



Jnanadeepa

Pune Journal of Religious Studies

ISSN 2249-1503

www.punejournal.in

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4264813

Stable URL: <http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4264813>

Radical Hermeneutics or Pre-hermeneutic Nostalgia? A Critique of John Caputo's Philosophy of Religion

George Karuvelil SJ

Abstract: This is meant to be a critical article on postmodernism. But how does one talk about postmodernism, which is a whole outlook on life, in a short article? Compounding this difficulty is my own judgment of postmodern philosophy (which is only one aspect of the wider cultural phenomenon of postmodernism) as a Wittgensteinian ladder: it is something that is to be kicked away, but only after having used it to see some of the blunders perpetuated by traditional Western thinking, and not before. To circumvent these difficulties I have decided to focus on a single postmodern theme and on a single author. The author is John D. Caputo and the theme is that of undecidability. Caputo, professor of philosophy at Villanova University, is considered "the foremost American continental postmodernist, continuing a line of inquiry extending from Nietzsche and Kierkegaard on up through late Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault". But this is not my only or even primary reason for choosing to focus on Caputo. The primary reason is his engagement with religious, and specifically Christian beliefs. Besides regarding Meister Eckhart as one of the heroes of his "radical hermeneutics" (his version of postmodernism), he has also made a significant comparative study of Thomas Aquinas and Martin Heidegger.¹ He has also been encouraging Catholics to adopt a "prophetic postmodernism" (Caputo 2000). In this essay, however, I shall restrict my discussion to Caputo's contention of undecidability between the religious and the tragic views of life and its application to Jesus and his resurrection.

Keywords: Kierkegaard, Caputo, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Foucault, Derrida.

Cited as:

Karuvelil, George. (2002). Radical Hermeneutics or Pre-hermeneutic Nostalgia? A Critique of John Caputo's Philosophy of Religion (Version 1.0). <i>Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies</i> , January 2002 (5/1), 63-80. http://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4264813

Radical Hermeneutics or Pre-hermeneutic Nostalgia? A Critique of John Caputo's Philosophy of Religion

George Karuvelil

Dept of Philosophy, JDV, Pune 411014

This is meant to be a critical article on postmodernism. But how does one talk about postmodernism, which is a whole outlook on life, in a short article? Compounding this difficulty is my own judgment of postmodern philosophy (which is only one aspect of the wider cultural phenomenon of postmodernism) as a Wittgensteinian ladder (Wittgenstein 1974: 6.54): it is something that is to be kicked away, but only after having used it to see some of the blunders perpetuated by traditional Western thinking, and not before. To circumvent these difficulties I have decided to focus on a single postmodern theme and on a single author. The author is John D. Caputo and the theme is that of undecidability. Caputo, professor of philosophy at Villanova University, is considered "the foremost American continental postmodernist, continuing a line of inquiry extending from Nietzsche and Kierkegaard on up through late Heidegger, Derrida and Foucault" (Marsh 1988: 459). But this is not my only or even primary reason for choosing to focus on Caputo. The primary reason is his engagement with religious,

and specifically Christian beliefs. Besides regarding Meister Eckhart as one of the heroes of his "radical hermeneutics" (his version of postmodernism), he has also made a significant comparative study of Thomas Aquinas and Martin Heidegger.¹ He has also been encouraging Catholics to adopt a "prophetic postmodernism" (Caputo 2000). In this essay, however, I shall restrict my discussion to Caputo's contention of undecidability between the religious and the tragic views of life and its application to Jesus and his resurrection.

The paper is divided into three parts. The first part gives a brief view of postmodernism and its significance, so that there is at least an inkling of why the postmodern ladder is needed. The second part of the paper is an exposition of the theme of undecidability, with special emphasis on Caputo's employment of it. In the last part I examine what this undecidability amounts to. I suggest that Caputo's espousal of radical undecidability is the result of being a prisoner of a pre-hermeneutic mind-set.

* George Karuvelil teaches philosophy at JDV, Pune and may be contacted at <jdv@vsnl.com>.

I. The Significance of Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a slippery concept. But in its philosophical form, it is generally taken as an attempt to dismantle the cardinal principles and assumptions of the modern outlook — a “radical critique of the ‘philosophical discourse of modernity’”(Van Niekerk 1995: 175).² If Descartes, Hume and Kant exemplify the modern, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty epitomize the postmodern. F.Nietzsche, M.Heidegger, and L. Wittgenstein are the transitional figures.³

Postmodern philosophy, however, is more than a critique of modernity. Much of what the postmoderns criticize go back to the origins of Western philosophy. Postmodern philosophy “clears up some of the smoke metaphysics has been sending up for over two millennia, ever since Plato took it upon himself to answer all of Socrates’ questions...”(RH 6), as Caputo puts it. That makes it rather inappropriate to characterize the postmodern mood as a reaction to, or an attempt to dismantle, the modern. The term is appropriate only to the extent that modern philosophy accentuates some of the features present from the beginning. The metaphysical history of Western philosophy, especially that of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, may be characterized as common sense writ large on the cosmic canvas with the indelible ink of Aristotelian formal logic. By common sense I mean the everyday perceptual world of objects where objects are given to the senses as readymade entities. We

