

One New Book for the Preacher

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John D. Caputo, et al, *It Spooks: Living In Response to an Unheard Call* (Rapid City, SC: Shelter50 Publishing Collective), 2015.

Now that I live back in a small town, I find what I miss most about city living is public transportation. Riding Boston's "T" always made for good people watching and better still, eavesdropping. Even when I couldn't catch the larger context of what was being talked about, even when I couldn't understand the language, it was often compelling, enlightening. That was my experience in reading *It Spooks: Living in Response to an Unheard Call*. I was eavesdropping on a conversation that was strange, sometimes amusing (if unintentionally so), and ultimately enlightening.

It Spooks is, as described on the cover, "a book of visual, poetic and written responses to a paper by John D. Caputo," who is a philosopher of religion. Recently retired, he spent most of his career at Syracuse University, a deconstructionist à la Jacques Derrida. As such, he takes apart religion with pleasure and a sense of urgency. This is his way of being true to the God whom he feels the church domesticates against our best interests, a God that should not be taken as having existence but being of insistence. Actually, to sum up his theology, he would likely say (has indeed said), "God doesn't exist; God insists."

But the real benefit to be found in *It Spooks* comes less of his contribution than of the larger conversation it calls forth of the artists and writers who contributed to this book—a book of various typefaces and graphic tricks, of prints of paintings and art installations, of song lyrics, letters, essays, and poems. Thirty-five such people responded, most of them young, white, straight, American, and emerging from evangelical and orthodox Protestantism, more than a few once homeschooled and then further educated at Christian colleges and now finding themselves amidst a world that calls much of that upbringing into question.

With no editors mentioned, the provenance of the book feels mysterious, but this is doubtless part of the book's mission (if a book can be said to have a mission). To deny some central authoritative voice, to dodge the demand that there be a source to decide what's legitimate, this project means to work outside all authoritative and authorizing frames, to chase down the truth that is always outpacing us and that, were we ever to catch it, would be evidence against itself as true.

The effort, overall, hits its mark, if unevenly. Some contributors are more "qualified" for the task than others, which I say knowing to hold in question the whole notion of "qualifications"—professors, priests, a stay-at-home mom, a "monkette," among others, are all called on here. Some are more capable of meeting its high intellectual and artistic demands, which I also note knowing that this is part of the point. For more than a few, the effort is great indeed, involves passionate struggle to come to terms with the self, particularly as it apparently falls short of some orthodox ideal—the saved soul, the pure, the good. The young women seem most to feel crushed under this ideal.

For example, Sarah Wilhelm Garbers, who writes, “Although I didn’t kiss anyone in my first 25 years of life due to the rigidity of the expectations of my faith community and family, I filled journals documenting obsession and tortured attraction....” And of those journals, which are from “when I knew everything about the life of faith,” she writes, “They are wrought with self-hatred as I narrate my inability to embody the call to which I believe I’m responding....”

Another young woman, Carrie Borchardt, presents pages that actually look to have been photocopied from her journal. In one entry, she writes, “When I cannot name the It which bids me back and back again, I feel powerless, unidentified, unnamed. But when I try to box it in with any parameters, I find it bears no weight to me....I reflect on ...how for years I stifled my doubts with reverence and how life itself had to strip me of my pride of sureness before I dared ask the Other who It was and what Its shadowy motives are....”

But not all entries are so confessional. Indeed, most aren’t. Tad DeLay, in the entry he entitled “Orthodoxy’s Anxiety and Ideas that Fail,” brings a cooler head to the task and evoked in me less sympathy but a dose of appreciation. He claims his chapter is “a protest against ideas that fail,” and he begins with Caputo’s (elsewhere) challenge, that “the stronger and louder you shout your confessional faith...the more insecure you prove yourself to be.” More pointedly still to the likes of us preachers, DeLay writes, “If your theology preaches easily, there is always the chance that you are underestimating your hearer’s capacity to hear.”

Brian McLaren, whose chapter comes later on, would take it further. As to the question of whether Caputo’s “spooky, haunted message [will] preach in a typical local church,” he claims, “It won’t.” And yet, he writes, “It is exactly what needs to be preached for a growing number of people in a growing number of churches.”

It’s with this suspicion that I recommend *It Spooks* as one new book for the preacher. If you’re like me, then you’re at home in the mainline church, and you’re comfortable with our liberal orthodoxy, our theology of the cross, our redeemer who loves to save and saves to love, and our concept of sin as social and structural more than as personal failing. So it might be worthwhile to hear these other voices, *younger* voices who came of age as Christians when the religious right was dominant and fomenting anxieties that I, as a member of both Generation X and the United Church of Christ, can barely relate to. Not so for many Millennials, I regret to learn. What once-church-goers there are among that generation may largely have dropped church in order simply to survive, in order to cope with the world as it actually is.

I feel very sorry for the countless people who are trying to fit into an ideology whose strictures are too strict, are cutting off the breath of life. The loss of that is a loss of self, which I think some of the contributions reveal: a couple of writers, searching for themselves in the aftermath of an ideological upbringing, could hardly find anything beyond themselves. There is, I hate to say, a bit of naval-gazing in *It Spooks*.

But it all called to my mind the tradition of foot binding in China. When small feet were an aesthetic ideal, many girls were subjected to having their feet bound, which stunted growth. Past a certain point in their development, you could unbind the foot, but it would never grow in. Those girls would never walk right. They would certainly never run free. Is this the case when the human imagination is bound? Is this the case when faith is constricted at precisely the time when it’s meant to grow?

If so, then orthodox Protestantism is guilty of something far worse than irritating self-righteousness.

Yet there is an opportunity here, because another thing all the contributors to *It Spooks* have in common is an apparent desire to be taken seriously, which is something that should delight us preachers. If we find any such people in our pews on any given Sunday morning, we need not dumb down the gospel. Indeed, we *must* not simplify the message in an assumption that most people aren't listening anyway and those who are can't handle the raw, strange, wild God that the Bible as a whole testifies to and that history unfolding reveals and chases after. No, instead, we can be full-throated in whatever of God has haunted us all week. If it has kept us awake at night, it will surely keep congregants awake on Sunday morning, might even propel them, hopeful, curious, into the week ahead.