Comparative Theology as Repeating with a Difference: Deconstruction, Yogācāra Buddhism, and Our Conditioned Condition*

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John D. Caputo, a contemporary American philosopher and theologian, is known for his work demonstrating the relevance of Derrida's deconstruction for theology. Vasubandhu, a fourth-century (C.E.) Indian thinker, is a seminal figure in the Mahāyāna Buddhist school known as Yogācāra. Although at first blush an odd pairing, and despite their great differences, these two thinkers share a fundamental presupposition: the priority and centrality of our *conditioned* condition. Indeed, for them, attending to the ways that we are conditioned makes possible the pursuit of a truth that is beyond our conditioned filters, aspiring to open us to the truth that is unconditioned. For this reason, it is illuminating to read and think Caputo and Vasubandhu together.[1]

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[1] For prior literature on Buddhism and deconstruction, see especially Robert Magliola, *Derrida on the Mend* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1984) and *On Deconstructing Life-Worlds: Buddhism, Christianity, Culture* (American Academy of Religion Cultural Criticism Series 3; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997). Magliola relates early Derrida to Nāgārjuna positively. See also David Loy, "The Clôture of Deconstruction: A Mahāyāna Critique of Derrida," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 27 (1987) 59–80. Loy relates Derrida negatively to Buddhism by using

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For Caputo, we are conditioned in the postmodern sense of recognizing that we are historically and culturally located, immersed in certain linguistic systems, shaped by our individual experiences, and so forth, and thus we are always constrained by our particularized, finite perspectives. Likewise, for Vasubandhu we are conditioned, but as a Buddhist he is concerned especially with how we are affected by karma and by our sense of self (*ātman*).

It is intriguing that, because of their stress on our conditioned condition, these thinkers therefore deny that we have access to truth through cognition or through final, rather than provisional, language. It seems such a strange approach for inciting religious commitment—i.e., humbly to stress the limitations of their traditions' ways of knowing and speaking—and yet, for both, their soteriologies hinge on this attention to conditioning. Studying the two together can help us think through the implications for religiosity of acknowledging our conditioning and can help us explore the relation of epistemic and linguistic humility to religious commitment. In the final portion of this article, I will show how the contents of the compared thought systems have important implications for comparative theology and thus have affected my own comparative approach.

The following are some rough similarities between Caputo and Vasubandhu that this essay will explore and explain in more detail. First, Caputo's approach deemphasizes metaphysics and ontology in favor of phenomenology and hermeneutics. Similarly, recent scholars, although not without controversy, have wanted to read Vasubandhu no longer as a metaphysical idealist but in terms of phenomenology, and scholars have been calling for more attention to his text on hermeneutics, his *Vyākhyāyukti* (Principles of exegesis).[2] Second, both thinkers, though in different ways, discuss our conditionedness in terms of the problem of the self. Vasubandhu discusses this problem with respect to the implications of the Buddhist doctrine of no-self. Caputo focuses on the subject's lack of complete

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a Zen-influenced Madhyamaka to criticize Derrida. For more on this debate, see *Buddhisms and Deconstructions*, which has a selected bibliography on Buddhism and deconstruction ([ed. Jin Y. Park; New Frameworks for Continental Philosophy Lanham, Md.: Lanham & Littlefield, 2006] 271–72). Caputo focuses on later Derrida. While earlier Derrida has been charged with uncontained "drift," later Derrida is said to "retreat to Levinas" and is accused of unacknowledged essentialism. For late-phase Derrida in relation to Buddhism, see Jin Y. Park, *Buddhism and Postmodernity: Zen, Huayan, and the Possibility of Buddhist Postmodern Ethics* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington, 2008) as well as *Deconstruction and the Ethical in Asian Thought* (ed. Youru Wang; Routledge Studies in Asian Religion and Philosophy; New York: Routledge, 2007). Lastly, see David Pensgard, "Yogacara Buddhism: A Sympathetic Description and Suggestion for Use in Western Theology and Philosophy of Religion," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 5 (2006) 94–103. With regard to this last work, although we use many of the same exponents of Yogācāra to make our arguments, I am uncomfortable with Pensgard's sweeping claims for the "superiority of Yogācāra over the Continental Tradition," with his equating of Eastern and Western notions without more attention to contexts, and with his failure in this article to deal with differences sufficiently.

[2] Interpreters of Vasubandhu with phenomenological leanings include Thomas Kochumuttom, Stefan Anacker, Dan Lusthaus, William Waldron, and Richard King. Scholars promoting the study of Vasubandhu's hermeneutics text include José Ignacio Cabezón, Richard Nance, and Peter Skilling.

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autonomy, the historical and cultural locatedness of the subject, the subject's tendency to self-promote and self-protect, and the subject's resistance to radical transformation (*metanoia*). Third, for each thinker, the referent, or the object, must be reconceived; this is the case whether the object may be God, things in themselves, *the* meaning of a text, etc. Against our common assumptions, the referent, they teach, is not a "what," not an object with an identifiable essence. Fourth, once Caputo's and Vasubandhu's respective strategies are implemented, dualities of all sorts evaporate, which has ethical implications that Caputo discusses in terms of justice, Mahāyāna Buddhists in terms of great compassion. Lastly, both avoid self-referential problems by insisting that their own ways of speaking are not exceptions to the rule about all language being conditioned and thus limited. If successful here, they show us a way to affirm our religious thought systems while remaining ever critical of them and thus open to the wisdom of religious others; Caputo and Vasubandhu show us how to have faith and humility, strong devotion without dogmatism.[3] This will have important implications for comparative theology more broadly, which, again, is a topic to which I will return.

Overall, the strategy of emphasizing our conditioning is termed *deconstruction* for Caputo and *appearance-only* (*vijñapti-mātra*) for Vasubandhu.[4] Deconstruction and appearance-only, I contend, serve broadly parallel soteric functions, because the problems that Vasubandhu sees with our cognizing and with how we relate ourselves to objects and others are comparable to the problems that Caputo sees with our theologizing and with how we relate ourselves to God.[5]

[3] "Dogmatism" is used here in the sense of an absolutistic stance that has lost sight of its conditionedness.

[4] Although "representation-only" is a common translation for *vijñapti-mātra*, Bruce Cameron Hall points out that "representation" is problematic, in that it suggests a representational theory of knowledge, while the purpose of Vasubandhu's argument is to question such a theory of knowledge; see Bruce Cameron Hall, "The Meaning of *Vijñapti* in Vasubandhu's Concept of Mind," *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 9 (1986) 7–23, at 14. "Nothing-but-cognition" is yet another common rendering.

[5] For purposes of this article, I am presupposing Caputo's Derrida-influenced theology and working from there in light of Vasubandhu, unpacking their implications for comparative theology. In other words, I presume an audience willing to entertain Caputo's theology or, at least, one interested in where Caputo may lead comparative theology. Of course, Derrida and Caputo have their critics, and while I agree with Caputo's defense of Derrida, I do not think that this article is the place to address all of Caputo's and Derrida's critics and defenders. For critique of Caputo's "religion without religion" and references to critics of Derrida's late-phase thought (said to "retreat to Levinas" and a closet essentialism), see respectively Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008) and Tom Cohen, "Anecographics," in *Impasses of the Post-Global: Theory in the Era of Climate Change* (ed. Henry Sussman; Critical Climate Change; Ann Arbor, Mich.: Open Humanities, 2012) 32–57. For an early attack on reader-sided interpretation of textual meaning, see E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1967), and for a defense of Derrida against the charge of relativism, see Christopher Norris, *Against Relativism: Philosophy of Science, Deconstruction and Critical Theory* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997).

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Caputo

Caputo[6] applies Derrida's thought to theology, employing Jewish and Christian terminology and asserting strongly that we need deconstruction.[7] We need always to deconstruct our religious views, he thinks, because, until the kingdom of God arrives, our views are conditioned. Here, down below, in the fallen, imperfect world, there is no place where we can stand in order to have an unconditioned vantage point, no way of knowing that is not bound by the limits of our finitude.

In Caputo's system, pure, sacred truth is symbolized by the kingdom, and that is to be distinguished from the claimed truths of human churches. Caputo says that while we may passionately yearn and pray for the coming of the kingdom, any kingdom that does come, by virtue of its appearing here in this world to limited humans, in being received by us, thereby becomes conditioned. Therefore, Caputo says that the truth that is not limited by being conditioned, the kingdom, is always deferred in our experience. Correspondingly, whatever does appear, then, as reflected in our current religious understandings, needs to be seen as the church, not the kingdom—i.e., as conditioned, not absolute.

Caputo describes deconstruction as "the hermeneutics of the kingdom of God."[8] Deconstruction is a radical interpretive approach that relentlessly exposes conditionedness in the name of that which is not conditioned; it deconstructs in the name of what is not deconstructible. For example, and adding a new metaphor now, earthly laws will always be imperfect and conditioned. Consequently, we should deconstruct laws in the name of justice, which is not deconstructible, not perfectly containable by our conditioned words and historical forms. We deconstruct laws in order to "repeat them with a difference,"[9] negotiating the distance or difference between the present laws and perfect justice. Similarly, we must deconstruct historical religions in order to repeat them with a difference, deconstructing what is imperfectly human in the name of, and in aspiration towards, the divine.

[6] I draw especially on the following works by Caputo: *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion; Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1997); *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion; Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2006); and *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Church and Postmodern Culture; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007); along with shorter pieces that he has published in two collections. *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus* (ed. Mark Dooley; SUNY Series in Theology and Continental Thought; Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2003) 1–19 contains his "God and Anonymity: Prolegomena to an Ankhoral Religion," along with responses to other authors' articles on himself. *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* features his "Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion" (ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon; Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1999) 185–222.

[7] Caputo calls his a "Jewish-Augustinian" reading of Derrida (Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 58).

[8] Ibid.

[9] Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 75.

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By thus questioningly taking sides with "untruth" as we challenge current interpretations, deconstruction "is at the same time a hermeneutics of truth."[10] Therefore, this complicates our distinctions between truth and untruth. As becomes clear later, it may indeed complicate all of our dualities and absolutes.

