

Learning to Pray with Father Jacques

Len Hjalmarson

A Journey Through John D. Caputo's "Philosophy and Theology"

*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..¹*

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 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 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

¹ Bruce Cockburn, *Mystery*, from *Life Short, Call Now*, 2007.

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 ones 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.² 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.

² Though also Augustine. It was from Augustine that Descartes borrowed “Cogito, ergo sum.”

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 (such as, “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 omniscience 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...”³

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).

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*, Derrida his *Circumfessions*. Augustine’s mother’s name was Monica; one of Derrida’s journal entries is written from Santa Monica. Both men dreamed of going to the metropolis (Rome/Paris). 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).

³ Kevin Vanhoozer, “Pilgrim’s Digress,” in *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, Ed. Myron Penner (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005) 85-86

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, and that restlessness is increased by his inability to rest in the Name. That results in a still more restless inquiry. What 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 but reflect along with U2..

*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..⁴*

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.”⁵

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..⁶

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.⁷

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

⁴ U2 “City of Shining Lights” from *How to Dismantle an Atom Bomb*, 2004.

⁵ *Lord of the Rings*, Peter Jackson, Producer (Wellington, NZ: New Line Productions Inc. 2001)

⁶ Brian McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus* (Nashville, TN: W Publishing Group, 2006) 198

⁷ Ibid. 201

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,

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.⁸

Reading Caputo, I have a conviction that Derrida was one of those listeners, and indeed, even a lover, with a heart wounded by a beauty he could not name.

Derrida also differentiates between two messianisms: the concrete and historical ones (like that of Hegel and Marx) and the pure messianic, which is the very structure of the "to come" (*a venir*) which marks the open ended future. This isn't the "absolute" future, not something near so concrete as a salvation that is brokered by four spiritual laws (!),⁹ but something that can't quite be seen, something which will go beyond the human names we can name, like "justice" or "the gift." I hear echoes of T.S. Eliot in this hope, and the words from East Coker III:

*I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope for hope
would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.*

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:

*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*

⁸ Margaret Wheatley, "Consumed by Either Fire or Fire," *Journal of Noetic Science*, 1999

⁹ A salvation I doubt existed in the mind of Jesus. This Cartesian and cognitive exchange is at best the beginning of a long and expanding process of faith, hope and love and is much more than a ticket to heaven.

*Take this heart
And make it break¹⁰*

*This essay was written as a contribution to [The Church and Postmodern Culture](#) blog at the invitation of Geoff Holsclaws. For another take on these issues check out Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism*, Eerdmans, 1996.*

¹⁰ Yahweh, by U2 from *How to Dismantle an Atom Bomb*