

The Seminar on God and the Human Future

Report on the 2015 Spring Meeting

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The word “God” is pregnant with meanings. There is no universally agreed upon sense in which the term can be used. When people say they believe in God, they merely express an opinion that there is a god. All characterizations of the meaning of the word “God” amount to opinions. The God Seminar explores various conceptions of the divine. The seminar is, in part, a response to the so-called New Atheists, particularly the four horsemen: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennet, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. The New Atheists assign a specific meaning to the word “God” and imply that this is what the term really means, and *should* mean to everyone. For the New Atheists, God is defined as an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent being that interferes in human affairs. Many believers understand God in just this way. However, this view yields easily to critical evaluation, an evaluation with which most people can readily agree: how can there be unspeakable evil if there is a God who knows everything, is all-good and all-powerful (“theodicy”)? The New Atheists explore and point out the obvious flaws of this traditional “strong theology” view, a view that has not been held by serious theologians for centuries.

There are, however, other views or opinions on the meaning of the word “God,” some much more resilient to common criticism. These views have been explored eloquently and at length by, among others, Karen Armstrong in her book *The Case for God* (2009) and now by members of the God Seminar.

Derrida Finds Jesus Seminar, or Vice Versa

On Saturday morning at the Westar Spring 2015 meeting in Santa Rosa, California, two sessions entitled “The Weakness of God” and “The Insistence of God,” featured papers by John Caputo, who is the author of books by those same titles. Responding to Caputo were Sarah Morice Brubaker (Phillips Theological Seminary, Tulsa, Oklahoma) and Jeffrey Robbins (Lebanon Valley College, Annville, Pennsylvania).

John Caputo is arguably one of the leading philosophers of postmodern Christianity. As Jeffrey Robbins

puts it: “Caputo is a true philosophical theologian, which proves the possibility of the impossible.” It has been said that Caputo is the father of continental, that is, mainland European—particularly German and French—philosophy of religion.

Caputo is the founder of the “weak theology” movement that attempts to characterize the divine as a weak force, a polar opposite of the traditional “strong theology” attacked by the New Atheists. Caputo’s work has been influenced by deconstructionists, particularly Jacques Derrida, but also Martin Heidegger, Emmanuel Levinas, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and many others.

Postmodern philosophy and Derrida’s deconstructionism, in particular, can be challenging, especially to those of us who have not specialized in them. Like any other discipline, deconstruction has its own vocabulary and syntax—basic rules for how the words are used to “make meaning”—which need to be mastered before one can begin to follow the conversation.

In October 2003 I attended a conference at the University of California Santa Barbara that focused on the religious thinking of Jacques Derrida. In his keynote address “*Vivre ‘ensemble’* (Living ‘together’),” Derrida stated that he was going to make a major proposal. The lecture hall was packed with a couple of thousand listeners, glued to their seats for Derrida’s two-hour lecture. But I did not pick up a major proposal. In desperation I turned to other attendees and asked them if they had spotted it. No one had.

The following day we had an all-day conference, attended by Derrida himself and a number of Derrida scholars. I also asked them if they could identify the major proposal. No one could.

Without Derrida’s relative incomprehensibility, Caputo told us, he would not have been able to make a reasonable living trying to explain Derrida. But even Caputo agreed that some things remain unexplained. The truth is that it is very easy to be difficult and very difficult not to be difficult.

The assigned readings for the God Seminar, the two Caputo books referenced above, left me profoundly dejected. I did not understand them. My level of frustration was desperately high. I could see only two alternatives: either I am stupid or Caputo does not know what he is talking about. The first seemed rather unpleasant, so I opted for the second, even though it sounded supercilious. I confronted Caputo, stating that I found his works very challenging and at times incomprehensible, and that I am not stupid. I also told him that, if he knows what he is talking about, he can explain it so that others can comprehend it.

Caputo readily admitted that his two books were written for insiders, for those who speak Derridian. I was delighted to hear that, not only because it restored my standing among the relatively reasonable people, but also

because it let Caputo know that at least one Westar Fellow needed help. He told me to stop reading Caputo and listen to him on Saturday—he would make it all clear. And he did! Caputo was magnificent, superb, and outstanding in his presentation. He offered us intellectual candy. It was sweet to realize that listeners had a chance, at least to begin to understand deconstruction, Derrida, and Caputo.

Respondent Jeffrey Robbins recommended two excellent books by John Caputo that are meant for a general audience: *On Religion* (2001) and *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (2007). In the latter Caputo reclaims Jesus from fundamentalist evangelicals and proposes that Jesus himself was, in his own way, a deconstructionist. In *On Religion* Caputo answers the Augustinian question: who or what do I love when I love my God? He characterized the premodern world as the age of faith, the modern world as the age of reason and secularism, and the postmodern world as the post-secular age of relativity, which makes it an auspicious time to return to the question of religion.

Here are some highlights of the morning sessions described by John Caputo as the moment when Derrida finds the Jesus Seminar, or vice versa.

