

A Short Précis of *The Weakness of God and The Insistence of God*¹

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I grew up in a culturally Catholic world and was steeped in Greek philosophy and the Catholic middle ages. I deeply admired the brilliant adaptation of Aristotle made by Thomas Aquinas, and I readily embraced Heidegger's phenomenology, which had clearly been touched by the robust realism of Aristotle. Heidegger was what I had been looking for: a critique of modernity that did not leave me stranded in the thirteenth century. As the ice of the Council of Trent thawed under the warming fires of Vatican II, Heidegger dared to criticize modernity, not by going back to something premodern, but by going forward to something new. I admired the breakthroughs made by Husserl—whose "intentionality" echoed with the medieval *esse intentionale*—but not the Neo-Kantian transcendentalism and cognitivism of his phenomenology. The antecedent of phenomenology for Husserl was Descartes; the antecedent of phenomenology for Heidegger was Aristotle. That's the difference. I plunged into Heidegger, at first *Being and Time*, but I became still more fascinated by the later Heidegger's meditation on "*Gelassenheit*," with its echoes of the mysticism of Meister Eckhart, which became the subject of my first book.²

Derrida was the pivot. He reshaped everything for me and planted the seeds of the formula "radical hermeneutics."³ I added the qualification "radical" in order to shield the word from Derrida himself, who dismissed hermeneutics as a kind of code-breaking, a way to find a master key or *legendum*. Real hermeneutics, hermeneutics with teeth, I said, is our task *just because* we lacked the key, *just because* there is no final interpretation, *just because* interpretation never stops. A final interpretation is not an interpretation at all but a dogma. Interpretation goes "all the way down," to the roots. Hermeneutics is constituted in an affirmative way by the absence of a master key, which is not a defect, something

1. The following is an excerpt from the Preface of the English translation of the Spanish edition of John D. Caputo's *Weakness of God*. The Spanish edition is entitled, *La Debilidad de Dios: una teleología de acontecimiento* (trans. Raúl Zagarra; Buenos Aires: Promoteo Libros, 2014).

2. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought*.

3. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project*.

missing, but the open-endedness that keeps interpretation constantly on the move. The absolute future is always open, always coming, and we cannot see it coming. We must dare to take a risk, to keep the future open. We must dare to hope. Hope is the real audacity. Radical hermeneutics is a hermeneutics of hope.

But all along, no matter what path I have pursued, I did not know how *not* to speak of God. No *epochē* or reduction could keep me safe from God. Beyond any waiting for God or Godot, God was always waiting for me. No surprise that when I discovered Heidegger's later writings my first question was, is this not a kind of mysticism? When I discovered Derrida, what held my attention were his prayers and tears. It seems inevitable—the optical illusion of retrospection—that I would someday write a book on God and theology, a book in which, as Catherine Keller put it on the back cover of *The Weakness of God*, I would “come out of the closet as a theologian.” That implied, quite rightly, that I had been a closet theologian all along. It is unnerving to see one's whole life contracted into a blurb for a book.

The Weakness of Theology

“Weak theology” poses a stumbling block to the philosophers because it takes the name of God seriously and refuses to relegate it to “religion” or some confessional body, even as it poses a scandal to the confessional theologians because it displaces the name of God in favor of something going on *in* this name. While it was Vattimo who first made use of the vocabulary of weakness (*pensiero debole*), I myself had first adopted the word “weak” from Derrida's references to Benjamin's “weak messianic force.”⁴ That in turn drew my attention to St. Paul, for whom the “weakness of God” confounds the strength of the world (1 Cor 1:25). Weak thought is thinking deprived of recourse to an underlying metaphysical support. The deprivation, the *debilitas*, means that the strength of metaphysics has withered and thinking has been left to its own devices—that is, to interpretation. Weak theology is, beyond that, a theology that travels *sans papiers*. It carries no letter from the authorities. It ventures forth to speak of God but without divine warranty, reserving the right to ask any question about what calls itself Reason or Revelation (both capitalized and in the singular).

