

Christendom: An Unthinking Faith?

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Abstract: Søren Kierkegaard's and John D. Caputo's criticisms of "Christendom" and "the church" raise the spectre of the organised church being incapable of nurturing faith. The following evaluates these arguments by examining Christendom and the church against the background of a model of faith developed at the intersection of three theological perspectives – the scholasticism of St Thomas Aquinas, Kierkegaard's critique of the official Danish church of the mid-nineteenth century, and Caputo's deconstruction of the contemporary church. Drawing on Kierkegaard's concept of "Christendom", the article argues that we must look outside the church to see such a faith modeled, such as to the genesis of Albert Einstein's general theory of relativity, which proposes a faith-like picture of the universe, in contrast to the "scientific" understanding of God proscribed by the church. The article concludes by examining several aspects of the church's dysfunction that are exposed by its inability to foster faith.

"All things are at odds when God sets a thinker loose on the planet."

Edith Hamilton

THIS ARTICLE CELEBRATES THE JOY OF FAITH.¹ It examines the joyful faith and the joyful thinking of God (which are, I argue, one and the same thing) that absolve us from violence. This is a celebration of that faith which transcends the dysfunctionalities of the organised church, which all too often marginalise critical faith and critical thinking. This is a faith that revels in being "lost", as John D. Caputo writes; it is a joyful faith that anticipates discovering in Christ the way of salvation.

1. I am indebted to my good friend and Pastor Noddy Sharma for the two key insights that underpin this study – that Christendom is human-made, not God-made, and that the gift God gives us is another perspective on what we consider to be "common sense". I also thank Allan Demond, Senior Pastor of New Hope Baptist Church, and Professor Ross Mouer, School of Languages, Cultures, and Linguistics, Monash University, for help in making this a more focused essay.

The dysfunction that I examine here occurs when the organised church operates on an economic model that emphasises worldly, rather than spiritual “achievements”. The frame through which I seek to understand the reasons for this dysfunction is St Thomas Aquinas’s analysis of the imperfection of the human intellect in his *Summa Theologica*. From Thomas, I will draw inferences for Søren Kierkegaard’s attack on “Christendom” from the mid-nineteenth century, as well as Caputo’s critique of the contemporary church, which was influenced by Kierkegaard.²

I develop my model of faith as critical thinking at the intersection of these three theological traditions. These traditions help to flesh out a conception of faith as resisting the temptation to “perfect” Christianity by providing “easy” but facile answers to the questions of God. Faith instead stresses that we are each personally answerable to God alone – not to the church – by whose grace and charity we have been given to contemplate divine truth.

The conception of faith that I arrive at in this essay argues that faith is a thinking of God as That which puts the thinking intellect into question. This is a faith that is simultaneously a state of rapture and rupture – it ruptures *because* it is rapturous – in the strange sense of celebrating humility and abjection, poverty and abasement. And the dysfunction of the organised church lies in that its own institutional inertia compels it to reject this abjection and abasement, which characterise the Christianity of the New Testament.

A subsequent question that I address in this essay is, if not in the church, then where are we able to find this joyful faith modeled. Drawing on Caputo’s attempt to complicate the strict separation between the worlds of the church and of secularism, I argue that we can see faith modeled in scientific revolution of Einstein’s general theory of relativity. For what Einstein asks of us, I argue, is to believe his new way of understanding gravity and the universe that ruptures the “common sense” of the scientific establishment.

Finally, returning to the relation of the church to faith, I examine whether the organised church is able to facilitate the joyful faith in Christ that it claims to represent – a faith that thinks God as That which puts thinking in question. Concluding that it cannot, I examine the consequences of the church being able to proffer only an unthinking faith.

2. The concept of “Christendom” employed in this article is Kierkegaard’s. In referring to Christendom, I am not referring to the Christian polity that dominated Europe during the Middle Ages, before being supplanted by secularism during the French Revolution.

WHY QUESTION THE CHURCH? A POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE

The argument that I present here taps into a rich vein of critical thought that has its foundations in the emergence of deconstructive and post-structural philosophy in the 1960s, but whose origins I will trace back to Kierkegaard's 1855 *Attack on "Christendom"*.

Caputo's theology is representative of that deconstructive (or anti-structural) tradition, especially as he develops his thinking in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (1997), *On Religion* (2006), *The Weakness of God* (2006), and *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* (2007). But Caputo draws the impetus for his critique not only from Derrida, but also from Kierkegaard's polemics against "Christendom", or the official Danish Church of the mid-nineteenth century. And while Caputo writes in a very different cultural context than Kierkegaard, it is nevertheless clear that Caputo regards Kierkegaard's critique of Christendom as having continuing relevance for the church of the early twenty-first century. It is against the background of these two critiques that I hold up the joy of faith as embodying the Christianity of the New Testament, which Kierkegaard repeatedly contrasts to the Christianity taught in Christendom.

The questions that underpin Caputo's critique of how the church uses the name of Christ in *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* are disarmingly simple. If Jesus were to return to Earth – or if an Apostle were to return, as Kierkegaard writes³ – to check up on what we claim to do in God's name, would he approve? Indeed, if Jesus returned to Earth, what form would he take? "An illegal immigrant? A child dying from AIDS?" Caputo writes, "A Vatican Bureaucrat?"⁴ Would we even let him into our churches? Or might it be the case that we make of the name of "Jesus" what we need of it in order to justify the agenda we seek to attach to Christ's memory? Ultimately, do we behave more like Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor than we would care to admit, who, clothed in the authority of the Christ of the church is dismayed to recognise the man performing miraculous healings outside the cathedral in Seville as Christ, whom he must have killed as a heretic for undermining the church's power? Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor is a representative of what Caputo, following Kierkegaard, calls "Christendom", a "kingdom" of worldly wealth and power that

3. Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack on "Christendom"*, translated by Walter Lowrie (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944) 102.

