

**Textuality, Undecidability,  
and the Story of Jesus  
A Reading of John Caputo's  
Deconstructive Hermeneutics via  
Hans Frei's Theological  
Hermeneutics**

*David Alstad Tiessen*

Wycliffe College, University of Toronto

My purpose in this paper is to assess John Caputo's deconstructive hermeneutics as applied to reading the Gospels, and to argue that Caputo's concern to preserve a reading over the abyss of undecidability underlying all texts is to a degree truncated when he comes to these biblical texts. This, because Caputo adopts methodological supplements in the case of the story of Jesus which modify that story and obviate the possibility of the text speaking *qua* text. This in turn circumscribes the nature and possibility of an encounter with the o/Other through these texts, despite Caputo's concern to preserve this. In support of my reading, I employ Hans Frei's confessional/communal reading of the biblical story as offering a theological hermeneutics which in many ways begins and ends on ground shared with Caputo, and yet which approaches the text—and therefore hears the Other in the text—in a way that illumines the possibility of a more traditioned reading of the Gospels which yet respects and even broadens Caputo's own call to respect the 'abyss of undecidability' beneath the text.

**Reading Caputo Reading Scripture**

In Part Three of his *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are*,<sup>1</sup> Caputo turns to reading the biblical text, offering a "Defense of Devilish Hermeneutics," the subtitle under(mining)

the main rubric for the section: "On the Road to Emmaus." On the road to Emmaus, Caputo wishes to take up the "honorable ecclesiastical function" of the *advocatus diaboli*, which takes the form of questioning the Christian claim to have "The Secret"—or at least a Hint in the right direction—thanks to divine revelation.<sup>2</sup> While keeping company (of a sort) with the disciples on the road, Caputo posits a "phenomenological counterpart to the theology of resurrection"<sup>3</sup> in which we are to imagine that the death and subsequent absence of the charismatic personality of Jesus of Nazareth cast his followers upon the abyss of undecidability. Faced with this abyss, a decision needed to be made in the face of the ambiguity of the post-Jesus situation. Is the universe, like the tomb, finally empty after all? Or is there more to it? Were Jesus' words about the love and forgiveness of God somehow true, even though Jesus is gone?

For Caputo, the 'empty tomb' and 'Jesus' are 'undecidables'—which is to say that they are factual ambiguities upon which logical deductions for the sake of a neat conclusion simply fail. As undecidables, they do not give us the capital T Truth or the capital S Secret—the "words of God" in Scripture do *not* let us in on a Secret, we have no access to a philosophical or theological Archimedean reference point.<sup>4</sup> Undecidability is rather an opportunity for a decision on our part, located as we are amidst the inescapable play of traces, writing over the abyss. The 'empty tomb' and 'Jesus', as textual markers, function as occasions for hearing the disruptive Other in the biblical text, raising the possibility of an ethical practice oriented around service to the other.

For the writers of Scripture, the decision posed by this abyss of undecidability was answered positively, on the side of the hope that there is a justice to come, that there is, finally, a meaning to this life, which is found in Jesus of Nazareth. But the fact that these texts were written over the abyss, the fact that they are constructions, leaves them open, like any text, to deconstruction.

Caputo, though, is not a ‘Nietzschean’ deconstructionist. He does not side with the sheer absence of God in the face of the abyss. Rather, he highlights the affirmative side of deconstruction: the quasi-transcendental alterity and the justice-to-come that calls us to remain open to others, and to other accounts of reality, to what is ‘outside’ the text (circumscribed, of course, by Derrida’s ‘archi-writing’: *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*).<sup>5</sup> Whatever reading we take, it must be a reading which recognizes itself as one construal among others, and remains open to the rupture of alterity (the structural messianic). Whereas Christians, Caputo thinks, have tended to place the divine Word outside the text, claiming to have The Secret or at least a Hint of it, he wants to emphasize that divine revelation is not about an elevation beyond textuality, but about God’s ‘kenotic’ entry into the play of traces, the abyss of undecidability.<sup>6</sup> Yet the Bible is able, like many other books, to open us up to the coming of the Other, to the call to enact justice in the world. It is to be trusted to do so in part because the community of faith maintained a degree of continuity between its Origin (its encounter with Jesus) and its account of the Origin in the face of the absence of that Origin, by means of its respectful but creative imagination.<sup>7</sup> Here, undecidability permits the retention of ambiguity about where Jesus ends and the disciples begin, allowing for Caputo’s affirmation that the “slight gap that separates the Founder from the Founded” is not a rupture so profound that the alterity of the text is emasculated.<sup>8</sup> Given this ambiguity, Caputo is able to affirm that Jesus is “a unique, but not an exclusive site for the event of the infinite”—Jesus is “an extraordinarily good example of a universal human possibility, an exemplary ‘event’ of transcendence,” in which the disciples encountered an example of the *tout autre*, of the messianic coming of the other.<sup>9</sup>