But then what is left? Nothing—but the experience of life, the interpretation of life/death, of the traces of life and death, like so many lines in the sands of time, that take place in and under the name of God. Weak theology follows the trace of God, of the name (of) “God,” by realizing that it is forced, like the rest of us, to read the signs along the way, to make its way solely by way of its hermeneutic skills, forced to pay its own way with the coin of what insight it

4. Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, 55.

has to offer. There is no Big Being out there, no Big Book, no Big Institutional Body to back it up. Its force is weak, its voice reduced to the whisper of the persuasiveness of what it has to say. It has no powers of intimidation, no means of retaliation, no powerful institutional apparatus, no police, no army, no central headquarters, no money, no candles, prayer books or incense to enforce its will. Weakness is here a hermeneutic category; it describes the weak force of interpretation. It lays down the sword of the absolutes—the inerrant books and infallible decrees—that confessional theology carries at its side, in favor of peace, of the weak force of what it has to say.

A weak or radical theology has to do with what is going on *in* the strong theologies, the underlying forms of life (Wittgenstein) or modes of being in the world (Heidegger). Weak theology is a hermeneutic of the “events” (Derrida), the promises and desires that stir inchoately within our restless hearts. Strong theologies report back to their confessional communities. Weak theologies report back to anyone willing to listen to stories about life and death, whoever and wherever they are. Because they deal with underlying and more elusive matters, the weak theologies are varied and ambiguous, nascent and underdetermined, excessive and overdetermined, indeterminate, and inarticulate. They claim neither supernal nor supernatural provenance. Forged from below, from the natural and human materials of life in time, deprived of both speculative-metaphysical support and supernatural warranty, the audacity of weak theology is to be, without further pretense, a poetics—a constellation of metaphors and metonymies, of rhetorical tropes and unexpected linguistic turns, of narratives, allegories, and parables, whose cumulative effect is to give words to an underlying form of life.

The Weakness of God

God, the name of God, is the name of an event, of something that happens to us, or rather, of something going on *in* what happens to us, in and under this name. Weak theology proceeds from a double “reduction”—in the phenomenological sense—first, from God, from the name (of) “God,” to an event, to the call of an event, and then from that call to the response. Weak theology means to suspend God in favor of the event, to dare a reduction to reading the traces of the event, to hearing the echoes of the call. The call calls, whether we “believe in God” or not, whether we have even heard this name or not, which implies that this event might surface elsewhere, outside the confines of religion and theology and their “God.”

The event belongs to a purely hermeneutical order. The event is not God. It is not the name of God. The event is what is harbored *in* the name of God, the chain of effects that are set off by the disseminative energy of the name. The “event” (*événement*) is what is coming (*venir*) and coming (*revenir, revenant*), what promises and is promised, what calls and is recalled and is being called

for. The event is the invitation, the solicitation, the provocation, of something coming, something in-breaking or incoming (*l'invention*). The event is the coming of something unforeseeable, unprogrammable, something other (*l'invention de l'autre*), quite other (*tout autre*), which shatters our horizon, our expectation, which takes us by surprise. As such the event belongs not to the future present, the more or less foreseeable and predictable future, but the absolute future, the one we cannot see coming, where all we can say is, let's see what comes (*voir venir*). The event is impossible, not a simple logical contradiction, like a square circle, but *the impossible*, something whose coming shatters the hermeneutic horizon of what we thought was possible, throwing the world into confusion. Nothing guarantees that this gift will not be poison, that the event will not be a disaster. If the event is a promise, it is no less a threat; the promise of new life also threatens us with death, which is why the name of God so often serves as an alibi for murder. When it comes to the coming of the event, nothing guarantees a happy outcome.

