Critical Question: Why is the Emerging Church Drawn toward Deconstructive Theology?

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Difference, Humility, Surprise
by LeRon Shults, a professor of theology at Agder University in Kristiansand, Norway.

I see at least three emphases within “deconstruction” - understood broadly in the sense proposed by Caputo - that would naturally be attractive to Emergent Types (hereafter ET).

First, deconstruction not only accepts but embraces the category of difference. In part this is attractive to ET because they (we) are embedded within a late modern generation that is open to difference in ways that (so it appears to us) our evangelical “parent” churches were not. Many of these traditional churches focused on sameness: we must all behave according to the same rules, sing the same songs, look at the world the same way, and affirm precisely the same propositions. The deconstructive embrace of the significance of differentiation (differance, deference, etc.) gives ET a language for what they have already experienced: liberation from a constricting obsession with sameness.

Second, deconstructive epistemology (or hermeneutics) calls for humility within the search for knowledge. Now, my point is not that all deconstructive philosophers are humble and (say) analytic philosophers are not. My point is that the “method” of deconstruction is self-reflective in a way that promotes an ongoing interrogation of the way in which one is holding on to one’s knowledge. It challenges arrogant claims to have grasped final, neutral, universal truth. Many ET were raised in churches within the American evangelical sub-culture, wherein theological reflection was anything but humble. In fact, it wasn’t even reflection; it was declaration. Insofar as Derrida (and others) share epistemic qualities such as humility with the Christian apophatic tradition, the former can inspire ET to retrieve the latter.

As we continue longing to know and be known by God, deconstruction can alleviate some of our modernist anxiety by helping us accept our finitude; we are not God, but this is OK and we can all take a deep breath and humbly follow in the way of Jesus without pretending like we know everything. After all, even he didn’t know everything! ;)

Finally, deconstruction is surprising. We do not know ahead of time exactly what will emerge when we begin the process of interrogating our beliefs and the practices that shape our interpretations. Constantinian churches don’t like being surprised. They like being in control, and so their engagements with the “other” and the “unknown” tend to look more like colonization than open exploration. ET are willing to give up the need to predict the outcome of every encounter with absolute certainty. In fact, they kind of get a kick out of the shocking discoveries that emerge during the journey itself. Allowing for deconstructive moments within philosophy and theology...
is one way to open oneself to such surprises, and even to delight in them as they facilitate real transformation.

I’m sure there are many other more concrete reasons that deconstruction is appealing to ET, but it seems to me that these three general characteristics of the approach are a significant part of the mutual attraction. But, hey, maybe you think differently. I could be wrong.

Surprise me.

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: Difference, Humility, Surprise

The Difference That Faith Makes
By Carl Raschke, Professor of Religious Studies and Chair of the Department, University of Denver.

ETs and DT ("Deconstructive Theology", If You Can’t Speak in Acronyms)

Why are “emergent types” drawn to deconstructive theology? The question is a more than modestly daunting, if only because what seems like a straightforward question is overdetermined with contexts and subtexts that require some sifting. The
question also seems to presume that the phrases “emergent type” and “deconstructive theology” are intuitively evident in some garden variety manner of speaking. But they are not. A little history might be instructive.

The so-called “emergent” movement emerged in the mid-to-late 1990s amid the cultural hyperchange that followed the collapse of Communism – what Fukayama hyperbolically dubbed the “end of history” – and was propelled largely by a new global economic prosperity and the explosion of digital communications. It started, of all places, in Texas and was a strategic effort of a major Christian philanthropic foundation to mobilize Gen-X leaders within the evangelical churches under the somewhat tendentious name of Terra Nova. As its mission statement to this day emphasizes, it aimed to seed and support the efforts of “pioneer churches who are testing and implementing the new ideas that will drive the Church in the future.”

Despite its Bible Belt beginnings, the emergent movement quickly took on the colorations of its main motivators and supporters. After its initial and relatively modest conference in Houston in January 2002, the movement for the most part abandoned the South and became by and large a Blue State phenomenon with a bi-coastal demographic base. By the middle of the present decade it had forged serious alliances with old-guard Northern Protestantism and the “social progressive” wings of the mainline institutional churches. Its theology was no longer in any clear sense “evangelical”; it was now quite “eclectic,” almost amorphous.

I once had a conversation with a former youth pastor in the Dallas-Fort Worth area who claimed he was the one who had come up with the word “emergent” at a vision casting session for the Terra Nova group. He didn’t stake any claim to intellectual property rights, but the thought processes he described among the founders were interesting to say the least. The word “emergent” derives from the language of the so-called “new physics”, which in turn was built upon cybernetics and “systems theory” that was popular among New Age thinkers in the early 1980s. It was first introduced by the Russian-born Belgian chemist Ilya Prigogine in his theory of “dissipative” or “self-organizing” systems. Leonard Sweet, Brian McLaren, and Jerry Haselmayer in their book from 2003 entitled The Language of the Emerging Church define “emergence” as “an approach to science that is sensitive to ways a whole can become more than the sum of its parts.” They observe that “this can only happen when the sharing of information within the system is maximized.”

The emergent movement indeed has been an effort – at least in concept – to envision the church as something much bigger than its “parts”, including its doctrinal disparities or sectarian divisions. Furthermore, it has certainly been a system that has focused on the “sharing of information,” expanding from its aboriginal status as a kind of 1990s-style, neo-hippie Jesus movement redux to an all-but-the-kitchen sink method of omnivorous theological inclusivity as laid out in McLaren’s A Generous Orthodoxy. A crisper metaphor might be that of a postmodern high-country religious avalanche, set off by the accumulation of an unstable mass of loose and flaky powder.
that after surging downhill gains unbreakable momentum and sweeps everything in its path.

“Deconstructive” theology, on the other hand, has a divergent “genealogy” (as Nietzsche would say), pursuing an alternative “rhizomatic” trajectory (as Deleuze would say). As is well-known, Derrida coined the word “deconstruction” early in his career, then eventually stopped using it entirely. He employed it to make a subtle point about how texts are intended to be read. We need to read them as complex and to a certain extent “chaotic” events of flickering meaning, not as monolithic architectures of clarified Cartesian certainty. Derrida’s notoriously difficult style of writing exemplifies his own intention. You’re not supposed instantly to “understand it” or “even get it.” Just like you don’t wolf down a fine filet, you don’t swallow in one gulp a great piece of literature or philosophy. Anyone who whines that a philosopher should “just say straightforwardly” what he or she means is sort of like the guy who douses ketchup on his beef Wellington. You’ve got to learn to appreciate what you’re eating – or reading. Cliff Notes don’t work for Hegel any more than McDonald’s Value Meal menu works for black truffle foie gras.

That’s why philosophers for a long time utterly despised Derrida, and why many even to this day will sniff that he is not a “real philosopher,” only a “literary entertainer” (that came from one of my actual academic colleagues). Real philosophers don’t read texts; they reason about things, whatever that might imply.

Deconstruction’s Sordid Past

Now if the foregoing seems to have little or nothing to do with emergent church theology, you’re absolutely correct. But words often embark on an odyssey of their own which takes them a long way from sight of their homeland. Consider the word “postmodern” itself, which when first employed in the 1970s referred to a funky new style of urban architecture that had nothing to do with anything it now connotes. Ironically, it was the religious right and the neo-cons of the Reagan era (such as Bill Bennett) that made deconstruction a household word outside of academia. Yep, them guys.

It was a case of what one obscure literary critic years ago termed “the productive progeny of the malapropism” Webster by the way defines a malapropism as “the use of a word sounding somewhat like the one intended but ludicrously wrong in the context “ Such words sometimes also take on a life of their own. The cultural conservatives of the early Eighties, when they heard all those “tenured radicals” in universities talking about “deconstruction” thought it was a fancy word for “destruction,” remembering the cries of “burn baby burn” during the street riots of the 1960s. So “deconstruction” became a bit of pop cultural argot for post-Sixties anti-authoritarianism and has evolved into a sort of façon de parler for any sort of probing, critical, analytical, or overly nuanced way of calling into question a conventional habit of mind, or desecrating a sacred cow.
It is not surprising – indeed, it is truly a no-brainer – that anti-establishment “emergent types” (ETs, as LeRon Shults calls them below) would be drawn to an anti-establishment strand of philosophical nomenclature. Jack Caputo’s work has certainly made Derrida accessible in recent years, even if it is not clear to what degree one is reading Caputo and to what degree one is actually reading Derrida. Caputo’s latest book The Weakness of God in which he says for the first time that he is actually doing “theology” – previously by most accounts he was doing philosophy – has also helped shape a sense in which there is now something that might be called a “deconstructive theology”, even though I myself argued long ago, purist that I am, that the terms “deconstruction” and “theology” cannot be mated without causing genetic defects, namely, giving birth to an oxymoron. The reason I made that argument (and by the way I don’t think Jack is doing “deconstructive” theology,” though he is doing theology and a very interesting one at that) is because, as I argued in The End of Theology in 1979, deconstruction is about showing the infinite open-endedness of all sign assemblages and texts, whereas “theology” is about finding an intelligible “ground”, a sort of “here I stand”, for one’s beliefs and actions.

I wasn’t saying anything original at that point. The observation had been made repeatedly by Heidegger in his later phase, and Derrida glommed on to it. Heidegger and Derrida saw “deconstruction” – or what the former called the “Destruktion of metaphysics”, although the German word doesn’t mean exactly the same thing as its English homonym – as “the end of philosophy.” Without much imagination I inferred that would also imply the “end of theology”. It does. Modern Christians on both the left and right side of the religious spectrum for some dang reason are convinced that you aren’t “saved” unless you have the right theology – not to mention the right politics. That isn’t exactly what Jesus had in mind. Jesus – and of course Paul – never harped on the “T-word”, only the Biblical “F-word”, faith. You have, if I may paraphrase Kant, to “abolish theology to make room for faith.” Deconstruction is about the abolition of theology and demands instead that we walk nakedly in our faith. Call us Christians “naked faith walkers.”

*Give Me That Old Time Presbyterianism*

I think the problem may be – and I realize I’m not being theologically correct to say this – that many emergent types, if indeed the adjective emergent is drawn from “systems theory”, still hanker for a certain comfort and security that “systematic theology” – or mainline Protestant theology - once provided. Deconstructive theology – or at least the broad conception of it - perhaps is a way of being unsystematically systematic, or systematically unsystematic, in one’s religious reflection. The first thing that one has to establish is what exactly one means by “deconstructive theology.” If emergent types are supposedly drawn to it, that must mean there is some vast body of literature that goes by the name of “deconstructive theology,” which there isn’t.

In the early 1980s I edited a book that included major essays of some leading pioneers in what came to be called (first) “postmodern religious thought” and (later)
“postmodern theology.” The volume was entitled Deconstruction and Theology, but it was not proposing any strategy of “deconstructive theology” by any accounting. It was designed to (1) introduce deconstruction to a theological audience (2) attempt to show what deconstruction might do to the various theological disciplines. It was a motley collection of essays. The only author in the group to go on to write a “deconstructive theology” was Mark C. Taylor. He actually used that word at first, but later changed it to “a/theology” to underscore his debt to Thomas J.J. Altizer and the “death of God” movement. Since he knew Derrida well, he joined with him in discussions during the late 1980s about “negative theology”, which could be considered as deconstructive meditations on the Medieval mystics. But that was all fairly rarefied academic discussions and clearly has not had much of an effect on the emergent movement, which has probably only begun to try to read Derrida in the last few years.

I would surmise that Jack Caputo’s influence on the theological world, his successful “branding” of Derrida through his conferences and publications, and the fact that many of those now closely associated with the academic side of the emergent movement – limited though it may be – are his own students has been a critical factor. I’m not convinced that the vast majority of non-philosophical specialists who regard themselves as “deconstructive” nowadays have even the foggiest notion of what the term really implies. But there’s nothing wrong with that. What matters is the longer-range prognosis of the emergent movement.

I conclude with both an observation and a warning that I will develop in my next extensive post to this blog. If one surveys all the events these days that are promoted as part of the emergent “conversation”, it is increasingly looking like good old-fashioned Sixties-style ecumenicism. Ecumenicism was all the rage until the Carter presidency, when the new evangelicalism in America swept it away. Now a once self-confident evangelical America, particularly in the North as the blue states get even bluer in the face of the Bush presidency, is having serious doubts about itself, largely because it it succumbed to the temptation that made the liberal Protestant denominations moribund a generation earlier – it overly and overtly politicized faith. And the old Protestant establishment seems to be wooing the disaffected young evangelicals back into the fold along with some Catholics. I suppose someone stripped the “e” out of emergent when no one was looking. Just give me that “old time religion” of interfaith dialogues, ecumenical gatherings, and institutionalized (i.e., seriously funded) social activism. It was good enough for my Presbyterian grandmother. It must be good enough for me.

In all honesty I think for some emergent types to be “deconstructive” simply means you refuse in good conscience to listen to James Dobson on the radio. But if one assesses the pedigree of the word “deconstruction,” it was always bound up with “difference” or, in Derrida’s coy misprision, with differance, the tiny difference that is almost imperceptible, yet makes a huge difference. What would be the genuine difference for emergent types?
The genuine difference, as Søren Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous character Johannes de Silentio observes, is the difference of faith. Kierkegaard refers to this self-effacing “difference bearer” as the knight of faith. No one can tell by one’s outward show – the books one reads, the clothes one wears, the politics one espouses – who exactly is the knight of faith. The extrinsic marks are never obvious. For Kierkegaard, whom Derrida admired and who has had a tremendous impact on the development postmodern thought, faith is the ever so subtle difference that makes all the difference.

Faith is the key to any “deconstructive theology.” Of course, that would mean the deconstruction of theology itself, which it may be difficult for any “movement” to bear.

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: The Difference That Faith Makes

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Subversive Syntax
by Tony Jones, National Coordinator of Emergent Village, author of several books, and blogs at theoblogy.

O, how I wish St. Jacques would have chosen another word for his hermeneutic than decontruction. When speaking, I prefer to pronounce it with a French accent, and then go on to tell people that it really means something different in French. Unfortunately, that's not really accurate (as it is for, say, "difference" and différance). Honestly, I spend some time almost every week explaining that Derridaian decontruction does not mean "to tear down" but "to break through." As Jack Caputo writes in Deconstruction in a Nutshell, anyone with half-an-ear for the Jewish or Christian scriptures will recognize that "decontruction has a very messianic ring to it."

This connection between deconstruction and the Bible is especially meaningful, methinks. I am quite convinced that the Bible is a subversive text, that it constantly undermines our assumptions, transgresses our boundaries, and subverts our comforts. This may sound like academic mumbo-jumbo, but I really mean it. I think the Bible is a f***ing scary book (pardon my French, but that's the only way I know how to convey how strongly I feel about this). And I think that deconstruction is the only hermeneutical avenue that comes close to expressing the transgressive nature of our sacred text.

Deconstruction is bent on showing the limits of all hermeneutic frameworks, including its own. It doesn’t so much tear them down as burst through them, pushing them beyond their limits, showing their inevitable weaknesses.
Why? Because postmoderns don’t believe in anything, of course. At least, that’s what the critics will say. But, in fact, to read Derrida and Caputo and Kearney makes clear that the raison d’être for deconstruction is always justice. When other hermeneutics stagnate, deconstruction shouts, "There’s more here, there’s a perfect justice to be had, and we can’t rest until we get there!"

And I also like deconstruction because, in its own, self-reflexive deconstructing, it is deeply ironic. And I like irony. Indeed, I think that Jesus liked irony, too (particularly the Johnanine Jesus). Derrida was playful, he avoided answering questions, he liked soap operas, and he knew perfectly well that he was stepping into the very traps that he had laid for others. In other words, he didn’t take himself too seriously, and deconstruction is appropriately playful as a result. Play and irony -- two pills that I think more theologians should swallow.

I’m well aware of the many and vigorous critiques of Derrida and deconstruction, and I appreciate them. But I’m not looking for a foolproof hermeneutic -- no such hermeneutic exists. I’m looking for a hermeneutic that roughly parallels the syntax of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, and, IMHO, deconstruction does that.

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: Subversive Syntax

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The Will to Action
by Jason Clark

It’s daunting posting on this ongoing topic/theme, after the excellence of related previous posts and I run the risk of repeating them, and undermining them. Also I am at the early stages of my Ph.D research and my thoughts are those of the theological/philosophical neophyte, trying to see the 'wood for the trees', so please excuse my crude conclusiona suggestions.

I’ll approach this topic from two perspectives, in terms of 'best' and 'worst'. If deconstructive theology teaches us anything it’s that our new theologies, and concomitant ecclesiologies will embody some wonderful new things, as well as drifting into some dire productions (which in any event locates the emerging church in the continuing nature of the historical church).

'At it’s Best'
I think Leon outlined this superbly, that deconstructive theology enables us to be open to the 'other', and to take a position of epistemic humility. Whilst deconstructive philosophy has enabled us to unmask the \textit{a priori} commitments of the church to modernity, theologians like John Milbank (in a non nihilistic and non Heideggerian/Nietzschean way) have so ably shown and unmasked the \textit{a priori} commitments of secularism to liberal protestant ideals.

Christians are called to search for others not like us, not in aggression (as that destroys our openness and theirs to us) but so that we might hear and assess ourselves in light of others and they may in turn learn from us. This is so unlike pluralism, where consensus is the goal, or as in exclusivism with the crushing of the other into submission.

Within all this openness to the other, and epistemic humility, many of us have been discovering that the church is not the embodiment of truth (as Jesus is the truth and not a possession) but that it is the unique place that embodies the seeking of truth, of Jesus, by the Spirit.

Alongside Lyotard's diagnosis of suspicion towards meta-narratives, we realise there has never been a pure Christian meta-narrative, Christians have always borrowed from the culture around them and constructed a meta-narrative from the things at hand, the knowing of Jesus in the particular (at least that is my conviction). Yet it is this claim which highlights a problem of deconstruction.

\textbf{At its worst}

Deconstruction has a major flaw, inherent in it's makeup. Whilst Christians confess the particular of following the historical Jesus within changing historical contexts/horizons and traditions, the post-modern philosophers, or maybe more specifically within the neo-Nietzschean of deconstructive hermeneutics, there is little to no possibility that anyone can make any truth claims as a person, institution and organisation.

In the process of deconstruction debate often ends (and the need for ongoing discussion) once the false construction of what we are examining is revealed. There is no will to act at all, with a 'surface consumption' of what we have deconstructed, that Baudrillard mapped out so ably in his writing (I posted some thoughts on this \url{here}.

The deconstructive view seems to have no room for conflict and debate between claims. Yet whilst using their tools, it's discourse can help theologians remember that we cannot rely too heavily on our systems of thought. With an awareness that our theological constructions are inherent with sin, maybe deconstruction enables us to tread with caution with our assertions. But the power of sin is not just in the systems that are deconstructed but in the people who try to deconstruct!
Deconstructive theology can help us see the 'other', but is often so sceptical that it ends up having no responsibility to act to others, and can appear at best as the playful behaviours of the indulgent middle class, or something far more sinister at worst.

The deconstructive theology can become more about the 'subject' showing off their skills at subversion of the 'object', and their right to do so, than any desire to close of discussion and take action, as agents of the Kingdom for the mission of Jesus.

There is a responsibility to deconstruct, of openness to the other, but also of closing off, to be able to act. Whilst the emerging church finds an openness to the other, and humility in its beliefs, it must also learn the process of 'closing off', of moving from abstraction to the concrete, of the nature of action from within this new deconstructive freedom it has found.

**Action**

And in trying to find a way to do that we might turn to some French philosophers, from the meaningful agency of Bourdieu with his notion of 'tactics' (compared to the nihilism of Baudrillard), and the strengthening of this agency through the actions of 'bricolage' outlined by de Certeau, but that's a topic for another post.

*The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here:* [The Will to Action](#)

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**Beyond Silence**

by By David Fitch, co-pastor of *Life on the Vine*, and Betty R. *Lindner Chair of Evangelical Theology* at Northern Seminary. He is the author of *The Great Giveaway*, and blogs at *Reclaiming the Mission*.

To me this is a no brainer. Deconstructive theology is an excellent rejection of the evangelical-fundamentalism of their youth and all its ills in the face of a radically pluralist, post-Christendom, post-modern world. Many emerging church folk are allergic to anything that smacks of a.) an intolerant judgmental exclusivism, b.) an arrogant, even violent, certainty about what we do know, and c.) an overly-rationalized hyper-cognitive gospel that takes the mystery out of everything we believe. If I have over-stated myself, forgive me. But I too have felt these pangs in
relation to my own evangelical upbringing. Deconstructive theology is an excellent avenue of resistance to all these maladies.