4. John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2007) 34.

“betrays”⁵ the kingdom of the weak and the unworldly preached by the Christianity of the New Testament.⁶

The contrast between the two – the Christianity of the New Testament and that taught by Christendom – cannot be more stark. The latter, Kierkegaard argues, is a construction invented by “industrial priests” in the service of the Danish State. And so while what is taught by Christendom takes the name of Christianity, it can never attain to being anything more than “a sweetmeat which has a delicious taste, for which men hand out their money with delight”.⁷

The attraction of Christendom, to be sure, is that it propagates the “prodigious illusion” that what is being taught in churches is the Christianity of the New Testament. But the two, Kierkegaard argues, are of an entirely different order, and he juxtaposes them in two aspects. The “crimes” of Christendom, as he writes, are that it falsifies, and blasphemes against the Christianity of the New Testament. In the former case, Christendom falsifies the Christianity of the New Testament when it teaches the “impudent fudge” that Christianity is perfectible, which lulls Christians into a sense of complacency that the church is able to facilitate an “easy” path to God. In contrast, Kierkegaard describes the witness to Christian truth as being mired “in poverty, in lowliness, in abasement”,⁸ and foregoing the “worldly goods, advantages, luxurious enjoyment of the most exquisite refinement”⁹ of Christendom.

Christendom’s perversion of Christianity in turn leads Christians to engage in what Kierkegaard considers “the most dreadful sort of blasphemy”, which is the “worship [of] God by taking Him for a fool”.¹⁰ Christendom blasphemes because it can engage in only “the stupidest divine worship, more stupid than anything that is or was to be found in paganism, more stupid than worshipping a stone, an ox, an insect, more stupid than all that is – to worship under the name of God...a twaddler.”¹¹

And yet, despite the vitriol of his attacks on Christendom, Kierkegaard remains optimistic about the possibility of reforming the minds of “Christians” and of helping them to see how distant their lives are from the Christianity of the New Testament. But for the illusion of Christendom to go, he writes, we must seek to move in the direction of

5. Kierkegaard, *Attack on “Christendom”*, 33.

6. See Caputo’s comments on Kierkegaard in *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006) 48.

7. Kierkegaard, *Attack on “Christendom”*, 47.

8. Kierkegaard, *Attack on “Christendom”*, 7.

9. Kierkegaard, *Attack on “Christendom”*, 8.

10. Kierkegaard, *Attack on “Christendom”*, 84.

11. Kierkegaard, *Attack on “Christendom”*, 110. Kierkegaard’s ellipsis.

“clarifying men’s concepts, teaching them, moving them by means of the ideals, bringing them by pathos into a state of suffering, stirring them up by the gadfly-sting of irony, derision, sarcasm, etc., etc.”¹²

My aim here is to move my own thinking of faith in this same direction. Interested in preserving the joy of faith, I am keen to understand what goes by the name “faith” in the church today, so that I can clearly see the distance between it and the faith demanded by the Christianity of the New Testament.

Caputo’s critique of “the church” is likewise aimed at undoing the illusion that the church is a “self-authorizing entity” that acts in the name of Christ.¹³ Caputo’s critique of the church starts out from the Kierkegaardian “structural gap, the irreducible distance, that exists between [the church] and Jesus”.¹⁴ For Caputo, *Jesus* is the answer, not the church, which was only ever Jesus’ “Plan B”.¹⁵ Moreover, the church cannot recuse itself from accusations of abusing the name of “Jesus” merely by appealing to the authority of that name, Caputo writes, for the manner in which the church appeals to the authority of the name of “Jesus” is precisely what is in question. Such accusations are not new. The church has been haunted by this problem since the beginning of the Enlightenment. Immanuel Kant, for instance, presented the same case against appeals to the “sacredness” of religion in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, writing that:

Our age is the age of criticism, to which everything must be subjected. The sacredness of religion, and the authority of legislation, are by many regarded as grounds of exemption from the examination of this tribunal. But, if they are exempted, they become the subjects of just suspicion, and cannot lay claim to sincere respect, which reason accords only to that which has stood the test of a free and public examination.¹⁶

The organised church is dysfunctional because its motive forces come not from a desire for that which lies beyond it, but from a desire to maintain what Caputo describes as its “inner momentum”, which is the inertia

of [the church’s] institutional structure to assert its own authority, to authorize itself. The church behaves exactly as if it itself has fed the

12. Kierkegaard, *Attack on “Christendom”*, 97.

13. See Caputo’s references to Kierkegaard in *The Weakness of God*, 48.

14. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 32.

15. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 35.

16. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by J. M. D. Meiklejohn (Mineola NY: Dover, 2003) ix.

Jesus of the New Testament the line, "Thou art Peter and on this Rock I will build my church"... The church authorizes or founds itself by invoking the authority of a Founder who did not intend to found anything but to announce the good news that the kingdom of God was at hand and the end time was in sight. Having gotten used to the idea that the church defines and determines what Jesus stands for, and what Jesus would do, the church is not going to see its authority threatened by anyone, not even Jesus himself. Whoever defies the teachings of the church by definition stands accused of heresy – and that goes for Jesus.¹⁷

It is in this context that Caputo finds the question "What would Jesus do?" problematic. On the one hand, this is because we can only ask the question, let alone offer an answer to it, if we imagine that it is possible to translate God's logic into our own worldly, economic logic. We ask what Jesus would do not to put ourselves in question, but as a political ploy, a means for "a lot of supposedly religious people", Caputo writes, to "get their own way and bending others to their own will ('in the name of God')".¹⁸ People use the question "What would Jesus do?", in short, as "a hammer to beat their enemies".¹⁹ The question therefore has everything to do with bringing God to the people – of "cheating God out of Christianity",²⁰ as Kierkegaard writes – and nothing to do with thinking theologically, but which transcends the world of economics and politics the question has served so ably. For to think theologically, Caputo writes, is

to make the mind's ascent toward God, which means toward whatever event is astir in the name of God, where the name of God is not a linguistic object that can be stretched out on the table for analysis. To use the name of God is an unstable, destabilizing act that exposes us to whatever event is transpiring in that name, to whatever chain of events this name provokes. The name of God comes first, while thinking theologically comes as a response, the way one responds to a knock at the door that interrupts your work.²¹

Caputo is therefore sceptical of the value of asking what Jesus would do because it has more to do with figuring out what the name of Jesus can do for us in our worldly lives, and does not encourage the attitude

17. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 32.

