

PRAXIS AND MINISTRY

What Would Jesus Deconstruct?: The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church, John D. Caputo, Baker Academic, 2007 (ISBN 0-8010-3136-2), 160 pp., pb \$19.99

Only as I sit down to write this review of John Caputo's *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* do I notice that the editors of this latest installment in the so-far promising and intriguing series 'The Church and Postmodern Culture' let one slip past them: the book's cover has the subtitle as 'The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church', while the title and copyright pages inside record it as 'The Good News of Postmodernity for the Church'. The confusion over the postmodern hinted at by this suffix discrepancy – are we talking about a matrix of intellectual trends in continental philosophy and critical theory (the *-ism*), or about the cultural condition(s) that characterize the technologized, capitalist West (the *-ity*)? – is in one sense what Caputo's book, and the series as a whole, seeks to address.

To the author's and editors' relief (and librarians' consternation), the cover gets it right. This series is interested in postmodern-*ism*, about the potential prophetic value of postmodern ideas for today's Christian churches. Caputo's *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* presents a clear, readable exploration of the potential ecclesial, theological, ethical, and political value of deconstruction, the late French theorist Jacques Derrida's notion that all signification contains the seed of its own unmaking. This is well-trodden ground for Caputo, who has been dealing with Derrida in a theological key for decades now (see especially *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 1997). And while he has the nuance and sophistication of an expert, his writing, as usual, is creative, playful, frequently humorous, and often profound. In short, the book is a fun read – not too long, but not insubstantial; sufficiently provocative but not overly heady.

The discussion unfolds in six chapters. Caputo begins with a surprising interpretation of Charles Sheldon's 1896 classic *In His Steps*, the book that launched the recent 'WWJD' campaign. With subtlety and imagination, he undertakes a deconstructive reading of *In His Steps*,

1 which he reads as a deconstructive text. The character to which the
2 title's pronoun refers is cast as the deconstructor *par excellence*. Hence
3 the twist of Caputo's title: what Jesus would *do* is deconstruct, recalling
4 that doing is also poetic making, as in '*do this (poiete)* in remembrance
5 of me'. Deconstruction is always a making, for it contains construction.
6 It makes room for something else, something new, the advent of some-
7 thing not yet known but hoped after. This *theoria* is necessarily *praxis*.
8 Caputo's proposal is 'that what happens in deconstruction has an inner
9 sympathy with the very "kingdom of God" that Jesus calls for' (p. 33),
10 a common impulse to incessantly challenge the powers that claim sov-
11 ereign rule, and to proclaim a radical alternative that is always *to come*.
12 The church – her theology, her politics, even her liturgy – is 'provisional'
13 and therefore remains 'deconstructible', while 'the kingdom of God, if
14 there is such a thing, is not' (p. 35). This (theo)poetics of 'the impossible'
15 (God's kingdom) spills over into a politics of the possible, calling forth
16 a *praxis* that seeks to bring about God's kingdom in the here and now.

17 Deconstruction, then, with its relentless critique of the possible
18 (reality), is 'the hermeneutics of the kingdom of God' (p. 58). Caputo
19 describes 'the long history of "theology" . . . [as] an ongoing work of
20 deconstructing the name of God in order to release the *event* that stirs
21 within that name' (p. 58). Taking seriously the death of the transcen-
22 dental signified upon which all signification relies, Caputo is consistent
23 in pointing out that the *logos* (word, reason) of theo-*logy* is subject to the
24 same fallibility as all language. He responds preemptively to the criti-
25 cism that he might hold too low a view of the scriptures, drawing his
26 line in the sand: 'I am not an idolator. In deconstruction, the Scriptures
27 are an archive, not the arche (which means they are not God)' (p. 110).
28 I am sympathetic, but still I wonder if there might be a danger inherent
29 in Caputo's commitment to provisionality, this devout agnosticism.
30 This is by no means a new criticism to level against deconstruction, but
31 just as the work of deconstruction never ceases, so must it ceaselessly
32 demonstrate its ethical import.

33 Another criticism: I confess I quickly grew weary of Caputo's fre-
34 quent and sarcastic references to the Religious Right, for example, his
35 first paragraph: 'My hypothesis is if our friends on the Right really
36 meant to *ask* that question [what would Jesus do?] instead of using it as
37 a stick to beat their enemies, they are in for a shock' (p. 19). Unfortu-
38 nately, this 'us versus them' attitude toward his political and theological
39 opponents which permeates the entire book is in the end an all-too-easy
40 lapse back into the tired old categories that divide and stifle dialogue.
41 Besides, isn't a key feature of deconstruction the rejection of binary
42 opposites, which surely means *Left/Right* and *liberal/conservative*? I am
43 not sure if Caputo merely assumes that most of his readership will be
44 'pomo/emergent church'-types with a more (stereo)typically liberal
45 bent, or if he honestly thinks he might enlighten some Right-wingers

1 and persuade them to switch sides, but I fear his method, like a Michael
2 Moore documentary, might prevent his message from ever reaching
3 those most in need of its challenge.

