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THE WEAKNESS OF GOD...
AND OF THEOLOGICAL THOUGHT FOR THAT MATTER
ACTA EST FABULA PLAUDITE

ACCORDING TO THE EMERGENT CONVENTIONAL WISDOM, postmodernism has now during this inaugural decade of the third millennium taken a “theological” turn. And the theological turn itself has supposedly followed the vector of a “weak theology” sutured to an affirmation of God who is both “weak” in the general sense that Paul suggested in 1 Corinthians and the true “weak force” that governs the universe, as John D. Caputo proposes in an effort to incorporate Catherine Keller’s theme of creation *ex profundis*, a creation that has nothing to do with the sovereign and commanding act of the Deity that dominates Western theology, but is more a kind of aleatory and anarchic “creativity” embedded in a world that approximates Deleuze’s concept of the *chaosmos*.

Caputo borrows his many motifs and of course his nomenclature from Jacques Derrida in his later writings and Gianni Vattimo, whose concepts of “weak thought” and “weak Christianity” comprise efforts to reconcile “faith” with the postmodern condition and the thorough secularization of European culture. There are also echoes of the work of Alain Badiou, who has given currency to “event” language once again while writing about the significance of St. Paul in what might be loosely described as a revival of the Bultmannian *Ereignis* theology that flourished in the first half of the twentieth century.

Caputo, however, has crafted many of the lapidary *bon mots* that generate the discursive apparatus for the present trend in what might be politely called *neo-theology*, mainly because it is not any particular strand of theological reasoning or conversation but a revaluing of the role of theology on the whole. “God, the event harbored by the name of God, is present at the crucifixion, as the power of the powerlessness of Jesus, in and as the protest against the injustice that rises up from the cross, in and as the words of forgiveness, not a deferred power that will be visited upon one’s enemies at a later time. God is in attendance as the force of

the call that cries out from Calvary and calls across the epochs, that cries out from every corpse created by every cruel and unjust power. The *logos* of the cross is a call to renounce violence, not to conceal and defer it and then, in a stunning act that takes the enemy by surprise, to lay them low with real power, which shows the enemy who really has the power. That is just what Nietzsche was criticizing under the name of *ressentiment*.¹

The expression “logos of the cross” drives us in the direction where neo-theology is all at once beginning to sweep us. I use the neologism “neo-theology” because it captures what today’s “theological turn” in postmodernism genuinely represents—a broad-ranging, eclectic, and undefinable ripple across Western intellectual culture to generate a glossolalia of faith-talk. And in an age where the meaning of “faith” has been overburdened by tiresome culture-speak, cultural criticism, and even “culture wars,” any kind of faith-talk will suffice. It relieves us from the hypocritical and tedious moralisms of the “Christian right” while not forcing us to confront the banality and ineffectuality of so much of the religious left.

It is ironic that the original *soi-disant* “postmodern theology” that was for the most part birthed in the 1970s as a “radical theology,” which sought to be “honest to God”—the title of a best-selling book a decade earlier—about the ubiquity of unbelief and the “fact” that God was dead, as Nietzsche’s madman had proclaimed, should now turn back to affirm God, albeit in a weak sense of the term. It is also ironic that what was once captioned as *thanatotheology* (a portmanteau word that has the implications of both a “theology” of the “death of God” and the “death” or “end” of theology itself), or as *a/theology* (Mark C. Taylor’s famous formulary for what Thomas J.J. Altizer had been up to and where Derrida-driven “theological thinking” was trending), should now be reconstituted as *asthenotheology*—a “weak theology.” How do we go from a dead God to a weak God, unless God only “appeared” to be dead, as the docetists once claimed?

Caputo implies that weak theology is the Christian answer to Nietzsche’s taunt that it is simply Platonism for the mob and a fantasy politics for churlish, deceitful, “venomous,” and resentful “weaklings.” As in the quote above, Caputo insists a weak theology is not at all *ressentiment*, but one honestly wonders. Did God, contrary to the rumor started by Nietzsche, not really die, but merely “pass out,” collapse on the floor and go comatose, or become brain dead and remain for well over a hundred years on life support technology? Do we

¹ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington IN: Indiana UP, 2005), 14.

have here what we would call the Terry Schiavoization of the Western theological tradition? And are we good Democrats or Republicans, in the latter case even passing federal legislation to forestall the inevitable, hanging on until some specially anointed expert can be interviewed on Fox News opining that people, or Deities, who have been brain-dead since the French Revolution might with reasonable probability be brought back to minimal conscious functioning over many years, thus ingratiating our parents (e.g., the theists) and sticking it to our spouses (e.g., the nihilists).

