

***Rel 660: A Theology of Flesh***  
***Syracuse University - Fall, 2008***  
***Dr. John D. Caputo***

***Prospectus***

In this course I raise the question of what I will call a “theology of the flesh.” By “theology” I mean “secular” or “post-secular” theology, as opposed to confessional theology, that is, “thinking” through the questions posed to us by religious experiences, instead of studying religious beliefs and practices in their social and historical settings. By theology I mean a theology of the “event” that takes place in religious beliefs and practices, the notion of “event” being inspired by Derrida and, increasingly for me, by Deleuze, particularly in conjunction with his conception of a body without organs. I say “flesh” not bodies, because while I agree, indeed insist, that religion is all about bodies and I am interested in “religious bodies” of all sorts, I am distinguishing “flesh” as the site of pleasure and pain, suffering and *jouissance*, from the body as “agent,” as the site of action, agency and movement. The question I raise revolves around the event that takes place in flesh, and around religious flesh in particular, which means the events that are set off when flesh is touched by and in the name God, when it comes in “contact” with any of the sacred names. What does the name of God mean relative to flesh? In the Scriptures, under the press of sacred names, flesh is driven to extremes of glory and of agony, even promised life without end in the face of relentless death. When the life of flesh comes in contact with God, is it compromised or intensified, relieved of carnality or lifted up into a higher carnal life? As a theology of carnal life, a theology of flesh is a theology of life itself, of life and death, of birth and death, of mortal life, of life/death. How are birth and death inscribed in flesh? How are we to think birth as the gift of flesh? How are we to read the cut made by death in the flesh? If birth is the gift of flesh, if death is the fate of flesh, how are we to think the name of God, or rather the event that is harbored by the name of God? Can life be promised without being compromised? What would it be like to affirm the promise of carnality without compromise?

I chose two principal figures for this study, incarnation and technology, each of which is used to promise us life, more life, makes a promise of and to life, promising to supplement life, promising two supplements of life: a “theology of incarnation” and technology, coming into flesh and prosthesis, divinely touched carnal life and techno-carnal life, a divine coming to birth (*physis*) as flesh and the technological supplement (*techne*) of flesh. Do these promises compromise what they promise? Do they poison their gift? Might there be a possible “techno-theo-logy?”

I.

In Christianity, which turns on a theology of Incarnation, and hence on a notion not only of the body but of flesh (*caro, chair*), everything turns on an incarnation, a crucifixion, and a resurrection of the body, the question being what those figures mean for the flesh. I will raise the question of whether there is not a secret anxiety about flesh in the theology of In-carnation, a “secret horror” (Nancy) of the body in the figure of the risen body. I take my point of departure for the course from an expanded version of a paper I wrote entitled—“Bodies Still Unrisen, Events Still Unsaid” (*Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, 12:1 (April, 2007): 73-86.)—which is a deconstructive reading of the figure of the resurrection, of the sort of “re-petition” occurring in “re-surrection” and the sort of embodiment implied by the resurrection of the body. This paper will refer us to some key texts in the New Testament on the risen Jesus and accounts of the risen body found in Aquinas and Dale Martin’s *The Corinthian Body*. Christian incarnationality is situated between two paradigmatic and deathless bodies, the prelapsarian body

of Adam on one end of the history of salvation and the risen body of Jesus on the other end, the one originally meant to be free of death, the other resurrected incorruptible. Are these bodies without death also “bodies without flesh”? Is carnality thus compromised or completed? What is the relation between “incarnation,” coming into flesh by something not of itself enfleshed, and an originary carnality? This question very much depends upon a conception of the “event.” [Papers on the risen body are welcome. See Carol Bynum’s *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*. The work of Jean-Louis Chrétien and Michel Henry are also very important background sources here.]

