

## Editor's Introduction

### Rain without Rain: Štefan Štofanič's *The Adventure of Weak Theology*



Štefan Štofanič. Friend. Colleague. Former seminarian. Father of two. These things don't even begin to describe him. Stef was a bit of a "character," as they say. I remember the days (and nights) we spent as members of the research group Theology in a Postmodern Context fondly.

The book lying before you is, in a way, Stef's intellectual testament. *The Adventure of Weak Theology*, first submitted as a doctoral dissertation and now turned into a book, seems like the best homage and honor one can do to Štefan. The book itself is remarkable. Presenting a sort of genealogy of Caputo's weak theology, it demands the reader be attentive and patient: even if at times Štofanič seems to lose track, he always reemerges with an inspiring point that sticks—only late in the book, for instance, will he tell us why Saint-Exupéry communicates for him the impossibility of inhabiting a (religious) tradition ironically, "without religion" that is (14).

My hope, sometimes, is that some of his points have inspired Caputo to write the intellectual autobiography *Hoping Against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim* (2015). There has been very little contact between Caputo and Štofanič. I remember telling him, very, very often, to get in touch with Jack and exchange ideas, even to go and meet him or at least to try to get him on the jury of the dissertation. But, for one reason or other, Stef always was reluctant to do so—even if, occasionally, yes, yes, I will do so. The reason for this, one finds within this precious book, is that he wanted to have it published before getting in touch with his "object of study"—though he would have detested this term. He'd rather sit "in a rocking chair by the fire" (225), having a sip of some Redbreast and a smoke, before sending emails to "verify or falsify the hypothesis" of the present book.

Štefan had character. As a matter of fact, I am pretty sure he only contacted Caputo once his work was completed. Caputo then wrote to Štefan that he was "positively startled" that there was a chapter called "Brother Paul." Very few of us readers of Caputo would know of this episode in Caputo's life then, and Caputo was right in saying "that I would say is

very perspicacious of you." As usual, Štefan downplayed Jack's high esteem of his work—the evidence is right there in this old Facebook conversation I had with Štefan, or: how even digital presences can spook.

Of course, Stef too had been in a seminary and had grown to love Caputo's ways in life, as they were particularly close to his own. Stef, too, had been accustomed to this "strong theology" that Caputo, sometimes desperately, seeks to expel. Stef, too, had had his troubles with the authoritarian manners of his teachers; left the seminary (but not until reading Saint-Exupéry's *Citadelle* under the covers, with a flashlight!); went to Bournemouth, England; came to Leuven; and then left the academy. Stef wanted to be a writer rather than a scholar—the quips at contemporary academia are never far off in this book, and perhaps are a bit all too sarcastic in the last chapter.

He was in Slovenia, with Polona, his girlfriend, I believe, when he finally emailed the manuscript to Caputo. I am not sure how much of the book Caputo had read then, but I can imagine his surprise. Here was a complete genealogy of his weak theology, traced back especially to his *Against Ethics*, that at times even ridicules Caputo's "coming out of the closet as a theologian." I think Caputo immediately recognized that here, in Štefan's book, was an intense personal involvement with this thought, and I think, too, that Štefan—a theologian without theology—pretty much saw Caputo for what he had always been, a theologian, but then one that is one of a kind and with the sort of personality of which Stef could say: "I particularly like this fellow."

That was the only motivation he had to write this book—he didn't want to be a scholar, nor a professor, nor did he care for a PhD all that much. Stef wanted to write. And write he did. I imagine, back in 2013, that this book was a bit of a surprise for Caputo, an event even. All of a sudden, this unknown guy from Leuven, Belgium, writing to him with what was clearly not a Belgian name, writing on "Brother Paul" no less! Štefan insisted that the form of this book should be something of an "imaginary talk" between friends by a bonfire, but it is really my hope that something in Stef's manuscript prompted Caputo to ponder the muteness of the universe a bit more thoroughly. It was only after the imaginary talk turned real, at least virtual—through a very brief email conversation—that Lyotard's concept of the "inhuman" (and the smile on the surface of an otherwise mute matter) makes an appearance in Caputo's work.

