

MM Blue Sheet — A book summary by Art Morgan

John Caputo – WHAT WOULD JESUS DEconstruct?

Jean bought me this book to read before the annual Turner Lectures that I attend in Yakima. I read it on our 60th Anniversary trip around the Pacific Northwest. Romantic? I had never heard of Caputo but the preface writer described him as *“the most comprehensible philosopher I have come across—and not just clear, but downright entertaining.”* To use the term “comprehensible” with a philosopher is a first rate oxymoron. But it gave me hope as our tour moved toward Yakima.

I wrote the book comments before hearing the lectures, but should comment that many of us had great difficulty hearing whether or not the lecturer was comprehensible. I don’t know whether it was his fault, the sound system’s fault, or our faulty hearing aids. (You should have seen the row of geezers up front trying to catch what everyone was laughing about).

The listeners and readers have to get used to the term “DEconstruction.” On the third day some were thinking that the speaker was talking about *destruction*. In some ways the kind of *construction* Caputo talks about requires destruction. What are you to think when Caputo says: **“So if we ask, ‘What would Jesus deconstruct?’ the answer is first and foremost—the church!”** (p. 38) Preachers tremble others “amen!”

In this book, and sometimes in his lectures, Caputo refers to an old classic by John Sheldon called “In His Steps.” This book is source for the WWJD movement—***What Would Jesus Do?*** Caputo takes the question seriously, especially with respect to where Jesus stands with the poor and marginalized of all sorts.

Caputo sees Right Wing political and religious groups claiming a Jesus who would not claim them. They would be DEconstructed. Not that the liberal or any other religious institutions that make their livelihood out of use of Jesus are exempt. He points out that establishment of a religion or church was far from Jesus’ mind. He dreamed of a kingdom in which God’s way would shape human interaction. Caputo spells it out this way:

“The most Jesus-inspired thing to do today, in my opinion, is to translate the gospel’s commitment to the poor into an effective public policy that would actually implement an evangelical imperative, to come to the aid of the weakest and most defenseless people in society, above all the children...If Jesus ever said ‘My money is mine, I worked hard for it and want to keep it for myself and there are other things I would rather spend it on than those Samaritans,’ we have lost our manuscript..” (p.93)

Whether you are a bible-believing Christian or not, taking the actual teachings of Jesus seriously and applying them is a dangerous thing. A politician who proposes a Jesus-based political priority that leans toward the weak and the poor rather than the wealthy and strong can never be elected. A church that makes feeding the hungry, helping addicts of all sorts, offering clothing and shelter to those who need it will find its members objecting and leaving. Ministers in such churches have short ministries, with rare exceptions. It’s dangerous to take Jesus seriously. What would Jesus DEconstruct? All political, social, economic and religious systems that claim a morality of virtue but do not practice it and share it with all.

The book deserves discussion by clergy and serious lay people. It could be the basis for dialogue among churches. WWJD? It’s a difficult question to answer with clarity since we know so little about Jesus and how what happened 2000 years ago matters now. My sense is that there is an everlasting authenticity in the many, many teachings of Jesus that challenge the practices that result in the triumph of greed and wealth and power over the need of so many for their daily bread, health care, shelter and human dignity. In fact, people who don’t consider themselves religious, or the Bible meaningful, would agree with Caputo, himself a secular philosopher and not a theologian, that what people do as “Christians” is not what Jesus would do.

— Art Morgan October 14, 2011