classify them and talk about them in terms of genus and species, substance and accidents. Language is considered primarily in referential terms, a view that was most coherently and systematically expressed in the philosophy of early Wittgenstein. Into these categories we use for talking about what we take to be reality as a matter of common sense, enters logic. The laws of meaningful discourse like the principles of identity and non-contradiction now come to be seen as the laws of reality itself.⁴ The implication is that our talk about reality is no longer seen merely as that (i.e., the outer limits of discourse such that our talk does not end up in contradictions and, hence, meaninglessness), but as expressing the underlying nature of reality itself. Thus, reality comes to be seen in terms of unchanging, eternal essences and changing accidents. And when the law of non-contradiction, now imported from the realm of logic and discourse —which requires the classificatory device of genus and species-- into the realm of metaphysics and reality, it would follow that all reality and truth can, in principle, be classified into one coherent system. The main difference between a religious ‘being’ and other ‘beings’ is that the former is the most general category ‘Being’ with a capital B which underlies every other ‘being’. Further, by making the common sense world of perception as its paradigm, this grand metaphysical tradition lost sight of the knowing subject and her consciousness. This neglect of the subject has implications for decision. Decision is a matter of conforming to the reality of things, the unchanging essence to be discovered in the cosmos; it has

nothing to do with the interests and concerns of the subjects who decide.

This common sense view and the grand metaphysical synthesis faces its first major challenge in the modern period with the revolutionary developments in science, such as the overthrow of geocentrism. What is important here is not the individual scientific developments but the overthrow of the deliverances of common sense. Rather than suspend the wisdom of common sense, the moderns could have drawn another conclusion: that there are limits to our common sense categories. But that would have meant a radical departure from the ancient metaphysical tradition with its doctrine of one essential truth of reality. Brought up as they were on that tradition of metaphysics with its singular truth, they now began to see that singular truth to lie rather in science than in common sense. But a positive development of the uncertainties brought about by modern science was the discovery of the subject. The subject they discovered, however, was a subject of conscious operations; there is still no place for the unconscious or the different states of consciousness or for any hermeneutic mediation in knowing. For the moderns, the knowing may require an effort but there are no variations in the knowing consciousness. As a result, the Kantian knower may have to engage in an active interrogation of nature but the answers received from nature would be universally true and valid, in as much as reality could be known. Therefore, all knowledge could still be systematized into one logically coherent whole. It is easy to see that this dream of the moderns is in direct conti-

nunity with the older metaphysical tradition.

What postmodernism does is to expose the true nature of this heritage for what it is. It draws our attention to the fact that the objectivism of common sense itself is the result of the forgetfulness of the subject, that logic is not a feature of the cosmos, that the human subject is much more than the conscious reason with its formal logical operations. With the discovery of the various levels of consciousness, there is no way in which all knowledge could be synthesized into one coherent system. Thus, we are confronted with a multiplicity of language games and life worlds; we play different language games and inhabit different worlds. This, it seems to me, is the valid point in Jacques Derrida's critique of logocentrism: a repudiation of the idea that logos is not merely *our* word or *our* representation of the world, but an encapsulation of the essential nature of reality (what he calls "metaphysics of presence"). Once we give up that idea and recognize the hermeneutic mediation involved in our encounter with reality, we are not far from concluding with Rorty that "the world does not tell us what language games to play" (Rorty 1989: 6). If this is taken as the essence of the postmodern sensibility, we can see how different it is from that of the ancients and the moderns. For the ancients, with their metaphysical certainties built on common sense and its forgotten subject, it was the essential nature of reality that determined our language. With this referential view of language, there was no question of a multiplicity of language games. The same goes for the moderns with their

scientific certainties (built on the conscious operations of the subject, and the neglect of variations in consciousness). It was still the nature of reality that determined the limits of our language and knowledge; here again, there was no question of any multiplicity. Postmoderns, in contrast, have become acutely aware that they have no basis for building a single unified language: they can neither lay claim to a “metaphysics of presence” nor to the optimism and certainty moderns had in science.

II. Undecidability and Religious Truth

The contention of Rorty (“the world does not tell us what language games to play”) can also be taken as the most succinct articulation of undecidability. The contention is that there is a multiplicity of truths, meanings, interpretations, worldviews, theories etc. and we have no basis for deciding among them. Derrida is well known for his claim that “There is nothing outside the text” such that there could be any “reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign”(Derrida 1994: 158, 49). There could only be interpretations, and interpretations of interpretations. In the words of Madan Sarup,

Just as signs refer only to other signs, texts can refer only to other texts, generating an intersecting and indefinitely expandable web called intertextuality. There is a proliferation of interpretations, and no interpretation can claim to be the final one... [Derrida] opens up the vista of an endless play of signifiers that refer not to signifieds but to other signifiers, so that mean-

ing is always ultimately undecidable (Sarup 1993: 52).

John Caputo applies the doctrine of undecidability to the religious realm. In his opinion, there are two fundamental approaches to life: the religious and the tragic. He takes “the religious” as a certain way of responding to suffering. In the religious framework, “the very idea of ‘God’ means He who stands always and necessarily on the side of those who suffer” (RH 280) Although one could take exception to this characterization of religion as being excessively narrow, that would be diverting our attention from our theme. He contrasts this (religious) view of life with the tragic view as found in Nietzsche. “In the tragic view, suffering is *not* a violation, not a vandal which comes crashing into life, destroying and undoing life. It is, on the contrary, part of life...”(RH 282).⁵ On this view, “suffering is worked into the very texture of life, entangled with it... as part of the natural movement of the flux and its system of tensions and strife”. Driving the difference home, he says: “The real difference between the religious and the tragic is that, in the tragic view, suffering is not a violation, not an injustice, not an intruder without rights. Life is not unfair. It is as innocent as the wind” (RH 284).

