Moving Words

Theology and the
Performance of Proposing

Joseph Bessler

Thinking in the Wake of the Death of God

The edge of Paul Tillich's comment that "the proper response" to any claim of God as an object "is atheism" still cuts deeply into the embedded assumptions of most people who say they believe in God.[1] While located explicitly in his 1959 collection of essays, *Theology of Culture*, the view is consistent with the body of his three-volume work in *Systematic Theology*. To read Tillich carefully across the span of his career is to realize that he was attempting to expand both the audience and reach of theology. Unlike Karl Barth, who sought in the face of World War I to draw theology back from public discourse and to protect it from the gross failures of modernity as seemed evident in World War I, Tillich argued that theology needed to be engaged more deeply with the world.

Invited to address conferences on depth psychology and philosophy, gracing the cover of *Time* magazine, and footnoted in U. S. Supreme Court rulings, Tillich's existential theology involved an expansion of theology's conversation partners to the voices, theistic and not, of major humanistic philosophers, artists, and literary critics. That expansion is most clearly evident in the way he spelled out his view of theology as a correlation of question and answer. It is important, said Tillich, that one attend not only to the substance of a question that is put to theology, but to its form (e.g., as an existential question of meaning). And that when answering the question, the theologian must answer in the form of the question. This basic methodological move helped open theology to the world. Arguing that atheists were often rejecting forms of theism, which in fact needed to be criticized as merely mythological (and one sees here his lively connection with Bultmann), Tillich sought to demythologize theology by retrieving for Protestantism the philosophical tradition of Christian theology. To dramatize the newness and transformation of that classical model, however, Tillich stood the model on its head. While virtually all classical theology,

1. Tillich, *Theology of Culture*, 25.

informed by Platonism, viewed the journey to God as an ascent to the upper reaches of reality beyond the clouds and stars, Tillich argued that God is the "depth dimension."[2]

Nonetheless, Tillich's emphasis on Being, or the Ground of Being, or what in *Systematic Theology* he called "being itself," retained a metaphorical preference for stability. Insofar as Being holds everything—that is, insofar as everything participates in Being—then Tillich still privileged the stability and the preference for traditions that seem to follow from it. That Being continues to represent stability indicates how deeply the philosophy and theology of the West remained captive to the metaphysics of the unchanging, of stability, of what Derrida would call "presence." And so, Tillich's provocative comment—which was not all that provocative to specialists—helped raise the question of the Death of God in a yet more profound way.

My teachers at the University of Chicago, David Tracy and Langdon Gilkey, were both deeply influenced by Tillich, and both were deeply involved in discussions surrounding the Death of God.[3] Both in their own way spoke of theology's new, post-Tillichean experience of increasing alienation from public, secular life. Gilkey's own remarkable formulation of theology's bewilderment at its new situation deserves repeating here:

> No more than five years ago the "younger theologians" seemed to have a comfortable basis of their task, fashioned by the great theologians of the 20s, 30s and 40s. . . . We saw ourselves as a generation of "scholastics" whose function would be to work out in greater detail the firm theological principles already forged for us. We knew from our teachers what theology was, what its principles and starting point were, how to go about it, and above all we were confident about its universal value and truth.
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> The most significant recent theological development has been the steady dissolution of all these certainties, the washing away of the firm ground on which our generation believed we were safely standing. What we thought was solid earth has turned out to be shifting ice—and in recent years, as the weather has grown steadily warmer, some of us have in horror found ourselves staring down into rushing depths of dark water.[4]

And Tracy, in his opening chapter of *Blessed Rage for Order* (1975), could write: "What seems needed is a new look at the possibilities of a revisionist theology which will be appropriate to the central meanings of the secular faith we share and to the central meanings represented in the Christian tradition."[5] For

2. Notice the openness here to the philosophical project of Martin Heidegger, which one will also hear in the transformative work of Karl Rahner on the Catholic side.
3. It was Gilkey who helped name what was emerging as the "Death of God" theology and who encouraged several of the seminal thinkers to be in closer touch with one another.
4. Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language*, 8–9.
5. Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*, 14.

his part, Charles Winquist, in the final chapter of his book *Epiphanies of Darkness: Deconstruction in Theology* (1986), drew attention to the collapsing confidence in the public character of theology on the part of both Tracy and Gilkey, even as each was committed to theology as a public task.[6]

I wrote my dissertation on Gilkey and his longing for a more empirical theology—one that paid attention to what he called the *felt dimensions* of human experience as it opened up the space or dimension of the theological. He was not speaking of proofs for the existence of God, but he was looking for a domain of human experience that would be appropriate for illuminating the meaning of God language. Like Tillich, Gilkey himself was drawn to "depth" metaphors; he envisioned human experience as a layered phenomenon, including dimensions of the aesthetic, the moral, the political, and the theological. I loved Gilkey's desire to tie the theological to ordinary experience, even as I kept discovering Gilkey's fingerprints, as it were, on the shaping of the religious experience he was describing. What Gilkey argued he was *finding* in experience, looked increasingly to me like he was putting it there.