But there is a tension to be mined here. Despite the emphasis on the absence of the Origin (we are left only with ambiguous traces), Caputo speaks of Jesus’ “original and actual words.”<sup>10</sup> These words are not

portrayed as *impossible* to access—which one would think a reading over the abyss of undecidability would do—but as “almost impossible to access.”<sup>11</sup> That is, while affirming the quasi-transcendental nature of undecidability and a thoroughgoing textuality, Caputo nevertheless lets it slip that the *hors-texte* might after all be somehow available, and then goes on to speak of attempting “to resolve the multiple forms of undecidability that beset us” on the hermeneutical road to Emmaus.<sup>12</sup> This ‘almost’ that lends itself to the possibility of ‘resolution’, and supplements (subverts?) the trust Caputo has in the communal imagination, would seem to indicate that Caputo holds the possibility of accessing the Origin behind this (biblical) textual tradition. And in this I want to argue that Caputo betrays a certain hope for a key (a Secret?) by which to resolve the undecidability away from a decisive moment arising from a confrontation with an ambiguous textual other (in face of the absence of Origin), and toward a deduction from the Origin which precedes (and indeed programs!) the way the textual supplement is to be read.

Here, between Origin and Supplement, we see Caputo’s “radical hermeneutics” in dialectical relation to his “radical hermeneutics.” As a ‘hermeneutics,’ Caputo wants to call the gap between Founder and Founded a *slight* gap, one that can yet be trusted to reflect the Origin behind the text and thus yield a certain transcendence, on the basis of a hermeneutic of belief. As a ‘radical’ hermeneutics, Caputo wants to ‘harden’ the gap between Origin and Supplement—between Founder and Founded—such that the Church is forced to face the fact that it has founded *itself* and *constructed* a Jesus for its own sake, which can only be, finally, a misreading, a Jesus at odds with the Jesus of history. The church has constructed its own foundation in the construal of Jesus it proffers in the biblical text, yet for Caputo the gap between Origin and Supplement may nonetheless be slight enough to permit the advent of the Wholly Other (*tout autre*).

This tension seems to me to yield some deconstructive fodder! In the face of undecidability, Caputo betrays a certain confidence in his ability to assert something about the ‘real’ Jesus behind the text, and about the nature of the disciples’ post-Jesus response to their experience of him. This confidence rests on two basic methodological assumptions. First, Caputo writes that “*we cannot get the point of these stories without a religious version of the phenomenological epoche,*” without looking past the surface or ‘natural attitude’ of the text by means of a reduction of the text to its experiential core.<sup>13</sup> And this depends on the second, the view that historical criticism gives us access to the Jesus of history apart from the biblical narrative’s depiction of him, and that on this ground (which undergirds Caputo’s phenomenological confidence in the alterity of the text), we can be confident that the gap between Origin and Supplement is softer rather than harder.

The trouble is, though acknowledging that historical Jesus research offers merely an *interpretation* of Jesus, Caputo never examines the methodological assumptions behind historical criticism itself.<sup>14</sup> Rather, he privileges these, assuming the primacy of “what we know of Jesus on *independent, historical grounds,*”<sup>15</sup> as if such grounds are simply there to be had. So when Caputo asserts that Jesus wanted to get out of the way of the message he was preaching so as not to permit his own person to become the object of worship,<sup>16</sup> Caputo may be read as offering us a Secret. For by this we are given to understand that Jesus’ own *intentions* can somehow be isolated by means of an historical reconstruction apart from the Church’s creative (mis)reading of Jesus as found in the Gospels. Caputo appears to *know*—to have *resolved* the matter on the basis of the *almost* of the *hors-texte* peeking around from behind the biblical text—that Jesus was, *without remainder*, pointing away from himself in his preaching. So he asserts:

The birth of Christian tradition(s) depended upon the death of its

author, not because he died for our sins and to establish his church, but because while he lived he was preaching something else. Christian tradition(s) is a living example of the need for the hermeneutics of the death of the author and of ignoring the Founder’s intentions.<sup>17</sup>

Caputo here resolves the undecidability with his own supplement, a supplement derived from his trust in the methods of historical criticism to give him at least something of that “*almost impossible to access*” *hors-texte*, despite the fact that the Origin itself is always already marked by textuality (i.e., there is no *hors-texte* in this sense). And this then drives him to affirm a certain kind of religious experience to be found (uncovered?) in the text by means of a phenomenological bracketing of the disciples’ experience of Jesus. This is an experience born of the “trauma of ... faith in Jesus,”<sup>18</sup> which the disciples then construed in a certain way in the face of undecidability, and which the Church then further developed (constructed/distorted) away from this originary experience.

