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HOW TO AVOID THE GOD WHO CHOOSES: DENIALS

> *What makes us tremble in the mysterium tremendum?...knowing all along that it is God who decides: the Other has no reason to give to us and no explanation to make, no reason to share his reasons with us.*[1]

—Jacques Derrida, *Gift of Death*

> *One day I would have to stop deferring, one day I would have to try to explain myself directly on this subject.*[2]

—Jacques Derrida, *How to Avoid Speaking: Denials*

In an essay entitled "'Chosen by Grace': Reconsidering the Doctrine of Predestination," Margrit Ernst-Habib critically engages the theological notion of divine choosing and asks: "Why should a feminist theologian be interested in this subject? Why should a feminist theologian…spend time and energy re-discovering this doctrine, which seems to work against some of her core concerns? Why not deposit it on the dumping ground of those theological doctrines that have proved to be destructive not only for women but for all people who do not fit into the definition of the 'chosen race' because of their gender, race, class, or sexual orientation?"[3] While Ernst-Habib does in fact go on to make a case for retrieving a doctrine of divine election as a resource for "reassurance and empowerment for the marginalized,"[4] for the most part I think her initial, rhetorical question has actually been answered—contemporary theologians (not just feminists) have deposited a notion of divine choosing on the dumping ground, and for good reason. Divine choosing has been destructive, precisely because it is exclusive; and in the wake of modernity, theologians and scholars of religion have reckoned with the problem of exclusivity and attempted to reconceive, if not purge, the exclusive elements of religion.

Given the fact that exclusion is such a primary concern—for which the goal is to remove and/or limit Christianity's exclusive elements—a notion of divine choosing, with its explicit form of exclusion, is often avoided, again for good reason. But how do we avoid—or more precisely can we avoid—the pitfalls

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[1] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death, Second Edition & Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills, 2 edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2007), 57.
[2] Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold G Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 82.
[3] Margit Ernst-Habib, "'Chosen by Grace': Reconsidering the Doctrine of Predestination," in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 80.
[4] Ibid., 81.

associated with a theological notion of divine choosing? Can we avoid that which leads us to avoid divine choice? In this article, I want to take a trip to the dumping ground, dust off this antiquated notion, uncrumple the paper that it was once written on, and just take another peek. Perhaps the motivation is similar to the character who slowly creeps up to the villain that was just shot multiple times, to ensure that he is actually dead. My goal is not to attempt to recover a notion of divine choice or make some sort of a pitch for it. It is more of a Derridean instinct to go to the trash-bin and see what turns up, an irresistible desire to take a second look at what has been discarded and why. In so doing, I discovered that what was seemingly discarded is the very thing we cannot escape; what appeared dead at first glance is very much alive and well in an even more insidious manner. More specifically, the desire for avoiding divine choice is predicated on an attempt to remedy a problem, which reveals itself to be unavoidable in the remedy itself. Merely tearing out and crumpling up the theological page on which divine choice was written, violently tossing it in the bin, perhaps even setting it on fire in some sort of ritualistic pyre to cleanse religion of this reprehensible claim, does not solve it, or the problems associated with it, once for all. There is no moving beyond, excluding, *avoiding* it. In fact, the move toward a pure remedy or solution might be the very thing that keeps the problem(s) alive. Such a move only replays the dynamic; it does not—because it cannot—escape the problem, and therefore the move to avoid divine choice carries with it theo-ethical issues of its own that need to be reckoned with, including a certain kind of inescapability to purge theology of an identified problem, an inability to offer a remedy without poison.

This article seeks to explore the issues that arise with the attempt to remedy or avoid the problem of exclusive divine choice, where the underlying motivation for such is the affirmation of divine choice as thoroughly problematic. It will identify how avoiding a theology of divine choosing is predicated on an attempt to remedy a double-edged problem of exclusivity and human mastery over divinity. However, avoiding divine choice in an attempt to remedy this double-edged problem which it entails, such theologies do not—and cannot—in fact, escape certain forms of that double-edged problem. The goal of such an enterprise is to demonstrate how the problem is more complex, and thus more problematic, than it initially appears. It is something that should make us tremble. "Knowing all along that it is God who decides," as Derrida admits, is something that rightly "makes us tremble," and this article is an attempt to recover a healthier sense of fear with regard to the issue of divine choice, such that we do not rest easy thinking we have safely avoided it or the issues surrounding it.[5]

If and when the remedy to the problem of divine choice is that the theologian chooses the kind of God who chooses (or not), or the content of such a choice, then said remedy is trafficking in the very thing it has attempted to avoid or remedy. The theologian who avoids or excludes divine choice must reckon with the notion that any remedy to (exclusive) divine choice necessarily entails a form of (exclusive) human choice—by being the one who chooses to exclude such a possibility—thus reducing God to an object of human choice, and trafficking in a version of what he/she has tried to avoid or remedy. Additionally, for those with a theological commitment to a divine reality beyond, apart from, or at least not beholden to the control of the human being, such a move reduces God to nothing more than human theological ideas, language, concepts. Even if one does not share a commitment to such a

[5] Derrida, *The Gift of Death,* 57.

divine reality—i.e. whose concern is not (or never was) to maintain a notion of a divine reality beyond theological language and concepts—there might still be an expressed ethical concern about human mastery over divinity, wherein it is the human who can declare who/what God is/does, even if those ends appear ethical at first glance. If there is any concern about human mastery over divine mystery—as "when an embodied creaturely reality identifies itself with and so presumes to grasp and control an infinite mystery"[6]—then the theologian who tries to avoid a notion of divine choice must also recognize that in said remedy God has been reduced to an object of human mastery, a God of their choosing. In so doing, one would fall prey to John D. Caputo's critique of a "strong theology" that "belongs to the sovereign order of power and presence," wherein God becomes "something I have added to my repertoire, brought within the horizon of my experience, knowledge, belief, identification, and expectation."[7] A more thorough analysis of the problem of divine choice deconstructs any remedy, revealing an aporetic double-bind, and the rupture of the impossible necessity, and necessary impossibility. Critically engaging the problem of divine choice is therefore needed in order for Christian theology to be more rigorous and transparent about identifying and engaging the depth of the problem, in all its complexity and thorniness.

