

Research Article

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Confessional Discourses, Radicalizing Traditions: On John Caputo and the Theological Turn

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Abstract: This article explores the theological turn through the work of John Caputo, who famously transitioned from a philosopher of religion to a “weak theologian,” and later as a “radical theologian.” In so doing it argues that Caputo’s work as a radical theologian is an attempt at a practical performance of religion without religion: he inhabits the discourse of theology while radicalizing the tradition against itself. This article will show the value of this theological approach and how Caputo needs to directly inhabit this discourse as a theologian – confessing to be a theologian, becoming one of “their own” – to change theology’s trajectory. This trajectorial shift is felt both inside the academy and within the church itself. Caputo’s transformation from a philosopher to a theologian is a move from a (philosophical) description to a (theological) prescription. It is a transition from theory to praxis, and he could not do this without inhabiting that praxis’ context and its discourses. In doing so, and perhaps unintentionally, Caputo surprisingly respects critics like Dominique Janicaud, whose strident critique against the theological turn was at its apotheosis during Caputo’s transition: Caputo never ventures into crypto-theology nor does he sneak in prescription under the guise of a “phenomenology,” as many philosophers of religion are wont to do. Rather, he sees that one needs to embody the discourse to change it, which, ironically, is a position that would gain the approval of both Dominique Janicaud and traditional theology.

Keywords: Caputo, philosophy of religion, God, theological turn, phenomenology, radical theology, Janicaud

1 Introduction

“There is a good reason that nobody trusts theology.”¹ John Caputo mentions this concern often and with it he reminds us of theology’s problem with hidden assumptions and easy solutions. As Joeri Schrijvers describes it, “nobody trusts theology [according to Caputo], because theology all too easily shifts towards ontotheology and places God (or a similar referent) up on high, ‘up there,’ and then congratulates itself with this complacent ability to place God in the exact space where it wanted!”² If this is the case, then it raises the question of why John Caputo would not just embrace the theological turn in philosophy? Instead, why does

¹ Caputo, “The Sense of God,” 27.

² Schrijvers, *Between Faith and Belief*, 142–3.

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he leave philosophy altogether to pronounce himself a theologian? Why would Caputo embrace a discipline and discourse that he himself finds distrustful?

Caputo has stated often that he has always maintained a “weakness” for theology in spite of itself and it is clear throughout his work that he finds that religion has a great value to understanding ourselves and our world.³ However, this value can be acquired from within philosophy and the theological turn; theology’s depths can be explored from a distance and one does not need to become a theologian (nor a believer) to explore the theological tradition. Obviously, Caputo is well aware of this, which makes the subtitle to *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* such a powerful statement: here, Caputo has declared that he has exclusively written a theology. In subsequent publications, he continues labeling himself as a theologian, albeit a radical one.⁴

Furthermore, the *Weakness of God* becomes an event unto itself, marking Caputo’s transition as he engages religious communities through public speaking events, books written for lay audiences, workshops, and so forth. Since its publication, it is hard to find a work of Caputo’s that is not in some way aimed at a lay audience (or at least one that does not have this audience’s praxis in mind). There is a shift, in other words, that is not merely intellectual: “John Caputo, the philosopher and scholar of Derrida” becomes “John Caputo, the public and radical theologian.” Caputo has raised the stakes from merely exploring the value of religion to directly engaging religious discourses with the hope of transforming those discourses (hoping against hope, perhaps).

This returns us to questioning why. Why would Caputo, despite his distrust of theology, situate himself as a theologian? Given his heavy influence within the academy, the implications of this theological transition are felt beyond his own narrative: it likewise raises the stakes of philosophical–theological discourses themselves by challenging each side’s limitations and intentions.

In exploring this question, this article first revisits the contours between theology and philosophy by highlighting their respective boundaries and argues why those boundaries are necessary. In so doing, it will return to Dominique Janicaud’s critique of the theological turn and his issues with so-called “crypto theology.”⁵ Although many have progressed beyond Janicaud’s critique, the fact that he made these concerns present at the time that Caputo’s transition into theology is extremely relevant to Caputo’s motivations and intentions. From there, this article maps Caputo’s transition – both through his stated intentions and the outcomes of his arguments – to explore what Caputo’s transition says about theology, both as a discourse and as an intellectual tradition/discipline. Resultantly, it will show how Caputo inhabits the *discourse* of theology while critiquing *tradition* of theology, and how this has massive implications for both Caputo and the boundaries between theology and philosophy. In so doing, the final section of this article will argue that Caputo’s inhabiting of the discourse, rather than the tradition itself, opens new avenues for others to engage theological concerns without having to drop their philosophical rationales, sources, or argumentations.

As this article will show, what Caputo is attempting is a practical performance of religion *without* religion: he inhabits the discourse while radicalizing the tradition against itself. It is not without its own limits (Caputo often claims that it inherently is parasitic), but it has a consequential value wherein engaging the discourse breaks open the tradition from within (a weak messianism in the Benjamin sense), rather than from with-out as one sees in a philosophical critique. It has a radicalizing component to it, hence his all-important modifier: his is a *radical* theology. And yet, it is still a theology and could never be a philosophy.