I believe then what attracts so many emergent authors, friends and followers to Derrida, Caputo, Kearney and derivatives thereof is a theology which moves past these ills of modernity and provides the basis for:

a.) inclusive conversation that resists judgment,

b.) a comfortability with the limits of our knowledge,

c.) a window into a hyper reality that returns mystery to the center of our faith and practice.

In regard to a.) Deconstructive thought refuses to close off, resolve and thereby define permanently what a sentence, creed, or text might mean. The coincidence of meaning and being is no longer assumed even at “the origin” of the text itself. The meaning never finally arrives. The truth is always “yet to come.” In all of this, there is something very compelling to us recovering fundamentalists, especially if we can see our way out of the classic modern terms of moral relativism (which I think deconstruction at least tries to do). If you’re a recovering fundamentalist, conversation sounds good and deconstructive thought is compelling in the way it calls for keeping things open to the new, the other and the absolute future which is to come.

In regard to b.) Deconstructive thought shows how all speech in the Western tradition discloses a violence. Us recovering fundamentalists find this irresistible. We have seen the brutal effects of power-driven abusive interpretation of the Bible in the world. We are looking for humility and yet a way to live a way towards truth. Deconstruction uncovers the violence and helps us live with ambiguity and a search for the truth to be revealed in this moment for this time.

In regard to c.) Deconstructive thought makes way for a revealing of Truth (God) from its concealment (Heidegger’s alethia). This Truth, the God who comes in this way, is removed from our control and the control of systems (onto-theology). Caputo’s “hyper-reality” offers us a way to keep God from being usurped by a power agenda of some sort. Some of us recovering fundamentalists have seen that happen. Caputo’s Khora (that chaotic space wherein God comes into being for a moment) comforts us against the dangers of religious fundamentalism. We can return to mystery and quit worrying that we have to prove God apologetically via reason or science like our parents seemed obsessed about.

I too, along with many emerging church people, confess to also being a recovering evangelical fundamentalist fed up with evangelicalism’s modernist maladies of self assured judgmentalism, a violent arrogance in the way outsiders are approached with knowledge, and the loss of all mystery and transcendence in the face of modern rationality and science.
Beyond Silence

But might these same gains be produce by another road? Is deconstruction the only way out of the fundamentalist cul-de-sac?

Peter Rollins in the introduction to his book *How (Not) To Speak of God* (p.xi) quotes Wittgenstein’s last words from the *Tractatus* - “What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence.” He then proceeds to write an excellent theological description of deconstructive theology for the Emergent church as an extension of this assertion. But is there another response available?

How about those who have indeed followed Wittgenstein himself (in *Philosophical Investigations*) in his attempts to overcome the failures of the *Tractatus*, in his attempts to go beyond the Kantian delineations that limit how language can function. What if we cast aside the modernist language-world dichotomy and instead see language as that by which we participate in reality, a way of life that then enables us to experience things which cannot be captured in language alone. When we see language like this, we notice it can show/reveal realities instead of just speaking about them. And by participating in these languages, learning a way of life, we are transformed into seeing and experiencing what could not simply be talked about. These paths have already been well worn by Lindbeck, Hauerwas, McIntrye, Milbank, Stanley Fish (to an extent) and others.

I think I know why the emergent writers are at least a little hesitant to follow these thinkers. It is for the same reasons they are drawn to deconstructive theology. Because the deconstructionists (and emergent thinkers) believe these theologians (Lindbeck, Hauerwas et.al.) are prone to lead us to another sectarian fundamentalism, the very thing we are all running away from.

To this I respectfully disagree. I think the category of narrative/cultural linguistic (McIntrye-Lindbeck) requires openness and conversation. I think the hermeneutic of community limits our arrogance and violence. And I think the *via analogia* (or *analogia entis*) of the Milbank crowd paves a way towards mystery and transcendence in a profoundly liturgical way. I suggest that this avenue also provides fruitful ground to cultivate the very things we seek: inclusive conversation, humility in knowledge and mystery in engaging God. These voices offer it all in a way that embodies physically a mission into the world that helps us avoid Slavoj Zizek’s complaint about deconstruction. For Zizek argues that such post structuralism (read: Derrida) produces “… an endless quasi-poetical variation on the same theoretical assumption, a variation which does not produce anything new … a flabby poeticism ...which does not affect the place from which we speak.” (Zizek *The Sublime Object of Ideology* p. 155). While I have learned much from the deconstructionists, I think emerging voices can learn much more from these voices from Yale, Duke, Cambridge et al.
Why Deconstruction?
by Peter Schuurman, the bi-national coordinator for campus ministry in the Christian Reformed Church.

So why is the emerging church drawn to deconstruction, and Derrida as their prophet of choice?

1. Interpretation

If texts are chaotic events of flickering meaning, you can never be absolutely certain of your reading. There are always multiple readings that are possible. This challenges the idea that faith is certainty, without doubts or misreadings, and opens up room for questioning the church and theology in emergent conversations. It also resists the idea that literal, objective interpretations of Biblical texts are possible. Finally, it negates the claim of Christianity to be “The Absolute Truth” in some sort of pristine and pure way.

If we agree that everything is interpreted, and there are multiple interpretations possible, there is now freedom for emergent congregations to play and experiment with Biblical texts and theology. Doctrines like hell, the exclusivity of Christ, various legalisms and literalism are open for re-interpretation. Then friendly relationships with other churches and denominations with “a different interpretation” is also admissible. Even relationships with other religions becomes more acceptable, or at least less “black and white.”

Finally, the mission of the emergent church can proceed to “read” the faith for other generations and cultures, and specifically the postmodern world, in different ways, ways that are more suitable and perhaps seductive for that people group.

2. Love and Justice

Deconstruction, according to Derrida, is ethics. Singular readings of things are always violent, in so far as it is always exclusive of other readings. To find other readings, then, becomes an act of justice and love in so far as it gives room for other voices to be heard.

In this instance, a shift takes place: now its not as important (or even possible) to “get the right reading” as it is to “read in a just and loving way”—which means
allowing other readings to exist alongside our own. When this comes to institutions, this means emergent people recognize that Christendom, the American Empire, capitalism, patriotism and our own churches can be interpreted in other ways. In fact, in so far as they do not allow for the worlds of others to exist and flourish, they become violent and oppressive institutions. This concern for “the other” drives much of emergent politics and ecclesiology.

3. Messianism

Deconstruction holds that no reading does justice to all, and no reading ever will. The perfect interpretation, the “right reading”, the truly hospitable cultural construction is always “to come” – just like the Hebrew messiah.

This sounds like the word “emergence” in other terms. There is concern in the emergent crowd to remain open, tentative, evolving, and not name themselves as “this” or “that.” They are emerging, a work in process, a church that is not a church but is rather a church “to come.”

4. Liberation from the Determinate

Deconstruction declares that every particular reading is in a way, “false” and even violent in its exclusiveness. It seeks to live in the dynamic between the readings rather than in any determinate reading. If all interpretations and institutions are oppressive in this way, we can never rest, never think we have arrived. We are free only when we are beyond our particularities.

Although I have quibbles with some of the other connections named above, I want to elaborate a little on a subtle but I believe significant issue with regards to this similarity between deconstruction and the emerging church. Some of this critique comes via Jamie Smith’s writings, specifically, Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism?

In so far as some emerging churches (lets call this the “discontinuous emergent” church) show little regard for creeds and confessions and posit a radical discontinuity between themselves and the church that has gone on before, they share with Derrida a modern, negative view of freedom. Freedom, in this sense is a freedom from, freedom from restraint, particularity, tradition. This is freedom as autonomy, and can come with the non- or anti-denominational label or some sort of primitivist ecclesiology. This can be viewed as quintessentially modern, in so far as Immanuel Kant heralded the modern age by calling for a break from the “tutelage” of tradition.

I don’t want to “read” too much into these trends, but these are the hard philosophical questions that we can ask. At root, this approach may assume that to be unapologetically particular (ie. connected to the catholic tradition of the faith) in any way is to be necessarily besmirched beyond repair. An emerging church is one that has taken the courage (Kant’s term) to free itself from history, from tradition, and from all the baggage that comes with it.
Smith explains in The Fall of Interpretation that this view, at a deep philosophical level, conflates creation and fall. If to be human is to be finite and an interpreting being, and all interpretive traditions are violent, than our humanness is inescapably violent. But if word can become flesh, as it did in the “logic of incarnation” seen in Christ, interpretations can be incarnate in words and institutions that are not inherently violent. In fact, they may bring life. In effect, to unabashedly claim your historic Christian faith is to name your humanity, not to oppress others. We were created as interpretative beings, and while the fall does twist them in violent ways, in Christ our traditions need not be inescapably malevolent.

I recognize there are other emerging churches that describe themselves as a return to the ancient Christian tradition (lets called these the “ancient-future” emergents). While many of these churches are engaged in a desperately necessary retrieval project, there is potential for these churches to be co-opted by the dark side of postmodern life.

Let me explain it this way. If some ancient-future emergents do not see some sort of continuity with an authentic Christian tradition nor configure their ecclesiology in accountable relationships to a broader body but they selectively appropriate parts of the tradition that they find preferable, they may be assuming another kind of autonomy--one that picks and chooses “from above” as it were. This may operate as much in a consumer framework as otherwise, and as many have said, one common way to be post-modern is to be a consumer self (eg. David Lyon’s introduction entitled Postmodernity).

This is why Smith charges the emerging church with not being postmodern enough. He keeps positing a more persistent or proper postmodernism that takes us beyond the desire for autonomy and into a community of thought and practice that stretches through time and space, in other words, a particular embodied tradition and its institutions. This is, in fact, the “catholic” Christian faith of creeds and confessional Trinitarian dogma, the sacraments, and even hierarchy. This is a call beyond both a spiritual nomadic life and the spiritual fortress of fundamentalism, and towards a sojourning with the Spirit in catholic association, en route to the City of God. We might call this third kind of emergent “catholic emergent churches.” (small “c”!) Its not just “the same old church” but “the same old church in a new context,” which is genuinely ancient-future.

The more particular you are, it has been said, the more universal you become—in so far as to be human is to be particular. There are no generic, universal human beings, any more than there is generic universal reason. I would say to students on university campus: the more you respectfully and unapologetically express your particularity rather than sliding into a generic cultural codes, the more you free others to be their deep particular self. It is permission giving. For we are all much more deep than we reveal in North American cultural life. The mass cultural amnesia that Jane Jacobs talked about in her last book Dark Age Ahead is what threatens us the most, not the scandal of our particularities (although, of course, particularities are not sacrosanct or salvific in themselves). The fear of particularity, as Smith says, is a
negation of our finiteness, and therefore a negation of our humanity, and becomes a continuation of the disenchanted dehumanizing aspects of modernity.

We would do better to embrace as well a freedom to and with. There is also a freedom that comes when one is empowered by deep commitments and covenants, by submission to authority and accountability. This freedom is not historically a part of the American Way, but it may be the secret to its healing.

Lure of Obscurity

I want to end by mentioning a great little paper entitled “The Leisure of Worship and the Worship of Leisure” by Jack Miles, the author of Biography of God. In it he says that museums, or what he calls secular cathedrals, (and I would include universities in this, too) are contending with the same forces as religion today—that is, the forces of commodification, or “The Great American Hustle,” or to parallel Smith’s terms, the logic of the market. In museums, giant video screens replace text, and garish advertising campaigns fill the entire outside walls of buildings. The question ironically is asked: “Is nothing sacred?”

In so far as the emerging church constructs itself not as a unapologetic incarnational presence of the body of Christ but as a spirituality that markets a religious identity suitable to the preferences of a postmodern consumer culture, it does little to challenge the consumerist status quo, and as much as it eschews modern conceptual idolatries, it flirts with a new one, the logic of the market.

This is what I see as the vulnerable edge of the emerging movement, but it is a weakness I name as a partner in the conversation. This is the hard question for me: what if the customer is not always right, and there is a greatness that commands an allegiance beyond choice and autonomy? How can we nurture a commitment and authenticity that is not an extension of the rule of taste nor a retrenchment in embattled fundamentalist certainty?

Miles points to the community of Taize, France, which, incidentally is a community with Reformed Christian roots shaped by catholic liturgical practice. The scripture-based music, the times of silence, and the use of icons attracts thousands of young people every year. This, like many emerging Christian campus ministry groups on universities across the country that are tied and true to historical denominational commitments, would be a truly post-modern alternative.

Miles quotes Wired magazine: “There’s a huge lure to obscurity. That’s one of the keys—giving people something to discover, which is the antithesis of the way most advertising works.” Religious institutions, he says, “even making the most active use of showbiz techniques, cannot possibly compete in that game. But mystery is there own game, and perhaps they need to return to it.”
The postmodern shift can be described as a shift from mastery to mystery. Mastery puts an autonomous agent in control, manipulating things towards desired ends. It is an instrumental approach to life. Mystery, on the other hand, in the Biblical tradition, is not so much a puzzle to be solved, or a great cloud of unknowing, as it is a dogma and a sacrament revealed and received within a historically continuous community of faith.

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: Why Deconstruction? Also, the selection is part of a larger presentation which can be downloaded here.

Musical Hermeneutics: Bringing Musical Insights into Conversation with Biblical Hermeneutics
by Cynthia Nielsen

Performers and Composers as Co-creators

Bruce Ellis Benson in his book, The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue, argues that instead of choosing between Werktreu¹ or a kind of musical anarchy, we should look to the past where we find a way of conceiving music composition as an event in which the composer and performer become “co-creators.” Using Gadamer as a way to help us to begin thinking about models of music composition, Ellis writes, “Gadamer claims that an ideal dialogue has what he calls the ‘logical structure of openness.’ I think there are at least two aspects to this ‘openness.’ First, the conversation often brings something into the open: it sheds new light on what is being discussed and allows us to think about it (or, in this case, hear it) in a new way. Second, the dialogue is itself open, since it (to quote Gadamer) is in a ‘state of indeterminacy.’ In order for a genuine dialogue to take place, the outcome cannot be settled in advance. Without at least some ‘loose-play’ or uncertainty, true conversation is impossible” (p. 15). As Benson notes, Gadamar of course realizes that this is the “ideal” for conversations and that they do not always flesh out in this manner. Likewise, in stressing “openness,” Gadamer is not suggesting that dialogues are without rules. Rather, “the rules are what allow the conversation to take place at all. In effect, they open up a kind of

¹ A rather strict faithfulness first to the work and second to the composer.
space in which dialogue can be conducted” (p. 15). Though rules are essential for a
dialogue to occur, they can be overly restrictive or more on the “open” and “flexible”
side and “are themselves open to continuing modification” (p. 15). Though today we
tend to think of classical music as not particularly open, Benson shows that
historically this view is relatively new and in fact is only one way, not the way to
view composition. For example, in the 1800s there were two characteristic ways of
conceiving composition and these were exemplified by Beethoven and Rossini.
Though these composers represent two different styles of music, the deeper
significance lies in the differing ways that they understand the nature of musical
compositions, the role of the performance in expressing them, and the relation the
artist and the community (p. 16). As Benson explains, “Beethoven saw his
symphonies as ‘inviolable musical “texts” whose meaning is to be deciphered with
‘exegetical’ interpretations; a Rossini score, on the other hand, is a mere recipe for a
performance’ (Carl Dahlhaus, Nineteenth-Century Music, p. 9 [Benson, p. 16]. In other
words, Beethoven’s view is the more recent, innovative view that has come to
characterize how we think of classical music as Werktreu, whereas Rossini’s
conception was significantly more flexible, allowing the performer to participate in
the creative process. Moreover, for Rossini, “it was not the work that was given
precedence; rather, the work (and thus the composer) was in effect a partner in
dialogue with performers and listeners” (Ibid., pp. 16-17).

Benson on the Openness of Composing

In chapter two Benson observes our tendency to think that a musical composition
is finished when the piece (in its “final” version) is written down. However, there
are a number of assumptions that we should question in connection with such a
conclusion. For example, why assume that a process of revisions always leads to a
better version, much less to the “perfect” version? Beethoven was known for
ceaselessly revising and offering a number of variants for musical passages and entire
sections. Even if we grant that his revisions generally improved his work, we should
not necessarily conclude that they always did. Beethoven himself often commented
that his works contained a number of imperfections that he simply had to let stand
given his duties and other commitments. As Benson points out, there are number of
“nonartistic” reasons for compositions reaching a “completion” stage. “[T]he
vicissitudes of life have a way of deciding something is finished—whether or not the
artist is of the same opinion” (p. 68).

Is there a sense in which a composition becomes “fixed” and definite, or is it the
case that even for the composer there is a certain “indefiniteness” and indeterminacy
involved in his or her work even when the composition is “finished”? Arguing for
the latter, Benson explains that though it is the case that composers have “reasonably”
definite intentions, “it would be impossible for their intentions to encompass all of
the details of any given piece” (p. 67). In other words, often or perhaps most of the
time, the composer himself is unsure exactly how he wants every aspect and detail of
the work to sound until the piece is actually played with a specific group and very
particular instrumentation. Mozart, for example, would at times perform different
versions of the same work to a group of friends in order to seek their input as to which is preferred. Benson proffers a number of other examples, which I will forego for brevity’s sake.

There is also the additional complication of the performer “rightly” interpreting the composer’s intentions. To illustrate, Benson quotes Edward Cone who comments on the difficulties performers face in playing Chopin’s music, “The performer’s first obligation, then, is to the score—but to what score? The autograph or the first printed edition? The composer’s hasty manuscript or the presumably more careful copy by a trusted amanuensis? The composer’s initial version or his later emendation? [and so on]” (p. 70) To be sure one might give good reasons for choosing and preferring one version over another. But still we must recognize that performers, conductors and arrangers play a role in the process of composing, i.e., composing a work that is already “finished.” Yet, as we stated earlier, composers certainly have some definite intentions, but how extensive those intentions are is another question (as Benson asks, using Husserlian language—are they “vague” or “distinct” intentions?) Composers can and do, for instance, change their minds about certain works over a long period of time. Likewise, composers may not even be aware of a lack of determinacy until the work is performed. Though dealing with verbal content, Benson cites a passage by Hirsch that is applicable to musical content, “Determinacy does not mean definiteness or precision. Undoubtedly, most verbal meanings are imprecise and ambiguous, and to call them such is to acknowledge their indeterminacy: they are not univocal and precise. This is another way of saying that an ambiguous meaning has a boundary like any other verbal meaning, and that one of the frontiers on this boundary is that between ambiguity and univocality” (p. 74). We tend to associate boundary with precision, so “what does it mean for an ambiguous meaning to have a ‘boundary’?” (p. 74). As Benson points out, boundaries can of course be conceived differently. For example, they can be thought as rigid and inflexible or in a more flexible and bending way. This more flexible conception is the model for which Benson argues in terms of the “boundaries” of a musical work.

A number of interesting parallels might be drawn from what we have highlighted in regard to Benson’s musical findings and Biblical hermeneutics. Here I would like to widen this monologue to a larger conversation and hear your thoughts. Specifically, what are some of the ways that we might bring Benson’s discussions above in dialogue with biblical hermeneutics—how might we understand the nature of Scripture itself and our roles as interpreters (in a community or tradition)? In what ways might we apply (or not apply) the above musical insights to Scripture and why?

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Introduction:

In what follows, I discuss the somewhat interesting and bizarre reception of George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. By and large, this book is received as a treatise on 'postliberal' epistemology. To be sure, while it contains some of that element, to treat it solely as an epistemological thesis is to miss Lindbeck's larger aim: ecumenism and unity in the church. In looking at the larger project of George Lindbeck, one cannot miss his great efforts towards unity in the church: his 'observer' role during the Vatican II council (see this interview with Lindbeck by George Weigel pertaining to this in *First Things*), his efforts in the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) to help pen the Joint Declaration on Justification between the LWF and Roman Catholic church, and the many articles published in myriad journals and books on ecumenism, which are too numerous to list here.

Lindbeck himself has expressed a bit of bewilderment at the larger response to his *Nature of Doctrine*, and this can be seen a bit in the Forward to the German edition of the book (found in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. James Buckley; the mega-theology-reading Amazon reviewer Halden Doerge expresses this same sentiment in his Amazon review of that book). What appears in the extended entry is an attempt to extrapolate what Lindbeck was doing in *The Nature of Doctrine* with an eye not only on his use of Wittgenstein, but also on his larger corpus. Like Jamie Smith uses Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault in his excellent *Whose Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church*, I attempt to show that Lindbeck is, similarly, using Wittgenstein to help us Christians be better Christians; what is achieved here is a ressourcement by way of aggiornamento (Wittgenstein) with the goal of unity (see Jesus’s prayer for unity in John 17).