HERESY OF A DIFFERENT KIND

For the sake of clarification, I want to draw attention to the fact that the issue I am raising here about human theological choice is one that has been continually addressed throughout the history of Christian theology, particularly in the premodern orthodoxy/heresy debates. Yet, at the same time, I want to clearly distinguish how my argument differs. From early Christian authors such as Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyons, and Tertullian who wrote against heretics and heresies, to the conciliar and doctrinal debates in the fourth and fifth centuries and beyond, Christianity has repeatedly attempted to define and defend "orthodoxy" over and against "heresy."[8] As Clayton Crockett points out, given that "the etymology of heresy can be traced to the Greek word *hairesis*, which means to choose…the implication is such that choice is in itself wrong and to be condemned."[9] In other words, defense of orthodoxy was predicated on a notion that the problem was with choice itself, i.e. with any human, theological choice. Since it was believed by orthodox theologians that the truth of Christianity was revealed, and thus established and confirmed beyond human control in an absolute sense, any picking and choosing on the part of the human theologian would always amount to error and lead to untruth. As Crockett argues, the conclusion was: "I choose and therefore I am a heretic. I choose and it's necessarily the wrong choice…because the problem is with choice itself, the

[6] Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller, eds., *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 4.
[7] John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 9-10.
[8] See: Ignatius and T. W Crafer, *The epistles of St. Ignatius*, Texts for students (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1919); Irenaeus, *The third book of St. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, against heresies* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874); Tertullian and T. Herbert Bindley, *Tertullian On the Testimony of the Soul and On the "Prescription" of Heretics*, Early Church Classics (London, New York: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1914).
[9] Clayton Crockett, "Polyhairesis: On Postmodern and Chinese Folds," *Modern Theology* 30, no. 3 (July 2014): 34.

presumption that one could choose."[10] Similarly, Justo González highlights how early Christian theologians like Tertullian (and subsequent generations of theologians who mounted the accusation of heresy) believed that "once one had found the truth of Christianity, one should abandon any further search for truth," which includes further human speculation. González quotes Tertullian's "Prescription Against Heretics": "You are to seek until you find, and once you have found, you are to believe. Thereafter, all you have to do is to hold to what you have believed. Besides this, you are to believe that there is nothing further to be believed, nor anything else to be sought."[11] For Tertullian, philosophical inquiry, based on human logic and reasoning, was the most dangerous of all speculation; because God has revealed "the truth," any human speculation, or picking and choosing, would only amount to merely human projections and be led astray from the truth of divine revelation.

Although my own inquiry in this article shares a similarity with theologians who define orthodoxy over against heresy—in terms of highlighting the theological problem of human choice—there is certainly a clear point of departure in the goal and motivation for such. As is well-known, "the habit of producing heretics as outer boundary markers for orthodox identity…exposes a repressive evasion of evident Christian complexity."[12] In other words, the pursuit of orthodoxy has rejected or excluded, often violently, any alternative, defining itself in relation to (the) Other/s, and thus repressed an inescapable complexity that has always been part of the Christian tradition. My goal, however, is precisely the opposite: to expose a greater complexity within Christian theology, revealing the limitations of any proposed answer or solution to the problem of divine choice. Thus, while the locus of problematic human theological choice is similar, the goal could not be more different. In fact, part of what I intend to show is the way in which the critique of orthodoxy—as a totalizing discourse that operates on a power dynamic, embedded within a logic of the One,[13] with excluding tendencies[14]—emerges from a theological location that is also nervous about human choice, control, and mastery over divinity. In other words, I will argue that the problem of human theological choice, which is what drove the orthodox theologians to define heresy, is something that the progressive theologian—who critiques orthodox theologians for defining heretics—also believes to be problematic. Moreover, the remedy to the problem of exclusive divine choice cannot escape navigating some form of exclusive human theological choice, which is precisely what it defines as problematic and has attempted to remedy. Therefore, in direct contrast to any attempt at presenting an "orthodox" theological position in this article (in contrast to a "heretical" one) I aim to expose a greater complexity to the problem of divine/human choice, an impossibility and inescapability revealing no adequate, final, definitive solution or answer for the theologian who attempts to remedy it. In so doing, it will destabilize any orthodox position or stance with regard to the problem, even as we gain a clearer picture of it. A clearer understanding of the problem of divine/human choice is not intended to

[10] Ibid., 35.
[11] Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity, Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 75.
[12] Catherine Keller and Laurel Schneider, eds., *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 2.
[13] See: Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2008).
[14] See: Margaret R. Miles, *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 65–114.

render the problem unproblematic, nor to make a case *for* exclusion or any kind of exclusive divine/human choice, but to raise the stakes about just how problematic they are by revealing the limits of any attempt to remedy the problem(s).

AVOIDING DIVINE CHOICE TO REMEDY EXCLUSIVITY AND HUMAN MASTERY OVER DIVINITY

As I have intonated, contemporary remedies to the problem of divine choice are predicated on an identification of exclusivity as the problem. In one of the landmark works in the dawning of modern theology, Immanuel Kant zeroes in on the problem of exclusivity in religion: "far from establishing an age suited to the achievement of the *church universal*…Judaism rather excluded the whole human race from its communion, a people especially chosen by Jehovah himself, hostile to all other peoples and hence treated with hostility by all of them."[15] For Kant, it is the Jewish theological notion of chosenness that is problematic for a modern, universal religion because of the former's inherent exclusivity. Of course, for Kant, the universal religion within the bounds of reason that he envisions is indeed Christianity, as we can only "begin the universal history of the Church…from the origin of Christianity, which, as a total abandonment of the Judaism in which it originated, grounded on an entirely new principle, effected a total revolution in doctrines of faith."[16] Apart from the glaring Christian supersessionism and disturbing anti-Semitism, Kant's point about the problematic nature of exclusivity in religion has been almost universally accepted and confirmed in modern (and "postmodern") Christian theologies.[17] A thoroughly modern, universal religion must begin with a "total abandonment" of exclusive doctrines and dogmas, and because divine choosing represents the problem *par excellence*, it should be one of the first to go.[18]

In the wake of modernity, a sustained analysis and critique of religion's problematic exclusivity has continued, across various theological discourses, even if the goal is no longer to establish a "universal religion." Even when we have come to recognize the limits of any kind of Kantian, Hegelian, and/or modern notion of universality, there is a still an acute concern about vestiges of exclusivity; in fact, more recent discourses are keen to point out the inherent exclusivity of modern universality itself, highlighting "how modernity's internal dynamics and factors operate 'discursive[ly to exclude].'"[19] From an ethical perspective, exclusion "names what permeates a

