

## **‘Perhaps - the art of post-secular spiritual care?’**

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### **Introduction**

I should put my cards on the table at the outset and confess. I am neither a theologian nor a philosopher and I don't believe in the existence of God.

I do have a PhD but it's in Visual Art and it was completed at an obscure University in the Australian outback. I have one published book, but it's a memoir, written for a general audience (albeit one that's interested in death and dying) called *I Am Here: Stories from a Cancer Ward*<sup>1</sup>.

The book is about what happened after I turned my back on academia in 2011, resigning from a tenured lecturer position at the same obscure university in the Australian outback and retraining as a secular pastoral care worker in a cancer hospital in Melbourne Australia, where I worked for three years.

The reason for returning at my ripe age, to study at VU is that my Australian Clinical Pastoral Care qualifications are not recognised here and I need a Masters in Theology in order to practice as, what is known in the Netherlands, a **geestelijk verzorger**.

‘Geestelijk verzorger’ can be loosely and somewhat unsatisfactorily translated into English as ‘spiritual carer’. But the word ‘geest’ (Geist in German) as well as meaning ghost and spirit, also means ‘mind’ or ‘psyche’- and just to confuse things, ‘geestig’ can be ‘funny’ or ‘humorous’ and a ‘geestelijke’, a cleric or

clergyman. In addition what is known in the English language as the Humanities is, or at least was traditionally, known in Dutch as 'geesteswetenschappen' and 'wetenschap' contains both the idea of a body of knowledge and the practice of a science. 'Geesteswetenschappen' is thus somehow beyond the binary of humanities vs science.

I mention this because I think it's useful to step outside of binaries, whether you think of the work you do as pastoral work, spiritual care, geestelijke verzorging - or whether none of those terms really cover it.

### **What is spiritual care (= 'geestelijke verzorging')?**

The professional association to which most 'geestelijk verzorgers'<sup>2</sup> in The Netherlands belong, the VGVZ, produces a comprehensive professional standards document in which the work of a 'geestelijk verzorger' is described as "begeleiding, hulpverlening en advisering bij zinsgeving en levensbeschouwing."

<sup>3</sup> I lack the space here for a full consideration of the exact equivalent of those words in English but obviously, help and advice but also 'begeleiding', a word which alludes to 'leading' and 'direction' and can be a euphemism for 'supervision' but really, in its most positive sense, it alludes to the idea of walking alongside someone who may be unsure and being there if they need you - but without them losing their agency or being subject to a power relationship.

'Levensbeschouwing' may be translated as 'life stance' but this doesn't have anything like the currency of the Dutch word. The German 'Weltanschauung' is probably more widely known in English, although it is not often used in everyday conversation as 'levensbeschouwing' is in Dutch. 'Zingeving' is the making or giving of meaning - but also in the sense of 'purpose' and 'joie de vivre', as in 'zin in het leven'.

## The problem of 'spirituality'.

'Spirituality' (spritualiteit) is but one of four dimensions of 'levensbeschouwing en zingeving' in the work of a geestelijk verzorger that are identified in the document. The others are: existential, ethical and aesthetic. The fourth dimension of aesthetics is a recent addition (2015). It was not present in the 2002 version of the Beroepsstandaard document. It was added because of *"the importance that many people find in beauty in nature and culture in relation to experiencing meaning and well being, sometimes exactly when rationality no longer offers any answers. Geestelijk verzorgers do a lot of work with art, poetry and music."*<sup>4</sup>(my translation)

My work in Theology had barely scratched the surface when I encountered the name of John D. Caputo in a Hermeneutics 1 class where the idea of 'a religion without religion', and his connection with the work of Jacques Derrida was almost casually mentioned by the lecturer. I have some familiarity with Derrida through my work in art theory and I was immediately intrigued by the possibilities that a poststructuralist approach to theology could afford, and how the deconstruction of 'geestelijke verzorging', particularly in the context of the problem represented by secular (or as I am inclined to think of it now, *post-secular*) geestelijke verzorging.

Ever since I began this work I have been interested in a double sided question: *What kind of pastoral care can an agnostic or an atheist offer a person who is dying, be they religious or not?* and this is a question I consider in my book. My project now is a broader one and, I believe, even more urgent : *What kind of spiritual care can we offer to an atheist?*

What kind of geestelijke verzorging or spiritual care is appropriate for a nihilist, a

materialist, an existentialist - a radical, not to say rabid, anti-theist like, let's say Richard Dawkins, vehemently anti everything that is not verifiable and falsifiable. Many times I have been sent away by a dying patient when I presented myself at their bedside as a pastoral worker before I had a chance to tell them that, I too am a non-believer in the existence of God or gods.