To repeat, then, the kingdom and justice indicate the unconditioned, or the highest truth, but we do not have that as such; we have only conditioned ways of speaking of truth and conditioned forms of it, yet we tend to run from this in denial and mistake conditioned things for absolute things, grasping idolatrously. As does Vasubandhu, Caputo traces this regrettable tendency to our sense of self and related insecurities. When we overlook our conditionedness to claim dogmatically absolute truths, we are self-asserting, promoting ourselves over others, claiming that we have privileged access to the unconditioned and that those with different views do not.[11] When church members claim to know, for example, "what Jesus would do," Caputo thinks that they need to stop and really "*ask* that question instead of using it as a stick to beat their enemies,"[12] "as a club to pound what is different."[13] Caputo thinks that we would do better to keep deconstructing, keep questioning rather than answering by admitting that our answer, and indeed every earthly answer, is conditioned. We should perpetually question, keep searching, in order to put ourselves in question and thus be open to fundamental transformation (*metanoia*).[14]

Sounding somewhat Buddhist, Caputo insists that the subject lacks complete autonomy, being "antedated by systems" that precede it: unconscious forces, the linguistic system in which the subject is "always and already immersed," and so forth.[15] "When we speak of the 'I'. . . or the 'self,' we are . . . gloss[ing] over the complexities, . . . hastily summariz[ing] the . . . numerous competing forces, constantly shifting," he writes.[16] Given this, the idea that we could have access to unconditioned truth or "reference," that we could know final answers, is "excessively subjectivistic."[17] Furthermore, as with subjects, likewise with objects. For Caputo, things have no nature; nature is just what nature is taken to be.[18] Thus, deconstruction, Caputo maintains, "constitutes a certain anti-essentialism."[19]

[10] Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 30.

[11] This parallels the Buddhist concern about views *(dṛṣṭis)* as forms of attachment (Hugh Nicholson, e-mail message to author, June 6, 2011).

[12] Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 19 [italics in original].

[13] Ibid., 110.

[14] Such words about being willing to put ourselves in question, for me, resonated all the more powerfully when juxtaposed with Buddhists' no-self doctrine, with their analysis of the problem of the self that is more thoroughgoing than Caputo's.

[15] Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 345 n. 19.

[16] Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 283.

[17] Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 17.

[18] Ibid., 180.

[19] Ibid., 138.

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However, without thinking that we can ever definitively answer such questions as what Jesus would do, still Caputo feels that he can say, at least, that Jesus would somehow deconstruct; that is, Jesus would problematize our conditioned views, never satisfied with what is thus limited. Jesus would challenge the "sphere of the 'same,'" "deliver the shock of the other."[20] As Caputo reads it, the New Testament is full of stories of Jesus doing just that.[21]

Following this Jesus, then, Caputo says, "The church is 'deconstructible,' but the kingdom of God, if there is such a thing, is not, . . [and] the kingdom of God is that in virtue of which the church is deconstructible."[22] Note the "if there is such a thing" part, which is extremely important. If we acknowledge that the kingdom, or religious truth, cannot come to us without thereby being conditioned, then we do not know; hence the "if." We have only faith, not knowledge, Caputo will insist.

In Caputo's writing, as I understand him, the kingdom, or the unconditioned, is like a ghost; its status is complicated. If a ghost appears, it does so in the mode of a kind of semi- or peculiar existence that is also part nonexistence. A ghost is the sort of thing that points to the fact that the sharp duality between existing and not, the usual way of thinking, may be inadequate. On the one hand, the downside can be seen in Caputo's frequent appeals to the trope of a ghostly specter as an emblem of our inability to access the truth. Caputo thinks that we must allow ourselves to be haunted by this specter. If we let ourselves be spooked, be "put in question by this question," then we will always constantly ask whether indeed we are doing what Jesus would do, following him, or "just going where we want to go on our own."[23] This is why Nietzsche is prominent in this system, but Nietzsche is, in Caputo's words, a "specter not a 'dogma.'" Caputo writes, "I do not give him [Nietzsche] dogmatic authority; I just can't shut him up."[24] That is the negative side. There will always be doubt as we are haunted by the possibility of other answers, interpretations, viewpoints, and contexts.

On the other hand, the upside is that the ghostly trope is not only an emblem of our inability to capture truth but also an emblem of the unconditioned itself. In this view, the kingdom may appear or be present in the sense that the unconditioned haunts our conditioned systems, ever unsettling and prodding our earthly ways. Ghosts do have a kind of reality or presence for us, but only of a limited, betwixt-and-between, elusive sort. The unconditioned is like that, Caputo thinks.

[20] Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 26–27.

[21] In the Old Testament as well, Caputo says that "God is on the side of deconstruction, [as the God] who intervened at a crucial moment in the construction of a famous tower, calling construction to a halt, disseminating . . . tongues" (Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 54).

[22] Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 35.

[23] Ibid., 43.

[24] John D. Caputo, "'O felix culpa,' This Foxy Fellow Felix: A Response to Westphal," in *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus* (ed. Mark Dooley; Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2003) 171–74, at 172.

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Let us translate the metaphor again now, for if language is conditioned, we must keep translating, trying out other possibilities. Caputo draws a parallel between our inability to know God transparently and our inability ever to arrive at *the* meaning of a text (including scriptures). If all readings are conditioned, then no reading is definitive. In order to elaborate, and alluding to Derrida's *The Post Card*, Caputo uses the metaphor of lost mail.[25] First, a lost item, like a ghost, is yet another image of something with a tricky, complicated status. The owner of something lost feels as though it exists somehow, that the lost thing is indeed here, but in another sense the lost thing does not exist because the item cannot be accessed or held. Observe also that when something is lost, we seem to appreciate it newly, wanting its presence all the more intensely. Herein lies the advantage of seeing the unconditioned, such as justice, in this way: it generates desire, motivating us to strive for ever elusive justice. In contrast, thinking that we already know justice in itself, and that we have legitimized the law in order to ensure it, does not generate that same effect.

Comparing texts to lost mail, in particular, Caputo says that texts follow the "postal principle"[26] in that texts always get lost—for example, when they are misunderstood, misquoted, altered, redacted, and read differently. "A text remains structurally and in principle capable of being understood differently . . . so that it is always happening (*arriver*) but never arrives (*arriver*) decisively at just one final destination . . . that would be authorized to pronounce its meaning once and for all."[27] Caputo thinks that this "postal principle" is the principle of any tradition. Christianity itself practiced this sort of creative re- or misreading in its appropriation of the Hebrew Scriptures, arriving at an unexpected destination.[28]

For these reasons, Derrida describes what he is doing as a movement from ontology to "hauntology."[29] Caputo argues not that there is a ghost, as though identifying an entity, but "that something ghostly is happening."[30] The conditioned appears as things, but the unconditioned is present only as a haunting event. Thus, Caputo moves away from metaphysics and instead towards hermeneutics, poetics, and phenomenology. Instead of asking what is, he wants to ask what appears in our experience and what that might mean.

Hermeneutically, reading literally will not help us avoid being haunted. We cannot reproduce precisely what Jesus does in the Bible, because we live in different circumstances than Jesus did. Also, we cannot know what Jesus would do because, if predictable, Jesus would have represented more of the same, not the loosening up of the same to make room for the incoming of the other. However, Caputo thinks

[25] Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 46.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., 46.

[28] Then, the "Christian tradition . . . [over time] is the history of taking the story of Jesus differently, again and again" (ibid., 47–48).

[29] Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 120.

[30] Ibid., 144.

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that the haunting question of what Jesus would do, if allowed truly to penetrate and remain a question, can help us develop as much judgment as we can.[31]

Hauntology is phenomenology, because Caputo works from our experience.[32] He speaks of the phenomenon in question (i.e., feeling haunted by the unconditioned) as an experience like that of a call or solicitation.[33] Again, I see calls and solicitations to be like ghosts and lost items, because when, for example, a deployed soldier calls home but is unable to be home, we do feel to some degree that loved one's presence. At the same time, during the call we are acutely aware of the limited way that the loved one is here with us, which makes our yearning for fuller presence increase sharply. Analogously, we do not have full access to the unconditioned, but we feel called by and towards it, and so in that sense we do have some semblance of it, which pulls us to seek after it, wishing it to be here among us.[34]

[31] Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 96.

[32] Importantly, however, Caputo is careful to distinguish his sort of phenomenology, which is a phenomenology of anonymity (i.e., what is given in experience is anonymous/undecidable, because our condition is to be severed from the truth), from that of Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion, who affirm that the infinite or God can make an appearance (of a sort) in phenomenology—e.g., via Marion's notion of a "saturated phenomenon." Caputo remains skeptical of such claims of "infinite givenness" (Caputo, "God and Anonymity," 3) or of a "phenomenology of infinity," which sound to him "too much like the Secret" (ibid., 4). However, even this duality or distinction starts to blur, Caputo admits, because while we can distinguish God and anonymity conceptually, phenomenologically (i.e., experientially) the traits are the same: we reach limit states that are indefinite, formless, nameless, and so on. See Caputo, "God and Anonymity," 6–7.

[33] An opponent might ask, with this notion of the call, is Caputo not thereby introducing the problematic category of unmediated, universal experience? Quite the opposite: it seems to me that Caputo is trying to rule out any appeal to unmediated experience, but he is struggling to find a way to express what is going on when, in the midst of mediated experience, we yearn for the unmediated that we cannot have. Why a call rather than no call? Why affirm faith rather than disavow it? There is an undecidability in trying to define concepts such as faith, and that is why Caputo keeps deconstructing. These are passions, not knowledge (which is why they can go wrong). Caputo is sensitive to Kantian limits but thinks that we have to say "yes" along the model of Mary's response at the time of the Annunciation; hers is a commitment, a choice with a risk, a passion with a fallibility, not a knowledge or something groundable. One does not have to define faith this way, of course, but Caputo argues that there are advantages to doing so.

