremost expositors of the ethico-religious dimensions of Derrida’s challenging work, providing a clear, accessible, and even playful explanation of the religious shape of deconstruction. Caputo presents his case by means of an intertextual reading of Derrida’s work through Charles Sheldon’s 1896 classic, *In His Steps*, the original source of the WWJD? question. From this unique combination, Caputo develops advice for how the church can benefit from deconstruction as it owns the fact that it is a provisional entity that looks toward the future coming of the kingdom of God.

For Caputo, deconstruction is not a determinate position or manifesto; there is no deconstructionism. Rather, deconstruction is a way of inhabiting an institution (like the church) that is driven by a passion for the truth about whatever is repressed, omitted,
or marginalized within that institution. Deconstruction is a process of letting that truth happen, letting the kingdom come, by opening up any rigid structures within the institution which prevent the fullness of truth from emerging. As Caputo sees it, if the church allows deconstruction to happen in its midst, it will increasingly be open to the faith, hope, love, forgiveness, and hospitality of the kingdom. He develops this theme through the first four chapters of the book, positioning justice, the gift, the impossible, the messianic, and hospitality as key elements of deconstruction. The eponymous fifth chapter is given to an application of deconstruction to the contemporary church’s struggles with consumerism, war, feminism, homosexuality, and abortion. The book concludes with descriptions of two different churches that Caputo believes embody, in their unique ways, the deconstructive shape of the kingdom of God.

Readers who have only seen deconstruction treated as a theory of language may be led to wonder if the deconstruction treated in this book is indeed the same matter about which they have heard elsewhere, as that view is not much in evidence in this volume. Such readers will find footnote 10 in chapter 3 helpful in orienting them to the context of the terminology used by Caputo, but coverage of the full range of the Derridean corpus cannot be found here. Readers interested in that kind of overview should supplement Caputo’s book with James K. A. Smith’s *Live Theory* volume on Derrida. But even without the full picture, Caputo’s exposition of the ethics of deconstruction could go a long way toward correcting some of the misunderstandings of deconstruction that can be found nearly everywhere today.

Unfortunately, though, as Caputo applies deconstruction to the real-world issues facing the church today, it becomes evident that his particular version of the postmodern gospel is not entirely good news for the evangelical church. The problem here is not the postmodern bogeyman, as some may fear. Rather, the problem is that Caputo himself is perhaps not postmodern enough; he is haunted by the Enlightenment attitude toward religion, and is thus not the best voice to herald the advent of postmodernism to evangelical readers. Understand, I appreciate Caputo’s work and have learned a great deal from him, but this book, for all its promise, ends up being a mismatch of author and audience, creating problems that make it difficult for the “good news” of deconstruction to be heard.

To support this allegation, I will focus on what I take to be the most significant point at which Caputo and his evangelical readers are on divergent paths, namely, the status of Scripture. Whereas evangelical identity is shaped by a high view of the authority of Scripture, Caputo views the Bible as an “archive of Jesus” (pp. 33–34), a preserver of the *memory* of Jesus, from which the church draws to “repeat with a difference” the ‘theo-poetics’ of the kingdom of God (pp. 55f). There is a lot packed into this brief description, but the religion Caputo unpacks from it is not so much Christianity as it is deconstruction itself, as a prayer for the impossible, undeconstructible event of justice, or love, or the gift (it goes by many names). In saying this, I am not at all questioning the depth or honesty of Caputo’s commitment to Christ; that is never at issue in this book. Rather, I am suggesting that his recommendation of Christian faith in this book would appear to be itself a function of his commitment to deconstruction, not the other way around. I actually do not think Caputo would disagree with me here, as his own statements about deconstruction, religion, and the Bible suggest, both in this text and elsewhere.

For Caputo, deconstruction “hits the ground” in the church “under the name of God—it being understood that this affirmation can be made under many names, with or without God” (p. 124; cf. pp. 68, 118). This fact, he says, “complicates the distinction between theism and atheism” (p. 58). The Caputo we encounter in this text is a follower of Derrida’s “messianic without any concrete messianism” who only endorses the Christian faith to the degree that it lives up (or shows potential to live up) to the call of
undeconstructible love. Indeed, Caputo says, “[w]here love is implemented, there is the church” (p. 124).

This is, in many ways, a prototypical Enlightenment approach, as can be seen if we compare Caputo’s deconstructed church to the enlightened church envisioned by Immanuel Kant. For Kant, the true church is one that is willing to discard the historical particularities of its contingent faith, its authoritative text, and its ecclesiastical structure if these are found to hinder it from more purely approximating the true universal religion. Of course, Kant’s true universal religion is one of rationally defined morality, of which Caputo is no fan, but on closer analysis, Caputo’s approach is not so different from Kant’s. Obviously Caputo and Kant are very different thinkers, and I do not want to gloss over their differences. Kant wishes to articulate rationally the exact nature of the universal religion, whereas Caputo will staunchly resist all efforts to articulate the identity of the eschatological event that calls the church beyond itself; for Caputo, Kant’s naming of the end toward which we should move places limits on the openness, and thus the vigor, of faith. By contrast, Caputo thinks that deconstruction is called by unnameable love toward a radical openness to the unknown, unexpected visitation of the uninvited other. But despite these differences (and others), the spirit of Kant moves in Caputo’s assessment of Christianity. Like Kant, he treats the elements of Christian faith as contingent components to be accepted or discarded as they are measured against a call from beyond them.

