Dear John Caputo,

I want to thank you for your beautiful lecture this afternoon on Schelling, which expands on your weak or radical theology, and relates it (not to French postmodernism) but to German Idealism. In your book ‘The Insistence of God’ you already confessed to be a ‘headless’ Hegelian and now you take side with Schelling, especially his positive philosophy and his accentuation of facticity. ‘No essence has ever managed to spontaneously burst into existence’. By means of that plain sentence you take us to the heart of important discussions and your own weak theology. Here is a goodbye to Anselm, to Hegel’s logic as well, a hurray for Schelling and Heidegger and a close proximity – I guess – to Catherine Keller’s creation from the deep.

Your lecture raises many points for conversation and I will pick up some of them. But let me please start by shortly explaining why your theology matters to me in our Dutch context. To do so, I would like to bring to the fore two theologians that were very important for Dutch modern, liberal Christianity today.

The first one is Allard Pierson, who lived in the nineteenth century. Pierson came from a pietistic background, but turned to the modernist, liberal theology that was upcoming at that time, rather late compared to other European countries – perhaps due to a certain doubt about the speculations and abstractions of German philosophy and its ‘oracles’. Pierson served the modernist movement as a Church-minister until his abdication of the ministry in 1865. He felt that the modernist movement, religiously spoken, was thin soup, which made him turn away from religion, directing his interest to aesthetics, history of art and literature as a highly esteemed professor at the Amsterdam University. His departure from the modernist movement was a serious, nearly devastating blow for liberal theology in the Netherlands, which ever since always remained a minority movement within Church and society. Pierson raises the question, whether we can be modern and religious. He gave a negative answer himself. To be modern is incompatible with true religion. The accusation liberal theologians often feel, from both the religious orthodox and the modern secular side is that they are not nearly religious or secular enough.

The second theologian I would like to mention is Harry Kuitert, a theologian from the neo-Calvinistic churches who worked at VU university over here, who passed away at the age of 92 in September this year. Kuitert was the most important figure, at least in the public arena, in the opening up of the anti-liberal, neo-Calvinistic churches toward social and doctrinal changes from the 1960’s onward. After a rather moderate defense of the Christian faith he turned increasingly radical in the 21st century and got famous for his dictum that ‘all we say about up there, comes from down here’. Many secularist intellectuals wondered about his struggle with the idea of God, which they held to be nonsensical anyway. To many orthodox believers he seemed to be the anti-Christ in person. To many former believers he became their companion, the testimony of their lost faith and the reason to welcome the erosion of the neo-Calvinistic pillar that had been quite influential in Dutch society. The theological question related to this episode is the question whether God-talk really is nothing but human speech.

Of course, nobody would read Caputo for a refutation of either Allard Pierson or Harry Kuitert. In my opinion, it is worthwhile reading Caputo, precisely because he does not contradict Pierson nor Kuitert, yet adds something to their point of view. To my mind, he can be helpful for the articulation of a perspective in which we can be both modern (or postmodern) and religious, and in which god-talk is not simply reduced to human speech.

First of all: God-talk. Caputo repeatedly pointed out that God is the name for an event. In the name of God we open ourselves up to the event of forgiveness, justice, hospitality and the like. Now it is obvious that Caputo denies an ontological status to the event and resists any identification of it. The identification of the event would put an end to the event. For in that case we would introduce it into the realm of what is calculable, foreseeable and programmable, whereas it should always be beyond the horizon of our expectations and our understanding.

But still, there is something to the event and the call of the event that transcends us. Of course, Caputo’s work is full of disclaimers not to mistake the insistence of God/event for Gods existence. God does not exist. Neither does God act. The call is a call in the name of God or in the middle voice, as Caputo explains it, and it is a call related to the promise of the world, not to some supernatural entity. We have to take these disclaimers to heart. But then again, the call – and that is my point – does transcend us. It does not transcend the world, perhaps, but us. In his lecture Caputo says that the call ‘calls upon us as from without’. Surely the ‘as’ is a disclaimer once again. The call calls upon us ‘as’ from without. It ‘does not originate with us, but terminates us, putting us in the accusative’. In *The Insistence of God* Caputo wrote: ‘Transcendence is the insistence or the promise of the world’ (p. 52). It seems to me that this kind of transcendence precisely complements and adds to Kuitert’s dictum, that all that is said about up there, comes from down here. It does not refute this sentence, but opens it up, denies its disclosure and breaks it open by the event, the promise of the world, the call or whatever words Caputo uses to point to this very qualified sense of transcendence.

In his work, this call of transcendence seems closely related to our desire for the event, to such an extent – it seems to me – that the insistence of God insists in our desire for God, even though we do not know what we desire, when we desire God.

So far so good for my first statement: there is some transcendence in Caputo’s theology that points beyond a mere human origin of God-talk.

Second, then, religion, and the question whether it is possible to be both modern or postmodern and religious. Caputo clearly aims at a religion without religion. He tries to overcome the priests, the rituals and the institutional regulations of organized religion. In *The Insistence of God* he also tried to overcome the religious *Vorstellung*, not by sublating it into *Begriff*, but by means of the event. We have to detect the insistence of the event in religious symbols, thereby turning our confessional theology into a radical theology. In his lecture this afternoon, Caputo seems even more positive about *Vorstellung*, symbol and religious language, as he says [at least in the written version we received] that ‘symbol or *Vorstellung* is superior to the concept, related to being in a way no consciousness can ever achieve’ [I have to precise now, that this sentence was taken from the longer written version we received to respond to. The sentence was not in the lecture, but the meaning was].

