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**A POWERLESS GOD:
INTERPRETATIONS OF THE CROSS BY DOROTHEE SÖLLE AND JOHN D.
CAPUTO**

by

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Introduction

This thesis is about the cross. The cross is a central feature of Christianity in all times and places. I define the cross as the event of Jesus Christ's suffering and death that has been interpreted in many different ways. Several contemporary Christian theologians have presented promising new interpretations of the cross in fruitful conversation with (post)modernity. They navigate the current era by remaining faithful to what they consider the meaning of the cross, while at the same time liberally revising classical interpretations of the cross. In this way, they go beyond these classical interpretations without surrendering the significance of the cross. Two such contemporary thinkers are Dorothee Sölle and John D. Caputo. Their respective interpretations of the cross are of particular interest because they engage with an important development occurring in the North American and Western European context: the changing attitude toward God. God no longer has the same demanding, clearly demarcated presence as was reflected in classical doctrines such as the impassibility of God.¹ Some theologians, including Sölle herself, taking their cue from Hegel and Nietzsche, have conceptualised this development as the 'death of God'. As I explain below, Caputo has taken this concept one step further in a postmodern direction by coining the notion of the 'death of the death of God'. The problem that ensues concerns the (im)possibility to speak of God after the death of God. Taking Sölle and Caputo as my theological conversation partners, in this thesis I present research on interpretations of the cross that aims to contribute to the solution of this problem.

Whereas most classical interpretations of the cross have attempted to separate God from Jesus Christ's suffering and death, both Sölle and Caputo understand the cross differently. For them, the cross shows that God is not left unaffected by the suffering and death abounding in the world. Both Sölle and Caputo infer from the cross that God is not watching suffering and death from an isolated position in heaven but instead that God is affected by it. What distinguishes their interpretations of the cross from other contemporary proposals is that they conclude from the death of Christ that God suffered and showed weakness. The world decided to crucify Jesus Christ, thereby determining his fate. Similarly, both Sölle and Caputo argue, God is affected by the world. His² weakness is reflected in the cross of Jesus Christ.

If God is thus affected by the world through the cross of Jesus Christ, to a certain extent this renders God dependent on the world. After the death of God, it has become impossible to see God as a metaphysical being existing entirely separately from the world, who either rules the world omnipotently (classical theism) or has abandoned it completely (deism). If one holds that God does not exist entirely separately from the world but that he is still intimately related to it even after the death of God, then this means that God needs the world in order to be God at all and that he is dependent on the world in this way. I define God's dependence as his involvement with the world *that affects his way of being God*, for instance in the current situation after the death of God. The category of God's dependence on

¹ Marcel Sarot ('Patipassianism, Theopaschitism and the Suffering of God', *Religious Studies* 26, no. 3 [1990]: 363–75) provides an informative discussion of previous attempts to define the impassibility of God. He refers to the doctrine as it is held in ancient and modern times, in conjunction with the related notions of 'patipassianism' and 'theopaschitism'.

² I refer to God with masculine pronouns not because I think that God is a man, but because this is the most common way of referring to God. I do not use capital letters for the pronouns I use to refer to God, following a convention started by the New Dutch Bible translation (NBV) in 2004.

the world connects the interpretation of the cross to the desire to speak of God after the death of God.³ By concluding from the cross that God can be affected by the world, both Sölle and Caputo attempt to speak of God after the death of God.

When both Sölle and Caputo thus apply the death that Jesus Christ suffered on the cross to God, theologians must focus on the implications of this application in the here and now. If the cross is indeed central and significant today, it cannot be reserved as an event trapped in the past. Our theological task is, rather, to study the cross and what it says about God in relation to present salvation. This focus, I believe, is what reveals the protestant presupposition of my research. I consider what the cross says about God in relation to how God might be God-for-us (*pro nobis*) after the death of God, not what the cross might say about God as he is in himself (*in se*). In this vein, Bonhoeffer famously wrote in one of his letters from prison that ‘only the suffering God can help’.⁴ In their interpretations of the cross, Sölle and Caputo each have provided an account of this suffering God against the background of their own time. These unconventional accounts result in new and exciting options to continue speaking of God after the death of God, but they simultaneously raise questions that are informed by the Christian tradition and its understanding of salvation. Might they have interpreted the cross in such a way that God has become so dependent on the world that he is no longer recognisable and therefore unable to help us? Or is the application to God of the death that Jesus Christ suffered precisely the language that enables Sölle and Caputo to speak of salvation for (post)modern beings? In this thesis I compare the two thinkers, thereby gaining a focused view of how they understand God’s dependence on the world in their respective interpretations of the cross. My research question, then, is as follows:

How do Dorothee Sölle on the one hand and John D. Caputo on the other understand God’s dependence on the world in their interpretations of the cross, against the background of the (death of the) death of God?