[15] Immanuel Kant, "Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason," in *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. Allen W Wood, trans. George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 155.
[16] Ibid., 156.
[17] For an in-depth analysis of a pernicious and recurring anti-Semitism at work in modern Christian theologies, especially as a reaction to the exclusivity of Judaism, see: Chris Boesel, *Risking Proclamation, Respecting Difference: Christian Faith, Imperialistic Discourse, and Abraham* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008). For an in-depth analysis of a pernicious and recurring anti-Semitism at work in modernity more broadly (beginning with Kant), and its wide-spreading racial implications, see: J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[18] For Kant, this would also include an abandonment of all doctrines and dogmas that necessarily conflict with practical reason and human freedom.
[19] J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 45.

good many of sins we commit against our neighbors"[20] and thus the focus has been on the "struggle to do away with faith structures of exclusion" that continue to privilege white, male, Western, Euro-centric, anthropocentric images, symbols, and perspectives to the exclusion of all others.[21] Contemporary theologians have also critically examined the preeminent instantiation of Christian exclusivity, namely Christo-centric claims about Christ as the exclusive path to salvation. Such "conservative exclusivistic claims for 'one and only'" no longer seem tenable given the reality of, and growing appreciation for, present-day religious pluralism.[22] As Martin Hägglund puts it, the consensus seems to be that "'good' religion…welcomes others and 'bad' religion…excludes," and thus the focus should be on avoiding or remedying exclusion as much as possible.[23]

However contemporary remedies to the problem of exclusive divine choice, as found in the Christian theological tradition, that amount to a situation wherein the theologian chooses, more wisely, reasonably, and, often, in a way that seems less exclusive, cannot avoid certain forms of a double-edged problem of exclusion and human mastery over divine mystery that is the very motivation for avoiding divine choice in the first place. The task that I have set out before us is to highlight precisely how or why they cannot, drawing out the implications and issues that arise if/when divine choice—and perhaps even God more generally—is reduced to (nothing more than) an object of human choice. More importantly, because the move to remedy divine choice runs up against other expressed concerns within the very same corner of theological discourse, a sharper analysis of the attempted remedy to divine choice reveals a predicament wherein the theologian will need to discern between two versions of the same problem, as opposed to a clear identification of the problem (of divine choice) with a clear solution. Taking a lead from Chris Boesel, I am framing the goal of this engagement as an attempt to "get some clarity on the complexity of the limits" of attempts to remedy the problem of divine choice, "such that our decisions…become more informed, more responsible, and more difficult."[24] A more thorough exploration of the problem of divine choice reveals that all we are left with, as I will argue, is a poisonous remedy, an illustration of Derrida's *pharmakon*, "that dangerous supplement that breaks into the very thing that would have liked to do without it."[25]

It is quite fitting then, that the focus of my analysis will be poststructuralist engagements with Christian theology, especially the former's attraction to the apophatic or negative theological tradition. Within such theo-ethical engagements with poststructuralism, one finds an acute concern about

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[20] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 72.
[21] Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 65-66.
[22] S. Mark Heim, "Differential Pluralism and Trinitarian Theologies of Religion," in *Divine Multiplicity: Trinities, Diversities, and the Nature of Relation*, eds. Chris Boesel and S. Wesley Ariarajah (New York: Fordham, 2014), 122.
[23] Martin Hägglund, "The Radical Evil of Deconstruction: A Reply to John Caputo," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 127.
[24] Chris Boesel, "Divine Relationality and (the Methodological Constraints of) the Gospel as Piece of News: Tracing the Limits of Trinitarian Ethics," in *Divine Multiplicity: Trinities, Diversities, and the Nature of Relation*, eds. Chris Boesel and S. Wesley Ariarajah (New York: Fordham, 2014), 257.
[25] Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (University of Chicago Press, 1983), 110.

human mastery over divinity. In the opening pages of *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, the issue at hand is sketched quite clearly. Recounting the danger of too firm a relationship between human language, concepts, ideas and the divine, the editors of this volume write:

> This problem arises when the difference and distance between divine and creaturely reality is not big or radical enough; when creaturely finitude assumes too cozy a relation with the divine infinite, as if the former—creaturely concepts, categories, languages, texts, persons, communities—could comprehend and so contain divine reality. And when an embodied creaturely reality identifies itself with and so presumes to grasp and control an infinite mystery, it is time to start passing out the crash helmets and flak jackets to protect the bodies of neighboring but differing creatures. Mastery over divine mystery routinely results in a body count.[26]

Here we see the problem of human "mastery over divine mystery" clearly illustrated: whenever divinity is reduced to human "concepts, categories, languages, texts, persons, communities," there is ample reason to worry about too much power in the hands of the human theologian to comprehend, contain, and control the divine. As Boesel's chapter in this volume goes on to point out: "isn't human mastery of divine mystery always precisely ethically problematic, in that, in whatever form, it always puts the neighbor at risk?"[27]

This risk is what Letty Russell calls the "power quotient," the ability to enlist divine reinforcement and justification for human desires and ideals; and, unfortunately, history has proven that such power commonly translates into domination. Russell goes further in arguing that this sorted history has often been linked with a theological understanding of divine chosenness: "divine election and its subsequent use in nation building and colonialism have often become a screen for imperialism and racial domination."[28] Drawing on the work of Renita Weems, Russell identifies the reification of divine election for colonialism, imperialism, and racism: "a people who consider themselves special in the eyes of God have the power and privilege to dominate others."[29] Historically, when humans have had the ability to claim and control divine power (including chosenness), it has typically meant "bad news" for others. Russell captures the essence of the problem: "[divine] election helped provide divine reinforcement of racism and imperialist expansion in the United States, South Africa, and elsewhere."[30] The ways in which divine chosenness has been used to justify and validate oppression, domination, colonization, etc. are precisely why many contemporary theologians have abandoned a notion of divine choice.

Such concerns about human mastery over divinity are also found in the work of liberation theologians like Jon Sobrino, who have always had a healthy

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[26] Boesel and Keller, *Apophatic Bodies*, 3–4.
[27] Chris Boesel, "The Apophasis of Divine Freedom: Saving 'the Name' and the Neighbor from Human Mastery," in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 325.
[28] Letty M. Russell, "Postcolonial Challenges and the Practice of Hospitality," in *A Just & True Love: Feminism at the Frontiers of Theological Ethics: Essays in Honor of Margaret A. Farley*, ed. Maura A. Ryan and Brian F. Linnane (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 115–16.
[29] Ibid., 118–19.
[30] Ibid., 119.

desire to secure theology from our "expectations regarding God." Matthew Lundberg hones in on the problematic nature of the theological endeavor for liberation theologians: "Human god-talk in natural theology is directed by a sinful and manipulative self-interest that grasps the positive features of created reality in an attempt to create an image of the divine that justifies and legitimizes human projects in the world."[31] Drawing on Karl Barth's denunciation of "natural theology," Lundberg affirms the problem of "too cozy a relation" between creaturely finitude and the divine infinite because of how it can fund human, "sinful" endeavors. As Sobrino point out, "the sinful tendency to manipulate the idea of God" has material ramifications, translating into the historical sin of structural oppression.[32] In an attempt to respond "theologically to the oppression and poverty that has been tacitly and sometimes overtly supported by the Christian church and its theology since the 15th-century conquest," particularly in Latin America, Sobrino highlights and critiques the problems that arise when humans have control and mastery over divinity.[33] In other words, for liberation theologians such human control over divinity is not merely a theological *faux pas*, or sin against divine infinity, but problematic precisely because of how it "justifies and legitimizes human projects in the world," including colonialism, domination, and oppression. The problem, it seems, stems from the ability to "manipulate the idea of God," and the way that enlists too much power in the hands of the human theologian.

