
The book takes its title from the “What Would Jesus Do?” fad that was popular in recent years. Caputo takes each word of the phrase “what would Jesus deconstruct” and makes it the object of a chapter in the book. After an introductory chapter to set the stage, chapter two examines the nature of the “would,” by showing us how deconstruction, and postmodernism more generally (which Caputo describes as the “condition of irreducible pluralism” [42], a condition that is as ancient as it is postmodern [56]), radicalize hermeneutics in such a way so as to show us that one cannot make a straight derivation of action from a text, even the texts of religious Scriptures.

In order to bolster his claim that deconstruction is a hermeneutics of the kingdom of God, Caputo then moves to an elaboration of deconstruction, as he understands it (that is, in a “slightly Jewish-Augustinian” way that understands deconstruction “as a form of prayer” [58], where “deconstruction means the affirmation of the impossible” [124]) in the third chapter. This chapter provides what is probably the best, most succinct account of Caputo’s understanding of deconstruction that I have read to date: it provides a summary of deconstruction (as did Caputo’s Deconstruction in a Nutshell) as a religious (without religion) activity (as did Caputo’s The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida).

Chapter four then moves on to examine what, exactly, “Jesus” means in the title phrase. Here, Caputo puts forward the thesis that the New Testament provides us a poetics, a theopoetics rather than a theology, of weakness and “sacred anarchy” (86).

With these conceptions of Jesus and deconstruction in place, Caputo is finally able, in the last chapters, to move on to an analysis of what exactly Jesus would deconstruct. The result is a fairly blistering critique of our modern, late-capitalist culture, both on the Right and the Left (though, if one is intent on such labels, Caputo clearly shades to the left), and specifically of the role of the church in such a culture. Chapter five takes deconstructive aim at the church’s position on economic justice, militarism, patriarchy, abortion, and homosexuality.

And while it should be noted that when Caputo speaks of the Church he usually means the Christian Right (which gets its fair share of critique in the book), this potential fault is remedied in the sixth chapter, when Caputo describes and places an “exemplary value” (117) on two distinct moments of contemporary Christianity: the work of John McNamee in St. Malachy’s (Roman Catholic) Church of North Philadelphia and the “paraliturgical” (130)

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1 A fad that, perhaps unknowingly, draws on a series of sermons delivered by a late 19th-century minister in Topeka, Kansas, and later published; cf. Charles Sheldon, In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?. New York: Grosset and Dunlop, n.d.
Ikon movement in Belfast, North Ireland. By discussing these two wonderfully different aspects of the church, Caputo seeks to avoid the trap of associating institutions with what is “bad” and in need of destruction, rather than what must be deconstructed in the name of a promise held within itself.

I will not here go into the specifics of the deconstructions that Caputo thinks Jesus would do. This would perhaps be inappropriate in the academic context of this journal (and would rob you of the joy of reading Caputo’s often whimsical critiques of the established order). Rather, here I would like to briefly discuss, not what the text says, but what it enacts: by showing the application of his thought to non-academic matters, Caputo shows the practical impact of philosophy (specifically deconstruction) in a religious setting (specifically the Christian church). In the context of a journal dedicated to religion in the public sphere, such a book pushes us to reflect more widely: what is the role, not just of religion, but of philosophy or theory more generally, in the public sphere? One cannot, after reading Caputo’s description of deconstruction, be content to remain within the traditional dualism of theory and practice: though we must acknowledge this difference, it must also be strategically reversed (i.e., what has been traditionally under-valued must be re-valued) and then displaced (i.e., both members of the dualism must be seen as variations on a third that is prior to each) [cf. 145n.10]. Perhaps poetics would be the name of the third that is prior to theory and practice. If this is so, then Caputo’s invocation of a “theo-poetics” and its relation to deconstruction as the hermeneutics of the kingdom bears importance beyond the (already important) realm of Christianity. Perhaps What Would Jesus Deconstruct?, and the brand of deconstruction it puts forward, sets the terms for a serious and meaningful debate of the role, not just of religion, but of philosophy itself in the public sphere.

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