So it is that Caputo, in the spirit of Kant, stands in judgment over passages of Scripture that he finds incompatible with his “weak universal” of undeconstructible love. Paul’s discussion of women in 1 Corinthians 11, Caputo asserts, has nothing to do with the kingdom of God (p. 106). Likewise, regarding homosexuality, Caputo argues that “the Greeks were right and the dominant tradition among Jews and Christians is wrong, just as the Scriptures are wrong to underwrite slavery and the oppression of women” (p. 109). He even hints that belief in Christ’s resurrection is not an essential component of Christian identity, and may in fact be deleterious to it (pp. 132–133). Sadly, his arguments are not based on the kind of close textual reading required either by deconstruction or faithful biblical hermeneutics, but are instead presented as defeaters of a series of straw man biblical “literalists.”

Caputo’s attitude toward the Bible is summed up neatly in his approving quote of Schüssler Fiorenza, who urges that no text “that perpetuates violence against women, children or slaves should be accorded the status of divine revelation if we do not want to turn the God of the Bible into a God of violence” (p. 111). Such a quote could have just as easily come from Kant who, in Religion Within the Bounds of Reason Alone, raised the question “as to whether morality should be expounded according to the Bible or whether the Bible should not rather be expounded according to morality.” Opting for the latter, Kant argues that Abraham should have rejected the supposed “voice of God” telling him to sacrifice his son. Because Abraham should have known rationally that killing innocents is universally wrong, he should not have heeded the voice of Yahweh, and should have chosen instead to follow the dictates of the moral law in faithfulness to the one true universal religion. While Caputo criticizes Kant’s stance on this issue, rightly observing that following Kant’s advice would place Abraham above the call of God (i.e., judging God’s call by means of his own autonomous faculties; p. 49), Caputo does not seem to realize that his handling of Scripture is a version of the same attitude. Specifically, his own understanding of justice and love govern his approach to the Bible.

But what is the source of Caputo’s understanding of justice and love? Kierkegaard maintained that we cannot hope to understand Abraham’s actions at Moriah apart from the call of God on his life; there simply are no standards external to that call by which we can make sense of his choices. This, then, raises the question of the source of the call on the church. For Caputo, that which calls us is nameless and unknown (pp. 49–50),
whereas for evangelicals, the One who calls us is Christ, through his Word. Caputo handles the undeconstructible call of “the kingdom” (one of the many names for the nameless event that calls us) as though it is discernible apart from the Word by which the kingdom is announced, and it is his sense of the call of the kingdom that moves him to ignore those texts in Scripture that seem to call him elsewhere. I would contend, however, that in doing so, Caputo has reduced the difficult alterity of divine self-revelation to human sameness. A more consistently deconstructive stance (and a more difficult one) is one that remains open to the otherness of God’s self-revelation, even when that revelation leads us to “places we do not want to go (especially to places we do not want to go)” (p. 54).

To wrestle carefully with the text of Scripture, to submit oneself to God’s authority through it, to be unwilling to jettison any part of it that does not seem to “fit”—this is to be deconstructively open to God’s otherness. If we take seriously the entirety of Scripture, holding to the Reformers’ sense of sola scriptura, we put ourselves and our churches in position to be deconstructed by God himself, through his Word and Spirit, according to the call of his justice, his righteousness, his shalom. Pace Caputo, this is the best context for deconstruction. I realize that Caputo would dismiss such faith as impure compared to the contentless expectation of the pure messianic hope he champions, but I would submit that there is more than enough différence between the kingdom of God and human ecclesiastical constructs. Thus, even as we look specifically to Scripture to form our expectations with regard to the kingdom, we must still be unreservedly open to the uninvited surprise of God opening up our constructs to be shaped in ways we never expected. It is here, in robust eschatological Christian community, that we find the true event, the true gift, the true call under which Christians are to live. Sadly, Caputo’s deconstructive pharmakon for the evangelical church goes down as more poison than cure, but in doing so, his book serves as a helpful reminder that if we allow God’s Word to deconstruct us, dividing joint from marrow, and if we purposefully act as agents of divine deconstruction in one another’s lives within the church, we should be led to a hospitality and love more life-giving than the “religion without religion” offered by Caputo and Derrida.

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Among our most helpful thinkers in current New Testament studies are those who have conscientiously bridged their NT expertise with other disciplines—scholars such as Richard Bauckham (with historiography), D. A. Carson (with cultural studies), and Anthony Thiselton (with hermeneutics). To this mix can be added Scot McKnight, bridging the gap between NT scholarship and the increasingly influential emergent church (EC). Already known to those familiar with the EC through his thickly-trafficked blog (www.jesuscreed.org), McKnight has provided what may be the most significant biblical and theological rationale to date for some of the distinct emphases of the EC, such as kingdom, community, and praxis. A Community Called Atonement is part of a new series entitled Living Theology, edited by Tony Jones, national coordinator for Emergent (www.emergentvillage.com).

An introductory chapter asserts that (1) atonement is not making the difference in the lives of Christians it ought to, and (2) the reason for this lack of atonement-fueled