I find and will argue that Caputo needs to directly inhabit this discourse as a theologian – confessing to be a theologian, becoming one of “their own” – to change theology’s trajectory. This trajectorial shift is felt both inside the academy and within the church itself. Caputo’s transformation from a philosopher to a theologian is a move from a (philosophical) description to a (theological) prescription. It is a transition from theory to praxis, and he could not do this without inhabiting that praxis’ context and its discourses. In

³ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 24.

⁴ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 1.

⁵ Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn.”*

doing so, and perhaps unintentionally, Caputo surprisingly respects critics like Janicaud who are suspicious of theology and philosophy's theological turn: Caputo never ventures into crypto-theology nor does he sneak in prescription under the guise of a "phenomenology," as many philosophers of religion are wont to do. Rather, he sees that one needs to embody the discourse to change it, which, ironically, is a position that would gain the approval of both Dominique Janicaud and traditional theology.

Before moving forward, though, I should note a few things about my approach. This article is argumentative in nature, and, in this sense, it would be too unwieldy to give a topographical overview of the ongoing debates regarding the roles and distinctions between theology and philosophy. I will therefore have to presume that readers have some background knowledge of these debates. Furthermore, this article is an extension of previous research on these debates and will refer to my previous work where I more clearly and exactly engage the roles of theology and philosophy within the academy and within society, writ large. Those caveats given, though, I find that this approach is acceptable due to the theme of this special issue and will ask the reader for some leeway in the section that follows since I do not wish to present an expansive relitigation of Janicaud's critique of crypto-theology and, rather, would like to apply this critique to Caputo's transition from philosopher to (radical) theologian.

2 Questioning rigor and discipline

Janicaud's seminal essay, "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology" sparked a deep debate within the philosophy of religion at the turn of the twenty-first century due to his strident critique of what eventually would be called "crypto-theology."⁶ As one can see in the anthology in which it was published, several prominent scholars took his critique seriously while also interrogating the validity of his claims. To my mind, the most notable response comes from Paul Ricoeur who argued that, on hermeneutical and methodological lines, phenomenologists must continue to respect and adhere to the limitations of their chosen method. To that end, he maintains that phenomenology can be a very valuable approach for theology in so far as it maintains its descriptive, rather than prescriptive character.⁷ As I have argued previously, I find that Ricoeur's appreciation for the limits of any given method is a strength; when thinkers break phenomenology's method and move from description to prescription, for example, they not only weaken their phenomenological analysis but also muddle prescriptive and theological addresses since they create aporias in their rationales. The argumentative foundation upon which they interrogate their given issues and concerns creates both a weakened philosophical investigation and a weakened theological response to those issues and concerns.

Be that as it may, what is important for our present scope is that Janicaud's critique arose while Caputo was finalizing his first explicitly theological work, *The Weakness of God*. This being the case, I argue that Caputo was well aware of the apprehensions of crypto-theology and that it is worth briefly reviewing Janicaud's claims that philosophy remain distinct from theology. What I think goes unnoticed within this somewhat dated debate is that, while many see Janicaud as trying to safeguard phenomenology (and philosophy in general) from theological encroachment, he is also safeguarding theology from a *philosophical* encroachment. I find that Janicaud's critiques are well founded and, not only does it

⁶ Janicaud, "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology." "It is a question here of analyzing the methodological pre-suppositions permitting a phenomenologist... to open phenomenological investigations onto absolute Transcendence while putting aside the Husserlian concern for rigor and scientificity," 35–36; from there, Janicaud sets out the parameter of his critique (see 35–49). Finally, it is important to note that Janicaud does not coin the term "crypto-theology" here, this becomes a popular phrase arising from the debates Janicaud provoked.

⁷ On this point, Ricoeur's so-called "three consequences" of a hermeneutic phenomenology of religion are key, see: Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse," Also relevant is his commentary on the hermeneutic circle in which believers find themselves is also of value to our present concerns (Ibid., 135).

strengthen philosophy by critiquing “crypto-theology,” it also strengthens theology by raising a tacit critique of “crypto-philosophy.”

In short, Janicaud basically argues that the theological turn introduces presuppositions within phenomenology which run contrary to the foundations of the method as developed by Edmund Husserl.⁸ He points out that this turn often moves away from phenomenology being a descriptive enterprise which explores how phenomena appear to consciousness and how consciousness renders these phenomena into understandings and meanings. Contrary to this, the theological turn expands the scope of phenomenology too far when it begins to consider the divine beyond the mere facticity of consciousness’ consideration of there being something more to, or beyond, the phenomena in question. The *noema* of phenomenology gets stretched too thin to account for anything except for what a given phenomenologist claims it to be. When thinkers do this, they are no longer engaging phenomenology as a discipline, Janicaud argues, they are using phenomenology to a very particular, theological end.⁹ While they may come up with new ideas and ways to reconsider the relation between the self, the other, and the world built between them, the problem remains as to whether they are really doing phenomenology.

