

## The (beauty of the) foolishness of God

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### Abstract

“The gospel is foolishness. Preaching is folly. Preachers are fools.”<sup>1</sup> This is the refrain throughout Johan Cilliers’ and Charles Campbell’s inspiring and unsettling book on homiletics. As the quote indicates, the authors connect the folly and foolishness to the gospel and to the preaching preacher. They invoke all kinds of fools, clowns, tricksters and jesters, including Jesus, to explain the meaning of “the folly of the cross”, as Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 1:18–25. However, Cilliers and Campbell do not so much address the implications of the folly of God, or, to put it in a different way, the folly that God is. Whenever they relate the foolishness to God, they refer to paradoxical phrases like ‘powerful weakness,’ or ‘different aesthetics,’ or the ‘terrible beauty’ of the cross. They assume that an omnipotent God who is at the same time powerless and mocked at the cross is the ultimate figure of foolishness. Still, this vulnerable God remains in power, somehow. Resurrection guarantees triumph after all.

In his *The Folly of God* (A Theology of the Unconditional, Salem/Oregon, Polebridge Press 2016), Jack Caputo, however, digs theologically deeper when it comes to what is going on in the name (of) “God”. Caputo interprets the Pauline rhetoric on the folly of the cross in a more radical manner. He “weakens” the folly of God into an insistent call that we give existence in works of mercy. In Caputo’s weak theology there is no ultimate winning God, despite the foolishness of the cross. Because, we do not know what is coming at us when we pray for God’s kingdom. It might be beauty, even the beauty of folly, but it might also be a threat. That is the risk we take when putting our faith in the folly of God.

This contribution intends to construct a dialogue between Cilliers and Caputo about the hermeneutics of 1 Corinthians 1:18–25 and its implications for understanding the folly of God.

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1 Campbell, Ch. L. and J.H. Cilliers, *Preaching Fools*. The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly, Waco/Texas: Baylor University Press 2012, p. 1.

## Keywords

*foolishness of God; weak theology; hauntology; John D. Caputo; 1 Corinthians 1:18–25.*

## 1. Introduction

Spring 2019, the *Rijksmuseum* in Amsterdam exhibited “All the Rembrandts”, marking the 350th anniversary of Rembrandt’s death (1606–1669). (Bikker 2019) *Rijksmuseum* has the world’s largest collection of Rembrandt paintings,<sup>2</sup> and the exhibition presented sixty drawings and more than 300 of the best prints (etchings) in its collection, next to their twenty-two paintings. One of the top pieces is Rembrandt’s *Self-portrait as the Apostle Paul* (1661).<sup>3</sup> It is the only painting in which Rembrandt portrays himself as a biblical figure. (Bikker 2019:173) The painter, or the apostle, is looking at us, with his body slightly turned towards us. In his right-hand he is holding a stack of papers with notes on them, maybe letters. From underneath his coat a sword protrudes, that is probably carried across his chest. Only the hilt of the sword is visible, with the pommel, grip and guard. Paul is wearing a dark-brown coat, and a white turban on his curly, greying hair, probably disguising a balding head, as testified by the second century apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla*. Rembrandt was 55 years old when he painted this self-portrait.

Visiting the *Rijksmuseum*, standing in front of the painting, within about two meter’s distance from the canvas, I stare at a man who is just a few years younger than I am now, although he looks older. Perhaps he is marked by life, but his strong, dark eyes look at me with interest. “Who are you?” they seem to ask. “Are you like me?” I contemplate these questions, but at the same time, I want to ask him “What did you mean when you wrote to the people in Corinth about the ‘foolishness of God?’ Did you, near the end of your life, came to the realization that the event that is going on in the name (of) ‘God’ really is weak and foolish? Or was it just a rhetorical statement

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2 See <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en>.

3 Self-portrait as the Apostle Paul, Rembrandt van Rijn, 1661, oil on canvas, h 91cm × w 77cm, cat. no. SK-A-4050. See <https://rkd.nl/explore/technical/5016197>; <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.5280>. The painting was acquired by *Rijksmuseum* in 1961.

meant to disarm the criticism that the ‘people of the way’ were ignorant and insignificant?”

Of course, these questions were a little fantasy game I played, projecting my thoughts and feelings on a mirror image, while being captivated by the artistic brilliance of the famous Dutch 17th century painter.<sup>4</sup> Or was it, maybe, a creative process of inversion, typical of symbolic acting, like we do in liturgical and sacramental acting? (Barnard et al. 2014) When I visited the *Rijksmuseum*, I was in the process of reflecting on the current essay in honour of Johan Cilliers. At home, I had been reading about the beauty of folly and the foolishness of God and wondering what it means in Johan’s theology. The next moment, I was standing in front of this breathtaking self-portrait of Rembrandt as Paul.