It was Tracy's rethinking of Tillich's model of theology as correlation, however, that proved more influential for the discipline. Tracy argued that Tillich's correlational model of question and answer should be re-imagined: correlation as conversation. And to explore the significance of that shift he turned to Hans Georg Gadamer's (student of Heidegger) analogy of understanding as playing a game—that you give yourself to the "to and fro" of the game so that the game plays you.[7] In a way analogous to the activity of playing a game, then, Tracy argued that correlational theology should be understood as a conversation in which we allow the *to and fro* of the conversation to play us. Insofar as the goal of theology is greater understanding, this hermeneutical model calls for everyone's voices to be honored, while also encouraging all voices to listen well and carefully to others. In truth, there is something of the mystical in Tracy's appropriation of Gadamer's game analogy; the giving of oneself to the game—to be played, as it were—suggests a kind of apophatic norm to hermeneutics.

What the irenic Tracy had been reluctant to acknowledge, however, is that part of the enjoyment in playing a game is playing to win. People bring strategies to games—strategies they learn over time—that function as a kind of point of view when approaching the game, or the game of interpretation. Such strategies of engagement underscore the importance of *players* playing the game and, thus by analogy, of constructing—and not just receiving—their interpretations.

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6. Winquist turns to Victor Turney's analysis of liminality to locate the discourse of theology in the ensuing period, from which we have not yet emerged. Winquist encourages theologians to embrace the marginality of this liminal period, using the discourse of deconstruction as a way of entering more deeply into the rupture that has occurred not only between theology and its external publics, but within theology itself.

7. See Tracy, "Theological Method," 41.

Tracy had thus been somewhat reluctant to acknowledge the role of argument in theology. In several places, for example, he allowed the point that argument may be needed to interrupt a conversation in order to work out particular problems or issues, but he would not acknowledge the rhetorical, persuasive dimension of theology itself.[8] It is as if Tracy did not recognize that this own works were attempting to persuade others about the nature of the discipline of theology, and that he was very good at it!

Tracy's model of theology as conversation and as hermeneutics echoes—in a slightly less obvious way—Tillich's focus on the stability of being. Because hermeneutics is the study of interpretation, it acknowledges that tradition provides relative stability for this approach to theology. Tracy wrote of interpreting the *classics* of the tradition—a term that has surfaced in a number of criticisms of Tracy's work, insofar as "classics" tends to refer to a predominantly Western, white, male tradition of authorship and authority.

Thus, Tillich and Tracy and Gilkey's commitments to public theology retained a commitment to a model of God tied conceptually to the language of stability, of sovereignty, to what Derrida would call "presence." And that commitment to the logical consequences of stability, of tradition, of sovereignty, of conversational presence, and so on, functionally sought to hold on to a model of God that was no longer intellectually persuasive.

My own interest in theology as a rhetorical discipline comes in part from my eventual critique of Tracy's own avoidance of rhetoric.[9] But my interest in rhetoric was encouraged earlier, during my studies as an undergraduate at Northwestern University and its School of Speech, where in its department of Communication Studies I encountered the discipline of rhetorical studies. Thomas Farrell's work on rhetoric and rhetorical theory helped me imagine the continuing work of theology in what I take to be a more postmodern direction.[10] Contrary to our frequently held assumptions that "rhetoric" means empty ornamentation, Farrell demonstrates that rhetoric is a public discipline about questions and issues that are uncertain, but that yet require an audience capable of rendering judgment.

By adopting a more rhetorical footing for theology, I understand it as a discipline that does not issue from a stable, secure ground, but from the midst of uncertainty and instability. Yes, theology, like all disciplines, has been shaped within the flow of histories, cultures, and understandings of reality. And the theologian is always operating in two overlapping, but distinct, domains. Insofar as the theologian is involved in the scholarly analysis and critique of the ongoing life of the discipline of theology, one is engaged in a kind of rhetorical

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8. See Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other*.
9. Again see Tracy's book, *Dialogue with the Other*.
10. Farrell, *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*. See especially chapter six, "Rhetorical Coherence: Refiguring the Episodes of Public Life," in which he contrasts "conversation" and "rhetoric."

criticism. Insofar, however, as the theologian is offering a proposal for how to understand not only the discipline but also the theological as such, then one is engaged in the poetic work of engagement, seeking to provoke, confront, and cajole whoever will listen with a proposal for practicing life together. Because the proposals of theology—not just constructive/systematic theology, but also works of fundamental/philosophical theology—are always rhetorical in character, they emerge not only in the midst of rich historically, politically, and socially configured contexts but also, and inevitably, as partial constructions—both in the sense of being fragmentary and in the sense of leveraging interests. I am therefore very grateful for the work of Jacques Derrida, and to other philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Jean Luc Nancy, and theological interpreters such as Mark L. Taylor, Jack Caputo, and Catherine Keller, who help us imagine the work of philosophy and fundamental theology in the midst of instability.