Within the discipline of theology, this turn has been welcomed with what I call a “philosophical turn” where theologians have renewed their interest in rational critiques of metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. This can be seen within fundamental theology, whose practitioners welcome postmodernism and its socio-theoretical critiques to re-examine the role of theology and its doctrines within a contemporary context.¹⁰ Furthermore, works by theologian-phenomenologists such as Jean-Yves Lacoste have grown in prominence as scholars wrestle with new lacunae which have emerged as a result of both turns.¹¹ And even more so, there are thinkers like Emmanuelle Falque who wish to see both of these turns merge and, consequently, that the borders between theology and philosophy to become more and more porous, if not dissolve altogether.¹²

Following this, it is important to note that Caputo himself thinks that both disciplines are working toward the same end and, in the process of seeking this end, they will find each other. As he notes at the end of *Philosophy and Theology*, “If you take a long enough look, beyond the debates that divide philosophy and theology, over the walls that they have built to keep each other out or beyond the wars to subordinate one to the other, you find a common sense of awe, a common gasp of surprise or astonishment, like looking out at the endless sprawl of stars across the evening sky or upon the waves of a midnight sea.”¹³ This book is a love letter of sorts to both disciplines and how they have helped him in his search for self-understanding. In the process, Caputo proffers that each discipline is not opposed to the other. Furthermore, although each discipline takes its own approach to seeking understanding, both should work together rather than seek to delegitimize the other.¹⁴ Although I agree with Caputo that both disciplines can contribute to the other’s search for understanding, broadly construed, I think that they do this best when they operate on their own terms and I also think that this is exemplified in his transition for explicit philosopher of religion to explicit radical theologian.

I find that when both disciplines maintain their distinct presuppositions, methodologies, and subsequent argumentations, then each better serves their roles within the larger academic discourse. In my previous work, I compared the phenomenological approaches of Merold Westphal and Richard Kearney and examined how each uses a hermeneutic phenomenology to different ends. What this analysis showed is that Westphal all-too-easily slips into a theological and prescriptive mode in his work yet he does so for a

⁸ Janicaud, “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology,” 18–23; note his appreciation of Ricoeur’s restraint on p. 23.

⁹ Janicaud, “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology,” 97, 99–103.

¹⁰ See, for example, Dickinson, *Theological Poverty in Continental Philosophy*; Koci, *Thinking Faith After Christianity*.

¹¹ Lacoste, *From Theology to Theological Thinking*; or Lacoste, *La Phénoménalité de Dieu*. For a comprehensive review of how Lacoste’s work straddles between theology and philosophy, see: Schrijvers, *An Introduction to Jean-Yves Lacoste*; and Wardley, *Praying to a French God*.

¹² Falque, *Passer le Rubicon*.

¹³ Caputo, *Philosophy and Theology*, 98.

¹⁴ Ibid., 91–2.

remarkable end: he wants to present philosophical critique to Christians in pursuit of a better, more Christ-like, Christianity.¹⁵ But, when he does this, he is more than willing to break out of his phenomenological method and, when reading his work as a philosophy of religion, his argumentation becomes overburdened by trying to serve too many audiences and disciplines. On the one hand, he presents a fair onto-theological critique of the god of metaphysics, but on the other, Christianity still comes to save the day since he presents these philosophical critiques as dormant within the tradition of Christianity; they were there all along and philosophy just needed to provoke them out of their slumber.¹⁶ Though I cannot pretend to know what motivated Caputo, I imagine that this is what he meant when he remarks that no one trusts theology.

Richard Kearney, on the other hand, hews to the limits of phenomenology and engages theological resources solely through a hermeneutics of retrieval.¹⁷ In so doing, he goes out of his way to explicitly state that he is not doing a theology and others should not consider his work as explicitly theological. Importantly, he follows through with this within his argumentation. If insights gleaned from his work prove to have theological value, then great. But they are in and of themselves, philosophical insights.¹⁸ This allows Kearney to be more philosophically rigorous when evaluating a given theological resource since, unlike Westphal, he is willing and able to bracket out certain theological presumptions in order to evaluate their contributions to how a self perceives and engages its world.

Caputo has welcomed Kearney's approach and often prods Kearney into moving closer to a theological register, especially with each's shared appreciation for the concept of "possibility" and a theopoetics as hermeneutics.¹⁹ However, Kearney still employs a theopoetics from a strictly hermeneutic phenomenological perspective as if he took Ricoeur's response to Janicaud to heart and knows that this would dilute his larger hermeneutical project. In a sense, I find that Kearney knows that the problem of a crypto-philosophy is equally as problematic as a crypto-theology: if he were to blur the distinctions between philosophy and theology, could he so easily vet those theological sources? Or, would he have to augment his thinking and leave room for certain presuppositions to be accepted, thereby upending his carefully constructed hermeneutic phenomenology?