The political implications of this are vast. In untangling claims of 'fideism' (Hauerwas gets this too), I hope I have helped to open up a way to see how radical unity in the church really is both as a witness to our brothers and sisters in the church as well as to those outside of it. I think the work of David Burrell would be a great supplement and "way forward" here as well.

I would love to hear what you think.
George Lindbeck After Wittgenstein?

Don’t, for heaven’s sake, be afraid of talking nonsense! But you must pay attention to your nonsense.¹

In the following sections, I seek to ask three questions regarding Lindbeck’s appropriation of Wittgenstein, which are asked in an intentionally provocative order to ‘fish out’ what I will argue is a more appropriate picture of Lindbeck than is regularly offered. The first question asked is, “Is Lindbeck’s reading of Wittgenstein a ‘good’ one?” After briefly exploring both Lindbeck’s own comments on his own usage and some recent scholarship on Wittgenstein, I will be poised to ask the question, “Are Wittgenstein and Lindbeck ‘fideists’?” And lastly, after these two exercises, my concluding inquiry is, “What, then, is Lindbeck doing with the work of Wittgenstein?” As I hope to show, this use of Wittgenstein as a kind of aggiornamento or ‘updating’ situates Lindbeck within a much older tradition by way of a ressourcement or ‘returning to the sources’ which will be key for his larger ecumenical goal. Lindbeck’s key text that I will be considering throughout this inquiry is his The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age.²

In order to begin with this inquiry into Lindbeck’s appropriation of Wittgenstein, it might be helpful to consider first not whether Lindbeck’s reading is a ‘good’ one, but what he says about his own use of Wittgenstein’s thought. In multiple places, Lindbeck admits as a caveat that his own reading of Wittgenstein may be easily contested³ or that he has divulged responsibility away from such a thinker, thus insinuating that all liability of appropriation falls fully on him.⁴ So, to ask whether or not Lindbeck’s reading is faithful to Wittgenstein may in fact be a non-starter as far as Lindbeck is concerned. Also of note here might be the question ‘which Wittgenstein?’ Indeed, as recent scholarship has shown, there really is no longer a single Wittgenstein (if there ever was), as interpretations on almost all key points are hotly debated.⁵

⁵ See Ray Monk, How to Read Wittgenstein, ed. Simon Critchley (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005). After spelling out that the only agreement concerning Wittgenstein is that he has been immensely influential, Monk states “that what I offer here is only one possible way of reading Wittgenstein” (p. 1). See also Alfred Nordmann, Wittgenstein’s Tractatus: An Introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and the whole survey of discussion revolving around the Tractatus as well as a similar overview of continuing controversies in David G. Stern, Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations: An Introduction (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2004). Lastly, see Jeffrey Stout’s introduction in Joseph Incandela, et. al., Grammar and Grace: Reformulations of Aquinas and Wittgenstein, eds. Jeffrey Stout and Robert MacSwain (London: SCM Press, 2004). Referring to Thomas Aquinas and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Stout says, “their intellectual legacies are deeply ambiguous, and have generated much controversy. Even their most ardent deenders do not see eye to eye on how they should be read” (p. 1).
To begin to ask our question, then, at least one example stands out that indicates that Lindbeck’s reading of Wittgenstein may not be as careful as it should be. This is his brief discussion of private religious experience and symbolizations in *The Nature of Doctrine*. Here Lindbeck mentions that Wittgenstein conceives of private languages as “logically impossible.” However, on a closer reading, one finds that ‘logical impossibility’ is not a category in which Wittgenstein is working as much as the category of ‘sense’ [*Sinn*] and ‘non-sense’ [*Unsinn*]. Indeed, he had been working quite closely within these categories since his first publication, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Alasdair MacIntyre sensed this same tendency to interpret Wittgenstein in manner way and attempts to offer the following corrective:

Wittgenstein...has sometimes been interpreted as trying to offer a proof of the logical impossibility of a private language, conjoining an analysis of the notion of language as essentially teachable and public and an account of the notion of inner states as essentially private in order to show that a contradiction is involved in speaking of a private language. But such an interpretation misconstrues Wittgenstein who, I take it, was saying to us something like this:

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6 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 38. For Wittgenstein’s discussions on private language, see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), §243-315. Ray Monk, *How To Read Wittgenstein*, 87-8 points out that, while §243-315 is typically delineated as the ‘private language argument,’ this choice has some arbitrariness about it as he points to Saul Kripke who believes that the argument actually originates in §202: *‘And hence also “obeying a rule” is a practice. And to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule “privately”: otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.’*  


8 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London: Routledge, 2001). While sense and nonsense are found *passim*, consider these two ‘book-end’ statements within the *Tractatus*: in the preface, he says, “It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be drawn, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense” (4). The penultimate proposition reads, “My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyway who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright” (6.54). See also Nordmann, *Wittgenstein’s Tractatus: An Introduction* for a fascinating thesis which offers a fourth, implicit category between sense and nonsense. The first category comprises of language that describes what is true or false about the world, thus sensical (e.g. “Katie walked through the doorway”). The second category describes language that, while not senseless, does not refer to reality because in either their tautological or contradictory state, “there is no situation in the world that would render them true or false, indeed, they cannot be true or false” (p. 3) and thus communicate no real content (“I know nothing about the weather when I know that it is either raining or not raining.” Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.461). The third category consists of sentences like “he is envious of my talents,” which for Wittgenstein, masquerade themselves as real sentences but they do not contain any real grammar and are nonsensical, equivalent to something like “the droogfyll yuts bobblingly.” For the fourth category, Nordmann argues that Wittgenstein, in the exercise of writing the *Tractatus*, actually embodies a fourth, implied sentence: “*The Tractatus is written in a nonsensical language and it advances a persuasive argument*” (p. 8). Also, especially the last chapter “The senses of sense,” pp. 159-202. To wit: “We...discover nonsense because our attempt to use sentences differently fails to yield sentences that have sense. This does not preclude, however, that these sentences and our failure might somehow make sense” (p. 164). Here Nordmann concludes “that there is indeed some sense that is inexpressible in speech. ‘This shows itself’ (*Tractatus*, 6.522).”
on the best account of language that I can give and the best account of inner mental states that I can give, I can make nothing of the notion of private language, I cannot render it adequately intelligible.⁹

Likewise, David Stern reminds us that Wittgenstein’s “ultimate aim is to get the reader to see that such theories of inner experience make no sense.”¹⁰ At this point, however, one cannot really continue to pose a substantial inquiry into whether or not Lindbeck offers a ‘good’ reading of Wittgenstein because in fact, most of Lindbeck’s Wittgensteinian allusions are in passing to how he has helped Lindbeck out in regards to language or philosophy in general.¹¹ However, there is one explicit example of how Lindbeck applies Wittgensteinian thought towards his own project in a specific manner in The Nature of Doctrine, but this inquiry have to wait until the final section of this inquiry which attempts to illustrate Lindbeck’s actual strategy.

My second question in regards to Lindbeck and Wittgenstein regards whether or not they are ‘fideists.’ Often assumed, but without ground, is that because Wittgenstein possesses a ‘Wittgensteinian fideism’ and focuses upon ‘descriptive shows,’¹² likewise Lindbeck, because of his philosophical indebtedness to Wittgenstein, emphasis upon ‘intratextuality,’¹³ and talk of ‘thick description,’ must therefore also be a fideist through and through.¹⁴ To begin to unspin this complex, fictional web, I shall begin with Wittgenstein himself. In this untangling, because the issues are so vitally connected, the second part of the question as it concerns Lindbeck will be answered simultaneously in the asking and answering of the question, “What, exactly, is Lindbeck doing with Wittgenstein?” Concomitantly, this inquiry will also address Lindbeck’s wider theological project.

Whence Fideism: the Mare’s Nest

Did Wittgenstein himself actually possess a ‘Wittgensteinian fideism?’ It is here that the work of Fergus Kerr is instructive. In his Theology After Wittgenstein, Kerr points out that most conceptions of Wittgenstein’s original relationship to theology have to do with the assumption that Wittgenstein himself must have possessed a

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¹⁴ See, e.g., the following blatant remark in Daniel Arnold, “Of intrinsic validity: A study on the relevance of Purva Mimamsa,” Philosophy East and West 51, no. 1 (Jan 2001): “Despite the sophisticated epistemological apparatus and the eminently non-Wittgensteinian realism, then, Alston’s position seems to me to be, in the end, vulnerable to the same critiques as can be leveled against the Wittgensteinian-fideist positions of, say, D. Z. Phillips and George Lindbeck” (p. 40).
‘Wittgensteinian fideism.’ This term was introduced as early as 1967 by Kai Nielsen in an article of the same name. As an atheist he [wanted] to go on arguing that religion is a massive error...[objecting] to the way that certain Christian philosophers allegedly maintain that religion is a way of life that is only intelligible to participants.” The break in credibility occurred when interpreters such as Nielsen and others mistook religion to be what Wittgenstein meant by ‘form of life’ [Lebensform]. Furthermore, for Nielsen, the ‘language-game’ of ‘religious talk’ was assumed to be autonomous and epistemologically self-enclosed. However, as Kerr rightly notes,

The very idea that religion, or anything else on that grand scale, could count as a ‘form of life’ in Wittgenstein’s sense, although it keeps cropping up, has to be excluded on textual grounds. Once that is made clear, the notion that a language-game is autonomous, in the sense required to generate ‘Wittgensteinian fideism,’ proves equally empty.

To sum up, Kerr has shown that on strict textual grounds, Wittgenstein does not equate religion to a form of life, nor is a language-game as found within a form of life (see below) an autonomous endeavor.

Elsewhere, Kerr notes: “Wittgenstein’s final conception of how human beings mesh with the world, as instinctively interacting agents rather than centres of rational consciousness, developed from his discontent with [Sir James George] Frazer’s conception of religious practices as based on beliefs.” Not only does Wittgenstein not equate a ‘form of life’ to a religion, but it turns out that his formulation of the relationship between form of life and language-games is in fact a reaction to a popular conception promoted by religion itself at the time. To return to Kerr’s argument in Theology After Wittgenstein, he directs attention to the Philosophical Investigations and quickly notes that where ‘forms of life’ are mentioned, they speak of something entirely different.

In §19 where Wittgenstein first introduces the idea, he asks us to “imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle. – Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no. And innumerable others. – And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.” In the second place where ‘form of life’ arrives (§23), this term is talked about as modes of activity that include speaking, including commanding, describing, telling a story, joking, thanking, greeting, and praying. As Kerr interprets it, “To imagine a language is to imagine an activity such as commanding and obeying. Language is the conversation that is

17 Kerr, Theology After Wittgenstein, 28.
18 Ibid., 29.
interwoven with the characteristic activities of human life.” Thus, “To wonder whether such a vast and internally diverse phenomenon as religion or Catholicism would count seems superfluous.” Yet this pleonastic conflation is exactly what Norman Malcolm has promulgated, helping to spread a misrepresentation throughout Wittgensteinian scholarship. It is the scale of ‘religion’ that is far beyond anything found within the Philosophical Investigations that shows this idea to be pure myth: ‘religion’ must, of course, contain innumerable language-games. Because these Lebensformen exist within a larger culture, it is an impossibility to also declare that a language-game could be strictly autonomous. “The notion that any language-game functions in isolation from others has no basis in Wittgenstein’s work. On the contrary: the famous and beautiful comparison between our language and a medieval city shows how far from his mind such a notion was (§18).” If the chapter on this Wittgensteinian fiction could now be considered closed, let us now consider turning to Lindbeck.

**George Lindbeck: Description and Wittgensteinian Aggiornamento**

What about Lindbeck’s ‘thick description’? Does not this also further connect Lindbeck to Wittgenstein’s ‘descriptive shows’ and further, to a ‘Wittgensteinian fideism’ that can only ‘show’ things because they are ‘fideistically’ believed? The direct answer to both of these questions is ‘no.’ The first reason that this is false is due to the fact that the term ‘thick description’ comes not from Wittgenstein but from Clifford Geertz who, in turn, borrows from Gilbert Ryle.

Quoting Geertz in a favorable manner, he reveals that ‘thick description’ does not refer to ‘thick,’ hermetically-sealed epistemological walls around a religion, but actually refers to intelligible interpretation within that culture. What is actually pilloried as ‘hermetically locked’ is that system which seeks to isolate and generalize across all religions as having the same kind of relationships between symbols and deeds. That which is ‘locked’ is that foundational assumption that all religions function and operate in the same general way, thus abstracting away from the particularities of each. Again, quoting Geertz, Lindbeck wants “not to generalize across cases but to generalize within them.”

Earlier in The Nature of Doctrine, Lindbeck makes a similar point when he calls into question “the notion that there is an inner experience of God

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22 Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein*, 31. Similarly, we see George Schner protesting against this same idea in George P. Schner, “Metaphors for Theology” in *Theology After Liberalism*, eds. George P. Schner and John Webster (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2000): “…neither Kierkegaard nor Wittgenstein literally proposed a segregation of Christianity from culture based upon a theory of its irrationality or merely pragmatic character” (p. 25).
24 As quoted in Geertz: “This hermetic approach to things seems to me to run the danger of locking . . . analysis away from its proper object, the informal logic of actual life” (ibid).
25 Ibid.
common to all human beings and all religions.”

In contrasting his proposed cultural-linguistic theory of religion with what he terms the ‘experiential-expressivist’ outlook, he says, “the sense of the holy or the sacred that is the identifying mark of religion for much of the experiential-expressive tradition is not a common quality, but a set of family resemblances.”

This bears a strong likeness to Wittgenstein’s own attempt, as Ray Monk narrates it, to move away from the Socratic notion that, for any given concept, there is an ‘essence’—something that is common to all the things subsumed under a general term. Thus, for example, in the Platonic dialogues, Socrates seeks to answer philosophical questions such as: ‘What is knowledge?’ by looking for something that all examples of knowledge have in common. (In connection with this, Wittgenstein once said that his method could be summed up by saying that it was the exact opposite of that of Socrates.) In the Blue Book Wittgenstein seeks to replace this notion of essence with the more flexible idea of family resemblances.

After citing one of the origins of this idea in Wittgenstein, Monk comments that this hunt for essences is paradigmatic of the ‘craving for generality’ that springs from our preoccupation with the method of science.” Instead, as David Stern argues in regards to investigating practices and rules, Wittgenstein’s own approach is intentionally unsystematic which “holds out the hope of doing justice to the indefinite and multicoloured filigree of everyday life.”

To be sure, as we have just seen with the notion of ‘family resemblances,’ there are other times when Lindbeck might sound as if he is waxing Wittgensteinian. “Scripture, one might say, was interpreted by its use.” Also, Lindbeck says, “the case for the theological viability of a cultural-linguistic view of religion can only be presented, not proved.” The latter quotation bears resemblance to Wittgenstein’s dictum in the Tractatus that a proposition can only be shown and not said. The argument could be made that within the context of the two proceeding passages, Lindbeck is not referring at all to Wittgenstein but respectively to the Reformers’ intratextuality in the former and Lindbeck’s desire to move away from a liberal foundationalism that clings to the philosophical fashion of the day in the latter. On the other hand, it could also be plausibly argued that not only is Lindbeck engaging in the two aforementioned tasks, but he is also waxing both Geertzian and

26 Ibid., 40.
27 Ibid., emphasis mine.
29 Ibid., 338.
32 Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine, 134.
33 Wittgenstein, Tractatus, 4.1212. See also 4.022, 4.121, 4.461, 6.12.
Wittgensteinian. Next, I seek to explore this dimension as well as clarifying as much as possible the previous issues regarding fideism and ‘good’ readings.

“What, then, is Lindbeck doing with the work of Wittgenstein?” Lindbeck answers this most directly in the forward to the German edition of his *Nature of Doctrine* when he says that along with other thinkers such as Hans Frei, David Kelsey, Edmund Schlink, Bernard Lonergan, and Clifford Geertz, his use of Wittgenstein “is meant to be ad hoc and unsystematic.” An *ad hoc*, and, as he says, ‘pre-theological’ usage directly implies a higher goal, and for Lindbeck, this is his “commitment to the search for Church unity with faithfulness to historic creeds and confessions.” This, I would argue, is the correct frame to begin inquiry into Lindbeck’s use of Wittgenstein.

Before addressing Lindbeck’s key instance of Wittgensteinian appropriation as it is found in *The Nature of Doctrine*, a brief word may be offered to clarify and connect the deconstructive exercise above about ‘Wittgensteinian fideism.’ As I have shown, there is no such thing. Therefore, because no such thought exists anywhere within Wittgenstein’s actual thought expressed by his texts, to say that Lindbeck possesses such an abstraction becomes even more absurd. To take this one step further, because Lindbeck’s appropriation is both *ad hoc* and unsystematic, it follows that the reader does not have to impose a system that will topple if one removes one piece of the ‘whole’: because Lindbeck quotes Wittgenstein from time to time and makes direct (unsystematic) use of his ‘forms of life’ (as we will see below), this does not mean, *a fortiori*, that he must also be a ‘Wittgensteinian fideist’; there is no logical connection to what does not exist.

The key section in *The Nature of Doctrine* that exemplifies what Lindbeck is doing with Wittgenstein is found in part II of chapter 2 called “A Cultural-Linguistic Alternative.” It is here that Lindbeck first reveals a specific use of a distinctly Wittgensteinian notion, and that is the language-game. Before assessing what use Lindbeck makes of this, we must first take a look at how religion is talked about in the context of the passage in which this usage appears. For Lindbeck,

a religion can be viewed as a kind of cultural and/or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought. It functions somewhat like a Kantian *a priori*, although in this case the *a priori* is a set of acquired skills that could be different. . . . Like a culture or language, it [religion] is a

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34 Fideism seems to be a very slippery and inaccurate term also (mis)applied to Hans Frei. See a description of Frei’s frustration with this misrepresentation of his own work in Paul J. DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 31.


36 Ibid.


38 Ibid., 33.
communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those [inner] subjectivities.  

The first thing to note is that Lindbeck likens religion to the Kantian a priori. For Immanuel Kant, the exploration of the a priori was always along an epistemological road to knowledge apart from experience which is in contrast to the empirical, or knowledge a posteriori. Furthermore, Kant’s a priori involves cognition and judgment which exist first as inner realities. While Lindbeck is not specifically interested in epistemological problems per se (although it includes it), what he is interested in is the exterior reality of religion as a ‘communal phenomenon’ which is the pre-supposed, assumed reality that shapes individuals within specific cultural contexts. Two decades earlier, Lindbeck had also shown how a kind of a priori can be found within theory of knowledge of Thomas Aquinas. Like Lindbeck’s use of Kant here in The Nature of Doctrine, he was also employing Kant in an ad hoc manner to reveal the underlying (a priori) assumptions found in St. Thomas “that knowledge of being and of first principles is projected into, rather than abstracted from, sense experience.” The claim being made in Thomas is “against the objective a priorism of Augustinian Platonism” which did try to abstract knowledge objectively from experience. Between 1965 and 1984, we can see that Lindbeck is interested in a similar discussion: both in Thomas and in proposing a cultural-linguistic alternative to religion, Lindbeck aims to show that humans are shaped by external realities both in regards to the intellect and in the wider culture/religion-at-large and its effect on the production of meaning; knowledge and meaning never begin first with the self but are always imparted from outside either through existence itself or through a culture/religion as it exists within that reality.

