



The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event (Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion)

John D. Caputo

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Applying an ever more radical hermeneutics (including Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology, Derridian deconstruction, and feminism), John D. Caputo breaks down the name of God in this irrepressible book. Instead of looking at God as merely a name, Caputo views it as an event, or what the name conjures or promises in the future. For Caputo, the event exposes God as weak, unstable, and barely functional. While this view of God flies in the face of most religions and philosophies, it also puts up a serious challenge to fundamental tenets of theology and ontology. Along the way, Caputo's readings of the New Testament, especially of Paul's view of the Kingdom of God, help to support the "weak force" theory. This penetrating work cuts to the core of issues and questions—What is the nature of God? What is the nature of being? What is the relationship between God and being? What is the meaning of forgiveness, faith, piety, or transcendence?—that define the terrain of contemporary philosophy of religion.

The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event (Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion) Details

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From Reader Review The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event (Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion) for online ebook

Shawn Birss says

This book was probably one of the most challenging reads I have ever taken on, along with Kant's A Critique of Pure Reason sixteen years ago, hardly a word of which I still remember.

Despite its theological intent, this book is far more in the philosophical stream. Caputo is a philosopher, and this is his first book of theology, so this is no surprise. The reader should be prepared to read within this frame and culture. Like most books of philosophy, this one stands upon all that has come before it. There is some assumption that the reader has an understanding of previous classical philosophical writing, and the points made in the book are framed as arguments, referencing and building on these old theses. This made the first third of the book a very difficult read for me, as I found myself frequently consulting dictionaries and Wikipedia articles just to keep up. As a well-read former pastor with a degree in theology (but only very elementary education in formal philosophy), I think my experience would probably be shared by most lay readers.

At the end of the book, I would now recommend that anyone interested in reading it first brush up on some Derrida at the very least before cracking the cover of this one.

Besides my handicap of not adequately knowing the philosophical roots of Caputo's thoughts, his writing style is somewhat inaccessible as well. What I first took to be a high academic style in the first few chapters, one with which I simply needed to gain a familiarity to understand, I came to realize was just an unnecessarily poetic and wordy way of writing, which made the text sound elevated and profound without actually adding any substance. As the book went on, his elevated prose died down to a more reasonable and straightforward cadence and vocabulary. When Caputo introduced an idea, he would again raise the tone, but as he continued to describe it he would become more readable again. I was reminded frequently of Orwell's short booklet called *Why I Write*, in which he challenges writers to use plain English and an economy of words (for many reasons, not least of which being) for the sake of inclusion. Given the time and patience, I found I could decode most of what Caputo said, especially since he would usually repeat the ideas that had been introduced with obtuse poetry. Had Caputo used a plainer and more quickly understood language, and not repeated himself so much, I do not doubt that this book could have been 150 pages shorter.

My final criticism is Caputo's general lack of knowledge in the area of basic biblical theology. This was the bridge upon which Caputo and I stand to meet. While I struggled to understand his deep philosophical roots, his elementary understanding of basic Christian theology was baldly obvious to me. For example, in Chapter Ten (my favourite), on forgiveness, Caputo argues for some very interesting and beautiful ideas about the nature of forgiveness in the Kingdom of God, and its power to free the forgiven to repent and act rightly, while removing the need to do so. However, the entire chapter hovered and orbited around such basic theological principles as justification and prevenient grace without ever mentioning them. The chapter reads as though Caputo is commenting on the very childish Sunday School idea that we must be forgiven, without any understanding of what it means to be justified, a far heartier and deeper truth. I do not condemn his ignorance (assuming that it is naïveté and not deception). However, I can imagine another reader being dazzled by his obvious philosophical brilliance, and missing that Caputo still has a gap in his knowledge. Unfortunately, at its worst, this means that there are too many times that Caputo's arguments that diverge

heavily from classical theology often present the classical view as a straw man, though I believe this is unintentional. Caputo is simply a far more well read philosopher than theologian, and of this the reader should be aware, so as not to take his presentation of theology at face value.

All that being said, I'm very glad I read this book. It has some beautiful, refreshing ideas. This is not a practical book. Though it is as anarchist as any Christian Anarchist book I've ever read, it is not anarchist in any meaningfully practical way. The anarchist will have much to consider to inform their anarchism, but the application will be theirs to make. The Christian will have their belief deconstructed and examined, hopefully in such a way that much could be illumined for some. However, Caputo stops short of suggesting how such interesting ideas might meaningfully impact the Christian's relationship with the Divine or be practically demonstrated in their relationship to others. This application is for the Christian reader to make. The Weakness of God is written for the head, not the heart (unless his elevated poetic language was an attempt to engage the reader's passion, which failed). Caputo intends to write for the realm of ideas, and in this, he succeeds.

