

Proposal 7

Risking Idolatry? Theopoetics and the Promise of Embodiment

John Caputo recently remarked that deconstructionism has not taken hold in the church as he had hoped. The “good news of postmodernism,” which is the subtitle of his *What Would Jesus Deconstruct*, is not generating the kind of buzz that a gospel should. Is this perhaps because deconstruction is unable to fully embody an alternative, life-giving picture to traditional ways of theologizing? Poetics, etymologically, is about the creation of something new. Despite its ability to break apart ossified ground in order to open up fertile earth for new possibilities, is deconstructionism unable to provide the newness which the church seeks? Theopoet Rubem Alves contends that the truly new can never be born out of a negation of the old. He writes: “The people of God [are] an essentially positive reality. [Their] action is creation and never reaction.” Alves defines this creation as the embodiment of God’s desires for the future of the world. Practically, humans participate in making God’s future—which is also our own future—present.

This paper will suggest, with Alves, that we do not simply prepare the way for God’s promised future, proclaim, or merely hope for its coming. Instead, we make (or fail to make) God bodily present to our fellow human beings and to creation as a whole. To answer this calling means practicing Luther’s imperative to ‘sin boldly’ in pursuit of justice (hence deliberately “risking idolatry,” perhaps the greatest offense for the postmodern academic). For Alves, God desire to become bodily and relies upon our response. He writes that God would answer the question “What do you want to be?” by saying: “But you still don’t know? Haven’t I told you? I told you and you didn’t listen. I want to be Jesus of Nazareth. I am Jesus of Nazareth. I am an ordinary man. I am all ordinary people. There is nothing better than to be a man, a woman, a child.” Yet, instead of further fleshing out God’s humanity, we have devalued our own, abdicating our responsibility to embody God’s desires.

The topic of this paper is meant to coincide with Kevin Hector’s *Theology Without Metaphysics* (Cambridge, 2011), scheduled for review by the Philosophy of Religion section at the 2012 AAR annual meeting. Hector asks whether all language about God is inherently metaphysical, violent, and ultimately idolatrous. Does our inter-subjective communication, an implicit part of our corporeality, necessarily violate the divine? Hector then seeks to perform a Wittgensteinian therapy whereby, instead of deconstructing the metaphysical framework, he paints an alternative picture. Alves, through theopoetics, employs a similar therapeutic method; he creates an alternative way of speaking about God without binding himself to the reigning paradigms through negation. This paper will explore the overlap between Alves’ and Hector’s approaches and contend that in seeking to make God present (already a step too far for deconstructionism) we are called to risk idolatry for the sake of embodiment.