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THE POWER OF GOD AND THE “WEAK THEOLOGY” BY J.D. CAPUTO IN THE LIGHT OF THE NEW TESTAMENT PASSAGES

John D. Caputo, a postmodernist philosopher and the author of the movement known as a “weak theology” or “theology of the event”, tied his theory with an idea of the “weakness of God”. In his view God is only an inner power, an impulse which in different religious systems receives merely “contingent worldly expressions”. Moreover, the idea of the weakness of God entails a demand for exercising theology in the same way. Hence Caputo is placing himself in contradiction to “strong theologians”. In Christianity – more precisely in Jesus – Caputo finds a special proof for this concept. In its light he reads New Testament passages, especially the Letters of Paul. The “weakness of God” idea – although it is present in the Bible – in Caputo’s account causes problems, because he neglects these passages which underline power (δύναμις) and authority (ἐξουσία) of God. In the wider perspective it entails “diluting the particularity of Christian doctrine”.

In the ancient world both in Greco-Roman and Jewish environments an idea of deity was inextricably linked to power¹. In this paper I would like to discuss the J.D. Caputo concept of a “theology of weakness” and the selected New Testament passages describing power (δύναμις) and authority (ἐξουσία) of God/Lord. I have decided to elaborate on fragments from the Pauline letters mainly because he has to deal with the different communities and convince them to believe in God. What is more, the letters of Paul are the most philosophical writings within the New Testament texts and Caputo, as he said – “always invokes his authority”². So, firstly I am going to discuss Caputo’s account of theology, and secondly elaborate on fragments from the Pauline letters which seem to contradict this account. In the final part I am going to assess this from a catholic point of view.

Caputo and weak theology or theology of the event

J.D. Caputo is a postmodernist philosopher born in 1940 in America who has been involved in the deconstruction of Christianity. He is the author of the movement known as “weak theology”. In several books and articles Caputo presented his concept of theology also called “theology of the event” and bound it up with the idea of the weakness of God. What is important in his speaking about these two

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¹ For example in Homeric description, although gods have a lot of anthropomorphic features, they still remain immortal and there are different spaces under their authority: Zeus is the god of sky and thunder, Poseidon wields power under the oceans, Athena is the goddess of wisdom, inspiration and law etc. In the Old Testament God in several places has been presented as God “mighty and strong in battle” (Psalm 24) as God who “created earth and sky” (Psalm 24), also as a source of wisdom (Sirach 1:1).

² J.D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God. A Theology of the Event*, Bloomington 2006, p. 42.

ideas is that he is placing himself in contradiction to “strong”, “imperative”, “sovereign” theologians, which means those who usually speak in an imperative tone and are on the side of dogma. He criticises so-called “strong theology”, which can take two different forms in speaking about the nature of God. The first of these takes place when the theologians think that only they to some degree “are exempted from human condition and hard-wired up to God”, which means that everybody else apart from them needs salvation. The second form of this theology relies on a kind of “lifting” or “reducing” of the veil over human conditions. God comes, setting out from himself and sets new conditions. It is blasphemy to try to subject God, who is totaliter alter, to any condition (Marion). Caputo describes it as a form of blackmail. As well as these two ideas there is also another one. Some theologians admittedly say that it is impossible to remove these conditions, but acknowledge Christianity’s advantage in carrying people towards a transcendent God (Millbank). All of these forms get mixed up with God³.

On the contrary, Caputo tries to “locate the heart of Christian theology in Jesus”⁴ not in Neoplatonic ideas or Cambridge school. For Caputo all religious systems created in a particular time and space – are only “contingent wordy expressions” or a “dramatization” of the event. Caputo says: “Religion is an event in its structure and theology is a description of it”⁵. It is impossible to discuss all the nuances of this concept here. Nonetheless, the difference between the nature of religion and the nature of the event is noteworthy, because it is important for Caputo’s reading of the New Testament. Caputo writes:

Religion is something that happens, while the event is not what happens but what is going on in what happens (...). Religions belong to the historical world, which is why we speak of «the religions of the world», while a theory of the event is meant to give an account of the conditions under which the world occurs. Religion is worldly («secular»), while the event precedes the world. The event leaves its traces in religion, so the analysis of religion – the theology of the event, the philosophy of religion, the hermeneutics or deconstruction or radical hermeneutics of religion – proceeds by tracking down these traces, which means to track down the constitutive forces in what is constituted⁶.