Relevance

This thesis outlines, compares and evaluates unconventional interpretations of the cross which do not receive enough attention in academia, churches, and the media. This will be helpful for both Christians and non-Christians, clergy and laypeople alike, who take an interest in the cross or are invested in it existentially but who simultaneously feel uneasy with its dominant interpretation involving Anselm’s satisfaction theory (the idea that Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was the only way to satisfy the requirement that humanity give back to God more than the world in exchange for sin). In other words, my research can contribute to showing that there is more than one way to think about the cross. This does not mean, however, that this thesis is irrelevant for those who favour the dominant interpretation. The thesis outlines the choices both Sölle and Caputo have made when interpreting the cross and what the consequences of these choices are. This detailed analysis is indispensable for all, even if one disagrees with their argumentation.

³ I was introduced to the categories of the dependence and independence of God as a way to describe modern and classical conceptions of God respectively during a course on systematic theology taught by prof. dr. Maarten Wisse in 2020. I was further alerted to the usefulness of these descriptors by Marcel Sarot, “‘Een mooie gedachte, maar veel te weinig’? Kritische kanttekeningen bij post-theïsme”, *Kerk en Theologie* 67, nr. 3 (2016): 207–27.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Christian Gremmels et al., trans. Isabel Best et al., Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 479.

The relevance of this thesis for systematic theologians specifically is twofold. First, it contributes to approaching the problem of how we can meaningfully speak of God after the attitude to God has shifted in (post)modernity. If theology can be understood as God-talk, then this is a crucial theological problem. Second, it engages with a common critique of liberal theology. Is it true that by abandoning the notion that God exists independently from the world, some liberal theologians have effectively ceased to speak of God? In other words, has liberal theology dissolved God into the world, rendering him unrecognisable? This is a broader topic informing my thesis and is important for systematic theologians who are addressing the liberal tradition, whether they consider themselves affiliated with it or not. The fact that I have chosen to study Sölle and Caputo, however, does reveal my positive attitude toward liberal interpretations of the cross.

Historical and theoretical background

In this thesis, I focus on the suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross and what that means for how we can speak of God after the death of God. I have studied what the cross says about God according to both Sölle and Caputo. This topic fits neatly in the broader Christological question regarding what Jesus Christ's person and work can tell us about God. Therefore, my research question is closely related to historical developments within the field of Christology.

Christology seems to be in tension with the classical doctrine of God; the example of the incarnation can show this. If the Logos becomes flesh in Christ and the Logos is God (John 1:1–14), change seemingly has been introduced into God. Therefore, a challenge ensues: How can we possibly still uphold the classical idea of God's unchangeability? The cross has challenged the classical doctrine of God in a similar way. If God became human in Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ suffered and died on the cross, did God then also suffer and die? And, which is perhaps more scandalous, is God thereby affected by the world, to the extent of making him dependent on whatever the world wants to do to him? The theoretical framework of this challenge to the classical doctrine of God and how theologians have subsequently approached it forms the background of my comparison of Sölle and Caputo. In order to further illuminate this background, the current section is informed by the following guiding question: How do God, the death of God, and the death of the death of God relate to Christology?

In the patristic period, most – if not all – theologians worked under the presupposition that God is 'simple and impassible'.⁵ Therefore, they somehow had to solve the seeming tension arising when reflecting on Christ's suffering on the cross in relation to God. Origen, for example, held that God suffered what he cannot suffer because he freely accepted it.⁶ Another solution was later formulated with reference to kenosis (Phil. 2:5–11), which is the self-emptying of Jesus Christ even to the point of death. The subject of this kenosis was understood to be the pre-existent Logos accepting human nature. Therefore, nothing was taken away from the divinity of Jesus Christ; the human nature was merely added to the

⁵ Bruce McCormack, 'Kenoticism in Modern Christology', in *The Oxford Handbook of Christology*, ed. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 446.