The “beauty of folly” directed me to *Preaching Fools*, written by Johan Cilliers and Chuck Campbell (2012).<sup>5</sup> The refrain throughout this inspiring and unsettling book on homiletics is “The gospel is foolishness. Preaching is folly. Preachers are fools.” (2012: 1) The authors connect the folly and foolishness to the gospel and to the preaching preacher. They invoke all kinds of fools, clowns, tricksters and jesters, including Jesus, to explain the meaning of “the folly of the cross,” as Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 1:18–25. However, Cilliers and Campbell do not so much address the implications of the folly of God, or, to put it in a different way, the folly that God is. Whenever they relate the foolishness to God, they refer to paradoxical phrases like “powerful weakness,” or “different aesthetics,” or the “terrible beauty” of the cross. They assume that an omnipotent God who is at the same time powerless and mocked at the cross is the ultimate

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4 *Rijksmuseum* curator Jonathan Bikker writes that the reason why Rembrandt used Paul’s features was to increase the viewer’s engagement with the apostle: “In every work that Rembrandt ever painted or etched he did his utmost to draw us in, whether it be by telling a story in such a way that we become utterly engrossed in it, or by portraying people as they really were, or by rendering the protagonist’s emotions so convincingly that we empathize with him or her.” (2019, 174)

5 Cilliers and Campbell wrote the book together, elaborating on their conversations, primarily over email. They do not reveal which of them is the lead author of which chapter, although they acknowledge their differences in writing styles and the resources they could draw on. They worked hard to make the book a unified whole, they say, so it would be rather impolite to distinguish the twin others. Nevertheless, my guess would be that, based on the references and the examples, Johan Cilliers took the lead in chapters 3, 5, 6 and 7.

figure of foolishness. Still, this vulnerable God remains in power, somehow. Resurrection guarantees triumph after all.

Philosopher of religion and “radical theologian” Jack Caputo, however, digs theologically deeper when it comes to what is going on in the name (of) “God”,<sup>6</sup> in his *The Folly of God* (2016). Caputo interprets the Pauline rhetoric on the folly of the cross in a more radical manner. He “weakens” the folly of God into an insistent call that we give existence in works of mercy. In Caputo’s weak theology there is no ultimate victorious God, despite the foolishness of the cross. We do not know what is coming at us when we pray for God’s kingdom. It might be beauty, even the beauty of folly, but it might also be a threat. That is the risk we take when putting our faith in the folly of God.

My contribution to Johan’s *Festschrift* constructs a dialogue between Cilliers and Caputo about the hermeneutics of 1 Corinthians 1:18–25 and its implications for understanding and preaching the folly of God. The dialogue is based on a close reading of *Preaching Fools* as well as of *The Folly of God*. My interpretation of these books leads to some theological thoughts and some reflections on “hauntological” preaching. I start, however, with browsing some New Testament commentaries. The verb “browsing” probably suits best the modest level of my exegetical research. This is the first of two personal disclaimers I will make in this article. I am not a biblical scholar, so I try to learn from the experts’ interpretations of the words of Paul in the first letter to the Corinthians.<sup>7</sup>

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6 Caputo often uses intentionally scare quotes when referring to God.

7 I like to thank Ernst Boogert and Suzan Sierksema-Agteres, biblical scholars and PhD’s at PThU, for their help in understanding 1 Corinthians 1:25. Suzan made me aware of the book by Chalamet and Askani (2015). Furthermore, she pointed out that the specific combination of “mōron tou theou” is not known from sources outside the New Testament that were not influenced by the New Testament. She also mentioned that according to the 28th edition of “Nestle-Aland” there doesn’t seem to be something remarkable going on in the text. Ernst referred me the commentaries of Fitzmeyer (2008) and Thiselton (2000). Furthermore, he suggested that Paul uses a rhetorical strategy with the notion of “God’s foolishness”, to expose and weaken even further the supposed wisdom of the Greek. The foolishness of God, therefore, cannot be isolated from this rhetorical context. He thinks verse 25 should be translated like: “suppose God is foolish and acts foolish; still, his foolishness is wiser than the wisdom that people might think they have!”

## 2. Paul on the foolishness of God

We encounter Paul's discourse on fools and foolishness in 1 Corinthians 1:18–25.<sup>8</sup> Specifically, the reference to *to mōron tou theou*, verse 25, deserves our attention. “For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”<sup>9</sup> Fitzmeyer (2008) states that Paul uses in this passage “stylistics devices” and rhetorical strategies, and Thiselton (2000: 173) mentions “Paul’s startling oxymoron” in verse 25. The noun ‘*o mōros* can be translated as “fool” for a human being and as “something foolish” for objects.<sup>10</sup> The connection between this noun and the name of God raises the question what sort of genitive it is. Does it characterize God as the One who communicates something that is perceived as foolish (objective genitive), or does it attribute something foolish to God, does it describe the quality of God Himself as being a fool (attributive genitive)? Surprisingly, the commentators do not seem to be interested in the genitive. Neither Fitzmeyer nor Arzt-Grabner et al. (2006) reflect on the genitive. Fitzmeyer, however, does mention that in verse 24 *theou* precedes both *dunamis* en *sophia*, accentuating that these are “attributes of God”. While in verse 25 *mōros* is followed by *theou*, which could suggest that *mōros* is not an attribute of God.