The trouble is (it seems to me), that this methodological supplement forecloses on the very undecidability Caputo wishes to maintain because it gives primacy to an overly reductive historical method for determining Christian origins. Even where such methods are used with humility, they remain, as B. Keith Putt puts it in an interview with Caputo, “simply one way of reading among others” when considered against the backdrop of undecidability.<sup>19</sup> But Caputo, while willing to grant other kinds of readings of Jesus *within* a privileging of the methods of historical criticism,<sup>20</sup> closes off even the possibility of a more specifically Christian reading on the grounds that it is a later construction, and, more basically, on the assumption that ‘determinable messianisms’ are almost ineluctably violent—that an adherence to the particularity of the Christian confession, for instance, would almost necessarily head toward an exclusion of the other.<sup>21</sup>

On Caputo's construal, then—and this will come into sharp relief next to the work of Hans Frei—it appears that the meaning of the biblical text and its account(s) of Jesus is ultimately situated *outside* the text itself; the meaning of the biblical text is exposed not from within the text and the Christian tradition itself but from a circumvention of what the text says on the surface (or, to use Husserlian terms, its “natural attitude”) for the sake of exposing something more (experientially) generic that gives rise to or lies behind the text (via the “phenomenological attitude” coupled with the methods of historical criticism), which then funds his “phenomenological counterpart to the theology of resurrection.”<sup>22</sup> What I want to argue, following the explication of Frei below, is that by the imposition of this methodology, the meaning of Jesus himself comes to be located very much in traditions extraneous to the ‘historicality and linguisticity’ of Jesus and the Jewish disciples. Given Caputo's desire to be ‘truer’ to the “almost impossible to access” Jesus of the *hors-texte*, his methodology can no more escape distorting Jesus than can those who adhere to traditionalist readings of the text, which he simply closes off on the basis of his particular methodology. Now, while Caputo may well recognize that possibility given that he acknowledges his reading as one among many in the face of the undecidability of Jesus, I want to argue that he nonetheless assumes an approach which prematurely cuts short the undecidability so basic to his method. While he is perfectly willing to acknowledge the possibility of *either* a believing *or* an unbelieving hermeneutic at a general level, he is not so willing to allow undecidability to infect/infest the phenomenologically reductive and historical critical methods for the sake of yet other (traditioned) possible accounts of the gospel stories.

### **Frei: Reading Between Tradition and Undecidability**

At this point Hans Frei's theological hermeneutics can perhaps illumine another

kind of response to ‘undecidability’, a more traditioned and narratively particular response. Frei begins at a parallel point to Caputo. He recognizes the thoroughly textual/linguistic situation in which we are located, affirming that we have reality only under a description, and affirming the disjunction between signifier and signified, such that a text is fully capable of meaning apart from the presence of the signified. But rather than seek to account for the particularities of the Christian faith by means of a kind of phenomenological reduction, or to ground Christian theological affirmations in an external foundation such as historical criticism, Frei simply calls for an understanding of the text as a realistic narrative read in terms of its ‘literal’—as in, literary or plain—sense (*sensus literalis*) by a particular faith community.<sup>23</sup> As realistic narrative, the biblical story is both history-like and fiction-like, making claims of a factual nature and also exhibiting the intentions and subsequent actions of its characters.<sup>24</sup> In such a narrative, the character of Jesus is inextricably embedded in a particular context, such that “narrative form and meaning are inseparable, precisely because in both cases meaning is in large part a function of the interaction of character and circumstances.”<sup>25</sup> The meaning of the narrative is centred in the narrative itself, rather than in some structure external to the text—that is, rather than in a conflation of the text and its referent, either historical or ideal. Frei can thus assert simply that “Jesus *is* his story,” which is to say that we cannot look elsewhere than this particular narrative to discover the identity of Jesus.<sup>26</sup> In keeping with this, the Christian community has traditionally not sought to fit Jesus into another framework of meaning. Yet in this adherence to the literary/plain sense of the text, this community does not “have more than [its] concepts of God,” it does not have any claim to the *presence* of God in any “separate intuition, ... preconceptual or prelinguistic apprehension or grasp of God in his reality,” but rather has only the *promise* of God to speak “in, with, and under the concept” as it is understood as