While the theo-ethical concern about too much power in the hands of humanity is widespread —as is concern about its connection to divine choice—I want to resharpen the focus of our analysis on poststructuralist theological engagements, particularly through the locus of Christian apophatic discourses. Part of the so-called *tournant théologique* included a revisiting of the Christian apophatic tradition because of how its *unsaying* resonates with poststructuralist discourses that acknowledge "the radical limits of finitude with regard to knowledge, language, and meaning."[34] Despite repeated contestations from such central figures as Derrida that "no, what I write is not negative theology,"[35] even "the most negative of negative theologies,"[36] Mary-Jane Rubenstein highlights how there is still "an uncanny relationship…between the deconstruction opened by the death of God and the *via negativa* guided by the living one."[37] Just how uncanny this relationship is, remains to be seen.

In the last few decades, there has been an "emerging arena of postmodern discourse" that engages "the theme of incomprehensible divine mystery and the critical-constructive readings of the apophatic tradition."[38] Part of

[31] Matthew Lundberg, "Echoes of Barth in Jon Sobrino's Critique of Natural Theology: A Dialogue in the Context of Post-Colonial Theology," in *Theology as Conversation: The Significance of Dialogue in Historical and Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 92.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 84.
[34] Boesel, "The Apophasis of Divine Freedom: Saving 'the Name' and the Neighbor from Human Mastery," 310–11.
[35] Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," 77.
[36] Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1982), 6.
[37] Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "Dionysius, Derrida, and the Critique of 'Ontotheology,'" *Modern Theology* 24, no. 4 (2008): 727.
[38] Boesel, "The Apophasis of Divine Freedom: Saving 'the Name' and the Neighbor from Human Mastery," 307.

Derrida's so-called "turn to religion" included significant engagement with—and at some points fervently distancing himself from—the apophatic tradition that has sent Christian theologians reeling ever since.[39] Rubenstein reflects on this: "One wonders why, after thirty-five years, the question of 'apophaticism's' relation to 'deconstruction' has not been put to rest. After all, the author himself has issued the final word: 'No what I write is not 'negative theology.'"[40] Yet, theologians continue asking themselves: "Why does this not satisfy us? Why are we not satisfied with this 'not'...Why do we keep asking him?" Perhaps it is because "both negative theology and deconstruction witness—and, in fact, catalyze—the failure of language to circumscribe an alterity that enables and exceeds linguistic determinations."[41]

In theological engagements with deconstruction and its relation to apophaticism, the motivation to maintain such an alterity is one of its driving forces. Specifically, poststructuralist, Derridean-inflected theological engagements with apophaticism express concern about reducing divine alterity, letting it seep into the grasp of human hands, because of how this kind of an ontotheological collapse into sameness can—and often does—spell bad news for the human Other on the receiving end of such a power trip. John D. Caputo's work in this area has shone a bright spotlight on the theo-ethical landmines of a "strong theology…in love with strength, right from the gate,"[42] and suggests a "weak theology…content with a little adverb like 'perhaps.'"[43] For Caputo, deconstruction helps apophatic theology resist such a desire to close, to encapsulate, to name, to disclose the secret, to answer the question. As Derrida notes in "*Différance*," although apophatic theology gestures toward the impossible and unknowable, it is really "only in order to acknowledge [God's] superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being."[44] There is an acute concern about the way in which, despite claims to the contrary, "negative theology drops anchor, hits bottom, lodges itself securely in pure presence and the transcendental signified." Caputo explicates the concern, that, in his reading, Derrida mitigates against: "Deconstruction saves negative theology from closure. Closure spells trouble…closure spells exclusion, exclusiveness; closure spills blood, doctrinal, confessional, theological, political, institutional blood, and eventually, it never fails, real blood."[45] Closure has wide-ranging ethical dangers, as Caputo deftly points

[39] Plenty has been written about Derrida's so-called "ethical" and "religious" turns, with various positions on Derrida's later engagement with religious and ethical/political themes and the extent to which this amounted to a "turn." See: Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992); Clayton Crockett, *Derrida after the End of Writing: Political Theology and New Materialism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018); Michael Naas, *Miracle and Machine: Jacques Derrida and the Two Sources of Religion, Science, and Media* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012); Herman Rappaport, *Later Derrida: Reading the Recent Work* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Carl A. Raschke, *Force of God: Political Theology and the Crisis of Liberal Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); James KA Smith, *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory*, annotated edition (New York ; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005).

[40] Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "Unknow Thyself: Apophaticism, Deconstruction, and Theology after Ontotheology," *Modern Theology* 19, no. 3 (July 2003): 387.

[41] Ibid., 387–88.

[42] John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 7.

[43] Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 9.

[44] Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Reprint edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1984), 6.

[45] John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 6.

out, including a collapse into a system of sameness that results in an "identity that nation-states build to defend themselves against the stranger, against Jews and Arabs and immigrants…against all the others, all the other others."[46] Any such collapse into presence would destroy the "otherness" of the *tout autre*, and thus Caputo reads deconstruction as aiding us in that process by allowing the *tout autre* to remain "wholly other" in order to respect the difference. "The whole point of the *tout autre* in deconstruction," Caputo argues, "its burning passion, is a messianic one, to keep the system open, to prevent the play of differences from regathering and reassembling in a systematic whole with infinite warrant."[47]

In addition to the collapse of difference-into-sameness that is destructive to the human Other, Caputo has also critiqued the tendency of theology to do the same to the divine Other, which goes hand-in-glove with the above ethical concerns. Reducing divinity to human control and mastery funds the violence of closure and exclusion by enlisting far too much power in the hands of humanity over divinity. In *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, Caputo draws heavily on Derrida's "religious" writings, often rhythmically repeating Derrida, in order to advance a "religion without religion."[48] Echoing and channeling Derrida, Caputo tries to sketch out the religiosity of deconstruction: "Deconstruction repeats the structure of religious experience…Deconstruction regularly, rhythmically repeats this religiousness, *sans* the concrete historical religions; it repeats nondogmatically the religious structure of experience, the category of the religious."[49] Caputo argues the *sans*—i.e. "religion *without* religion," or religiousness *sans* determinate dogmas, doctrines, etc.—"differentiates the 'determinable' faiths, which are always dangerous,"[50] precisely because the latter places themselves (mistakenly) in the dangerous, dominant position of determining and deciding. Thus the problem with determinable, dogmatic faiths is the mistaken illusion of the power to choose.