[34] This is why Caputo describes Derrida as remaining a phenomenologist but one whose phenomenology limits itself and cannot be phenomenology "in a rigorous sense." Derrida wants "to 'go beyond phenomenology' but to do so phenomenologically" (Caputo, "Apostles of the Impossible," 206, 208, respectively). (With this qualification, we see yet again that no term or label in this system, not even "phenomenology," should be absolute.) Caputo's phenomenology of anonymity is an unusual sort of phenomenology. Like Yogācāra's development, which the scholars say was prompted, in part, by the concern to avoid the nihilism that was sometimes attributed by opponents to Madhyamaka thought, likewise Derrida is also trying to avoid nihilism. Speaking of the gift, which I will introduce shortly and which is another metaphor for the unconditioned, Caputo says that "it is impossible for the gift to 'exist' *as such*, to be 'present' or make an 'appearance,'" but he goes on to clarify importantly that Derrida does not conclude from this that "there is absolutely no gift" (ibid., 206 [italics in original]). Surprisingly (for the other always comes unexpectedly), the Yogācāra-Madhyamaka debate helped me understand the Caputo-Marion debate. Both Vasubandhu and Caputo want neither essentialism nor nihilism. Caputo is trying to steer a careful intermediate

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Thus, hauntology is phenomenology but it is a "phenomenology of what is *not given*."[35] Although we may seem to experience the call of truth, our conditioned state and epistemic limits render us uncertain of the caller's identity or even the caller's very existence. Is it really God? Or, as Nietzsche says, is it "a bit of undigested meat"? Oversimplifying the point for effect, Caputo quips that Freud "thinks that what is really being called for is our mommy."[36] Hindus, I would add, think the caller is Brahman, Muslims that Allah calls. "Who has authorized me . . . to decide that undecidable?"[37] "Where would one be standing?" Caputo asks.[38] "It is a condition of our hearing [the call] that we *cannot* identify it further. The confession that we cannot identify it is *constitutive* of it. For as soon as we would be able to identify it . . . we would have begun to . . . put ourselves back in the nominative. We would no longer be in the accusative, put on the spot, de-posed by what it poses to us."[39]

Caputo explains that if Abraham in the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac[40] had been more concerned to ask about the identity of the voice that called to him, making his obedience contingent upon knowing, it would ruin the power of the story. There would be computable cost-benefit analysis on Abraham's part, not a giving up and over of himself, an excess outside of any economy, a transcendence. Without his non-knowing, Abraham "would not be the father of faith but of good investments and estate planning."[41] Thus, "the spiritual journey we launch under the impetus of a calling . . . actually depends on not knowing."[42] However, if this is so, then deconstruction, as an affirmation of what cannot be known or finally named, is an affirmation that "can be made under many names, with or without God."[43] This has profound implications for theology of religions, as will be explained eventually below.

However, to say that no way of talking is ever final and that names and language are always limited or conditioned is not as bleak as it sounds; this is because Caputo thinks that names harbor events. By an "event" I understand Caputo to mean the sacred time when we are opened up to the unconditioned, the sacred itself. Caputo

course—in Buddhist parlance, a "middle way." Like the name of the text for which Vasubandhu wrote a commentary, Caputo's system is also *Madhyāntavibhāga* (Discriminating the middle from the extremes).

[35] Ibid., 206–8, at 207 [italics in original].

[36] Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 114.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 196.

[39] Ibid., 97 [italics in original].

[40] Or was it Ishmael? Muslim traditions say it was Ishmael.

[41] Caputo, "God and Anonymity," 14.

[42] Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 49.

[43] Ibid., 124. It is precisely because Caputo's approach is *not* to have untranslatable concepts that he keeps deliberately changing up his terms and shifting between religious and nonreligious language: democracy, Christianity, justice, kingdom, gift, hospitality, ghost, prayer, call, etc. By implication, he disagrees with the insularity of Wittgenstein's "language games" and with the so-called "cultural-linguistic" approach to theology.

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says that deconstruction is a prayer for the release of the event that stirs within conditioned names.[44] When we respond to a name, what we are really responding to is what the name promises, not what it can actually capture or deliver. Caputo observes that "when we speak of something . . . being 'worthy of the name,' . . . we are speaking of the event that name contains. The event that is going on *in* the name is the event of a *call*, of something calling and of something being called for *by* the name." "Anyone who hears what is resonating in the word 'democracy' (or 'Christianity') . . . knows that no existing democracy [or form of Christianity] . . . is up to what is called for in that name."[45] What is called for is never here but rather always deferred, or "to come."[46]

It is because the kingdom is always deferred and the events harbored in names always "to come" that Derrida speaks of a messianic or prophetic structure.[47] Caputo writes that "it would be 'idolatrous' to identify the event . . . with its present state of affairs . . . instead of being drawn by the call of that event."[48] The messiah, "the one who is coming . . . can never be present. He must always function as a breach of the present, opening up the present to something new."[49]

[44] Ibid., 58. Deconstruction is not only prayer, but confession as well—i.e., in the sense of confessing our conditionedness.

[45] Ibid., 59 [italics in original].

[46] This soteric urgency about, and drive towards, the future to come helps explain why it is a misreading of Caputo to see him as constituting a "sort of linguistic Berkeleyianism," a charge against which Caputo defends himself in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (16). It is striking that, when read as a metaphysical idealist, Vasubandhu has also been compared to Berkeley, and studying the two thinkers together helped me to see this as a possible misreading in Vasubandhu's case as well. I do not see Caputo as denying any kind of reference whatsoever, leaving us trapped in our own language and minds, "signifiers . . . leading only to other signifiers." This is because, "while there is nothing which . . . would escape the constraints of textuality, it is no less true that everything . . . written has been directed toward the other of language, toward the alterity" to come, he says. Quoting Derrida, Caputo writes, "Deconstruction tries to show that the question of reference is much more complex and problematic than traditional theories supposed. [Deconstruction] even asks whether our term 'reference' is entirely adequate for designating the 'other.' The other, which is beyond language and which summons language, is perhaps not a 'referent' in the normal sense" (Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 16). Vasubandhu also wants to reconceive the notion of reference, or referential objects.

[47] "If the Messiah did show up he would ruin everything." This is why in Christianity, "since it is believed that the Messiah has already come," Christians now wait for him "to come *again*" (Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 60 [italics in original]).

[48] Ibid.

[49] Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, xxiv. I see this as a strategy, to use a Buddhist term, to avoid attachment—i.e., to avoid elevating the finite to the infinite while still allowing the infinite to stir within the finite and urge us on. Also, this prophetic/messianic element is what takes Derrida beyond negative theology. Caputo describes Derrida's theology as more prophetic and eschatological than apophatic and mystical (ibid., xxiv). Deconstruction is not "merely negative" but "deeply and abidingly affirmative—of something new, of something coming" (ibid., 3). While negative theology seems to Caputo "a more refined way of affirming that God exists, or hyperexists" (ibid., 7), in contrast, "*différance* does not settle the God question one way or the other; in fact, the point is to un-settle it" (ibid., 13). On Caputo's account, deconstruction "saves apophatic theology from telling a bad story about itself, about how it speaks from the Heart of Truth" (ibid., 6). Caputo says that

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However, an opponent may ask whether it is not a kind of answer to the question of "what Jesus would do" to say that Jesus would deconstruct. Caputo replies that deconstruction "is not a determinate position . . . but a 'how,' a *way* of holding a position. . . . It provides an unsettling reminder about how . . . [not to hold any given position] with too much complacency and self-assurance, and about allowing ourselves to be held."[50] Caputo very clearly admits that Derrida's own system "emerged under determinate historical conditions," and thus it, too, is deconstructible.[51] Translations, deconstructions, repetitions with a difference do not stop. "In the end, Derrida concludes, there is no end."[52]

This unending deferral rather than presence means that, for Caputo, truth is not an object to grasp or know but rather something we do, something we work at, which brings us to the implications for justice. "In the theory of the event, 'truth'

he "begs to differ" with negative theology "insofar as negative theology turns out, upon analysis, to be actually a . . . way to trump language and representation" (ibid., 10). "The God of negative theology is a transcendental signified, the dream of being without *différance*, of being outside the text" (ibid., 11). Negative theology claims "to touch bottom not by means of representational thinking, of concepts and discursive reasoning, but by . . . entering into a wordless, imageless . . . inner sanctum of the temple." Therefore, "far from a deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence, negative theology . . . effects . . . the triumph of presence over representation. . . . To that extent, deconstruction is its nemesis. . . . The *last* thing that could be claimed in deconstruction is that one has reached the point of ineffability, of silent union, beyond words and concepts" (ibid., 11 [italics in original]). "Derrida wants to hold the hand of negative theology to the fire of its word . . . [namely,] that it does not know . . . , so that one is not sure whether this is God" (ibid., 12). While negative theology is described here as putting "*presence* over representation," in contrast, Caputo says that his own view is that truth is *doing the truth*, which means putting *passion* over representation" (ibid., xix [italics in original]). I wonder, might Vasubandhu, in turn, want to say that we need to put *com*passion over representation (*vijñapti*)?

[50] Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 55 [italics in original]. "*Différance* is not God," Caputo insists emphatically (Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 1–19). It is "neither a word nor a concept . . . because Derrida is . . . addressing the conditions under which words and concepts are formed in the first place, which means that *différance*, as the 'word' for that, is a kind of non-word" (ibid., 8). It is "not an entity" and "has no truth," and, paraphrasing Derrida, it is, therefore, "irreducible to any ontotheological reappropriation" (ibid., 7). Consequently, this is why deconstruction "writes under erasure," "saying something without saying it, even deforming and misspelling it"—*différance* "being the most famous misspelling" (ibid., 2). I am reminded here of Nāgārjuna in the *Vigrahavyāvartanī* (Refuting the objections), a text that, rather coincidentally, uses the metaphor of a phantom for the central Buddhist notion of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) and argues that emptiness is an antidote to all positions rather than itself one more position. Indeed, I think that Caputo has helped me to understand this sort of argument in Nāgārjuna in a way that I never did before.

[51] Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 142.

[52] Ibid., 53. The "come" of which deconstruction dreams is a "completely open-ended, negative, undetermined structure. . . . For the future present, insofar as it is already pre-envisioned, belongs to the regime of the same, which is not the absolutely undetermined surprise that Derrida calls the 'messianic hope.' . . . Of this future to come, we can only say 'come'" (ibid., 56). In other words, Caputo distinguishes between what he calls the present future and the absolute future. The present future is up ahead but what we can imagine and plan for. This is the realm of retirement savings and the like. The absolute future, on the other hand, is totally unforeseeable, and Caputo's way of speaking of that dimension in our lives is that our self-oriented limitations and conditioning get opened up somehow to the other.

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means what is trying to come true, which points to our responsibility to make it actually come."[53] "Justice in itself does not exist but it is something we demand and something that is demanded of us."[54] Justice itself actually existing or coming would bring our efforts to an end, but justice haunting us is what keeps us in hot pursuit.

