

## SEEING JESUS AS A DECONSTRUCTIONIST

An earlier version of this paper was presented to a Northwestern College faculty colloquium in November 1998 under the title: "Postmodernism and Deconstruction: A Christian Perspective." The student philosophy club at the University of Central Florida asked me to present the paper in 2004. I gave them the title: "Christianity and Postmodernism." Apparently thinking the title too bland, they advertised it as "Seeing Jesus as a Deconstructionist." I like that title so I'm sticking with it in this somewhat revised version.

The paper's function is frankly apologetic—a defense, not of Christianity as such, but of the legitimacy of a postmodern/deconstructive reading of Christianity. Such a defense is needed because of the very negative press these movements have received from the political and Christian "right" (often the same). Examples of this can be found in a convocation address given by Carl Zylstra at neighboring Dordt College some years ago, and more recently by Douglas Groothuis's trashing of postmodernism in his book "Truth Decay." Groothuis seems to suggest that Christianity requires a Neo-Platonic metaphysics and epistemology. (A much more positive approach is taken by James A. K. Smith in his book "Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?" in which he wants to take the main pomo/decons to church. Smith's book, in addition to his tedious writing style—so different from his mentor, John Caputo—carries a lot of baggage from his earlier association with Francis Schaeffer and his current association with the Calvin College philosophy department. Further, when he does get postmodernism into church, it is not evident how his worship suggestions follow from postmodernism.)

The terms "postmodernism" and "deconstruction" are often used interchangeably as in Caputo's claim that "postmodernism is deconstruction." I see them as closely related and overlapping, but still, at points, distinguishable. In thinking about postmodernism, my main source is Richard Rorty. In discussing deconstruction, my main source is John (Jack) Caputo and Jacques Derrida as mediated by Caputo. I should add that Merold Westphal whose name is familiar to Christian philosophers, contributes to both of these movements.

First, then, let me characterize postmodernism. First, a suspicion with regard to metanarratives (Lyotard) or, as we say, the hermeneutics of suspicion. (The opposite would be the hermeneutics of trust, exemplified, for example, in those who believe everything George Bush says.) Second, a rejection of modernity's confidence in reason and science. Third, an emphasis on the contextual and perspectival nature of all thinking, knowledge and truth. Fourth, philosophy is primarily narrative rather than argumentative, more like literature than like science (in fact, science is more like literature than like science). Fifth, it is anti-realist and rejects the correspondence theory of truth; reality, especially social reality is constructed rather than discovered. Finally, there is no way out of Plato's cave. We may visit various caves (language games, vocabularies) but cavelessness is no option. We have no access to a transcendent vision of reality that is, as Rorty once noted, "the dream at the heart of philosophy."

The main role and contribution of postmodernism in people like Rorty, I think, is to take philosophy off its pretentious and arrogant pedestal and to create an opening, a space, for something else, an opening for faith. I do not think there is anything uniquely Christian, as such, in much of postmodernism. This is particularly true of Rorty, whose dismissal of religion is rather glib. Nonetheless, I think his humiliation of philosophy has been a significant contribution and accounts for the hostility with which the power centers of philosophy have responded to him.

I think deconstruction is more promising for developing a Christian perspective, and I turn to that now in a consideration of the work of Jack Caputo. (I once suggested to a class that we might view Rorty as preparation for Caputo in much the same way that John was a preparation for Jesus.) Before elaborating on his reading of deconstruction and its relation to Jesus, I want to comment on his remarkable book, a book on ethics than which none greater can be conceived, "Against Ethics."

He begins by saying, "I am against ethics." After acknowledging the apparent dangers in such a claim, he goes on to point out that ethics is too easy on us. It tries to provide our moral life with guardrails and safety nets so that we can have some assurance that we have fulfilled the law and met our obligations. Ethics allows us to feel good at the end of the day. But the moral life is not safe, says Caputo. It is risky always, because "obligation happens" and keeps on happening so that we are surrounded by obligations, more than we can ever meet. How do we find our way amidst this never ending stream of obligations? How we yearn for a guardrail, a safety net. But "my satellite is out. I wait daily by my phone for a call from Being but it never comes." We need to work our way through these never ending obligations on our own with, as Kierkegaard would say, fear and trembling. While I suspect that most evangelicals will be uncomfortable with Caputo's sense of a lack of moral guidance, his point is that our obligations to suffering others go far beyond what most ethical systems or rules would demand of us. So Caputo's "against ethics" is not a case of amorality, but a conviction that we may never be complacent that our obligations have been met.

