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John Caputo, cross and cosmos: a theology of difficult glory

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John Caputo. *Cross and Cosmos: A Theology of Difficult Glory*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2019. 287 pages. \$30.60.

Over the last few years, philosopher John Caputo has sought to bring together his interest in Derridean deconstruction and what he calls radical theology—a theology that lets go of the grandiose ontological claims of confessional theology for something strangely weak: a God who does not exist, but insists; a God not of being, but perhaps...of possibility. For a confessional Christian like me who has not given up on theology as a constructive task, the language of deconstruction is challenging enough. Yet in this volume Caputo goes all of that one better. He places at the center of his deconstructive, radical theology his own unique take on Luther's theology of the cross from the Heidelberg Disputation (1518).

Why better? In my view, the deconstructive impulse is not new to theology, but pushes already and everywhere in the Christian tradition itself. Theology is always already troubling itself, I would argue. Caputo rightly pursues a theology of the cross in the selfsame spirit. In doing so, however, he pushes a beyond the recognizable claims of the tradition. Caputo sees himself as taking Luther quite a bit farther than Luther. By the end of the book, he even adds a thesis or two to Luther's Heidelberg Disputations, where the cantankerous German first articulates his theology of the cross against theologians of "glory." More importantly, however, Caputo crosses over the gap between the orders of creation and the orders of redemption in classic Lutheran theology to truly reconcile God to all things in relating cross to cosmos.

The cross part of this should not be surprising. Caputo is aware of the powerful dialogue that James Cone pursued with the tradition of the theology of the cross through his landmark book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. A theology of the cross refuses to call the bad good and the good, bad—but instead calls a thing what it really is. There is in the working out of this tradition, in all its jagged forms, a desire to be sure not to call God what God is not—a kind of aniconic view of the cross. Here Caputo rightly links this theological move to what Tillich does in the Protestant Principle—it pushes back and guards the Godness of God. The "more" that Caputo does, however, is to keep pursuing that negation through the very conception of God itself, beyond being and actuality to possibility itself. God, for Caputo, is that which happens under the name, that which stirs within the very events that disrupt our ontological conceptions and our fixed views of the cosmos. And there, with that last piece, Caputo crosses over into a wholly other conversation: an understanding of the cosmos itself. Here Caputo draws on the work of physicists to press far beyond the ontologies of metaphysics. Christian neo-Platonism is his real opponent here, and Caputo will not rest until his radical theology also accounts for what physicists puzzle over: the ultimate destruction of an ever-expanding universe that eventually will go out, disappear, as if nothing ever existed. In Caputo's eyes, however, this fragility of the cosmos in relation to a theology of the cross is a thing of theopoetic beauty and gift. By God, it even leads to doxology (278)!

My little review cannot do Caputo's book justice, but perhaps it will have. I would note as a fellow traveler in a theology of the cross that Caputo neglects some of what really makes Luther tick. At one point, Caputo throws up his hands that Luther sees a theology of the cross as both negation and a means to hold on to the aspects of God Luther otherwise understands as hidden, *absconditus*, as it were (142-43). But what Caputo argues is an utter nonsensical contradiction that he wishes to pursue to the end is better understood in light of Luther's conception of the means of grace. Luther was a pastoral theologian (not a systematician) and his

radical critiques of reason and revelation need to be understood in connection with Word and Sacrament—not as perfect, but good enough for the disorienting ongoing struggle that is *Anfechtung*. Caputo should take heart—Luther is (possibly) even more modest in scope than he imagined.

Caputo has a lover’s quarrel with theology and continues to push theology to be ever truer to itself. His vision is indeed radical, bracing, but also hopeful in a most fragile sense possible. Warning: preachers and homileticians alike will have to work hard to wrest a blessing from this strange, nightly visitor to the realm of theology. But it will be worth it. Caputo embodies some of theology’s deepest impulses, especially those who view the cross as more than a cipher for atonement theology but allow us all to press beyond mere economic exchanges of atonement to the mysterious revelation of God in both cross and cosmos.

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