This kind of a divine-human power struggle is what Caputo names, in other contexts, "strong theology," and offers the alternative of a "weak theology." In *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*, Caputo reflects further on the misplaced power that theology has desired, arguing that "theology has always been strong theology and religion has been strong religion, in love with strength, right from the gate."[51] Though he seeks to find in the theological tradition the places that gesture toward "the weakness of God," he laments theology's denial of such because "it is too much in love with power, constantly selling its body to the interests of power, constantly sitting down to table with power in a discouraging contradiction of its own good news."[52] In opposition to a tradition that can (and often does) "accumulate an army and institutional power, semantic prestige and cultural authority," Caputo seeks to sketch a theology that unleashes the name of God as a "weak force."[53] For those keenly aware of the dangers of power, especially divine power in the hands of humans, Caputo offers an alternative: "In a strong theology, the name of God has historical determinacy and specificity—it is Christian or Jewish or Islamic, for example—whereas a weak theology,

[46] Ibid., 231.
[47] Ibid., 246.
[48] Derrida, *The Gift of Death, Second Edition & Literature in Secret*, 50.
[49] Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, xxi.
[50] Ibid., 47.
[51] Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 7.
[52] Ibid., 8.
[53] Ibid., 7.

weakened by the flux of undecidability and translatability, is more open-ended."[54] For Caputo, (part of) the problem with strong theology is its misplaced desire and claim to name something determinate and specific, thus reducing God to "an object of conceptual analysis."[55] Put differently, it appears that strong theology is ethically problematic because of its claim to put itself in the divine driver's seat, endowing it with a (desire for) power that is always dangerous.

At first glance it might appear, very clearly in fact, that a theology that takes Caputo's critical analysis seriously would indeed reject something determinate—and exclusive—like a theological notion of divine choice. A doctrine, notion, or theological claim of divine choice is ethically problematic, and epitomizes that which is or should be deconstructed, because it identifies a transcendental signified that declares something definitive about God, which, according to Caputo's reading of Derrida, is impossible. Additionally, the content of this theological notion is a determinate choice, i.e. divine choice for this/that. Caputo focuses on how Derrida continually disrupts and unsettles any absolute declarations about finality (religious and ethical), revealing the ways in which determinate forms of religion and justice are limited, always fall short, and are, by extension, themselves unjust. Thus a theological claim of divine choice, especially with its unique presentation of the problem of exclusion, represents the problem *par excellence*. It is a messianism with a messiah. It is a determinate, exhaustive, definitive choice. It is closure. It is no longer awaited, for it *has* come, happened, arrived, been decided. It lodges itself securely in presence and the transcendental signified, which would betray the deconstructive movement of the impossible.

On the one hand, this is certainly true; Caputo's strident critique of determinate, exclusive doctrines and dogmas would undoubtedly apply to theological claims about divine choice. As I have maintained all along, such theological claims for (exclusive) divine choice would definitely be ethically problematic along these lines of thinking.[56] On the other hand, Caputo's critique might *also* be problematic for any attempt to remedy this problem. Theologians who reject, avoid, or exclude such a theological notion encounter a new set of issues that, ironically, fall prey to the same critique. Caputo's theo-ethical concern—about determinate religion, doctrines, dogmas—is directly related to the one that I am raising about attempts to remedy such, namely the problem of human mastery over divinity. And because "mastery over divine mystery routinely results in a body count," this is a concern that needs to be taken seriously.[57]

To the extent that this is the case, a weak theology would also be subject to the same critique that Caputo marshals against a strong theology, navigating a

[54] Ibid., 8.

[55] On the opening page of *The Weakness of God*, Caputo confesses "a weakness for theology," despite his attempts to avoid it, especially in *Prayers and Tears* where he is more comfortable talking in terms of "religion." Now, however, he admits that he can no longer "deny that what I am doing here is theological." In the footnote to this statement, he argues that his desire to avoid "theology" was because of it "suggests the onto-theological project, which takes God as an object of conceptual analysis" (p. 301).

[56] In a much broader context I would highlight a similar kind of deconstructive impossibility for the theologian who seeks to confess or claim a notion of divine election/choice, albeit much different—and more problematic—than it might first appear.

[57] Boesel and Keller, *Apophatic Bodies*, 3–4.

similar kind of ethical danger, especially if/when it is decided that God does not decide. And if so, it begs the question as to whether a weak theology can safely avoid the problem. In fact, a weak theology can actually serve to *strengthen* the hand of the human theologian, which is the very thing Caputo is critiquing and trying to remedy. More importantly, any remedy to divine choice wherein the human theologian decides or chooses that God does not decide or choose, would be subject to the same critique marshalled against the "'determinable' faiths, which are always dangerous."[58] A God of undecidability—if/when that means a God who cannot, does not choose—can only be arrived at, or secured, through the *decision* of the theologian.[59] Therefore, when the theologian chooses the kind of God who chooses (or not)—or even attempts to avoid such a notion—such a move reduces God to "an object of conceptual analysis," something the human theologian can choose (or not), and enlists the human (theologian) with a dangerous power supply—the very thing Caputo critiques about "determinate faiths." So while I very much agree with Caputo's ethical concern about enlisting the human theologian with a dangerous "power supply," I also want to raise the concern about how attempting to avoid a God who chooses does just that.[60] Furthermore, if exclusive choice—or a divine choice that excludes—is *the problem*, the remedy to divine election that entails *excluding* such a possibility cannot avoid that which it has tried to remedy. In other words, such an analysis reveals that the remedy to (divine) exclusive choice is (human) exclusive choice.