Spotting the Theological in the Political

I turn now to a relatively brief reflection directly related to a broader book-length project on which I am currently working, tentatively titled *Moving Words: Theology and the Art of the Political*. In it I will argue that works of theology are rhetorical, constructive proposals, moving words to orient life within and beyond communities of religious affiliation. In this project I argue that theological speech is more similar to political speech than to scientific speech. Theology is less concerned with the rational inquiry of nature than it is with forming communities and establishing, maintaining, and re-creating a life-giving *polis.* This is not to say that theology should not be interested in science or in contemporary philosophy, for by engaging these disciplines theology maintains its claim to wisdom, which is to say a discourse that is not merely popular or conventional but one that strives to encourage an ethic of public conversation and engagement at a serious level. Great theology, in my view, encourages that public engagement with science and philosophy because of its vision *for* the *polis*, for the kind of dynamic exchange that keeps a community growing, off center, creatively unstable, and perhaps impossibly open to the impossible— akin to what Derrida has suggested.[11]

In my book project, I begin by using contemporary acceptance speeches, delivered by political candidates at their party's nominating conventions to show how the flow and coherence of their speeches move through five topics similar to those named by Christian theology—the goodness of persons created in the image of God, the flawed and estranged character of human beings from our capacity and promise, the core proposal for a new beginning grounded in the transformative presence and activity of Jesus the Christ, the emergence of a new

11. See, Derrida's essay, "Justices."

and growing community that embodies the presence and transformative practice of that Jesus in compelling and inviting ways, and a vision of future well-being not simply for one's own community but for the healing of the world.

Bill Clinton's 1992 Democratic Convention address, for example, begins by affirming the American Dream, interpreting that phrase in part through the language of an "expanding middle class," and affirming his own participation in that experience and dream. He then in a second move begins to call into question the leadership of then President Bush, and here one sees Clinton turning to the language of America's status "falling" in the world, and of Bush himself caught in "failed" policies. These apparent slides announce a deeper problem, that Bush was himself out of touch with the aspirations of the middle class.

On cue, Clinton then turns to the third move, announcing that what is needed is a "New Covenant" between Americans and their leaders, a covenant that will enhance the interests of a thriving middle class even as it asks and demands new things of us. Much of the center of the speech explores the dynamics of his proposal, and as he concludes that portion, he then in a fourth move launches into the kind of community that America can yet build if we will join with him. In this new community there will be a new/old ethos to this community—one that respects all others and does not play the "them" game—"them the gays, them the minorities, them the liberals," because, says Clinton, "this is America, one nation under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all."

In his fifth and final move, Clinton, having already noted that President Bush had "mocked" what Bush called "the vision thing" of the Clinton campaign, turns to a vision of the future. He concludes his address by inviting his audience to imagine the future of the nation by imagining the future of his daughter, Chelsea—and of all our sons and daughters—and the responsibility we owe them to build a strong and vigorous nation.

While at one level the speech plays out very conventional themes—and alludes, however consciously or unconsciously, to the topics of a Christian theology—the speech also offers a proposal, a vision, for how the community should both see itself and see its relation to the world. Clinton cannot make the American people choose, much less internalize, this proposal, but he has to make it in ways that are both strategic and poetic. While it is commonly said that candidates campaign in poetry but govern in prose, it is important to remember that the promises a candidate makes in poetry will be remembered when that candidate is governing in prose. In other words, the poetry must already risk its real convictions or be damned by a future court as having been merely manipulative.

My point in suggesting this parallel is *not* to endorse any political dogma of "American exceptionalism" nor to show the dependence of political speech on the religious or theological in a way that would demonstrate the transcendent status of theology. Instead, my point is to make evident that every theologian's coherent interpretation/construction of the major topics of theology is *rhetorical*

in character, that it makes a proposal, inviting a variety of audiences, including audiences it may not be aware of—for that is the way of discourse—to imagine ways of being together, ways of engaging others.[12] And like the political, to which I am aligning/comparing theology, the proposals of theological discourse aim to influence the direction and orientation of communities that will listen to it. And that play of discourse, not unlike the political itself, can be fairly contentious.

The reason that theological proposals differ is because they are constructing the coherence of these topics in strategic ways to leverage different concerns, (e.g., concerns about the nature of correct, orthodox belief, or the existential meaning of faith, or concerns about equality of persons—and thus about justice—or even for the earth itself perhaps, or the need to speak of the end of God-Talk, and so on). They differ, therefore, in their intentionality and in the discourses to which they are disposed to listen. In the wake of this last generation's explosion of theological voices, I confess to being somewhat amused and annoyed by the idea, voiced by some, that it makes no difference whether one is a liberal Christian, for example, because one is *only* giving intellectual cover to far-right conservative Christians. Such a claim is analogous to saying that it makes no difference to be politically progressive in the U.S. or France or Malaysia or China, because you are thereby *only* giving intellectual credibility to far-right parties within that national political system.[13]

More importantly, what I also want my analogy to illuminate is that the topics of theology, as such, are not *sui generis, not* unique; they do not name a fixed or even relatively bounded, and therefore closed, set of understandings, as many orthodox and postliberal theologians would like. Rather, these topics, especially when engaged together (implicitly or explicitly), enact a coherent structure for *proposing* models and orientations for the purpose of showing a possible way into making a common/uncommon future. At stake in these public proposals is not only the always dangerous terrain of communal identity formation, but also the way in which the boundaries of a community are engaged, for example, guardedly, openly. To borrow a phrase from Jack Caputo that we will explore a bit later, the Christian names of these topics cannot control or contain the event of proposal "sheltered" within them. Yet, understood as a discourse akin to the political, theologies risk proposals that invite others to take them seriously.