That suffering may be “as innocent as the wind” does not mean that Caputo is about to side with the tragic view of life, as against the religious. This is so because he also realizes that

The tragic view, against its own rhetoric, is in fact not hard enough: it accepts, embraces, and makes light of

just what it should resist. It is tolerant of that against which it should raise its voice in protest. It accepts just what it should defy. It lets violence off too easily. Its notion of justice of strife is that of a weak-willed judge. It has no nerve for a real fight, which means to resist the wasteful effects of suffering (RH 285).

He recognises that from the religious point of view,

the tragic view has a short memory and is a pawn in the hands of those who know how to play the game of power. It is the religious view which is liberating, while the tragic view is the laughing gas of the suffering. It asks them to love their exploitation and affirm it in a Dionysian dance. Suffering is not innocent, not when there is systematic exclusion and oppression all around (RH 286).

One would have thought that this is reason enough to throw in one's lot with the religious view. But not for Caputo. He says, "I know of no way to adjudicate between these incommensurables, nor is that my wish. I prefer to keep the debate open..." (RH 285)

2.1 Undecidability and Christianity

If one cannot decide between the religious and the tragic, it is only to be expected that there is no way of deciding the truth of specific religious doctrines like the resurrection. In a lengthy article, Caputo takes on the Christologies of two prominent theologians, Thomas Sheehan and Edward Schillebeeckx, to make the point.⁶ Adopting the hermeneutic method of historical criticism, both these theologians agree that the earthly Jesus under-

went a series of transformations in history: from an eschatological prophet to the coming Son of Man, from this to the reigning Lord, and finally, to the eternal Son of God. Only in the last version does he attain flat-out divinity.

In spite of such broad agreement, they reach very different conclusions about Jesus, his message, and his relation to Christianity. For Sheehan "historical-critical method uncovered the cold truths about Jesus": he is the prophet who proclaimed the good news that God has descended without remainder into humankind ("God disappears into man"), thus effectively proclaiming the end of the Old Testament religion with its transcendent God. But the Church reverses this message and makes the messenger the message, which must be considered a "standing heresy". Schillebeeckx's hermeneutics, on the other hand, leads to a more traditional Christology, which not only permits the divinisation of Jesus but also traces the origins of Christianity to him. The main source of their difference lies in what they take to be basic. The basis of Sheehan's death-of-God Christology ("hermeneutics of unbelief") is his interpretation of the *Abba*-experience of Jesus; the heart of Schillebeeckx's "hermeneutics of belief" is the conversion experience of Peter and the disciples.

Caputo wants to go beyond this divide between a hermeneutics of belief and unbelief. He disagrees with Sheehan's interpretation of the *Abba*-experience, but agrees with him that Christianity does look like a mistake. According to Caputo, "the *Abba* experience does not mean that the Father has

just disappeared *into* his children...”; its whole point is *religious*: “he stands unequivocally *with* them [the poor and the despised, the outcasts and the dispossessed], takes their side in thick and thin, like a faithful and loving father”(RT 160. *italics original*). Caputo disagrees with Sheehan, not because he thinks that there is any basis for adopting the opposite point of view (hermeneutics of belief), but because Sheehan closes off the religious option. This, he considers illegitimate from the perspective of radical hermeneutics. Jesus “may have been right about his *Abba* [standing by the suffering and the dispossessed]” (RT 169). We cannot close that possibility. But that does not license us to say that *Abba* does stand by the poor; that would be to close the possibility in the opposite direction. Caputo’s complaint against both is basically the same, though they cut in different directions. Both fail to take the radical implications of hermeneutics (i.e., undecidability) seriously: “if Sheehan has closed down undecidability in the direction of an atheistic humanism, Schillebeeckx closes it down in the direction of a trust in things for which hermeneutics gives no warrant” (RT 149). If Sheehan is wrong in trying to cut Christianity off by arguing that Jesus taught the death of God, this does not authorize us to think that Christianity can be legitimately traced back to Jesus as a continuation of his message.

According to Caputo, a great deal depends on what we think happened to Peter, which is at the heart of Schillebeeckx’s hermeneutics. And Caputo gives an excellent phenomenological account of what could have hap-

pened to him. He does it in terms of the “impossibility” of murder”. The basic idea, taken from Emmanuel Levinas, is that although someone can be murdered physically, the otherness of that person cannot be eliminated. Levinas explains this by attributing a certain “infinity”, and hence inextinguishability, to the other person. Levinas’ own phenomenological analysis focuses on the murderer. He is haunted by his deed, by the “ghost” of his victim. Caputo, in contrast, focuses on the survivors, the friends and disciples of the victim: they too experience the ghost, the spirit of the victim, especially when they gather together. The power that Jesus had in face-to-face situations, in his look, haunts the disciples after his death. They experience the infinity of Jesus and in that depth they have a glimpse of the face of God, says Caputo. Something extraordinary had just happened to them. So resurrection, phenomenologically, is “that kind of power that came crashing in upon the disciples”(RT 167). Jesus’ life was totally given over to the message and he kept faith in the face of death. This is an experience of the impossibility of murder, the triumph of love over death, which Caputo says, is the basis of Simon’s experience. “The impossibility of murder is the phenomenological counterpart of the theology of resurrection” (RT 167) Peter’s conversion experience, that God stood by Jesus to the end, is what the disciples meant when they said that Jesus was raised.