*To asthene*s tou theou ischyro*teron iblOn anthrOpon* – “the weakness of God is stronger than men” (I Cor. 1:25). What are the ramifications here? We must be mindful of what Paul perhaps really meant by *astheneia*, or “weakness.” The word in *koine* Greek means alternately “sickness,” “disease,” “frailty,” “impotence,” “timidity,” “disability.” Paul’s invocation of the term is more in keeping with how Nietzsche really understood it. Pauline theology postulates that the “weakness of God is stronger than men” for the simple reason that Christ had to die for God to show his final and full power, what we might call his *parousiac* power. Nietzsche, of course, held like most of his progressive nineteenth century congeners that the resurrection was not real; it was simply a “mask” for resentment, or “slave morality.” But in *The Antichrist* he makes the almost “orthodox” observation that Jesus died because he had to die. Jesus was the writer of new laws on new tablets. Jesus comes close to being the figure that Nietzsche himself mysteriously envisaged and vaunted—Zarathustra, the teacher of the “overman.” One wonders whether Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* was also envisioning parousiac power, but that this power could no longer be contained, as we find in the New Testament, except in some apocalyptic and “more than human” (or “more than Christian”) foreboding. God is dead. God died on the Cross—that was also Altizer’s argument. But God must die for one reason, as Zarathustra announces, so that the “overman” will live. When one says “weakness” on Nietzsche’s terms, one speaks of the “last man.” The last man and the overman are not only different than night and day; they are as different as the stench of decomposition and the lightning flash of creation.

As ruthless critic and skeptic of all “theologies” Nietzsche pioneered with Marx and Freud the hypermodernist “hermeneutic of suspicion,” as Ricoeur named it, ferreting out the hidden and truly *revelatory* substrate of all “ideological” formations that could be exposed by rigorous critique as diversions, deceptions, or dissemblances. Like formalism in modern art, this style of hypermodernism simply turned the perceptible, or sentimental, stratum inside out, contriving a funhouse mirror out of the venerable Aristotelian metaphysics of presence and showing the “phenomenal” to be enduring and the durable to be astoundingly contingent. In Nietzsche’s time the point could not be argued philosophically; it

had to be dramatized in the sort of pseudo-Wagnerian operatic parody that was *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Nietzsche's aphoristic—and as Deleuze would say “rhizomic”—undermining of the Platonic armature of constructive reasoning that Heidegger would later codify as the “overcoming” of metaphysics turned upside down in a unstinting volleys of cavalier gestures the “moral interpretation” (i.e., Kant and neo-Kantian liberalism) of the world. It is through Deleuze's re-reading of Nietzsche and through Derrida's chemical marriage of post-structural linguistics with Heidegger (before Saint Jacques himself became a self-conscious “writer,” and a “religious” writer, much like Kierkegaard) that postmodernism, and to a large extent “theological” postmodernism, is engendered.

Paul, on the other hand, was not anything approaching what nowadays we would call a postmodernist theologian. Virtually the whole Christian theological tradition - from Augustine and Calvin, from Aquinas to Tillich to Moltmann—has now been claimed as *proto-pomo* by somebody with an axe to grind, or a perhaps as part of a self-promotion scheme to give their once dusty scholarship new vigor and sizzle. Unlike Nietzsche, who is genuinely and historically by most older and responsible accounts the true progenitor of postmodern thought, Paul was not all preoccupied with the “ethical” category of weakness. Paul contended simply in a variety of key passages, perhaps in a perduring adaptation for evangelical purposes of the semiotic of pop pagan soteriology, that God had to “empty” himself, become a slave, and become weak in order to disclose paradoxically his authentic majesty and “sovereignty,” which happened at Easter morning. God “so loved the world,” as the Johannine formulation goes. It is not clear whether the ongoing Nietzsche-Paul dialectic truly has any relevance for what is at stake today in the movement of neo-theology. The issue seems to be whether the weak slave, the most wretched of the earth's victims who is object of the kind of galloping and gross injustice that Caputo—and by implication Derrida—have identified as the interpretative matrices for the call to “justice” and self-sacrificial love that instantiates all “weak theology,” can be considered the new *vox Dei* that whispers into our postmodern ear.

It is not clear that today's burgeoning cohorts of “weak theologians” comprehend either the paradoxes of Paul's rhetorical strategies or the unattenuated thunder of Nietzsche's assault on Christianity. The *piece de resistance* in both Paul and Nietzsche is power—not weakness. Nietzsche, who was a classical Greek philologist and not a Biblical scholar, misconstrued Paul's use of the symbology of the mystery cults and goddess worship to drive home for Gentile consumption his own sort of “post-Rabbinic” messianic triumphalism. The “modernism” and rigorism of the Pharisaic “moral interpretation” could not allow God to die. Paul's gambit was brilliant. A kenotic

theology served to immanentize the transcendent while transcendentalize the power of the immanent, a reversible field of difference which Nietzsche captures in the “choice” between “Dionysus and the Crucified,” and which Deleuze carefully articulates as an Alice-in-Wonderlandish “logic of sense.”