12. And by offering fairly conventional Christian understandings of those topics above, I in no way mean to narrow or limit the range of possible interpretations of those topics. Contemporary works of liberationist, political, feminist, and various post-modern theologies, including works by Westar friends such as Don Cupitt, exhibit the marks of these topics precisely because these works, however different, are offering proposals for our attention and possible commitment

13. See Harris, *The End of Faith*.

Once one begins to sees the topics of theology as enacting a proposal that performs the processes of both identity-formation and boundary engagement, while shaping as well an understanding of the milieu in which these processes have import, then one begins to realize not only why there are such differences in contemporary theology, but why orthodox and more mainstream theologies through much of the twentieth century have explicitly avoided the language of rhetoric with respect to theology. They did not want to acknowledge in any way that theology might be "grounded" on anything other than fixed truth; they did not want to acknowledge that theology was "partial"—representing in effect some cultural interests over others; they did not want to acknowledge the slippery slope of their own positions, hence the inclination toward anathematizing others and towards an emphasis on both truth (as unchanging essence) and a high-wall view of the boundaries separating the true community from the false. What we might call theology's *anxiety* of its rhetorical character is nowhere more evident than in the topic I have yet to discuss: God.[14]

The reason it is helpful, in my view, to begin with theologies' varying constructions of the topics of theology, rather than with God, is because by attending to these constructions we can see the contextual and the rhetorical character of theology. In addition, we can begin to see better how God has functioned throughout the history of theology in the West to both stabilize the shifts in theological rhetoric and to minimize any attention to the play of an ungrounded rhetoric. As early Christian thinkers gravitated toward imagining their Christian view of God in terms of Plato's eternal, unchanging forms, they sought not only to explain in some philosophical sense the contingency of all that exists within time. They also sought to claim that Christian faith provided for those who joined the company of Christ a point of connection, a lifeline, to that eternal, unchanging realm—and thus, to something better than what other cults were offering. After all, the emergent Christian theology had to *propose* something, and something at once distinctive yet also within the range of cultural intelligibility, in order to gain a hearing. And so early Christians grappled—and grappled differently—with how best to link faith in Christ with an enduring truth.

What creeds called forth by emperors sought to achieve was a stability of truth claims that mirrored the belief in an unchanging God. Creeds sought to limit discourse, to hedge it within a oneness, a unity to be celebrated and empowered, while simultaneously creating an otherness to be damned—at least until it should be graced to enter into the imperial oneness of orthodox truth. While there is considerable play within the political and intellectual range of that imperial and philosophical discourse, it is the discourse within which the-

14. Cupitt, *Emptiness and Brightness*, names this anxiety of universal contingency in a very accessible way.

ology steeps for about a thousand years, before it is stretched by dramatically new knowledge and new political circumstances.

The emergent forces of modernity would challenge the political model of kingship and the classical assumptions of knowledge and philosophy. Yet, those same new forces retained an anxiety of change, the anxiety of rhetoric. Institutions of philosophy/science, whether early on in Descartes' meditations, would seek a kind of Archimedian point from which to view the world objectively, providing an epistemological foundation of certainty and a virtual mirror of nature onto which new sciences would confidently build. Later on, as in Newton's universal law of gravity, which provided hope and fuel for other discoveries of universal knowledge, modern institutions were eager to show that they were the faithful guardians of a universal truth appropriate for a rational creation. God remained quite important, if now secondary, in this new situation. The relations of church and state that flowed from the wars of the Reformation now blessed the rise of nationalism, and the adventures of colonial expansion. Churches, however, anxious over the loss of their old prerogatives, would grasp at any and every failure within the modern experience—as in Karl Barth's use of World War I—as a proof of the need for a God who was, in Barth's language, "totally Other." Despite Barth's own flamboyant rhetoric, the study of rhetoric would be dismissed throughout much of the modern period as decoration and as mere flowery speech. Its own rebirth in both culture and theology would come in the 1960s and 1970s, when we all became reacquainted with the shaking of the foundations.

As stated at the outset of this draft, the tendency to think about God in terms of stability reaches into the mid-twentieth century. And even as it is clear that Gilkey's sense of solid ground melting under his feet conveys deep anxiety, there were already intellectual resources emerging, insisting that our previous attachments to metaphysical and linguistic stability were both unwarranted and illusory. For example, in 1962 Jacques Derrida began what editor Peggy Kamuf has called "one of the most stunning adventures of modern thought," by publishing his translation of Edmund Husserl's *The Origin of Geometry* with a "long critical introduction."[15] Not shrinking from this new situation, Gilkey sought in his 1969 book, *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language*, to re-stabilize God language as a depth dimension of ordinary speech.[16] But, it would be in the discovery of the ungrounded character of language and reality that a new philosophy and theology of instability would respond to Gilkey's anxiety over "the rushing depths of dark water."