It is within this understanding that we should approach Lindbeck’s key mention of Wittgenstein in The Nature of Doctrine:

Lastly, just as a language (or “language game,” to use Wittgenstein’s phrase) is correlated with a form of life, and just as a culture has both cognitive and

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39 Ibid.
41 Ibid., 2-4.
43 Ibid., 63.
44 Ibid., 45.
45 Here Lindbeck argues that for Thomas our “knowledge of being is a reflection in experience of the light of the agent intellect, and that this latter must, therefore, be understood as a preconscious anticipation [a priori] or openness to the fullness of being [ens], to God” (ibid., p. 62). This “openness to the fullness of being” is a non-objectivized reality. “Existence…never does become a direct, thematic object of knowledge, not even when it is isolated for attention by the metaphysician” (p. 59). Instead, “Metaphysics indicates its objects by negative judgments,” which we find ultimately leads to Thomas’ concept of analogy (59-60).
behavioral dimensions, so it is also in the case of a religious tradition. Its doctrines, cosmic stories or myths, and ethical directives are integrally related to the rituals it practices, the sentiments or experiences it evokes, the actions it recommends, and the institutional forms it develops. All this is involved in comparing a religion to a cultural-linguistic system.\footnote{Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine, 33.}

To extrapolate backwards: as a religion’s presupposed outward form evokes inner experiences, so does a culture’s behavior elicit inner cultural cognitions or thoughts, and finally, so does Wittgenstein say, “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.”\footnote{Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, §19.} Each inner or cognitive state presupposes—\textit{a priori}—an external form, medium, framework, or ‘religion’ of life such as “doctrines, cosmic stories or myths, and ethical directives.” We should note right away that Lindbeck does not make the fallacy mentioned above, seen in Norman Malcolm, of equating religion with an ‘autonomous language-game.’ He equates by use of \textit{simile} a Wittgensteinian language-game with rituals, sentiments, experiences, recommending actions, and developed institutional forms. Despite Kerr’s correct insistence that a religion is not equated to a ‘form of life’ in the actual texts of Wittgenstein, we can see that here, Lindbeck is not saying that this is what Wittgenstein actually said; on the contrary, Lindbeck is merely pointing to Wittgenstein in order to say something like: now see how Wittgenstein conceives of the relationship between ‘form of life’ and ‘language-games’? – now imagine that the relationship between a religion and its practices and experiences are conceived very much \textit{like} that, and you’ve got it! Above, granting out that Lindbeck’s reading of Wittgenstein is not always precise and so allowing him to use him in an \textit{ad hoc} and unsystematic manner, I would argue that this is indeed an appropriately analogous reading of the relationship to forms of life and language to religion and its practices and experiences.\footnote{See Lindbeck’s more succinct declaration of this on Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine, 51.} What must be remembered is that Lindbeck is not making textual claims regarding Wittgenstein.

Do not Lindbeck’s language-games within religion sound like Wittgenstein’s “commanding, describing, telling a story, joking, thanking, greeting, and praying”?\footnote{See Kerr’s summary above on p. 6.} In Lindbeck’s next paragraph after the above quotation, he names this relationship between the two realities to be \textit{dialectical}. This is contrasted with a unilateral relationship to emphasize that the relationship is not a one-way street, but this needs to be clarified.

The ‘inner’ person needs the ‘external’ person just as the external person needs the inner person for there to be a dance; however, in the case of the cultural-linguistic alternative proposed, it is the external person who takes the lead in the dance. As Lindbeck points out,\footnote{Lindbeck, The Nature of Doctrine, 34.} what the experiential-expressivist outlook does is say that the inner partner takes the lead over against the external person. Within Lindbeck’s cultural-linguistic scheme, he does allow for the external person within the dance to
be influenced by the inner person, but this is precisely because the relationship is a dialectical one. The reality is found within the synthesis, but in discerning this reality, the contention here is that the cultural-linguistic primacy on the ‘outer’ over the ‘inner’—without annulling the inner—is actually the more convincing story.

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: Lindbeck After Wittgenstein? Also, the essay in its entirety may be downloaded here.

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Praying with Fr. Jacques
by Len Hjalmarson

You can't tell me there's no mystery
Mystery,
Mystery,
You can't tell me there's no mystery
It's everywhere I turn...'

In the interview that launched the discussion of James K.A. Smith’s recent book, “Who’s Afraid of Postmodernism,” David Fitch responded to criticism from certain writers on his and Smith’s assumed contextualizing approach. David offered this answer:

Although I have nothing against contextualization per se, Jamie nor I have this in mind as we present our various takes on postmodernity as a critique of current American church practice. We are both simply trying to unveil what the critique of postmodernity reveals about both our current culture and our current church practice. We are using the postmodern authors to unveil the huge shortcomings of current church practices all because of our indebtedness to modernism and all its manifestations. The response we both offer, however, is not to contextualize a church to postmodernity, but rather to reinvigorate an ecclesiology for our times. As Jamie states, “it might just be these Parisians who can help us be the church.” (23).

David goes on to point out that the average evangelical is largely unaware of his or her own debt to culture: and in particular, to modernity and the Enlightenment. Santayana once remarked, “We don’t know who invented water, but we know it wasn’t fish.” And nearer to home, near the start of another Reformation, Martin Luther wrote, "Learn from me, how difficult a thing it is to throw off errors

1 Bruce Cockburn, Mystery, from Life Short, Call Now, 2007.
confirmed by the example of all the world, and which, through long habit, have become a second nature to us."

This all comes to mind as I offer some reflections on John D. Caputo’s little book, *Philosophy and Theology*. We the Church mostly stumbled through modernity, some of us claiming the tail as the elephant, and others, the legs or the trunk. We thought our sight was both whole and clear, while it was shaped by the particular distortions of modernity. Smith, Caputo and many others, including Derrida, Lyotard and Foucault help us “see our seeing” and we are perhaps closer to embracing a chastened rationality (Franke) while moving toward an ecclesiology for the postmodern world. I offer these reflections on Caputo and Smith as neither a theologian nor a philosopher, but as a student of Jesus, and of the gospel and culture (ah! that little word “as”).

Jamie’s book suggests that the church as an embodied presence is the social strategy in the fragmented worlds of declining modernity. He considers modernity through the eyes of Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault, and does an admirable job of showing us that there were profoundly prophetic components in their critiques, which often had deeply biblical resonance. That resonance has been largely missed by evangelicals, for the same reasons that fish never discovered water, and for the same reason that Luther complained of his difficulties. Some things never change.

That may be simultaneously our curse, and our hope. We fail to perceive the water we swim in precisely because we are situated. Those who discover that they have stepped onto the stage in a play centuries in progress will recognize their limits as well as the possibilities. Four acts have been written; the fifth is up to us. Because the story has coherence the future we imagine is always rooted in the past; because we are the actors we have true freedom.

As Caputo is fond of pointing out, those with power define the rules of the game, or of the conversation; other voices are marginalized. That is the sad experience of a Kierkegaard, as well as of a Derrida, two weeping prophets who taught us much about hope and faith, but also the experience of many hundreds of prophetic voices within the hegemony of western rationalism. On the surface the story Jamie tells is that of old philosophers playing games with language. But the deeper narrative is poignant: a bride who has forgotten her identity, and who lives fearfully behind walls. That fear generates hostility, and closes space rather than opening it. Knowledge that is protected tends to become destructive and oppressive rather than liberating (the classical “hiding the light under a lampstand,” but also the classical power game).

The result has been a missed opportunity for dialogue and enrichment. One of the beautiful things about efforts like that of Smith and Caputo is the recovery of that opportunity. Smith relates the story in terms of three postmodern philosophers and then suggests the implications for the postmodern church. Caputo weaves many figures around the story of two disciplines, and then shows how those two disciplines took flesh in two parallel lives many centuries apart. Caputo’s book is ostensibly
about the relationship of philosophy and theology; more narrowly, it’s about the relationship of faith and reason, and more narrowly still, it’s about the dangers of too clear a distinction between the two (with a nod to Heisenberg, a name that doesn’t occur in the book, IIRC).

Caputo begins with Augustine and Aquinas, and through them, with Plato and Aristotle respectively. Plato and Aristotle had notably different starting places: for Plato the true world was above, and that is where one starts; for Aristotle, one begins with the senses and with the visible world right here under one’s nose. This latter approach betrays a confidence in the senses and by extension the mind that perceives. Aquinas could never have been a Calvinist.

Descartes, on the other hand, was a good Catholic, standing on the broad shoulders of Aquinas. Caputo compares his impact to the tremors of the Copernican revolution. In fact the context of his work was that same revolution and shaking; Descartes intention was to place faith on a more firm foundation (thus, “foundationalism”). Now we use “Cartesian” as an epithet for subjectivity and individualism, and equally for the myth of “objectivity” (developed further by Kant). The end result was the subjection of God to the principles of reason. Inevitably, God became an unneeded postulate.

Caputo is a wonderful narrator. His use of metaphor and humor adds color and texture, and like Jamie he is able to story complicated ideas and demonstrate how one idea connects to another.

By the end of the nineteenth century theology was on the defensive. Three great critiques of religion had been offered: religion as a false antidote to the misery of poverty (Marx); as a psychological illusion (Freud); and as an expression of our resentment by against the power of the strong (Nietsche, 33). Theology retreated into romanticism which stressed the creative power of the imagination over against the confining power of reason. Friedrich Schleiermacher was the great father of this movement. Caputo closes chapter 3 with Nietzsche’s words: God is dead. He begins chapter four like this: “A funny thing happened on the way to the funeral. The wheels came off the Enlightenment.”

Caputo observes that the Enlightenment was a necessary phase, an essential course correction in working out a reconciliation of the competing claims of faith and reason (35). What went wrong was hubris; the manifestation was political. Enlightenment ideas about reason were just that: ideals. In practice this translated into Imperialism. The Enlightenment placed the crown on the heads of white European males, whose duty it was to spread Enlightenment worldwide. The pure philosophical idea was also under fire, first by the Romantics and then by Hegel. Hegel argued that the ideals of pure reason have their coefficient in history where they are embodied in the blood, sweat and tears of concrete people. It was a fundamental shift. But Hegel’s story has a dark side. Hegel said that Christianity is the absolute religion and the absolute truth; but only in the sense of a representation of the real truth.. the philosopher’s truth.
Essentially the New Testament narrative is myth that points to the truth. (Enter Rudolph Bultmann). This was all occurring during Kierkegaard’s time, and his response set the stage for the postmodern critique of “totalizing” systems.

In the fifth chapter Caputo apologizes, and then offers three ideas as the backdrop for the postmodern situation. First, in Being and Time (1927) Heidegger argued that as soon as we come to be we find we are already there. We can never get behind ourselves and see ourselves come into being, we can’t get out of our skin and look down from above. In other words, we are shaped by the presuppositions which we inherit (45). This isn’t a bad thing; we are fish swimming in a sea. Fish tend to do poorly on land. These angles don’t bind or blind us but shape and color our perspective. This is the hermeneutical turn.

Secondly, when Descartes wrote Meditations, he was already writing. The entire work of doubt rested upon language. That presupposition escaped his notice. Caputo writes, “Vocabularies are like keys that fit certain locks.. and they have a drift about them. They are public or cultural entities.. deeply steeped.. in presuppositions and prejudices..” (46). There is no pre-linguistic sphere. We make progress not by trying to shed language but by inventing new language, by becoming poets (meaning-makers?). This is the linguistic turn.

Thirdly, Thomas Kuhn’s publication in 1962 The Structure of Scientific Revolutions which coined the phrase “paradigm shift.” Kuhn tracked several of the greatest breakthroughs of the Twentieth century, and discovered that great breakthroughs do not occur based strictly on factual evidence. First, scientists work within a paradigm (a set of accepted beliefs that are a framework and a lens for their study; they are situated.) When the foundation of the paradigm weakens and new theories and scientific methods begin to replace it, (and sometimes when the old guard retires) the next phase of scientific discovery occurs. Kuhn argues that progress from one paradigm to another has no logical method, but instead is based on intuitive and supra-rational factors. Kuhn coined the phrase “paradigm shift” to describe this process, which is more like art than science. This is the revolutionary turn.

The point is that suddenly science, which had claimed objectivity and purity, suddenly appeared to have the same frailty as theology. Now science was accused of mythologizing. The admission that scientific discovery was not founded after all on pure reason and objectivity meant dethroning the scientist himself from his lofty priesthood. This reopened the possibility of different types of knowledge, and in 1977 Lyotard defined the postmodern condition as “incredulity to meta-narratives” (French grands recits or literally, “big stories”) or “totalizing stories” (referring to Hegel). Part of the concern was with reductionism (that is “religion is nothing but your need for a father”) in the growing awareness of deep complexity. Caputo writes,

“Postmodernism thus is not relativism or skepticism, as its uncomprehending critics daily charge, but minutely close attention to detail, a sense for the complexity and multiplicity of things, for close readings, for detailed histories,
for sensitivity to differences... are not the modernists like the Shemites, furiously at work on the tower of Babel, on the “system” as Kierkegaard would say with biting irony, and are not the postmodernists following the lead of God, who in deconstructing the tower clearly favors a multiplicity of languages, frameworks, paradigms, perspective, angles? From a religious point of view, does not postmodernism argue that God’s point of view is reserved for God, while the human standpoint is immersed in the multiplicity of angles?” (50)

Lyotard picked up on the notion of “language games” from Wittgenstein, proposing an irreducible plurality of languages (Babel again?), each with their own rules. Language is situated, and the rules of one discourse.. science.. don’t apply in another.. art, or religion. The integrity and idiosyncrasy of each must be protected. The result was a new legitimacy for theological discourse. Addressing God in prayer could no longer be dismissed as nonempirical therefore invalid (53).

The lines between reason and faith were being redrawn, and the distinction more porous. Previously it was assumed that in science seeing was pure seeing, and in faith sight was darkened. Seeing was one thing, believing was another.

If you recall The Santa Claus, the Christmas comedy with Tim Allen, the puzzled Allen finds himself at the North Pole talking to elves. He looks out the window to see a polar bear directing traffic, shakes his head and realizes that he can’t be seeing what he is seeing: he doesn’t believe in elves and Santa Claus. The elf sets him straight: he has it backwards. Seeing isn’t believing: believing is seeing.

The outcome of the three turns noted above was the introduction of seeing as, a third term that mediates the sight of faith and the sight of reason. Seeing through reason requires a kind of faith, a confidence (con-fides) in presuppositions; seeing by faith requires a certain reason, a confidence in texts and witnesses and the incarnation of truth in the faithful community. Finally the distinction between theology and philosophy is the distinction between two kinds of seeing.

From here one can go directly to Kevin Vanhoozer and his analogy of maps. Maps are not so much explanatory as exploratory. Too often we have mistaken the map for the territory (Lewis?). When we forget the distinction we end up with totalizing narratives. In a lucid and helpful passage Vanhoozer writes,

“Metanarratives, I submit, are not so much explanatory as exploratory frameworks. The map also has the advantage of situating knowledge claims in the context of everyday life: our walk.” You are here. I agree with the postmodern insight that human reasoning is situated. I also agree with Lesslie Newbigin that the postmodern critique of foundationalism has shown that human thinking always takes place within “fiduciary” frameworks. Even the Enlightenment project began with a “faith” in the omnicompetence of reason, with a faith in a certain way of mapping the world and our way in it. The
question, then is not whether we can avoid subscribing to some fiduciary framework or another, but rather, which one enables us to make cognitive contact with reality?

“All human thinking takes place within fiduciary frameworks, but only the biblical frameworks enable us rightly to interpret the nature of ultimate reality. To be sure, the biblical maps do not explain everything. They may tell us how to go to heaven, but they do not tell us how the heavens go; we need Galileo and Einstein for that. Similarly, they tell us how humans should live, but not everything that life consists of; we need Crick and Watson for that. These supplementary maps drawn up by other disciplines do not contradict the biblical maps but identify previously unknown or uncharted features.

“The point is that we need multiple maps for multiple purposes. We can map the same terrain according to a variety of different keys and scales. In this respect, Rorty is right: our vocabularies (maps) are related to our interests, to what we want to do. A road atlas need not contradict a map that highlights topography, or a map that highlights historical landmarks and points of scenic interest, or a plat or survey that shows where properties begin and end. “Reason does not stand over the gospel, deciding which map to accept and what to reject. Here Christians and postmoderns agree: reason itself is always already situated...”

Caputo has created some philosophical and theological capital, and he uses the final two chapters to make an investment. He describes his intention as examining “the atheistic Augustinianism of Jacques Derrida” (59, somewhere else ironically called “Father Jacques”).

The parallels in the two lives are eerie. Both grew up in North Africa; both were unusually attached to their mothers; both were self-described as “men of tears.” Augustine penned the *Confessions*, *Circumfessions*. The play of chance was critical for Derrida, and what was taken as chance by Derrida was taken as grace by Augustine (that little word “as” again).

Derrida admits that he “rightly passes” for an atheist, but indulging in the play refuses to make the equation. The scene has a Danish feel: in his own time and context Kierkegaard refused to be identified with the “Christian” masses, by his profession hoping only to become one. Derrida prays, though he confesses not knowing to whom he prays. Meanwhile in the context of the “Christian” west most of the Church claims certitude in knowing God, while our practices fail to reflect that knowledge. Derrida has Augustine’s restless heart, but that restlessness is increased by his inability to rest in the Name. That results in a still more restless inquiry. What

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1 Kevin Vanhoozer, “Pilgrim’s Digress,” in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, Ed. Myron Penner (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005) 85-86.
comes across well in Caputo’s narrative is the wounded heart of Jacques Derrida, as though he has somehow glimpsed something eternal that remains beyond his grasp.

And it’s at this point that most of us will so strongly identify. We have seen the beauty of the city that will descend from above. We have touched the beauty of its Creator. Yet we are strangers in a strange land. We live between the times, in this "City of Shining Lights". I can’t help wonder along with Bono whether..

The more you see, the less you know,
The less you find out as you go..
I knew much more then...
Than I do now...

It’s the pathos of our time, a time captured in the expression of Galadriel in Peter Jackson’s production of The Lord of the Rings: “Do not let the great emptiness of Khazzad Doom fill your heart, Gimli son of Gloin. For the world has grown full of peril, and in all lands love is now mingled with grief.”

The Naming is critical; in a sense it is what McLaren describes in The Secret Message of Jesus. “To you has been given the secret of the kingdom” (Mark 4:11). McLaren describes how he could not distinguish the cries of common birds, so all the notes mixed together. But once he learned the cry of the blackbird, bluebird, or bobolink, he could identify the notes. Perhaps the secret message of Jesus is like that. Until our eyes are opened to perceive it we have an unnamed longing. McLaren quotes Lewis:

We do not want merely to see beauty.. we want something else.. to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to become part of it. We cannot mingle with the splendors we see. But all the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with the rumor that it will not always be so...

Glimpses of the kingdom come to us unexpectedly.. and we are incurably wounded with the desire to see and know more. These moments of seeing and knowing can’t be conjured or created, they can only be received.

Who then can say what was or was not received by Jacques Derrida? Who can say whether he was faithful to the call he knew? It’s relatively easy for those of us who claim knowledge and purpose to also claim identity. But the danger is that in attending to our purpose we lose touch with humility, with the reality that we did not create it. Margaret Wheatley writes,

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1 U2 “City of Shining Lights” from How to Dismantle an Atom Bomb, 2004.
2 Lord of the Rings, Peter Jackson, Producer (Wellington, NZ: New Line Productions Inc. 2001)
4 Ibid. 201.
How do we attend to our purpose while holding the humility that we do not create it? Once we catch a glimmer of what it might be, how do we avoid taking over as creator? It gets even more complicated. How do we avoid getting ego-seduced by the specific manifestation of our gifts? Is it possible to live in the humility of knowing that our purpose, as clearly as we self-define it, is but "a husk of meaning"? The task is really to become superb listeners. Heidegger wrote that waiting, listening, was the most profound way to serve God.7

Caputo closes his own meditation --, a meditation which has morphed into something more like a confession --, with a final thesis: philosophy and theology are ultimately two companion ways to nurture the passion of life. What emerges from his comparison of Augustine and Derrida is a consideration of the human condition, our awe in the presence of beauty, and our fundamental need to worship. Philosophy and theology are for lovers. The central question is, “What do I love when I love my God?” This question goes all the way down, and ends in a prayer shared by two personalities separated by centuries of thought and tradition. U2 will offer another prayer in closing:

Yahweh, Yahweh
Always pain before a child is born
Yahweh, Yahweh
Why the dark before the dawn

Take this city
A city should be shining on the hill
Take this city if it be your will
What no man can own, no man can take
Take this heart
Take this heart
Take this heart
And make it break8

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: Praying with Fr. Jacques

8 Yahweh, from How to Dismantle an Atom Bomb.
Superficial Church: The Loss of Real Church
by Jason Clark

In trying to get a grasp of Jean Baudrillard’s writing I have been struck at his notion of the ‘superficial’ and how it might form a diagnosis of the plight of the many discussions of what is ‘authentic’ mission and church. Also his thoughts might give us cause for concern about how post-modern culture subsumes and neuters our best attempts at translating our hopes for emerging into reality. Also it has convinced me further of the need for ‘Deep Church’ as a response to the enculturation of emerging and modern church, but I’ll come to that in a later post.

Hyper-reality
At it simplest level Baudrillard suggests that in our image saturated world images (of TV, cinema, internet, computer games, mobile phones, CCTV, Web Cams, digital cameras etc), representation has saturated reality so much that experience takes place a distance from the things we are viewing. For example, it’s hard to go to New York without bringing the experience of the New York of the movies and TV with you to that ‘real’ encounter. I know I felt like I was in a movie when I went to NY for the first time.

Or the person who spends hours making amazing iMovie recordings and shows of his life and family, whilst in the ‘real’ world his marriage isn’t great and his spiritual life needs attending to. The computer-edited version of the world is more ‘real’ than the real world.