Caputo does not ever directly address a theological notion of divine election or choice.[61] However, he does explicitly express a similar concern about a God of *our* choosing. In *The Weakness of God*, Caputo further sketches out some of these theological concerns: "The modest proposal I make in this book is that the name of God is an event, or rather that it *harbors* an event, and that theology is the hermeneutics of that event, its task being to release what is happening in that name, to set it free, to give it its own head, and thereby to head off the forces that would prevent this event."[62] In an attempt to construct a "theology of the event," Caputo employs eight descriptors to define what he means by "event": uncontainability, translatability, deliteralization, excess, evil, beyond Being, truth, time. Through each of these descriptors, Caputo shows how the event continually evokes a sense of rupture, in-breaking, surprising, overflowing, releasing, etc. "There is always something uncontainable and unconditional about an event,"[63] Caputo argues, something that betrays any attempt to name it completely, which means that "the name can never be taken with literal force, as if it held the event tightly within its grip, as if it circumscribed it and literally named it, as if a concept

[58] Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 47.
[59] Writing about "undecidability," Derrida clarifies that it does not (merely) mean one does not—and cannot—decide: "The undecidable, a theme often associated with deconstruction, is not merely the…oscillation or the tension between two decisions; it is the experience of that which, though heterogeneous, foreign to the order of the calculable and the rule, is still obligated…to give itself up to the impossible decision, while taking account of law and rules…But in the moment of suspense of the undecidable, it is not just either, for *only a decision is just*." See: Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992), 24.
[60] Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 13.
[61] Although he does explicitly state, in his more recent work, that "God is not an agent…[or] a being who does things," *The Insistence of God*, 31ff.
[62] Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 2.
[63] Ibid.

(*Begriff*) were anything more than a temporary stop and imperfect hold on an event."[64] Thus theology should recognize that "an event cannot be held captive by a confessional faith or creedal formula," which is why Caputo contends that theology's task is to release and set free, rather than foreclose or hold captive.[65]

Again, it is fairly clear that a "concept (*Begriff*)," confession, or "creedal formula" of divine choice would seemingly betray the uncontainable and unconditional nature of the event. And for theologians who resonate with these theological concerns, a notion, concept, or doctrine of divine choice would be problematic because it attempts to circumscribe, name, and contain the eventive nature of the divine. Caputo continues:

> Events happen to us; they overtake us and outstrip the reach of the subject or the ego. Although we are called upon to respond to events, an event is not our doing but is done to us (even as it might well be our undoing). The event arises independently of me and comes over me, so that an event is also an *advent*. The event is visited upon me, presenting itself as something I must deal with, like it or not…the event is not necessarily good news.[66]

This language continues to cut against theological notions of divine choice for the very same reasons noted above. However, if one were to simply exchange "event" for "divine choice" here—which would undoubtedly do violence to Caputo's intention (despite any "death-of-the-author" claims)—this language would sound eerily familiar to the stalwarts of divine choice in the Christian theological tradition like Augustine and Calvin. For these theologians, divine choice "happen[s] to us…is not our doing but is done to us…arises independently of me and comes over me…presenting itself as something I must deal with, like it or not." Augustine and Calvin would certainly agree that divine election "is not necessarily good news," or does not always appear that way and is not always experienced as such. Calvin surely had ample reason to call divine election the *decretum horribile* (especially given his understanding of double predestination).[67]

When pressed to the limits of *why* God chooses some (and not others) in "On the Predestination of Saints," Augustine appeals to the mystery of God in an attempt to be faithful to the notion that divine election is fundamentally about God's choice, not a human choice. Although the point that Augustine is trying to make is that it *is* "good news" that God chooses any to be saved, he too cannot help but wonder about those who are not chosen, who are predestined to eternal damnation, and the ways in which that seems like it is "not necessarily good news." When discussing God's mercy and judgment, Augustine defers to the inscrutability of God and God's ways, and interrupts his analysis of divine election by stating: "But His ways are unsearchable. Therefore the mercy by which He freely delivers, and the truth by which He righteously judges, are equally unsearchable."[68] In the midst of this treatise on his understanding of divine choice as predestination, Augustine, who is never

[64] Ibid., 3.
[65] Ibid., 4.
[66] Ibid., 4–5.
[67] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. John Allen, vol. II (Philadelphia: Presbyterian board of Christian education, 1936), 207.
[68] Augustine, "On the Predestination of Saints," in *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge (Washington, D.C: Catholic University Press, 1992), chapter 11.

short on words, analysis, declarations, etc., makes a strangely *apophatic* gesture in the midst of his strongly *kataphatic* assertion of God's sovereign, free, gratuitous choice for desperate, dependent, despondent humanity. When in the preceding (and subsequent) pages he expressed full certainty, confidence, and clarity about who/what God has chosen, and how that is genuinely good news, he now appeals to mystery when he cannot figure out or reconcile why a seemingly gracious God has chosen to condemn some human beings to eternal damnation of "His" own free will, which appears to be very bad news. Augustine's appeal to mystery might be understood, in Caputo's language, as an attempt to let the divine event "happen to us…overtake us and outstrip the reach of the subject or the ego." "Although we are called upon to respond to events," as Augustine seems to be doing here, he must also admit that "an event is not our doing but is done to us (even as it might well be our undoing)" leaving us with "something I must deal with, like it or not," especially when "the event is not necessarily good news."[69]

John Calvin also appeals to the mystery of divine will in his doctrine of divine election in order to assert that it is primarily God's choice. Before beginning to explicate his doctrine of predestination, Calvin addresses the danger of human curiosity and its wanderings into "forbidden labryrinths, and soaring beyond its sphere, as if determined to leave none of the Divine secrets unscrutinzed or unexplored." He thus admonishes the curious—and arrogant—seeker to remember "that when they inquire into predestination, they penetrate the inmost recesses of Divine wisdom, where the careless and confident intruder will obtain no satisfaction of his curiosity, but will enter a labyrinth from which he will find no way to depart." Thus the curious human inquirer should recognize that "it is unreasonable that man should scrutinize with impunity…and investigate, even from eternity, that sublimity of wisdom which God would have us to adore and not comprehend, to promote our admiration of his glory.[70] Calvin is suggesting that it is unreasonable to think that the human being could not only understand, but actually investigate with scrutiny, divine election, as if the human being could attain the "sublimity of wisdom" that is only reserved for divinity. Again, like Augustine—and Caputo, for that matter—Calvin makes a similar appeal to the unconditional and uncontainable nature of divinity in order to keep it out of the grasp and control of humanity. Although for Calvin, this is less of an overtly apophatic move, because he is more explicit in maintaining that the only way we can know the secrets of divine wisdom is through the testimony of Scripture, he does admit a certain unknown with regard to the mystery of divine choice—a mystery that the human being is incapable of understanding or comprehending, and thus grasping and controlling.