For him the importance of all religions lies in the fact that they can create an eventiveness, they are harbours of the event. Their function is to evoke in the believers openness to transcendence. Religion renders mostly to inner life and the external factors of religions are of less importance. No one religion has a prevailing position. The God is a stranger who discreetly speaks in silence. By necessity these contentions entail different views of many theological issues - in comparison with Christianity - such as creation or salvation. For example the first is for Caputo not a *creatio ex nihilo*, but creation from something bad to something good. The author considered also presents a different understanding of faith – as “the feeling that wells up with us when we take our measure against some immeasurable immensity”⁷. Surprisingly, the special proof for this concept was founded by him in Christianity.

Caputo notices that Jesus – as he is described in the Gospels – is not a spectacular miracle worker, like for instance his contemporary Apollonius of Tyiana. He worked in silent and mysteriously. He was agonised and nailed to the cross. It was a proper revelation of the nature of God. In this light Caputo reads all the New Testament passages. It leads him to negate as anthropomorphisms these passages which outline the power of God.

³ J.D. Caputo, *The Sense of God. A Theology of the Event with Special Reference to Christianity*, in: *Between Philosophy and Theology. Contemporary Interpretation of Christianity*, ed. L. Boeve, C. Brabant, England 2010, p. 27-28.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 29.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 30.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 31.

⁷ J.D. Caputo, *Philosophy and Theology*, p. 68. From: D. Newheiser, [review]: *J.D. Caputo, Philosophy and Theology, Nashville 2006, 84 pp.; The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event, Bloomington 2006, 365 pp.*, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 10 (2008), p. 106.

Depiction in the Pauline Letters

The New Testament conception of God is strictly related to the Old Testament. Both of them have a Hebraic background, although in the New Testament one notices many more Greek influences, at least if we are comparing it with the older books of the Old Testament. At first I would like to underline here that Hebraic mentality is very concrete; they did not create philosophic tractates about God, but they believe in a God who gives material goods, gives help in battle, gives salvation from danger. In the Letters of Paul, the most philosophical writings in the New Testament, one can also find many places where God is described as a strong and mighty.

Δύναμις and ἔξουσία in relation to the sphere of God

Ancient Greek knows two terms which in translation to the modern languages are connected with power – δύναμις and ἔξουσία. Paul uses both of these terms in secular and religious contexts. The first one is present more often and occurs mainly in relation to religion, whereas the second one is used mainly in talking about people and everyday things and only 3 times is rendered of God/Lord.

For δύναμις one can list 43 occurrences within the Corpus Paulinum. This noun renders according to Paul:

(1) God the Father whose “eternal power (ἡ τε αἰδὶος αὐτοῦ δύναμις) and divine nature has been understood by the things he has made” (Rom 1:20), who has power to rise from the death (1 Co 6:14), who has power to work within us (Eph 3:20, see also 2 Co 4:7, 2 Co 6:7, 2 Co 13:4, Gal 3:5, Eph 1:19, Eph 3:7, Col 1:11, 2 Th 1:11, 2 Ti 1,8);

(2) to Jesus Christ who “was declared to be Son of God with power (ἐν δυνάμει) by the resurrection from the dead” (Rom 1:4), who has power to do “signs and wonders” in proclaiming through Paul the Gospel to the Gentiles (Rom 15:19 see also 1 Co 5:4, 2 Co 12:9, Phi 3:10, Col 1:29)⁸;