My favourite part of the book is the last four chapters. In them, he speaks most personally and plainly about forgiveness, grief, change, growth, and inclusion in the Kingdom of God. These were also the most accessible parts of the entire book, easily understood and applied.

The book did not convince me of Caputo's view of God as a "weak force". Still, I found in Caputo's provocative reconsideration of Paul's "weakness of God" in 1 Corinthians, and his application of these ideas to the Creation accounts much to be considered. There is a lot of good here. The fearless attempt to acknowledge and reconcile some of the Bible's most difficult descriptions of God is commendable. I appreciate the theories that suggest a God that could exist in a world of pain without contradiction. And I love Caputo's religionless religion and call for inclusivity.

I do not believe I will return to Caputo again. I'll probably always fondly consider him an interesting figure, though. In that way, he may become a little like Chomsky to me. I'd listen to a lecture by him. I'd read an interview with him. I'll read books by those influenced by him (in Caputo's case, I recommend Henry Rollins), but I don't think I'll ever read another book by him. His ideas are good, but the effort is too much.

Now, if I ever find myself, perhaps a decade from now, with a greater foundational understanding and knowledge of classical and contemporary philosophy (especially Derrida), I may change my mind and return to Caputo. To any reader who already has this foundation, and an interest in radical theology and philosophical anarchism, I do recommend this book.

Patrick O'Hearn says

Excellent, but becomes repetitive.

Corey Hampton says

Some parts of this book are beautiful and deeply moving, (almost) poetic reflections on the 'reign of God' through Caputo's Derridian/Levinasian hermeneutics. I give these sections five stars. But there are also sections that I had to work hard to finish (I don't believe they were necessary and should probably be edited

from the book). Besides that, I give this book four stars overall. I hope that the academic philosophers and theologians who read this will be challenged by the radical hospitality called for by the event housed within the name of God.

I'm currently working on my MA thesis using Caputo's radical hermeneutics in the context of political theology.

Derek Brown says

The first part is much better than the second part. Caputo isn't able to keep it together much beyond 100 pages (except the conclusion, which is fun). Deconstruction, hermeneutics, phenomenology??? These aren't the same thing. Maybe he better works out the relationship between them elsewhere, but he doesn't do it here (also acts as if he is following Derrida, but only as if Derrida started writing in 1990).

Shenkel says

Read this book.

Jerome says

My initial attraction to this book was largely based on the title. As anyone familiar with liberation theology can attest, the dominant understanding of God and his relationship to humanity is based upon a narrative articulated and perpetrated by the powerful. As such, religion -- especially in its institutionalized form -- always reinforced hierarchical social arrangements. God's power is a reflection and a projection of the power of the elite. In undermining this dominant theological narrative, liberation theology has to look at God from the point of view of the oppressed. Hence, it has to begin not with the omnipotence of God, but with his weakness.

John D. Caputo is a professional philosopher and a leading figure in offering theological interpretations of the thought of Jacques Derrida. In this work, as in others, he engages in a "deconstruction" of traditional Christian theological narratives. Caputo focuses on a few key principles. First, God's "reign" is a Kingdom. God's power is typified in the act of creation *ex nihilo*. God's power is such that he can change the past, and lastly, that God's forgiveness takes place within an economy of restitution. In "undoing" these principles (*arche*), Caputo maintains a few themes of his own. Namely, *the name of God signifies not a being but an event; the Kingdom of God is a kind of "divine anarchy"; and that the insufficiency of logic-based discourses should be replaced by a "poetics of the impossible."*

The book itself is not without its own weakness. At times it feels really repetitive. The author probably could have whittled it down a hundred pages or so. Also, it assumes some knowledge of the major disputes of 20th Century Continental philosophy. The core arguments can probably be grasped by the layperson if she is patient and doesn't mind glossing over various lemmas and forays into the more esoteric aspects of philosophy. But a comprehensive reading requires at least a familiarity with the likes of Derrida, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Marion, Benjamin, Zizek and Deleuze.

My main problem with the book however, has to do with the implications of Caputo's idea "divine anarchy." A theory of Divine anarchy should function like any other anarchist theory, which is to say, it should outline a specific framework for action. As is typical of a philosopher, Caputo is more interested in theory than action. While the book offers excellent theoretical material for deconstructing dominant theological narratives, it doesn't offer a formula for liberation. Given this limitation, within its scope it is still a worthwhile book. The section of forgiveness is especially beautiful.