embedded in Scripture and in the concrete Church practices of Word and Sacrament, which then carry that community forward into the world in loving service toward the neighbour.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, the Christian community, in its response to the Jesus it finds in the text, simply confesses that it is this precise Other which it finds there, an Other which the story itself identifies with the God of Israel, as it is this God who raised this same Jesus from the dead. But, confessing also that it knows its Saviour only under the linguistic sign, it recognizes that it cannot claim ownership of this sign in any way, and especially not as it engages the public sphere, as it points to the gospel in its service to the neighbour. In this engagement, this confession of such a particular Other is to evoke (it is hoped) practices marked by the self-same humility of the narratively-rendered Jesus, in all his specificity—indeed *because* of his own humble obedience to God in service of the whole world.<sup>28</sup> Translated into a Caputonian idiom, this is to say that the community of faith makes a decision of faithful response to the claim of the story itself, a decision made in face of the ambiguity of the abyss of undecidability without concern for logical, historical, or experiential *demonstration* that the referent of the text as Supplement is somehow true (in these senses) to its historical Origin (though it should be noted that this is, for Frei, assumed at some level, textually and hermeneutically speaking it is an unnecessary move which in fact comes to be an *unfaithful* move, in that textual trust is replaced by a trust in ourselves as arbiters of meaning in the text relative to modes of discourse external to Scripture).

In light of this very specific ‘Other’, an ‘Other’ who is identified in the text and yet remains ‘outside’ the text as the occasion *for* the text, Frei affirms that there can be “no complete ‘interpretation’ of a text” because “a ‘good enough’ text . . . has the power to resist; it has a richness and complexity that act on the reader.”<sup>29</sup> In this way Frei recognizes the primacy of the biblical text

for the community of faith, which confesses that it follows after a particular Lord, albeit a Lord who is always only *indirectly* present and indeed *exceeds* the ability of the text to grasp, and one which calls for a unique humility on the part of those who read (and disagree about) the biblical text. As it reads and hears the text, the Christian community is reshaped and reoriented around the One to whom the text bears witness. This community simply *confesses* (in the face of ‘undecidability’) that the Jesus of the text is the Jesus of history *and* of faith, for this is the only Jesus we have.<sup>30</sup>

### Caputo and Frei: Conversing Over the Abyss of Undecidability

To return to Caputo, now in light of Frei, the particularity of the communal aspect in which Scripture is read comes to be subverted in Caputo for the sake of an abstract philosophical structure, oriented around an ‘abstract messianism’. At one level this is to be expected: Caputo is doing philosophy before theology, after all. But such a mode also signals the imposition of *another* community on the community that is formed around these texts. That is to say, Caputo is reading these texts through the lenses of the historical critical enterprise and a phenomenological *epoche* as a necessary means of deriving meaning from the text, for the sake of supporting a *general* ethical approach, rather than for the sake of allowing these texts to re-shape the ethical theory—Caputo is after “a kind of religion within the limits of reason alone.”<sup>31</sup>

Now, to be fair, Caputo recognizes the blurring between the ‘determinable messianisms’ and the general ‘messianic’ structure in Derrida’s thought, such that Caputo comes to argue, *pace* Derrida (though retaining the distinction), that deconstruction cannot itself escape becoming yet another determinable messianism in light of the fact that it must take historical shape in some fashion or other.<sup>32</sup> This reflects Caputo’s recognition that the concept of the ‘abstract messianic’—i.e., the structure of openness to the incoming of the other that arises from a

recognition of undecidability as a quasi-transcendental—would have had more than a little difficulty arising strictly from phenomenological ground apart from the historic, determinate messianisms.<sup>33</sup> Caputo is thus aware of deconstruction's debt to the Jewish prophets (and the particular community to which they belong), even if he doesn't want to be held accountable to that particular God.<sup>34</sup> But the point is, Caputo ultimately places both Scripture and Jesus himself under the umbrella of a larger theory, which is essentially a different story than the gospel story, a story belonging to another community. God, for Caputo, is eminently translatable into another name, that being the passion for justice. In keeping with God's 'kenotic' descent into textuality, God "does not care whether you call him God so long as you call for justice."<sup>35</sup>

The figure of Jesus, as a figure of the Wholly Other in the Scriptures, serves this ethical vision. For Caputo, in the face of undecidability, we must turn to telling the gospel stories for the sake of the inbreaking of something Other which disrupts us, which will help us discern between the divine and the human in the text.<sup>36</sup> Here we may find clues to the divine alterity, "where it may have left a trace," and thereby clues as to "how to go about revising, rereading, reworking the tradition."<sup>37</sup> Though we can never tell whether "this man [Jesus] heal[s] by God or by Beelzebub,"<sup>38</sup> the hermeneutical key Caputo offers for discerning the traces of the divine alterity in the text is found in an ethics of the Other, of merciful response to the weak and the downtrodden. Citing St. Paul's words on God's shaming the wise by what is foolish (1 Cor. 1:26-29), Caputo asks:

Might the trace of the divine be found in the points in the scriptures where our humanity is turned inside out, our human hierarchies inverted, our freedom and self-continuity disrupted by the shock of divine discontinuity? Might not the most divine element of all in the sacred writings be found just at those

points where our self-love, self-aggrandizement, and self-importance are jolted by a divine blow, by a contradiction, a *skandalon*, Paul says, in which the foolishness of God confounds our human wisdom, in which the weakness of God stays the violence of our power? It is in that spirit that our devilish hermeneutics seeks to speak when we insist that our identity is to be put at risk by the coming of the other, who bears the mark of God on his or her countenance.<sup>39</sup>

But this reflects the very concerns Frei has with locating the meaning of the text outside the narrated events within it, wherein a dichotomy appears between what counts as 'divine' versus 'human' as somehow distinct from the story itself.<sup>40</sup> This is for Frei a violation of the text's narrational integrity for the sake of disclosing a new world of meaning from the text (as with traditional phenomenological hermeneutics *à la* Ricoeur). Frei employs deconstruction as a theory that helpfully undermines such a project, freeing the text to create its own world, which may or may not be 'disruptive' for the sake of a new ethical theory.<sup>41</sup> Now, Caputo is by no means a traditional hermeneut, yet Frei's concerns raise the question of whether Caputo is reading more *hermeneutically* here than not—that is, they suggest that Caputo is seeking moments of a kind of 'transcendence' in/beyond the text, and by this he has a means of corralling and excluding aspects of the story which might problematize the abstraction of an ethical theory (away) from these texts as traditionally read. He is here reading for a particular kind of disruption based in a generalizing of the biblical particulars, which is a reading circumscribed by the methods of historical criticism and the phenomenological reduction. But if the biblical text is to function as a disruptive, messianic Other, in which we are able to discern points at which the 'divine' may be

traced, the question arises as to how any hermeneutic, devilish or otherwise, is able to retain this *qua* hermeneutic. That is (and with a nod to Albert Schweitzer), to the extent that Caputo's radical hermeneutic incorporates assumptions about what constitutes religious experience and what can be counted as historically true of Jesus for reading the text, how can an openness to the 'shock' of the text be preserved? Will not this 'shock' end up looking very much like the methods which uncover it? Will not this 'shock' end up being domesticated by an abstract method, becoming a merely pedestrian version of what it could be when situated within a concrete community attempting to listen to a very particular Other?

At this point it may be helpful to invoke Derrida briefly. Derrida's approach, which denies being a method *per se*<sup>42</sup>—though, as noted, Caputo posits that it cannot help becoming one 'messianism' among others—preserves the importance of both a 'traditional' reading and an 'exorbitant' reading, in which attention is given to what the traditional reading has shunted off to the margins, and new ways of reading texts are opened up.<sup>43</sup> But here 'new' readings rest upon the traditional reading. Derrida says: "The laws of reading are determined by the particular text that is being read."<sup>44</sup> This means "we must remain faithful, even if it implies a certain violence, to the injunctions of the text. These injunctions will differ from one text to the next so that one cannot prescribe one general method of reading."<sup>45</sup>

When it comes to the biblical text, I want to suggest that Frei respects Derrida's injunction in this regard more than Caputo. This, by virtue of his emphasis on the realistic narrative, in which Jesus *is* his story, a story which is *confessed* as true and is followed faithfully (it is hoped) by the Christian community in the face of the ambiguity of these events. Whereas Caputo appears to want to approach the Bible on the same (phenomenological) ground as any other text, at least in terms of its ability to stand as Other to its readers, but with the supplement of what historical criticism

validates, Derrida offers a reminder that the particularities of the text at hand must be allowed to give strong guidance to one's interpretive hand. What this reminder suggests in regard to Caputo as read in light of Frei is that Caputo has not permitted a more traditioned way of reading the biblical story enough room to be heard; this way of reading has been obviated by means of his prior methodological commitments—one cannot, he maintains, get the point of the biblical stories without a phenomenological *epoche*. On this ground, Caputo does not appear to allow the biblical text and its own internal injunctions room to breathe as a text in its own right. Or, to put it another way, Caputo has not left enough room in the undecidability of textuality for the biblical text itself to speak *qua* text, regardless of the concern for historical-critical validation *or* for the need for it to speak *in a certain way*—i.e., in the mode of a (Levinasian) ethics of the face of the Other. Or, to put it still another way: Caputo has more of The Secret than he lets on.

