Caputo and Derrida in a Actual Churches
Exploring the Influence of (a stream of) Postmodern Thought on Christian Practices

Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion
Saturday, November 23
7:00 pm - 9:00 pm
Loch Raven Room II
Sheraton Inner Harbor

This is My Body: Deconstruction, Eucharist, and Community
Joel Avery & Keegan Osinski

As Derrida returned to Plato's writings throughout his life, looking for moments of aporia in each new reading, so too Christians, returning time and again to the Eucharist, open themselves to the possibility of encountering the body of Christ in the presence of the stranger in each new gathering.

Using John Caputo's work in What Would Jesus Deconstruct? and his interaction with Derrida in Deconstruction in a Nutshell, as well as the work of Louis-Marie Chauvet, we will show how deconstructing the Eucharist in response to the call of the nondeconstructable absent-yet-Real Presence harbored therein yields an encounter in which the Eucharist becomes a deconstructive act that calls into question and breaks down social hierarchies and individualized faith in order to reveal Christ's broken body in the community that gathers at his table.

We discuss liturgy as a repeated yet singular event—a counterpath of life that we travel as strangers together on our way to the table, where we arrive without ever arriving, and where we see in the face of each stranger the presence of Jesus revealing itself.

We will spend the bulk of the paper demonstrating how these ideas are manifest in the work of two communities-- St. Lydia’s, an ELCA-affiliated “dinner church” in Brooklyn who ground their worship in a deconstructed liturgy centered on a shared meal, and ikonNYC, a group outside the realm of traditional church who explore and deconstruct ideas about faith.

A Différent Kind of Preaching: Derrida, Caputo and the Deconstruction of Contemporary Homiletics
Jacob D. Myers

Preaching is in a state of crisis in the West. I contend that the theological crisis for Christian proclamation—that which threatens theology from within—is that the words (logoi) we use in reference to God (theos) are always already encumbered by a certain rationality (logos) and unless we expose this feature of theo-logy and experience the features that simultaneously
structure the possibility and impossibility of preaching, our quest will never quite reach its intended
destination; preaching will never quite be theological.

In this paper, I hold the contemporary crisis of preaching to be theological and epistemological: it
is a crisis of hearing God. More concretely, the challenge to which I respond is the problem of
conceiving preaching through the emerging epistémê. My argument is that theology—and
proclamatory theology, in particular—has been governed by a particular rationale that parallels
Derrida’s term, logocentrism. Because I question the binary logic that has governed much of
Christian theology in the West my essay takes shape as a deconstruction of such logic. By tracing
the epistemological assumptions ingredient in contemporary homiletics we may open up a way of
understanding preaching in emerging Western contexts savvy of the philosophical biases that
problematize theology at base.

My thesis is that contemporary homiletics smuggles unexamined philosophical presuppositions
into their theologies of proclamation and that such a priori constraints are what is holding back
preaching today. In support of this thesis I enlist the support of the eminent French intellectual
Jacques Derrida and his North American interlocutor and collaborator, John D. Caputo. Their
penetrating gaze and relentless questioning of the foundational (theological) assumptions
undergirding Western thought will enable us to imagine a different, indeed, a différant kind of
preaching.

In order to think différance properly one must un-think what one thinks about concepts, which, by
extension, means the un-thinking of thinking itself. Through a certain reading of the western
philosophical tradition Derrida deconstructs the binary logic that divides speech from writing.
Caputo carries this kind of thinking into his reading of the theological foundations of the church.
Différance “is” a kind of concept—not quite ontological, hence the scare quotes around “is,” and
not quite conceptual—that indexes the problem of bifurcating speech and writing while subverting
it. Derrida’s neographism signifies the movement according to which language, or any code, any
system of referral in general, is constituted ‘historically’ as a weave of differences. Preaching is
committed to both speech and writing. Every Sunday preachers bear witness to God’s Word with
their mouths (speech) vis-à-vis the Bible, God’s revealed Word (writing). This is both a problem
and an opportunity.

By challenging the linguistic structure and philosophical assumptions upon which all contemporary
homiletics rest, with Derrida and Caputo, I exposes the play of semiotic difference and epistemic
deferral (différance) always already at work in preaching in order to imagine a différant kind of
preaching.

Weak Chaplaincy: Employing Caputo’s “Weak Theology” in Clinical Pastoral Settings
George Schmidt

In The Weakness of God, John Caputo argues that classical theodicy seeks to excuse God from
the “causal hook, whether for the vagaries of natural disasters or for the disasters caused by human vagary…” For Caputo, traditional theodicy is an obscenity. Although he takes great pains to reject theodicy as a “thoroughly onto-theological project,” Caputo’s work in The Weakness of God offers an important alternative to the problem of evil. In this paper, I shall inspect this alternative as it presents itself in pastoral care settings, more specifically, the hospital bed and waiting room. It is the employment of Caputo’s “weak theology” in this setting that this paper seeks to explore.