Baudrillard calls this experience ‘hyper-reality’.

Simulations of reality
Baudrillard also uses the notion of ‘simulation’. The link between the signs we create, the simulations of reality are often completely disconnected from each other. The representation of something, anything is not seen as a way to connect to the reality behind it, rather it becomes a reality in itself. Again in other words we become obsessed with the image itself, how cool it is, rather than the truth of what it is about. So we pay large sums of money not for trainers that are the best for running, but for the experience of the image attached to the trainers, which has little to do with running at all.

This causes us to be focused on the intensity of am image rather any need for real meaning, depth is replaced with surface, and the ‘phantasm of authenticity which always ends up just short of reality’ (The Revenge of the Crystal, 1990).

Simulations make reality
Yet whilst simulations are separated from reference to reality, they become my reality. For instance movies make me cry and connect to ‘real’ feelings, a beer advert makes me thirsty, watching the Asian Tsunami on the news shakes my faith. There is an implosion of surface simulation into reality. Images don't just shape reality, they have become the thing that preceded reality! They absorb, shape, consume, and produce what we see as reality.

When we watch ‘Celebrity Big Brother’, are these people being ‘real’ at all as D list professional fakers, who are aware the cameras are watching them, in a fake home cut off from the real world for the time they are in the ‘reality show’. Big Brother is real in that it makes it’s own reality.

**Style Attachments**

Baudrillard asks if we ever buy something because of what it does and not because it is attached to a style, or lifestyle? Are we really more than the fulfillment of images of an aesthetic and image of reality.

If I buy tools for the car, are they the best or do I buy into the colours and shiny adverts they show them as a the tool for the cool tool guy. Does my computer work better or does it make me feel like part of the ‘cool’ that goes with using it (apple any one?). All our food seems attached to a style, ‘Aunt Bessie’s’ yorkshire puddings, Tesco’s ‘Finest’ etc.

And how do we try to escape the tyranny of this simulation? Baudrillard suggest we do so by producing events, activities, images and objects, which assure us that we have the new and better reality! In other words we manufacture our escape from the false reality we find ourselves in, we have created fetish of the authentic, to escape false authenticity.

This is the realm of the hyper-real, or more-real- than real. We binges on reality experiences of traveling every weekend we can to somewhere more ‘real’ for experiences, we use interactive TV, instant messaging, blogging to be more ‘real’, watch reality TV shows on plastic surgery, make CD’s that have the sounds of vinyl record scratches, have huge video screens at live sports events and music concerts.

We replace the loss of the real with nostalgia. Yet these attempts to provide an alternative to the loss of the ‘real’ as even more unreal! Maybe we need Big Brother to feel like our reality and our life really exists, to give us the impression that whilst these ‘reality’ TV people are false we are ‘real’.

**What Does This Mean for our developing Church Ecclesiologies?**

If Baudrillard is correct in any measure, I’m sure you can see some of the connections begging to be attached to the condition of discussions about church. Here are a few that I can discern. Remember these are suggestions based on Baudrillard being correct,
and I am not critique him here, just summarising his thoughts. (I am by inclination a critical realist, rather than a postmodernist like baudrillard and I’ll come to that in another post)

1. Hyper-real Church:

How much of the emerging church discussion, movement is caught up with hyper-real images of church. We’d rather blog, podcast, write about the image of a better and more authentic church than actually be involved in ‘real’ church. Emerging church can function as the pastiche, edited iMovie of church, that has not correlation to reality.

We are trapped in trying to incarnate church to our culture, by the pursuit of the superficial and hyper-real. What if real church doesn’t look like the idealized images we are endlessly portraying about church.

2. Simulation Church:

Our conceptions of church, the practices of the new forms of church we make, or maybe our existing forms are mere phantasms, surface images with no depth or substance. We are ‘faking it’ to ‘make it’. We will give our money and time to re-editing the image, finding conjecture and suggestions of what church might, could and should be, but never engage in doing ‘real’ church. The fantasy church is much more real than the real thing. And our false images become so real we think they are ‘real’ church. We measure everything by surface realities, and our discussions of what is ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ form more superficial, and yet more ‘real’ forms of church.

We become endlessly self referential with our false reality more ‘real because it isn’t the reality we escape from (usually the false image of the evil modern church).

3. Fetish Church:

And how do we try to escape this problem? By more re-branding, more image management. We call ourselves missionaries in a post Christian context, we buy the missional church books, we postulate the new and even more ‘real’ church, and avoid the reality of doing and being church even more.

Emerging church becomes a fetish, and fashion lifestyle we buy into, or we trade in for a different version. The aesthetic of church becomes the message. The space of engagement with the aesthetics of our culture, become pastiche fetishes, that end up being consumed, and we eventually leave them for something more real. We become the very thing that we despise and pathologically move on to a new fake hopeful and yet even more artificial constriction of church.
We pride ourselves on exposing the shallow com-modification of the modern church with its worship band heroes, of people obsessed with style over substance, and end up just as shallow and superficial by that measure with our endless ‘re-imagining’s’.

4. Pastiche & Nostalgia Church:

Pastiche church is the temptation to take the aesthetics of other church traditions, of those of our culture, and to patch them together in a superficial manner. We might get nostalgic for the ancient church and grab some liturgies and use them but never know the depths of what they really signify. Or we engage in kitsch and pastiche of images from culture, without really knowing why we use them other than they seem real in their own right. In other words we use images at random, project them over some music and see it as an experience, or we make aesthetical art spaces, that degenerate into consumer therapy, self justified with the user experience, as ‘authentic’. Our worship experiences becoming self authenticating.

Conclusion

I haven’t offered a critique of Baudrillard, just a summary of some of his main thoughts and how they might relate to emerging church, or any form of church. But some quick thoughts for now.

1. Tendencies: Abstract into Real: recognise that every-time we re-imagine church we are in the west a people who will struggle to translate that into any reality, and are bent, distorted towards finding the re-imagining to be real itself. Maybe this is the ‘sin’ (inherent missing the mark) of our current culture.

2. Trapped in Consumption: And at the heart of our bent towards the hyper-real, and fetish of church, is our entrenchment in capitalism and the market place. We need to really understand how capitalism has captured our understanding of what it means to be real, and find some ways out of it into non-commodified forms of church, to find the spaces between the doing of church and the consumption of church that will enable a liberating and ‘real’ change.

3. Evaluate our Ecclesiologies: Then use that understanding of our tendencies and the snares of consumerism to assess our current and suggested future forms of church.

Do you see any of these interplay’s in church, and any ways out?

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: Superficial Church: The Loss of Real Church
On Signs and Meaning  
by Christopher Roussel  

In Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, we can find a strong attempt by the authors to combat any system of signs that create a static, unchanging interpretation. Generally, these lead to fascism—the desire to be controlled. In religion, and particularly in Christianity, we can find this motif in fundamentalism. As we can see fundamentalism seemingly on the rise, what is an alternative that stays away from such a system? What are some symptoms of it that we may be able to find not only in our world, but also even in our own lives?

Faciality  

Deleuze and Guattari call the Face that which decodes and overcodes body and head into a single object: a face. This Face should be understood as an abstract image—a white wall and a black hole. Deleuze and Guattari suggest that these two objects always follow two concepts: signification (signifiance) and subjectification. Signification is never without a white wall and subjectification never without a black hole. At their intersection is where the face appears. In the movies, the close-up treats the face as a landscape—again, the white wall and black hole. Deleuze writes that “Christian education” exerts spiritual control over both the abstract face and the landscape by overcoding them into a predefined system of meaning. But, I suggest we read “Christian education” here more as “fundamentalist tendencies” as it appears that in other sections of this work that he isn’t necessarily against religion—or Christianity—in general, but rather a specific form of it.

Signification happens, regardless of one’s approach. In a motion not unlike Heidegger, Deleuze and Guattari state that “the world begins to signify before anyone knows what it signifies; the signified is given without being known.” Then, Deleuze gives us examples of this: “Your wife looked at you with a funny expression. And this morning the mailman handed you a letter from the IRS and crossed his fingers. Then you stepped in a pile of dog [feces].....It doesn’t matter what it means, it’s still signifying.” There is always this act of signification, regardless of meaning. Signs always refer to other signs in an infinitely circular pattern—Deleuze’s hint at Nietzsche’s eternal return. Yet, fundamentalist tendencies take a portion of these signs and deem it knowable. Then, a class of priests that interpret everything is added, but Deleuze points out that they are deceptive because their interpretation always reimparts the signifier—the Face. Hence, “the ultimate signified is therefore the signifier itself, in its redundancy or ‘excess.’”

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2 ATP, 112.  
3 ATP, 112.  
4 ATP, 114.
Regimes

This religious regime of signs can be seen as such: the Face at the center, surrounded by priests. Around the priests are circles of society where members move relatively freely between the lines of society, but there is always an excess. This excess is taken as the counterbody of the Face. The counterbody is the body of the tortured or excluded and is seen negatively as something always becoming-animal (i.e. inhuman). The priests take this and impart signification on it by transforming it negatively as a scapegoat. The scapegoat is sent out as excess into the unknown desert where the crowd of people should never go. As a result, the priests’ system is able to remain hierarchical and without change. Yet, it is precisely this tangent that Deleuze would like to see religion travel along: “It is we who must follow the most deterritorialized line, the line of the scapegoat, but we will change its sign, we will turn it into the positive line of our subjectivity, our Passion, our proceeding or grievance. We will be our own scapegoat. We will be the lamb: ‘The God who, like a lion, was given blood sacrifice must be shoved into the background, and the sacrificed god must occupy the foreground.... God became the animal that was slain, instead of the animal that does the slaying.’”

This direction, then, means the eradication of the sign-to-sign circularity. We now have in the place of the center of signification a point of subjectification. Instead of a spiral, we have a “linear proceeding into which the sign is swept via subjects.” This line is best seen as a line of deterritorialization—the decoding of signs. Tied with this line is also the line of reterritorialization—the recoding of signs, giving new meaning to signs as they are interpreted through subjectification. This creates a never-ending process of interpretation and re-interpretation while staying away from the overcoding processes of the despotic regime. We now have a cut from the binary system of the despotic regime and a movement towards a polyvocal system. And this polyvocal grouping is Deleuze’s alternative to fundamentalism. But, is it the direction that Christianity should follow?

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here:

On Signs and Meaning

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5 ATP, 115.
7 ATP, 127.
Art and the Postmodern Church
by Dan Siedell

I.

An increasingly important part of the life of a curator of modern and contemporary art is to attend art fairs, particularly those in Miami in December and New York in February. The art fair brings art galleries from around the world to a convention center that enables museum directors, curators, critics and collectors from around the world to look at art without having to go to each of these galleries. The fairs are a great place to meet artists, see collectors, re-connect with colleagues in the profession and chat with gallery staff. But they are terrible places to look at art. Each gallery sets up a booth that is crammed with art and during the course of the fair the cramped booth is crammed with people. Both the cramped quarters of the booth and the crowded confines make the art impossible to look at. The art fairs pose a huge problem for curators, whether they know it or not. The problem is not necessarily the art fairs themselves, but that a growing number of curators are going to the fairs instead of making studio visits with artists, spending time with gallery directors in their galleries, and looking at art—either in the artist’s studio or in the gallery space. Both the studio and gallery spaces are more conducive to in-depth contemplation and reflection. But it’s hard and inefficient work. If curators continue to go to artist studios, take the trouble to cultivate deep relationships with galleries and see their exhibitions, then the art fairs offer a nice, if sometimes overwhelming complement. But when curators merely rely on the art fairs, their work becomes, over time, superficial. It tends to produce exhibitions that look like every other exhibition, which lack the depth and texture that should characterize curatorial relationships with contemporary artists.

I was in New York two weeks ago for the art fairs in New York. But, as is my custom, I spent as little time at the art fairs as possible, choosing to fill up my time meeting with collectors, making studio visits, talking with gallery directors, and looking at art, gleefully free of trendy crowds. I did not see as much “art” or network with as many people if I’d merely camped out at the fairs. But I had other work to do. But, given my studio and gallery work as a foundation, my brief stays at the fairs were enjoyable.

II.

I am also writing a book on modern and contemporary art and Christian faith for Baker Academic’s new series, edited by William Dyrness and Robert Johnston, called Cultural Exegesis, and I am presently writing a chapter on contemporary art and the postmodern church. Because I always seem to find myself in New York during Great Lent, I enjoy the opportunity to attend services at several churches in Manhattan.
One of my favorites is St. Thomas Episcopal on Fifth Avenue, which is just a few blocks from my hotel. I was also invited to attend the Village Church, a PCA church that is located in Greenwich Village and meets in a beautiful old Seventh Day Adventist Church. I have several friends in the artworld who worship at the Village Church. By all accounts, it is a remarkable fellowship. Just a cursory glance at the Village Church’s website reveals that it is nothing if not on the front lines of urban engagement (www.villagechurchnyc.com). The site’s progressive visual aesthetic, its emphasis on searching, questioning, and exploring, all suggest that the Village Church, if not self-defining as “emergent,” is nonetheless a fellow traveler. It is a very young church fellowship, many are students, young married couples, who are smart, attractive, engaging, and clearly committed to following Jesus. It is an enjoyable, friendly, well-educated group. I could have spent all afternoon with them.

Two days earlier, I attended morning Eucharist with barley twenty people at St. Thomas at 800 am. Not a single person greeted me until I shook the Rector’s hand upon leaving the chapel after the Eucharist. The contrast between my experience of the Village Church and St. Thomas could not have been sharper. It would be easy to contrast them thusly: one is full of joy and authentic praise and the other is rote habit for those who are legalistically following the rules of Christian religion and not the authentic relationship with Christ. However, the Rector’s simple and short homily (and I mean short, like five minutes max) hit me like a ton of bricks. He encouraged us during our Lenten fasts to fast from sin. Why worry about giving up certain things like alcohol, chocolate, meat, etc. and still sin, making yourself a hypocrite as well as a sinner? And as I left St. Thomas to meld into the hustle and bustle of midtown Manhattan on a Friday morning, I realized that it was only at such a liturgical, sacramental place, a place in which the parish was involved in various forms of Lenten observance, that the power of his quite un-liturgical, un-sacramental statement: “fast from sin” could have such remarkable power.

III.

I concluded my first contribution to this site (“Aesthetic Practice and the Postmodern Church”) with the following:

Unless it takes the aesthetic as seriously as did the Church of the Seven Councils, the postmodern church will never be anything but a footnote to the Western, Modern, and Protestant tradition. But it is only in the emerging church, whatever and wherever it is, that such a possibility even exists.

As I was going about my business in New York and since my return home, I still believe the emerging church or the emergent movement is, to my mind, the only place that art and the aesthetic can be discussed and debated in an open manner. However, it will remain just that: discussion and debate unless it is accompanied by the sustenance of a robust sacramental and liturgical life. To put it crassly, the difficult, radical, and problematic discussions about art and the aesthetic have to take place at
places like the PCA Village Church but for it to have any long-term impact, it has to be nourished by places like the Anglo-Catholic St. Thomas Episcopal Church. It is spanning the space between these two churches that is the challenge.

Let me state it the following way: the liturgical and sacramental richness of the ancient faith makes it possible to worship God everywhere. We don’t think in those terms, as influenced as we are by our non-sacramental, non-liturgical, rationalism that shapes our Christian lives. But this belief saturates the Scriptures themselves, which is often overlooked by high churchers as well as the low. We have to reconsider the fact that we can only utter such praises as Psalm 24 (“the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it”) and Solomon’s temple dedication (1 Kings 8: 27) in which he testifies to the fact that nothing made with human hands can contain God, if we also recognize that God indeed wants us to worship in specific ways, in specific places. We are too quick to quote Jesus’s statement to the Samaritan woman (John 4: 21-24) that God is worshipped only in “spirit and in truth” that we forget that Jesus can say this only after he has told her that she must worship in Jerusalem—that the Samaritans do indeed worship in ignorance. Solomon can praise God that he can’t be defined by a building only after he has built the Temple. We can look forward to the New Jerusalem when there will be no need for the Sun because the Lord’s uncreated light will shine on us only when we follow Asaph and exclaim that we only know the truth of the world when we “enter the sanctuary of God” (Psalm 73).

How can we see Christ everywhere, as Alexander Schmemann once wrote, when we don’t first recognize that we see Christ in a special way via icons, and receive him in a special way through the Eucharist, and meet him in a special way at church? The “everywhere” has meaning ultimately when there is a “somewhere.” Our tendency is to embrace the “everywhere” without first respecting and assimilating the “somewhere.” The Village Church is “everywhere” and St. Thomas is “somewhere.” The former needs to recognize that God has indeed sacramentally and liturgically given specific ways to worship, ways that have been preserved by the Living Tradition of the Nicene Church. But the latter needs to recognize that the “somewhere” does not limit where we see Christ, or, in the context of the visual arts, how we make art, but actually serves as the engine that pushes us out into the world, which, of course, is what the “Mass” actually means: a recognition of the sacred space and at the same time an emphasis in the “going out.” We are “sent out” but we are “sent out” from somewhere specific.

IV.

The art fairs are wonderful social occasions; they are the “everywhere” of curatorial work. The galleries and artist studios are the “somewhere” of curatorial work. But I cannot have the former without remaining committed to the latter. In fact, the art fairs are only productive if the foundation of traditional ways of viewing art remain. The problem is that the art fair isn’t really about art, it’s about social relationships that “art” generates. My concluding impression of the Village Church and what I can extrapolate from other emerging churches and fellowships involved in
one way or another in the emergent movement, is that they are filled with terrific people who love and want to follow Jesus, people with whom I want to spend an hour at the local coffee house or pub talking theology, art, politics. But it’s not church. It needs the sacramental and liturgical specificity of the Nicene church, in all its dogmatic, aesthetic richness in order to meet God. My concern is that the emergent movement cultivates strong social situations occasioned by “God.” I enjoy the Village Church as a meeting of followers of Jesus and brothers and sisters in Christ, but only after I worship at St. Thomas. Just as I worry that curatorial work will, over time, become more superficial and “socially based” through the influence of the art fairs, I worry that over time, the emergent movement will likewise remain shallow, not become “deep” as Jason Clark aptly observes, because of its focus on the social. The dialogue about the aesthetic and the visual arts must start in the postmodern church, but to have a deep impact, it will have to be sustained by the work of the premodern church, the Nicene Church, the one Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church, not only as a spiritual, but earthly reality.

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: Art and the Postmodern Church

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Reflective Summaries:
On Religion, by John D. Caputo

Chapter 1: The Love of God
by Gail Wiggin, the mother of two awesome college kids and the full-time Ignition Director of a 19-year old brand strategy and design firm.

In preparation for the 2007 Conversation, here is the first of several accessible (hopefully) summaries and reflections on the various reading for the conference. This will run congruently with the posts investigation why EC is drawn to deconstructive theology (if such a thing exists...see this and that).

Caputo establishes his voice and asserts his sense of humor right from the start. Without hesitation, he declares a deeply entrenched fascination for people who are “unhinged lovers....and worth their salt” – men and women of passion. Religion is for them. But woe is he who is not worth his salt, mediocre and “not worth sowing”. Best for such sorry sorts to leave this book on the shelf. In fact, these “irreligious sorts”
deserve his abuse and can rant as they see fit. However, should they criticize his love of God one bit, he will cup his ears.

Repetitive at times, Caputo tends to fall in love (after all, he is a lover) with his phraseology and word usage but as it turns out, rather than a writer’s conceit or a tendency to avoid editorial drudgery, this pattern defines him as more of a poet than a prose writer and thesis postulant. The writer is, in fact, a bard. And he speaks straight as an arrow into the hearts of those who understand a thing or two about themselves. After all, such hearts are the seekers of a “love without measure”, per his great teacher, Saint Augustine.

The chapter frames up Caputo’s definition of religion and the paradox of Godly love. His thesis: defined as the “old-fashioned, open-ended love of God”, religion may be found with or without “Religion” — institutional and determinate faith communities that open their doors to some but not all. He sets the stage by carefully describing the agonizing space in which we live straddled between the “future present” and the “absolute future”—and names “impossible” as a defining religious category. He then tours us through our hunger for God’s realm, this “kingdom of the impossible” towards the slightly sanctimonious-sounding, slightly vacuous-sounding question for which we seek the “secret” answer: “What do I love when I love my God?”

Now passion must be for something other than taking profits. Caputo’s “God lovers” are people who believe in something, who hope like mad in something and who love with a love that surpasses understanding. There is no merit in loving moderately. The mark of really loving is unconditionality, excess, engagement and commitment—all fire and passion. In short, it is a deeply religious, mysterious, not-of-this-present, silent and screaming aloud “yes” to God. And why must we say yes? Because deep in our DNA is a profound yearning for the impossible and with God, unbelievable things are possible—plain and simple.