At its heart, these are questions concerning rigor and to whom or what one is faithfully rigorous. For the strict philosopher doing phenomenology, one needs to be faithful to the method's inherently descriptive character and its notion that consciousness' rendering of phenomena into meaning and understanding is the best avenue for realizing a coherent framework of knowledge and/or understanding. For the strict theologian engaging phenomenology, one needs to be faithful to theology's notion that revelation – *broadly construed* – has occurred and that it is possible to have some sort of relationship with the divine through this revelation, which is made manifest within an ecclesiastical community.²⁰ Should the philosopher find value within this theological register, their fidelity hews toward the notion that a people have found meaning and understanding through a particular engagement with the world. Contrariwise, should the theologian find value in a philosophical rationale of this meaning-making, their fidelity is first and foremost to the ecclesiastical community within which the theologian resides. Concerning the latter, this community (whether Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, or otherwise) has its own internal logic and presuppositions which, *mutatis mutandis*, is established as doctrine. This does not mean that the theologian must pass some sort of doctrinal test (though they do exist, such as the granting of *nihil obstat*, for example), it is just that they, in the very least, must address this internal logic and its contents in their work.

¹⁵ Sands, *Reasoning from Faith*, "Comparative Eschatology: Westphal's Theology, Kearney's Philosophy, and Ricoeurian Detours." See also: Sands, "Passing Through Customs," 1–13.

¹⁶ See, for example, in Westphal's, *Suspicion and Faith* where he jokingly states that Marx plagiarized the prophet Amos (213). On more academic terms, in his *Overcoming Onto-Theology*, Westphal is keen on stating that postmodern critique echoes the same critiques within biblical revelation (xvi, 24, 178 FN. 5, 180–1, 192).

¹⁷ See, for example: Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, 17, 19–20; Kearney and Treanor, "Introduction," 4–5.

¹⁸ The strongest and most explicit example of this is: Kearney, *Anatheism*, xv–xvi.

¹⁹ For an early example of an ongoing trend, see: Caputo, "Richard Kearney's Enthusiasm," 87–94.

²⁰ I arrive at my framework through Lacoste's definition of theology in: Lacoste, *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, 593–99; for more, see: Sands, "Passing Through Customs," 4–5.

Some readers will outright object to how I have defined the roles for philosophy and theology. They may critique my working parameters for both disciplines as outdated and/or draconian. In and of itself, this is fine since my argument is more focused on how Caputo transgresses these definitions while also maintaining them: Caputo, as I will argue, seemingly accepts these roles within his work yet finds a way to upend them through his deconstruction of Christianity and its tradition (i.e., its internal logic and its doctrinal contents). In the next section, I will show how Caputo's theological engagement adheres to the discourse of theology while critiquing its doctrines; this is what I call inhabiting the discourse of theology without accepting the theological tradition. Ironically, this is exactly what his favorite theologians – Paul Tillich and Meister Eckhart before him – did and why they are integral to Caputo's theology. What arises from this is that Caputo's entire work takes up the mantle of questioning rigor, asking whether theologians, pastors, priests, bishops, and laypeople are more faithful to their tradition (sometimes Capital T, Tradition, which becomes a vicar of Capital T, Truth) than they are to their own communities.

3 Radical theology's three principles: A brief overview

Caputo's opening salvo against doctrine is his critique that God is not a supreme being, not a sovereign "up there" who rules over and above everything. In *The Weakness of God*, this tenor clears away the notion of a metaphysical God who is in charge of everything and who is, consequently, responsible for everything. In this sense, Caputo argues that "the name of God is an event, or rather that it harbors an event, and that theology is the hermeneutics of that event, its task being to release what is happening in that name, to set it free, to give it its own head, and thereby to head off the forces that would prevent this event."²¹ In a similar fashion, his *The Folly of God* begins with an argument that God is not an ultimate sovereign being and that to each and every rendering of God as a supreme entity we should adopt a Tillichean atheism which rejects this notion and its implications.²² Furthermore, Caputo often refers to Eckhart's prayer for God to rid himself of "god" in order to find the depths of God. Finally, in *The Insistence of God*, Caputo entrenches this position by positing that God does not exist, but rather insists. That God should be conceived of as an event (rather than just a name with an ontological beingness) which calls and stirs us, that God's *being there* for us requires our participation in which we answer this call from God. In our response to the call, we make God-with-us an event unto itself where the passion of our desires for the impossible is made manifest through our corresponding prayers and actions to the call from God.²³

Throughout each work and within each turn of his larger project, Caputo's first intent is to rid what he calls, citing Tillich, the "half-blasphemous and mythological" construct of God which the Christian tradition and its theology has set up for itself. Contrariwise, by understanding God as a call, one can seek the depths of God and the ground of their own being.²⁴ What is remarkable about this, for our present scope and purpose, is how Caputo's initial theological engagement is an upending, a rending even, of the authoritative, Capital T, theological Tradition upon which most Christians base their belief. At first blush, this seems more like an atheistic critique against the foundations of Christianity, and Caputo is all the happy for it. Why is this?