When I speak of the possibility of *the impossible* ("with God all things are possible") we must proceed with caution, remembering that this is hermeneutics, not metaphysics. I am not saying, and this is a misunderstanding I want to cut off, that the name of God is the name of a being who does impossible things. I am not even saying that it is the name of a being who calls. God is not an agent-being who does, or refrains from doing, certain things for which God is praised or blamed. The call is not the doings of a being; it lies in what is being-called in the middle voice; the call is called *in* the name of God. So *the impossible* is a possibility that gets itself called in and under this name, an invitation to do the impossible, like a faith that moves mountains. But as Heidegger shows, it is constitutive of the call in a positive way that we are unable to establish the ontic identity of the caller, if there is one.⁵ So there is a cascading chain of audacity here: the name of God is not the name of a being, even of the highest or first being (*ens supremum, primum ens*), who does impossible things. It is not the name of the Being or ground of beings, as in Hegel and Tillich, which is just more metaphysical, post-theistic panentheistic theology. Nor is it the name of the being beyond or without being (*hyperousios*) of mystical theology, behind which one usually finds Neoplatonic (hyperousiological) metaphysics. The audacity of God is this: God does not exist—as a being, as the being of beings, as a hyperbeing—God insists. That is the formulation of *The Insistence of God*, which is a sequel to *The Weakness of God*. God has the audacity to not exist, to be content with a call, or rather, with something that gets itself called in and under the name of God, insinuating itself into the sinews of factual life. God has the audacity to leave the existence and the strength to us. That event

5. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, §57; Derrida, *Given Time*, I: *Counterfeit Money*, 6.

is what is going on *in* (Deleuze) the name of God, what is being promised and mourned (Derrida) by it. In *The Weakness of God* the existence of any such being, or Being of beings, or hyperbeing, called God is put out of play. So when I say that the name of God is the name of the possibility of the impossible, I have in mind an entirely hermeneutical matter, where the possibility of *the* impossible means the event that shatters the horizon of expectation, where existence is our responsibility.

Weak theology is a hands-off hermeneutics that keeps its hands out of the pockets of metaphysics in order to understand, to stand under, the event. Having purely hermeneutic force, not entitative power, the name of God lacks the boom and bombast of a supreme and omnipotent entity that can draw (other) entities out of nothing, intimidate poor Job, issue divine commands from on high, all the while reigning sovereignly above and outside that order. An event, its voice ever soft and low, can always be prevented, refused or repressed, ignored or distorted, and all this with impunity. The call does not keep an army at its beck and call. It is a force without force, a force that cannot be enforced.

Radical Christianity

The Weakness of God is focused on the hermeneutics of the kingdom of God whose coming is announced in the preaching of Jesus, and here more often than not I am following the lead of Dom Crossan and the Jesus Seminar. Weak theology makes no attempt to conceal its debt to the NT. The unabashedly confessional turn taken in this book—my weak theology proposes a radical Christianity—does not contradict what I am saying about the distance between a weak (or radical) theology of the event and a strong confessional theology; it illustrates what I mean. My idea in the book—and this is a point I fear I have failed to make clear—is not to start another war, this one between strong theologies and weak, and to put the two in strict binary opposition. On the contrary, the first thing we must do in deconstruction after making a distinction like this is to deconstruct it, to show that the distinction is porous, that the borders cannot be policed, that there are all kinds of contaminating contacts. Radical theology is not some kind of pure ahistorical undertaking, and events are not essences that are empirically embodied in the confessional theologies. No theology, no thinking, weak or strong, drops out of the sky. Every radical theology has an historical genealogy, a materiality, a family tree, a pedigree, a debt to one confessional tradition or another, in accord with the demands of a hermeneutics of factual life. Here, as everywhere, the strength of a distinction made in deconstruction is found precisely in its weak points, the points of intersection between its two terms.

Accordingly, a radical theology is the becoming-radical of confessional theology, a way of radicalizing a particular theological tradition, the very one(s) we

inherited, in which we find ourselves always and already. A radical theology whispers radical thoughts in the ears of the confessional traditions, haunting them, giving them no rest. It does not exist; it insists. It does not exist in itself and it cannot take place in an historical vacuum. It is not pure reason but a pure parasite. It is parasitic on the inherited confessional theologies, where the parasitic function is, like many parasites, salutary, necessary for the health of the organism: it releases the event that a concrete confessional theology contains (possesses) without being able to contain (limit), like a “container of the uncontainable” (ἡ Χώρα του Αχώρητου). A radical theology discloses the event the confessional theology encloses, that it “harbors,” which means both to conceal and to protect. It lets the event burn through the confessional theology and make itself felt. This is risky business, which is why confessional theologians time and again incur the wrath of the confessional institutions. When they break through to the event, or the event breaks out in them, either way, this breakthrough—their audacity—is viewed with alarm by the confessional powers that be, for whom the inbreaking event is uncanny and unorthodox, heterodox and heretical. Heretics and mystics are thus important resources for radical theology, heroes of audacity, its patron saints and sometimes, alas, even martyrs. In the past such audacity could cost the heterodox their lives; nowadays it can cost them their livelihoods.

