

## **I Have Not Come For The Healthy**

Anyone who follows my work knows that John D. Caputo is a significant influence. He has been a guide for over half my life and his article shows why; it beautifully expresses the type of affirmation I aspire to. In closing, he invites me to respond to three theses about Pyrotheology. For me, they are gentle cautions, acting as lighthouses warning of rocks ahead, of dangers that might cause Pyrotheology to run aground. In them, I hear once again his concern with the influence that Lacan has had on my work in recent years. Elsewhere, he has expressed concerns that Lacanians like Slavoj Žižek are primarily interested in Christianity as outsiders, using it as an example in the service of something else, and that psychoanalysis offers up a metaphysical system every bit as overarching as those found in religious fundamentalism (Caputo 2009). This has led him to reflect that all my Žižekian talk of a Lacanian lack can sound like a form of ‘crypto-Calvinism’ that paints an overly negative picture of the human condition (Caputo 2015). What Caputo does in his article, then, is to offer a reading of Pyrotheology as a fundamentally affirmative affair.

With this in mind, Caputo explores how Virginia Wolff offers up an ‘ultimately affirmative’ working example of the distinction between messianisms and the messianic (see Caputo 1997a, pp. 117ff). What Jacques Derrida called ‘messianisms’ reflect our actual existing traditions of belief, defining things for us, giving us a sense of how the world is and should be, of what is right and wrong, good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable. But every concrete messianism is also haunted by what Derrida called ‘the messianic’ – a promise, or potentiality, that has not been realised or actualised, that has not even been dreamed of, a possibility that prevents us from sitting down, patting ourselves on the back and thinking that we have things nailed down. Our traditions are deconstructible constructions haunted by an undeconstructible call (Caputo 1997b, p. 42). They contain a messianic event that cannot be contained by them (Caputo 2006, p. 2). Words like ‘Justice’, ‘Hospitality’, ‘Democracy’, ‘Education’ or ‘God’ promise more than they deliver so that when someone comes along and says, for example, ‘this is justice’, they set in stone something absolutely futural and unforeseeable that needs to flow, grow, and reform (Derrida 1992, p. 10). While this commitment to what Derrida (1994) called ‘the to-come’ within our actual existing communities involves risk and uncertainty, Caputo shows

us how this openness to the future, and the deconstruction of what presently exists, can be profoundly transformative and affirmative. Caputo has no fear of unknowing, or of critique, or of an uncertain future. Indeed, he positively loves them and has spent his career drawing out the political, religious and cultural value of deconstruction. His is a project of praise and affirmation concerning that which we cannot grasp, that which does not exist but that insists (Caputo 2013). By comparison, my emphasis on a sense of original lack at the heart of subjectivity seems rather depressing and a repetition of a type of dark Protestantism. However, I tend to think that we are speaking of the same phenomenon from two different angles. The problem for me is simply that there are a great many people who don't have the type of affirmative relationship with that which deconstructs and destabilises. Instead, deconstruction produces anxieties and defense mechanisms.

For Tillich (1958), there are a number of different ways of relating to the religious, political and cultural traditions we inherit. What he calls an unbroken myth is a symbolic narrative taken literally but, at a certain point in life, unbroken myths are challenged and we are faced with the choice of a) abandoning them and picking up a new unbroken myth; b) repressing the challenge and remaining literalists; or c) embracing the myth in a broken way by acknowledging its symbolic nature. For many people, the point when the unbroken myth is challenged is deeply painful and even horrifying. The desire for an unbroken myth is so strong that we do anything to avoid the alternative, scared of the unknown or fearful of everything collapsing around us. In these situations, the sense of nothingness that is part of being human is experienced not as a blessing but as a curse. Those people who are most helped by Transformance Art are often the people who have some level of doubt and self-critique, yet who also experience these as a form of suffering. Their questioning is experienced as a type of *symptom*, by which I mean a phenomenon that is in our body but not of it – something we either don't see, try to ignore, or attempt to overcome. Yet the symptom, if we listen to it, speaks a truth. It tells us that something isn't right in our world. It is a protest against something that is bad in our lives. While the symptom causes us suffering, it can, if we listen to it, become the site where real transformation and new joy can blossom. If we let it speak, it can become the force that causes us to change our lives. In this way, the symptom –

commonly understood as something negative – is transformed into something positive. Lacan (2016) notes this change by calling it the transformation of a symptom into a *sinthome*, which, in French, sounds like ‘Saint Homme’, ‘Holy Man’. Here, he is pointing to the way that the site of our suffering can become a type of prophet calling us to a new life. I would cast Caputo’s celebration of the gap between the messianisms and the messianic, between the deconstructible and the undeconstructible, as a celebration of lack as potentiality, possibility and openness to the future – a celebration that is the very direction in which my own work pushes. But Pyrotheology concentrates on reaching those people who find deconstruction frightening and who have conspired with religious, political and cultural forces to protect themselves and others against it. The type of risky unknowing that Caputo celebrates as a *sinthome*, many suffer as a symptom. Perhaps he is right, therefore, to say that I operate with a type of crypto-Calvinism. However, I repeat Calvinism with a difference: lack (or original sin) is not something that needs to be done away with but, rather, turned into a positive by fully embracing the negative. Caputo’s work presents us with a healthy form of faith, but Pyrotheology has not come for the healthy – it has come for the sick (Mark 2:17).