15. See Kaumf's preface to *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, vii. Michel Foucault published his first major work, *The History of Madness*, in 1960. Jean Luc Nancy would begin his publishing career in 1973. Don Cupitt wrote *Taking Leave of God* in 1980.

16. Gilkey, *Naming the Whirlwind*.

Moving from Stability
to Instability, Three Proposals

What better way to indicate this turn to instability than by taking up three quite different proposals that exemplify this shift. As my treatment of each will be relatively brief, I will not attempt assessments of these various moves, but try only to capture the way in which the shift to instability occurs. The three texts are *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World* (2011) by Mark Lewis Taylor, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* by Catherine Keller (2003), and *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (2006) by John Caputo.

Taylor wastes no time in introducing his readers to what he calls "the theological." Writing in his preface, he tells us one should not confuse "the theological" with the "guild discipline" of theology, which is a "credentialed profession, especially in the Christian West, that typically reflects on doctrines of a religious tradition and fosters an ethos of transcendence."[17] While later in the book, Taylor will acknowledge that he is a member of that professional guild and proceed to suggest lines of re-interpreting the major topics he had earlier sidelined. In this introductory moment he wants to illuminate a distinction between what the guild typically does in its conventional—read "stable"—practice with something far more fascinating and less stable:

> The theological is a specter haunting Theology, is already unsettling it, perhaps dissolving it, disseminating it anew among other languages and other disciplinary discourses—on the way to revealing something much more significant than Theology's structured ethos of transcendence. The theological strikes a "neither/nor" approach to the binary of transcendence/immanence, but recasts both of these in a milieu of what Jean-Luc Nancy terms "transimmanence," a haunting and ghostly realm of seething presences. It is a milieu within which we must reckon with a new belonging of the theological and the political to one another.[18]

Informed here by Avery F. Gordon's work *Ghostly Matters: Hauntings and the Sociological Imagination* (itself influenced by Jacques Derrida's *The Spectres of Marx* [1992]), as well as by Nancy's philosophical notion of "transimmanence," Taylor announces a significant disruption to theology-as-usual. Although other theologians will see in this move the attempt by Taylor to engage in the work of fundamental theology, they will also see him trying to avoid discussing this milieu of "transimmanence" apart from any sense of stable foundations.

The theological, for Taylor, begins far away from any conventional language of God. In fact, Taylor uses the following lines from Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* as the epigraph for his preface: ". . . the entire parapenal institution, which is created in order not to be a prison, culminates in the cell, on the walls

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17. Taylor, *The Theological and the Political*, xi.
18. Taylor, *The Theological and the Political*, xi–xii.

of which are written in black letters: God sees you." Taylor comments on those final words:

> The theological is not this phrase; it is the seething discourse and practice that is alternative to that marking and making of the cell's agony. It envisions a liberatory and different way through the weight of the world. It is the way those who endure imposed social suffering "weigh-in" with an alternative to the world that is often weighted against them and buttressed by the discourse of transcendence.[19]

In line with his own previous works in the area of liberation theology, Taylor sees conventional theology in this passage and throughout the book as part of the problem—wedded too frequently to interests of colonial power and wealth, and utterly insensitive to those persons and groups suffering at the margins. What is relatively new for Taylor is his use of categories, not only "transimmance," but also this image of the "weight of the world" from the philosophy of Nancy, who provides the intellectual analysis of an unstable view of reality. Nancy's essay, "Being Singular Plural," in which he rejects any and every attempt to get a stable discourse of Being, is itself a kind of political ontology, disallowing either a kind of glomming onto plurality or a reductionism into singular particularities. By insisting on the interplay, the dynamic milieu of these three terms at all levels of existence, Nancy destabilizes all claims to settled or sovereign power.

Taylor also uses Nancy's complex reflections on the "weight of the world," by which Nancy seems to explore the spacing and pressures of bodies in extension within a metaphysics of *Being Singular Plural.* Taylor uses this language of weight and his own sense of "shifting" weight to help name the way pressures and oppressive forces pile up on those who live at the margins of society—including those who are tortured. In responding to this horrible weight of oppression, Taylor looks at the production of art from within and among the circles of those who are oppressed, and he finds here expressions of what Nancy calls "transimmanence." With this term, Nancy envisions a transcendence of immanence, but not transcendence in the sense of ascent out of the domain of weight. Rather, "transimmanence," according to Taylor (commenting on its treatment in Nancy's book, *The Muses*):

> is a passing, and passage, about "coming, departure, succession, passing the limits, moving away, rhythm. . . ." Transimmanence's passing and moving, thus, is not some tranquil floating. It can also be a place of vertigo, often described as facing an "unknown," again however, an unknown *within* the world, self, society, and history, the unknown within passings and passages of and through a singular plural world.[20]