Translating the passage from 1 Corinthians in German, Arzt-Grabner et al. (2006: 55) put folly and foolishness between scare quotes when they are connected to God or the gospel: “das “Blöde” Gottes” (verse 25) and “die ‘Blödheit’ der Verkündigung” (verse 21). Several commentators indicate that Paul must speak ironically when writing about foolishness. It is a rhetorical trick, using this paradox. It seems foolish, but it is not, of course. In this respect the commentators tend to follow the fourth century “would-be Ambrose” Ambrosiaster in his comment on verse 25, from his *Commentary on Paul’s Epistles*.

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8 Cilliers and Campbell start Paul’s reading in 1 Corinthians 1 with verse 17, but most commentators perceive 1:18–25 as a unit within the larger unit of 1:10–4:13, where Paul addresses the issue of divisiveness in the congregation.

9 This is how it is translated by ESV, RSV, NKJV, and NASB. NIV and NRSV translate the text as “For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”

10 The “definitive article with the neuter single of the adjective *mōros* strictly means *the foolish thing*.” (Thiselton 2000: 173)

When Paul speaks of the “foolishness of God,” he is not implying that God is foolish. Rather he is saying that since God’s way of reasoning is in accord with things of the spirit, it confounds the reasoning of this world. It is wiser than human reasoning, because spiritual things are wiser than carnal ones. Spiritual things do not exist through carnal ones, but the other way around. Therefore, carnal things are understandable in relation to spiritual ones. Similarly, what belongs to heaven is stronger than what belongs to earth. So, what seems like the weakness of God is not really weak at all. Christ appeared to be defeated when he was killed, but he emerged as the victor and turned the reproof back on his persecutors. (Bray 1999: 16)

Fitzmeyer (161) asserts that verse 25 “formulates a maxim or epigram of timeless validity. Paul does not use his usual word for folly, *mōria*, but rather the neuter singular of the adjective *mōros*, “foolish,” as a noun, because he is trying to express ‘God’s foolishness,’ as it is judged by unbelievers.”<sup>11</sup> But this gospel of folly is for Paul superior to the wisdom of the world. Fitzmeyer points out how in the Roman world Christianity was considered “madness” and a “superstition”. “Paul’s gospel proves indeed to be ‘folly’ to most of his contemporaries because of the contemporary conventional wisdom about crucifixion in the Roman world.” (Fitzmeyer 2008: 154)

Schrage (1991), however, acknowledges that God really participates in the foolishness and weakness of the cross. It is not just a manner of speaking for the gentiles and the Jews. God’s acting on the cross is foolish, for the sake of saving the weak. He states that verse 25 explains the “eschatologisch vollziehende Umkehrung aller Werte.”<sup>12</sup> (189) Although he also indicates the specificity of Paul’s statement. Paul is talking about the concrete case of the crucifixion, and not about a general rule.

For Barclay (2015), Paul emphasizes the clash of wisdoms between God and the “world”. Barclay refers for the motive of “folly” to the work of Larry Welborn, *Paul, the Fool of Christ* (2005).<sup>13</sup> “Paul’s jarring, paradoxical

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11 Earlier on, he uses the phrase “skeptical humanity” for the unbelievers (158).

12 To be translated as “eschatologically reversal of all values”.

13 Campbell and Cilliers (2012) also build their interpretation of Paul on Welborn; see the chapter “Folly at the Heart of Preaching”.

expression is meant to separate entirely the divine from the human scale of norms. (...) His aim is not to turn the human scale simply on its head, but to break the presumption of congruence that makes a human value system reflective or representative of the divine.” (Barclay 2015: 12)

In sum, God is acting in the event of the crucifixion, and this might be perceived as foolish. Even stronger, it is foolish compared to the manners of the world. The crucifixion is putting everything on its head, turning the world upside down. The last will be the first in the kingdom of God that is coming towards us in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. But even when Paul’s reference to God’s foolishness is more than just a rhetorical construction, still the New Testament scholars seem to agree that “something foolish” is not an attribute of God. The genitive in *to mōron tou theou* seems to be an objective genitive not an attributive one.

From this exploratory surfing some commentaries on 1 Corinthians 1:18–25, we move on to how Cilliers interprets this Pauline text. In *Preaching fools*, we find an extensive reflection on these words of Paul and their importance for the rhetoric of preaching.

### 3. Cilliers on the folly of preaching

*Preaching Fools* should be mandatory reading in every course in homiletics, regardless of continent or country. The book makes a joyful and inspiring read. It is obviously conceived with passion and humour, and its approach to preachers and preaching is creative, provocative and captivating. It might not be textbook homiletics when it comes to didactics, but it certainly provides students in the art of preaching with a viable and fruitful pedagogy for ministering to the foolishness of the Gospel. Cilliers’ and Campbell’s thoughts on the witness of fools, the disruptive folly of Jesus, a theology of laughter, preachers as agents of interruption, and the rhetoric of folly, are so exciting and encouraging that you want to be a fool yourself after reading the book, and act on the urge to preach foolishly about the folly of God.