(3) to the spirit of God⁹ by whose power (ἐν δυνάμει) everybody is abounds in hope (Rom 15:13; about the spirit of God see also Rom 15:19; 1 Co 2:4, 1 Th 1:5, 2 Tm 1:7);

(4) to the Gospel which is “the power of God (δύναμις τοῦ θεοῦ) for salvation for everyone who has faith” (Rom 1:16 see also 1 Cor 2:4-5);

(5) to the cross of Christ which is the power of God (δύναμις τοῦ θεοῦ) for salvation for everyone who is being saved (1 Co 1:18.24);

(6) to the kingdom of God which “depends not on talk but on power (ἐν δυνάμει)” (1 Co 4:20);

(7) to the fleshly life after the resurrection which will be raised in power (ἐν δυνάμει)” (1 Co 15:43);

(8) to the angels of Christ (2 Th 1:7);

(9) to godliness (2 Ti 3,5).

For ἔξουσία one can list 25 occurrences both in secular and religious contexts. Taking into account the latter Paul renders this noun

(1) to God the Father as a source of the power (οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν ἔξουσία εἰ μὴ ὑπὸ θεοῦ) (Rom 13:1);

(2) to Jesus Christ as a source of power for building people up (ἐξουσίας ἡμῶν ἧς ἔδωκεν ὁ κύριος εἰς οἰκοδομήν) (2 Co 10:8, 2 Co 13:10).

From this list one may see that this topic is very frequent. Although it is true that in many cases these texts could be read as references to inner life, nevertheless it is impossible to negate that God for Paul is a Creator of the world and not only in a moral sense as Caputo sees it. Furthermore, taking into account the personal Paul experience which is described both in the Acts of the Apostles and in his Letters, it is palpable that he was convinced about the external manifestations of God’s power. Several

⁸ English translation according to New Revised Standard Version Bible 1989.

⁹ I used a small letter do not want to suggest that in all of these passages Paul has in mind the Holy Spirit. Sometimes it is difficult to discern.

times, for instance, Paul is talking about God, who saves his life during persecutions, when he was a shipwrecked. (vide Act 26:17-22, 2 Tm 3:11, 2 Co 11:25).

Two fragments from the Letters to the Corinthians in dialogue with Caputo

Now I am going to concentrate on two texts which are used by Caputo for proving his theory. One of them is in the first chapter of 1 Corinthians which as Caputo says is “the charter statements of the theology of weakness”. On the basis of it Caputo writes:

Jesus, Paul says, is the icon of the living God, the distinctive way that the invisible God is made visible to us. That means that in Christianity Jesus is the expression of the event that is harboured in the name of God, and that contrary to Christianity’s dominant tendency, the God that is thus revealed is a God not of sovereign power but of weakness, which leads Paul to say that “the weakness of God is stronger than human strength” (1:25)¹⁰.

Firstly, I would like to cite the text to which Caputo refers here:

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (...). For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

I think that Caputo’s application of this final statement from 1 Co 1:25 is wrong and one-sided. On first glance of this text one can see that Paul is describing God in contradictory way. He is speaking about the Christ and his cross as a power, which appear to be weak in the world. For a proper understanding of this text it is also necessary to know the context of 1 Co¹¹. The community in Corinth was fraught with strains and problems. One of them was the division within the church between the lower and the higher classes. There is also another issue about this community. The Corinthians have a special interest in knowledge, they like new things. It is more convincing for me that in response to these facts Paul wrote statements about the true wisdom and true power of God. It was a means of convincing Corinthians that even if Christianity appears to be weak, because of the lack of spectacular character of this religion, mainly lowborn believers, conflicts and tension within the church, it is the true knowledge and the power of God – because God also seemed to be weak in his presence in the world.