19. Taylor, *The Theological and the Political*, xiii.
20. Taylor, *The Theological and the Political*, 130–31.

The theological, according to Taylor, emerges in this complex space where those who have suffered profoundly from the weight of the world, weigh in with their own traumatized voices in ways that call forth the possibility of the world shifting, weighted differently. The theological is this-worldly, but it does not collapse into the always-already-said, always-already-done of immanence. Instead, it shifts, it turns, it weighs in, it proposes a turn upon the failed models of past transcendence. Taylor's significant nod to the rhetorical comes in part as he acknowledges that the site of his own exploration of those who bear the weight of the world rhymes with the Christian topic of the crucifixion of Jesus. How Taylor begins to reimagine the significance of that scene, I will leave to the reader.[21]

Catherine Keller's *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* opens with phrases affirming the very watery depths that Gilkey glimpsed "in horror":

> And darkness remains over the face of *tehom*: the deep, salt water, chaos, depth itself. Out there. In here. Meditating two centuries ago on "how everything begins in darkness," Schelling intimated that "most people turn away from what is concealed within themselves just as they turn away from the depths of the great life." . . . We are trained to fear the darkness. "What terrifies you?" asks [Luce] Irigaray of her masculine interlocutor. "The lack of closure," she surmises. "From which springs your struggle against in-finity." What might happen if we ceased to fight, if we let the undertow draw us toward the depths?
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> The darksome waters bear so many denigrated faces: formless monsters, maternal hysteria, pagan temptation, dark hoards, caves of terror, contaminating hybrids, miscegenation and sexual confusion. Queer theories, groundless relativisms, narcissistic mysticisms. The collapse of difference. Excess, madness, evil. Death. Amidst the aura of a badness that shades into nothingness, how can we rethink the darkness of beginnings? This book is about that depth, its darkness, its face and its spirit. What kind of a subject-matter is that?[22]

It is as if Keller had read Gilkey's metaphor of solid ground turning to "rushing depths of dark water," and said to him, "Yes, that's exactly where we need to be. What are you afraid of?" Keller wants to demonstrate that it is possible for theology to be at home in the midst of instability; in fact, she wants to argue that this is theology's proper home.

In order to make that argument, she begins by identifying the traditional formula of *creatio ex nihilo* as the problem, tracing its roots to the loathing of women, the loathing of the body, and the loathing of change. Aligning its notion of a good creation with the ordering command of a Father god, the early church fathers inserted into their doctrine of creation a word that Genesis had not used: *nihil*. The Hebrew *tehom* ("the deep") is not *nihil* ("nothing"). By inserting this

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21. See especially Taylor, *The Theological and the Political*, 125–58.
22. Keller, *Face of the Deep*, xvi.

"nothing" into church doctrine, however, the early fathers of the church sought to provide a clear theological foundation. A good God created the world *ex nihilo*, from nothing; how powerful is that? And how well ordered must the creation have been, being created by such a good God? Comments Keller:

> Theologies have tried to draw the line at "God," to say that, whenever the creation starts, it is preceded by absolutely nothing—nothing but the pure and simple presence of God the Creator. Certainly this "nothing but" of a non-negotiable starting-line lends a useful sense of foundation. It offers protection from the tidal waves of a chaos for which we are never prepared; and from the slow lapping erosion of meaning. Is it possible, however, that the foundationalisms themselves have proved more dangerous than that which they have damned and damned?[23]

To argue against that stable foundationalist doctrine of creation, Keller will turn 1) to her own previous work in process theology on the dynamic notion of "continuing creation," 2) to the still unsettling discourse of feminist theology (pointing out the link between those dark waters of chaos and women's vaginal waters), and 3) perhaps most importantly to the linguistic play of Jacques Derrida's *différance*:

> The affinity of tehom to Derrida's *différance* lies there where the latter leaves its "trace" in writing. Might we read its elusive "always already" in the salt water deposited in the second verse of the Bible? We might then track this precreation trace back out through the prolific play of difference flooding "the creation," unfolding in its light and dark, its swarming multitudes, its "creeping things innumerable." Spurred on by the more recent grammatology of Derrida's beginnings, we need no longer derive those swarming, fluttering, bifurcating multiples from the undifferentiated Origin of a simple Creator. . . . In other words the attempt to discover the true origin is doomed. It only brings us to the boundary of our own language. . . .[24]

By framing the West's fascination with and commitment to stability, to foundationalism and sovereignty as unrealistic *avoidance*, as a damming up of the unconscious and strategic blocking out of the unworthy dark-sinned hordes at the gate, Keller shows that far from being the basis of a just theology of creation, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is part and parcel of the Fall, as it were—the Fall into the madness of order. To correct this deep theological problem at the heart of Christian theology, Keller argues that we must relearn to navigate and negotiate the complexity of what at least some ancient voices knew as "the deep." Once again, instability is not presented as a mere pose but as the milieu in which we live and move and have our being. If we can begin to own this truer state of affairs, Keller believes we have reason to hope:

23. Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 10.
24. Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 10.