⁶ Theo Kobusch, 'Kann Gott leiden? Zu den philosophischen Grundlagen der Lehre von der Passibilität Gottes bei Origenes', *Vigiliae Christianae* 46, no. 4 (December 1992): 331.

divine nature.⁷ In this proposal, the classical conception of God was protected even with regard to the cross. Jesus Christ allegedly suffered and died only according to his human nature, saving the divine person from death. Thus, the challenge of Christology to the classical doctrine of God was resolved without making God dependent on the world because the Word of God suffered only ‘in the flesh’, merely ‘tasting’ death.⁸ We can question, however, if the cross still has something meaningful to say about God if the suffering and death of Jesus Christ can be applied to his human nature only.

At the dawn of modernity, a fundamental change occurred in the way the challenge of Christology to the classical doctrine of God was conceptualised. Luther coined his theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) in the *Heidelberger Disputation*, arguing that the cross reveals God under the form of his opposite (*sub contraria specie*). This means that in Luther’s theology, divine revelation is hidden in or behind the cross; God reveals himself in ways that seem foolish in the eyes of human wisdom.⁹ Luther’s theology of the cross cuts off any metaphysical speculation right at its root, as it reduces divine revelation to the cross. According to this theology, God is *only* revealed in Jesus Christ’s suffering and death on the cross. This is a major shift in Christological thinking. Luther applies the cross to our knowledge of God, thereby giving priority to the soteriological implications of God becoming human in Christ over the metaphysical conception of God. At the same time, however, Luther’s theology of the cross does not imply that God is dependent on the world. The cross merely shows how God approaches sinful humanity because we, as sinners, cannot know God in his majesty. Furthermore, for Luther God can only be said to have suffered and died to the extent that what can be said about the human nature of Jesus Christ also holds true for his divine nature.¹⁰ It follows that Luther indeed applied the suffering and death of Jesus Christ to God but without concluding that God is dependent on the world.

Although Luther did not think God’s way of being God was affected by the world, his way of applying the suffering and death of Jesus Christ to God opened new avenues of thought in modernity. At this point, the notion of the death of God comes into focus as the background of the comparison between Sölle and Caputo. It is not necessary to sketch a full history of the death of God in this thesis; it suffices at this point to name two thinkers, Hegel and Nietzsche, who shaped its development. Hegel interpreted the death of God philosophically as the ‘speculative Good Friday’. This means that in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, the infinite (God) passed through the finite (the world). In Hegel’s interpretation, the death of Jesus Christ is not merely some historical event but refers to God himself. This death of God is a way that Spirit comes to itself in history, thereby sublimating death.¹¹ Thus, Hegel has philosophically applied the suffering and death of Jesus Christ to God in a way that closely connects God and the world, leading to a mutual dependence.

⁷ Bruce McCormack, ‘Kenoticism in Modern Christology’, 446. Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *The Suffering of the Impassible God: The Dialectics of Patristic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) apologetically covers the heterodox proposals (Docetism, Patripassianism and Arianism) leading up to the ‘orthodox’ solution.

⁸ Cyril of Alexandria, *Third Letter to Nestorius*, 33 (Wickham).

⁹ Vitor Westhelle, ‘Luther’s Theologia Crucis,’ in *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther’s Theology*, ed. Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and Lubomir Batka (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 156–67.

¹⁰ Johannes Zachhuber, ‘Jesus Christ in Martin Luther’s Theology’, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, 29 March 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.327>.

¹¹ Michael Welker, *God the Revealed: Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 153–163.

Nietzsche connected the death of God to the demise of religion in his nineteenth century bourgeois context.¹² In *The Gay Science*, the madman famously pronounced God dead in a speech at the market place.¹³ To Nietzsche, the death of God meant the death of the moral God, which entails the end of any metaphysical foundation of meaning and value.¹⁴ Furthermore, Nietzsche despised the sacrificial interpretation of the crucifixion. As he wrote in *The Antichrist*, this interpretation is full of pitiful *ressentiment*.¹⁵ It appears that in Nietzsche's philosophy, the cross is one of the ways in which the metaphysical God who demands sacrifices is shown to be pathetic and unbelievable, or in other words, dead. In this way, Nietzsche has applied the death of Jesus Christ to God. God's fate has been determined by the world, rendering him not only dependent on the world but also even annihilated by it.