Another interesting passage is the encouragement to boast about weaknesses in 2 Co 12:9-10:

[Lord] said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

The fragment cited above is a final part of the so-called “Fool’s Speech” in 11:21b-12:10. In this passage Paul is proving that he is a real apostle because of his weaknesses. He is equal to other apostles, whom he called “false apostles” due to his being also a son of Abraham and an Israelite, but he has an advantage, a superiority comparing himself to them in his suffering for Christ. This situation replicates what Jesus experienced¹². In Paul’s view God wants to make all people weak to show that human efforts

¹⁰ J.D. Caputo, *The Sense of God...*, p. 38.

¹¹ It was G. Theissen who suggested first that in interpreting 1 Corinthians is essential take account of social factors.

¹² Conf. P. Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Cambridge 1997, p. 455-456.

are insufficient. Human weakness thus is an area of revelation of God's power¹³. So, we can read this text as follows – the weakness which comes from God allows somebody to be stronger than normally people are who seem to be strong. On the basis of this text one can speak only of God who is apparently weak but in reality he is full of power.

In this light although one can agree with several of Caputo assertions, for me this theory is wrong in radicalising the weakness of God. I would like to quote here one statement:

But suppose we take Jesus to be the icon of God in an unconditional way, then the passion and death of Jesus means God is indeed weak and vulnerable, not within an economy of weakness but a weakness or vulnerability without reserve (...). If God really is vulnerable, God is not free to freely assume vulnerability. Weakness and vulnerability constitute something God is, not something God freely chooses to take on¹⁴.

If one reads the Bible it is true that God is described as weak and vulnerable. In the Old Testament we have for instance the meaningful picture of tearing of cloth which was employed for instance by the author of the Gospel of Matthew at the death of Jesus to express the mourning of God the Father: “At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom” (Mat 27:51). However, on the other hand, it is impossible to neglect the texts which speak about the power of God. If God is only weak power, an impulse, on which basis can faith (Hebrew – אמת means also surely, verily, truly) be lent? Is this a proper way of speaking about God and a proper reading of the New Testament? How for example was Paul able to convince the Romans to believe in this kind of God? Isn't it another kind of regime in speaking about God? Why do the passages about strong God should be read as a kind of anthropomorphism, whereas e.g. the story of Abraham is a “real” story about God?

Evaluation from the Catholic point of view

To evaluate this concept first I would like to say, following David Newheiser, that Caputo presents the theologians other than himself as “strong” ones. Even within the doctrine there is diversity of concepts¹⁵. The second point is that Caputo admittedly agreed that it is impossible to avoid conditions, but does not apply this statement to postmodernist thought. The inability to avoid determinants means that it is impossible to have an objective approach to one issue “without reserve”. To go further means that not only are the Jews and Gentiles subordinated to the certain conditions as was the case for Christian tradition but that this is also the case for contemporary theological thought. I do not want to say that some anthropomorphic descriptions are not present in the Bible, but rather that all of them say something to us about God. And my question is why postmodernist analysis should be more convincing for me than the ancient text, which I personally think is inspired?

The second point to which I would like to draw attention is that it is impossible to find out the nature of God by only using reason. I have to agree with Caputo's statements that God is vulnerable and is weak. There are a lot of texts that mention that. But God also remains strong. This old clash is inextricable. In my view the grace is necessary to get a proper interpretation of the texts, as a Magisterium Ecclesiae said:

However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words (...).The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually

¹³ Conf. *Słownik Teologii Świętego Pawła*, red. G.F. Hawthorne, R.P. Martin, D.G. Reid, Warszawa 2010, p. 747.

¹⁴ J.D. Caputo, *The Sense of God...*, p. 39.

¹⁵ Conf. D. Newheiser, [review]: *J.D. Caputo, Philosophy and Theology...*, p. 107.

expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture¹⁶.

I do not want to say that in doing theology one should suspend reason, but only that we should be aware that reason is limited, especially in speaking about God. Caputo's effort to show which point theology and philosophy have in common should not be underestimated. However, my question is: what is the added value for Christianity from this account? As D. Newheiser said it “risks diluting the particularity of Christian doctrine”¹⁷. If Caputo's reading of the New Testament is correct, what was the function of the revelation?