The present needs no introductions. It’s this business of the absolute future that confounds us and pushes us to the limits of the possible: the shoreline of the religious, the domain of “God knows what”. We’ve got a fundamental problem with “terra incognita”. No matter how we fuss and rant and do our best to “manage risk”, we fail. But this is not necessarily bad news. Caputo contends that the impossible is actually something for which we pray and weep and long for with a restless heart. In fact, as we lose our grip (or better still, let go) we are transformed for the impossible is what makes experience to be Experience: an occasion that really happens! As Caputo triumphantly puts it, the impossible is what gives life its salt. It follows, then, that Experience itself has a religious character and edge. The notion of life at the limit of the possible constitutes a religious structure—without a church or a steeple or tight-lipped instructions.

 Needless to say, in this religious life, this out-of-control absolute future world of the impossible, we expose ourselves to radical uncertainty. But never fear, smiles
Caputo, “If safe is what you want, forget religion and find yourself a conservative investment counselor”. This is why faith, hope and love have to kick in.

We don’t take easily to living in a cloud of unknowing and have a tendency to start asking lots of questions—mostly along the lines of “hmmm, I admit to being unhinged; have apparently said Yes to the impossible; don’t know where I’m going, and, wonder who the heck knows the secret to who I am? As Augustine put it, “I have been made a question unto my self”.

Well, Caputo doesn’t hesitate to comfort us. It’s best to be upfront about our confusion (an attitude of upbeat minimalism) and not put too high a spin on things. In fact, the secret is that there is no secret. Now, this is not going to be a popular answer with hip, academic skeptics who embrace “phallic, modish nihilism” but rather because in the long run, this answer “pays the best returns”. There is simply no way for us to know “The Way” or “What I love when I love my God” and, as a consequence, we find ourselves trafficking in inescapable interpretations. The best and most enduring interpretation is Truth, but that hardly solves matters since there isn’t a soul around who knows with certainty what is coming next. No one has a finger on “Being’s button. (So what do we do? Caputo takes this up in Chapter 5, when he hypothesizes that the inescapability of interpreting Truth will force a shift into “doing” the Truth, which is rather like “doing” the impossible.)

Saint Augustine believed that we are driven by a deep desire towards God, even if we don’t know it and try to curb our innate thirst via substitutes such as lust and greed. Caputo contends that in the relative present, the passion for God has an even wider sweep and that we must commit to live in confusion and give the passion of our doubts full throttle. Rather than speculating non-stop about the nature of God, we have certain responsibilities: real things that we can do. We can choose to take action—to do the truth, to do justice and to “make the mountain move”. When the love of God calls, we had better answer. We break the spell of self-love when we assent to “Yes”, as did Mary with “Here I am.” In this fashion, something unknowable and better takes its place—something to which we bind ourselves self passionately. We are beset by love.

Bottom line, if the secret is that there is no secret “Way”, then clearly we are called upon to “let ourselves be re-invented, overtaken by the impossible”. As he can no longer skirt issues surrounding the meaning of Holy Scriptures, Caputo situates them firmly within the “element of unknowing” – and within the embrace of this book, his psalm to “learned ignorance”. He wishes that religious institutions and confessional faiths were more disturbed from within by a radical non-knowing and makes a “brief’ against their closure towards those of other faiths or un-faith. He yearns for them to acknowledge that “faith is always inhabited by unfaith” and that, in fact, the opposite of faith is not doubt but certainty—a headset that certain organized religions have in spades.
Finally, though, Caputo sees no need to choose between a determinate religious faith and this faith of unknowing that he has been describing but rather, to inhabit the space between them—to “let each disturb and unhinge the other and by disturbing, to deepen the other.” In the meantime, he urges us to find temporary respite in the determinate faiths, as desert wanderers seek shelter from the desert’s scalding sun and numbing cold.

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: On Religion: Chapter 1

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**On Religion, by John D. Caputo**

**Chapter 2: How the Secular World Became Post-Secular**

by Joshua Erickson, a student at Princeton Theological Seminary and part of the Emergent Princeton Cohort.

**Summary:**

For people that are familiar with trends in philosophy, it might strike them as odd that John D. Caputo would invoke St. Augustine in his musings about religion. Not that such an invocation is inappropriate for Caputo but just that one might find it odd. Caputo suggests that we (by whom I took him to mean Christians, the church, and Western Academia) are now in a place where we can once again listen to the sage words of St. Augustine as we are in a “post-secular” age. Caputo suggests that the world has gone through three ages of thinking. Now that we are in the third, St. Augustine is once again a voice to be reckoned with.

Caputo offers these three ages but then suggests that we hold to them lightly. I suppose he is worried about people clinging to the ages with such earnest as some have with the pre-modern, modern, and post-modern classifications. The first age was the “sacral age.” This was the era of which the likes of Anselm were living into the motto of “faith seeking understanding.” The hermeneutical circle began with God and ended with God. There were two concepts of God which were being considered. The first was the metaphysical concept of God and the second was the “You.” The metaphysical concept of God was the “gift” from Hellenistic philosophy
to Christianity and it is this metaphysical concept which is oft debated (and much of the occasion for this philosophical conversation). The “You” is the God of Anselm’s piety and the God with which Anselm and others would begin and end their days on their knees earnestly seeking and hoping to love more deeply. Caputo suggests that it is very important to notice that much of the theology done in this age was done while the theologian was on her/his knees. Theology was done in loving reverence. It was in this age that theology was done as a spiritual discipline of sorts.

The next age was the age of secularization. This age was characterized by a prevailing thought that someone had invented religion and then declared it off limits from “reason” (43). In this age, Anselm’s arguments had been extracted from his hermeneutical circle in which he was doing theology in service of the church and Christian spirituality. It was then plopped into the philosophical thought world of Kant and thus divorcing Anselm from his hermeneutical circle. The question or problem of God was ushered away from the inner sanctum of the church sanctuary and put on trial in the courtroom of “reason.” God was faced no longer with the faithful faces of the church but faced the grim Judge “Reason” (46). In this court God was already dead. Even if you could come up with “valid” proof, the proof you had was for an idea for a God that did not exist or was an idol. This created a dualism between the sacred and the secular world.

The prophets of this age were Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. They were following Kant and Hegel. It was Hegel who “put a torch to the epistemological system of Kant in which the oppositional and dichotomizing way of thinking” (49). Hegel trumped Kant’s “understanding” with historical “Reason” (50). This was the power to apprehend the convergence of opposites in the correct historical world and see history as the autobiography of God in time (50). Kierkegaard thought this was awful for “God had not come into the world in order to get an account of himself from German metaphysics” (50). Kierkegaard was also responding the decadence of Christendom in Denmark. He believed that Christendom made it “easy” to be a Christian. He called for a return of some of the marks of the apostolic faith that emboldened those who faced the persecution brought by the Roman Empire. He was a prophet calling for the purity of heart that would bring those who called themselves Christians actually to their knees. For Kierkegaard, “history is not the story of Eternal unfolding rationally, but the mind-numbing event of the altogether astonishing intervention of the Eternal into time in the Moment of the God-become-man, a crashing of the party of reason and history by God who assumes the form of a servant, which scandalizes Jews and confounds philosophers” (51). Kierkegaard was calling for a Christian faith which took this sentiment seriously. For Nietzsche, God was dead or rather that there was no longer life to be found in European faith (53). For both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, the world of Enlightenment Reason and of Hegelian Absolute Knowledge needed to be left behind (55).

The final age is the one of desecularization. That is the death of the death of God (56). This age harkens back to the Hebrew and pre-Constantine Christian faiths which did not have metaphysical theologies (57). Paul, and later Kierkegaard, called
for a leap of faith which was beyond description by the philosophical categories of his era. This is now possible today for people in a post-Enlightenment world (59). It is possible because of the death of the death of God. Nietzsche leveled the playing field by declaring that God was dead. In the same movement, so was Absolute Truth, Physics, and the Laws of Grammar, or anything that tries to hold the center firm (60). Nietzsche was trying to decapitalized anything that tried to Capitalize itself. The irony is that Nietzsche’s critique ever so closely parallels the biblical critique of idols (63). Idols are any human made constructions trying to take the place of God. Moses smashed the Golden Calf with a hammer; Paul disparaged the Corinthians for their following of the idols built by philosophers and Nietzsche used the Enlightenment critique of reason to thrash “capitalized” philosophical idols (63).

**Thoughts and Reflections:**

Reading this chapter was a liberating experience for me. I found the idea that Nietzsche and Moses were both interested in deconstructing idols a striking thought. Moses is held up in high regard in the Judeo-Christian and Nietzsche is held in nearly quite the opposite. I find it very insightful on Caputo’s part of see them as doing much the same thing.

When I finished reading this chapter (and the book), I found myself to have an unsettled feeling in the bottom of my stomach. This was a familiar feeling. It was the feeling that I get when I know my beliefs and suppositions about faith, life, and God are about to be challenged. It left me wondering what idols I have been chasing after lately. This is a terrifying question for me as I am a seminary student. The thought that I have been chasing after idols and I thought it was God that I was quite alarming. This was especially true considering that I have recently come to better understand some of the orthodox doctrines of Christian faith. It is those very doctrines that can come under critique when one follows the critique of Moses, Paul, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche. I do not mean to end this reflection in a cliché manner but when I was finished reading this chapter I was left with the question of “what would Jesus deconstruct” in my mind. I look forward to the conversation surrounding that question.

*The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here:
On Religion: Chapter 2*
Today, at this point that I describe as post-secular or post-modern, the religious sense of life turns on what I am calling the hyper-real, by which I mean a reality beyond the real, the impossible that eludes modernity's narrow-minded idea of what is possible. The impossible disturbs the reality of the present from within and leaves us hanging on by a prayer (p. 91).

This brief passage seems to capture the essence of Caputo’s argument in chapters three and four of On Religion. Religion trades in the impossible; modernity is all about what can be defined, explained, and controlled - the possible, or at least the rational and understandable. Caputo argues in these chapters that modernity has gotten somewhat ahead of itself; indeed, it has created its own demise by blurring the lines of the possible and the impossible.

In the previous chapter, Caputo discussed how the critique of religion that modernity offered served instead to ironically undermine its own suppositions. Now, he demonstrates that the tools of modernity - the technology that represents the pinnacle of accomplishment in modernity - serves instead to enable religion to flourish. Caputo’s showcase illustration is the rise of the virtual as embodied in high tech communication, such as the internet and modern media. The internet, by creating a reality that is virtual and that thus occupies the space between the real and the not-real, has become a playground for religious thought and discourse. Contrary to expectations, modernity through technology has created a space where religion not just survives but actually thrives:

We have begun, God help us, to tamper with the our sense of what is real. But is that not what every religious figure from the Jewish prophet to the televangelist has dreamed of doing? To break the grip of material actuality and open our eyes to being otherwise, to a dimension beyond reality that lifts the limits imposed upon us by presence and actuality - is that not something that classical religion has tried to do ever since Moses took a hammer to Aaron’s
golden calf, which tried to contract the transcendence of God to a physical object? (p.68)

The reason that religion thrives in this new world is that the possible has begun to give way to the impossible - and that is the stuff of religion.

Religion, for Caputo, offers a window into the impossible. However, it also belongs to impossible people, people who themselves are uncertain about this strange new world where the real and the not-real blend together to form the hyper-real. And, Caputo argues, this uncertainty has given rise to a new fundamentalism as a way of coping with the uncertainty.

Fundamentalism is an attempt to shrink the love of God down to a determinate set of beliefs and practices, to make an idol of something woven from the cloth of contingency, to treat with ahistorical validity something made in time, one more case of Aaron and the golden calf, one more confusion of the raft with the ocean (p. 107).

Fundamentalism is, in short, the confusion of interpretation with revelation. It is the failure to recognize that there is always a space between what God has said and what we have heard that God has said. It is the contraction of the experience of the Real with the Real itself. And, in some sense, it is a natural reaction to a world where the boundaries of the real appear tenuous at best. How do we know what is real? This is real, by God, and we will defend it - that is fundamentalism, as Caputo explains it.

Caputo grapples with something that few of the detractors of postmodernity seem to tackle: how does our technology shape the way in which we think, the way in which we view the world? For good or ill, technology has changed us, shaped us as we have shaped it. We are symbiotes, really - we have created something that has now become a part of the fabric of our existence. And in unleashing the virtual we have forever changed the way in which we think about what is real. Who is the real me - the person who I am in my everyday, flesh-and-blood existence, or the person I become when I place my fingers to the keyboard and plunge under the waters of cyberspace? Are they the same person? And how would I know the difference? On a more practical level, the internet has changed the way in which we conduct business, the way in which we connect with others, the way in which we receive our news and organize our day and pay our taxes. We think differently and act differently as a result - we are virtual people, living with one foot in the real and one in the hyper-real. We are networkers and content creators and browsers and linkers and downloaders. So much of who I am is nothing more than bits and bytes stored in some repository somewhere that, if tomorrow the world were plunged into a new dark age, I would have lost something of my very identity.

This is a scary existence, when I pause to consider its implications. In some sense, fundamentalism is an understandable reaction - when everything seems so uncertain, so virtual, of what can I be sure? What can I trust; what can I find that will remain
stable, the same tomorrow as it is today? There is something that is fearful at the heart of the fundamentalist impulse - a fear of losing oneself, of losing identity or purpose or the story that makes sense of one's existence. And, to mirror Caputo's reflection on the religion of Star Wars: "Fear leads to anger; anger leads to hate; hate leads to suffering." Fundamentalism is built on an irony and a contradiction: the irony is that, while the conditions are more favorable towards religion in western societies than they have been in some time, this is itself a cause for concern for the fundamentalist. The contradiction is that fundamentalism has adapted itself well to this virtual world, indeed, has become dependent on it even as it finds in it much to fear. For where would fundamentalism be without the technology that enables its message to be spread?

The situation is quite impossible. Religious people are the people of the impossible, God love them, and impossible people, God help us. Both these things under the same roof, both in the name of God. Like anything else that is worth its salt, religion is at odds with itself, and our job is not to sweep that tension under the rug but to keep it out in the open and allow this tension to be productive. (p. 94).

If the failure of fundamentalism is in sweeping this tension under the rug, then a successful theology, a successful approach towards religion, will be one that can live within this tension honestly and humbly.

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: On Religion: Chapters 3 & 4

On Religion, by John D. Caputo

Chapter 5: On Religion-Without Religion
by Rick Power

In describing “religion without religion,” Caputo’s starting point is that “there is a fundamentally religious quality to human experience itself.” One can be religious as an adherent of any of the historic religious systems or of no religion at all. Caputo’s essay on religion, therefore, “is also an essay on being human.”

Religious Truth/True Religion
These are opposed terms: religious truth exists in the several religions, each of which are “irreducible repositories of their distinctive ethical practices and religious narratives,” while none of these particular religious traditions can lay claim to being the “one true religion.” Religious truth is true in a different way than scientific “truths” are true; therefore, there can be no one true religion any more than there can be one true language or one true culture. Religious truth is truth without knowledge in an epistemologically rigorous sense; so, it is belief without certainty.

Paul says in 1 Cor. 8, “knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Love trumps knowledge, which is at its best when it concedes what it doesn’t know. The faithful of any religion should accept that their faith is the historical shape that the love of God has assumed for them. There are many ways to know and love God and they are all true. We must be aware of the historical contingency of the language, symbols and formulations of our particular approach to God.

Caputo wishes to return to the medieval sense of vera religio—true religion as the virtue of being genuinely religious, genuinely or truly loving toward God. God is greater than religion. Religion in its institutional forms is deconstructible—the love of God is not. Religion is to the love of God as a raft is to the ocean. A raft is a human artifact, constructed in the hope of navigating a boundless sea. Contrary to what has been claimed, God does not show a preference for one particular style of raft over another. We must renounce exclusivity and avoid the trap of claiming a privileged divine revelation. “God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” (I John 4:16) “Anyone, anywhere, anytime. Period!”

The proper approach to religious truth is not a propositional attitude; rather, truth calls for action—doing something to make truth happen. We are called to “do the truth.” If the name of God is a deed, then loving God means getting something done or letting something impossible get done in us. But doing the truth should not be confused with misguided attempts to impose one’s faith on others. Confusing religious truth with Knowledge can (as history testifies) move human beings to enforce the truth through violence.

The Tragic Sense of Life

In the face of the endlessly varied forms of religion, faith is fragile and tenuous. But on an even more basic and primordial level, the love of God is haunted by a specter of emptiness, nothingness—“an anonymous and loveless force in things.” Is there anyone or anything out there? Will all our words and strivings come to nothing? Should we not simply stare bravely into the abyss with Stoic (or Nietzschean) resignation?

The religious sense of life takes shape against this backdrop of the tragic. The tragic sense of life keeps the religious sense honest and blocks the triumphalism and self-enclosure of fundamentalism. Though Caputo cannot make the specter go away, he does not allow it to have the last word. This is because, first, the tragic view...
suffers from a “phallic romanticism,” a kind of macho heroic hopelessness that enjoys cursing the darkness. But, second, and more tellingly, the tragic sense of life comes up short in the sense of Augustine’s facere veritatem, doing or making the truth. The tragic view would call innocent both the impersonal destructive forces of nature and the malice of the human heart—each are seen just a part of the way cosmic forces play themselves out. This leaves no basis for valuing altruism above genocide other than some kind of aesthetic sensibility. So, in Caputo’s view, the tragic sense of life is inauthentic.

Nevertheless, there is no cognitively definitive way to decide between the tragic and religious senses of life. We do not find the religious without the tragic (unless the tragic has been violently suppressed). “Faith is faith in the face of the facelessness of the anonymous”—not in the denial of the tragic.

**The Faith of a Post-Modern**

“God is love,” as the religious centerpiece of Caputo’s presentation, cuts both ways. The phrase can be taken to mean that when we love anything it is really God whom we love. Or, it can be turned around to say that love itself is a divine force. Both of these are attempts to unmask what is “really real.” The pre-modern approach to unmasking says that love is really God (Augustine); the modern approach says that God is really love (secularizing reason). But post-modern faith announces an end to the projects of unmasking, of seeking the really real. We’re left with undecidability, with the passion of non-knowing—truth without knowledge.

The holy undecidability between God and love, God and truth (or justice, or beauty) is where faith takes place. Undecidability is the reason faith is faith and not Knowledge. With Augustine, Caputo confesses that we do not know who we are . . . and that is who we are. We are not thereby left with nothing; we are left with our passions—of non-knowing, for God and of our love for God.

We do not know what we believe or to whom we are praying. Though we can all quote prayers and creeds to describe the content of our beliefs, these creedal statements are trying to give propositional form to a living faith and a radically different form of truth. But the undecidability, the endless translatability and substitutability of names like “God” and “love” must remain open. Undecidability protects faith and prayers from closure and allows faith to be faith indeed.

Though the question of love and faith resists one big final answer, it demands a response in the form of action—not a formula to recite, but a deed to do. Prayer, too, in its many forms, is a way of doing the truth. Each form of religion and prayer is true, though none has absolute or transhistorical credentials. Each is a historical how, not a transhistorical what. God is everywhere and dwells among everyone. “Everyone who loves is born of God.”

**Axioms of a Religion Without Religion**
Following Augustine’s and Bonaventure’s “journey of the mind toward God,” Caputo proposes three stages of post-modern existence or three ascending axioms of a religion without religion. 1) “I do not know who I am or whether I believe in God.” This is too cognitivist and not passionate enough. Here, undecidability runs too close to complacency and indecision. 2) “I do not know whether what I believe in is God or not.” This is moving in the right direction, but still not passionate enough; it continues to think of life as an epistemic problem to be solved—a determining of what rather than a doing of how. 3) “What do I love when I love my God?” (or, Caputo would revise, “How do I love . . .”) This is moving out passionately in love, though the question of who or what we love remains undecided and undecidable.

The withdrawal of God is not intended to give rise to guessing games about what is going on behind a great cosmic curtain. God’s withdrawal is a matter of justice—of God’s deflecting our approach from God to the neighbor. Is justice then another name for God? Or is God another name for justice? This kind of question is not only undecidable (as we have said), it is also pointless. “If I serve the neighbor in the name of God, or if I serve the neighbor in the name of justice, what difference does it make? If the name of God is a how, not a what, then the name of God is effective even when it is not used.”