The so-called 'God-is-dead theologians' of the 1960s can be interpreted to have grappled theologically with the heritage of Hegel and Nietzsche. In the US, Thomas J. J. Altizer concluded that Jesus' death on the cross refers to God's death in Altizer's secular age. According to him, God emptied himself of his transcendence until he died on the cross. God as Absolute Spirit was thereby released into his opposite, and therefore spirit could come to consciousness in history. Altizer saw this happening in the 1960s: because God was completely absent in secularised society, spirit could become present in all of humanity.¹⁶ Another God-is-dead theologian, Gabriel Vahanian, was among the first to criticise Altizer regarding the death of God. He thought that Altizer and others misunderstood the death of God as a soteriological necessity, while he contended it was a cultural event.¹⁷ According to Vahanian, Nietzsche's death of God occurred whenever God was reduced to a cultural artefact.¹⁸ Interestingly, Vahanian did not apply the death of Jesus to God. The death of Jesus the human was rather the death that liberated God and humanity from their dependency on each other.¹⁹

Dorothee Sölle applied the cross to God in a way that is related to the God-is-dead theologians, but she uniquely related it to the notion of representation. In her first book, published in 1965 and titled *Stellvertretung (Christ the Representative)*, Sölle processed the death of God in secularised society and especially after the Holocaust.²⁰ Immediately after Sölle's death, Sarah Pinnock published a volume discussing her theology and containing helpful evaluations of her interpretations of the cross, transcendence and suffering, and her

¹² John D. Caputo, 'Atheism, A/Theology, and the Postmodern Condition,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 270.

¹³ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 119-120.

¹⁴ Matthew Edward Harris, 'The Reception of Nietzsche's Announcement of the 'Death of God' in Twentieth-Century Theorising Concerning the Divine: The Death of God,' *The Heythrop Journal* 59, no. 2 (March 2018): 150.

¹⁵ Benjamin D. Crowe, 'Nietzsche, the Cross, and the Nature of God,' *The Heythrop Journal* 48, no. 2 (2007): 246-7.

¹⁶ Harris, 'The Reception of Nietzsche's Announcement of the 'Death of God' in Twentieth-Century Theorising Concerning the Divine,' 152.

¹⁷ Gabriel Vahanian, 'Swallowed Up by Godlessness,' *The Christian Century*, December 8, 1965, 1505.

¹⁸ Harris, 'The Reception of Nietzsche's Announcement of the 'Death of God' in Twentieth-Century Theorising Concerning the Divine,' 153.

¹⁹ Mike Grimshaw, "'In Spite of the Death of God': Gabriel Vahanian's Secular Theology,' *Palgrave Communications* 1, no. 15025 (December 2015): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2015.25>.

²⁰ Dorothee Sölle, *Stellvertretung: Ein Kapitel Theologie nach dem 'Tode Gottes'*, 19.-26. Tausend (Stuttgart: Kreuz, 1982). The publication of the book was preceded by an article which already contains important elements of the later book (Dorothee Sölle, 'Theologie nach dem Tode Gottes,' *Merkur* 18, no. 201 [1964]: 1101-17).

Christology.²¹ While Sölle stirred much controversy during her lifetime, recent systematic academic attention to her work seems relatively sparse. It is widely agreed that Sölle understood God as dependent on the world. What is less well known is that this understanding was deeply rooted in her Christology.²² However, considering the challenge of Christology and especially of the cross to the classical doctrine of God, this should not come as a surprise. In this thesis, I explore and evaluate how Sölle operationalised the challenge of Christology to the classical conception of God in the context of the death of God.

John D. Caputo applies the cross to God in a way that is related to Sölle's, but distinct. This distinction can be traced back partially to theological developments that have formed the theoretical framework of my research. In the 1980s, God-is-dead theology was updated with contemporary developments in continental philosophy in mind.²³ The philosopher Mark C. Taylor, for example, employed Jacques Derrida's concept of deconstruction as the hermeneutics of the death of God. Caputo, who reads Derrida through the lens of his later works, goes a step further than Taylor on this point. If modernity, which has set rational boundaries that have squared off religious faith, leads to secularisation and the death of God, then postmodernity, which is the critique of such rational binaries, leads to the death of the death of God.²⁴ For Caputo, then, deconstruction is not the hermeneutics of the death of God; in fact, deconstruction offers a new way to discover the event stirring in the name of God.²⁵