The event harbored in the Christian tradition(s) is the kingdom of God. The kingdom is what is to come; it has already begun to come in the life and death of Jesus. The entire vocabulary of “come” (*viens*) and “to come” (*à venir*) in deconstruction bears the mark of Jewish and Christian messianism. In weak theology the parables about the kingdom of God that Jesus tells, the parable that Jesus himself *is*, is the paradigm. Antiquity is rife with stories of men born of a woman but fathered by a god, but unlike these god/men Jesus does not slay his enemies and emerge triumphant. He is publically executed and his disciples scatter and deny knowing him. He goes to his death without resistance, but not without the agony of the garden, and most importantly not without forgiving his executioners. When faced with an enemy, he responds with love; when faced with an offense, with forgiveness. The kingdom of God he proclaims is focused on the poor and imprisoned, on the lost coin, the lost sheep, the lost son, on the outsider and the outcast, the least among us. When God “rules” in this kingdom, the rule is ironic, unruly, unroyal: the last are first, the insiders are out and the outsiders are in, a topsy-turvy world that makes no sense in the eyes of the world. The first chapter of 1 Corinthians perfectly condenses the kingdom of God that Jesus announced. It is a kingdom of those who are not wise or well born by the world’s standards, in which God has chosen the foolish to make manifest his wisdom and weakness to make manifest his rule.

However audacious it might sound to the orthodox, the “weakness of God” is thus not a phrase I coined but a direct citation of Paul (1 Cor 1:25). The ex-

pression is explosive, revolutionary, subversive—in short, the height of audacity. *The Weakness of God* is the systematic and radical pursuit of Paul's point, a hermeneutics of weakness, but (and this is my audacity), *without* compromising it the way I maintain that Paul does in the second chapter of 1 Corinthians. Paul makes it clear that for all his talk of weakness, he has something up his sleeve. His intention is not simply to greet the power of the world with the weakness of God but to trump the power of the world with the greater long-term *apocalyptic power* of God (2:5–6), which triumphs over Satan and his minions, making God's enemies his footstools. The power of the cross for Paul will eventually crush the power of the Romans who crucified Jesus. An infinite retaliation, the torments of hell, awaits them. What looks like weakness to the world is really power, true power. At that point, as so often happens in what we call Christianity, the voice of Paul has taken over and the voice of Jesus, who forgives his enemies, breaks off.

In weak theology, on the other hand, the idea is to follow the weakness of God all the way down. "Christianity" means those who answer the call (*ekklēsia*) to take Jesus as "the icon of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). Everything that Christians believe about God must pass through the prism of Jesus, who images God for them. But Jesus is a figure of the weakness of God—of forgiveness, not retaliation; of peace, not war; of preferring the poor, not the wealthy; of lambs among wolves, etc. But if Jesus, then also God—that is the Christian premise. Weakness all the way down to the root radically—that is radical Christianity. If Jesus is the icon, then the mark of God is not omnipotence, not triumphant power, but persecution; not retaliation, but forgiveness. If the kingdom of God is rejected, scorned or even attacked, that is not to be answered by the sword, and if the "church" at times has taken up the sword, that is proof that the church is not to be confused with the kingdom of God.