What are we to make of this strange, shared resonance between those who confess a robust theological concept of divine choice and Caputo, who we might readily assume does not? While the resonance might not center on the theological content of whether or not God chooses, there is a shared concern about theology being reduced to something that is entirely up to the theologian. All three worry that divinity collapses into something that is within the grasp and control of the human "subject and ego," something that is merely the result of human theological desires and decisions. In short, the concern is that there is something inherently dangerous, both theologically and ethically, about reducing God to an object of human choice or decision.

[69] Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 4–5.
[70] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II:172.

Caputo seems intent on maintaining the uncontainability of the event that happens to us, with theology's task being to "head off the forces that would prevent this event," in order to ensure that this event happens "independently of me and comes over me."[71] But if/when the theologian chooses to exclude the possibility of a God who chooses, the "event" (i.e. "God") is contained, prevented, and no longer independent of me, but very much dependent upon the decisions and choices that I make. Just as Caputo is arguing that "a confessional faith or creedal formula" forecloses, holds captive, or prevents the event (of God), the same is true for the exclusion of even the possibility that God might choose (or not). Pressed to the limits of their understanding about divine choice, Augustine and Calvin appeal to mystery, inscrutability, and unknowing. If one were to take seriously Caputo's apophatic stance with regard to the divine event, if one genuinely inhabited a space to let divinity be divine, then this would mean that one would need to reckon with a theological possibility of divine choice.

Caputo continues his theological project in a more recent work, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*, where he attempts to further distance what he calls "weak theology" (a continuation of his theology of the event) from "strong theology," by drawing on a theological notion of "perhaps." Caputo insists: "One must, it is absolutely necessary, always say 'perhaps' for God: God, perhaps (*peut-être*). Whenever and wherever there is a chance for the event, that is God, perhaps."[72] In contrast to "theology in the strong standard version" that employs "omni-nouns and hyper verbs" to establish power and presence, "weak theology…is content with a little adverb like 'perhaps,'" which interrupts and intercepts, disrupts and deflects.[73] Proposing a weak theology of "God, perhaps," Caputo writes:

> Once I say I know the name of the event, once I can say, this is God, the event is God, then the event ceases to be an event and becomes something I have added to my repertoire, brought within the horizon of my experience, knowledge, belief, identification, and expectation, whereas the event is precisely what always and already, structurally, exceeds my horizons. What I mean by the event is the surprise, what literally over-takes me, shattering my horizon of expectation.[74]

In a theology of "perhaps," Caputo continues his critique about definitive claims about God, because of how they collapse divinity into "something I have added to my repertoire, brought within the horizon of my experience, knowledge, belief, identification, and expectation." Rather, Caputo proposes a more open-ended notion of divinity, a theology of "perhaps" that appreciates the surprise of the event that will always shatter my horizons and expectations.

Suppose one approached the topic of divine choice taking Caputo's critique seriously—what would be the responsible approach to this dangerous notion of divine choosing? If and when the theologian has decided that it is best for him/her to decide, when he/she has come to the conclusion (not surprisingly) that a God who chooses is far too violent, offensive, problematic (i.e. exclusive), has he/she not fallen prey to what Caputo is railing against here? If so, then perhaps excluding a notion of divine choosing might actually

[71] Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 2.
[72] Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 9.
[73] Ibid., 9.
[74] Ibid., 10.

be a denial of the "perhaps," because such a decision reduces God (as "event") to something that consequently does not exceed my horizons of expectation. Could one even safely avoid such problematic decisions, both divine and human, even if one claimed a certain apophatic stance toward them? To the extent that this is the case, it would mean a precarious predicament wherein either we decide, and thus make God an object of our decision and, ironically, fall prey to the "strong" theology Caputo critiques here; or we leave room for a God who chooses (or not), perhaps.

Now, of course, Caputo (and others) might argue that a God who chooses—especially when connected to traditional understandings of divine election—is merely the work of a strong theology of absolutes, closure, dogmas, etc. And, on the one hand, this might be an accurate accusation. But what I am arguing, or attempting to problematize, is the way in which any definitive exclusion or denial of a God who chooses is subject to the same critique. In fact, critiques about definitive claims about God (e.g. a God who chooses) are definitive claims themselves. In an attempt to leave room, open up space, with "a little adverb like 'perhaps,'" does one inevitably close the gap?[75] How far does the "perhaps" go, especially when Caputo's theology of "perhaps" insists that "God does not exist," but rather, "God insists"?[76] How apophatic are we really being if we have made decisions about God's decisions? Isn't a God we choose very much the product of our expectations, a God who has been "added to my repertoire, brought within the horizon of my experience, knowledge, belief, identification, and expectation"? And, if so, shouldn't that recognition be "what makes us tremble in the *mysterium tremendum*…knowing all along that it is God who decides," or not?[77]

At the very least, for those of us who have heard Caputo's clarion call about the problems of human mastery over divinity, a sharper awareness of the predicament that divine choice presents should cause us a great deal of trouble. Further along, Caputo writes: "If the name of God is not causing us a great deal of difficulty, it is not God we are talking about."[78] This is precisely what I am arguing in this article, by highlighting how the problem of divine choice should (continue to) cause us a great deal of difficulty, and if it is not, then perhaps we have not understood the problem in all its fullness and complexity. Any attempt to remedy the problem of divine choice can result in a God of our own choosing, along the way leading us to believe that we have solved the problem, and hence no longer causing us a "great deal of difficulty"; in so doing, that might mean "it is not God that we are [now] talking about." If we have begun to think we can do away with a God who chooses, safely avoid it, quickly dispose of and exclude such an antiquated, obsolete notion, then perhaps we were never talking about God to begin with. Caputo maintains that "God's problem"—or the problem with God, including and especially a God who chooses—"is that God *insists*, is an insistent problem that won't go away."[79] I am suggesting that this includes, most especially, a theological notion or possibility of divine choice. It is a problem that "*insists*, is an insistent problem that won't go away."