Alex says

Caputo writes in a uniquely poetic way, and I admit there is much on my first read through that I had difficulty understanding. There were, however, many points that I connected deeply with and am excited to revisit again.

I read this theology of 'the event' as a vision of God who is not a powerful agent of change, but rather a co-inhabitant in the fabric of reality, one that can be experienced or exposed. This position begins with an exploration of *creatio ex nihilo*, which Caputo subverts by arguing that God created out of the primordial darkness that hovered over the face of the deep. It is not that God created something out of nothing, that God created from an absence, but rather that God called beauty out of the substance that is. The image of God calling persists powerfully throughout the book.

Sacred anarchy is another theme that weaves its way throughout the book. Caputo sees the Kingdom (the already-not yet) as inherently anarchical because of its non-hierarchical nature. The first will be last, and the last will be first. How is order to be kept if there is not a structure set in place? Beyond this, if God does not occupy a place of authoritarian control, as an agent of change, how can the essence of this non-structure be enforced or intentionally dis-ordered? In this sense, our connection with reality, with God, and with ourselves, is loosely strung together, constantly in peril of falling apart. But perhaps this is how we encounter the event. If we hear God 'playing on the string of time' at the weakest and most penetrable intersections of reality's web, we may stumble upon a tear and be momentarily exposed to God's calling out of us our beauty and goodness.

Time becomes an essential aspect of this discussion. How do we now understand time if we accept that there is not an authoritarian other that retains order through strength? Caputo says, "To ask God to give us the gift of time is to ask for the most eye-opening moments and to expose us to the most impossible, unforeseeable things." He also explores the connection between time and forgiveness, which is an alteration of time.

This text continues to guide me into the arms of the Eternal Thou. The moment that I grasp truth, I have perverted and objectified God. There is something simultaneously frightening and freeing about this idea. In some ways, I feel as though I am running parallel with nihilism. Yet, if I listen for the call, I encounter truth and beauty. At least, through my own lens of experiences. As a bonus, the weak force model resolves the tension created by the model of an interventionist God. As Caputo says, a powerful God, who had/has the capacity to intervene in the most brutal historical tragedies, is robbed of eternal goodness. In this way, humanity must work in tandem with God in order to heed God's call and birth beauty and justice into the world.

BlackOxford says

Helping God's Escape

Our largely secularised world prides itself on its freedom from the deadly virus of religious dogmatism. This condition, one might believe, frees us also from the need to know anything about theology.

But it is the remnants of religious doctrine which lurk in our presumptions about what constitutes reality that are often more potently destructive than any explicit dogma. These remnants are largely unconscious, undiscussed and impenetrable except in a theological genre.

I believe that 'power' is one of the most important of these theological remnants. And John Caputo is arguably the world's leading thinker about how we might make them explicit, and thereby a matter of some debate, and perhaps even choice. Caputo puts the matter bluntly: "One of the most fundamental fantasies of religion is the fantasy of power." Among other things it is this fantasy that religion perennially tries to sell to those in power, for its own advantage, that destroys religion from within. And it is this fantasy which *The Weakness of God* seeks to reveal as such.

Power is a 'naturally' theological problem in that no matter where or how it is exercised - politically, militarily, socially, within the family, the firm, or the charitable organisation - it provokes the question of its legitimacy and its ultimate source. The assertion that the legitimate font of power is the monarch, or the law, or the president, or even *The People*, begs the question 'Why?'. Historically therefore, one way or another, Ultimate Power, God in some guise, is invoked as its justification.

Caputo's idea is to stop thinking about God as a massive source of ontological or dynamic power that connects via spiritual high tension lines to governments, ruling hierarchies, and individuals. He invokes instead the (rather undogmatic) Judaeo-Christian idea of the "power of powerlessness", a weak force (for lack of a better vocabulary) which is exerted by the "unconditional claim" that we have on each other as human beings.

God, for Caputo, is neither a set of doctrinal propositions nor a fixed point of belief, nor a sovereign power or authority. God is a "call, a promise, and a hope". In traditional theology God is termed 'not a thing'. Caputo conceives of God in a similar way, as an 'event'. "The name of God is powerful because it is the name of our hope in the contract Elohim makes with things when he calls them 'good', when he calls them to the good...The name of God is the name of an unconditional promise not of unlimited power".

Caputo is not a closet atheist or anti-traditionalist. Neither is he a biblical literalist. But he is keenly sensitive to questionable interpretations. For example, a rather persistent doctrine of creation ex nihilo, from nothing, doesn't stand the test of comparison with biblical testimony. In Genesis the movement is not from non-being to being at all; it is from being to the good. Thus this presumed fundamental power of God can be seen as a philosophical rationalisation - of someone's existing power to be sure.