In the chapter "Dancing in the Void," Štofanič argues without really arguing—he tells a story rather—that Caputo puts all sorts of abysses on a par. Štefan had a feel for Nietzsche as much as he had a taste for the impossible. He seems to have regretted that Caputo's weak theology has a strong "orientation" (187) and that Caputo forgot that the desert about which we talk, experience, and write is in effect "more than one":

Nietzsche's dancers dance to a different song than weak theologians. It is an odd chapter, to be sure, and Štofanič does not really seem to speak his mind. Again, one will have to wait and pay attention before Štofanič tells us the real point of all these digressions toward Saint-Exupéry. Perhaps one should reread or read more carefully even.

If anything, Štofanič shows us how to read in his book. He gives us long quotes, some of which we already know, but then focuses on a turn of phrase that we have always read passed. It is a remarkably modest "deconstruction of weak theology" (78) that he sets out to do—especially in the first parts of the book; later on the desire to deconstruct seems to disappear. There are two concurring trends in the book. At first, he tries to critique and deconstruct Caputo's version of weak theology, stating that this particular version too is but one name: there might be "more than one" weak theology. Then, in a second phase, Štofanič falls victim, I think, to his own modesty and is spellbound by the "logic of the without," as perhaps we all have been and Caputo, for sure, too. At this juncture, Štofanič gets lost because of the fact that every deconstruction ends up with more things to deconstruct, so that all that is left is deconstructions over deconstructions over deconstructions . . . You can almost feel Štofanič wondering: What if what I write here is, in effect, one more deconstruction, one more story to tell? In this second phase, then, you'll see a sort of eulogy of the story, of the narrative he's composing—later on he will compare it to an opera, although he clearly preferred the sonata. I think he did get stuck here and should have contacted Caputo, not to verify or falsify the hypothesis—*à quoi bon?*—but to have a chat, light a fire, and think. Štofanič acknowledges two tendencies in Caputo. Again, this is long before weak theology appeared on the scene: on the one hand, one should "demythologize Heidegger" and put the "question of being" on a diet, so to say, without the grand story of new beginnings and old, bygone, epochs—"the story is too big and easy to debunk" (139) (although we're still trying to debunk it). On the other hand, once weak theology arrives on the scene, Štofanič notes, it is possible and even desirable for us to tell stories, to dream and imagine things differently, to perhaps sit by bonfires and listen to good ol' storytelling. Like many of us (and Caputo, too, I believe), Štofanič got tired of deconstructing.

He wanted something of an affirmation but was not yet ready, I think, for the *viens, viens, oui, oui* he singles out in Caputo's *The Weakness of God*. I am not implying he will ever have been, nor that he should have done so. I only regret his not being around for telling stories about it now, especially after Caputo's *Hoping Against Hope*. There is an affirmation in *The Adventure of Weak Theology*, though, and there is no doubt that Štofanič took the entire project of weak theology seriously, very seriously even, that is, as something real. He believed, like many of us, that the

“strong theologies” coming to us through seminaries, through Brothers Paul, through an abundance of Mass, is too strong and forgets about the fragile human condition that does not always “believe” and walks around with sticks like blind men and women. Štefan felt for the latter and had “faith” in them, more than he trusted the men of strong theology (are there any women here?). “Nobody trusts theology”: these are the first words Caputo spoke here in Leuven, and Štefan and I were present. It made a big impression on me, and I was unaware that it did on Stef, too. Yet, being educated in Leuven, we both grew wary of anything that would be without anything and, considering the “end of metaphysics,” of anything that would “underlie” anything too.<sup>1</sup> We were “dancing in the void” to be sure. Stef and I were therefore troubled by the very concept of a “religion without religion.” Once I entered a classroom, where I had to teach about Caputo’s religion without religion, soaking wet and dripping rain (it does rain a lot in Belgium, you know), and said: “The only thing you need to know about religion without religion is that it is just about as real as rain without rain.” I should have skipped the class, perhaps. Stef had pretty much the same idea: there was a lot of reverence toward the tradition—how could there not be, being stamped with it as a former seminarian—and a lot of respect for Caputo’s religion as well. This respect is obvious from the numerous times Štefan, in his second phase, tries, wants, and is willing to diverge from Caputo’s viewpoints but nonetheless solicits his author’s approval by mentioning that he had used the same methodological strategy earlier. This second phase, then, is a bit of “diverging without diverging,” if you will.

*The Adventure of Weak Theology*, even though written in 2012–2013, will stand its ground. It maps Caputo’s path to his weak theology better than anyone has done before and does not shy away from several (quite) amazing features in Caputo’s career: his early dismissal of Derrida (anyone?), his break from the “system of Heidegger” (let’s call it what it is), his quasi-privileging the tragic views of things (forgetting about a certain desert), only to opt for theology later on—you will have heard it here first.