18. John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006) 3.

19. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 31.

20. Kierkegaard, *Attack on "Christendom"*, 32-33.

21. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 6.

of poverty and humility that place us in the service of Christ's name. Asking what Jesus would do does not bring us closer to God. Caputo instead suggests substituting in its place his own question – "What would Jesus deconstruct?" – for the "Christian Right" is in need of deconstructing, he writes, since the truth of the Christianity of the New Testament is one of deconstruction. Caputo's hypothesis is, after all, that "the first thing that Jesus would deconstruct is WWJD itself, the whole 'industry,' the whole commercial operation of spiritual and very real money-making Christian capitalists."²² What asking the question of What Would Jesus Deconstruct? reinforces is that we cannot possibly imagine what God would do, that human logic is insuperably inadequate for the task of trying to think from God's point of view. This question thus deposits us into our place of humility and abjection before God. And yet, the question also opens us onto thinking theologically, since we can only do so by first "humbly acknowledging our wretchedness".²³

This impasse that human reason encounters in trying to think theologically – that desiring to think theologically places us in a position of wretchedness yet it is because we are wretched that we cannot think theologically – is at the heart of Kierkegaard's attack on Christendom. For far from encouraging us to humbly acknowledge our wretchedness, Christendom teaches, Kierkegaard writes, "impudent fudge about Christianity being perfectible".²⁴ Christendom thus elides the impasse of thinking theologically because "it does not frankly and unreservedly make known the Christian requirement" of poverty and wretchedness,²⁵ and therefore does not expose the Christian to the condition which bars him or her from perfecting their faith.

But while this paradox of thinking theologically is the source of Kierkegaard's attacks on Christendom, he does not make clear why it is that Christianity is not perfectible, nor why we cannot, from a position of wretchedness, comprehend God. For that we must turn to Thomistic theology, which exposes the wretchedness of the human intellect, and the barrier to comprehending divine truth that it erects.

22. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 31. Of course, in suggesting that Jesus would deconstruct the WWJD "industry", Caputo is himself offering an answer to the question. But the difference is that Caputo recognises that his own answer is not immune to being deconstructed as well, whereas the conservative Christian who wields the question of What Would Jesus Do? like a "hammer" does not seem to be haunted by the same sense of humility as Caputo is.

23. Kierkegaard, *Attack on "Christendom"*, 29.

24. Kierkegaard, *Attack on "Christendom"*, 28.

25. Kierkegaard, *Attack on "Christendom"*, 38.

WHY QUESTION THE CHURCH? A SCHOLASTIC PERSPECTIVE

St Thomas argues in the *Summa Theologica* that the human intellect is caught between its belief that it has been given by God to contemplate divine truth, and its inability to comprehend that which it desires above all else. This imperfection appears most starkly in what Thomas calls the “contemplative life” itself, which is that life given over to the contemplation of divine truth.

The imperfection of the intellect is not a peripheral issue in Thomistic theology, one which we could dismiss as mere evidence of our fallenness. Rather, the imperfection of the intellect lies at the heart of his theology, since everything else in the *Summa Theologica* ultimately depends on the intellect’s ability (or otherwise) to comprehend divine truth. Consequently, although the *Summa* starts out with Treatises on the Nature and Existence of God, on Creation, on the Angels, and on the Work of the Six Days, before turning to a Treatise on Man, the first four Treatises must be read in terms of Thomas’s reflections on his own inability to comprehend divine truth. Thus, the question proper to the *Summa* is not so much the question of Divine Truth per se, but of the intellect’s capacity to “think theologically”, or to transcend its “wretchedness”, which colours any consideration of God whatsoever.

The picture we receive from the *Summa* is one in which the human subject is essentially divided against itself, a self-contradiction. As Simone Weil writes, we are a contradiction insofar as being creatures, we are God, and yet infinitely other than God.²⁶ It is critical to recognise this contradiction, for it is because the intellect is imperfect that Christianity is imperfectible, and hence why we must question the church that seeks to elide such problems.

The Intellect and Infinity

Our divided nature stems from the contradiction between our intellect and “the form of the human body”. On the one hand, Thomas argues that the intellect, being “nobler” than bodily “matter”, “rises above” the body. The intellect’s nobility is realised in its potential to contemplate infinity.²⁷ It is insofar as we are potentially able to contemplate infinity that we are like God. And yet, because Thomas attributes

26. Gustave Thibon, “Introduction”, in Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, translated by Emma Crawford and Mario van der Ruhr (London and New York: Routledge, 2007) xxvi.

27. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Fathers of the English Dominican Province, (Notre Dame IN: Ave Maria Press, 1948) Part I, Question 86, Article 2.

the form of a thing to that which primarily acts in it,²⁸ so then is the “higher reason” of the intellect – which is its “intent on the contemplation and consultation of things eternal” – limited by the materiality of the body’s “lower reason”, which “is intent on the disposal of temporal things”, and infinitely other than God. As a result, the intellect can contemplate “things eternal” only through “knowledge of temporal things”, writes Thomas, “according to the words of the Apostle (Rom. i.20), *The invisible things of God are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made.*”²⁹

The potential of the intellect is thus that it is able to rise above the material body *through* the material world, in which it is able to glimpse the eternal. This is, however, a promise that cannot be realised. For Thomas writes that while “a faculty and its object are proportional to each other”, such that “the intellect must be related to the infinite, as is its object, which is the quiddity of a material thing”, it is nevertheless the case that the infinite “does not exist [in material things] actually, but only potentially, in the sense of one [material thing] succeeding another.... Therefore”, he writes, “infinity is potentially in our mind though its considering successively one thing after another.” But so too is it the case that “our intellect cannot understand the infinite either actually or habitually”, since, by definition, “the infinite is not represented by one species”. That is, the infinite “cannot be understood [materially] except by a successive consideration of one part after another, as is clear from its definition... for the infinite is that *from which, however much we may take, there always remains something to be taken.* Thus the infinite could not be known actually, unless all its parts were counted: which is impossible.”³⁰ Caputo gives this struggle to think the “in-finite” a deconstructive treatment when he argues that “the ‘in-finity’ of ‘God’ refers to an unstable situation in which the finite keeps foundering, in which determinate conditions keep collapsing under the call of the unconditional event, in which constructions keep falling under the weight of the undeconstructible”.³¹

The integrity of God is at stake in preserving this distinction between the unconditional event and the determinate conditions of the material world, or between the promise of infinity and the reality of the finite mind. As Weil warns, “we must be careful about the level on which we place the infinite. If we place it on the level which is only suitable for the finite it will matter very little what name we give it.”³² Likewise,

28. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 76, A. 1.

29. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 79, A. 9. Italics in original.

30. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 86, A. 2.

31. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 294.

32. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 55.

Kierkegaard argues that the official, if well-meaning “crime against Christianity” is precisely that Christendom allows the eternal to collapse into the temporal, thereby cheating God out of Christianity.³³

The difficulty we face in trying to comprehend the truth of the Christianity of the New Testament is that, while we receive Christ unconditionally, as a gift from a God who gives perfectly, nevertheless it is one of the key axioms of Thomistic theology that “the received is in the receiver according to the mode of the receiver”.³⁴ As such, while Christ is given perfectly, we can only ever receive him imperfectly. Weil argues as much when she writes that “everything without exception which is in me is absolutely valueless; and, among the gifts which have come to me from elsewhere, everything which I appropriate becomes valueless immediately I do so”.³⁵ But Christendom teaches otherwise. Christendom counsels us that because we are “not really able to bear this divine thing which is the Christianity of the New Testament”, so should we content ourselves with the “optical illusion” that what *the church* gives us really is what *God* gives us – the Christianity of the New Testament.

Kierkegaard counsels us otherwise. He implores his readers to not accept this optical illusion, in which “what looks as if it were serving a higher interest, the infinite, the idea, God...upon closer inspection proves to be serving the finite, low things, profit”.³⁶ Thomas, too, recognises this distinction between those things of “higher interest”, of which the intellect is able to pose questions, but for which it is unable to furnish answers, and those finite things, such as matters of profit, that it is easily able to comprehend. The former Thomas calls objects of “faith” or belief; the latter objects of “science”. And just as we must maintain the distinction between the promise of infinity and the reality of the finite mind, so too must we maintain this distinction between those objects of faith and those of science. For “it is impossible”, Thomas writes, “that one and the same thing should be believed and seen by the same person. Hence it is equally impossible for one and the same thing to be an object of science and of belief for the same person.”³⁷ The integrity of God – the object of faith *par excellence* – is again at stake in preserving this distinction, and we must be careful to ensure that the worldly phenomena that are claimed as objects of faith or of science actually do possess the qualities Thomas attributes to them.

33. Kierkegaard, *Attack on “Christendom”*, 32-33.

34. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 84, A. 1.

35. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 31.

36. Kierkegaard, *Attack on “Christendom”*, 275.

37. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q. 1, A. 5.

The point that Kierkegaard stresses here, and which I take up below, is that we should not assume that everything that takes the name of “faith” actually is an object of faith, and it could well be that we find better models for faith outside the church, such as in the world of science, than inside it.

The Intellect, Faith, and Science

A view that is not easily shared from within Christendom, it was Albert Einstein who saw most penetratingly the extent to which science and faith are intertwined when he wrote, “science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind”.³⁸ As such, it could be, as I argue below, that the “science” of Einstein’s general theory of relativity requires that we adopt an attitude that is more characteristic of “faith” than does the “faith” of Christendom, which proscribes a more “scientific” understanding of God. As such, it would be prudent to recognise that the warning Weil presents against science – that “a science that does not bring us nearer to God is worthless. But if it brings us to him in the wrong way, that is to say if it brings us to an imaginary God, it is worse” – applies equally to that which takes the name “faith”, which we must be careful does not bring us to an imaginary God.

Despite their long-standing resistance to religious veto in science, a growing community of scientists are growing comfortable acknowledging the convergence of faith and science. This is especially true in light of the growing body of scientific evidence that points to the conclusion that the universe was created under conditions that science cannot comprehend.³⁹ Owen Gingerich has identified this convergence of faith and science in his study *God’s Universe*. Gingerich, a professor of astronomy and the history of science at Harvard, argues that this is a result of the scientific intellect being caught between what he calls an “anthropic principle”, which is the temptation to see the universe as having been designed with human life as its goal, and the “Copernican principle”, in which the scientific intellect must concede that it occupies only a marginal and largely insignificant place in the universe. And while modern science has developed on the basis of the latter, the scientific intellect nevertheless “cannot easily brook any doubts about its sway”, Gingerich writes. This is because, on the one hand, science has been so successful in “describing and shaping our modern world”,⁴⁰

38. Albert Einstein, “Science and Religion”, *Nature*, no. 3706, Nov. 9 (1940) 605.

39. See, for instance, Robert Jastrow, *God and the Astronomers* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1992).