It is hard to see how even a die-hard naturalistic philosopher could object to such an account of the resurrection. And it does seem to give sufficient

basis for tracing the origins of Christianity back to Peter's experience of Jesus. What, then, is Caputo's objection to Schillebeeckx? The objection is two-fold: First, to trace Christianity back to Jesus would be against the intentions of Jesus. Second, impossibility of murder is "*an experience that is in principle available anywhere*, and is not localized in Jesus of Nazareth." (RT 167. italics original). Of course, the point of both the objections is to maintain the undecidability about Jesus because "If Jesus is an undecidable, then he is a place where the bottom drops out..." (RT 169). To accept Schillebeeckx's hermeneutics would be to close off such undecidability. That would amount to denying that "the world is innocent and does not need saving... The world just plays itself out, the quanta of energy just discharge, and it — the world, *das Spiel*, *das 'Es'* — just does not know that we are here" (RT 170) "Yet surely, *the believer must concede this possibility*" (RT 171). Caputo would let this thought cross Simon's mind, that Jesus' murder was just part of the way cosmos discharges its energy, that history has no point at all not only in the immediate aftermath of the crucifixion "before he started to round up the disciples [before he experienced the impossibility of murder]; and even after he had gotten the whole thing going" (RT 172).

Consider, first, the intention of Jesus. One might wonder how an ardent devotee of undecidability could be so sure about the intentions of Jesus. But I shall not pursue that line. Caputo reasons that as a devout Jew, Jesus speaks, not in his own name, but in the name of

the Father. Therefore, "Christianity does look like a mistake... not because, as Sheehan makes out, Jesus was an atheist but because he was so devoted to the true spirit of the Torah" (RT 161) It is not that people like Schillebeeckx are not aware of this. But they ignore the intentions of Jesus on the basis of the hermeneutic principle of semantic autonomy. The principle says that meaning is not governed by the author's or the agent's self-understanding; that meaning far exceeds the original intention, that meaning continues to unfold in the tradition. Caputo objects to this move because "while Gadamer's theory works very nicely with Shakespeare and the American constitution, there are [three] rather special complications involved in the claims that the moderates make" (RT 162).

1. The moderates have an inverted version of the argument of semantic autonomy. "The argument says that you should ignore the person of the author and pay heed to the intentional content, the *Sache* of his message. But the moderates are doing exactly the opposite": overriding the message and exalting the person. "This is like making a cult of the person of Shakespeare or Thomas Jefferson and ignoring what they said or wrote" (RT 162-3).

2. Acceptance of the historico-critical (hermeneutic) method places the moderates in a curious position of having to divinise the author and at the same time override his intentions. Jesus was divine, but he himself did not quite appreciate it; that was the work of the disciples. "The Church... claims to have a different (and may be even a better, more

thematic, reflective) understanding of what he was doing than he himself had” (RT 163). This “better” view may even be opposed to Jesus’ self-interpretation. Caputo imagines a situation where someone projects the post-resurrection theological developments and submits them to Jesus for his consideration. He suggests that Jesus might have been scandalized by it and condemned it as coming from Satan. Then he poses the rhetorical question, “How far can you go in disregarding the intention of the author if you also claim the author was divine?” (RT 163).

3. Lastly, Caputo presents a scenario where Jesus’ message was roundly accepted by everyone, lived a long life etc., resulting in a Judaism revived with the *Abba* spirituality of Jesus. Then, Christianity would not have got off the ground because in that scenario all would have believed that the Father was all and Jesus was nothing. Message would have prevailed and not the person.

The long and short of these considerations is plain: for Caputo, the sort of “death-of-the author hermeneutics” adopted by moderates like Schillebeeckx is illegitimate.

III. Understanding Undecidability

Let us examine the validity of these objections since some of the assumptions involved here go to the very heart of the doctrine of undecidability. And I suggest that we examine these objections by attempting to answer a basic question: What does Caputo mean by undecidability? There seem to be at least two plausible ways of understanding his

contention. Undecidability may be considered to be (1) an exaggerated form of apophatic theology; or (2) an existential wavering of faith that occurs even in the lives of saints. While the first relates to the content of religious doctrines, the second concerns the concrete life situations of believers. Roughly, the distinction corresponds to the distinction he makes between the message and the person. In the remainder of this article I shall argue that Caputo’s undecidability is very problematic when understood in either of these ways. I suggest a third possibility that it is best understood as a nostalgia for a lost world, an era when it was possible to believe that the world chose the language game we played.

3.1 Undecidability as Negative Theology

There are some indications to show that Caputo’s rhetoric on radical hermeneutics and undecidability is an advocacy of a negative theology. Understood in this sense, undecidability just means that we must acknowledge “the contingency of its [religion’s] symbols” (RH 280). The fact that one of Caputo’s heroes is Meister Eckhart (“one of the masters of disruption” who throws “the guardians of Being and presence... into confusion and consternation”, RH:265) is significant. Moreover, at the end of his article on Sheehan and Schillebeeckx, he explicitly talks about the need for a negative theology (RT 172). Caputo’s emphasis on truth as *a-letheia* points in the same direction. As a matter of fact, although I have given his account of the resurrection earlier, he places it much later and the purpose

of his account is to caution us “not to break off too quickly and reach a resolution” of the hermeneutic conflict (RT 169). And not for a moment do I doubt that truth as *a-letheia* really has a role to play in terms of a negative theology. It says that disclosure/unconcealment is also a closure and concealment, that reality is not revealed to us in its fullness; if it were so revealed we humans would be incapable of receiving it. Truth –humanly grasped reality— does seem to involve a concealment; it is not a “mirror of nature” (See Rorty 1979). Besides such theoretical considerations, I am also willing to grant that in the face of institutional Christianity’s obsession with the objective truths of faith, such negative theology may be a need of the hour.