Before engaging with the homiletics of folly of the authors of *Preaching Fools*, I must make a second personal disclaimer. I am also not a homilician. My field of expertise in practical theology is in congregational

studies and leadership, besides exploring the field of public theology of popular art and culture. But despite my lack of above average expertise in homiletics as a practical theologian, I am an ordained minister in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. Although I am not professionally or vocationally connected to one congregation, I do practice preaching and leading worship on a regular basis. So, I am practically a homilician.

Furthermore, it might be interesting to know that as a theological student at Utrecht University, when this university still had a department of Theology, I received my training in homiletics from Rudolf Bohren's *Predigtlehre* (1986). Johan dedicates *Preaching Fools* to the Swiss-born but the Heidelberg based teacher Rudolf Bohren (1920–2010), who, as Johan writes, “taught me to see,” with which I fully agree.<sup>14</sup>

In chapter two of their book, Campbell and Cilliers provide us with their hermeneutics of 1 Corinthians 1:18–25. The keyword for them in this fragment from Paul's letter is cross/crucifix/crucifixion. “Viewed through the lens of the cross, gospel foolishness is not simply comical, but also deeply disruptive and unsettling.” (2012: 2) After presenting three exemplary images of the folly of the cross, Don Quixote pointing to the crucified Christ in a broken and fragmented world being one of them, Campbell and Cilliers explain how they as homiliticians have been haunted by these words of Paul in a world overwhelmed with violence and death.

Campbell and Cilliers emphasize the meaning of the cross as an interruption, that recalls the disruptive ways of Jesus,<sup>15</sup> referring, amongst others, to philosopher Alain Badiou's book about Saint Paul's universalism (2003). But the cross is also a reminder of the hiddenness of Christ's power. There is a paradoxical wisdom and power in the cross that the world perceives as

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14 As a Master student, I wrote a thesis (1989) on Bohren's own preaching practice, under the supervision of Marinus van der Velden (1928–2005). Van der Velden was then the chair of Practical Theology at Utrecht University, and he was a friend of Bohren. I analysed four sermons from Bohren's sermon volume *Wider den Ungeist* (1989), using the “Heidelberg method of sermons analysis” (Debus et al. 1989), developed by, amongst others, Gerd Debus, to whom Johan also dedicates his book (“who weighed words with me”).

15 Campbell and Cilliers 2012, 19, n.2. “Messiah” and “cross” are incommensurable realities, “a shocking, blasphemous paradox”. (20). They refrain from the translation “madness” for *mōrian*, although it serves as a reminder how radical and scandalous Paul's preaching was. (20, n.6)



weakness and foolishness. Living with this paradoxicality, in the liminal space that comes with it, requires believers to adapt a bifocal vision. In faith, we see a new world coming, while we are still part of the old age. The wisdom and power of God are the new reality in faith, but this new reality is hidden in the weak and foolish appearance of the cross.

A bifocal vision is also necessary to discern the double irony of Jesus' crucifixion. In a reflection on the contextual meaning of a crucifixion in Paul's culture, the authors describe how the cross, as the ultimate humiliation of Jesus' proclamation of God's kingdom, becomes his "throne," and his crucifixion his "coronation". And this royal performance is already foreshadowed by Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey, "a carefully orchestrated, carnivalesque form of 'street theatre'." (25) By his speech and actions, Jesus turns the world upside down, and parodying the powers that be. This fits with the image of Jesus as a "trickster," exposing the ruling powers. "[T]he gospel turns on a complex, coarse and vulgar joke," they assert. (27) It evokes a laughter that is profoundly theological, the laughter of the preaching fools.

This is what Paul's proclamation of the foolishness of the cross hints at. "To preach the cross one must enter deeply into this foolishness and take up the role of the fool." (28) And that is exactly what Paul himself did, he became a fool for Christ's sake, he took on the role of the "socially ostracized, 'low and despised' moron." (28) Moreover, he assumed this theatrical role (1 Corinthians 4:9–10) intentionally. Although it was more than a role, his disruptive behaviour and preaching was constituent of his life after the "Road to Damascus" event. His rhetoric is crazy, nonsensical and disorienting, shaped by shocking, unsettling paradoxes, according to the authors.

It might be that the authors felt the nagging voices of their more orthodox readers, after so much talk about fools and foolishness in connection with the gospel of Jesus Christ, because near the end of the chapter about Paul's gospel of the cross they meditate on Christ's resurrection. The resurrection qualifies the foolishness of the cross and constitutes the cross as foolish, they claim. Without the resurrection of Christ, Jesus would just be one more historical dead person. Referring to 1 Corinthians 15, they remind

us of how Paul sees crucifixion and resurrection as two sides of a coin, inseparable. Both are essential of Christian life.

Campbell and Cilliers finish chapter two with four methodical pointers for preaching. First, foolish preaching interrupts “the principalities and powers”. Second, such preaching creates a liminal space where the Spirit might move. Third, such preaching makes new perceptions possible and helps to discern the presence of God’s kingdom. Finally, such preaching does not take itself seriously, because it completely depends on the gift of the Spirit.