> If we discern a third space of beginning—neither pure origin nor nihilist flux—
> its difference translates into another interstitial space: that between the self-pres-
> ence of a changeless Being who somehow suddenly (back then) created; and the
> pure Nonbeing out of which that creation was summoned, and toward which its
> fluency falls. That alternative milieu, neither being nor nonbeing, will signify the
> site of becoming *as genesis*: the topos of the Deep. Can we tell the story this way:
> that *tehom* as primal chaos precedes and gives rise to the generative tensions of
> order and disorder, form and formlessness? Might *tehom* henceforth suggest the
> chaoid (so not necessarily chaotic) multidimensionality of a bottomless Deep:
> the matrix in which the creation *becomes*? In which the strange inter-fluencies
> of creatures—in ecology, predation, genetics, cultures—crisscross the abyss of
> difference?[25]

In Keller's language of "Can we tell the story this way?" one can hear her
proposal to rework and replay differently the classical *topoi* of Creation and
Fall and the place of humanity and human discourse within her reformulation
of the "milieu." It is important to reiterate that here, as with Taylor before, and
Caputo to come, Keller's rhetorical proposal does not emerge from an argument
based upon sure foundations and settled truths. No, Keller's proposal emerges
precisely from an understanding of *realizing* (the word *reality* itself seems too
fixed here) as chaotic, unstable, boundless. Any discourse of God, therefore, in
Keller's proposal will not link to a discourse of stability but to an association
with instability.

One might argue that this move to philosophy on the part of Taylor, Keller,
and Caputo (still to come) suggests an anxiety over the foundations of their own
discourse, but that is why the point above needs reiterating. At stake in these
turns to philosophy is the argument that the *appearance* of stability, of stable
presence and persistence, is itself a construction emerging out of the play of
language and discourse. A better *discipline* for all disciplines, they suggest, is
to attend more carefully and more persistently to this endlessly rhetorical real-
izing of unstable proposals.

Jack Caputo's *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (2006) expresses his
desire to enter "into dialogue with the groundbreaking theology of creation to
be found in Catherine Keller's *Face of the Deep*."[26] Like her, he also has biblical
texts in mind as he begins; not the creation account, as with Keller, but Paul's
references to weakness in 1 Cor 1:25 and 2 Cor 12:10. Yet it is Caputo's indebted-
ness to Derrida's philosophical journeys into instability that helps him explore
and re-imagine the core topic of theology, God.

To begin his process of deconstructing, which, to be clear is not at all the
same thing as denying, theology's discourse of God, Caputo notes a pivotal
distinction between "names" and "events." "Names," claims Caputo:

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25. Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 12.
26. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 18.

contain events and give them a kind of temporary shelter by housing them within a relatively stable nominal unity. Events, on the other hand, are uncontainable, and they make names restless with promise and the future, with memory and the past, with the result that names contain what they cannot contain.[27]

Informed it seems by something like J. L. Austin's distinction between *constatives* and *performatives*, Caputo echoes a distinction that Derrida made in a discussion of J. Hillis Miller's analysis of the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins. About Miller's analysis, Derrida writes:

> What is remarkable in the Millerian deciphering is the analysis of a *double performative*: After having elucidated the doctrine, that is, the constantive knowledge, the ontotheology, the theology, or the epistemology that serves as the presupposition or foundation of the performative stratum of the poetic act, one must bring to light a still more profound foundation. The stratum of the foundation has a constantive appearance, to be sure. But it becomes a credible consensus only through a more originary engagement and thus through an initial performative, through the preperformative of a pre-event that precedes and prepares everything.[28]

Once again the move is from relative stability to relative instability. While it seems that names, or constatives, provide the stability for the sake of events, or performatives, Derrida challenges that assumption, pointing out that what *appears* as a constantive actually presupposes prior performative events. Those preperformatives, as Derrida calls them, have something of a more ghostly character, as does Caputo's further description of *events*:

> Names belong to natural languages and are historically constituted or constructed, whereas events are a little unnatural, eerie, ghostly things that haunt names and see to it that they never rest in peace. . . .
>   Although a name contains an event, an event cannot in principle be contained by a name, proper or common. There is always something uncontainable and unconditional about an event, whereas names, like "God," belong to the conditioned and coded strings of signifiers. The event is the open-ended promise that the name can neither contain nor deliver.[29]

With this unsettling distinction between name and event, Caputo opens a space between what he calls "strong theology" and his own weak theology. By "strong theology" Caputo means that God is the "nominator of an entity," that is, the name of a being named God, or the name of being itself. Such theologies, says Caputo, grounded as they are in the name of a sovereign, are often accompanied by "corpulent articles of faith, a national or international headquarters,

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27. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 2.
28. Derrida, "Justices," 235.
29. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 2.

[and] a well-fed college of cardinals to keep it on the straight and narrow."[30] By "weak theology" Caputo means the event that is sheltered within the name of God. Resisting the language of Being and of God's sovereign power and even the way strong theology has "power up its sleeve" when it speaks of the weakness of God,[31] Caputo underscores the importance of the unstable and the undecidable:

> The name of God is the name of an event transpiring in being's restless heart, creating confusion in the house of being, forcing being into motion, mutation, transformation, reversal. The name of God is the event that being both dreads and longs for, sighing and groaning until something new is brought forth from down below. The name of God is the name of what can happen to being, of what being would become, of what rising up from below being pushes beyond itself, outside itself, as being's hope, being's desire.[32]

So if God is other than being yet an event sheltered in some sense in the language of being, how does Caputo propose to proceed?