4 For a book dealing with complex philosophical concepts and riddled
5 with francologisms (which might be my own neologism), Caputo's text
6 should be accessible to the interested layperson. As a first exposure to
7 deconstruction and postmodern discourse, it might be tough going –
8 James K.A. Smith's first book in the series (*Who's Afraid of Postmodern-*
9 *ism?* 2006) might be a better place to begin before graduating to this one.
10 Although some sections are more dense and theoretical (Chapters 2
11 and 3 especially), they are often the most rewarding. For example,
12 Caputo's description of Derrida's notion of *the gift* (pp. 69–73) is
13 perhaps the clearest excursus on the topic I have encountered. These
14 chapters also contain some of his best one-liners: 'Deconstruction is a
15 way to dream' (p. 60); 'undecidability . . . is the condition of possibility
16 of a real decision, not the opposite of one' (p. 67); 'the only thing that can
17 be truly forgiven is the unforgivable; the only condition under which
18 true forgiveness is possible is when forgiveness is impossible' (p. 73);
19 'There is always risk in everything worthwhile' (p. 77). All in all, Caputo
20 provides an outstanding *theological* orientation to Derridean decon-
21 struction: concise but by no means watered-down; not exhaustive but
22 not exhausting either.

23 Chapter 4 transitions us from Derrida and philosophy to Jesus and
24 the Bible to build up to Chapter 5, 'What Would Jesus Deconstruct?: Or,
25 What Ever Happened to the Sermon on the Mount?', where Caputo lays
26 all his cards on the table. With searing candor, his deconstructive
27 reading of Jesus' Sermon (which is provocative insofar as it is patent)
28 addresses some key issues facing the church today: economic justice,
29 militarism, patriarchy, abortion, and homosexuality. While my instinct
30 is to sound a great 'Amen!' at the end of each section, my previous
31 concern haunts me. I fear this rhetoric either will never reach those it
32 hopes to convert or, if they *are* reading, will shut down the conversation
33 immediately. In which case, he is preaching to the choir, and we
34 would-be 'Amen!'-shouters are simply furnished with an excuse to
35 smugly congratulate ourselves on being so enlightened and above-it-
36 all.

37 Lest anyone fear his goal is the demise of every traditional vestige of
38 the Christian faith, Caputo states near the book's end that

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40 The deconstruction of Christianity is not an attack on the church but a
41 critique of the idols to which it is vulnerable – the literalism and authori-
42 tarianism, the sexism and racism, the militarism and imperialism, and the
43 love of unrestrained capitalism with which the church in its various forms
44 has today and for too long been entangled, any of which is toxic to the
45 kingdom of God. (p. 137)

1 While I share his frustration with the church's idolatry and often find
2 myself spouting similar polemics, I must play devil's (Dobson's?) advoc-
3 cate: it cannot go unmentioned that this laundry list of conservative
4 hang-ups lacks any of the idolatries to which 'the Left' is susceptible –
5 elitism; arrogance; feigned intellectual humility; the sort of tolerance
6 which ignores the very real tensions that exist between ideologies;
7 and the hollow promise that we can bring about our own salvation
8 through open-mindedness and self-actualization (sung to the tune of
9 the Beatles' 'All You Need is Love').

10 Caputo's final chapter on the church's mission offers a reminder that
11 'the task of converting that poetics [of the kingdom] into reality falls
12 squarely on our shoulders. It is up to us to implement it, to make it
13 come true' (p. 134). To pray, as Jesus taught us, 'Thy kingdom come'
14 is to acknowledge the radical discontinuity between God's kingdom,
15 inaugurated in the resurrection of Jesus, and the kingdoms we inhabit
16 in the time that remains. We are called to live *as if* that coming kingdom
17 *has indeed come in Christ*, thereby embodying that hoped-for but still
18 far-off redemption, which does not make it so but *in faith* bears witness
19 to a hope beyond hope. Regarding Caputo's claim that we, through our
20 efforts, *make it come true*, I might quibble over semantics – but of course
21 deconstruction is about nothing if not semantics – for we ultimately do
22 not furnish our own salvation. Rather, as we live to embody God's
23 kingdom, we also wait on and hope for the Other, the Absolute, the
24 Unconditioned, to come and set things aright, to finally fulfill what we
25 are hopeless in ourselves to accomplish.

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32 **What Are We Waiting for? Christian Hope and Contemporary**
33 **Culture**, Stephen Holmes and Russell Rook (eds.), Paternoster, 2008
34 (ISBN-13 978-1-84227-602-0), vi + 243 pp, pb £9.99

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36 Stephen Holmes and Russell Rook state in the introduction to this
37 volume that its purpose is to offer lay readers new approaches to and
38 understandings of eschatology that may not find their way into the
39 average church. Pointing to Albert Schweitzer and Karl Barth as key
40 figures for understanding how contemporary academics view escha-
41 tology, the editors note that, for those outside of academic theological
42 circles, the idea that eschatology affects our everyday living, now, has
43 not achieved common currency. Due to the customary treatment of