Another danger of this concept is its relativism and nihilism. Indeed, there is no place for both revelation of God and faith in God. It is only a description of the feelings, the internal impulse of one human being, which are rendered to something Unknown. Trying to avoid accusations of relativism Caputo, like other postmodernist thinkers, speaks about the event as a general experience, to some degree. But without a doubt this concept is too subjective in its interpretation of religion, it neglects a lot of material contained in written texts, and what is speaking in it is no longer an interpretation of the text, but only a human impression gained on the basis of the texts. It is a very strange way to make theology trustworthy in the contemporary world by its disowning of the concept of God or its reduction to an inner impulse. If, in this idea, God is needed at all, he plays as small a role as is possible.

According to my understanding of revelation – in accordance with the New Testament description – God reveals himself during history in different ways (conf. Heb 1:1). This cannot be reduced only to historical or cultural conditions. For taking revelation as a truth it is necessary to believe in the reality of the world. God sent Jesus Christ when the fullness of time had come (Gal 4:4). The presence of God in that time was experienced differently than now. At present it is the period in which the Spirit plays the main role. That is a mystery of variability and invariability, and a weakness and power which are entailed in the plan of God.

To sum up I would like to repeat that trying to reach the real nature of God only on the basis of reason is indeed a “hubris of the human being”¹⁸. From a postmodernist stance, “without metaphysics” and “without religion”, we can speak only about an empty idea of God, about a desperate act of reason which does not want to transgress his own limits in order to believe¹⁹. In the light of the New Testament God has revealed himself as love, so let me cite here, in conclusion, another statement from 1 Co 13:8: “Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end”.

MOC BOGA A „SŁABA TEOLOGIA” J.D. CAPUTO W ŚWIETLE TEKSTÓW NOWEGO TESTAMENTU

Streszczenie

John D. Caputo, postmodernistyczny filozof i twórca nurtu określanego mianem „weak theology” lub „theology of the event”, związał tę koncepcję z ideą słabości Boga. Bóg jest dla niego wewnętrzną siłą, impulsem, który zyskuje w różnych religiach jedynie „przypadkowe, światowe wyrażenie”. Co więcej,

¹⁶ Conf. Dogmatic Constitution of Divine Revelation Dei Verbum 12, in: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html [retrieved 10.01.2015].

¹⁷ Conf. D. Newheiser, [review]: *J.D. Caputo, Philosophy and Theology...*, p. 106.

¹⁸ J. Schrijvers, *From Love to Life? Toward a Contemporary Phenomenology of Religious Life*, in: https://cygnus.cc.kuleuven.be/bbcswebdav/pid-14498408-dt-content-rid-29853800_2/courses/B-KUL-A07H6a-1415/frontmatterSUNYDEFINITIEF.pdf [retrieved 10.01.2015], p. 9.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 10-11.

jego zdaniem, idea słabości Boga pociąga za sobą postulat takiego właśnie uprawiania teologii. Tak więc Caputo stawia siebie w opozycji do tak zwanych „silnych” teologów. W chrześcijaństwie – a dokładniej w osobie Jezusa – Caputo odnajduje specjalne potwierdzenie dla tej koncepcji. W jej świetle odczytuje Nowy Testament, zwłaszcza Listy Pawła. Idea słabości Boga – choć obecna w Biblii – w ujęciu Caputo nastrocza wielu trudności, ponieważ neguje on wartość tych tekstów, które podkreślają Bożą moc (δύναμις) i władzę (ἐξουσία). W dalszej perspektywie pociąga również za sobą „rozcieńczenie doktryny chrześcijańskiej”.

Słowa kluczowe:

John D. Caputo, “weak theology”, moc Boga, Nowy Testament, *Corpus Paulinum*

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