This brings us to one last way that Caputo describes deconstruction—namely, as *passion for the possibility of* the *impossible*.[55] Caputo says, "When you go to the possible nothing much happens." You get more of the same. Thus, "the only event . . . is to go to the impossible."[56] Explaining further with the notion of the gift, Caputo speaks of the gift as a paradigm for the impossible because as soon as something is given, there is debt (e.g., expectation of return) and there is reward (e.g., being owed); thus, an economy kicks in, even though true gifts are meant to be a loving excess given outside any economy and without regard for return. However, that the economy always rears its head means *not* that the gift is impossible *simpliciter*, but only that the gift is "*the* impossible ([in the sense that] it belongs to the vocative order)"—to the order of a call.[57] We should still try to give, Caputo thinks, not motivated by return, even though there will inevitably be a return. In short, the very conditions of the gift's happening nullify it, condition it, pull it back into an economy, and that dilemma and paradox is precisely the mark of it. Hence deconstruction is passion for "*the* impossible."

Because experiencing the unconditioned without thereby in the process conditioning it is an impossibility (i.e., a phenomenological impossibility), at bottom, this is just a way of "confessing the need for faith."[58] Just as we should still give in the face of the impossibility of the gift, we should still speak our religious languages, knowing that our way of speaking will not prove to be permanently adequate. We cannot escape economies, but it is in virtue of the gift that we can loosen them a bit, opening them up.[59] Economies are all that exist, but they "are made fertile and productive by the gift by which they are ruptured and interrupted. . . . Economies need gifts."[60] The time of the gift, Caputo says, is a kind of "suspension" that is the "very essence" of "sacred space."[61]

[53] Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 61.

[54] Ibid., 64.

[55] He qualifies, though, that "'*the* impossible' refers [here] not to a logical [impossibility] but to a phenomenological impossibility" (Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 317 n. 1 [italics in original]). As I understand Caputo, this means that the idea that there could be an unconditioned "out there" is something of which we can conceive. Thus, logically speaking, the unconditioned is possible, not impossible. But the idea that I could somehow experience the unconditioned, know its nature or whether indeed it is even there, without conditioning, is a phenomenological impossibility.

[56] Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 50.

[57] Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 69–71 [italics in original].

[58] Caputo, "Apostles of the Impossible," 206–8.

[59] Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 71.

[60] Ibid., 72.

[61] Ibid., 133.

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Like giving without regard for return, Caputo maintains that the most "radical prayer" is "praying with no . . . assurance that anyone is out there to hear"—or without assurance, I would add, that our God is the God.[62] Here we have another duality complicated, one with far-reaching implications for our theology of religions: faith, it seems, cannot be separated from doubt.[63] If we give, serve, or pray knowing that God will pat us on the back for it, the economy is only reinforced. However, conversely and crucially, if we give, serve, or pray anyway, when we are unsure of God, *that* is the sacred time.[64]

With the above reading of Abraham and these notions of radical prayer and the gift in mind, Caputo thus asks suggestively, what if, just what if, living religiously requires non-knowing, a moment of atheism or doubt, structurally? "What then becomes of the distinction between . . . believer and infidel," between Christian and non-Christian?[65]

Vasubandhu

Although Vasubandhu[66] is often read as a metaphysical idealist (that is, as denying that objects of perception exist independently of the mind), my own interpretation of him here instead follows scholars with phenomenological leanings.[67] Yogācārins

[62] Ibid., 127. Likewise, "when I pray, am I not also praying that there is someone to hear my prayer? Praying is the sort of thing that requires that we are already praying in order to get started. When I pray, I am also praying to be able to pray, praying that my prayer 'has a prayer,' has a prayer of a chance, that it is not left without a prayer. I am praying that there is something to prayer . . . . The prayer on behalf of prayer itself, is structured into the prayer" (John D. Caputo, "A Game of Jacks: A Response to Derrida," in *A Passion for the Impossible*, 34–49, at 40).

[63] Faith and doubt are interrelated—dependently originated, to use a Buddhist term.

[64] Ibid., 17.

[65] Ibid., 17–18.

[66] I focus on five works attributed to Vasubandhu: 1) the first chapter of *Madhyāntavibhāga-bhāṣya* (Commentary on the *Discriminating the middle from the extremes*; henceforward *MVB*), 2) *Trisvabhāva-nirdeśa* (Treatise on the three natures; henceforward *TSN*), 3) *Viṃśatikā* (Twenty verses; henceforward *Viṃś*) with its commentary (*vṛtti*), 4) *Triṃśatikā* (Thirty verses), and 5) *Vyākhyāyukti* (Principles of exegesis; henceforward *VY*). English translations of all of these texts except the last one are available in Thomas A. Kochumuttom, *A Buddhist Doctrine of Experience: A New Translation and Interpretation of the Works of Vasubandhu, the Yogācārin* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1982) and Stefan Anacker, *Seven Works of Vasubandhu, the Buddhist Psychological Doctor* (rev. ed.; Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2005). Anacker provides as well the Sanskrit texts. I relied on secondary scholarship for my comments on the *VY*. Just as Derrida and Caputo have their critics, Yogācāra has been criticized by Madhyamaka for crypto-essentialism. For Candrakīrti's critique of Yogācāra, see Peter G. Fenner, "Candrakīrti's Refutation of Buddhist Idealism," *Philosophy East and West* 33 (1983) 251–61 and Robert F. Olson, "Candrakīrti's Critique of Vijñānavāda," *Philosophy East and West* 24 (1974) 405–11.

[67] See Kochumuttom, *Buddhist Doctrine*; Anacker, *Seven Works*; Dan Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophical Investigation of Yogācāra Buddhism and the "Ch'eng Wei-shih lun"* (Curzon Critical Studies in Buddhism Series; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002); William S. Waldron, *The Buddhist Unconscious: The Ālaya-vijñāna in the Context of Indian Buddhist Thought* (RoutledgeCurzon Critical Studies in Buddhism; New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003); and

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work phenomenologically from experience because they presuppose that, while we are unenlightened, our ongoing experiences are continually adding to our karmic accumulation, and that fuels our bondage (*saṃsāra*). Therefore, it is essential to examine and change how we experience in order to be liberated. Furthermore, because intent is crucial for karma, the Yogācārins were primarily concerned to analyze cognition, or consciousness.[68]

Remember that Caputo embraces phenomenology because he rejects the dualities of ontology (e.g., existing/nonexisting, present/absent, gift/no gift). Such dualities would not accommodate Caputo's experience of ghosts and calls.[69] Vasubandhu may be similarly dissatisfied with the usual choices for categorizing referents. Vasubandhu's position may not be exactly idealism (which too flatly denies the ultimate reality of anything beyond the mind), nor realism ("which assumes a close if not exact correspondence between" mental images and the external realities that they purportedly reflect). Instead, Vasubandhu's position follows from the Buddhist doctrine of dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*), i.e., that everything arises from causes and conditions, and thus everything is dependently arisen rather than autonomous.[70] Mahāyāna Buddhists hold that dependently arisen, so-called "things" are empty (*śūnya*)—that is, empty of own-being (*svabhāva*) or essence. What is dependently arisen and empty may turn out to have much in common with Caputo's ghosts.

The historical context for Yogācāra was worry that the rival Madhyamaka school's description of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) was apt to be perceived (fairly or not) as veering towards nihilism. In his writings Vasubandhu tries to develop a new hermeneutic of emptiness in order to clarify how empty things are not completely nonexistent even though they have no own-being.[71] The realism-versus-idealism debate, with its talk of entities, works best in the realm of ontology, but it is phenomenology that can focus us on interdependence, including the interdependence of mind and world.[72] In the Indian Buddhist system, "it is on account of our [mentally] clinging to forms

Richard King, "Vijnaptimatrata and the Abhidharma Context of Early Yogacara," *Asian Philosophy* 8 (1998) 5–18.

[68] Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology*, 172, 485.

[69] Ontology would not do justice, we might say. I mean this in two senses. First, ontology would not do justice to ghosts and calls (i.e., would not adequately accommodate our experience of ghosts and calls), and second, Caputo thinks that justice, like truth, is something you do (*facere veritatem*) and that phenomenology brings us to that "doing" better than ontology does.

[70] Waldron, *Buddhist Unconscious*, 162.

[71] Richard King, "Early Yogācāra and Its Relationship with the Madhyamaka School," *Philosophy East and West* 44 (1994) 659–83; Hall, "Meaning of *Vijñapti*," 15–17; and Paul M. Williams, "Some Aspects of Language and Construction in the Madhyamaka," *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 8 (1980) 1–45, at 10–15.

[72] Robyn Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion: A Theo-logical Introduction* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2005) 25.

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of life that again and again we produce them. . . . It is our will, our . . . desire which creates the world in which we live, and the organism which corresponds to it."[73]

Buddhists see the world as consisting of conditioned, interactive phenomena, and it is the status of such so-called "things" that is controversial. Yogācāra offers what Richard King calls a container or receptacle view of empty things. The idea is that for something to be empty, it must still exist in some way, just as there is still something (i.e., a receptacle), even when the receptacle is empty.[74] Things are "in one sense existent (*bhāva*), but not in the everyday sense of being . . . independent 'entities' or 'objects.'" For this reason, there is a refusal or suspension of ontological debate.[75]

Let me illustrate a phenomenological reading of Vasubandhu by looking first at his *Viṃśatikā* (Twenty verses). The text begins by saying that everything is appearance-only because there is the appearing of nonexistent things. Although it is easy to see how this could be construed as a declaration of metaphysical idealism, an alternative reading takes this to mean only that, when things appear to us in the *saṃsāric* realm, this side of *nirvāṇa*, those things do not exist in fact as they appear to exist to us in consciousness. This is because, as long as we are stuck in *saṃsāra*, our experience of things is conditioned by our karma and our sense of self.

Vasubandhu goes on to compare our ordinary experience to that of someone with eye disease. Our unenlightened view, symbolized by the diseased eyes, is always flawed because it is compromised by our karmic and self-centered conditioning. Next, the text offers answers to various potential problems with this position—how to explain restriction to time and place, for example, if indeed exactly corresponding objects are not responsible for our experience of objects. Vasubandhu answers with more analogies. For instance, while dreaming, we feel that we are experiencing things restricted to specific times and places, when in fact this dream world is only constructed by our minds and there are no corresponding external objects. As I read the several analogies, though, maybe they are not necessarily meant to show that outside realities do not exist. The analogies are extreme or exaggerated in that the objects discussed are totally factitious, but perhaps the analogies are merely meant to emphasize the role of mental construction in experience and are meant to show

[73] Waldron, *Buddhist Unconscious*, 5. The second quotation is from Anagarika Govinda, as quoted by Waldron (Anagarika Govinda, *The Psychological Attitude of Early Buddhist Philosophy, and Its Systematic Representation According to Abhidhamma Tradition* [London: Rider, 1969] 54).