Next to this, I think there is another reason to perceive a deep sense of religious awe in Caputo’s theology.

In *The Insistence of God* Caputo pointed out that the word ‘perhaps’ is crucial. ‘Perhaps’ unties us from our certainties, opens us up to the unexpected, makes us sensitive to the possibilities of another world. But ‘perhaps’ also makes our responses to the call or the insistence of the event permanently and systematically ambivalent, ambiguous and dangerous. ‘God drives us mad’, you wrote in that book, and ‘to pray is to invite trouble’. We respond to the call for more justice, for a better life or more life. But we can never be sure whether we actually will make life better and really establish a better justice if we try to realize the promise and try to give existence to the insistence of God. It is inherently dangerous to respond to the call, because we take the risk to disrupt and disturb the present in view of an unforeseeable future. We might make things worse, and in search for a better justice, we might stimulate acts of violence, never knowing whether we open ourselves up to angels or demons, inviting either the good Lord or the devil himself to come in when we open ourselves up to the incoming event.

If I am correct, this means that Calvin’s Geneva, the Anabaptist’s Münster, Lenin’s Russia, the jihadi’s Raqqa, and so many places more, are all responses to a call gone wrong in various degrees. We hope for the best and act upon it, but we may end with a catastrophe. The notion of risk and danger is very fundamental to Caputo’s notion of religion. We cannot escape the risk, once we respond to the call, but we are at the mercy of the event, at the mercy of the world and at the mercy of God. I am inclined to say that this accounts for a religious attitude that is compatible with modernity or postmodernity. But let me compare this attitude to some sort of mysticism that blossomed in a Calvinistic environment.

In Calvinistic theology the distance between God and the world is enormous, almost as big as the distance between the event and this world in Caputo’s theology. In Calvinistic theology, a strict monism is sometimes taken to its extreme, to such an extent that both the good and the evil are directly wrought by God and it would take a lot, a hell of a lot of semantics, to separate God and evil, if you would want to. Moreover, Calvinistic theology is acquainted with the double predestination, hidden in God, which always unsettles the believer, precisely when they seem to be close to God for exactly nearness to God might imply extreme pride and function as a sign of ultimate separation.

There is a clear sense of fear and trembling in Caputo’s theology of perhaps, a sense of tremens and fascinans, of ambivalence and ambiguity in our response to the call that drives human beings mad with God and implies that their prayer is for trouble. We are at the mercy of the event, at the mercy of the world, at the mercy of God – who holds salvation and damnation within his hidden council.

If I am correct, this directly relates to Schelling, Eckhart and Luther and their mysticism Caputo referred to in his lecture. Schelling bailed, he says, face to face with a very abyssal possibility, a very radical facticity, like Luther did, on decisionist and voluntarist grounds. Where Eckhart could go from God to Gottheit, in a neo-platonic way, Luther and Schelling opted for a gracious God over against the Deus absconditus. God will be gracious God in the end. My Calvinistic mystical brothers would face the abyss more austere. Damnation and salvation are open possibilities, and we have no options because it’s all up to God. It is fascinating – and horrible.

I do not think it is very likely that Caputo’s weak theology of perhaps coincides with the very strong Calvinistic theology of a hidden council. But there is a point of contact to the extent that both want to face an abyss.

It seems to me that the abyss Caputo wants to face is the abyss of not knowing what ultimate reality is like. It cannot be traced back. It is hidden behind the facticity of being. We know that, but not what being is. Given the facticity of being, we open ourselves up to the event, we respond to the call, we give existence to the insistence of God, but we cannot lay claim to know what ultimate reality is like. That is the great perhaps we have to face.

Caputo pleads for a weak theology that does not overstretch its reach, but responds to the call and thereby gives existence to the insistence of God, putting strong definitions about the ultimate reality aside: ‘There is the exist*a*nce of God—which is not to be confused with the untransformed That of what simply exists, with the hard-heartedness of the world, with a kind of blind and irreducible necessity’.

I am very sympathetic to this approach. But my question is: from where do we take the courage to be, that is: to respond to the call? From where do we take the basic trust to engage with the exist*a*nce of God. I do not expect a final answer. But I suspect that Caputo’s theopoetics implies more faith by far in the goodness of being (like Schelling) than his philosophy allows him to admit. In my view his theopoetics is affirmative of being, in spite of perhaps.

Let me finally illustrate it with a famous poem by the Dutch poet Remco Campert, poëzie is een daad van bevestiging. It is poem you can probably find in anthology of Dutch poetry and I translated it myself, very clumsily, but I think this will do.

Poetry [theopoetics] is an act of confirmation.

I confirm I am alive.

That I am not alive on my own.

Poetry is a future,

to think about next week, about a different land,

about you when you’ve grown old.

*The poem ends:*

Every word that is written down

is an assault on oldness,

death will win in the end, for sure,

But death is just the silence in the room

after the sounding of the last word,

death is an affection