Once again, we must not pit weakness in binary opposition to strength, as if strength in any sense, in any context, is always something to be avoided. As this same Paul famously said, when I am weak, then I am strong (2 Cor 12:10). Once again, this is a point that is perhaps not made sufficiently clear in *The Weakness of God*. The kingdom is about the "weak force" of forgiveness, about the "powerless power" of non-violence, about living like the lilies of the field. It is a force, a true force, but it is weak or non-violent force. It is a power, a true power, but a powerless power, not power as the world knows power, not retaliatory power in this life or the next. Above all, it is not, as it is for Paul, a short term disadvantage with a long-term advantage, a "secret" (1 Cor 2:7) unknown to the unsuspecting that takes them unawares. It is rather the powerless power of forgiveness *as such*, of pure forgiveness, no matter what the cost, even if the powers and principalities would prevail. Forgiveness is a gift given without the expectation of return, whether it is a good strategy or a foolish one, especially if it is a foolish one. The weak force of the kingdom of God, then, is the force of

a *claim* that is made upon us *unconditionally but without power*, which rises up in a kind of splendor over the powers of the world—like the kiss that Jesus gives the Lord Cardinal Grand Inquisitor in *The Brothers Karamazov* that completely disarms this powerful man; or like the powerless power of a man who forgives his executioners.

The audacity is to say “come” to a kingdom *without* trying to back up the kingdom with the existence of a super-being, a God-being, a Big Being, to command or enforce it. The audacity is to call for a kingdom *without* a “heavenman” (James Joyce), an eternal *logos* come down from eternity to light the way for a humankind lost in the dark (Gospel of John); *without* turning the kingdom into an economy, *without* making his death into the price the heavenman had to pay his heavenly father in order to redeem us from sin. The weakness of God is not a world-historical, table-turning divine triumph that crushes the enemies of God.

The Insistence of God

I have been criticized for lacking a doctrine of the Trinity in *The Weakness of God*. That is a lack, I would say, I share with Jesus of Nazareth, and it arises from keeping my eye on what Jesus said and did, not on what they said and did at the Council of Nicaea. Since I see my weak theology as a kind of heretical Hegelianism—where the event does service for what Hegel called the Absolute Spirit—I can now see my way clear to an eccentric Trinitarianism.

The Trinity traces the movement of the double reduction, the movement from insistence to existence.

1. The name of the Father is the name of a call, of the insistence of a call that calls for a response. The Father does not exist; the Father insists as the inexistent event that calls for existence.

2. But that call cannot be heard, that insistence cannot be felt, the event cannot eventuate, without a mediator. By calling for the coming of the kingdom, the mediator contracts or concentrates the event into a particular form and figure. In the mediator, an *icon* is put forth (*vor-stellen*) as a figurative form of the event, a salient, striking, arresting image. This image forms the centerpiece of a *poetics*. The mediator is a particular individual who steps forth and announces the event, who says in uncompromising terms that he has been sent to announce the year of the jubilee (Luke 4:18–19), that the kingdom of God is coming and has already begun. In this individual, the call achieves its first mundane reality, and for having the audacity to be the incarnation of the event (not of an eternal *logos*) he is repaid with death, which destroys his particular empirical existence—but not the event.

3. The event cannot be deconstructed. The de(con)struction of *the* impossible is impossible. Murder cannot reach as far as the event, as far as the face (Levinas) of the mediator. As every martyrdom shows, murder has access to the

empirical individual but not to the event. In that sense, the event, though too weak to defend itself, is stronger than death. The disciples of the mediator agree that the event that took place in the mediator is to be sought among the living, not the dead. Under the impact of this event, they reconvene (*con-venire*) and they reinvent his life. So the event lives on in the lives of the community; the event survives (*sur-vivre*) in the dangerous memory of the martyred mediator. The event continues to insist, to call and solicit, and so begins to be converted into existence in the community. The ones who are called by the call (*ekklēsia*), who answer the call in words and deeds, in spirit and in truth, fill up what is lacking in his dead body, which lives on in their bodies. These bodies are the people of God, God's entrance into the world, God's existence. They materialize the spirit that the mediator left them when he left the world, the spirit in which insistence achieves existence.

This Trinitarian spirit in a weak theology is neither a subsistent triadic process going on in eternity (Augustine and Aquinas) nor a metaphysical process in the being of the Absolute (Hegel). The Trinity describes the dynamics of the event, of the passage from the insistence of the event into existence, of the double reduction, first from the name to the event and then from the event into a response, and it takes place in space and time.