To my mind, Caputo is following a phenomenological tradition of clearing away presuppositions and preconditions to get to an Archimedean point upon which the world pivots. Here, that world is the Christian world, and he is challenging how Christians conceive of God and how this critique fundamentally changes revelation, its reception through sacred tradition, and eventually, each Christian's own life of faith. One can

²¹ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 2.

²² Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 4–6, I accessed the Kindle Edition for this publication, page numbers are approximations (see: Ch. 1, "God is not a Supreme Being").

²³ This is the essential argument to the *Insistence of God*, see: p. 247.

²⁴ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 2, page numbers are approximations (see: Ch. 1, "God is not a Supreme Being"). He gets this from: Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 25.

see this in his so-called two principles, The Protestant Principle of *Semper reformanda* and The Jewish (at times called Derridean) Principle of *Semper deconstruenda*:

On Tillich's telling, *semper reformanda* means that nothing finite and conditional can ever be adequate to the infinite and unconditional, which stands in constant judgment over anything finite and conditional – including religion, including even the Protestant one. Derrida proposes his own deconstructive and – let's say – Jewish Principle, let's say *semper deconstruenda*: no construction can ever be adequate to the undeconstructible and so every construction stands under constant judgment by the undeconstructible. Nothing that exists is ever adequate to the pressure of the call of what is being called for. No finite and conditional form must ever be confused with what is being called for.²⁵

Over time, and often in informal settings, Caputo will add to this a third principle, The Catholic Principle, which incorporates the notion that, even if revelation is closed (pace doctrine), then in the very least its reception and reflection is always proceeding through the Holy Spirit; the Church is always *in medias res* and its mission of bringing about the Kingdom of Heaven is always already ongoing.²⁶ When reading Caputo's critique of a supreme God upon high into these three principles, one sees that Caputo's concerns are not in doctrinal excellency but in praxis through the life of faith.

This becomes clear in the sense that his ultimate concern against a supreme being is that it allows humanity to abscond from responsibility and its participatory role in the manifestation of evil.²⁷ Caputo, in this sense, thinks that we have read the problem of evil backwards, that it is not so much a "God" allowing evil to happen, but that we let evil happen through our actions or willful inaction and then blame it on a supreme God. For him, the onus is on the people of God, not Godself, to alleviate the world from evil. Furthermore, God's revelation, however understood, is there to provoke us – to stir us – into participating with God to alleviate injustice and suffering.

In so doing, Caputo's engagement with doctrine is a scrutineering of how it emphasizes God's role in producing both splendor and despair rather than how humanity discharges itself from culpability. For example, in *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, Caputo adroitly points out how Charles Sheldon's prayer of "what would Jesus do" has been weaponized by the American Christian Right *not* in the process of discipleship, but for political ends. Rather than putting oneself into the "*accusative*," as he often argues, one puts others' actions into the crosshairs and uses the life and words of Jesus as evidence against them.²⁸ For Caputo, all-too-often doctrine plays a legitimizing role for these judgments, and while those in authority – pastors, bishops, theologians, apologists – readily admit that all have sinned, they themselves rarely take their own fallenness into account when pontificating on the "Truth" of the Gospel.²⁹

This is where *The Weakness of God* and its successors, *The Insistence of God* and *The Folly of God*, receive their intellectual thrust: Caputo seeks to engage in a *reformer* of-and-within theology through a *deconstruenda* of its doctrines and beliefs, in order to more thoroughly embrace the practical nature of its tradition.³⁰ As I will argue in the next section, this can only be done by inhabiting the discourse – being within Christianity and its theology – and cannot be done from an outside critique.

Through looking at the weak messianism and the deconstructive logic of Jesus' life and crucifixion, *The Weakness of God* impels its audience to not look for a conquering savoir but to look within themselves, to

²⁵ Caputo, *The Folly of God*, 21–2, page numbers are approximations (see: Ch. 2, "The Unconditional").

²⁶ Caputo, *In Search of Radical Theology*, 51. "The Catholic Principle appropriately broadened and deepened is the principle of historicity and temporality, materiality and carnality," 53: "The church, like any tradition, does not *have* a history, it *is* a history." Also note: the three pills and so forth show that Caputo's style often presents certain essential arguments/conditions.

²⁷ For a lay version of Caputo's argument, see: Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 24, 61, 95. For a more academic version, see: Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 7, 15–7, 36–40, 49, but especially p. 49: "The hoary theological 'problem of evil' thus has nothing to do with all the choices that a sovereign omnipotent and omniscient God could have made but failed to make... The problem of evil has to do with the ambient and chaotic play of ambiguous beings, an ambience beyond mere ambiguity, since our choices rarely boil down to two. The ambience of our being is its greatest if riskiest resource."

²⁸ Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 24, 49; NB: he takes this notion from Levinas' phenomenological ethics.