[74] Kochumuttom translates the *MVB*'s commentary on 1.1 to say that "when something is absent in a receptacle, then one, seeing that receptacle as devoid of that thing, perceives that receptacle as it is, and recognizes that receptacle, which is left over, as it is, namely, as something truly existing here" (Kochumuttom, *Buddhist Doctrine*, 236). In other words, the definition of emptiness found in early Yogācāra literature is the existence of nonexistence (King, "Early Yogācāra," 666). See *MVB* 1.13 and 1.2.

[75] King, "Early Yogācāra," 667–68; Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology*, 6.

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how it is the mentally constructed objects (the objects as experienced) that account for the characteristics of human experience in the *saṃsāric* realm.[76]

Verses 11–15 address atomic, or mereological, theories. Vasubandhu shows incoherencies in conceiving of things as wholes made of basic particles, as groups of basic parts, or as aggregates. (These three options are treated by some opposing schools as an exhaustive set of options for the composition of material objects.)[77] If interpreted as though trying to show the impossibility of material objects, then once again it is easy to see this portion as supporting metaphysical idealism. However, it is possible instead to see this section as not necessarily aiming to disprove physical objects, but rather as pointing to the limitations of our conceptualizations of so-called objects, implying that any conceptualizing is problematic. Vasubandhu does not really say that the outside world is completely nonexistent; he just denies that things-in-themselves could be conceptualized satisfactorily as atoms. This may be phenomenology, not ontology, for the actual meat of Vasubandhu's argument here is the point that objects are never actually experienced in any of the ways imagined by the three options.[78]

However, if corresponding independent objects do not explain our experienced version of those objects, and instead our conditioning does, then how are we to understand the conditioning process? For this, we need to understand the Yogācāra view of the structure of our minds. Here we begin to see how Vasubandhu, more than Caputo, helps us think in detail about why and how we are conditioned, and about how our conditioning proliferates. The earlier Abhidharma tradition mapped the mind by asserting six kinds of consciousnesses: namely, the five sense consciousnesses plus the thinking consciousness, which has as its objects input from the five sense consciousnesses plus linguistic constructs and mental images. Yogācārins expand this six-part map of the mind by positing two additional consciousnesses, which make up a subliminal realm of our minds.[79] Yogācārins

[76] Other potential problems treated include how to explain shared perceptions and produced effects, given the view that objects as perceived are only apparent. Vasubandhu's analogies in answer to those two problems are, respectively, the experience of hell (i.e., hell is collectively hallucinated due to shared karma) and wet dreams (i.e., effects are produced as a result of imagined constructions, not due to external realities).

[77] In further detail, the argument is that if something has parts, then it is not irreducible and could be further divided into more parts, but if it has no parts, then it would be invisible; if it is invisible, then no matter how many are aggregated, the combination still would not be visible. Also, if something has no parts, then how would it have contact with other things or enter into relationships?

[78] Kochumuttom, *Buddhist Doctrine*, 180. As Hall observes, in the context of Buddhist debates, atoms are tools to demolish substantial "things," but the danger may be that atoms themselves can, in turn, be reified (Hall, "Meaning of *Vijñapti*," 18). Thus, perhaps atoms stand for any subtle, lingering "things" that may remain upon previous Buddhist analyses intending to deconstruct entities. Atoms stand for the notion of fundamental, irreducible elements, and Vasubandhu's point is just to insist that deconstruction must be radical and thoroughgoing until there are no such self-standing elements.

[79] The six-part map of the mind was thought to be inadequate for explaining our experience and for supporting Buddhist doctrine. It left unanswered certain questions. For example, given Buddhist belief in transmigration (rebirth) and no-self, if upon death sensation and thinking cease, then

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add a seventh consciousness, the defiled or afflicted consciousness (*kliṣṭavijñāna* or *manas*), in order to explain the "preconscious tendency" to assume the existence of the self. Thus, the seventh consciousness is the "I-making" function, which creates our attachments.[80] Then they add an eighth consciousness, called the store consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), which functions to store and reproduce karma.[81] These two subliminal processes operate with, and underlie, all conscious processes.

Vasubandhu's *Triṃśatikā* (Thirty verses) explains the role of these subliminal processes in shaping our experience. The opening of this text mentions transformations (*pariṇāma*) of consciousness (*vijñāna*), which are said to be threefold. That is, our conditioning "consists of three layers," or "three subjective transformations," which are elaborated in verses 2–18. First, the eighth, store consciousness, or karma, retains all of our habits and inclinations deriving from our past experiences, informing how things are responded to and received. Second, the seventh, afflicted, or I-making, consciousness shapes our cognition with selfish attachment and tendencies to "protect and further" the self. Third, the first six consciousnesses (that is, our thinking and sensing) operate while shaped by these subliminal influences.[82]

The *Triṃśatikā* says that what we experience as self and other, or as subjectivity and objectivity (*ātman* and *dharma*), develops from this three-part process. Similarly, the opening part of the *Discriminating the Middle from the Extremes* speaks of duality (*dvayam*), which is glossed as referring to grasper and graspable (*grāhaka* and *grāhya*), or subject and object. *Saṃsāric* experience is said to involve this duality that is not actual but is contributed by the mind and thus is called the imagination of the unreal (*abhūta-parikalpa*). In contrast, *nirvāṇa* is associated instead with emptiness (*śūnyatā*), which for the Yogācārins here means the absence of constructed duality.

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how can existence carry over into another related lifetime where consciousness reemerges? Since scriptures define some meditative states as stilling all six consciousnesses, how does the meditator stay alive and consciousness reemerge from meditative states? How can we acquire cumulative knowledge and skills, such as when learning a sport? That is, where is that information stored when not actively conscious, and how is it retrieved? Why are the same things often perceived differently by different persons, or even by the same person at different times? What explains this coloring? Lastly, how does a past deed produce its karmic effect in the future? (Tagawa Shun'ei, *Living Yogācāra: An Introduction to Consciousness-Only Buddhism* [trans. Charles Muller; Boston: Wisdom, 2009] xvii, 15–16).

[80] Tagawa, *Living Yogācāra*, xviii, 16; Mario D'Amato, *Maitreya's Distinguishing the Middle from the Extremes ("Madhyāntavibhāga") Along with Vasubandhu's Commentary ("Madhyāntavibhāga-bhāṣya"): A Study and Annotated Translation* (Treasury of the Buddhist Sciences Series; New York: American Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2012) 11.

[81] Technically, first, there was an additional root or adhering consciousness (*mūlavijñāna, ādānavijñāna*) put forth, but this was then further dissected into the *kliṣṭavijñāna* and the *ālayavijñāna* (Tagawa, *Living Yogācāra*, xviii). Paramārtha, reflecting the Chinese leaning towards the theory of Buddha nature, would posit, in addition, a ninth consciousness (*amalavijñāna*), the undefiled or pure consciousness, a term not used by Vasubandhu.

[82] Tagawa, *Living Yogācāra*, 17.

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The text says that the storehouse consciousness endures because of habit-energies, or perfumings (*vāsanās*). Karmic conditioning is metaphorically described as a storehouse, which stores seeds and perfumings, images connoting a sense of lingering effects, of spreading and permeating. Experiences shaped by the karmic seeds of past experiences in turn create fresh seeds and more perfume that the store consciousness again accumulates, shaping future experiences. Thus, there is a vicious cycle—Caputo would say an economy—from which it is the religious task to free ourselves. Verse 19 says that not only karmic deeds but also dualistic grasping perpetuates the storehouse consciousness. Vasubandhu suggests that the storehouse consciousness endures "only in collaboration (*saha*) with the habit-energies of the twofold grasping." Therefore, eradicating this dualistic grasping would abolish the distorting karmic conditioning synonymous with *saṃsāra*.[83]

Verses 20–25 as well as the *Trisvabhāva-nirdeśa* (Treatise on the three natures) introduce the signature Yogācāra teaching of the three natures (*trisvabhāva*), which helps elaborate the difference between enlightened and *saṃsāric* experience. The three natures are 1) the imagined or constructed (*parikalpita*), 2) the dependent (*paratantra*), and 3) the perfected (*pariniṣpanna*). Dualistic constructions and discriminations correspond to the imagined nature; the process of constructions arising through conditions corresponds to the dependent nature; and the absence of the construction, the non-discriminating into subject and object, corresponds to the perfected nature.[84] Verses 31–35 of the *Trisvabhāva-nirdeśa* assert that the imagined nature is to be correctly understood, the dependent nature is to be stopped, and the perfected nature is to be attained.[85] When, upon enlightenment, we see in the perfected nature mode, our experience lacks bifurcation.[86]

Vasubandhu explains that the teaching of appearance-only helps us reach the perfected nature.[87] First, becoming aware of our conditioning, we realize that the objects we experience are only representations of consciousness, not corresponding precisely to realities.[88] Next, this disruption of our sense of objectivity shakes as

[83] Kochumuttom, *Buddhist Doctrine*, 150–151.

[84] Ibid., 91–92.

[85] Ibid., 20.

[86] This is why the imagined and dependent natures, in *TSN*.17, are characterized as defilement *(saṅkleśalakṣaṇam)*, whereas the perfected nature is characterized as purity (*vyavaddana-lakṣaṇam*).

[87] See, e.g., commentary on I.7–8 in the *MVB* and the end section of the *TSN*, especially verses 36–37.

[88] Kochumuttom, *Buddhist Doctrine*, 61–62. Of course, the contention that karma and self-attachment distort our mental images is not unique to Yogācāra. What is "distinctive . . . is the refusal to extend the discussion beyond a purely phenomenal account." Other Buddhists, such as Sautrāntikas, say that we can infer objects from our experience—i.e., from our mental images of them. Yogācārins, however, argue that it is "logically unestablished (*asiddha*), a source of suffering . . . and philosophically superfluous" to extend claims beyond that which is experientially given (King, "Vijnaptimatrata"). Procedurally, this is much like Caputo insisting that we must start from where we are and thus proceed phenomenologically—in his case, from the fact that only anonymity is given in experience.

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well our subjectivity because the intent, the grasping that fuels karma, now stops, "for desire . . . presupposes a subject who desires and an object which is desirable. Without making a distinction between subject and object one cannot speak of . . . desire or . . . attachment."[89] Vasubandhu is questioning the subject as much as the object by demonstrating their interdependence.[90] The point is that objectifying things, projecting cognitive objects, is necessary for craving and a basic way that we create and perpetuate our sense of self. Getting rid of the objects helps us get rid of the self. This getting rid of objects is a Buddhist counterpart to, and expansion of, Caputo's point that we need to give up God as an object. In both cases, desires relating to the self make letting go of our constructed objects extremely difficult—but, if accomplished, extremely liberating.