> Suppose we dare to think about God otherwise than metaphysics and metaphysical theology allow? Suppose we say there is at least this much to the death of God: that the God of metaphysical theology is a God well lost and that the task of thinking about God radically otherwise has been inescapably imposed upon us? Suppose we say that metaphysical theology has been given enough time to prove its case and that the time has come to think about God in some other way? What then?[33]

Moving away from metaphysical stability, Caputo is also clear that he is not trying to resolve the debate over whether there is "an entity called God." "About God as an entitiative issue, I have no opinion."[34] Caputo can make this statement, almost casually, because the understanding of language with which he is working both assumes and explains the disconnect between words and things. Enter the term *différance*:

> *Différance* is a word Derrida uses to describe the general condition that besets us all . . . in virtue of which we must all make our way by way of the differential spacing of signifiers. Boy/toy/joy, king/ring/sing, and so forth, produce the significant effect they do by reason of the differentiated spacing, either phonic or graphic of these signifiers. Whether you say king or *roi* does not matter so much as whether, inside the language game you are playing, the rest of us can discern the difference (or the "space between") king/sing or *roi/loi*. In general that sort of thing holds, *mutatis mutandis*, not only for linguistic signifiers but also for the concepts they signify, and more generally still for the whole range of our beliefs

30. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 7.
31. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 8.
32. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 9.
33. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 23.
34. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 10.

and practices, cultural and institutional, all of which come under and are structured by this differential spacing.[35]

As many have known for some time, there is a genuine cultural revolution at work in this turn to language. For theologians and the faith community it means that God is no longer understood as a being or Being itself operating outside of language to which the name "God" refers, hence the importance of the distinction between name and event.

Nonetheless, as indicated in his language of "daring" above, Caputo believes a weak theology might also be a forceful one. He italicizes the "*existential intensity*" of passion at work in the "modesty of [t]his proposal." "Indeed, as an event, the name of God overtakes us and overturns us, uprooting and unhinging us, and leaves us hanging on by a prayer."[36] In a way that reminds me again of Gilkey's project seeking the "renewal of God-language," Caputo's proposal involves just such a re-imagining, only now within a dramatically revised understanding of language and metaphysics. His proposal will re-work not only the language of God and the critique of the notions of sovereignty and being, but also of creation (with assistance from Keller's work), as well as topics on Jesus and the kingdom of God and eschatology.

Conclusions

While my own reflections here are partial and somewhat fragmentary, I hope that one can see that these three theological works I have been exploring—in only a very cursory way—are immensely helpful for a project designed to make evident theology's own structure of proposal. With the help of these authors, one can see afresh that the topics of theology—creation in the image of God, sin, christology, ecclesiology and eschatology—are not names of fixed doctrines, but that they instead, and especially together, shelter an event of proposal that has within it the potential and capacity—through its interaction with an audience—to be a *polis* transformative of the ways we not only speak, but listen, and act, and move in a widening world.

There is always a temptation in our late modern and postmodern worlds to be suspicious of any discussion of God, and thus perhaps a tendency to read into these three texts a defensive posture, a desire to locate a place, a topos, in culture where one still might defend the existence of God as an object of worship. Each of these three texts respond to that challenge by calling into question the adequacy of our own established metaphysics and offering, as well as an alternative, more unstable understanding of language and the milieu of our world shaped by moving words. It is from within this revised and

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35. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 24.
36. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 11.

re-imagined understanding of our cultural and global milieu that these think-
ers pose the question of "the theological," "the Deep," the "Weakness of God,"
as possibilities, as proposals for how one might both re-imagine the meaning/
consequences of such language, as well as how one might best locate oneself to
encounter the impossible event of God.

What becomes clear in these proposals is not only that they are moving away
from the rhetoric of establishment, foundations, and stability and moving in the
direction of ontological instability, but that this move to the uncertain is also a
move toward the political margins, away from established power in order to
evoke a new kind of credibility with a new kind of audience. There is an aware-
ness of a shift in creative power away from the dominance of Euro-American
empires and toward a more complex play of identities in a new world that
is not only post-modern but post-colonial. And these shifts already portend
potentially dramatic transformations as our world enters into the depths of
a transition-resisting empire and embracing a new play of differing voices.
Precisely in this new metaphysical/linguistic insecurity that can yet shelter us,
we can learn both that we need to listen carefully to others' witness of life and to
others' proposals, but also to insist on the importance of collaboratively crafting
proposals as part of a shared obligation to negotiate real differences within and
across boundaries together.

If my current project, *Moving Words*, will make a helpful contribution to
understanding the rhetorical/proposal character of theological discourse, it will
do so in no small part to the kinds of projects I have sketched here. For these
kinds of creative and courageous works help all of us see our world in a new,
unstable, uncontrollable, yet hopeful and purposive light.

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