First Morning Session with John Caputo

The Weakness of God

I. “Weakness”

The word “weakness” has three sources:

1. Caputo began with the work of Gianni Vattimo, an Italian philosopher and politician who studied at Heidelberg with Hans-Georg Gadamer. Caputo’s first point is based on Vattimo’s concept of “weakening philosophy,” which embraces the weakening of metaphysical structures and of “strong thoughts.” Instead of true knowledge, certainty, and demonstrative proof, what we have are unstable structures of interpretation. Gadamer’s theory of hermeneutics points to weakness of thought, to the tentativeness of knowledge—for example, everything that was discussed about martyrs during Westar’s Christianity Seminar one day earlier. Caputo referred to those conversations as a “relatively stable but therefore relatively unstable structure of interpretation.” The philosophy, or theology, of weakness means that things are tentative.

2. Caputo’s second point comes from Jacques Derrida who explored what deconstruction has to do with justice. In his essay “Force of Law,” Derrida explains that justice is the weak call of the necessary: justice insists, but it cannot compel. Law has force, but justice does not; justice is not strong. It has a call, it has an oughtness, desirability, allure; it is a promise. We must make law (the strong) just, because we cannot make justice (the weak) strong.

Justice is the undeconstructable call. Some undeconstructables are the unconventional call of justice, gift, hos-

pitality, forgiveness, all of which are biblical themes. Every deconstruction is made in the name of the undeconstructable.

Caputo pointed out that the idea of justice to come is a messianic feature, similar to that of the messiah that never shows up. Perfect justice and peace come only with death. As we live in time, we are incomplete. We will regret wanting perfect peace because that translates to death. We have been expected by the dead, those who have perfect justice and peace, to make right what has been wrong.

3. The idea of the weakness of God is completely biblical. 1 Corinthians 4 demonstrates what Caputo means by the weakness of God. There Paul points to God’s solidarity with those who have nothing, who are weak. God stands with the weak. There is no omnipotent being in waiting. The weakness of God is a strategy. It exposes the call to justice.

II. Being

1. Caputo wants to remove God from the order of being. God is not a super being, not a mighty agent who does things. To describe God as a supreme, mighty being, is what Hegel called *Vorstellung*, a representation or picture, or what Paul Tillich called symbolic language. According to Tillich, the proper response to the notion that “God is a supreme being” is atheism. Caputo calls it “strategic atheism.” This was also our original voting question (see below).

2. Unlike Tillich, Caputo argues that God is not a ground of being—this would simply mean more metaphysics, preserving God, as it does, as a being. If forced, under the threat of execution or torture, to have a metaphysical system, Caputo would settle for Tillich’s. But he finds it too metaphysical. The value of the call’s calling is the call (to justice), not its metaphysical credentials.

3. Caputo does not favor apophatic theology, an approach to theology that defines God in terms of what God is not. You cannot say, for example, that God does or does not exist, because both “existence” and “nonexistence” are categories of human thought, and therefore cannot rightly be applied to God. God is not a “super being.” Apophatic theology quickly turns into neoplatonic metaphysics, which situates God within the order of beings. The name of God is the name of justice, it is Amos. It is not Pseudo-Dionysius (a sixth-century theologian, the most influential proponent of apophatic theology).

Is it possible that a supreme being could exist? Maybe. “I just don’t believe it,” Caputo said. Understanding God as a supreme being leaves the impossible problem of explaining how an all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good God co-exists with so much evil. Caputo is suspicious of big stories, or theories of everything. Those stories are representations and pictures. They do not tell us what is really out there.

They are what Don Cupitt calls “maps” of reality, but even the maps themselves are representations and pictures. If there is a supreme being, we are in trouble. He is more trouble than he is worth. “And he is a he.” Maybe there is a supreme being, but Caputo hopes not.

III. The name of God is an “event.”

What is an “event”? Caputo uses the term in a technical sense. For him, it has a specific meaning: an “event” is messianic, it is Jewish, it is the coming of something you cannot see. Language is always flowing. We do not have it, it has us. We are in the middle of it, we live in a continual actuality. Deconstructionism is about time. Every important idea is about what is to “to come” (French *venir*, a key concept in Caputo’s meditations on God). Because the name of God is an important idea and because it therefore is about what is to come, the name of God is a verb, an “event.” *Venir* means the inbreaking of something unexpected and unstable. It could be trouble, since we cannot anticipate it. Life is exposed, structurally, to the arrival of something we cannot see coming. We live in relative instability. If there is too much instability, life becomes destructive. We live in what James Joyce called “chaosmos.” We can only know what a language means when it is dead, when it stops flowing. God is the name of a promise, of something to come, just like “democracy to come” is the promise that

democracy will happen. The name of God functions in the same way. In the name of God something gets said and done. It is in a state of coming. For this we need deeper faith, risky faith. Faith, hope, and love are required—they are unhinged virtues. Because God is a verb, an event, not a noun, theism and atheism that imply categories of being belong to a different field.