While Caputo may see undecidability as a matter of negative theology, there are two reasons for considering this form of negative theology to be mistaken. The first reason is this: traditionally a negative (*apophatic*) theology was done in the context of a positive (*cataphatic*) theology, which gave expression to certain key religious experiences. Just to take one example, we find religiously oriented people from across religious and cultural traditions talking about grace. There are also experiences which are historically unique and may not have exact cross-cultural parallels. The experience that led Jesus to call God “*Abba*” could be counted among such experiences; so could the experience of the first disciples of Jesus that led them to proclaim that God had raised Jesus from the dead. Note that each of these affirmations –whether cross cultural

ones or others— has a positive content. The role of cataphatic theology is precisely to give expression to that content. But Caputo does not seem to make room for any content whatever. How could there be any content if a religious view of life cannot be affirmed against its opposite? Such undecidability amounts to saying that one cannot say *anything positive* about religious truth (or its opposite). Advocating such an apophatism that makes no room for cataphatism is like saying that we must erect traffic signals all over the place, but not build any roads! Therefore, while we need to remain very cautious about the cataphatic theology, it cannot be completely dispensed with. And this, it seems to me, is what is implied in the utter undecidability advocated by Caputo.

The second reason for considering such apophatism to be mistaken is the nature of religious content. The original context of negative theology is the metaphysical tradition that I have called the fixation of common sense⁷ and the realization that God cannot be fitted into such categories; that all attempts to fix the “essence” of “God” in such categories are bound to go astray. This is one way of affirming that the content of religious talk is utterly different from the content of everyday talk. Therefore, it makes perfect sense for Eckhart to throw “the guardians of Being and presence” into utter confusion, such that it leads to a “breakthrough” in their understanding of the nature of God-talk, done in terms of the metaphysical categories of common sense. However, the case of the resurrection or Peter’s conversion experience, (to take a concrete example), just does not fit this because what is af-

firmed in the resurrection, even in Caputo's phenomenological version, is totally contrary to common sense. To experience the impossibility of murder is already to have achieved a breakthrough from the realm of common sense to the realm of religion. The danger is that those who were not privy to that experience may lose touch with that breakthrough and, having an inherited doctrine, may fall back into common sense and start thinking of resurrection in terms of, say, resuscitation. This is what calls for a negative theology. But Caputo's notion of undecidability is far more: it would not permit even Peter to talk about the breakthrough he experienced. What is implied here seems to be not merely an affirmation of the utter difference between the content of religious statements and the statements of common sense, but a total denial of any content whatever to religious statements and experiences.⁸ And if no content whatever is given to religious talk, would it not be nonsensical even to speak about the message of Jesus, which Caputo is keen to distinguish from the messenger?

This is probably the place to examine his argument against using the principle of semantic autonomy. His argument is that the point of semantic autonomy is to pay heed to the message and not the messenger, whereas the moderates are doing the opposite. This assumes that the message of Jesus is different from the person. The Christian claim has been that in this *particular* case, such a dichotomy between message and messenger does not exist, that Jesus lived his message so fully that words and deeds, message and life, be-

come one. The real issue, then, is whether this is a reasonable claim. According to Caputo himself, the message, the core of the *Abba* experience of Jesus, is that God is on the side of the poor and the despised, no matter what. Now if the core of Peter's conversion experience is that God stood by Jesus to the end through his suffering and shameful death, and this is what the disciples meant when they said Jesus was raised, then it is just a concrete exemplification of Jesus' own message. Therefore, on Caputo's own interpretation, it does seem reasonable on the part of the disciples of Jesus to have identified the message with the messenger, (irrespective of what one might say of Shakespeare or Jefferson). Moreover, such a claim alone would be faithful to (i.e., would be an adequate expression of) their experience of the resurrection. But it does raise another question: if resurrection or the impossibility of murder is an experience that is in principle available anywhere, doesn't that imply that such an experience is not to be used for divinising Jesus? Since this question raises an issue that goes far beyond Jesus to the very heart of the claim of undecidability, I shall deal with it separately, while discussing the aversion of the postmoderns to the concrete and the existential.

What if an application of the principle of semantic autonomy leads to an explicit negation of the agent's intentions? As far as Jesus' own self-understanding is concerned, I think Caputo could not have been more right in saying that Jesus would have been scandalised, if the post-resurrection theological developments were submit-

ted to him as a future plan. It would be very strange if Jesus, as a faithful Jew in love with his *Abba*, was not scandalised by such suggestions. However, the important question is not how Jesus would have responded to such a suggestion, but whether self-interpretation is the last word in matters of personal communication, i.e., matters that concern truths about the speaker himself or herself. The answer would seem to be in the negative. The self-interpretation of a person in love, for example, is usually that s/he is unworthy of the beloved. But which beloved would take that seriously? If a beloved were to do that —other things being equal— that would amount to a Himalayan blunder! Self-interpretation in such matters has nothing to do with the assessment of the real situation, nor with the experience of the beloved. So, too, Jesus' self-understanding does not matter for the disciple's assessment of the master. A disciple can take that seriously only to the extent that his own experience is limited to the words of the master. It would be foolish of a disciple who has not only heard the master but has lived with him and in the process found the master to be the locus of his own God-experience, to ignore that experience and cling to the words —as foolish as the lover who takes the beloved's protestations of the unworthiness so seriously as to leave the beloved!