In chapter three of their book, with the title *Theology between Fragment and Form*, Cilliers and Campbell emphasize that the notions of bifocal vision and liminality also have consequences for the images of God. God is liminal, on-the-move, and gets broken, fragmented during this trajectory. But the Spirit picks up these broken forms of Christ and reforms them continuously. It is the Spirit who keeps the double foci of faith together, while we live in the dynamic juncture of the old era and the new world. And it is the spirit who guides us through liminality between fragment and fullness. The Spirit holds God’s weakness in Christ together with God’s final victory over death. “Infinitely vulnerable, but never finally defeated,” with a reference to Harvey Cox’s *The Feast of Fools*. (57)

The author’s pneumatological claim is part of a theological argument that is rather paradoxical, I would say. On the one hand, they write about God’s power. On the other hand, they imagine God moving through the liminal space and leaving footprints with the marginalized and voiceless people. These footprints of God are revealed in the fragmented Christ and prompt the folly of the cross. The Spirit of the fragmented Christ conceives new forms, but she “does not erect monuments of power and does not re-create statues of excellence or spaces of splendour.” (53) However, the description of what the Spirit is *not* doing is followed by the clause “at least not in the sense in which most of us normally understand these attributes.” This is an (adverbial dependent) clause of concession, conceding a supposition contrary to the assertion in the main clause. This implies that the Spirit is powerful, but for us to understand this power the Spirit communicates (accommodates) this power as weak and the wisdom as foolish. I quote:

God is present in this world and is revealed *sub contrario* (in contradiction). God is present in God's world only as a stranger, as a suffering servant, as the Crucified One—thus the shocking, paradoxical folly of God's revelation to us. God is present contrary to (*para*) the appearance (*doxa*) of the opposite. However, while “paradox” does capture tensions inherent in this foolish image of God, it is fundamentally a reference to human limitations. For the paradox exists only from the human perspective; it is more a confession of the linguistic and intellectual limits of human beings than a description of God. For God (if one dares to speak “for God”), there is no paradox in the crucifixion, no contradiction between the Almighty and the shamed and suffering servant. That is simply who God is. (54–55)

The Spirit accommodates God's workings to our human impediment, and that is why preachers depend on paradox and a kind of bifocal vision. Paradoxicality is not an attribute of God, it belongs to human weakness. God is present, God is powerful, God is almighty, God is in control. But it is a different control and power, vulnerable, insignificant, subversive, opening, giving freedom.

The authors strongly distance themselves from any attempt to reduce God's power to a human agenda of control and certainty, and from any “iron theology” that is connected to “the myth of redemptive violence”. This iron theology “gladly speaks of God's omnipotence – often understood as God-with-us – but that ironically struggles to understand this God-with-us in terms of compassion and weakness.” (65) Instead, they promote whatever (weak) metaphor, image, or work of art they imagine conveying the shape and form in which God reveals his power (female clown, wailing women, midwives; Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Giovanni Tedesco's *Crucifix*, Jan Wolkers' *Never again Auschwitz*). But still, God is a transcendent power, the Crucified is God.

I assume that these thoughts on the foolishness of preaching are agreeable to the author of a book about the “folly of God”. But before I engage with Caputo's theology, I want to share three observations from this review of Cilliers' and Campbell's reflections on “folly at the heart of preaching”. The first observation is that the authors seem to be concurrent in their

interpretation of 1 Corinthians 1:18–25 with the New Testament scholars. The second observation is that the authors write about the gospel, preaching, and preachers, but not so much about God regarding foolishness. The third observation is that the authors stretch the paradoxicality of Paul's notion of the folly of God to its limits.

In the next part, we will see how Caputo disagrees with the biblical scholars, how he speaks about foolishness as an attribute of God, and how he radically uses the notion of God's foolishness to "weaken" any strong theology that guarantees the judgement of the "sinners" and the salvation of the "believers".

#### 4. Caputo on what is going on in the folly (of) God

In his introduction to his *The Folly of God* (2016), Caputo presents his book as part of a trilogy to trace the logic of the cross outlined by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1.<sup>16</sup> The other books of the trilogy are *The weakness of God* (2006) and *The Insistence of God* (2013). "The titles of the three books are exactly symmetric and make for a kind of postmodern treatise on the divine names which I did not set out to write but which managed to write itself into the script," Caputo (2016: 129) states in his characteristic mode of thinking. He uses a "method of madness" in his theological treatise, a *morologia*, a fool's logic. "To put it in a way calculated to scandalize, this is a study of God's own madness, God's own foolishness." (4) Caputo tries to get at the depths of the "explosive language" of Paul about the weakness and the foolishness, or the folly of God.<sup>17</sup>

Exploring the depths of Paul's experience of God, Caputo finds common ground with his "favourite theologian" Paul Tillich, in the notion of

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16 Caputo calls his *The Folly of God* a "little book" and an "essay". The book seems to be an elaboration of Caputo (2015).