²⁹ This is a core argument in *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, and Caputo re-emphasizes in his passionate defense of radical theologians in the first chapter of *In Search of Radical Theology*, "Tradition and the Event: Radicalizing the Catholic Principle."

³⁰ It may be important to note that Caputo envisions these three books as a trilogy.

the depths of themselves, to find the sense of justice and passion which encompassed Jesus' teachings.³¹ Jesus points the way inward, not the path to a heaven up above. Salvation becomes communal, not eternal and therefore outside of our world. In this sense, *The Weakness of God* critiques Christological doctrine while engaging the tradition from whence this doctrine comes: here, Caputo seeks to show that tradition is *lived* and it is from within us – that the reception of revelation is an internal event in the sense of both within us and within the world (i.e., it is not otherworldly in either case) – and for it to persist it needs to be enacted in a life of faith. One does not “have” faith, which can be lost, one *lives* faith, which needs to be enacted to continue.³²

The Insistence of God lays the foundation underneath this prescription by showing the intellectual operation which propels this sense of tradition: here, enacting one's faith is both a response to God's insistent call, the event which harbors the name of God, and this response cannot be a mere acknowledgement. Rather, this response must be action obligated to bringing about justice within one's community, which in turn upends one's understanding of world (again, a *semper reformanda*).³³

Furthermore, Caputo unpacks and expands this notion of the event of God harboring God's name through critiquing Christianity's abstract and anthropocentric notion God. Concerning the latter abstraction, Caputo critiques this through the story of Mary and Martha attending to a visit from Jesus. Here, Caputo highlights the hospitality and obligation Martha embodies in her preparation for Jesus and she becomes a metaphor for tending and working toward the Kingdom of God whereas Mary, though still highly regarded in Caputo's eyes, embodies the contemplative relationship one has with God. Though Mary-as-contemplation is definitely necessary, Caputo avers that we often overemphasize this contemplative gesture and forsake the hospitality embodied through Martha.³⁴ In addressing the anthropomorphism employed by these abstractions, Caputo posits what he calls a cosmotheopoetics which emphasizes the creational element within the event of God. Here, Caputo's aim is not to reconcile God with the cosmos (or physics, or any form of scientism) but to show that our world is much bigger and wider than our own field of vision. Therefore, our insistence upon justice, answering the call within the event of God allows us to participate (with)in creation; we become co-participants with God through-and-within creation. This cosmology expands the notion of justice in the sense that one's participation (or response to God's call) is an act of creation; pursuing justice is a creative act, not merely a *restorative* one.³⁵ The Christian is not trying to just alleviate evil or restore the world to a “proper order,” the Christian is participating in creation itself when it responds to God's call to enact justice throughout the world. When asking oneself, “what can I do to participate in creation through justice?” one returns to the *semper reformata* and *semper deconstruenda* in that they employ deconstruction to reformulate their sense of the world as they participate in the *tradition* (i.e., Catholic Principle) of answering God's call. Here, for Caputo, the Kingdom is made manifest through life and creation.³⁶

Stepping back for a moment, what is remarkable is that Caputo's theological project rests upon deconstructing the very contents of theology, i.e., doctrine. Although plainly summarized above, each of the concepts which undergird his theology relies upon a critique of the doctrines established within the church. For instance, Caputo often questions whether Jesus – or Yeshua, as Caputo calls him to differentiate from the metaphysical baggage surrounding “Jesus Christ” – could ever make sense of the Council of Nicaea. He often questions whether Jesus would even accept the doctrine of the Trinity and its metaphysics!³⁷ In short, Caputo does not merely hem the margins of doctrine, his *reformanda* strikes at its core principles and Caputo readily admits that these critiques would have “traditional” theologians fuming and running for the doors.

³¹ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 43–5, 53–4, 115–6, 233–4.

³² Ibid., 118.

³³ Ibid., 140.

³⁴ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 45–7.

³⁵ Ibid., 94–6.

³⁶ Ibid., 254–5.

³⁷ Ibid., 154. He returns to this notion often, see: Caputo, *In Search of a Radical Theology*, 35.

So how can he be properly called a theologian if he rejects most of the presuppositions and established concepts/teachings within the field and within the Church?

This is where I find that Caputo is best understood as inhabiting the discourse of theology and where his theopoetics becomes not just another doctrine or, even worse, a set of alternative doctrines with its own anti-canon.³⁸ Rather, it is a mode of speaking, acting, and believing which takes up the mantle of theology's oft neglected mission. Recall that my working definition for theology includes two parameters: it reflects upon revelation (broadly construed) and how *it is received within a given community*. Caputo's critique against theology is that theologians, ministers, pastors, priests, bishops, and other ecclesiastical authorities have neglected their communities in pursuit of doctrinal excellency and often their own selfish gain. They have forsaken the prayers and tears of their communities when they retreat to a sense of self-legitimization whereby they control and master Capital T "Truth" through Capital T "Tradition." In so doing, they have weaponized doctrine, just like the American Christian Right weaponized the query, "what would Jesus do?"