## Conclusion

Caputo and Frei clearly share an interest in following Jesus on the Emmaus Road. But, as Caputo writes of Barth and Derrida:

Barth does not differ from Derrida because Barth decides and Derrida remains on the threshold, but rather because Barth casts his lot with a specific messianism, with the proper name and historical determinacy of Jesus Christ, while Derrida casts his lot with the love of a justice to come that *can always be determined otherwise*.<sup>46</sup>

In the face of undecidability, thinkers such as Barth and Derrida, together with their close relatives Hans Frei and John Caputo, while sharing much in the way of a recognition of a thoroughgoing textuality, part ways in the face of the Messiah of the Gospels.

For Frei, this means a proper theological hermeneutic takes place in the living community gathered around Jesus Christ,

confessed as present, but only *indirectly*, indeed, *ambiguously*, under the concept, as a gift. This means that human (e.g., the church's) words are never adequate to capture the Word. Nor does the biblical text claim to wrap everything up—Frei explicitly affirms the eschatological aspect of the present, based in the open-endedness arising from the Jesus who affirms that he is and will bring Justice: “The Christian believer must apply the reserve of not knowing even to his own faith in the future presence of Jesus Christ.”<sup>47</sup> This is to say that the biblical story is understood to be *exceeded* by that which it signifies. The text itself is not taken to be adequate to the Story itself. This means that despite the reference of the text to something beyond and outside itself, this is not a reference to a static transcendental signified which ensures the one-to-one correspondence (i.e., the *presence*) of the signified. Theologically defined/confessed, the *living* nature of the signified ensures that *our* readings of the text can never be fully trusted; it ensures that the community of faith can never establish an ideological bulwark in (or against) the world; and it ensures that that community finds itself driven to a theological and hermeneutic humility in response to Christ's own humility in service of the lost, the oppressed, the other.<sup>48</sup> In other words, Frei's trust is based specifically in a material (positive, not general) content, a material *claim*, a claim which does not lead readers of Scripture to possession of the ultimate Secret but precisely to its opposite—to the claim that the Secret is *not* in hand, even if it is indeed confessed that there *is* a Secret (of a sort). That is to say, the “Secret” is, in biblical terms, the mystery which has been revealed (Eph 3:8-12), the mystery of Jesus Christ who came not to be served but to serve, to lay down his life, to ‘empty’ himself, and in so doing to identify the God with whom the Christian community has to do. Frei argues that the Gospel accounts of the resurrection exhibit the textual identification of the dead-but-now-raised Jesus and the action of God. The text does not permit these to be torn asunder, and as

such the text leads to the affirmation that Jesus shares in the identity of the one God of Israel. On the basis of this positive, material claim, the community of faith, reading in terms of the *sensus literalis*, is called to live out its life in terms of service to the neighbour. The fact that the Word beyond all human words is taken to be a *living* Word means that this Word remains free to disrupt our tendency to idolatry and our attempts to establish ourselves on certainties. If we are to follow Frei's hermeneutical lead in reading Scripture, we will find ourselves called to hermeneutical and ethical humility in response to Jesus Christ the Word, a situation which is in turn dependent upon an affirmation of Jesus, indeed, *as* the Word amidst the community of faith.<sup>49</sup>

Caputo's confession in the face of undecidability runs in another, albeit parallel, direction. In light of the absence of The Secret, in light of alterity, we are to remain open to the other, enacting justice wherever we can, without claiming its arrival for fear that such a claim leads inexorably to violence and exclusion of others. For Caputo, Jesus functions as a reminder of this vision, a confirmation of such an ethic. But this Jesus, as a sign of an absent (dead) signified, is, by means of an imposition of certain (modern?) philosophical and historical methods, perhaps rendered a little too absent in the face of undecidability. The Jesus of the text, the Jesus identified so closely with God as the One who raises him to life and grants him God's own name, is eliminated as a possibility before the Book is even opened. At this level, Caputo operates more in The Secret (as he defines it) than not. At the same time, Caputo knows that we must *confess* our commitments, to take a stand with justice (the undeconstructible) in the face of undecidability—this can never be demonstrated, faith is always already a (positive) construal in the face of the neutrality of factual existence. At this level, Caputo remains innocent of The Secret. But that leaves things a bit blurred. The gap between Founder and Founded/Origin and Supplement is at once hardened by



undecidability, and softened (in a way) by certain methodologies for the sake of a certain ethic. The trouble is, without any particular material guide as to what counts as the trace of the divine, as to what counts as Justice, it may in the end be all too easy to corral the shape of the (divine) 'other' in the text by means of subtle methodological Secrets hidden in the background. Should this be the case, the textual 'other' won't really be other at all. And that comes a bit too close to looking like a Secret.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> John D. Caputo, *More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000). Hereafter cited 'MRH'.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 207. The Secret is, for Caputo, following Derrida's concept of the 'absolute secret', the traditional Western philosophical desire to access Truth or the Good or Being in itself—i.e., the absolute—and therefore to achieve a stance (a metanarrative) by which all else may be measured. This would include claims to having Divine Revelation. In assuming that there is no Secret, Caputo's "radical hermeneutics" begins with a recognition that we are always already and inescapably part of the flux of reality (of 'facticity'). There is always a "structural blindness" undergirding the hermeneutical enterprise (MRH 1-4).