The meaning of God is enacted. It is enacted equally but differently in the quests of, for example, Gandhi, Jesus and Chief Joseph. It is enacted in an openness to the possibilities and impossibilities of the future. The meaning of God is enacted in the multiple movements of love. “In the translatability of the love of God, it is we who are to be translated, transformed, and carried over into action, carried off by the movements of love, carried away by the transcendence that this name names and commands.”

Comments

Are all rafts equally fit for ocean navigation? Allowing that all religions, as human artifacts, are deconstructible, how might we evaluate some as more appropriate than others for conveying human beings toward the love of God? Caputo makes clear he wouldn’t trust a fundamentalist raft to get him across a pond. So, he is not accepting of just any religious impulse. I think he would look at all religions or religious atheisms as territories inhabited by both saints and slackers—those who are true lovers of God and others who are pretenders (and a lot of folks struggling in the spaces between). How to tell the true from the false? “Salt is my criterion of truth, and love is my criterion of salt.” (p. 3)

So, Caputo, drawing upon the vocabulary of scripture and Augustine, lifts up love as the trans-historical and trans-cultural criterion of religious truth. His meta-theory of religion employs a criterion from within a particular religious tradition to evaluate religion (or religiousness or spirituality) in general. If this is the case, it leaves us hoping for a clearer understanding of just what this “love” looks like from one cultural context to another. But Caputo isn’t applying the criterion in this way. He
says the movements of love are “too multiple, too polyvalent, too irreducible, too uncontainable to identify, define or determine.” (p. 140) In other words, love, as understood in the Christian tradition, is not the criterion; rather, “love” is the Christian placeholder for “passion for the impossible,” that kernel of human experience Caputo calls religious.

This clears away a lot of fog. For, as Caputo acknowledges, many approaches to God or Reality do not use the language of love to describe their experience. For such persons, “the love of God means to learn how to dance or swim, to learn how to join in the cosmic play, to move with its rhythms, and to understand that we are each of us of no special import other than to play our part in the cosmic ballet.” (p. 139-40) This would stretch the concept of love so thin that it no longer resembled the Christian notion of sacrificial self-giving for the good of another. The meaning of love is indeterminate, as is the meaning of the God who is love. This indeterminacy, or “undecidability,” means there is no starting point that is better than another. The biblical and Augustinian vocabularies of love and justice work well, as would Tibetan Buddhist “compassion,” Jewish “righteousness,” Confucian “benevolence,” or any other historically and culturally appropriate way of expressing the passion for the impossible.

We should not think Caputo is offering a Christian theory of religiousness. What he has given us (and it is a gift) is a sympathetic understanding of human religiousness explained by means of Christian language and narratives.

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: On Religion: Chapter 5

Reflective Summaries:
Philosophy and Theology, by John D. Caputo

Chapters 1-5
By Russell Rathbun, one of the ministers at House of Mercy in St. Paul, MN and the author of “Post-Rapture Radio,” and the upcoming “Midrash on the Juanitos.”
Philosophy and Theology is a kind of “School House Rock” rendering of the history of western thought. I mean this in the best sense, Caputo, tells the story of the rocky, love/hate, on again/off again, king of the hill, relationship between Philosophy and theology from the Greeks to the present in simple, amusing and unforgettable language, thick with content, creating images and treating concepts in ways that will stick with the reader in a way they didn’t in Introduction to Enlightenment Thought 101.

Chapter one sets the stage. Caputo begins with this thesis: The most important word in the title “Philosophy and Theology,” is “and.” The “and” can indicate the relationship of two things made for each other as in, “I now pronounce you husband and wife,” or it can mean “against” or “verses.” Before he begins tracing the shifting meaning of the “and” Caputo, gives some working definitions of the two words on either side of it. Theology comes at issues of God, meaning, life, the self, etc. from a particular community of faith. A theologian thinks through these issues in light of the “tenets of faith” and “the contents of revelations” proclaimed by her particular faith tradition. Philosophy approaches issues of God, meaning, life, the self, etc. free of any presuppositions or community obligations. The philosopher is independent with reason as his only guide. One thread of his story, he says, will be to see how well those two working definitions hold up, pointing out that, while philosophers claim independence they are working from a particular cultural location—Western Europe and America—and they tend to come to very western sounding conclusions.

Acknowledging that Philosophy and Theology are covering much of the same territory but from different starting points (reason and faith) these two make valuable companions if they are considered two different modes of thinking or dimensions of a person. “But if we think that the distinction between philosophy and theology means there are two types of people out there, two different styles of life—a theological life of faith and the philosophical life of reason,” Caputo says, “then we are more likely to get a battle.

“The second thesis that that I will advance...is this: the tendency for a battle to break out between philosophy and theology is exacerbated in modernity...(roughly the period from the seventeenth century to the first half of the twentieth century),” Caputo asserts at the beginning of Chapter 2. To do this advancing, he recounts the less adversarial relationship between our two main characters in the pre-modern period, or the “age of faith,” reminding us that while important advances where made in both fields as a result of faith and reason working together—faith, theology, had the power and who ever has the power will always abuse it. Reason served as the handmaiden of faith, was a valuable servant but was never allowed to go it alone.

Caputo offers two examples of how theology and philosophy worked together in the pre-modern period: Anselm and Aquinas. Both became Saints and both asked theological questions aided by the important philosophical influences of their respective times. Plato through Augustine influenced Anselm’s reasoning, and Aquinas’ was influence by Aristotle. To illustrate the difference between the two
Caputo recalls the Raphael’s painting, School of Athens. “Raphael portrays Plato with his right hand pointing skyward, meaning that the true world is above, of which this sensible world here below is a copy, which is congenial to one kind of theology. Aristotle, however spreads his right hand out over the ground in front of him, which means that you always start with the sensible world under your nose, which is the keynote of another way of doing theology,” Caputo writes.

Saint Anselm’s famous “proof for the existence of God,” (tagged by philosophers the “ontological argument”) is consistent with his Platonic influence. God is the being that which no greater can be conceived. But if something exists merely in our mind but not in reality, the thing that exists in reality is greater. So if God exists merely in our mind and not in reality, anything that really exists is greater. Therefore God exists in reality and not merely in our mind. But Anselm wasn’t making an argument based purely on reason but was seeking to articulate that which he felt he already knew. Caputo says, “Anselm was formulating an idea of God that expressed his religious experience of living ‘through Him, and with Him, and in Him.” Anselm’s approach is Platonic because he seeks God above not by going outside but by going within.

Thomas Aquinas agreed with Anselm that the existence of God was intuitively obvious if you had an intuitive and direct knowledge of God. But that kind of knowledge was not available in this life. Instead we have the physical things that have been given to us, the natural world and reason, which created by God are good a sufficient basis, when bolstered by faith, for making truth claims about God.

In both Anselm and Aquinas there is no antagonism theology and philosophy. “The supernatural gift of faith seeks to understand itself in theology, and philosophical reason is the natural means, the natural gift, god has given us to do so.” Caputo concludes.

But it seems if you let people start thinking, they don’t want to stop. Moving in to modernity, the Enlightenment, or “the age of reason,” in chapter 3, Caputo writes, “The time had come to get out our telescopes and to see more closely just what was going on for ourselves, and to do so freely, without the priests telling us in advance what we are going to see.”

Modernity is birthed by reason shouldering its way to the forefront and making possible the advent of modern science. The “Copernican revolution” brings into focus the adjusting tension between theology and reason and introduced a new character to the story—the natural sciences. Instead of assuming that reason was an instrument for understanding God and that the natural world was further testimony to God’s presence, the natural sciences assumed nothing, using reason to make objective observations and form conclusions about what they saw. The balance of power shifted in modernity. “The relationship between faith and reason was reversed, and now the principle that whoever is in power abuses it was visited upon the church...and upon God.” It was faith, theology, and the notion of God that had to
prove itself before the court of reason. Thinkers like Newton and Descartes began to use principles of scientific reasoning to address philosophical and theological questions. Descartes, Caputo thinks helps mightily to put reason on top when he refers to God as the “cause of itself.” Aquinas had said that God was the “first cause uncaused,” but to Descartes’ mathematical mind everything must have a cause. That is a foundational principle and must apply to all things even God; therefore God had a cause and the only thing sufficient to cause God is God. It is God now that must conform to foundational principles of reason, pass muster. It is now reason that enlightens everything, even God, whose job that once was.

Under Kant, God becomes relegated to the role of a wise governor, nature’s god, who has set the moral and natural principles down for men to discern and follow. Caputo writes, “While this Enlightenment rational theology linked God up with certain basic human intuitions, the effect was to put God in such a vulnerable position that it was only a batter of time until some one would come along and lop God off, on the grounds that natural science and human ethics, that is, reason could really get along fine, thank you very much, without this extra hypothesis, which tended more and more to look like an unnecessary supplement.” Then, in the 19th century, Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche came along to do just that. Nietzsche summed it all up: God is dead—and theology was down and was having a hard time raising its head off the mat.

“But a funny thing happened on the way to the funeral,” Caputo begins chapter four, “the wheels came off the Enlightenment.” While a helpful and necessary corrective, a maturing process in the developing relationship between faith and reason, the modernity overreached. It turns out “objective truths” were a more subjective business than first thought and rational foundational principles failed to provide a firm foundation in all cases. Caputo, however, is not interested abandoning modernity, “but in the continuation of modernity by another means, and that is how I interpret what is nowadays called postmodernity.”

Even before the end of the nineteenth century, the Enlightenment had received a mortal wound. German philosopher, G. W. Hegel, insisted that “pure reason” had one foot in time and history. Reason played out in, and was affected by, a concrete reality, in historical locations, with actual people and cultures and languages. “Hegel introduced a distinction between what he called Verstand, abstract understanding, and Vernunft, the concrete embrace of a robustly historical reason,” observes Caputo. One Enlightenment idea that Hegel would not let go was the notion that reason formed a comprehensive “system” that seeks an end that governs all the elements of the system. History unfolds with a rationality he called the “absolute,” which makes sense of events and actions. “So, for example, the Hegelian is committed by this view to say that the Holocaust is all part of a plan administered by the hidden hand of history’s Vernunft,” Caputo points out.

Hegel did not dismiss theology, in fact called Christianity the absolute religion, the absolute truth, but what he meant was that it was the best representation of the
absolute truth, the best story to the real unvarnished philosophical truth. Christianity was a metaphorical way of speaking about a metaphorical situations. The natural world is an expression of the divine live in an objective manner; human culture is an expression of the divine live in a cultural and historical life; and philosophy is the highest form of cultural or spiritual life in which the absolute comes back to itself in self-knowledge. All come together in a system of divine life and absolute truth, that in the end, Soren Kierkegaard said, has God looking like a German philosopher. Kierkegaard was a great influence on early twentieth century theologian Karl Barth, who insisted on the scandal and contradiction that is New Testament Christianity. God does not need and orderly system.

“If the main drift of modernity was toward secularization,” Caputo writes in chapter five, “it is inevitable that something that gets to be called postmodern will provide an opening for the postsecular.” What then does theology look like in this historical and cultural context? Caputo, first maps out the ideological turns that brought our main characters here. First, Martin Heidegger argues in Being and Time (1927), that as soon as we come to be we find that we are already there, or we can never get out side ourselves and see our selves. Therefore, it is not possible to make presuppositionless observations. Our presuppositions are inherited and shape us, but this is not a hindrance, they define the particular angle from which we observe. Caputo calls this the hermeneutical turn.

Secondly, our language shapes our understanding. The words we have available to us effect how we define, talk about a theological or philosophical concept. Caputo calls this the linguistic turn. The final turn comes when Thomas Kuhn published The Structure of Scientific Revolutions in 1962. Kuhn says, that scientists are not bloodless, objective observers, but are living human beings with hunches and instincts. They do not act purely objectively. The great strides in science are not made by adding a new bit of knowledge to the old ones but when a scientist, in order to make sense of that new bit of knowledge, shuffles and reconfigures all the old bits and gains a revolutionary insight, creates a whole new paradigm. “But at the start of the revolution, all the “evidence is on the side of the old guard, and the avant-garde is proceeding mostly on insight and intuition,” Caputo says, “let’s call this the revolutionary turn.” The hermeneutical turn, the linguistic turn and the revolutionary turn make up what comes to be called the postmodern turn. In 1977, Jean-Francois Lyotard defined The Postmodern Condition as “incredulity to meta-narratives,” that is an unwillingness to believe in “big stories” or “totalizing system” that put all to right and leave nothing out. Caputo concludes, “Postmodernism thus is not relativism or skepticism, as its uncomprehending critics almost daily charge, but minutely close attention to detail, a sense for the complexity and multiplicity of things, for close readings, for detailed histories, for sensitivity to differences.

And so, where does that leave our heroes, philosophy and theology? Chapter six begins to answer that question. Chapters one through five are an important background for understanding how we got to where we are today, and Philosophy and
Theology will be an invaluable background for the conversation we will be having in Philadelphia together.

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: Philosophy and Theology: Chapters 1 - 5

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Reflective Summaries:
The God Who May Be, by Richard Kearney

Chapters 1-3
by Doug Davis

How ironic it is to observe so many monotheistic followers still failing to recognize the message: that God speaks not through monuments of power and pomp but in stories and acts of justice, the giving to the least creatures, the caring for orphans, widows, and strangers; stories and acts which bear testimony—as transfiguring gestures do—to that God of little things that comes and goes, like the thin small voice, like the burning bush, like the voice crying out in the wilderness, like the word made flesh, like the wind that blows where it wills (51).

I want to start my comments by stating something of who I am as I interpret and make meaning (for myself and maybe others) of Kearney’s narratives. I train/educate/prepare/profess to/indoctrinate school administrators as a professor of educational leadership. One of my central projects in my work is to improve public education. I am also a practicing Catholic and for the past nine months I have been participating in Emergent conversations. While the conversations deeply resonate in my spiritual life, I also find strong relevance within Emergent discourse for thinking about leadership and education.

I am also a member of a loosely-knit group of professors of educational administration with the banner of Leadership for Social Justice (LSJ). The goal of our group is to better prepare school leaders to be agents of social justice in both the manner in which they run schools and the development of schools as learning institutions that will serve to promote a more socially-just and democratic society.
While I applaud and support the work of my colleagues in this group and find them to be talented and committed scholars, there is something missing that offends my postmodern sensibilities. Simply, social justice is frequently essentialized and viewed as a defined goal, as if there is some quantifiable measure of justice and injustice that may be measured, modified and corrected in a certain way. The resulting moral imperative for those who prepare educational leaders is to increase “the capacity for social justice” within the practice of school management. In addition, the “other” in need of social justice is almost always defined; typically as a member of a group, or a subject of a specific “identity,” that has suffered injustice. Thus, justice becomes something to be realized through an identification of the other that allows for identity politics to systematically, through policy and defined praxis, promote justice. My concern is that injustice itself is dependent on social construction of subjective identities. Injustice is the essentialization of the other; a failure, to use Kearney’s understanding of persona as possibility of transfiguration, of an “openness to the persona of the neighbor in each instant…” (18).

Derrida, Caputo, and Kearney (and many others) provide me with a means to critique (dare I say, deconstruct) some common themes in the LSJ narrative. My hope as I engage in this scholarly work and discussion, in and external to my field, is to strengthen the LSJ effort. In these comments, however, I plan to focus on Kearney but I want to briefly scaffold my thoughts on my recent (and as yet unfinished) reading of Caputo’s “Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida.” While the subject of this book is Derrida and religion, the concept of justice is inseparable from a discussion of Derrida and religion. Caputo discusses and explains key ideas from Derrida’s work including, the “absolute other” as all “others” (including God), the “impossibility to come,” messianic time, negative theology, and the impossibility of a gift. Regardless of some differences Kearney portrays between his views and Derrida’s and Caputo’s, there are many common ideas that will provide fertilizer for fruitful conversation in Philadelphia. The key common theme, however, is a twist of the eschatological kingdom (to come) that equates the kingdom with God to come or “The God Who May Be”, the possibility that God may be the promised kingdom. For Derrida (and Caputo), the messianic coming of God is always, and will always be (as is justice, democracy, and one might also add, the kingdom), the possible impossibility, or the impossible possibility. Kearney, on the other hand, speaks of the “God of the possible” and states “…the God-who-may-be offers us the possibility of realizing a promised kingdom by opening ourselves to the transfiguring power of transcendence.”

Kearney suggests that Transfiguration is crucial to understanding and realizing the possibility of God and the kingdom to come and this is the subject of his book. While these comments are a somewhat simplistic and over-generalized presentation of Kearney’s well-supported arguments, my goal is to briefly consider some implications of this work for efforts to promote justice (or I could say God’s “kingdom”) through education.
The first chapter develops a phenomenology of the persona. *Persona* is defined as “this capacity of each of us to receive and respond to the divine invitation” (2). Kearney addresses what he considers to be “crucial contemporary debates on the notion of an eschatological God who transfigures and desires” (9). Kearney describes possibility of transfiguration of the other as the “otherness of the other.” Persona is there but cannot be grasped; it escapes our gaze. There is an enigma of presence-absence. Thus, the future possibility of the other is impossible for me to know. “The persona is always already there and always still to come” (12). Regardless, there is a desire to fuse or to appropriate the other’s persona that is related to the desire to fuse with God. This requires, however, a present God. In contrast, Kearney suggests: “To this fusionary sameness of the One I would oppose the eschatological universality of the Other” (15). Thus, one’s capacity to lead for justice through defining and knowing the other is shown to be impossible and attention is turned toward an ethical call for transfiguration of the self: “The fact that universal justice is an eschatological possible-still-to-come creates a sense of urgency and exigency, inviting each person to strive for instantiation, however partial and particular, in each given situation” (15).

Kearney provides examples of religious transfiguration in the next two chapters that illustrate the human role in the acceptance of the gift of the kingdom or transfiguration. The second chapter interprets the epiphany of the burning bush. Recounting the story and describing Moses as a man who longed for a God of justice and liberty, Kearney questions interpretations of the meaning of God’s name. He suggests that a more meaningful (true) translation might be “I am who may be” rather than “I who am” or “I who am not.” Kearney contrasts his view of the signature of a God of the possible with the ontological reading of the story that views “the proper name of God revealed in Exodus 3:14 is none other than the absolute identity of divine being and essence” (23). Thus, God is conceptualized as a categorical being with substance (definable yet remaining transcendentally undefinable). The divergent eschatological interpretation emphasizes “the ethical and dynamic character of God” (25). The focus is placed on the I/Thou relationship whereby the promise of the kingdom from God is realized through human ethical living. Kearney explains:

Here God commits Himself to a kingdom of justice if his faithful commit themselves to it too; the promise of Sinai calls forth a corresponding decision on behalf of the people. To phrase this otherwise: the I puts it to the Thou that the promise can be realized only if those who receive it do not betray its potential for the future. Not that this is a matter of conditional exchange—turning the Exodus revelation into an economy of give-and-take. No, the promise is granted unconditionally, as a pure gift. But God is reminding his people that they are free to accept or refuse this gift. A gift cannot be imposed; it can only be offered. A gift neither is nor is not; it gives (29).

Kearney calls for a new hermeneutic of God as May-Be, an onto-eschatological hermeneutics, or a “poetics of the possible” (37).
Chapter three, “Transfiguring God,” further explores the Biblical meaning of transfiguration through narratives of Mount Thabor and the four paschal apparitions. At Mount Thabor, according to Kearney, the person of Jesus is “metamorphosed” into the persona of Christ. Among the many meanings of the transfiguration, Kearney emphasizes the call to avoid making Christ an idol:

The disciples’ effort to fix Christ as a fetish of presence, imposing their own designs on him, make it necessary for God to intercede from the cloud and bid them attend to Christ’s otherness: “Listen to him!” In this manner, the voice of transcendence speaks through Christ as divine persona, thereby arresting the idolatrous impulse of Peter, James, and John to fuse with his person or possess him as a cult object (42).

This allows for a messianic persona of Christ beyond the finite person Jesus of Nazareth providing a preview of the kingdom to come, a call to/from God. Again, however, “this eschatological promise requires not only grace but ethical action on our part” (45). The third chapter ends with a recounting of the four paschal testimonies of the resurrected Christ. In these accounts, Christ was not recognized at first by those who know him and there was a common sharing of food. But, most importantly, Kearney reminds us:

The post-paschal stories of the transfiguring persona remind us that the Kingdom is given to the hapless fishermen and spurned women, to those lost and wondering on the road from Jerusalem to nowhere, to the wounded and weak and hungry, to those who lack and do not despair of their lack, to little people “poor in spirit” (51).

May those of working for peace and justice be know by our fruits, our “fruits of love and justice, care and gift” (49). But if my reading of Kearney is fair, my work for the Kingdom begins with me.