40. Owen Gingerich, *God’s Universe* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2006) 111.

while what the intellect has been able to achieve through science is, he writes, “hardly conducive to modesty”.⁴¹ As such, the facts of what we now know about our place in the universe leaves the scientific intellect divided against itself. As Gingerich writes:

Human beings, with their brain capacity, their use of complex language, and their ability with abstract reasoning, clearly represent the pinnacle of life on earth, far outdistancing any rivals.... Yet part of the glory of human creativity and self-consciousness is the ability to ask questions reaching beyond ourselves, about whether the human brain is really the most complex object in the universe or about whether we are alone in the universe – alone in either sense, whether God exists or whether extraterrestrial intelligence exists.⁴²

The scientific intellect is thus divided against itself insofar as it is given so that it might contemplate questions that reach beyond itself; yet, in finding itself unable to provide answers to those questions, the intellect experiences itself as imperfectly suited to achieve the task for which it believes itself given. This clearly mirrors Thomas’s analysis of the imperfection of the human intellect. And as Etienne Gilson writes in his survey of Thomistic philosophy, while the human intellect occupies “an important place in the hierarchy of created beings”, it is nevertheless “at the bottom of the order of the intellects; that is, the farthest removed from the divine intellect.”⁴³ Human intelligence, Etienne writes, is “the faintest ray in the order of knowledge”.⁴⁴

Gilson thus describes the condition of the human soul as existing in a state of “potency” since “it is not all that it could be. Indeed”, he continues, “it is even in a state of privation, because it feels that it ought to be what it is not.” A human soul, Gilson concludes, “is a kind of incomplete perfection. But it is fitted for completion and feels the need and experiences the desire for it.”⁴⁵ Interestingly, Weil suggests that we should value this imperfection as a “favour” from God. For “it is a favour”, she writes, “that the essential imperfection which is hidden in my depths should have been to some extent made dear to me.... I wish and implore that my imperfection may be wholly revealed to me in so far as human thought is capable of grasping it. Not in order that it may

41. Gingerich, *God’s Universe*, 31.

42. Gingerich, *God’s Universe*, 31-32.

43. Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, translated by L. K. Shook (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002) 198.

44. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 191.

45. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 190-191.

be cured but, even if it should not be cured, in order that I may know the truth."⁴⁶

This is thus the picture of our "wretchedness" that we draw from the *Summa Theologica*, and which Kierkegaard considers to be the foundation for any "Christianly" embrace of the Christianity of the New Testament.

CHRISTENDOM, TRUST, AND FAITH

Christendom and the church confront an impasse in trying to reconcile our imperfection with its teaching that Christianity can be perfected. On the one hand, the church cannot tolerate the spectre of a God who cannot perfect us (as Weil recognises, we turn to God not in the hope of being "cured" of our imperfection, but so that we might know the truth of our imperfection). And yet, the authority of the church paradoxically *relies* on our imperfection, and so the church needs a God who cannot "cure" us. For it is only if God cannot perfect us that the church takes as its remit to provide us with an image of Christ that can perfect us. Thus, the church must cover over our inability to receive God's grace perfectly, and that we are incapable of making that difficult and destabilising ascent toward God by bringing the divine to the people. In God's stead, Christendom offers itself as the object of our trust and love, when God does not seem to be listening. In so doing Christendom metes out rewards for the effort that we put into our faith, and thereby transforms "faith" into a transaction, a "sweetmeat", as Kierkegaard writes, "for which men hand out their money in delight".⁴⁷

In bringing the divine to the people, Christendom serves to establish an "equilibrium"⁴⁸ between humans and God. But "to search for equilibrium is bad", Weil writes, "because it is imaginary", and what Christendom ends up giving is a "purely imaginary reward... [which] is the exact equivalent of what we have expended, for it has exactly the same value as what we have expended".⁴⁹ From Christendom we receive not a God Who requires us to exceed ourselves; Christendom instead institutionalises our desire for "a God who smiles on us".⁵⁰ But this deity, made in the image of the people who desire its blessing, is not the God of the Christianity of the New Testament. And in bringing this God to the people, Christendom shifts the focus of our "faith" away

46. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 58.

47. Kierkegaard, *Attack on "Christendom"*, 47.

48. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 14.

49. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 7.

50. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 9.

from Christ Jesus and onto the human-made institution that bears Christ's name.

It is at this point that the dysfunctional inertia of the church overwhelms the joy of a faith that seeks to think beyond what the church allows to be thought. The result is that this joyful faith and the Christ it seeks are marginalised by the church, or the church cuts away its own foundations, exposes itself as a foundation without foundation, or what Caputo calls a "religion without religion".⁵¹ It is, in other words, an institution that invokes the authority of an excluded Author. We might illustrate this graphically by writing *Christendom*, or simply *-endom*, a suffix that elides its root, and draws our attention to itself as the "worldly kingdom of a Christian establishment, the power of a worldly dominion or domination".⁵²

In deference to that marginalised Author, however, we might ask two questions of *Christendom's* relation to Christ. First, in what way does the trust and faith that we are called to place in Christ rupture the authority of the church? Second, if not in the church, where can we see the faith that we are called to place in Christ modelled?