I will examine the Christian theology of Incarnation first in terms of two theological sources and then in terms of two non-theological sources. The theological sources will be Jean-Luc Marion and the self styled “radical orthodox” theologians. First I will take up a recent work of Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, where the “glory” of the flesh is thought in terms of the glory of God. I will claim that Marion undertakes an analysis of erotic flesh on an analogy with the risen body, a point which I think throws a crucial light on Marion’s work and what I like to call, *pace* Janicaud, the “phenomenological turn in theology” that is taken in his thought. I will propose that there is a symmetry in Marion among God without being, bodies without flesh and life without death. Then I will examine Graham Ward’s *Cities of God*, which is a sustained theology of Incarnation and of religious bodies, stretching from the body of Christ, through the mystical body, to the Eucharist and the Church, asking again whether carnality here is completed or compromised, what is the fate of flesh, what is the theology of flesh, amidst all these theological bodies.

The non-theological sources I will take up are Derrida and Nancy. We will read Nancy’s famous article “Corpus,” and *Noli me tangere*, based on the famous scene in the Gospel of John in which Jesus tells Mary Magdalene not to touch him until he has risen to his Father. I recommend you consult Jacques Derrida’s *Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* and I invite papers on Derrida and Nancy, but I have chosen to make this book “consultatory” and to read Derrida’s *Animal* book in seminar instead. *Dis-enclosure*, the English translation of Nancy’s *Déclension* (which I found dis-appointing!) will also be in English by the fall and is available for consultation.

## II.

In the second part of the course I will switch perspectives from a theology of incarnation to what I will call a techno-theology, a theology of flesh and technology. The techno-bodies or technologically enhanced bodies of today might also be thought of as contemporary bodies without flesh, at least in part, as bodies whose fragile flesh has been supplemented by a prosthesis, in which birth (*physis*) is technologically assisted, death deferred and youthfulness prolonged. In the first case, the vulnerability of flesh is relieved by miracle; bodies are miraculously healed, raised from the dead and able to move at the speed of thought itself. In the second case, techno-living bodies, technologically supplemented flesh, learn to fly and ward off disease and death. Biblical miracles become medical miracles; technology repeats theology. Is theology being realized all around us? Donna Haraway speaks of three crucial (and very binary) “boundary breakdowns”—between human and animal, between organism and machine, and between the physical and the non-physical—occurring in recent philosophical and scientific thinking. Is there a fourth boundary breakdown in the making, between God and the world, between *ousia* and *hyper-ousia*? Is the boundary between creature and creator giving way to a new conception of the auto-theo-poetic process of the event? This also raises what is today called the question of “post-humanism,” the latest installment of the “end of man” debate—here I recommend Thomas Carlson, *The Indiscrete Image* (Chicago, 2008), and Janicaud, *On the*

*Human Condition*, although I will not devote class sessions to these texts.

The transition from the first to the second phase of the course will be provided by reading Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* followed by Agamben's *The Open*, which challenges the theological elevation of "human" life above animal life and includes a brief discussion of the "physiology of the blessed."

I will introduce the problem of a techno-theology of the flesh by way of a study of *Angels: A Modern Myth* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), by Michel Serres, a fascinating if neglected contemporary French philosopher, in whom all three displacements mentioned by Haraway are underway. [This book is out of print, but it is in the Bird library and I will put it on reserve.] Serres explores the correspondence of the angel and of angelic "bodies" and contemporary technology, especially info-technology (an angel as an ancient "IM" system) in terms of the "event" (Deleuze) that transpires in both. Is medieval angelology dreaming of contemporary technology? Is technology a "repetition" of angelology? What does "time" mean on such a view? If Heidegger thought the "holy" is menaced by technology, Serres (and Deleuze?) think theology and technology bear an internal relation to each other. (In the philosophy seminar on Wednesday mornings I will take up the later Heidegger's critiques of "humanism" and of technology as the "metaphysics of modernity.") Serres rethinks the binary relation of *techne* and *physis*, human and animal, organism and machine. [Agamben has also recently written a treatise on angels, but it is disappointing (and only available in Italian and German.)]

From Serres I move to Donna Haraway's famous "Manifesto for Cyborgs" and something from her more recent work on "companion species" in *The Haraway Reader*. The final reading of the course will be Mark C. Taylor, *After God*, which proposes a theological (as in death of God theology) reconstruction of the transformed understanding of bodies and life that has been effected by the advanced information technologies and by "complexity" theory in which he sees a repetition of Hegel, which Taylor brings to a head in his proposal of "religion without God." For background on this book, see Taylor's *The Moment of Complexity*.