*Writing in the 1980s, in a series of letters, Antonio Negri characterises the painful transition from revolutionary hopes to defeat by a triumphalist neoliberalism: "We have to live and suffer the defeat of truth, of our truth. We have to destroy its representation, its continuity, its memory, its trace. All subterfuges for avoiding the recognition that reality has changed, and with it truth, have to be rejected ... The very blood in our veins had been replaced." <sup>5</sup>*

Interestingly, this is similar to how I experience John D. Caputo's thoughts about religion - and how I might think, at least in my darker moments, about my disillusionment with art. You might say, like Chris Kraus in *I Love Dick*, that "Art, like God or The People, is fine for as long as you can believe in it." <sup>6</sup> but when you no longer do, what then? What is there? And this is why I was very interested in the fact that aesthetics, albeit in a very limited, one might even say myopic, way is included in the Dutch professional standards document for geestelijk verzorgers.

As someone without a faith community or a religious tradition, at least not in the traditional sense, and coming to the work of spiritual care after 25 years of art practice and research, and teaching in art schools, art for a long time sustained me and/or provided something to push against. Even though I haven't practised as an artist for more than ten years I approach my work with people (and my own life, such as it is) as a practice, or praxis, not unlike like the making of an artwork. And for some, art can indeed be a source of consolation. For W.G. Sebald, "The consolation of art consists of being able to reach, in an

artwork, at least when it's successful, an ephemeral, self-regulating equilibrium.”

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Indeed language, narrative, space and elements of music, rhythm, tone, timbre and silence are indeed crucially important in working with people who are sad, who are afraid to die, who are in mourning - and those experiencing an existential crisis, those who are suffering from the Lyotardian nihilism Caputo describes in his autobiography.<sup>8</sup>

### **A matter of grace**

Not being a believer in God or gods, and not having been brought up with or educated in a religious tradition, I was unfamiliar with the concept of ‘grace’ which is called forth with regularity in his book by Caputo. Grace (which the OED translates as “the free and unmerited favour of God, as manifested in the salvation of sinners and the bestowal of blessings”<sup>9</sup>, it is perhaps best understood as the best of gifts, something which comes unasked for, but more like a calling - or insistence, as Caputo has it.

Like art, grace is something which, when you get it, makes you wonder how you ever did without. And, in the naming of it, it is made real perhaps - or at least more real that it was before. And from quantum theory we learn that what is real, what exists and what does not, is more like a continuum than a binary - where nothing exists wholly and forever at either extremity.

Naming something, like measuring a particle, is like moving it a little closer towards one or the other end of this continuum. Some names are more invested with meaning than others, have become so laden with meaning that they topple. Perhaps ‘love’ is such a name, and ‘God’, and ‘spirituality’, and ‘truth’. Such a

name or word can create a negative space, a hole, emptying an event of meaning. A gift, like grace, can become distorted when it is connected with the idea that 'the favour of God' is being bestowed upon you - and that you're special.

Yet as a non-religious person I understand the concept of grace as a gift, and there is gratitude - but I think of it as a gift of the ten to the power of five hundred universes and the eleven dimensions about which the quantum theorists speculate. But oh lord we want to believe ourselves special and in this we are so human but we are also much more than humans. And perhaps to think of ourselves and what we are, as humans is actually sadly reductive. And

As Caputo puts it:

*The new cosmology is taking our breath away with speculative leaps that have opened up a cosmological "perhaps" that has stolen philosophy's thunder (which is wonder). It has rendered obsolete the old pre-Copernican mythopoetics to which theology has too long been wedded and shaken our most basic presuppositions about "human" and "life" and "matter", exposing them to a "perhaps" we never imagined.<sup>10</sup>*

## **Perhaps**

What I want to pick up on is the idea of 'perhaps'. Perhaps the idea of 'perhaps', in the way that John D. Caputo outlines it, could enable a spiritual worker <sup>11</sup> with "the courage of an eerie non-conviction" <sup>12</sup> to console a person in the midst of despair with "the possibility of the impossibility that inheres in still and small things." <sup>13</sup>

Could 'Perhaps' "serve as a dim but guiding light, a slightly anarchic quasi-principle, a principle without principle, whose flickering lead we are asked to follow with fear and trembling." <sup>14</sup>

But what is it that 'perhaps' makes possible? What does "perhaps" do?' Caputo asks:

*"Perhaps" does not do anything. It does not pray or weep; it does not desire anything, or give anything. It doesn't give a damn.(...) "Perhaps" does not take place - but it is what makes it possible for what exists, to take place — or to lose its place.*" <sup>15</sup>

What could a spiritual worker do...? Perhaps it is the naming of the 'perhaps', to *insist* on it being named. Because it is in what is made possible, perhaps, the gift, the grace even that could be facilitated with that simple word, 'perhaps'.

And then *perhaps* a new kind of spirituality becomes possible. One that we will not call spirituality, because it is a hackneyed phrase and we are done with clichés. *Perhaps* we do not need such a word anymore. *Perhaps* there are other, better words which have not lost their meaning.