A DEFINITION OF FAITH

As we have seen, the paradox of trying to think theologically is that we have no starting point other than the intellect to begin to think theologically, but as soon as we try to do so we discover that the intellect provides an inadequate foundation for doing what it believes itself given to do. Thinking theologically, then, is likewise a foundation (for our relation to God) without foundation. But faith acts to transcend that gap between the intellect and the divine. Faith emboldens the intellect to "let go" of God, to allow Christ to not fit the idols that the church has constructed, which are only ever of our own imagining, as Caputo writes,⁵³ and to nevertheless trust that God will still be there with us. But this "letting go" of God is impossible for the church. The authority of the church is based, after all, on the perception that it alone is the repository of the divine truth that eludes every individual intellect. The

51. Caputo writes that the "real opposite of a religious person" is a "selfish and pusillanimous curmudgeon, a loveless lout who knows no higher pleasure than the contemplation of his own visage" (*On Religion*, 3).

52. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 48. In writing *Christendom* to signify the exclusion of Christ from the institution, I have in mind Jacques Lacan's use of the nomenclature *Œ* to signify the elision of meaning in the structure of metaphor, wherein a signifier *S* comes to signify the unknown signification _ only by excluding the meaning of *S* (cf. Jacques Lacan, "On the Possible Treatment of Psychosis", *Écrits: A Selection*, translated by Alan Sheridan, [London: Routledge, 1997] 200.)

53. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 34.

church cannot let go of God lest it undermine the perception that God resides exclusively in the church building and the “Name” with which it clothes its representatives, such as Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor. Thus, to argue that faith can bring us to Christ only if we first let God slip from our grip threatens the very foundations of Christendom. Nevertheless, it is precisely this learning how to let go of God – which is to say, learning how to be faithful to a God who exceeds our grasp – that is demanded by the Thomistic account of the imperfect human intellect.

This is also what is demanded by the God Who puts all things at odds when a thinker is set loose on the planet. This God illustrates the intimate connection between thought and faith, between a thinking that, in faith, seeks to think beyond what is “allowed”, and a faith that is bolstered through that thinking. This is a conception of faith that says that *faith is that thinking of God as That which puts the thinking intellect into question*.

Faith conceived in this way embraces the kind of auto-deconstructive movement that Caputo argues is what Jesus would do. This is faith that embraces the lack of simple answers to the questions of God, and which is emboldened because things are getting harder, not easier. For the thinking intellect itself does not escape being put into question when God sets loose a thinker. And Caputo is excited about this impasse, which I call faith. For “we are really on the way of faith and hope and love”, he writes, “when the way is blocked; we are really under way when the way seems impossible, where this ‘impossible’ makes the way possible.”⁵⁴

EINSTEIN AND THE RUPTURE OF FAITH

The dysfunction that impedes our way to this faith lies not with the imperfection of the intellect – indeed, this is the *condition* of faith, not its limit – but with self-authorising Christendom, which ordains itself as a totality, an “I”. But faith begins with the deposition of this nominative “I” for the sake of another perspective. Faith is an act of “humility”, inasmuch as in faith we know that for “what we call ‘I’ there is no source of energy by which we can rise.”⁵⁵ This other perspective is that of the dative “me” – who we are insofar as we are *given* by the other, *before* “I” come to see myself as an “I”.⁵⁶ The weakness with

54. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 46.

55. Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 31.

56. This dative “me” is the same subject as Jean-Luc Marion’s *l’adonné*, or “the gifted” – that subject who receives itself from what it receives (see Book V in Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002] 248-319).

Christendom – as with any institution, which makes it ripe for deconstruction – is that it is reluctant to let go of the view it has cultivated of itself as a self-sufficient and self-authorising “I”, as Caputo describes the church. Indeed, we might say that the founding myth of Christendom is the claim that “I have faith.” Faith cannot be thought within the economic logic of the “I”. Faith ruptures economy.⁵⁷

Historically, the paradigm of this self-sufficient “I” has been the scientific intellect, especially as it was codified in classical (Galilean and Newtonian) mechanics. Left unchallenged for two centuries this “I” produced an anthropocentric understanding of Nature and the universe, according to which humans, as Lincoln Barnett writes, “egocentrically order[ed] events in [their] mind according to [their] own feelings of past, present, and future”.⁵⁸ And for those two centuries it was impossible to imagine how the universe could be anything but the great mechanical system described by Newton’s laws. But the universe looked like the picture of the universe that classical mechanics gave us not because Newton was remarkably successful at translating his observations into mathematical formulae – although he was – but because the Newtonian picture of a mechanical universe *imagined the universe* for us. Classical mechanics functioned literally as the nominative “I”, assuming for itself a monopoly of describing and shaping our imagination of the universe by naming Nature, and thus determining what could be accepted as the “common sense” universe. And the entire power and authority of classical mechanics was bound up in its self-authorising power to name Nature. Moreover, because classical mechanics had established the rules that defined which system of names could be accepted as common sense, so then was it impossible to oppose that scientific “I” from within “common sense” itself. By the close of the nineteenth century, then, classical mechanics had attained for itself the reign over Nature that Christendom exercises over Christ.

Yet, while we can see in classical mechanics an analogy for how Christendom exercises its own power, we can therefore also see an analogy for the kind of faithful thinking of God that is denied by Christendom in the way that a small group of theoretical physicists working in the early twentieth century broke away from Newton’s mechanical view of the universe. Foremost amongst this group were those scientists who created modern physics, and in particular Albert Einstein, and his general theory of relativity. What distinguishes this group is that they began their scientific investigations not from the basis of accepted common sense, but by questioning the premises upon which

57. I cannot expand upon this idea in this article, but will do so in future research.

58. Lincoln Barnett, *The Universe and Dr Einstein* (Mineola NY: Dover, 2005) 72.

the accepted common sense was founded. Einstein, for instance, argued that common sense could not provide a stable ground for scientific investigation, since common sense consists of “nothing more than a deposit of prejudices laid down in the mind prior to the age of eighteen”.⁵⁹ Einstein argued instead that scientific investigation must begin by critically examining the axioms upon which prevailing theories base their assumptions, for scientific theories, being human-made, are “never completely final, always subject to question and doubt”.⁶⁰