Moving on to characterize deconstruction, I would emphasize four points. First, a deep concern for "the other" (l'autre), especially powerless, neglected, or suffering others. It is important to note here that "the other" may be a person, a group or class of persons, an animal or animals, or even alternative but ignored interpretations of texts, historical events, or whatever. And Caputo observes that the very institutions designed to guarantee justice and fairness inevitably fall short. Consider what he says about the "law."

The law is a schema that tries to cover as many cases as it can, as fairly, equitably, and even-handedly as it can. But it never quite can. The law inevitably falls short of individuals because it cannot see what it is aimed at . . . about which it systematically keeps itself in the dark. Deconstruction, which is "justice", on the other hand, keeps its eye peeled for the little bits and loose fragments easily lost sight of by the law. Deconstruction is on the watch for the exclusion, the victims, the injustice produced by the law, which even the best laid laws inevitably produce. (p. 87, AE)

**And concerning animals:**

**Isaac wished Abraham could get over this thing, that he would not put so much stock in blood offerings. Isaac knew that his mother hated this business too. It was beyond Isaac how the Lord of Hosts was served by all this. . . . The animal too is “flesh”, suffers, and is accordingly a locus of obligation. (AE, 140,145)**

**Without a specifically religious context, Rorty shows a similar concern for the others in his suggestion that moral progress is more a matter of sensitivity to those who suffer rather than a quest for principles, and his further claim that we gain such sensitivity as we increase the scope of those we consider “us” and shrink the scope of “them”.**

**Second, deconstruction may be viewed as a process of de-centering and re-centering. Imagine a page with a text written on it. The text represents the center of power, the ruling interpretation. But there are also margins on the page. These represent what is not in the center of power, i.e., the marginalized. Again, what is marginalized here may be a person, a group or class, or an ignored interpretation of a text or historical event. Deconstruction wants to de-center what is in the center so as to make room for what is marginalized. Just as Jesus must be seen as one who cares immensely for neglected suffering others, so He was clearly concerned to de-center the powerful so as to re-center those who are of no account. The Pharisees, for example, are de-centered in order to re-center Samaritans, publicans, sinners, lepers, the blind, widows, and orphans. As Caputo puts it so well in his essay “Elements of a Postmodern Christian Philosophy” (probably his most distinctively Christian work):**

**The cast of characters in the kingdom is a cast of outsiders, a cast of outcasts: sinners, lost sheep, prodigal sons, tax collectors, the lame, the possessed, etc. Everyone who is out of sight, outside, outlawed, in short, everyone who is plain out. They are the ones with whom God has sided, the ones to whom the kingdom belongs, the poor ones who enjoy God’s special favor.**

**Third, a rejection of onto-theology—the hijacking of God for the purposes of metaphysics. This constitutes a rejection of the God of the philosophers, of God as Being, in favor of the God before whom we can sing and dance. One may also see this as an attempt to de-Hellenize theology in order to rediscover the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith.**

**Finally, I would characterize deconstruction as an emphasis on hospitality without limits. Here Caputo borrows heavily from Derrida who notes that hospitality involves not only the welcoming of those we invite and expect, but more importantly the welcoming of the uninvited, unexpected, and perhaps unwanted. Derrida also plays off “host” against “hostage”, noting that those whom we host and who host us are in a sense also being held hostage.**

**It seems obvious, then, as we think both about Jesus as portrayed in the gospels and about deconstruction as here outlined, that Jesus may very properly and insightfully be viewed as a paradigmatic deconstructionist. If Jesus may be seen as a deconstructionist,**

**His church's record in this area is fragmentary and inconsistent at best. Caputo observes that right wing, reactionary Christianity "has nothing to do with Jesus's prophetic fervor and his stand with the weakest and most outcast among people." (Deconstruction in a Nutshell, p. 43.) Caputo's harshest criticism is directed at Christians who turn "the crucifixion into a profitable business" and who wrap the cross in the flag. But that merely points to the need for the deconstruction of organized religion in order to make room for faith. "Deconstruction is a blessing for religion, its positive salvation. It discourages religion from its own worst instincts by holding the feet of religion to the fire of faith. Deconstruction saves religion from fanaticism and triumphalism. It helps religion examine its conscience, counseling and chastening religion about its tendency to confuse its faith and knowledge . . . which is what spills blood."**

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