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: The God Who May Be: Chapters 1-3

**The God Who May Be,** by Richard Kearney

**Chapters 4-5**
by James R. Getz Jr., a Doctoral Candidate at Brandeis University.
Kearney's fourth chapter is on 'Desiring God.' This chapter moves from an interpretation of the Song of Songs, to a discussion of the Song of Songs by Levinas, to a discussion of Levinas discussion by Derrida and Caputo. It progresses from summation, to metaphysical reading, to phenomenological reading and finally to deconstructive reading. Through this discourse on interpreting desire the question turns on what the desire of God is, who desires whom, and what kind of desire it is.

Kearney begins with a truncated exposition of the Song of Songs itself. He is not shy: the Song is about sex. It is about desire. It is about longing of the other. It culminates in Song 8:6: "Place me as a seal upon your heart/ like a seal upon your arm/ for love is as strong as Death/ ardor as is as mighty as the Grave/ the flashes are flashes of fire/ a flame of Yhwh." (my translation). Kearney surmises, "unlike Platonic love, this incarnational love of the Bible does involve all the senses, sound, odor, touch, sight, taste, but unlike the old pagan rites of sexual fusion and sacrifice, it resists the phallic illusions of totality, finality or fullness." (p. 59) It is "a desire that desires beyond desire while remaining desire." (p. 60)

This desire is then contextualized and analyzed in light of the two predominant metaphysical categories in the book: onto-theology and eschatology. The onto-theological reading of desire is tied to an inner lack, an inner desire to know absolutely. It is a desire to storm the heavens and find the certainty that would render faith unnecessary and make God less dangerous. The eschatological reading of this desire is a hope of the future, a response desiring the God that has first desired us.

The discussion and preference for the eschatological, a preference seen throughout Kearney's work, brings about an analysis of the work of Emmanuel Levinas. It is from Levinas that Kearney appears to take his ideas of the eschatological. Levinas himself formulated this idea in rejection to the grand Hegelian system of history. Levinas sought to break this system with an eschatological desire from outside of time, eschatological over teleological. Levinas played Hegel's concept of desire against itself. He saw the object of desire as voluptuousity of the other which brings about fecundity through a transcendence of paternity. That is to say, desire leads and engenders a gift that transcends the initial desire. However, Derrida and Caputo would see this last step as impossible.

Derrida and Caputo work with a deconstructive reading of desire. This desire desires an other that is tout autre, every other. In Derrida's summation, this other is not conscribed merely to human or divine but includes everything. Caputo interprets this as a desire rooted in importance of every specific other. Yet, this is a desire that Kearney shies away from. He holds instead that there needs to be something that allows us to recognize the object of our desire. Kearney in the end concludes, "While God's lovers will always continue to seek and desire him whom their soul loves, they have always already been found because already sought and desire by him who their soul loves." (p.79)
Kearney's fifth chapter is entitled "Possibilizing God." The title comes from Mark 10:27 where Jesus states that with God all things are possible. Kearney's goal in this chapter is to chart a new metaphysical course that allows for the eschatological notion of the possible, the possibility of the impossible. To this aim he interacts with recent attempts to reexamine the possible in the works of Husserl, Bloch, Heidegger and Derrida. A quick summary of these theories are in order. While Kearney ultimately finds all four of these scholars' religious understandings of the possible wanting, he holds that they all point to the possible as something more than the actual. He ends the chapter by summarizing his understanding of the Possible God.

"1) It is radically transcendent, guaranteed by the mark of its "impossible-possibility." 2) It is "possible in so far as we have faith in the promise of advent." 3) It calls and solicits us. 4) And, finally, the eschatological May-be unfolds not just as can-be but as should-be, already, now, and not yet, is always a surprise and never without grace. (p.100)

In his conclusion "Poetics of the Possible God" Kearney ties two general premises of the book together. The first is his attempt to retrieve an alternate hermeneutic of the possible; and the second is the concept of Godplay in this possibility.

First, Kearney looks at various philosophers from Averroës to Cusanus to finally Shelling in an attempt to explain the possible in a way that allows for the eschatological hope of the possible. Kearney sees "the divine Creator transfiguring our being into a can-be", a being capable of creating and recreating anew meanings in our world, without determining the actual content of our creating or doing the actual creating for us." (p.102). This openness of God is revealed in a new hermeneutical understanding of the trinity, "The Father might thus be re-envisages as the loving-possible which transfigures the Son and Spirit and is transfigured by them in turn." (p. 106)

This inner Trinitarian transfiguration plays finally into Kearney's understanding of Godplay. God and humanity are in an eschatological play of possibility, the possibility of the Kingdom never fully possessed. The Trinity is understood in the Eastern Church as a sacred dance or perichoresis. Kearney holds that this dance is the God-play into which the Triune invites humanity to partake.

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: The God Who May Be: Chapters 4-5
Many of you may have been familiar with the Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future. Robert Webber began to sculpt this call about a year ago. The beginning draft of the AEF Call embodied much of Robert Webber’s arguments already written in his Ancient-Future book series of recent years. Through much effort by Bob and his associates (Ashley Gieschen and Phil Kenyon), and the four editors, Howard Snyder, Kevin Vanhoozer, D.H. Williams and Hans Boersma, the Call went through numerous revisions and ended up with 350 endorsers including myself. It appeared in Christianity Today in September. The AEF Call was aimed squarely at established evangelicalism. It argued against a gospel reduced to propositions, modernist individualism in the church, and an evangelicalism that had caved in to pragmatic and consumerist versions of church practice. Instead, Webber and friends called evangelicals to renew the category of Biblical Narrative as the primary category by which we understand truth, Scripture, worship, spiritual formation and embodied justice in the world. After almost a year in process, this “Call to an Ancient Evangelical Future” birthed what is to be the first of several annual conferences on the Call this past December at Northern Seminary.

The Conference brought together Brian McLaren, Frederica Matthewes-Greene, Aaron Flores, Martin Marty and Lauren Winner to engage with the Call over their respective areas of primary concern. I offer the following observations of the presentations and my own reflections of what I saw as important issues raised by the Conference on the Call.

Brian McLaren presented first and kicked off the conference with a well delivered coherent challenge to the importance of several issues the Call was addressing which coalesced with many of the concerns in the Emerging (Emergent) church movement. Brian’s uncanny ability to bring together many sources and synthesize key observations was ideal for this kind of conference. I thought he was challenging and erudite, and set the tone for the rest of the conference.

I, as a faculty member at Northern, was asked to respond. I raised two questions for Brian which recurring several times during the conference.

1) A central theme of the AEF Call was that the church must get back into the task of narrating our Story before the world, as opposed to marketing to the world etc. The prologue of the AEF Call asked, “Who Gets To Narrate the World?” Brian raised...
this question from the call and he answered by saying “no one.” Rather, according to Brian, we must take the position that “nobody gets a privileged position.”

In my response, I asked, if we do accept that there are no metanarratives in the Lyotard sense, should the question even be “who gets to narrate the world?” Or should the question be instead, how can we narrate the Story we have been given more faithfully so that the truth of our story in Christ can be fully displayed and tested in the contest of narratives that has become our postmodern reality in the West? Should the question for this conference be, How can we become less distracted with the various modes of selling the gospel, or defending it using meta foundations that no longer exist and instead return to the narration of the gospel of Christ so that the powerful living reality of God, the Father, Son and Holy Ghost in a people can do the speaking?

I think Brian might have agreed with me on this. For me then, the Call would seem to imply that we must first recognize that our relationship to the world is not one where we are trying to out argue, out reason, or engage in a contest on the basis of some neutral public language with those who might disagree. It is not the task of trying to translate our language into some public discourse. It is not even first the task to somehow search for correlations between our own Story and that of a so-called wider culture. It is (with Milbank) first to recognize that reality is about narration and that we must fully engage in the process of narrating our Story in Christ passed down through the apostles in the Church until He comes. Our relation to the rest of the world is not to assume a superior position over other narratives, but to enter alongside and allow the extension of our Narrative to engage the alternative worlds and their narratives until the Eschaton.

I suggested that this could be done humbly, non-violently and vulnerably because our story informs us that God is sovereign and at work both in us and in the world to bring all of creation towards His completion. This position is nicely articulated by Romand Coles, who favorably comments on Yoder in his Beyond Gated Politics. In Beyond Gated Politics he quotes (p. 115) Yoder as saying “In contrast to narratives that claim to possess sovereignty by securing a continuous relation to an authorizing origin, “Jesus is Lord” is the solicitation to a perennially unfinished process of critiquing the developed tradition [by receiving challenge from exterior narratives] from the perspective of its roots (Priestly Kingdom 15-17).

All that to say, this question of “Who Gets to Narrate the World?” came up again several times over the 2 days of the conference.

2) Brian McLaren also urged us to realize that for the church to go forward in the postmodern, post-Christendom context, it would require both a deep ecclesiology and a generous orthodoxy. Brian was arguing for evangelicals to recover a place in the church catholic. To which I responded with a hearty 'Amen.'
For me however the question of a deep ecclesiology together with a generous orthodoxy posed a potential oxymoron-ish combination which may not make sense. For if we evangelicals do in fact gain a deeper appreciation for the high-church liturgical traditions and the justice oriented traditions of Mainline Protestantism, we may in fact find ourselves requiring a more defined Orthodoxy rooted in the historic traditions of the church. In other words, by embracing Ecumenical Christianity “deeply”, it might not mix well with “generously.”

And so for me, the question to Brian and the conference was how is this deep ecclesiology possible without turning the church into an introverted, internally driven inward looking sectarian community withdrawing from cultural engagement? Of course I have not been one to worry about this because I see the power of Yoder, Hauerwas and, yes, even Milbank as the ability to engage culture more substantially, more peacefully (in the case of Yoder and Hauerwas) than any contrived Rawlsian classic political liberalism or derivative versions thereof. I am always wary of those who would deny religious language or identity into the public sphere and call it peacefulness. But I digress.

Back to the question concerning generous orthodoxy and deep ecclesiology, I asked specifically whether liturgical church could be combined with Brian’s notion of generous orthodoxy because liturgy is certainly a self defining exercise that asks us to define ourselves and our words Scripturally and historically. Wouldn’t his lend itself to a more narrow defined community than a generous one, at least as McLaren has defined it?

I could go on. Aaron Flores brought to the table how the Call actually asks of all ethnic and or minority groups coming to the Call “to expense their differences.” He pointed out how most of the language of the AEF Call is white evangelical establishment language. He argued that the Call by asking minorities to use this language, was in essence denying their cultural contributions and saying we don’t need or want your participation. Indeed Aaron points to the obvious situation we are in who have grown up in old-line evangelicalism, modernity and all its pitfalls. The evangelicalism of N. America and Christianity Today is largely a “white man’s religion.”

The Call has many more problems, not the least of which is the category of Narrative which seems to be passé. VanHoozer’s and Sam Wells’ use of Drama seems to be more encompassing and advances over the older Narrative theologies. Nonetheless, I think that many great questions were raised.

In Summary:

1. Who Gets To Narrate the World?

2. Is deep ecclesiology together with a generous orthodoxy possible?
3. Is modernity mainly the problem of White Evangelicals? In that case could the AEF Call have spoken in a language that made sense to anyone else other than White Evangelicals?

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: The Ancient Evangelical Future Call Conference: A Few Reflections from a Participant

Events: Is the Reformation Over? A Conversation Among Friends – a report by Eric Austin Lee

Last weekend at Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City, MO, I attended the conference entitled "Is the Reformation Over? A Conversation Among Friends." Inspired by the question asked by a recent book by Mark Noll, Rev. Dr. John Wright set up a series of interviews with George Lindbeck, David Burrell, and Stanley Hauerwas.
My comments are coming a little late onto the scene, but admittedly, I have been swamped with coursework until now. In the meantime, however, some reports have been blogged:

- The Tim Suttle Weblog
- La Perruque
- Kruse Kronicle

With that stage already set, I think the most important theme I heard in John’s questions and in the responses to them by Lindbeck, Burrell, and Hauerwas, is one of friendship. All three of these guys have either attended or taught at Yale, and in one way or another over the years have deeply influenced each other through their work. And, while Burrell is (I think) the only one who has ever published a whole book out of these three on the topic of friendship, it was clear that this was a theme that pervaded the entirety of the discussions. Friendship, defined in an Aristotelian sense, has more to do with what friends share as common ends/goals, as opposed to mere agreement on issue X or Y.

George Lindbeck was the first to be interviewed on Friday morning. He retold some of his profound adventures as a Lutheran observer at the Second Vatican council in the early 1960’s. He told some wonderful stories about the friendships he developed with the Catholics there and the other Lutheran observers. The story that stands out for me is one where Lindbeck and his wife were over at a priest’s house for dinner during the time of the council, and afterwards, the priest offered Lindbeck’s wife a cigar, and she took it! They had an after-dinner smoke, and this was just one of many gestures of friendship that continued over the years.
Before moving on to Burrell’s interview, I did want to touch on Lindbeck’s response to the reaction to his most popular book, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. The image he associated with its reception was on-the-mark: *Nature of Doctrine* has been much more of a "rorschach blot" than anything else, as seen by the myriad interpretations that people have read into the book, most of them not having much to do with Lindbeck’s original intentions. He expected ecumenists who were well-read in theology to read it! Also, of importance was that whenever he waxed [Clifford] Geertzian, he was always thinking of Thomistic/Aristotelian *habitus*. Furthermore, he affirmed that Christian theology should *always* be built upon Biblical foundations, but he does admit that he contradicts himself a bit in his own book. Lastly, he also confirmed that what he is doing in *The Nature of Doctrine* and in much of his other life’s work, especially as found in the [Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification](https://www.lwml.org/library/joint-declaration-on-the-doctrine-of-justification), is in the form of Thomas Aquinas’ *quaestiones*.

These last points were very helpful for me (and hopefully others as well), especially because I had just finished a paper last semester attempting to tease out these ideas with the main idea being that *The Nature of Doctrine* cannot be rightly interpreted apart from the ecumenical *telos* in Christ, which has been the main goal of the work of Lindbeck both proceeding that book as well as after.

George Lindbeck left us with the following: "One mistrusts entirely predictions of what the future will be." It was meant both as a warning to not trust our own predictions and as a hopeful reminder to trust in the providence of the Triune God.

**David Burrell** immediately established himself not only as a guy who loves to tell stories, but also as one who tells them well. The beginnings of the discussion around Burrell began with some early autobiographical information, and quickly worked its way toward his relationship with his teacher Bernard Lonergan. Lonergan taught him the distinction between those who need certitude, and those who *search for understanding*. We are a people who tend to always search for something graspable and certain, yet the great theologians are actually those who are not expounding upon the right answers, but are those who ask the great questions. Through this search for understanding, Burrell continued the friendship theme by further describing theology as usually done between a master and apprentice. Maybe George Lucas got some things right in the end, after all.
An important point that Burrell raised was the difference between a division and a distinction. For thinking theologically, this is paramount. For instance, the Trinity is one God having one essence but three distinct persons; also the distinction between nature and grace is an important one: if grace is a gift, then what is nature? -- a given? No, both are gifts, and one completes the other and brings it to its fullness in the Triune God.

The last bit I want to touch upon in regard to Burrell and friendship is his interfaith work on Thomas Aquinas, Moses Maimonides, and Avicenna (Ibn Sena). Burrell has shown in some of his books that Thomas Aquinas, in addition to Aristotle, is quite indebted to both Maimonides and Avicenna -- indeed, Burrell said that on five key issues, Thomas is indebted to Maimonides.

Burrell’s final words were to remind us that the central task of theology is that faith in Jesus is central as well as to be Christian community as the body of Christ that is always welcoming and understanding as opposed to fearful of others (a kind of certitude).

Stanley Hauerwas was as interesting, hilarious, and profound as ever, and also said things that surprised many. Somehow, he was able to recall a list of all the books he had ever read at Yale under each professor that assigned them. In this telling, some of his formation around Thomas Aquinas and Wittgenstein emerged early on. Something that resonated with Burrell’s earlier statements was when Hauerwas said that most people tend to miss the investigative enterprise of Thomas’ work. Similarly, friends have told me that the thought of Thomas cannot be grasped by getting to a 'pure Thomas' but upon a more careful reading, one will find that his thought is much more of a labyrinth and not nearly as systematic as we think it must be.
Likewise, Hauerwas said that his own work has always intentionally been non-systematic; instead, it has been much more engaged in the task of "theological journalism," attempting through never-ending re-descriptive articles to show how things really are. Thus, theology is fundamentally teaching speech in an attempt to not let language "go on holiday."

"It's one thing to read Aquinas, it's another thing to pray with somebody who reads Aquinas," said Hauerwas. Later on, he said that friendship and the life of prayer are internally related to each other. In this vein he pointed to Jean Vanier and the L'Arche communities to teach how to be as Christians.

Hauerwas' closing words were to be not afraid, because Jesus is Lord! He went on to say that another of our primary tasks is to defeat the speech-act of "Jesus is Lord, but that's just my opinion." And perhaps surprisingly to some, Hauerwas told us that we can never read the bible enough, because it teaches us the grammar we need to live the Christian life.

After the three main interviews, there was a panel discussion between John Wright and the three guests. I didn't really take any notes at this point, but it was a good conversation as well, which was further followed up by a Q&A session. For now, unless somebody took some better notes, we will just have to wait on the content of this conversation until this conference hopefully gets transcribed and edited into a book, which John Wright plans to do.

I am not entirely sure how I missed this, but I only found out last night over dinner with my wife Tiana and some really good friends of mine that in the month of January, the week of 18-25th is "On Christian Unity Week." The 18th is also the day the conference started, which, though perhaps providential, is a humbling reminder that this conversation is not only happening at seminaries in Kansas City, but also across the world.
Events: Easter-The End of Deconstruction: on the 2007 Emergent Theological Conversation
Geoff Holsclaw

The 2007 Emergent Theological Conversation has come and gone. I am writing this as I wait to get on a plane to Chicago, more tried than I usually am, but less than I could have been having spent a couple of days swimming in deep thoughts with some of my most favorite people.

From Derrida and Deconstruction to the undeconstructible Event; from the passion of the Impossible to the poetics of the Possible; from onto-theo-logy to theological poetics; from Lent to Easter...the ground we covered, and much more.

There are many turns these days in continental philosophy, but I will spend time on a most significant turn (dare I say revelation) that happened here in Philadelphia in the exchange between Richard Kearney and John Caputo, arguably the two most influential English speaking continental philosophers.

During a panel session half way through the conference, I asked the simple question, “What does deconstruction have to do with Easter? It is easy to recognize the 'Jesus' of deconstruction who lives in Lent, in the wilderness, as an anchorite monk. But how does this deconstructive 'Jesus' live in Easter, after the Resurrection?” (I'm sure I didn't ask it near as eloquently, but that's how I wanted to phrase it.)

In reply Richard Kearney launched into a moving account of how indeed Derrida, personally and philosophically, persisted in a self-imposed Holy Saturday, forbidden/held from the Resurrection, but that in spite of this, Derrida’s work was pregnant with the possibility of Easter and that people like himself (Kearney), Jack Caputo, Jamie Smith and others were faithfully drawing out those secret dimensions of deconstruction which would indeed rise again on Easter Sunday. Kearney suggested that while Derrida refused to make the step from Holy Saturday to Easter Sunday, that deconstruction in no way barred that step and indeed almost asks for it. Admittedly, Kearney acknowledges a slightly different take on deconstruction (influenced via Ricoeur), but Caputo was also receptive to this reading of deconstruction.

For myself, and I believe for others, this was an extremely helpful distinction between the work of Derrida and, in a sense, the necessary overcoming (or
deconstructing) of Derrida, moving from the wilderness of Lent and Good Friday into the surprise of Easter Sunday.

Kearney said that over the recent years he has, in friendship, gentle nudged Jack to find his own voice and speak of the Easter Sunday of Caputo’s own religious tradition instead of merely commenting on the Holy Saturday of Derrida’s desert wanderings. And indeed, Jack was very responsive to this suggestion, and claims that even in his most recent work he is attempting to do this very thing (I think he was referring to his forthcoming *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? [fall 2007]*). From the written work of Caputo that I have read, and from the concerns of many readers/commentors here, I had not envisioned such openness to constructive (dare we even say, Resurrected) theology.

Of course it remains to be seen if Caputo’s deconstructive ‘Jesus’ can indeed live well after Easter Sunday, but we will have to wait and see. In either case, the conversation was immensely helpful and eye opening, if at times jarring and frustrating (but was good conversation isn’t?).

Much more was discussed and questioned, and if you are writing your own reflections, please leave a note in the comments so I can compile a list.

* The above post can be found in its original form with a conversation that follows here: Easter – The End of Deconstruction.