Echoing Kant’s missive against the sacredness of religion, Einstein argued that it is critical to question any theory that would monopolise “common sense”, which was the position attained by classical mechanics at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was in his willingness to think counter-intuitively that we can see in Einstein’s response to – and overturning of – classical mechanics a model for the kind of faithful thinking of God that brings the thinking intellect into question. For Einstein maintained that it could well be that Nature is in fact highly counterintuitive, and that the universe in fact makes no sense, from the point of view to common sense. And a counterintuitive universe is precisely what Einstein discovered in his “other-worldly”⁶¹ general theory of relativity – that space and time are not absolute; that the speed of light in a vacuum is a constant; that energy and mass are equivalent to one another; that the space-time continuum that forms the “surface” of the universe is curved; that there is no such thing as a “straight line”, and so on.⁶² Of course, in time this counterintuitive picture of the universe came to ossify into the new “common sense”, and what was once radical theoretical physics is today manna to any physics undergraduate. Nevertheless, Einstein’s genius was his ability to imagine that Nature could be seen from a perspective other than that of the “common sense” of classical mechanics.⁶³ Moreover, Einstein’s genius, which broke open or “awakened” the scientific “I”, was his ability to *think otherwise*⁶⁴ than common sense, and to “surmount the

59. Barnett, *The Universe and Dr Einstein*, 58.

60. Einstein cited in Gingerich, *God’s Universe*, 6.

61. Michael White and John Gribbin, *Einstein: A Life in Science* (London: The Free Press, 2005) 66.

62. See Albert Einstein, *Relativity: The Special and General Theory*, translated by Robert W. Lawson (New York: Pi Press, 2005), for Einstein’s own explanation of his theory. See also Max Born’s excellent and accessible *Einstein’s Theory of Relativity* (New York: Dover Publications, 1965).

63. Einstein seems to have possessed this skill as early as his mid-20s. See White and Gribbin, *Einstein: A Life in Science*, 70.

64. By the term thinking “otherwise” I have in mind Levinas’s term *autrement*, which signifies that which is not only different to, but unassimilable by the Order of the Same. See, for example, Emmanuel Levinas, *Autrement qu’être ou au-delà de l’essence* [*Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*] (Paris: Kluwer Academic, 1974).

barrier reared by man's impulse to define reality solely as he perceives it through the screen of his senses".⁶⁵ Indeed, as Roger Penrose writes, it is almost inconceivable that anyone other than Einstein could have discovered general relativity, which required an entirely different "order" of thinking:

This theory was of a kind – almost unique in scientific development – where it is not unreasonable to suppose that, had Einstein not been there, the theory might well still not have been found by anyone, a century or more later. [For] the work of many individuals contributed to special relativity, and the theory would still have come early in the twentieth century without Einstein. But the general theory required a different order of originality, and it is hard to see any plausible train of thought that would have clearly guided others to this theory.⁶⁶

Christendom abhors the kind of genius evident in the general theory of relativity. It is difficult to imagine how anyone other than a visionary such as Einstein could have come up with the general theory because the first step towards the theory required the decidedly unscientific step of giving up the power and authority of classical mechanics by adopting a perspective *other* than that of classical mechanics. For Einstein this alternative to the "I" was the dative "me". Einstein saw scientific investigation not in terms of enabling the intellect to assert its control and mastery over Nature, but in terms of the intellect's *being given* to understand a Nature that is always in excess of what the intellect can know of it. This shift from the "I" to the "me" incorporates a rupturing shift in ideology, inasmuch as the intellect must cede its power to the Other – in Einstein's case to the unknowable in Nature. As a result, Einstein came to see that science and religion, knowledge and faith, are inextricably linked. Hence his maxim – "science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind".⁶⁷

THE ETHICS OF FAITH

The courage to seek a perspective other than that of the power and authority of the *status quo* that is evident in relativity – this Emmanuel Levinas calls "ethics" or "thinking otherwise". It is what I am calling faith. What characterises both ethics and faith, as we shall see, is that they each mark a rupture in the exercising of power.

65. Barnett, *The Universe and Dr Einstein*, 58.

66. Roger Penrose, "Introduction", in Einstein, *Relativity*, xiii

67. Einstein, "Science and Religion", 605.

The rupture of ethics lies in the “event” of the “advent” of another person, whose existence “undoes” the power of the “I” to control its world. The advent of the other person is experienced as a rupture, argues Levinas, because the “I” cannot control or assimilate the other person. Levinas understood God as the “Altogether-Other”, and Caputo argues that the coming of the kingdom of God is the exemplary event of the advent of the Other – an unforeseeable event that surprises and strips me of any power that “I” might imagine “I” possess. “Events [such as the coming of the kingdom of God]”, Caputo writes, “happen to us”:

They overtake us and outstrip the reach of the subject or the ego. Although we are called upon to respond to events, an event is not our doing but is done to us (even as it might well be our undoing). The event arises independently of me and comes over me, so that an event is also an *advent*. The event is visited upon me, presenting itself as something I must deal with, like it or not.⁶⁸

What Caputo here identifies as the call to respond to events – whether it is the coming of the Other or of the kingdom of God, which is the same thing – is faith. In contrast to the “I” of Christendom, faith does not seek to master the kingdom of God, but to welcome it openly, allowing God to come to us in whatever way God so chooses, rather than forcing God to fit the idols we have constructed. The church thus experiences Christ as a rupture.