Having found that most theology has left this mission underserved, Caputo seeks to reinvigorate a discourse which ideally finds itself always already *in medias res*, always seeking an understanding that is beyond its reach, always in reform, always deconstructing itself when seeking understanding. As I will also show, this can only be done *within* theology – a philosophical critique can only go so far – and if someone like Caputo is going to change the church then they have to inhabit its discourse; speaking within the church, to the church, as one of its own.

4 Theopoetics as a theological discourse: It could not be otherwise

As I have argued, Caputo's deconstructive critique of Christian doctrine necessitates that it be within the tradition rather than coming from outside of it, as one would do in a philosophy. I think that this can be understood through his use of theopoetics and how it employs a messianic weakness which ruptures from within. This section will finalize my argument by exploring how Caputo uses his theopoetics for an internal critique which is directly aimed at praxis; at developing a radical theology which engages doctrine not for legitimization but to seek a deeper understanding of how to live a life of faith.

At its core, Caputo's theology is confessional. He opens himself to theology's discourse by confessing his belief in, not just its value, but its necessity. Far too often crypto-theologians sidestep this issue of confessionality through the guise of doing philosophy, especially via phenomenology. I find that one of the reasons why they do this is because of doctrinal concerns and the fear that they may become overburdened by having to accept beliefs they find questionable. But what Caputo shows us is that questioning these beliefs is in and of itself a theological gesture, and while it can be done at a safe distance, one can only change the trajectory of these beliefs (i.e., their guidance of the church itself) by confessing to be one within the community which holds these beliefs. In this way, Caputo's value to both theology and those philosophers of religion who would be confessional is that his usage of a theopoetics allows him to be both speak from the position of one within this Christian community while also being critical of what that community professes.

For Caputo, a theopoetics needs to be confessional if it is to have any meaningful response to the event of God. He states this in the *Insistence of God* when he addresses the need for a radical theology:

I am interested in theology first as it functions in the confessions, where it is "factically" found, but finally in the event that stirs within historical theological reflection. That event-driven thinking is what I am calling radical theology, preserving the name "theology" but under a certain erasure. I start with confessional theology while trying to expose it, to expose myself, to its own excess, to hold us all open to the event. My interest in theology, like my interest in the name of God, is

³⁸ To my mind, this is why Walter Benjamin was such a profound influence for Caputo's, *The Weakness of God*, which spurs Caputo on to discuss a messianic tradition within the Church rather than a messianic salvation coming from outside of it.

focused on the dynamics of the event that is calling in theology – an event that is calling on theology, that is getting itself called and recalled in theology, that theology is calling for. That is the event, which is God, perhaps.³⁹

This cannot be a mere hermeneutical retrieval nor a description of understanding. Nay, it needs to be enacted (i.e., to open itself, to expose itself to the event of God) in order to survive and/or have meaning. Caputo's theopoetics, to be sure, has a methodological rationale and with this it touches upon Richard Kearney's usage of a theopoetics.⁴⁰ What differentiates Caputo's understanding of the concept is that it is a *mode of living* and, just like any modality, it needs to be enacted and to declare itself to the world: here I am, I could not do otherwise.

A theopoetics is also the means by which Caputo can satisfy the first aspect of my working definition of theology in that it acknowledges something deeper stirring within humanity, something we perhaps can call divine, which reveals something about our own nature to ourselves. Where it differs from other confessional statements is that it is happy to revel in mystery, it requires it in fact. This is where Caputo's work satisfies the second component of my working definition: Caputo speaks to his community of fellow believers by re-presenting the concept of mystery to them under the guise of *semper deconstruenda*: it reminds them that they do not completely know what binds their community, save for the historical–theological reality of the church. This historical reality is always ongoing and it is always deconstructing itself when it acknowledges the divine mystery that stirs underneath all its doctrines. Caputo evokes the image of a haunting, following a Derridean hauntology, when he describes this relationship:

As a theology focused on the insistence of the event, radical theology represents a way to get at something spooking confessional theology, some specter of the “perhaps” transpiring in theology that haunts the halls of theology, all the while calling for a new species of theologian. To the old species of theologian, radical theology looks like it is just playing around with theological language; to a radical theologian, the old species of theologian looks like someone afraid of the dark. Radical theology, the becoming radical of confessional theology, feels about in the dark for something the old theologians would just as soon keep under wraps, something that steals over them in an idle moment, a thought that perhaps all this really is through a glass, in the dark, and perhaps the darkness goes all the way down.⁴¹

Elaborating upon how a theopoetics operates within this structure, Caputo states:

I invoke theopoetics in order to explain the discursive shape, the grammatological genre required by radical theology. The “radical” in radical theology goes to the roots of classical theology and uproots them, pulling up by the root the *logos* of the old theology and replacing it with a poetics. In the process it uproots its piety, its celestial demeanor, along with the mythological and quasi-gnostic drift of its *logos*, exposing it to the events that underlie and undermine it. Or, to put it another way, the old “logos” of theology is replaced with “events,” which are addressed by a poetics, not a logic.⁴²

For Caputo at least, a theopoetics requires a confessional nature, but to whom and to what? It is not the *logos* which doctrinally holds authority within the church, but a fidelity to the events upon which those rational doctrines are founded – and upon which they are upended once they become too authoritative, too sure of themselves. Professing fidelity to these events is required for any and all radical theology since this is not a mere critique of logic, it is a reorientation of an entire community reason for being and living.