Unlike Caputo's deconstruction, however, if Vasubandhu's theory of appearance-only can help us to attain the perfected nature as claimed, then for Buddhists there is such a thing as unconditioned knowing—namely, the awareness of enlightened ones, nondiscriminative gnosis (*nirvikalpajñāna*).[91] This achievement, this destruction of the store consciousness, is a "metaphorical means of describing the disruption and final elimination of karma."[92] Because the store consciousness is just a container for the karmically tainted seeds and so is itself non-intentional and neutral, although we are greatly conditioned by our past, we have the opportunity to create a different future—i.e., by generating wholesome karma, positive seeds and momentum, which helps us eventually halt karma altogether.[93] This contrasts sharply with Caputo's claim that deconstruction never ends and the kingdom is always deferred.

However, thus far I have described Vasubandhu only with respect to phenomenology. It is notable, though, that Vasubandhu is one of very few Indo-Tibetan authors to have written a treatise on scriptural hermeneutics, his *Vyākhyāyukti* (Principles of exegesis), a text receiving increased attention from scholars in recent years.[94] This text seems to share many of Caputo's attitudes. Vasubandhu emphasizes, for example, that literal reading does not suffice, so readers must develop interpretive

[89] Kochumuttom, *Buddhist Doctrine*, 12. As Hall concludes, "The intention . . . is not to reduce the material to the mental [i.e., idealism], but to deny the dichotomy while affirming that the basic reality is more usefully discussed in terms belonging to a correct understanding of the mental"—more useful, that is, for soteriology, for eliminating craving (Hall, "Meaning of *Vijñapti*," 15; D'Amato, *Distinguishing the Middle*, 23). It is ignorance and attachment that cause the division into internal and external in the first place, and the most stubborn duality "to which we are habituated is this distinction between self and other" (Waldron, *Buddhist Unconscious*, 159).

[90] Kochumuttom, *Buddhist Doctrine*, 61–62.

[91] The Yogācāra term for this awakening is *āśraya-parāvṛtti* (revolution or conversion of the basis).

[92] Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology*, 346. Vasubandhu tends to portray the storehouse consciousness as destroyed at awakening. Later Yogācārins (e.g., Paramārtha) instead envisage it as purified, leaving a pure consciousness (*amala-vijñāna*) (King, "Vijnaptimatrata").

[93] Tagawa, *Living Yogācāra*, 37.

[94] Jonathan C. Gold, "Vasubandhu," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (summer 2011 ed.), ed. Edward N. Zalta, http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/vasubandhu.

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judgment.[95] Like deconstructionists, Vasubandhu stresses that meaning depends on context, and he examines ways that single phrases can give rise to multiple meanings.[96] As Caputo stresses the importance of particular situations over universal interpretive rules, Vasubandhu proceeds by exploring particular passages rather than articulating universal principles, perhaps implying a wariness about generalized rules.[97] Also, Vasubandhu says that although messages spoken by Buddhas are perfect, "the acts of speaking that successively give voice to them may not be"—in Caputo's terms, this distinguishes the *arche* from the archive.[98] Lastly, Derrida's notion of lost mail is reminiscent of Vasubandhu's argument for the authority of Mahāyāna sutras because Vasubandhu reminds his opponents of problems with their own canon, citing many references to lost texts and naming sectarian disagreements about canons, concluding that no tradition can claim to have the complete, original canon.[99]

In part due to my dwelling longer on Vasubandhu's view of language, studying Vasubandhu has helped me understand, more deeply than I did with Caputo alone, how language impacts our cognition, contributing to our attachments and sense of self. Yogācārins see language not just as provisional and limited (as Caputo does), but also as deeply damaging. Jonathan C. Gold explains, "The bifurcation of the universe . . . appears necessary in the formation of any [linguistic] concept." For example, when "we say of any given thing that it is 'physical,' we are effectively saying, at the same time, that all things are either 'physical' or 'not physical.' We create a 'duality.'" Similarly, when I conceive of my self, "I am dividing the universe into 'self' and 'other.'"[100] Language's inherent dualism causes us to experience in terms of dualism, imposing it and perceiving things as separate from ourselves (and each other).[101] Linguistic limitations "are part of what sets everything in motion" on the wheel of *saṃsāra*.[102]

[95] Richard Nance, "Models of Teaching and the Teaching of Models" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2004) 215. An example of applying judgment rather than reading literally can be found in the *Viṃś* commentary (*vṛtti*) when Vasubandhu deconstructs the literal meaning of the Buddha's statements about the twelve sense bases (*āyatanas*) (Gold, "Vasubandhu").

[96] Nance, "Models," 231, 261–63. This accords with the Buddhist doctrine of skillful means (*upāyakauśalya*), the doctrine that enlightened teachers adapt their teachings according to the context and in accord with audiences' needs, so that teachings should not be held rigidly as dogmatic truths but instead should be recognized as context-dependent means that must be skillfully employed.

[97] Ibid., 248.

[98] Ibid., 269–70.

[99] José Ignacio Cabezón, "Vasubandhu's *Vyākhyāyukti* on the Authenticity of the Mahāyāna Sūtras," in *Texts in Context: Traditional Hermeneutics in South Asia* (ed. Jeffrey R. Timm; Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1992) 221–43, at 226–28; Gold, "Vasubandhu."

[100] Gold, "Vasubandhu."

[101] Vasubandhu, in his commentary to the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha*, indicates that the impressions of speech serve as the manifesting cause for objects to arise. The uttering of the name "eye," for instance, contributes to the arising of an eye as an object of awareness (Waldron, *Buddhist Unconscious*, 159).

[102] Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology*, 427. This explanation of language's problems helps make clear the notion of *prapañca* in Yogācāra. *Prapañca* means linguistic concoction, linguistic

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A fascinating trope that is used by Vasubandhu in the *Trisvabhāva-nirdeśa* relates to these points about language and how we are conditioned.[103] Interestingly, in light of Caputo's use of ghosts, Vasubandhu makes use of the illusion of an elephant (a ghostly elephant, if you will) conjured by a magician using mantras.[104] In a nutshell, the point seems to be that, although magical mantras (powerful language) really cause this deceptive illusion, we are duped because we think that seeing an actual elephant object is what produced our experience of the elephant. Likewise, our karmic and selfish conditioning—brought on, in part, by language's dualism—is what causes us to see things in a deluded way, but we are fooled because we think that we have perceived accurately actual objects. In each case, the problem is that we are unaware of the actual causes of our experience of objects.[105] This elephant illusion metaphor is very useful for the Yogācārins because they hold that what we think we experience as a result of accurately sensing outer objects actually arises instead largely due to the operations of the two subliminal consciousnesses—that is, due to our karmic and selfish conditioning.[106] Although some readers have understood the elephant illusion to be a figure for external reality, thus suggesting that the external world does not really exist, the point here may instead be to reflect upon our experience's causal story, which, more modest than an assertion of metaphysical idealism, just highlights how we condition perceived things.[107]

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proliferation, and cognitive projections onto experience, suggesting that "words and concepts become 'realities' overshadowing the actual conditions" (ibid., 204). Also, Tagawa clarifies that the "frame of perception is none other than language itself," which is "carried out at the level of the sixth consciousness"—i.e., at the level of the thinking consciousness that is part of the mind's third subjective transformation (Tagawa, *Living Yogācāra*, 22). Tracing this back further to the first transformation, Waldron explains that all of our awareness is preconditioned by language because in the Yogācāra model, our experiences arise based on the store consciousness, which is already structured by the categories of language use. Waldron writes that the "entire process is conceived in terms of the imperceptible impressions . . . of linguistic and conceptual categories and their subconscious influences upon every moment of waking awareness." Furthermore, because language is social, languages give rise to the worlds that we inhabit not only as individuals but also as social beings (Waldron, *Buddhist Unconscious*, 166–69).

[103] On this trope, see Jonathan C. Gold, "No Outside, No Inside: Duality, Reality and Vasubandhu's Illusory Elephant," *Asian Philosophy* 16 (2006) 1–38 and "Yogācāra Strategies against Realism: Appearances (*ākṛtī*) and Metaphors (*upacāra*)," *Religion Compass* 1 (2007) 131–47.

[104] The context is explanation of the three natures. The perceived illusory elephant superimposed on a piece of wood, Vasubandhu says, symbolizes the imagined nature; the conjuring of the elephant appearance dependent on the condition of magical mantras matches up with the dependent nature; and the truth of the wood without the imposed illusion is the perfected nature (Gold, "No Outside" and "Yogācāra Strategies").

[105] Gold, "No Outside," 13–14.

[106] According to early Yogācāra, appearances (*vijñapti*) are not the mental representation of sense objects as much as they are "a representation of the agent's own subliminal karmic predispositions." Appearances are more a reflection of our state of mind than they are reflections of the actual world (King, "Vijnaptimatrata").

[107] According to Gold, Asaṅga (Vasubandhu's brother, another Yogācāra thinker) uses the elephant to show that one could have experience of an object (due to mental construction) in the absence of a corresponding external object. However, Vasubandhu uses the comparison to a dream

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Because linguistic conceptualization requires dichotomized essences, conceptualization falters in the face of a dependently arisen, non-dichotomized world. This means that enlightened awareness of emptiness and interdependence is necessarily non-conceptual; its content cannot be described. Hence Buddhists' assertion of ineffability (*anabhilāpya*). Conventional, conditioned language only points inadequately, and ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*) is that to which conventional language is trying to refer but which cannot be captured in words.[108] This resonates well with Caputo's description of events harbored in names, with Caputo's idea that names call, promising something that they cannot deliver. Although it is likely an incorrect Sanskritization of a Middle Indic form, interestingly Dan Lusthaus notes that the Sanskrit term for convention (i.e., *saṃvṛti*) literally means "enclosed." Therefore, the term for ultimate truth would then suggest the breaking out of closure or economy. This moment is the experience of appearance-only, viz., the moment consisting in experiencing the world in such a way that one now sees that one's sense of self and one's perceptions of discrete objects are merely constructed. Whatever is experienced at this point apart from construction must necessarily be "beyond" language.[109] Thus, overall, Yogācāra analysis reflects "the Mahāyāna theme that there is a problem even more fundamental than craving, namely conceptualization," for it is conceptual bifurcation that gives rise to the craving.[110]

Vasubandhu's writing style, regarded in light of this deeply suspicious view of language, resembles Caputo's in frequently playing with words and shifting terms. Verses 10–21 of the *Trisvabhāva-nirdeśa* are a clear case in point. Here Vasubandhu applies the same terms with different meanings to all three natures, and opposed terms to each of the same natures, so that the natures are said to be different but in another sense not different, dual but non-dual, natures but non-natures, etc.[111] Given the implications of linguistic conceptualization just discussed, this wordplay seems to be reminding us of the limitations, tentativeness, and translatability of all language—even Vasubandhu's own.