However, to effect this same rupture amongst humans requires the vision and the courage of the genius to *think otherwise* than “common sense”. Faith is courageous because it lets God slip from our grasp and from our desire to see in the name of Jesus “a mirror in which we behold our own image”.⁶⁹ Moreover, faith is courageous because it carries us beyond – and therefore against – the “intimate” community of the church, which is founded by excluding everything it considers “beyond” itself. Such an intimate society, writes Levinas, is “a society of beings totally present to one another”, such that its members are exactly symmetrical to one another, who exactly coincide with their appearance and with others’ expectations of them, and who therefore have nothing to hide from one another. This is “a society of beings who have chosen one another”, Levinas writes, “but in such a way as to control every facet of that society; an intimate society in truth, quite similar in its autarchy to the false totality of the *I*. In fact, such a society consists of

68. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 4.

69. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* 34.

two people, I and thou. We are among ourselves. Third parties are excluded [since] the third man disturbs this intimacy essentially."⁷⁰

The paradox of the institution of Christendom thus becomes clear. For the church can maintain its internal homogeneity only by excluding any threats to it – not only Christ, but faith in that Christ as well. Such was the experience of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor. Indeed, Christendom can maintain its internal homogeneity only by excluding the very thought of exteriority itself, and by labelling anyone who does not belong to the society not as choosing an alternative life, but as simply not yet belonging to Christendom – as so-called "pre-Christians".

The paradox of this "Christian" intimate society is that in order to exclude the Other it must bring about the violence and death embodied in the popular consciousness *by* that Other – by the terrorist, for instance, but also by the heretical Jesus for the Grand Inquisitor. The intimate society of Christendom perpetuates a violence upon itself because it submits Christians to a "concept" (of the "good Christian") that *precedes* any particular person, and thereby "absorbs" every particular person under that concept. Christendom thus institutionalises violence as the "Christianly" experience *par excellence* – violence against God, as well as against Christians themselves.

Moreover, in excluding the Other, Christendom inadvertently denies itself the encounter with the Other that is the condition of possibility for "thinking" and developing a "moral consciousness". By excluding the Other, the church comes to reflect that "unthinking" totality that Levinas critiques. It is not that the church "is wrong or thinks badly or foolishly", writes Levinas – "it simply does not think."⁷¹ The Other is the condition of possibility for thinking because the Other introduces a *new* and *different* – and *unassimilable* – perspective into the world. This other perspective is, in turn, the seed of "moral consciousness", since I cannot ignore that "freedom exterior to my own"⁷² that is incarnate in the unassimilable Other. Therefore, in excluding the "third man" Christendom also precludes having to conceive of the freedom of the Other, of thinking of the Other, of thinking "otherwise", and therefore developing that moral consciousness that emerges from that encounter with the Other.

Faith ruptures Christendom not only because faith rejects Christendom as the way of Christ, but because faith follows a way – the

70. Emmanuel Levinas, "The I and the Totality" in *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) 19.

71. Levinas, "The I and the Totality", 13.

72. Levinas, "The I and the Totality", 17.

way of thinking and morality – that exists exterior to Christendom and cannot be absorbed by it.

In Christendom, we thus come to see the meaninglessness of a life lived without God lamented by the Teacher in *Ecclesiastes* (1:8-10), who writes:

All things are wearisome, more than one can say...
 What has been will be again,
 what has been done will be done again;
 there is nothing new under the sun.
 Is there anything of which one can say,
 “Look! This is something new”?
 It was here already, long ago;
 it was here before our time.

CONCLUSION: CHRISTENDOM, VIOLENCE, AND THE JOYFUL FAITH

The contradiction at the heart of Christendom is that it proffers an unthinking “faith” that requires that one submit to what is “common” by marginalising what is exceptional. But in so doing, Christendom manifests that violence from which it claims to save us. Christendom abhors the genius and the faithful alike for their courage to *think otherwise*. But so then does Christendom lament that God who sets such a thinker loose on the planet. Christendom, finally, is without Christ.

That is not to say that faith cannot save us. On the contrary! Faith alone can save us from this violence. But we are absolved of this violence only by a faith structured as a *thinking otherwise* (than what is “common”, which is to say, than Christendom). We are absolved from violence by a faith that is a thinking of God as That which puts the thinking intellect into question. And because we can each only ever think God alone, so then does God’s putting *me* into question save *me* from the violence of the common.

This conception of faith exists at the intersection of the four arguments that I have examined here. It takes its impetus from (a) Thomas Aquinas’s analysis of the human intellect, from which I drew inferences for reading (b) Søren Kierkegaard’s modernist critique of Christendom, and (c) John D. Caputo’s postmodern critique of the church, which proposes a (d) Levinasian critique of the intimate society of the church in terms of its resistance to the awakening of the “I” by faith. Conceiving faith in this way has in turn highlighted several aspects of the dysfunctional church, including that the church (a) is without Christ, (b) is unable to conceive of a freedom exterior to it, (c)

cannot experience the miracle of “the new”, and (d) is therefore denied a moral consciousness.

Finally, the two key consequences of this conception of faith are, first, that it demonstrates that we are each answerable to God – not to the church – Who alone is able to put me in question. Therefore, because I am answerable to God, faith exposes me as a “me” – given by the charity and grace of an Other to Whom I am indebted with a debt that I can never repay. Faith thus puts Christendom in question because Christendom seeks to supplant Christ. As such, following Kant’s lead, Christendom must remain “subject of just suspicion”, and we must hesitate to give it the “sincere respect” that is accorded only through “the test of a free and public examination”.⁷³

Ultimately, however, this is a joyous faith. It revels in being “lost”, as Caputo writes, in anticipation of discovering in Christ the way of salvation. For “Jesus is not the way”, Caputo writes, “unless you are lost.”⁷⁴ Bobby Kennedy was therefore speaking with a “religious heart” when he finished his speeches by quoting George Bernard Shaw – “There are those who look at things the way they are, and ask why.... I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?”⁷⁵ The joy of faith is the joy of what yet might be, of casting aside “what is” in anticipation of what is to come – of the unforeseeable event of the coming of the kingdom of God.

73. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ix.

74. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 42.

75. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 38.