<sup>5</sup> Throughout his writings, Caputo enlarges upon the theme evoked by Derrida's words in an interview with Richard Kearney: "Deconstruction always presupposes affirmation," and is "a positive response to an alterity which necessarily calls, summons or motivates it." See Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 118.

<sup>6</sup> See MRH, 208-209.

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, 214, where Caputo affirms what might be called a 'pious imagineering', a prayerful supplementation of the Origin, or what he calls a 'hermeneutics of belief.'

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 240. The 'messianic' structure is a quasi-transcendental structure of openness to the

possibilities of the future for the sake of the present. The 'messiah' is a category, a marker of what is *always*, structurally to-come. It is a means of remaining open to the hope of justice, and of constantly being reminded that the human project can never be allowed to close in upon itself and think itself complete. There is always something more that is unaccounted for; there is always an-other which must be taken into account. Thus, the messianic is a (religious) way of speaking of the undecidability marking human existence. It is simply a way of keeping "faith, hope, and love" alive as we choose these in the face of the abyss. For a discussion of the messianic, see chapter 6 of John D. Caputo, ed. (with commentary), *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> MRH, 214.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 214, italics mine.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 215, italics mine.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 228, italics mine. Caputo's comment comes in a discussion of Schillebeeckx's (over-)emphasis on the disciples' experience of Jesus at the expense of the historical/textual context for such an experience. Caputo offers a modified phenomenological account in which the abyss of undecidability does not permit Schillebeeckx's confidence in Jesus' spirit having inspired the post-death interpretive work of the disciples, and in which the imagination that gives voice to this experience remains connected to the determinations of historical criticism. This tether to the historical is important for Caputo partially because of his emphasis on the Jewish message of Jesus, in which Jesus affirmed "a profoundly Jewish monotheism, and a sense of human solidarity rooted in the fatherhood of God," but wanted simply to deliver this message and get out of the way (MRH, 234). This establishes the Jewish context of the Gospels while avoiding the particularism of traditional Christology, and funds a modification of the character of the phenomenological reduction in a Levinasian direction—i.e., toward a not unambiguous, not a-textual encounter with infinity, available to all by various means, but in this case by means of the vehicle of Jesus (MRH, 239).

<sup>14</sup> Caputo embraces the methodology of the post-Bultmannian 'New Quest' for the historical Jesus, while yet wanting to maintain that such a

reading is marked by the 'if' of the absence of The Secret.

<sup>15</sup> B. Keith Putt, "What Do I Love When I Love My God? An Interview with John D. Caputo," in *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*, ed. James H. Olthuis (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 167.

<sup>16</sup> MRH, 234. Such an assertion signals Caputo's alignment with the Enlightenment project of subsuming the particularity of Jesus the teacher to the universality of what he taught, as exhibited in figures such as Lessing and Kant. See for example Lessing's theses on "The Religion of Christ" in *Lessing's Theological Writings*, trans. and ed. Henry Chadwick, A Library of Modern Religious Thought (London: A. & C. Black, 1956), 106; and Kant's accounts of the 'speculative incarnation' and of Jesus' founding of Christianity as a natural religion of morality in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. and ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, ed. Karl Ameriks and Desmond M. Clarke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 82-84; 155-160.

<sup>17</sup> MRH, 215.

<sup>18</sup> John D. Caputo, "God is Wholly Other—Almost: *Différance* and the Hyperbolic Alterity of God," in *The Otherness of God*, ed. Orrin F. Summerell, Studies in Religion and Culture, ed. Robert P. Scharlemann (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 194.

<sup>19</sup> Putt, "What Do I Love," 166.

<sup>20</sup> MRH, 240. A privileging that should be noted as itself belonging to a particular story, which, as David Toole argues, gathers the bits and pieces yielded by historical Jesus work and constructs a narrative in competition with the Gospels: "The opposition is not between the biased, fact-obscuring narratives produced by the early church and the impartial, factual account of events produced by scholars. What's at stake, rather, is the meaning of events as those events are embodied in competing narratives; it's not fact versus fiction but story versus story, pattern versus pattern. To see that the dispute lies here is to have a renewed appreciation for the Gospels, for as narratives that structure the events of Jesus' life and death into a meaningful pattern, they are remarkable." See David Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo: Theological Reflections on Nihilism, Tragedy, and*

*Apocalypse*, Radical Traditions, ed. Stanley M. Hauerwas and Peter Ochs (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 229.