The weakness of God is the Kingdom of God. This is the point where the Jesus Seminar meets Derrida. The Kingdom of God is about the ethics of hospitality to a stranger, about unconditional forgiveness. And forgiveness is what got Jesus into trouble.

In response Sarah Morice Brubaker pointed out that weakness of God theology means that there is no attempt to rescue God from vulnerability.

Brandon Scott stated that Jesus’ Kingdom of God is something that will never be, it is always oncoming, it is in a permanent state of *venir*.

Art Dewey pointed out that, in Romans 8, Paul seems to suggest that God is not all-powerful, although Paul is not consistent.

Jarmo Tarkki asked why Caputo would call *venir*, God. Why not call it something else? Caputo responded that he did not choose the word “God,” it chose him. He played no role in it. His mother’s first words must have been something about God. The word God is inherited, but it can now be recontextualized.

Second Morning Session with John Caputo The Insistence of God

The Weakness of God and *The Insistence of God* go together. Justice is a weak call, but it insists strongly.

“Perhaps” is a dangerous theology. Theologians want assurance, philosophers want certainty, but we do not want to hear that perhaps God will be with us.

For Caputo, God does not exist; God insists. Theology is a radical way to think. God does not exist: God is a provocation. We are to fill what is missing in the body of God.

Religion is a *Vorstellung*, a poem; it is theo-poetics; it is poetry where the subject matter is God. Revelation is poetry. It undermines the traditional distinction between reason and revelation. Hegel does not have a key to the poem, nor do other philosophers. God remains an eternal *coming*, a verb, not a being, but becoming in the horizon. God is the promise of weak force, of justice to come, of the eternal perhaps.

In his response Jeffrey Robbins noted that radical theology happening within confessional theology (theology built on church doctrines) means that it has overstepped its conventional limits. Meanwhile, philosophers who overstep their boundaries stumble into God and theology. Philosophers

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Of all the possible ways to think about God, which concept makes the best sense for our world today? This celebration of the work of radical theologian John D. Caputo invites listeners to consider a new way of thinking about God as weak but potent, God as “the great perhaps.”

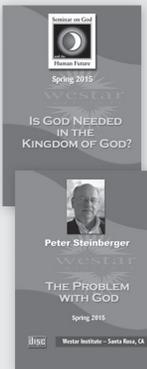
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have become theologians, theologians have become philosophers. They delightfully bleed into one another.

Robbins noted that there is a lack of trust in big stories. We now have little stories.

Postmodernists are non-theists, or post-theists. They are not atheists.

Caputo's God is a weak force that insists on justice to come. To use Caputo's own terms, his philosophical theology is relatively unstable: God is beyond being, God is *venir*, becoming, an event in the horizon. Perhaps frozen there forever but the call is out for the weak force of justice in, under, and with the name of God.

In Caputo's speaking and writing there are plenty of commas, as if he were struggling to find the right conceptual descriptions. His philosophical theology is refreshing, thought provoking. The collaborative work and dialogue has just begun. We are fortunate and privileged at Westar to have John Caputo as our conversation partner.

Afternoon Session with Joseph Bessler

The afternoon session featured Joe Bessler who spoke about "Moving Words: Theology and the Performance of Proposing".

Joe Bessler's presentation helped us understand Caputo's thinking and postmodern reflections on the divine, even though Bessler's talk was more about his book project that shares the same tentative title, *Moving Words*. According to Bessler, theological speech more closely resembles political speech than scientific speech.

We entered into lengthy discussion of "pure water" that is flavored all the way down. This metaphor used by Bessler ties to the work of the Christianity Seminar: there never was "pure Christianity."

Following this thought provoking and inspiring discussion another lengthy conversation ensued about the best

formulation of our God Seminar voting question. The original formulation was:

To the concept of God as a supreme being, as the highest entity, and to the attempt to prove the existence of this God, "atheism is the right religious and theological reply," as Paul Tillich says.

Although that formulation accurately reflected the topic and conclusion of the Seminar's discussion, several Fellows warned that people who had not been present for that discussion (for example, the media) could easily misconstrue that wording to mean that Westar was advocating atheism. The Seminar reached the consensus that it needed a different formulation—see below.

The Results of the Spring 2015 Vote

Statement

The subject matter of theology is God conceived as a supreme being or highest entity.

Fellows: **Black** / Associates: **Black**

Comment

A red vote indicates that one agrees with the statement; a black vote indicates one disagrees with the statement. The outcome of this vote therefore raises the question: if God as a supreme being is *not* the subject matter of theology, what is?

The God Seminar sessions were challenging to many attendees. Nonetheless, we have begun an adventure into *terra incognita*, the land outside of the medieval maps where dragons rule. It can feel frustrating at times but is ultimately rewarding. Westar's God Seminar has commenced its great journey! **4R**