The answer to Caputo's rhetorical question ("How far can you go in disregarding the intention of the author if you also claim the author was divine?") is rather easy. The intention of the author may be disregarded to the extent that such disregard does not contradict the

message, but enhances and preserves it. The message in this case, we recall, is that God is on the side of the poor no matter what. Cannot Christianity make the claim to have at least preserved it? There would seem to be enough evidence to show —in spite of its numerous failures in living that message— that the Church has helped to preserve the message. Notice that this is not a philosophical or theological claim, but a matter of empirical evidence for a claim made on behalf of a two thousand year old culture. Further, I think, one could also make a cogent case to claim that this preservation and enhancement was made possible by the divinisation of the author. It is the neglect of that particular self-interpretation of Jesus that has made the life of the message possible in a manner that does not remain merely a intellectual goal to strive after in futility, but an existential message that is powerful enough to affect and direct the whole person of the disciple.

3.2 Undecidability as Existential Wavering of Faith

A Second way of understanding Caputo's notion of undecidability is in terms of an existential wavering of faith. If negative theology was concerned about the content of religious affirmations, here the concern is with faith life of believers. Indeed, there are places where this interpretation seems to be the most suitable. For example, Caputo remarks at one point that there never really was an Augustine or a Nietzsche who instantiated the religious and tragic views, "not if that means to have consolidated oneself entirely on one side or the other of the divide, to be

religious or irreligious, decidably without doubt" (RH 287). His reference to doubts here seems to point in the direction of an existential wavering of faith. Understood in this sense, Caputo is referring to that common phenomenon where even after having decided on one's life orientation, one encounters moments of doubt. Even saints are not exempt from this, as the life of the Little Flower makes clear. Even Jesus complained about being forsaken by his dear *Abba*.

But this would not give us anything like the radical undecidability to which Caputo lays claim. While people like Jeremiah or the Little Flower may undergo serious moments of crisis in their faith life, there can be no doubt about their basic life orientation. Jeremiah might even accuse God of having seduced him, but that does not prevent him from being a prophet; even his very accusation is an expression of his religious commitment. The same can be said of Jesus. In other words, their doubts are not of the type where they cannot decide between the religious and the tragic. On the contrary, they come across as people who have made the cognitive counterpart of what contemporary moral theologians call a "fundamental option" (see Podimattam 1986), and any wavering is to be seen in the context of that option. But Caputo's undecidability is so radical that no such option can be made.

Of course, the contention is that such fundamental options are not based on any criteria. If this be the case, it depends on what sort of criteria one is looking for: if the criteria be experien-

tial, there seems to be enough of them. Let us pay closer attention to Caputo's claim. Notice that he is not merely saying that *we* cannot decide between the religious and the tragic on the basis of what may have happened to Peter, or that *we* cannot even decide what happened to Peter. He is talking about Peter himself: that he would have Peter doubt whether Jesus' death had any point at all (other than a cosmic play of forces). If resurrection was indeed something like a realization of the impossibility of murder, there is no reason to say that Simon came to that realization without having gone through such thoughts and their opposite. But Caputo wants more. He wants Simon to remain there, "worrying about that [possibility]" "even after he had got the whole thing going" (RT 172). This is tantamount to saying that even if Peter had an experience of the impossibility of murder, that would not license him to decide between a religious view of life and a tragic one. This is what makes us suspect that perhaps Caputo is looking for another sort of criteria, which will be dealt with in the next section.

Not only is Peter not licensed to decide on the basis of his experience, but also remaining in such a state is the very mark of genuine faith for Caputo. Faith, he says, "is genuine only to the extent that it acknowledges the abyss in which we are all situated, the undecidability and ambiguity which engulfs us all." Thus to remain undecided, to remain on the fence and watch both sides and never to get to either side of the religious-tragic divide seems to be an a priori requirement of faith! Life of the believer, on this view, is a con-

tinual groping in the dark without the slightest ray of light to direct; or a monotonous flow without even a glimpse (much less, the reach) of any shore. There are no decisions, no stages, no progress, no regress. In the absence of a fundamental option, there would be no spiritual growth. There would be neither a Mother Teresa nor a Maximilian Kolbe! And what dreary world that would be! In the absence of a fundamental option for the religious view, one wonders what these words “faith” and “believer” are doing here. Do these words have any meaning? If a person must remain undecided about the religious view of life itself, I fail to see what meaning they could have.

To remain with such radical undecidability is to abdicate human responsibility. And a Simon who does that would not be the Simon of historico-critical method, but a Simon of Caputo’s Nietzschean nihilism. Although he denies radical hermeneutics to be nihilistic, the reason for considering it nihilistic is this: If truth is ‘openness to mystery’, *a-letheia* (as he says it is), then there remains the possibility that one who is so open may be touched by that transcendent mystery. And how could anyone who has been so touched continue to remain undecided? To remain undecided is equivalent to saying that one has not been touched, that the transcendent has made no difference in one’s life. Caputo’s love for undecidability, then, is in effect, foreclosing the religious option. When that possibility is left open, as he does against Sheehan, he cannot at the same time say that even when a person has been touched by the transcendent s/he

should remain undecided. Caputo’s Simon is not merely a psychologically defective individual incapable of deciding about the significance of experiences in his life, but much worse: he is one who, even after knowing the significance of his experiences, refuses to decide. This is equivalent to saying that no experiences are really of any real significance! All interpretations of life are equally valid or equally invalid!! This is what gives a nihilistic flavour to Caputo’s radical hermeneutics.