<sup>21</sup> Caputo's main line here goes like this: "The concrete messianisms have always meant war, while the meaning of the messianic is, or should be, *shalom, pax*" (John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*, The Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion, ed. Merold Westphal [Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997], 190). But it must be noted that Caputo has also recently rescinded that line to a degree in the recognition that it does not in fact respect the ambiguity inherent in any concrete community in light of undecidability. On this issue see Ronald A. Kuipers, "Dangerous Safety, Safe Danger: The Threat of Deconstruction to the Threat of Determinable Faith," and Shane Cudney, "'Religion without Religion': Caputo, Derrida, and the Violence of Particularity," and for Caputo's 'repentance', see John D. Caputo, "Hoping in Hope, Hoping Against Hope: A Response," 126-128, 147, all of which are in James H. Olthuis, ed., *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> MRH, 239.

<sup>23</sup> In this brief sketch, I am drawing together Frei's early emphasis on realistic narrative per se, with his later emphasis—arising from the advent of 'cultural-linguistic' approaches to religion—on Scripture as read within the community of faith. This 'shift' is not significant for the purposes of this essay, but it might be helpful to note that in what follows I am largely drawing from Frei's later work, which is marked by an engagement with phenomenological hermeneutics, deconstruction, and varieties of literary theory.

<sup>24</sup> Regarding fact claims, it is important to note that Frei maintains an essential distinction between the *text's* meaning and the factual/historical referent of that text. Hermeneutically speaking, factual or other truth claims do not bear on discerning the meaning of the text itself; there is no need to refer outside the text to an extra-linguistic meaning as a way of discerning meaning *within* the text. The world of the narrative—the narrated world—is taken as the real world, as understood within the community of interpreters. See Hans W. Frei,

“The ‘Literal Reading’ of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?,” in Hans Frei, *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 139-140.

<sup>25</sup> Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), 280.

<sup>26</sup> Hans Frei, “Remarks in Connection with a Theological Proposal,” in *Theology and Narrative: Selected Essays*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 42.

<sup>27</sup> Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 79.

<sup>28</sup> See Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ: The Hermeneutical Bases of Dogmatic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975; reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000), 191-193 (page references are to reprint edition).

<sup>29</sup> Frei, *Types*, 86-87.

<sup>30</sup> The point of this is not to deny that the textual presentation of Jesus is an interpretation of him, such that there may well be some disjunction between the historical and the textual Jesus (there is a place for historical criticism in Frei’s method), but merely to point out that to submit the biblical text to the primacy of other methodologies is ultimately not to read *this* text, which gives us the only Jesus available.

<sup>31</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 202.

<sup>32</sup> See the discussion in *ibid.*, 139-143.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 201-202.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

<sup>36</sup> MRH, 218.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Though even here it must be noted that Caputo also affirms the impossibility of distinguishing ‘our words’ from ‘God’s words’ in the text of Scripture: “Even *l’écriture sainte* is still *écriture*, the medium in which historical and linguistic communities expressed the trauma of their faith in Jesus.” (Caputo, “God is Wholly Other,” 194.)

<sup>41</sup> For Frei’s deployment of deconstruction against phenomenological hermeneutics, see “‘Literal Reading,’” 124-139.

<sup>42</sup> See Kearney, *Dialogues*, 124.

<sup>43</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, corrected ed., trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 157-164.

<sup>44</sup> Kearney, *Dialogues*, 124.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> John D. Caputo, “What Do I Love When I Love My God? Deconstruction and Radical Orthodoxy,” in *Questioning God*, ed. John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion, ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 296-297.

<sup>47</sup> Frei, *Identity of Jesus Christ*, 193.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Valentine Cunningham’s comment that “silence, puzzle, *aporia*, absence, blankness, stuttering, are as much part of Biblical theology, of Scriptural logocentrism, as are their opposites,” and that “Biblical logocentricity is already deconstructionist.” He concludes that “theology needs the reminders of deconstruction as much as deconstruction depends on theology’s.” See Valentine Cunningham, *In the Reading Gaol: Postmodernity, Texts, and History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 396, 402.

<sup>49</sup> Perhaps such an account can serve to mitigate to some degree Caputo’s worry that claims about incarnation tend (Hegelianly) toward claims that “the Absolute had come down to earth and been expressed in the one true *Begriff*,” or in the “One True Church . . . at Rome” (Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 247). Caputo asserts that Jesus’ ‘kingdom of God’ was not about the Absolute. Indeed. But neither (it must be said) is an account of the incarnation oriented so profoundly to both the theological and the textual, as is Frei’s.