17 In a conversation with Gianni Vattimo, Caputo states that underlying his theology of the event there is an anarchic thesis about God, or about the event that is harboured in the name of God, which is found in Paul's notion of the "weakness of God". Although he makes an interesting hermeneutic disclaimer in a note. "To be sure, inasmuch as the 'New Testament' is a vintage example of a 'text' a pastiche woven from multiple authors and redactors with multiple theologies in different churches transcribed by not always neutral scribes, I am prepared to concede that this thesis is frequently enough contradicted by the opposing thesis, by a good deal of bravado about the mighty power of God." (Caputo 2007, 62, n.16)

the “unconditional”. He learns from Tillich that theology begins with a theologically sensitive atheism, by weakening the God of high and mighty theology, like the mystics already knew. God is not an object or an agent, God is the womb of all things, the unconditional. There is something “going on in and under the name of ‘God’, something deep down in God, something that gives us no rest, that drives us on, and that is where the true interests of theology lie.” (21)

The next step in his radical theological treatise is to bring in Derrida’s methodology of deconstruction, which lowers (as the opposite of elevates) Tillich’s “the unconditional” to “the undeconstructible”. Deconstruction seeks to unravel the undeconstructible in every construction, to get at what is promised in the shifting meanings of the words and concepts we use. Deconstruction tries to blow up every freeze frame to keep the future open, because there is a promise (or a threat) in the future, there is “something going on”. The undeconstructible is unconditionally calling upon us. This calling characterizes deconstruction, and it is quite “spooky,” it haunts us. That is why Caputo writes about a “haunto-theology,” referring to Derrida’s “hauntology”. This unconditional undeconstructible does not exist, it insists. The call is visited upon us, it puts us in the accusative. It is up to us to exist this insistence that is going on in the name of “God”.

The name “God” is one of the ways to give words to the unconditional, which Caputo describes, with Derrida, as a “weak force”. The trope of weakness prompts his hermeneutics of 1 Corinthians 1:18–31, the logic of the cross. Caputo loves this text by Paul, and from a biblical theological perspective his whole theology is based on what Paul communicates about God opting for “the nothings and the nobodies” and about God’s folly shaming the powers of the world.<sup>18</sup> But despite, or maybe because of his admiration for Paul, Caputo in some vital theological or exegetical

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18 Caputo engages with Paul in all his theological work. For example: “Wherever possible, I invoke the authority of St. Paul, from whose protective cover I never stray any more than necessary. I am above all in Paul’s debt for what he calls the ‘logos of the cross’ ... which is quite central to the idea of the weakness of God. But Paul inscribes his idea of the weakness of God that is revealed in the cross in a larger economy of power ... from which I will, with fear and trembling, take my leave as circumspectly and inconspicuously as possible so as not to attract the attention of the authorities.” (Caputo 2006: 42)

aspects disagrees with Paul.<sup>19</sup> He wants to radically think through Paul's version of the weakness of God, beyond Paul's errors in belief, "because I think he takes what he says in 1 Corinthians 1 and largely walks it back in 1 Corinthians 2." (60) That is an interesting point of view, which is not commonly shared by the bible commentators, nor the exegetes.<sup>20</sup> Caputo's reading of Paul is "highly unorthodox," he confesses himself. (2015: 63) He argues that Paul's discourse on weakness and folly is embedded in God's final apocalyptic triumph in which everything is reversed, and the weak will be strong. Ultimately, the divine power will prevail, faith will win. The weak theology of 1 Corinthians 1 is an investment that will pay dividends in chapter two of the letter. That is how Caputo reads Paul. "All is well,"<sup>21</sup> at the end. But the unconditional is not a winning strategy. "The *skandalon* and the *moria* is that we may not win at all." (6)

This is a rather restrained and sobering statement. "To think the weakness and folly of God all the way down would consist, accordingly, in resisting the temptation to enter them into an economy of long-term strength and wisdom." (61)<sup>22</sup> The weak force of God, the unconditional, corresponds more to foolish acts like the pure gift, forgiveness, and hospitality than the execution of retaliating power. It may not come as a surprise that

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19 Caputo says about disagreeing with Paul that it "for some people means I am destined for ruin but for me simply means that I am not a party to the ruinous mythological and half-blasphemous idols of biblical inerrancy and ecclesial infallibility." (2016: 59)

20 Caputo (2015) is the published lecture of Caputo at a 2013 international theological conference in Geneva that had as its purpose "to examine the first two chapters of Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, (aspects of) the reception of these chapters in the history of theology, and, in a constructive approach, their potential meaning today." The publication also reports on the discussion following Caputo's keynote lecture. At the end of this discussion the moderator thanks Caputo for his theological boldness. "You are a philosopher who challenges us with real theological questions." (64) And the editors of the conference volume (Chalamet and Askani 2015) state in their introduction "Whether contemporary theologians, not to mention biblical exegetes, can embrace Caputo's 'weakness-trip' remains to be seen. His challenge to Christian theology and Christian proclamation, however, must be heard."