3.3 A Pre-hermeneutic Nostalgia?

If Caputo’s doctrine of undecidability can neither be properly considered a legitimate negative theology, nor a matter-of-fact existential wavering of faith, then we must begin to ask what exactly is going on here. What then is this undecidability all about? Why is it that even after finding the tragic view of life to be a weak-willed judge and the religious view to be the liberating one, Caputo still finds no way of deciding between them? What is the sort of criteria he is after? Let me suggest that his is a nostalgia for a lost world. The traditional metaphysical approach aspired to arrive at decisions under the illusion of having captured the presence (an unchanging essence of things outside language). Modern philosophy aspired to a pure reason outside the uncertain world of empirical knowledge and messy historical situations. It seems to me that Caputo is on the lookout for these very same things to base one’s decisions upon. And finding them absent, he returns the verdict of undecidability. How else to explain the suggestion that Peter, even af-

ter the experience he has had, must remain on the fence or that even one who finds that suffering is not as innocent as the tragic view makes it out to be, has no basis for deciding? Obviously, Caputo is looking for a criteria that exists somewhere out there independently of the humans. One positive indication that such nostalgia is indeed at work (besides the negative ones considered so far) is the terminology. Phrases such as “the world as it is” (taken from Nietzsche), the possibility of “suffering having no meaning” etc. (RT 171) seem to indicate a pre-hermeneutic ontology. It assumes a pre-fabricated world that is not humanly constituted, something called ‘meaning’ that is independent of human values, needs and desires (hence, can be found just like pearls in the sea, if only we look hard enough). Others have also noted the nostalgia underlying this postmodern style of thinking, although there is some difference of opinion as to how widespread it is.⁹

Such nostalgia implies a certain style of thinking inherited from the past, a style that has no place for the concrete and the existential. Terry Eagleton makes the following observation about postmodern literary theory:

‘meaning’ may well be undecidable if we view language contemplatively, as a chain of signifiers on a page; it becomes ‘decidable’ and words like ‘truth’ ‘reality’, ‘knowledge’, and ‘certainty’ have something of their force restored to them when we think of language rather as something we do, as indissociably interwoven with our practical forms of life (Eagleton 1983: 130, cited in Sarup 1993: 53).

Something similar can be said about Caputo’s philosophy of religion. There are two instances where his disregard for the concrete is manifestly present. One is his third objection, the hypothetical situation where Jesus’ message was roundly accepted. In that case, *Abba* (the message) would have been everything and Jesus (the messenger) would have been nothing. Then, Christianity would not even have got off the ground! This seems very reasonable. There would have been no Christianity in that hypothetical scenario because (a) such a revived Judaism would have carried on the *Abba* spirituality that Jesus exemplified in his own person. In effect, wouldn’t this mean that such Judaism would have become a substitute for Christianity? This is pure speculation, of course. And that takes us to our main point, which is the importance of actual history in the hermeneutics of religion. In the hypothetical situation envisaged by Caputo there would be no Christianity because (b) the Jesus of that scenario would not be the same Jesus to whom Christians trace back their origin. Their Jesus is a historical person who preached the *Abba* spirituality, was murdered in the process and precisely on that count, a Jesus in whom the disciples could experience that the Father was with the despised, the outcasts and the dispossessed, no matter what. Devoid of this concrete experience of murder and the subsequent realization of the impossibility of murder, the identification of the message and messenger would not have been possible. And there would have been no Christianity. But how is such a hypothetical situation relevant to the traditional Christian claim

that their origin is to be traced back to Jesus? Is anything more required to show that Caputo has not learned that important lesson taught by Wilhelm Dilthey, that the actual course of history is important to the human and cultural sciences?

The same lack of appreciation of actual history and culture is seen in his discussion of experiencing the impossibility of murder. After giving an excellent account of what could have happened to Peter, he goes on to add that such an experience is, in principle, available anywhere. It is “not localized in Jesus of Nazareth... or even Judeo-Christianity.... Everyone reveals the face of God. Jesus would not be the exclusive focus of our experience of the divine...[W]e are all of us, each for the other, a possible locus of the divine, a potential launching point for transcendence” (RT 167-68. italics original). Let us examine the claim. The issue is not whether Jesus is the exclusive focus of the divine. Such a claim would seem to go against the Christian tradition itself. (If God is omnipresent, anything in the cosmos can be a possible locus of the divine.) But Caputo may have a point here when seen against the background of the long tradition that exclusively exalts Jesus to the heavens. However, the claim, as it stands, raises an important philosophical issue. It concerns the conditions of the possibility of experience: given that cultures are different, do cultures of certain sort contribute to certain types of experience, while others to other sorts? In other words, is there an intrinsic relation between the nature of a culture and the sort of experience possible in that culture? Earlier,

while talking about cataphatic theology being an expression of certain religious experiences, I mentioned two types of experiences: those that are relatively independent of cultures and those that are intrinsically culture-dependent. But if Caputo is right, either there is only the former sort, or at least experiencing *another* person as the locus of the divine belongs to that type. It has no intrinsic relation to any culture.

There is a sense in which this claim is unobjectionable. In as much as cultures develop and change, a culture could change in a manner that makes it possible to have such an experience. But Caputo is not talking about changes in cultures; his claim seems to be that culture plays no role in this sort of experience. I wonder what sort of evidence is available for such a claim. Notice that this claim of *another* person being the locus of one’s religious experience (let us call it “neighbour mysticism”) is very different from what is known as “introvertive mysticism” where one’s own soul is the locus of such experience. While the fact of soul-mysticism occurring in both East and West and across large time spans may be pointed out as evidence for their culture-independence, is there anything comparable to show as evidence for neighbour-mysticism? If anything, pointers are in the other direction. If culture be considered the societal equivalent of individual’s habit, to talk about such culture-independence of neighbour mysticism would be like saying that the deadened conscience of a pathological killer can as much experience the divine in his victim as Mother Teresa did in the poor! Therefore, while agreeing with Caputo

that “every one reveals the face of God” in principle, I would add that not every one is capable of receiving that revelation; that would usually be possible only with the assistance of a culture.¹⁰ It is an appreciation of concrete human situations and the particularities of particular cultures that I find missing in Caputo’s philosophy. Devoid of it, there would be no possibility of change and development of beliefs, but only presumed eternal verities – whether of metaphysics, scriptural authority, or the intention of the historical Jesus, as in the present case.