One might also argue that the problem of God's choosing is a "non-problem" because it assumes, first, the existence of God, and additionally, a God who

[75] Ibid., 9.
[76] Ibid., 13.
[77] Derrida, *The Gift of Death, Second Edition & Literature in Secret*, 56–57.
[78] Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 28.
[79] Ibid., 29.

could, might, or would choose.[80] It is only a problem because it assumes the existence of God, and thus harbors an illusion that mistakes, in Caputo's words, "an event for a being, or a Super-being, a ground of Being, beyond or without being, a mighty being that does things, or mysteriously decides not to, an agent-being in the sky."[81] As Caputo argues, "God is not an agent who does things," and thus to suggest or even consider a God who chooses means one has not allowed the full weight of the "perhaps" to take hold.[82] Again, such a critique is not without warrant. But, yet again, I would argue in the opposite direction: the "perhaps" has already been collapsed into concluding that the existence of God is not even a possibility, much less the possibility of a God who can, does, might choose—and might make choices that are not beholden to human choices. And in so doing such a conclusion would deny and abrogate the "perhaps" altogether, turning "God" into "something I have added to my repertoire, brought within the horizon of my experience, knowledge, belief, identification, and expectation." In that case, such a denial would fall prey to Caputo's own critique. Put differently, excluding the possibility that God chooses (or not) not only traffics in the very thing attempted to be remedied, i.e. exclusive decision and choice, but also becomes something "I know…once I can say, this is God."[83]

CONCLUDING INCONCLUSIVELY: TIME TO STOP DEFERRING

Given my attempt to expose an inability to avoid the problem(s) of divine choice, how might we proceed? Given that the impossibility I have sketched is *impossible* precisely because the problem is *unavoidable*, what is the way forward? An appreciation for this impossibility is not intended to leave us in a state of nihilism or apathy regarding the problem, quite the contrary. My sole intention is to heighten our vigilance in dealing with the "violence" entailed in any approach or engagement with divine choice. Borrowing once again from Derrida, and concluding deconstructively:

> In saying this I am not advocating that such violence be unleashed or simply accepted. I am above all asking that we try to recognize and analyze it as best we can in its various forms… And if, as I believe, violence remains (almost) ineradicable, its analysis and the most refined ingenious account of its conditions will be the least violent gestures, perhaps even nonviolent.[84]

If the violence of divine choice (i.e. the theo-ethical issues entailed in attempts to navigate it) is unavoidable, I am arguing that the way to be "least violent" in relation to the problem is to "try to recognize and analyze it as best we can." This includes being transparent about how it is unavoidable, and being as rigorous as possible in our "analysis and the most refined ingenious

[80] Caputo might also, likely, situate (and reduce) this kind of argument to the "Kantian version" of postmodernism, or "thin postmodernism," as he calls it in his description of "two types of Continental philosophy of religion" in *The Insistence of God*, 87ff. He attempts to advance a more Hegelian version of postmodernism, "radical theology" of the event, where "God" too is a *Vorstellung*, where God does not exist, but insists.
[81] Ibid., 30.
[82] Ibid., 31.
[83] Ibid., 10.
[84] Jacques Derrida, "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," in *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff; trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 112.

account of its conditions." In so doing, I agree with Derrida that this "will be the least violent gestures."

Thus the goal of my argument is neither to endorse a notion of divine choice nor collapse into a nihilistic approach to the problem of divine choice. In fact, the very insights of such a deconstructive analysis should heighten our vigilance in dealing with these theological and ethical problems. Deconstruction reveals that the stakes are higher than we even imagined: we are trapped in a situation with no pure or good solution—every attempt carries its own set of issues or problems. Our best attempts are always limited, and yet we are trapped in a situation in which we cannot avoid, remedy, or escape them. This includes (most especially) those attempts to remedy the problem. As Walter Lowe acknowledges: "the puzzling situation in which we find ourselves…is precisely where deconstruction intends to place us. Indeed the process of situating us at this difficult intersection, and keeping us there, is a good deal of what deconstruction is about."[85]

Standing at this intersection, I am suggesting that the way forward includes continuing to think with all those who take the double-edged problem of exclusion and human mastery over divinity seriously, and to ask how we might advance Caputo's attempts to navigate this thorny dilemma, recognizing the limits of each and every attempt, and never resting assured that we have safely avoided the pitfalls. One way to frame the argument of this article, is an attempt to continue the trajectory Caputo outlines in his early work on radical hermeneutics, where he frames the project as a kind of "radical thinking which is suspicious of the easy way out."[86] Such is my suspicion as well; it was this kind of hermeneutics of suspicion that drove me to first reexamine the perennial problem of divine choice and the desires for avoiding it, and my suspicion has only heightened the more I think intently about it. My conclusion is that when one believes they have safely avoided the treacherousness of a theological notion of divine choice, they have taken the "easy way out." As Catherine Keller puts it: "When we think we've finally *got* it, have we already lost it?"[87] For those who are genuine in their concern for the issues raised here, the way forward begins by recognizing that there is no certain destination, no pure solution, no assured stance to take, no safe ground to inhabit. To the extent this essay has succeeded, it will not show us *the* way forward, but "raise the question…and let it hang there and resist the temptation" to answer it definitively, but rather try to maintain the courage to remain "intent on keeping the question…open."[88]

In "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," when Derrida finally comes to grips with the realization that he must finally "stop deferring" and "try to explain [himself] directly on the subject, and at last speak of 'negative theology,'" he begins by asking: "how is it possible to avoid speaking about negative

[85] Walter Lowe, *Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 17.
[86] John D Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*, Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 1987), 3.
[87] Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), ix.
[88] Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project*, 2. I have redacted Caputo's quotation where he says "resist the temptation to cut it down when it starts to look blue" because of the haunting imagery it elicits about lynching in the United States. See: James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011).

theology?" In a discourse that by definition intends to unsay, and avoid speaking, "how, if one speaks of it, to avoid speaking of it? How not to speak of it?"[89] Derrida realizes that perhaps he was unable to avoid it, that he can no longer defer, because in not speaking (about negative theology), was he not engaging in some sort of negative theological mode of discourse (about negative theology) all along? "Is there ever anything other than a 'negative theology' of negative theology?"[90] Like Derrida, we come to a similar realization with the problem of divine choice, that we were never able to avoid the problem in the first place, that our reasons for avoiding it as a way of avoiding a double-edged problem have resurfaced, that we have always already been in its midst.[91] Derrida reminds, and performs, the deconstructive predicament that I have tried to sketch: an inability to find safe ground or escape the problem, especially one that we would like to avoid. This article has tried to confront us with the reality of a denial, that to avoid divine choice as a way of avoiding its dangers—or worse, to think we have succeeded in doing so—is impossible. So how to avoid the God who chooses? Perhaps it is time we stopped deferring.

[89] Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," 82.
[90] Ibid., 83.
[91] Derrida performs the "always already" in the postscript to this engagement with negative theology, where he begins the essay with an ellipsis ("…"). See: *Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum)* in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr., and Ian McLeod (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).