This reversible field was not simply the tacit dimension of all Mediterranean as well as Near Eastern “dying and rising god” symbolologies but the emergent semiology of the postmodern to well. In that respect Paulinism is ironically Nietzschean for its own time. Paul nearly succeeded in his own venue in breaking through to Nietzsche insight about eternal recurrence, if we go the route of interpretation Deleuze has taken in *Difference and Repetition*. Paul’s parallax view of wisdom and folly is commensurate with that of weakness and power. Power and weakness do not simply intersect and somehow fuse together in a strange new “weak theology.” The power of divine weakness, as Paul states, is aimed at “shaming” the putatively powerful. Resurrection power is an unheard-of power, and it is not easily “believed.” It is certainly not a matter, as Vattimo would say, of *believing that we believe*.

Resurrection power is both before and beyond both chaos and cosmos. It is not simply *chaosmos*, as that is the realm of novelty and creativity, as our process theologians are wont to call it. It is *transcendent* sovereignty, albeit a paradoxical and semiotically duplicitous form of sovereignty that not even Calvin with his *duplex cognitio Dei* could catch an inkling of. For Nietzsche, the “choice” between Dionysus and the Crucified must come down on the side of the former for the simple reason that the “logos” of the latter is a masquerading and “inverted” *Wille zur Macht*. It is an inverted will to power because it clings to a covert “moral interpretation,” the moral interpretation that the world is, and must (the Kantian *sollen*) be, “just.”

But, as Nietzsche says repeatedly, the will to power has nothing to do with justice. Nor did the Cross—an abhorrent act of injustice! For Paul, through “dying and rising” with Christ we appropriate this act of injustice through faith, whereby we are “justified,” that is made new, that is transformed when we have refused to be conformed to every temporal power constellation—strong and weak—in the world. Nietzsche’s “surrender” was not to creativity, but to the act and *power* of creation, which is what is really signified in the “eschatological” telos of *Übermensch*. But that is simply an “a/theological” way of talking about what Paul perhaps talked about. As we know, Nietzsche viewed and adduced everything about the Christian faith through the lens of late Lutheranism, which was already by the mid-1900s cloyingly neo-Kantian. Nietzsche looked around and saw that the ethic of bourgeois respectability and neo-Kantian *Pflicht* that was commonly called “Christian,” but was really a strange sort of European civil

theology that lasted until the guns of August 1914 began booming. Nietzsche understandably failed to grasp Paul. That is clear. But he understood the seduction of the moral appeal to the inherent virtue of the “weak in the world.” For Paul, “weakness” is not a surrogate for, or even an enframing of, the divine per se. It is the mask, or concealment, of the divine that is unmasked finally after the stone is rolled away.

Weakness as a sophisticated type of anti-power rhetoric—a preoccupation of the cultural avante-garde since Foucault, but prevalent throughout the liberal Protestantism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—masks, however, its own version of sentimentality, the sentimentality of *ressentiment*. Nietzsche was emphatic on that point. Anti-power disguised as a “theology of weakness” is the will to power of the powerless, a moralizing ontology, a juridicizing of God in the name of a call to “justice” that remains obscure enough to sanctify the machinations of those who resent not being in power, an episodic *trahison des clercs*, as it were. Nietzsche has a totally different take on the “dialectic” of Hegel’s master-slave relationship. “Thus in the history of morality a will to power finds expression, through which now the slaves and the oppressed, now the ill-constituted and those who suffer from themselves, now the mediocre attempt to make those value judgments prevail that are favorable to them.”²

We have actually come full circle here in about two score years, from the end of theology to the “weak” reassertion of theology (hence, neo-theology), from Nietzsche back to a new and academically domesticated Nietzsche, except that now everything that what Nietzsche reviled is “revived” as the *point d’appui* for the latest pulse of the most puerile pronouncement of postmodern religious thought. Nietzsche the good liberal! Nietzsche the good Christian! Nietzsche the postmodern suffering servant! An unfortunate victim of some social disease, or neurological disorder!

Is a logos of a weak God conceivable, or feasible? Yes, of course. But Nietzsche had his own quite formidable answer. “Under the holiest names I pulled up destructive tendencies; one has called God what weakens, teaches weakness, infects with weakness.—I found that the ‘good man’ is one of the forms in which decadence affirms itself.”³ Postmodernity, once the reputed bohemian grove of rakes and rowdies, nihilists and assorted naysayers, now is teeming with—indeed, it boasts an occupying army of—“good men,” and of course good women. Men and women with a moral conscience. Men and women concerned

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), 216.