In conclusion, then, postmodernism rightly recognizes that we have a multiplicity of language games, that there are no “objective” criteria out there to determine our choice of language games. If the world does not tell us what language game to play, if it is open to a multiplicity of language games, the obvious conclusion one would expect is that we need to choose the language games we want to play. But if Caputo be taken as a representative of postmodernism, we can say that this is not their conclusion. And the reason is that the postmodern view still remains a prisoner of the old objectivist picture. And this is its tragedy. It has seen the

constructive role of the subject in the making of the cosmos¹¹, but it is not yet willing to let go off the old. It still wants a universality that is independent of concrete human situations. And not finding it, they pronounce all language games to be on a par, with no way of deciding between them, which is nothing short of abdicating human autonomy and responsibility. If the postmoderns were to pay more attention to concrete human situations they would not only have found it inevitable to decide but also found that their decisions are neither arbitrary nor based on some criteria out there. Kierkegaard would have said: It is only someone who is not an existing individual who would find any undecidability between the religious and tragic views of life. Only a “pure reason” that watches both sides from afar can sit on the fence in this matter. An existing individual, whether it be a Jesus who had the *Abba* experience or a Peter who found the *Abba* to be on the side of the unjustly crucified one, would not find any undecidability in the matter. And if their decisions are to be branded “unreasonable” or “arbitrary”, what could these terms mean other than the non-existence of pure reason and the impossibility that the world can decide for an existing individual?

Notes

1. Caputo’s major works include, *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics*, NY: Fordham University Press, 1982; *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987 (henceforth abbreviated as RH), *Demythologizing Heidegger*, Indiana University Press, 1993.
2. Van Niekerk’s own quote is from Habermas.

3. For the purpose of this paper, I shall not differentiate between postmodernism and poststructuralism because of the close similarity of their doctrines. See Madan Sarup 1993. For a different view see note 9.
4. Prof. Patrick Byrne of Boston College holds (in personal conversation) that Aristotle cannot be blamed for this and that he had a much more limited view of logic. Irrespective of what Aristotle himself thought there can be little doubt that Aristotle has been traditionally understood in this manner. See, for example, Mortimer Adler's book, *Aristotle for Everybody*, 1978 p.140
5. Further, "Suffering does indeed have its rights; it is part of the overall 'justice' of life. Suffering is not guilty but innocent. Suffering belongs within the sphere of Anaximander's *dike*, part of its balance of forces." 283.
6. Caputo: 1990, abbreviated as RT. The books under consideration are Thomas Sheehan, *The First Coming or How the Kingdom of God Became Christianity*, NY: Random House, 1986; Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, tr. by Hubert Hoskins, NY: Crossroad, 1985. The following summary of their positions is entirely based on Caputo's article.
7. Caputo calls it "everyday conceptions". See, RH, p.268
8. Here is one indication of such denial: "For a radical hermeneutics God is always and everywhere, in all the epochs, essentially withdrawn from the world..." RH, 279
9. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, unlike Madan Sarup, would sharply distinguish the deconstructionists from the postmoderns and attribute this nostalgia only to the former. See, "Postmodernism," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2000. I do not think the postmoderns can be so easily be absolved of this nostalgia, although I shall not argue for it here.
10. I am assuming a certain relationship between nature and culture here. All humans, for example, may be said to have a built-in sense of the ethical equality of humans which can be considered human nature; but this nature is not so compelling as to constantly treat others in that manner. That needs training and cultural support which provides the individual with a rough and ready map of ethical behaviour such that each time one has to act s/he does not have to begin at zero point and see why the other must be treated with respect and dignity. For more on this point, see, George Karuvelil, "Hierarchy, Equality, and Liberation: Some Reflections on Indian Culture", *Jnanadeepa*, 2/2. A similar relationship holds between culture and religious experience.
11. 'Cosmos' is used here in the phenomenological sense. See, Peter Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion*.

Reference

Adler, Mortimer

1978 *Aristotle for Everybody*, NY: Macmillan.

Caputo, John D

1987 *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

1990 "Radical Hermeneutics and Religious Truth: The Case of Sheehan and Schillebeeckx," in Daniel Guerriere (ed.), *Phenomenology of the Truth Proper to Religion* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

2000 "Philosophy and Prophetic Postmodernism: Toward a Catholic Postmodernity," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, vol.LXXXIV, no.4 Autumn, pp.549-67.

Derrida, Jacques

1994 *Of Grammatology*, tr.by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass

Eagleton, Terry

1983 *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Marsh, James

1988 in *International Philosophical Quarterly*, XXVIII, 4.

Podimattam, Felix M

1986 *Fundamental Option and Mortal Sin*, Bangalore: ATC.

Rorty, Richard

1979 *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

1989 *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sarup, Madan

1993 *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, Athens: The University of Georgia Press.

Van Niekerk, Anton A.

1995 "Postmetaphysical Versus Postmodern Thinking: Retaining the Baby Without the Bathwater," *Philosophy Today*, 39/2.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig

1974 *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by D. F. Pears & B. F. McGuinness with the Introduction by Bertrand Russell, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.