Returning to the issue of the theological turn in philosophy and the philosophical turn in theology, Caputo at once presses both to further turn into each other but also allows a space for radical confessionality. A confession where one can find a place within a community – they no longer must present critique from a philosophical distance nor profess belief from a theological one – and can also change that community's trajectory by critiquing its contents. Being confessional – stating “here I am” – no longer becomes a doxological profession of faith, it becomes living within and through a tradition of belief that is always reforming itself, always questioning its foundations to seek deeper depths, always reaching further than its

³⁹ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 60–1.

⁴⁰ Again, see: Caputo, “Richard Kearney's Enthusiasm.”

⁴¹ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 62.

⁴² Ibid., 63.

grasp. When philosophers do this, they openly acknowledge where their fidelity to rigor lies and note the intellectual tradition in which they operate. When theologians do this, they openly acknowledge that their own fidelity is to the community which they *serve*, and that whatever can be called divine cannot be succinctly stated in a rational proposition.

Concerning Christianity as a whole, when one stops reaching ahead and retreats to the comfort of doctrine and its self-legitimization, then, for Caputo at least, one stops actually confessing a life of faith. Moreover, if one seeks self-legitimization, then one has begun to profess a life of doctrinal certainty, a philosophical construct of belief devoid of the uncertain faith which should stir underneath all pronouncements for and toward the divine. In sum and regarding Christianity writ large, Caputo's radical theology is one which invites others to inhabit the discourse while critiquing its contents.

5 Conclusion

In the broadest terms, this article's aim was to elaborate upon Caputo's role within not just theology, but Christianity. In more a more direct framework, this article revisits the old controversy of crypto-theology within the theological turn in philosophy and phenomenology to show how Caputo's confessional nature allows him to inhabit the discourse of theology (and thus Christianity) while questioning that discourse's contents. In so doing, it argues not against a theological or philosophical turn, but rather for a more confessional discourse; for us to profess which communities our work addresses and what presuppositions we hold in our address. Although essayistic in nature, I sought throughout this article to reference Caputo's work as much as possible to give others access points to Caputo's work to better understand the mechanics which propels his radical theology. If one does not find my argument convincing, then at least this article could function as a *reportage* of Caputo's theological orientation. In closing, though, I would like to address the initial question of "why theology" and the upshot of this article.

Radical theologians such as Caputo exist in a difficult space where people often dismiss their works and deeds as either "not Christian enough" (meaning not doctrinally sound) or "too Christian" for academic purposes (meaning that it is not philosophy). Caputo is aware of this and, in his book *In Search of a Radical Theology*, Caputo discusses the difficulties of being a radical theologian in both the academic and political realm.⁴³ While John Caputo hardly needs my help in proving his legitimacy, radical theologians such as myself need help clearing a space for ourselves within our own communities and it is my prayer that this article, in the very least, contributes to an intellectual foundation for our own existence within the church. Anecdotal, sure, but I remember a conversation I had with a senior scholar when I critiqued Westphal as being more of a theologian than a philosopher. After some debate regarding the merits of my claims, this scholar came out right and said what was behind his thinking: "If you are right," he told me, "then I'm out of a job! My university doesn't have a theology faculty and I can't just up and leave philosophy. Furthermore, I doubt any theology faculty would have me given what I write and teach. It's not very theological in the traditional sense of the word."

Yet, if I may re-orient Westphal's own words, "whose tradition? which community?" Caputo's work helps establish the foundations upon which a self-critical theology may exist, nay, persists, and it also shows that its operation was always already within the tradition's discourse. Something or someone had to do the difficult questioning which led to previous reforms within the church, something or someone had to do the exhaustive critique of doctrine in order to develop doctrine further. On both occasions, that something or someone sought to address the concerns of its present community. A radical theology is nothing new in the sense that founding a tradition and community upon (divine) mystery – something which upends our rational faculties – was already sufficiently radical in and of itself. The church, at times and often, tends to forget this and retreats to the comfort of doctrinal certainty.

⁴³ See, for example: Caputo, *In Search of a Radical Theology*, 45–7.

Perhaps no one should trust theology; not just because of its doctrinal comfort, but because it is never settled. It is always already ongoing, ahead of itself, and at its best theology is critiquing its own doxology as soon as it utters it. Caputo, I find, answers the question of “why theology” through his hope that, perhaps, there is something deeper within theology than bishops, pastors, apologists, and career theologians know. These depths cannot be understood at a distance, one needs to dive in.

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