Caputo spends a great deal of thought on the biblical Kingdom of God. "The Kingdom of God is the event called by the name of God,... [it is] the contradiction of the 'world' (cosmos) which is the order of power and privilege and self interest, of the business as usual of those who would prevent the event."

Caputo's message, despite the apparently archaic but precisely apt terms in which it is expressed, is for 'prophecy'. "A prophet belongs not to the order of being...but to the order of the event, of the call, ... a

troublemaker who speaks for justice now." The task of the prophet is to release what is happening within the name of God in the world.

So, if you're thinking that, I don't know, maybe the Democratic Party in the USA, or the Labour Party in Britain, or the Social Democrats in Europe, could use a new foundation for their political life, perhaps there is something in Caputo that touches a nerve.

John says

I'm read this in order to write an article for a theological journal on "prayer and providence," in John Caputo's theology. This is (when you don't fall asleep reading it) a passionate book. I mean that. On the one hand, Caputo's deep and abiding desire to figure out how God changes everything charges ever page. On the other hand, his careful, plodding "compare and contrast," sections on Levinas and Derrida slow things down to a crawl, so that I can't drink a glass of wine and read this without falling asleep. In that, there is a problem. I'm desperately searching for a way to hang onto the heart of some gospel or another. And I keep thinking something along this line, where God as "a thing," gives way to God the event, might be just the thing. But, alas, Caputo can't get out of first gear long enough to provide a coherent and compelling narrative or story that makes his take compelling. His thinking has a prayer, but he can't provide the gas to get me where I want to go. For now at least, I'm still thumbing.

Nicolas Acosta says

This is Caputo's first formal foray into theology. A philosopher by training, Caputo has spent most of his career playing in the sandbox with Heidegger, Kierkegaard and (especially) Derrida, exploring religious issues unearthed by continental philosophy. But in *The Weakness of God*, for the first time, Caputo undertakes to speak of God from within the context of Christian belief and not merely as a philosophical spectator standing on the outside.

His primary aim is to deconstruct the formal concept of "God" in order to expose the elusive event that stirs with the concept. I don't use the term "deconstruction" loosely, or in the popular usage of the word as a kind of decimation that leaves nothing behind. By "deconstruct" (I am indebted to Caputo for my understanding of the word, as are so many others--the Yale Dictionary of Continental Philosophy goes so far as to label Caputo deconstruction's preeminent popularizer in the English-speaking world) Caputo means to open up and to air out ideas in order to let new life breathe through them.

The event that the name of God harbors is a provocation. It is a summons, a call that arises from a place we do not know and on behalf of which we cannot speak, but somehow it is there. We are made restless at the core of our being by this call, and we are drawn to its mystery despite the fact that it is beyond our comprehension. This call, however, is a powerless one. It does not wield might over us or threaten us with coercion; we are free to ignore the provocation of the divine. The smallness, the weakness of this call is constitutive of its transforming (non-)power. Because it is weak, it is seductive.

The Weakness of God thus turns on a kind of postmodern process theology, where the world is dominated by all the violence of being and power but is bathed in a love of God that is beyond being and beyond power. It is here that I am both most moved by this book and least impressed by it; I can't help but feel that if a

theology is truly deconstructive, it must abstain from the sort of hard claims that deny the orthodox view of God as a being with at least some form of power, and offer this image of a weak God as a non-metaphysical "supplement" to the tradition. And as Caputo has taught us well to understand, there is nothing safe or trivial about a supplement; its power lies in its ability to recast the main body through apparent subtlety. So why wouldn't Caputo refrain from the denials that are effectively specular, equally metaphysical parries of metaphysical doctrines? Had he achieved this, this book might have received a 5-star rating by my account.

But still, what's not to love about a writer who can craft such beautiful phrases as these?:

"We are incited by the powerless power of some quiet provocation, like the words 'good, good. . . very good' sweeping softly across the surface of the deep, making being restless with the good. We are swept up in the winds of solicitation and invitation, of promise and a prayer for the event, our ears pressed close to the name of God, cupped tightly to the force of the event that gathers like a storm in that name and that keeps the world from closing over."

Manda Sari says

good

Rod Buchanan says

So far I'm finding a pretty thick read. I would not go nearly as far as Caputo goes, but he stretches your minds and opens it to some new ideas and ways of thinking which I appreciated.

Merged review:

I disagree with some of what he says, but he is a magnificent writer. Some of it is a bit obtuse, but also great depth of insight and thought. It is a new way of thinking that is helpful, but I would not go nearly as far as he does.