*Everything is possible*, was the title of one of my art works when I was an artist. I am not an artist anymore, I turned my back on that world but now, in my incredulity, I can complete the work, by adding a comma and a word. *Everything is possible, perhaps*.

This is what I think Caputo means by the *insistence* of God, and for that, believing in his existence is not a prerequisite, indeed it may even be an obstacle.

For this is the ephemeral, the indefinable, the unknowable yet ineluctable unconditional, the *mysterium tremendum* that every artist aims for and if you are successful, you can make that happen in your work - but it is rare, and often brief.

And what matters in art and literature, matters equally (or actually infinitely more so) when working with people, in need of someone to walk along with them a little way, in the work that we will have to call, for now, spiritual work.

Here, as in art, everything here depends on your intention and the results can (and do) vary. Again, what matters here, more even than with art, is the audience's experience. And thus of ultimate concern are ethics: transparency, respect, and a radical empathy.

*What could a spiritual worker do?*

A spiritual worker may perhaps, even be able to console a person by appropriating the words of a sermon by Tillich, for example, with the insertion of a few instances of 'perhaps':

*Perhaps you are accepted. Perhaps you are accepted by that which is greater than you - and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept that perhaps you are accepted!*<sup>16</sup>

\* I removed "the fact" from the last sentence and replaced it with 'perhaps' as well as adding 'perhaps' at the beginning of each of the first two sentences. All of a sudden it changes. All of a sudden it becomes something that you can say,

and something that you can believe in, perhaps.

### **Conclusion and an apology**

On all of what 'perhaps' could make possible we can but speculate... Caputo quotes Derrida from *The Politics of Friendship*.

*"What is going to come, perhaps, is not only this or that; it is at last the thought of the perhaps, the perhaps itself ... the arrivant could also be the perhaps itself, the unheard-of, totally new experience of the perhaps. Unheard-of, totally new, that very experience which no metaphysician might yet have dared to think."*<sup>17</sup>

In closing, I apologise to the distinguished academics present for what is, at best, a bricolage. I can't even use the excuse that I employed when I was an academic, *I'm an artist!* anymore. But then I am not arguing a position, this is not a series of assertions or hypotheses, rationally argued in a proper sequence and backed up with appropriate evidence and references. It is, perhaps, a poem, a fragment of cosmo-theopoetics, light as a feather, which, having been released perhaps may float, and perhaps touch someone or something.

Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> Scribe UK and Australia. 2016.

<sup>2</sup> A note on Dutch terms: I have mostly left the term 'geestelijk verzorger' untranslated because there is no exact English equivalent. For similar reasons I frequently use the Dutch terms 'zinsgeving' (lit. giving meaning) and 'levensbeschouwing'.

<sup>3</sup> VGVZ - Beroepsstandaard geestelijk verzorger. 2015. p.10

<sup>4</sup> "Het belang dat veel mensen toekennen aan schoonheid in natuur en cultuur in relatie tot zinbeleving en welzijn, soms juist wanneer de ratio geen antwoorden meer biedt. Geestelijk verzorgers werken veel met kunst poëzie en muziek." (ibid) p38

<sup>5</sup> Mark Fisher. The Privatisation Of Stress. Soundings #48.

[http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article\\_comments/the\\_privatisation\\_of\\_stress](http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/the_privatisation_of_stress) Accessed 17.10.17

<sup>6</sup> Chris Kraus. I Love Dick. Semiotext(e). Los Angeles.

<sup>7</sup> Piet de Moor. Interview with W.G.Se bald. Knack Magazine 1992. 'Het troostende van kunst bestaat erin, dat je in een kunstwerk, tenminste als het gelukt is, een vluchtig, zichzelf regulerend evenwicht bereiken kunt. Dat is het mooie van kunstwerken, waaruit de tijd verdwenen is.' (my translation)

<sup>8</sup> Caputo, John D.. Hoping Against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim (Fortress Press).

<sup>9</sup> Stevenson, Angus. Oxford Dictionary of English (Kindle Locations 250984–250985). Oxford University Press - A. Kindle Edition.

<sup>10</sup> Caputo – insistence p22

<sup>11</sup> I prefer 'worker' to 'carer', since this is work and it must be done together, with another. It is relational, it is a collaboration. It takes time and effort and it requires courage. It is the work that expresses the care, it is *in the work* that we articulate the caring but it is a caring that is bigger than an individual. It is in a way like friendship, but it is not the relationship of friends, which is reciprocal. A spiritual worker asks for nothing in return.

<sup>12</sup> Caputo – Caputo, John D. The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps. Indiana University Press. p14

<sup>13</sup> ibid p13

<sup>14</sup> ibid p18

<sup>15</sup> ibid p16

<sup>16</sup> Paul Tillich. The Shaking of the Foundations. New York: Scribner, 1948. p.153

<sup>17</sup> Jacques Derrida, Politics of Friendship. New York: Verso, 2006. p.29 quoted by Caputo, John D. The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps. Indiana University Press. p264