Of particular importance is the chapter “Between Heidegger and Derrida,” in which Štefaník traces Caputo’s way from Heidegger to Derrida and mentions some awkward statements about Derrida on Caputo’s part. Were it not for Caputo (and the De Man affair), we would perhaps still be dancing in the void, reveling in this aestheticism of endless interpretations and deconstructions. But, for us, mediocre fellows and scholars, it is good to know, too, that Caputo is not all about Derrida, not just one more “Derridean,” that more than one thing is going on in this name. And, for one thing, Štefan Štefaník tells a pretty good story!

It is not just a story, though, and Štefan would be one of the first to

state that this is a very serious matter—smiling all the while though. Weak theology is serious business and Štefan took it really seriously, hoping that, in some way or another, he could be a part of it. I hope, here, with this book, his name will become inscribed in the adventure of weak theology and this book will be a further inscription in the spaces carved out by Caputo.

I dread concluding this introduction, for although it might be the first thing you read, it is probably the last thing I tell to Štefan (except for certain prayers, and tears, which I won't tell you about). I learned from Štefan not to take things too seriously. He once told me, late at night, about the typewritten letter Caputo received from Heidegger. I remember my amazement—as I was probably reading Heidegger's *Parmenides* at the moment—and regret to only have later realized that it was Stef's way of telling me not to take it too seriously. Academic business, well, is still a business. Stef and I never really talked about academic issues. As good friends, we obviously had more important things to discuss than philosophy, let alone theology.

To conclude—I do not want to conclude. Stef felt it, I feel it, and Stef communicates it, even though he wants to break free of the spell. What attracted Štefan is that Caputo's "speech," his voice (you will learn how important the voice is for Štofanić), is outside of rigid confessional boundaries. The unwarned reader, too, will notice that Stef speaks to the believer and the seeker more so than to professional theologians and academics. Qua writing, I feel that there are very few books that can compete with this.

Be that as it may. There certainly are a few flaws to be noticed in the book. However, it is not because he didn't notice or had the chance to notice Caputo's magnificent *The Insistence of God* or noted the importance of this theology, perhaps; it is, rather, that Štefan didn't notice the depth (If any—I am serious. And awaiting Stef's response.) of Caputo's yes—of Caputo's affirmation.

First of all, Štefan was wrong when he says that there are no saints in weak theology. He is, struck by "strong theology," adhering to the canon of saints of the traditions, and blind to those saints that don't get the light of (a rainy) day—Štefan forgot that there is light, even on a rainy day. Caputo is keen in *Hoping Against Hope* to tell us the story of these little souls and little saints, who insist that God exists through their very own practices. There's a bunch of them, Stef, and more than you knew. Second, I think Stef was oblivious to the breadth, and there is one, of Caputo's affirmation, of the yes. For Caputo, one needs the rainy days in order to tell what a sunny day is: after all, we only know that it is life that is important through the very possibility of death. Without the latter, the former would be but a life of an object, of little or no importance. It is

finitude that makes the days of our lives, rainy or sunny, important and meaningful. It is because of this *peras*, these limits, that all of our dreams are limitless. You need to say yes, my friend. There are rainy days, there are sunny days, and even if you can't have both at the same time, you can't have the one without the other. So, when Caputo says things like: "what I am getting at [. . .] under the name of the rose [under the name, Stef, there's a place under the sun for everyone], of the religion of the rose is a certain uncertain religion, whereas 'beliefs' are more likely movable furniture. Life is more like jogging than driving to work; the joy is in the journeying, not getting to the terminal destination," I just wish Štefan had taken it a bit more seriously, read more carefully—it is the first thing we should realize, admit to, the first yes.<sup>2</sup>

Even if "weak theology" or "religion without religion" is but a dream, I think Štefan, somehow, may have forgotten this: it is better to dream and not to forget, than to forget how to dream.

My dear friend Štefan, Stef, let me address you in the fraternal moment you touch late in your book (because you like "that fellow"): I salute you and smile at you, wherever you are, and conclude with the song you once sang to me in the middle of an abandoned parking lot somewhere in Czechia, on your way home: *Shine on, you crazy diamond*.

—JOERI SCHRIJVERS