21 My apologies for the reference to the 1989 song by Michael W. Smith and Wayne Kirkpatrick.

22 Caputo several times uses the word "economy" when writing about Paul's thinking on the foolishness of God. However, he is not referring to Paul's notion of the *oikonomia* but is borrowing a trope of Derrida from his reflections on the (pure) gift versus the economy of exchange. There is no gift without the circle of exchange, but we should never mistake the economy for the gift.

Caputo's favourite story is Jesus confronting the Grand Inquisitor with a kiss (Dostoevsky). At this stage in his argument, Caputo leaves Tillich, who helped him find a way of locating God in the depth structure of culture, behind. Because when Tillich speaks about God as the unconditional ground of all being, some metaphysical power is still implied. Instead, Caputo intends to weaken God into something "other than being," (Levinas), a groundless ground, an abyss. The "depth" dimension of Tillich makes way for "the event".

Caputo emphasizes that he does not seek to disprove the existence of God, he just greets "the Supreme being with supreme incredulity." God does not exist, God insists. The folly of the unconditional is that it "calls, lures, solicits, provokes, spooks, and haunts." (78) There is no reassuring entity or agent that takes care of us, rather an uncanny, homeless, spectral sort of thing that gives us no peace. It is "an infinitival in-finite, a to-come, a messianic promise (without a Messiah), a figure of hope against hope – how foolish is that? – in the coming of something that we cannot see coming, which may turn out to be a disaster." (79) It is the event of the "perhaps," and this perhaps is a rather disturbing call, not a projection but coming at us a projectile, that puts us at risk, full of hope but also exposed to despair, which requires of us the capability to sustain uncertainty. "The name of God is the name of the chance of an event. The kingdom of God is the name of the realm where the event pays an unexpected call upon us, waking us in the middle of the night with a loud rapping at our door." (81) The folly of the call is in the non-knowing, which is constitutive of the event, in a positive way.

Fitting the weakness of the event that is harboured in the name (of) "God," is the weakening of theology into *theopoetics*. Theology should be the reflection on the kingdom of God discourse in the gospels, which proper form is a poetics.<sup>23</sup> Theology needs to be weakened to an unpretentious poetics of the event that is taking place in the name (of) "God." Weak theology is a second order expression of a *theopoetics* of the folly of God. There are two tasks for this theology of the unconditional. First, to safeguard the open-endedness of the event, its indefinite mode. Second, to preserve

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23 Caputo (2016: 94) defines "poetics" as rhetorical strategies to address the event. Poetics is exposing us to the event.

its weakness from yielding to the authority of wisdom and strength. The radical hermeneutics of this theology needs to expose us to contingency and deep unforeseeability. Theopoetics is a hauntology, giving words to something infinitival that is coming. Summarizing this *morologia*, Caputo writes:

The folly of God is that God is an unconditional call without an army to back it up. The folly of God is that God does not exist; God insists. God's folly is, not clinging to existence, to disappear into an anonymous call, a call which leaves us uncertain about who or what is calling, what is being called for, what is being recalled. Our folly is to answer a call whose provenance is clouded, whose message is obscure, and whose memory is faded. It is the folly to answer an unconditional but uncertain call, where it is up to us to determine what is being called for, which requires us not only to be responsible to the call, but also responsible for it. (106–107)

The folly of God is not a move made in a divine chess game to outsmart the world, Caputo says. Or, to put it even stronger, the folly of the kingdom of God does not need God. However, this is not the end of the kingdom, it is the beginning of an alternative understanding that builds on Matthew 25. We pray for this kingdom to come, but it is structurally coming, it is the possibility of the impossible, the folly of an unconditional call. The kingdom insists, and it is up to us to exist this insistence by the works of mercy, which are the kingdom of God. It might sound blasphemous to some, when Caputo writes: “We are the ones whom God is waiting for, the one who have been expected to fill up what is lacking in the body of God, to pick up where God leaves off.” (118) Like with his hermeneutics of 1 Corinthians 1, Caputo also in his hermeneutics of Matthew 25 tries to stay clear from “the economy of winning,” in this case the final judgement with its cursing and punishing (Matthew 25: 41–46). Caputo stops his interpretation of Matthew 25 with verse 40, stating that a good storyteller knows when the story is over and stops talking. “There is nothing else to say. The figure of Jesus *is* a figure of solidarity with those who have been beaten down by the powers of the world, with the least among us. Jesus is the *ikon* of the nothings and the nobodies of the world, who bear the mark of God, of the weakness of God.” (122)



## 5. Rhetoric of the foolishness of God

Cilliers and Campbell complete their *Preaching Fools* with a chapter titled “the rhetoric of folly”. This rhetoric is characterized as bivocal,<sup>24</sup> disruptive, transgressive, and ambiguous. Bifocal preaching is paradoxical and metaphorical and stays away from tautology and timelessness. Disruptive rhetoric distinguishes itself by irony, parody and lampooning and shuns the reification and legitimation of power structures. Transgressive sermons have the courage to face the other and cross boundaries, while overcoming fear and a possible leaning towards masking and defacing. Finally, homiletic speech is ambiguous and indirect, contrary to speech that demands clarity, order and certainty. The authors provide a lot of telling examples of the rhetoric of folly and how it is a faithful alternative to, what they call, “iron rhetoric,” which is preaching based on an “iron theology”.