³ *The Will to Power*, 33.

about injustice and the suffering of the planet's long-suffering "multitude," as Hardt and Negri have denominated them. Men and women who have a sophisticated pluralistic and cosmopolitan conscience. Men and women who have broken ranks with the neo-liberal and neo-capitalist politics of economies of oppression, not to mention after disabusing themselves of the cultural imperialism of all monotheistic and "fundamentalist" spiritual hegemonies.

"The end of Christianity" (and by extension the end of theology), Nietzsche writes, is "at the hands of its own morality (which cannot be replaced), which turns against the Christian God."⁴ The end of Christianity and the death of God—and the death of theology! This cultural "eschatology" of the West Nietzsche refers to as nihilism. What does nihilism mean? *That the highest values devalue themselves*. The aim is lacking; 'why' finds no answer.⁵ Nihilism sets in with "the most decent and compassionate age." For it "is in one particular interpretation, the Christian-moral one, that nihilism is rooted."⁶

Nietzsche is lavishly quoted these days, but rarely heeded. Vattimo claims even to have found "faith"- a peculiar sort of weak faith - again through reading Nietzsche.⁷ If Nietzsche, as Deleuze understood, is the cipher for all that is to come (though not by any means Derrida's *avenir*), for a radically open future that the early prophets of postmodernity in America as well as in France glimpsed with giddy anticipation in the events of the late 1960s, then it is to Nietzsche we must be faithful. Can anyone be a "Christian" and a "postmodernist" in this rudimentary sense, where Dionysian hermeneutics and a *theologia crucis*, which cannot be a theology in any modality that familiar to us - synergize as the "event" that Christian confession throughout the ages has proclaimed as the ultimate *aporia*, Tertullian's precept of *credo quia absurdum*, the "paradox" of incarnation that conjoins in defiance of all human platitudes and certitudes the powers of life and death, of annihilation and resurrection?

Caputo is definitely on to something when he propounds that there is a "call" of something, or someone, amid the chaosmos. It is not *resentment*, but is it worthy of Nietzsche? What, or who, do we hear calling us? Is it the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - and perhaps even Allah - as Derrida in his meticulous iconoclasm insinuates? Is it the voice of the "impossible"? Is it a weak voice that offers a sense of the presence of deity in the face of the "weak force"? The metaphor—or even the weakened Pauline metaphor—of weak divinity takes

⁴ *The Will to Power*, 7.

⁵ *The Will to Power*, 9.

⁶ *The Will to Power*, 7.

⁷ See Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans Luca d'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

us not to a genuine aporia, but to a kind of theological antinomy. A “weak God” is not really a god, or even the simulacrum of a God, even for Nietzsche. Gods are always about power—unexpected, unexpurgated, explosive, and exponential power. Krishna revealing himself to Arjuna as the light of a million suns! Time, Destroyer of Worlds! The voice from the burning bush! The stranger on the road to Emmaus!

As Nietzsche discerned, the assertion of a sovereignty in weakness constitutes a profoundly moral claim as well as the promotion of a covert moral category that persists in upholding a moral interpretation of reality, while functioning as a conceptual fig leaf for the deep-seated Nietzsche-phobia of all Western theologies that are at once cultural and “political” theologies. It wraps power in weakness. If we are to exorcize once and for all our Halloween fear-fantasies of Nietzsche *redevivus* as the triumph of the amoral Nazi will, we must begin to read Nietzsche and reading and sharing in the *fröhliche Wissenschaft* of such a reading.

It has been said that every four hundred years or so the writings of Paul are re-read and rightly read, whereupon Reformation or religious revolution happens. It might also be said—when he wrote his book on Nietzsche Deleuze archly said it—that every fifty years or so Nietzsche is re-read and rightly read, whereupon a radical break with the tired old radicalism that has now gone comfortably and cozily mainstream inaugurates a new epoch of thought. The old postmodernism now purrs away day in and day out in our laps of intellectual luxury as every new philosophical *fashionista* from the Continent makes their grand tour of the American university circuit. Everything that was said forty years ago continues to be resaid, and everything that was discovered and forgotten is rediscovered as a new idiom for “doing theology” in the “new old-fashioned way.” *Deus infirmus*, the weak God lives, or is he dead? As Nietzsche said, he had to die. Dead are all gods, including, weak gods and their assorted *logoi*. Now that postmodern theology has truly ended in a supernova that will remain bright only for a brief time, we must ask ourselves what comes “after,” a *Nachtheologie*, or perhaps a *Nachttheologie*, to be sure.

For Nietzsche, the answer must come from the creators, not the “creative.” But all creators are destroyers. “A light for you, too, you best-concealed, strongest, most intrepid, most midnightly men?”⁸ Can one be a Christian and a Nietzschean? That is not a “hermeneutical,” but an *eschatological* question.

⁸ *The Will to Power*, 550.

Can the great “nay” become the great “yea”? Yes, yes. Yea verily. When we say “Christ,” do we not say *overman*, the one who *lives*?

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