With both Caputo and Vasubandhu, we find a caution against allowing ourselves to think too simply that our religious tradition's conditioned words refer, and yet both nevertheless provide a strategy for using language to approach truth. At the start of his *Triṃśatikā*, Vasubandhu says that his language is figurative (*upacāra*). For Vasubandhu, there is a great difference between, on the one hand, thinking that

to make that point, whereas he uses the illusory elephant to make a different point, as explained (Gold, "No Outside," 7).

[108] Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology*, 222.

[109] Ibid., 346.

[110] D'Amato, *Distinguishing the Middle*, 25.

[111] For example, *TSN*.12 reads, "The other-dependent nature is said / To be defined both as existent and as non-existent, / For, it exists as an illusion, / It does not exist, though, in the form in which it appears." Similarly, with the perfected nature, *TSN*.13 says that "it exists as a state of non-duality, / It is also the non-existence of duality" (Kochumuttom, *Buddhist Doctrine*, 97–106).

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the illusion is really an elephant and, on the other, seeing it but recognizing that it is illusory. The self-referential issue is whether Vasubandhu can then advocate his own language once he has problematized it as conditioned and illusory. As Caputo appeals to ghostly and translatable things at this juncture, Vasubandhu addresses the problem with the notion of illusive appearances and figurative speech. Vasubandhu affirms that *saṃsāric* experience is appearance-only, but if we can recognize appearances as mere appearances, our languages as limited, then maybe we will cease to be misled by them. In this way, these experiences may serve soteric purposes.[112]

As the commentary for the *Viṃśatikā* admits, even appearance-only teaching itself is only an appearance, a product of the discursive mind.[113] This is why the *Viṃśatikā* concludes with the caution that the intent or full meaning of "appearance-only" can be comprehended only by Buddhas, for it is beyond the scope of thought (*citta*).[114] Like deconstruction, appearance-only is a tool to short-circuit grasping; we must be vigilant about not grasping *it*.[115]

However, since our subliminal conditioning is not directly accessible to consciousness, our grasping tendencies cannot be cast off easily and are "extremely tenacious." Nevertheless, Buddhists believe that yogic meditation can make the workings of the subliminal realms of our minds transparent and that Buddhist practices can help intervene.[116] Over many lifetimes, there is hope for the eventual total elimination of conditioning. However, because, for now, our consciousness operates on top of the selfishly pulling deeper regions, it cannot be overemphasized that this "puts us in the position of swimming upstream."[117] In Caputo's terms, it makes reaching unconditioned awareness a little impossible.

While Caputo problematizes the duality of self and other and thus gets to justice and the kingdom by deferring and insisting on impossibility, Buddhists like Vasubandhu recommend another way to get there. If we can, despite the odds, swim upstream, the achievement of non-discriminative gnosis is described in Yogācāra not as a "quiescent state" but as a "surplus of compassion," leading

[112] Gold, "Yogācāra Strategies," 145; Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology*, 223.

[113] Anacker, *Seven Works*, 167.

[114] Ibid., 175; Kochumuttom, *Buddhist Doctrine*, 195.

[115] This means, then, that as Lusthaus writes, "We are . . . not cured by the Truth, but by efficacious deceptions (*upāya* [skillful means])" (Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology*, 475).

[116] Tagawa, *Living Yogācāra*, 64. Tagawa highlights the importance of the practice of giving, or generosity, in particular, which tops the list of the bodhisattva practices known as the six *pāramitās* (perfections, practices for transcendence). Giving/generosity calls to mind again Caputo's notion of the gift. If the motivation for practicing giving is for reward, then this amounts to "karmic ensnarement" insofar as one pursues better karma rather than seeking to eliminate karma (Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology*, 209). (Caputo would say in this case that the economy is not disrupted, that one is really selfishly estate planning, not acting under the call.) On the other hand, as Tagawa says, "The action of giving . . . when there is no expectation of recompense, is intimately connected to the removal of attachment to self" (Tagawa, *Living Yogācāra*, 64–65).

[117] Tagawa, *Living Yogācāra*, 86.

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to spontaneous activity for the benefit of all. It is "not the termination of thinking *simpliciter*" but an awareness lacking any subject-object dichotomy, which means that it is an experience of the "non-distinctiveness and equality of all entities."[118] What then becomes of the distinction between self and other, believer and infidel, Buddhist and non-Buddhist?

Conclusion

I would now like to conclude with reflections on the implications of my Caputo-Vasubandhu project for our religiously pluralistic situation generally and for the method and theory of comparative theology in particular. Within the context of recent attempts to promote and justify comparative theology, and especially with regard to debates defending comparative theology as a superior alternative to theology of religions, in past work I have argued that theology of religions and comparative theology cannot be separated, because our theology of religions influences how we read the other.[119] Here, I illustrate how the compared thought systems themselves will have implications for the comparative theory and method. I still affirm the close connection between theology of religions and comparative theology, but the material under examination here has caused me to modify my earlier position on theology of religions.

I will set aside exclusivism with respect to truth because it never seems to be the position of choice for comparative theologians and also because it seems to suffer from an internal difficulty.[120] Notice, however, that I have specified exclusivism with respect to truth. The positions advanced by theology of religions with respect to soteriological efficacy are separable from those with respect to truth, and I am aware of no internal difficulty plaguing exclusivism with respect to salvation.[121]

Given this, my new position, then, is that the remaining choices 1) between inclusivism and pluralism with respect to truth, and 2) among exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism with respect to soteriological efficacy, are, to use Caputo's term, undecidable. I cannot know whether there is one religious system that is at the top of a hierarchy or whether, on the contrary, there are multiple equal pathways. How could I? Where would I be standing? I began to ask what happens to our theology of religions and its relation to comparative theology when we take

[118] D'Amato, quoting Gadjin Nagao, *Distinguishing the Middle*, 27.

[119] Kristin Beise Kiblinger, "Relating Theology of Religions and Comparative Theology," in *The New Comparative Theology: Interreligious Insights from the Next Generation* (ed. Francis X. Clooney, S.J.; New York: T&T Clark, 2010) 21–42.

[120] Namely, if one believes that one's home tradition is in sole possession of all truth so that there are no truths elsewhere, this would commit one to the claim that no other tradition claims anything that is also claimed at home, which seems patently false, as examples of some shared claims are typically easy to cite.

[121] On this, see Paul J. Griffiths, *Problems of Religious Diversity* (Exploring the Philosophy of Religion 1; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001).

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our conditioning seriously, and when we shift from metaphysics and ontology to phenomenology and hermeneutics.

Theologians of religions are sometimes accused by comparative theologians of generalizing about religions as wholes and of oversimplifying matters of religious identity, essentializing in that sense, while comparative theology's emphasis on close reading and digging into the particulars of the other is thought to pay better attention to diversity, ambiguity, and change within traditions. Rather than oversimplifying questions of religious identity, comparative theologians, such as Francis X. Clooney, speak about complications of religious identity and the possibility of religious identity being "neither here nor there."[122] Theologies of religions are said to be typically framed as though traditions have essences and as though religious identities are static and self-standing, when really religions and identities are fluid, are complex, and are what they are only in relation to others. In this sense, theology of religions problematically seems to posit absolute entities, but, like comparative theology, deconstruction and Yogācāra are trying to disturb such absolutes.

Inclusivistic and pluralistic theologians of religion have been accused of distorting religious others in order to concoct similarity or of distorting by seeing others through the lens of a supposedly universal function or framework. Theologians of religions are told instead to strive to "get the others right" by seeing others on their own terms. However, according to the views under consideration here, there is no "essence" to a text or thinker and no way to read without conditioning; therefore this quest is misguided. Consequently, the task, according to my revised view, is not to feel about for the other's essence but to repeat the other with a difference.[123] I mean to make claims not about what is or about how Vasubandhu and Caputo definitively relate, but only about what coalesced in my admittedly conditioned experience of reading. I do not claim to discern the supposed original intent of Vasubandhu's works, "if there is such a thing." I acknowledge that what I privileged might have been otherwise. Therefore, conclusions are always tentative; more reading and more translating are encouraged.[124]

[122] Francis X. Clooney, S.J., "Neither Here nor There: Crossing Boundaries, Becoming Insiders, Remaining Catholic," in *Identity and the Politics of Scholarship in the Study of Religion* (ed. José Ignacio Cabezón and Sheila Greeve Davaney; New York: Routledge, 2004) 99–111, at 102–3 and 109–10. Similarly hard to pin down, Caputo describes Derrida as atheist and not, as Jewish and something of an Arab, as someone who writes between Hebrew, Christian, Latin, French, and Arabic with no clear native language or soil.

[123] See Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 142.

[124] While Caputo employs Jewish and Christian terminology in his theology, he also insists—indeed the logic of his system requires—that all names are provisional and translatable, and so Caputo himself invites analogous versions of his theology from other traditions' ways of speaking. Indeed, translation is a demand of hospitality, Caputo thinks (Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 259–78). Caputo invites versions from other traditions, and this is an invitation that I am trying to take up here, although about those other traditions, such as Buddhism, Caputo himself says that he feels "less competent to comment" (ibid., 303 n. 22). However, his early book *The Mystical Element in*

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Traditional theology of religions, by its nature, frames other traditions vis-à-vis oneself, or vis-à-vis one's home tradition, whereas my approach is trying to break out of the selfish orientation that drives our filters and lenses by recognizing how concern for self and the self's location condition comparison.[125] Conventional positions within theology of religions are about how traditions stack up, or whom to include in whom, which now strikes me as the obsession of insecure selves. We cannot know, Caputo says, what is an example of what, which is a repetition of which. Is it that "biblical faith and prophetic passion are examples of a deconstructive bent, . . . or that deconstruction here acquires a biblical bent?" Caputo says that he does not know which it is, and that it does not make much difference as long as we say "come" to the kingdom.[126] Furthermore, did my new theory result from the comparative reading, or was it there before, already driving the work to some extent? Comparative reading and theology of religions, I repeat, are interrelated—dependently arising, to use a Buddhist term.