Iron rhetoric and the rhetoric of folly represent two rhetorical structures, which create radically different perceptions of the world. Iron rhetoric forms a closed world of domination and fear. The rhetoric of folly fearlessly reframes perspective and creates new, liberating possibilities. Iron rhetoric works with rigid, authoritative certainties. The rhetoric of folly plays with open, creative imagination. Iron rhetoric finds its vocabulary and form within closed seriousness. The rhetoric of folly interrupts dominating rigidity and moves in a liminal space in which new perception may be born. (2012: 184)

It is not very outlandish to assume that Jack Caputo would say “amen” to this rhetoric of folly, or maybe “viens, oui, oui!” But it might also be interesting to consider the “rhetoric of the foolishness of God”. What might be the surplus of this foolishness of God rhetoric compared to the critical rhetoric of folly? What characterizes such a rhetoric of God’s foolishness? Based on Caputo’s work, I would suggest that we could find the following four aspects in sermons inspired by this “morological,” or “moropoetical” rhetoric: deconstruction, weakness of God, haunted, and theopoetics. Of

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24 Where vision translates in rhetoric, “bifocal” becomes “bifocal”. “Foolish sermons bring this bifocal vision to speech through bifocal rhetoric, which seeks to hold together the tensile incongruities at the juncture of the ages.” (Campbell and Cilliers 2012: 184)

course, this is just a tentative exploration of a rhetoric the elaboration of which exceeds the limits of this essay.

First, these sermons deconstruct what is going on in epic tales, prophecies, psalms, parables, stories, letters or any biblical God-talk that is inspiring the preaching. Every exegesis is a deconstruction of the possible meaning of a text, but the rhetoric of God's foolishness digs deeper and hunts for the unexpected that is hidden in what we know about God, perhaps. Even when it defies the common understanding of God's attributes or of any theological locus. There is always something going in a text that we have not grasped yet, maybe. Nothing is taken at face value because it looks "biblical" or theological sound. Instead, this rhetoric explores the potential of what is going on the text.

Second, these sermons are permeated with the weakness of God. They do not proclaim a victorious "god" who, at the end of time, drags the devil by his tail and smites him, together with all those who bowed their knees for him. God is not a punisher or an avenger, even though a lot of things that happen in our life's and world makes one long for revenge as a dish served cold. However, God is not an agent, God insists. It is up to us to give existence to his prevailing call for justice and forgiveness. Of course, there is a lot of God-talk in the Bible that suggests the agency of God and God's existence. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of God's foolishness looks beyond this discourse about God's agency for the affirmative event that visits us, calls us, summons us, solicits us to do justice, to be hospitable, to forgive, to give existence to the messianic works of mercy.

Third, the affirmative event that is going on in the name (of) "God" is coming at us, "like a thief in the night" (Mt 24:43; 1 Thes 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10). That is why these sermons have a "spooky" ring to them. They are haunted by the voices of the past that are testified in the Scriptures, and which speak to us as a "dangerous memory". However, not only are these sermons haunted by the "revenants," those who come back from the past, they are also visited by the voices of future generations, the "avenants". The rhetoric of God's foolishness makes us responsible for not forgetting the past and for foreclosing the future. These sermons have a tendency of making us feel uneasy with the present state of affairs, with the powers that be, with the homeostasis, because it might be that the current equilibrium is silencing

what is coming towards us and restraining the call for justice. “Perhaps,” is the keyword for this rhetoric. It might be, or not.

Fourth, the style and language that present themselves to these sermons are those of poetry, a theopoetics. This rhetoric is not argumentative and persuasive, but rather creative and enticing, aesthetic and intriguing, artistic and inviting. Deconstructing the weak call of the event that haunts us requires the performative mode of a poem, narrative and dramatic; or maybe even the mode of a prayer. Because the event that is coming at us is a matter for prayer. “For God is only given in prayer.”<sup>25</sup>

If preaching is a foolish thing and preachers are fools, what about homiliticians like Johan Cilliers? Maybe the superlative “foolest,” or “most fool,” does fit Johan, or in biblical lingo “the fool of all fools”. But figuring that out would just be a foolish exercise, foolish in the sense of nonsensical, a waste of time. Johan deserves all the credits we can give him for teaching us performatively the rhetoric of folly, in his publications, in his sermons, in his works of art, and in his personal presence, being a bit of a joker himself. Maybe now is a good time for Johan, after a long and productive academic career, being older and wiser than Paul and Rembrandt, to go to the next level of rhetoric, to the beauty of the foolishness of God.

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25 See the final chapter of Caputo 2006 (283–299), titled “A concluding prayer”. The quote is from page 286.

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