I will conclude the course with my own reflections on the "theology of the flesh" in which I hope to gather up what we will have learned this semester about resurrection and incarnation, about the technological supplement, about the human and the "post-human," about God and creation, about bodies with and without flesh, about life/death. I will challenge the symmetry of God without being, bodies without flesh, life without death, and propose a different understanding of God and life, or of the weak force of the event that is sheltered by the name of God and the event of life/death.

### *Required Texts*

(I will put all the hardbacks and background readings on reserve.)

Jean-Luc Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, (University of Chicago Press, 2007)  
Graham Ward, *Cities of God*, ppbk (Routledge, 2000)  
Gilles Deleuze, *Immanence: A Life*  
\_\_\_\_\_. And Feliz Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*  
Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli me tangere*, ppbk., (Fordham UP 2008)  
Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I am*  
Giorgio Agamben, *The Open*, ppbk (Stanford, 2004)  
*Angels: A Modern Myth* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), by Michel Serres [out of print]  
Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader*, ppbk. (Routledge, 2004)  
Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (University of Chicago Press, 2007)  
Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (Yale UP)

### *Reserve Room Readings*

Jacques Derrida's *Touching–Jean-Luc Nancy*, ppbk (Stanford, 2005)  
N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son* (Fortress)  
Michel Henry, *I am the Truth*  
Thomas Carlson, *The Indiscrete Image* (Chicago, 2008)  
Dominique Janicaud, *On the Human Condition*  
Carol Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336*  
N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*  
Mark Taylor, *The Moment of Complexity*

### *Office Hours (HL 506)*

I have scheduled office hours–Tuesday, 3:45-5:30, Wednesday, 1:00-4:15–but you should, for safety's sake, make an appt in advance by email at [johncaputo@comcast.net](mailto:johncaputo@comcast.net).

### *Course Requirements*

- (1) Seminar Participation (20%)
- (2) 2 Research Papers (40% each) (4,000-4,500 words each): For your first paper you should make a more detailed study of any of the particular figures or issues that are addressed in the seminars. For the second paper, you may do that again, with another figure or issue, or take up a related issue that I am not addressing in class.

#### *Paper #1:*

September 30: Statement of topic due

Oct. 28: Paper due

#### *Paper #2:*

Nov. 11 Statement of topic

Dec. 12 Paper due

## *Syllabus*

August 26	Orientation Lecture: “Bodies without Flesh” (Or: “Carnality, Incarnation and the Flight from the Flesh”) (Or: “The Fate of all Flesh”) Reading (handout): “The Fate of all Flesh: A Theology of the Event”
September 2	The Risen Body. Reading (handout): “Strong Imagination: A Hermeneutic of Bodies without Flesh
9	The Erotic Body: Jean-Luc Marion, <i>The Erotic Phenomenon</i> (selections)
16	Eucharistic Bodies Graham Ward, <i>Cities of God</i> , pp. 79-260.
23	Bodies without Organs Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, <i>A Thousand Plateaus</i> (selections)
30	Eid Ul-Fitr (no class) Statement of Topic, Paper #1
October 7	Jean-Luc Nancy, “Corpus” (handout) + <i>Noli me tangere</i> (See also Jacques Derrida, <i>Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy</i> )
14	Jacques Derrida, <i>The Animal That Therefore I am</i>
21	Giorgio Agamben, <i>The Open: Man and Animal</i>
28	Michel Serres, <i>Angels: A Modern Mythology</i> (Paper # 1 due)
November 4	The Problem of “Post-Humanism:” An Introduction Readings: Handouts
11	Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs,” “Ecce Homo,” “Cyborgs to Companion Species,” and “Interview,” in <i>The Haraway Reader</i> (Statement of topic, Paper #2) <i>Public Lecture:</i> David Wills, “Derrida’s <i>The Animal That I Am</i> ,” 5:00pm
18	Mark Taylor, <i>After God</i> (selections) Handout: Review of <i>After God</i>
25	TBA
December 2	Conclusion: Carnality, Incarnation and the Flight from Flesh
12	Paper #2 Due