The primary site for this exploration is New York City’s Roosevelt Hospital where clinical pastoral students from multiple denominations and faiths are reading Caputo and enacting what Paul called the logos tou stauron (“logos of the cross,” 1 Cor. 1:18). Through an engagement with the primary source data provided by the hospital chaplains I will focus on the dimensions of their work, which embrace alternative discourses outside of traditional soteriological rhetoric. Through this investigation I argue that rather than attempting to redeem the traumas of broken bodies, pushing them toward a greater sense of ‘wholeness’ and cessation of tears, chaplains are drawing on the weakness of God as a sustaining source necessary for a life lived from within such brokenness. This approach resists a problematic theodicy that risks the glorification of suffering, and instead locates God not in heaven on a mighty throne but weeping at the bedside of lost loved ones.

For instance, when I interviewed former Roosevelt Hospital chaplain Larissa Romero, she walked me through a visitation where she employed Caputo’s “weak theology:” “Two weeping parents asked me why God felt the need to take their baby girl away from them in the delivery room after a full 9 months of health. My answer was to weep with them as we sat for several hours talking about how beautiful their girl had been.” Romero explained to me later that Caputo’s work on the death of Lazarus where Jesus wept directly inspired her to take this approach. In that moment, she explained, “It was not God’s overarching power that was healing for this couple; it was being present with them and sharing in their weakness.” As Caputo notes, “The divinity is in the weakness, not the power. It is the weeping that is divine, not this high Christological sleight of hand, as if Jesus would be the source of immense human suffering in order to stage a display of divine might. But the weeping is the weakness of God, the tears of God, which is the compassion, the healing, the restoration of lost life.” Living into the call to act as the presence of God at the bedside, Romero embodied the “weak force” of God.

Through the engagement with hospital chaplaincy this paper will detail the influence of Caputo’s scholarship on clinical pastoral practices, and furthermore will argue for the necessity of implementing Caputo’s weak theology more widely in crisis situations. As Shelly Rambo has argued in Spirit and Trauma, when the life of the traumatized is one lived perpetually penetrated by death, it is problematic to embrace a salvific rhetoric of healing and wholeness. Rambo argues this often engenders feelings of guilt and shame in the traumatized, who often feel their “getting better,” or “getting over” a trauma is impossible. A weak God reminds us that holiness is found not merely in triumph over trauma, but rather in the authentic bearing of witness to a life lived and encouraged to flourish in spite of trauma. If God can find power in weakness, then those faithful to God might glimpse their own strength in their very brokenness.
Jack and Jacques walk into a church: Theopoetic Practices at Work in a Christian Community
Jeremy Fackenthal

This paper will discuss two means by which churches have, either consciously or unconsciously, placed into practice some important ideas gleans from the writings of John Caputo and Jacques Derrida. I discuss these two paths from theory to praxis by describing actual practices in place at the church I attend—a self identified “emergent” church with an outward focus. While these practices have grown organically over time and may not have begun out of intentional theological and philosophical reflection, such reflection has fostered their development and shaped the practices into what they are today. The two aspects I will discuss are (1) a rejection of ultimate Truth claims and openness to metaphor, and (2) a focus on articulations of God as insistent rather than existent within the world, noting specifically that if existence can be posited it emerges as embodied by the faith community. In doing so, the paper will draw from Derrida’s writing on myth and metaphor and Caputo’s latest book on the “insistence” of God.

As theopoetics a la Derrida and Caputo reminds us, appeal to inflexible doctrines marks a certain presencing of ideas as distinct and timeless, and this presencing aligns more clearly with theological projects that seek an ultimate Truth. Instead, theopoetics realizes that at best only fallibilistic statements are possible, and metaphor is likely the only means by which we can describe the divine. The church upon which I reflect in this paper acknowledges openly that persons present on Sunday morning likely do not agree on a single description of the divine. The church does not attempt to lead each person who attends down a single path to orthodoxy, but recognizes the rich theological diversity present within the congregation. Moreover, the church openly discusses theological language as metaphor, and the paper will cite a particular sermon on Jesus’ discussion with Nicodemus and then briefly reexamine the sermon through a reading of Derrida’s “White Mythology.”

Since many within our church have been damaged by conceptions of God as powerful, vengeful, or imperialistic, reframing our understanding of God in terms of patiently and persuasively insisting (a phrase discussed in Caputo’s The Insistence of God) abounds not only with philosophical significance but also with pragmatic import. As a community we acknowledge (through sermons and prayers) that God is present when we love each other and when we exhibit grace to each other. This idea is further fleshed out by our practice of providing a meal and supplies to homeless teens four times a month. We do this as a community of faithful persons, but we avoid preaching to the teens, handing out tracts, or even inviting them to church. We simply feed them and love them—but that moment constitutes an event in which God exists for them through our actions. God’s insistence patiently persuades the faith community to such action, but we can only acknowledge God’s existence when we act.
Caputo’s Response(s)