As mentioned above, scholars have charged that theology of religions reflects on other traditions in general rather than engaging the particulars of foreign systems. Critics such as S. Mark Heim have worried that pluralistic theology of religions and "singular end" approaches can unwittingly impose as normative and universal what is really a home perspective, thus snuffing out the difference of the other.[127] Comparative theologians assert that comparative theology attends, better than theology of religions does, to the specifics and particulars of compared systems on their own terms and that comparative theology shows more respect for singularities and differences. Caputo sheds new light on these concerns, and his work aligns with the prioritizing of particularity and difference because he deconstructs the relation between the universal and the particular and wants a "universal culture of singularities."[128] Caputo explains, "Justice in itself is not an . . . eternal Platonic form but the unique . . . justice that is cut to fit . . . the particular."[129] "If laws are universals," Caputo writes, "justice is sensitive to the singularity of the situation. . . . Laws have to do with the ninety-nine, but justice has to do with the one lost sheep. . . . Every time we feel unjustly treated by the law

Heidegger's Thought (rev. ed.; Bronx, N.Y.: Fordham University Press, 1986) contains a chapter on Heidegger, Eckhart, and Buddhism. (I wish to thank Curt Thompson for reminding me of the point about hospitality requiring translation [Curt Thompson, e-mail message to author, June 27, 2011].)

[125] As Tagawa says, comparing oneself to others is problematic when one is attached to oneself. "One cannot but end up praising ourselves, and either slandering others or envying them" (Tagawa, *Living Yogācāra*, 113).

[126] Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 114–16. Everyone privileges a name. "The danger is only to think that your name cannot be translated, that if someone does not use it, they are against you." Instead of asking which is an example of which, Caputo asks, "Is it a matter of choosing between the two? Do they not pass back and forth in a kind of holy dissemination?" (ibid., 68).

[127] S. Mark Heim has written about "singular end" approaches in his *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Faith Meets Faith Series; Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

[128] Caputo, *Prayers and Tears* 138, 155 (quoting Derrida). (See ibid., 35, 138, 154–55.)

[129] Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 140.

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we say, 'But this case is different.'"[130] In other words, the event happens when we suspend the general application of a rule to consider the concrete circumstances, respecting the differences. The event happens when we use our judgment, such as when, against the rule, Jesus chooses to heal on the Sabbath, or when, rather than reading the Bible literally, we must interpret it by deciding what Jesus would do in our own unique situations.[131] Indeed, singularity and particularity are that in virtue of which there is deconstruction. Singularity and particularity are why we translate.[132] Deconstruction, translation, and repetition cannot occur without, and are prompted by, particularities and difference.[133]

Inclusivistic theology of religions on the model of Rahner-inspired anonymous Christianity has been heavily criticized for ignoring difference and for offensively disrespecting others' self-understandings. Indeed, if I am just going to make Vasubandhu an anonymous Caputo, then I will risk angering Buddhists and will fail to learn anything new from, or be challenged by, Vasubandhu. I might as well read Caputo alone, but that would be, as Caputo says, just more of the same, rather than what I am after. Despite the fact that Caputo and other factors admittedly condition my reading of Vasubandhu, for the tension of the comparative difference to do its illuminating work, Vasubandhu must remain a different other and recognizable to Buddhists. Thus, my interpretation of Vasubandhu must be one that, while newly shaped by Caputo and me, is at the same time still supported with careful reference to Vasubandhu's texts. It should have a persuasive logic of its own in this comparative context. Thus, by advocating this approach, I am not saying that any reading is acceptable, but I am saying that "making meaning involves judgments, choices, decisions"—that this is the nature of faith and that it is by faith that comparative theology proceeds.[134]

Comparativists worry as well that positions established by theology of religions can predetermine in advance the outcome of comparative explorations. Indeed, if one accepts the fact of conditioning lenses, to what extent does that conditioning

[130] Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 65.

[131] Ibid., 66–68.

[132] Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 140. Caputo writes, "The singular is not a fall . . . from universality . . . but an *excess* that cannot be contained." "The singular is thought not as a particular under a universal but as an . . . irreplaceable individual. What better embodiment of such a 'kingdom of singularities' than the biblical kingdom itself, where God has counted every tear, and numbered every hair on our heads?" (ibid. [italics in original]).

[133] For a discussion of Derrida's concept of singularity and the matter of the plurality of singularities, and the relation of Derrida's thought on this to Jean-Luc Nancy's, see Marie-Eve Morin, "Putting Community under Erasure: Derrida and Nancy on the Plurality of Singularities," *Culture Machine* 8 (2006) n.p.

[134] Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion*, 45. It must be possible for readings to go wrong, but when they do, the problem may stem from their motivation, from what is selfishly or insecurely driving them, and not from their seeing newly or differently per se. Like the Buddhist parable about the water snake (according to which if you do not hold your truths correctly, they can bite you), similarly Caputo and Vasubandhu show that how and why views are held is key.

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predetermine, coloring our seeing to the point of precluding openness? There is a tension here, but the crucial point is that we proceed in faith, not in knowledge. Proceeding by faith, by definition, means "the urgency of forging ahead where one does not see, where in principle one cannot see," as opposed to knowing where one is going.[135] We listen for calls that prod our pre-set notions, and precisely because deconstruction interrupts regularities and foreseeable possibilities, it "sets off effects beyond its intentional control."[136] On this view, meaning depends on context and since we "cannot foresee all contexts in advance," we can never "fence off" the possible new meanings that may appear.[137] Caputo's description makes even clearer that this approach does not predetermine meaning in advance, when he says that deconstruction "moves by chance, not by a logic."[138] Caputo says that Derrida loves "experimental writing . . . to see what sort of convergences, divergences, and questions" arise. Derrida likes to "settle into these pieces of luck and explore their richness."[139] Would it be so terrible, I rationalize hopefully, if something serendipitous resulted from the "lost mail" of my poor Sanskrit?

Although Caputo does say, sounding relativistic and pluralistic, that "the idea of one true religion . . . makes no more sense than that of one true poem," in another sense he cannot really be a pluralist because he is agnostic about the relative ranking of traditions.[140] Thus, I would say that pluralism is here, like Nietzsche, a specter, not a dogma. However, Caputo argues, reasonably, I think, that inscribing faith within Derrida's *différance* can make us more open.[141] In other words, it is true that Caputo refuses to banish pluralism's haunting specter, but for him this specter is necessary to faith rather than hostile to it.

Finally, Caputo's stress on truth as something we do agrees with the objection that too often theology of religions talks about and theorizes the other rather than getting on with the actual engagement.[142] Therefore, I wish this comparative project of mine to be judged not so much on the logic of the theory but on the extent to which this side-by-side reading deepens our reflection on the implications of conditioning for faith and on the extent to which it helps us figure out how to be less self-oriented and more open. My way of demonstrating respect for the thinkers and traditions under study, in the end, is not to aspire to reproduce the letter of my two thinkers' writings, but rather to repeat them with the difference of each

[135] Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 338.

[136] Ibid., 183.

[137] Horner, *Jean-Luc Marion*, 44.

[138] Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 100.

[139] Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 50–51.

[140] Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 118.

[141] Caputo, "God and Anonymity," 8.

[142] As David Loy has remarked, "Derrida is concerned that we not replace the specific, detailed activity of deconstructive reading with some generalized idea about that activity" (David Loy, "The Deconstruction of Buddhism," in *Derrida and Negative Theology* [ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay; Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1992] 227–53, at 234).

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other.[143] My aim is no less than to try to occasion an event, a surprising incoming of the other, as Caputo says, by getting into bed with these unlikely bedfellows, although that sounds far too immodest.[144]

Final differences between the two thinkers, of course, remain; importantly, my method preserves them. Vasubandhu seeks unmediated, direct knowing, a release from conditioning, while Caputo sticks to faith, accepting the conditioned as "the medium in which we live." Vasubandhu sees language as damaging and thus reaches for the ineffable, while Caputo instead sees language as "creative and productive," translation as a way "to reinvent ourselves," repetition helping us to "forge ahead." Closure, for Caputo, is not an ideal; on the contrary, the whole point of deconstruction is to keep things open.[145]

Thus, the attention to conditioning leads to sharply different conclusions for these two thinkers, but their conditionedness and being conditioned ourselves make resting content, with either thinker alone, problematic. Like Caputo, I would say that this is not the apathy or paralysis of indecision, but rather it serves to intensify our searching. In this way, my comparison here endorses and justifies the comparative theological endeavor itself. I do not see myself as in a position to come down conclusively with final judgments about these two thinkers in terms of better or worse, but my study of each remains haunted by the questions raised by the other, and that is as it should be.

[143] Derrida himself, I would add, seems to affirm such an approach. Speaking of Caputo's reading of his own work, Derrida says that Caputo writes "according to his own trajectory . . . without, at the same time, betraying" him (Derrida). Derrida does not consider Caputo a literal interpreter of himself (Derrida). "It is another kind of gesture," Derrida says. "He [Caputo] is doing something new that, in turn, enriches my own text and gives it a wider scope." "He illuminates my text with his own culture and insight" (Mark Dooley, "The Becoming Possible of the Impossible: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *A Passion for the Impossible*, 21–33, at 21–22). Caputo, too, writes, "I cannot say whether it is . . . a gloss on Jacques or not, whether it has to do with his religion or mine. I do not know where to draw the line" (Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, xxix). Also, he states that texts have a life of their own (i.e., beyond their author), and that the "worth . . . of any text lies in the 'stimulus' it provides" (ibid., 110).

[144] I mean, of course, immodest in the sense of sexually immodest, but also immodest in the sense of its sounding too ambitious and grandiose for little old me to be able to set off an event. Any event that comparative theology can prompt, though, I think will always be modest (and in this sense very disanalogous to *the* event of the inbreaking of the kingdom). Worthwhile comparative theology I see along the lines of a good sermon. One rarely walks away from a sermon with a radically altered or previously completely unknown new truth. However, if the sermon can present an old idea or reading from a fresh angle, renew our attention to it, and suggest for it new possibilities and applications, deconstructing and reinterpreting it a bit, then the sermon can be powerful.

[145] Caputo, e-mail message to author, August, 20, 2011.

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