In *The Insistence of God* I redescribe the weak force of the event as a kind of irreducible, ineluctable insistence that insists on existing, where the weakness of God depends upon us to give God strength. As I said above, the critique of power and the defense of weakness cannot be conducted as if these words meant only one thing, as if there is no context in which power is something to be affirmed and weakness something to be avoided. The weakness of God translates into the strength of our resolve to fill up what is missing in the body of God. The name of God is the name of a promise that it is up to us to keep. The truth of God is something we must make come true (*facere veritatem*). That is the significance of the "perhaps," the *peut-être*, where the "might" of God Almighty in the theology of omnipotence is transformed into the "might be" of a weak theology, the "perhaps" of the event, which is the possibility of the impossible and demands a show of strength on our part. The two titles, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* and *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*, are intentionally symmetrical and ultimately synonymous.

I was not content to repeat myself here but to break new ground on several fronts. I claim in the tradition of Tillich that God does not "exist," not as individual entity, but instead God "insists," that is, the name of God is the name of a "call" that summons us beyond ourselves. But with that I want to push past Tillich by claiming that God is not only not an existent being but also that God is not the "ground of beings" or Being itself (or a mystical *hyperousios*). In a sense I am proposing a new "divine name," that the name of God is the name of "perhaps," not in the sense of something indecisive but in the sense of what

pushes us beyond the possible to the hitherto unimaginable. "Perhaps," I say, is not a "sleepy indifference" but "a steely, indefatigable, resolute openness to what seems to have been closed off," to an unforeseeable future.

I also engage in a detailed dialogue with and critique of two leading theorists of the day, Catherine Malabou and Slavoj Žižek, both of whom have resuscitated in their own way a new version of the "death of God" theology that descends from Hegel. I try to fashion a view that is neither confessional theology nor militantly atheistic, but belongs to what I call a radical theology, or what Derrida would call a religion without religion.

The book also pushes continental philosophy of religion beyond its old boundaries by entering into dialogue with what is variously called the "new materialism," or the "new realism," or "speculative realism," centered around the work of Quentin Meillassoux, a student of Alain Badiou, for whom St. Paul is a central figure of a militant revolutionary subject. Meillassoux spearheads a new generation of French and Anglo-phone philosophers who charge continental philosophy with subjectivism and call for a new realism, respectful of the mathematical sciences. Surprisingly, I actually agree with much of this criticism, and in the final section of the book I make use of the work of Bruno Latour to re-situate this "theopoetics" within a "cosmo-poetics." The result is not a cosmic nihilism, what Nietzsche called the "cosmic stupidity" (the stars don't know we're here) but what I call the "nihilism of grace," not the cosmic stupidity but the cosmic luck or grace of life, which intensifies the unique value of life instead of undermining it.

In speaking of insistence and existence, I am saying that we are not done yet. We have not fed the hungry nor released the imprisoned. This is not the year of the jubilee, maybe next year, but not yet. The event is like a messiah who never shows up, for whom we pray and weep. This structure of expectation is not a temporary condition but a temporal one, the very condition of temporality, of living in time. Weak theology is the affirmation that the future is always worth more, not because it is but because that is what it hopes for; that is its faith, its love. Hope is driven by the impossible. *By* the impossible everything begins.⁶ Hope dares affirm the fortuitousness of the perhaps, the vitality of the promise, the possibility of the impossible. The event that insists in the name of God is perfectly described by Levinas as the *beau risque*, the beautiful but dangerous risk of life, one in which God's fingers are crossed. In a theology of the event, things are neither steered mightily unto good by an invisible wisdom nor hollowed out at their center. Things are just unstable, risky, betokening neither an absolute plenum nor an absolute void but containing a promise that is also a threat, a "perhaps" that is not indecisive but audacious, that dares perhaps to hope. Things are astir with the undecidable fluctuations of the promise and the risk of perhaps. The fundamental category in weak theology is not loss but life, and the fundamental character of life is hope, the exhilaration of the promise/

threat, of a hope against hope. Dare to think (*sapere aude*), to be sure, but the motto of the *new* Enlightenment is dare to hope (*sperare aude*). The audacity of weak theology is the audacity of hope, and the audacity of hope is the audacity of God.

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