After several decades of relative marginalisation, radical God-is-dead theology received renewed critical attention in several edited volumes.²⁶ The volume *After the Death of God* carefully traces how Caputo has advanced the field of radical God-is-dead theology by providing an account of his debate with Gianni Vattimo. The editor of the volume, Jeffrey W. Robbins, engages with Caputo's idea of the 'death of the death of God' in the introduction.²⁷ In the death of Jesus on the cross, an event transpires, 'a certain death of God', which means the death of God as the highest, omnipotent being.²⁸ It seems that for Caputo, the death of God has the rather minimal meaning that God is weak and beyond being, and it does not (as in previous God-is-dead theology) refer to the decline of religion. Caputo applies the death of Jesus Christ on the cross to God, but he is not so much concerned with the historical development of secularisation. By the notion of the 'death of the death of God', Caputo means that the conditions of secularisation, assumed by God-is-dead theology to have caused the death of God, are no longer self-evident.

²¹ Sarah Katherine Pinnock, ed., *The Theology of Dorothee Soelle* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003).

²² Dianne L. Oliver, 'Christ in the World: The Christological Vision of Dorothee Soelle', in *The Theology of Dorothee Soelle*, ed. Sarah K. Pinnock (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 110.

²³ Christopher D. Rodkey and Jordan E. Miller, 'Introduction,' in *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology*, ed. Christopher D. Rodkey and Jordan E. Miller (New York: Springer, 2018), 11.

²⁴ Caputo, 'Atheism, A/Theology, and the Postmodern Condition,' 4-5; 15-16.

²⁵ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

²⁶ Stephen R. Haynes and John K. Roth, *The Death of God Movement and the Holocaust: Radical Theology Encounters the Shoah* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999); Lissa McCullough and Brian Schroeder, eds., *Thinking through the Death of God: A Critical Companion to Thomas J.J. Altizer* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004); Daniel J. Peterson, ed., *Resurrecting the Death of God: The Origins, Influence, and Return of Radical Theology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014); Christopher D. Rodkey and Jordan E. Miller, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology* (New York: Springer, 2018).

²⁷ Jeffrey W. Robbins, 'Introduction: After the Death of God', in *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 19.

²⁸ Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 66.

Later, in his 2019 monograph *Cross and Cosmos*, Caputo explicitly relates his theological project to the cross.²⁹ He argues that the cross shows how God will die when our finite cosmos implodes and that there is difficult glory in accepting this fact. He is not concerned with the God of classical theism who allegedly died at some point in history, but with God as he can be conceived by a postmodern theology of the cross: mortal and beyond being. Like Sölle, Caputo applies the cross to God, fully heeding the challenge of Christology. Both authors process the tension between the cross and the classical conception of God that has existed from early Christianity, concluding that God is dependent on the world. In order to evaluate both approaches and to determine whether and how, according to them, God remains God when he is dependent on the world, this thesis compares Sölle and Caputo.

When considering the challenge of Christology and the conclusion that God is dependent on the world, the theme of the difference or tension between God and the world (or the lack thereof) presents itself. A way this difference has been conceptualised is by thinking of God's transcendence. In the remainder of this section, I introduce several fragments from the vast debate about God's transcendence as a background for the present inquiry. These can help to understand and compare the respective conceptions of God by Sölle and Caputo, and consequently their conceptions of God's dependence on the world.

God-is-dead theology has generally emphasised that the death of God entails the dissolution of God's transcendence into the immanent. However, it has been noted that transcendence has made an unexpected return even after the death of God. It is apparently difficult for thinkers to step beyond the concept of transcendence. In the introduction to a volume on transcendence that Caputo edited together with Michael J. Scanlon, the editors identify two ways in which thinkers have attempted to move beyond transcendence.³⁰ The first way proposes a 'hypertranscendence' which reimagines transcendence in terms of the 'wholly other' (associated with Jean-Luc Marion and Emmanuel Levinas). The second way releases transcendence altogether and can be described as a 'post-transcendence' (associated with Gianni Vattimo).

Some are critical of these new models of transcendence emerging after the death of God. Writing in a volume called *Resurrecting the Death of God*, Andrew W. Hass objects that immanence within a sphere always already implies another sphere that transcends it.³¹ He argues that transcendence and immanence form a binary opposition that continues to reappear in different forms, even after the death of God. Immanence is always an immanence *to* something, and transcendence is always a transcendence *over* something. Even though one might argue that the immanentism of God-is-dead theology is only immanent to itself (as radical immanence), Hass observes that transcendence is bound to make an implicit or explicit return because the classical dualism between immanence and transcendence has never been dismantled. In order to overcome this dualism, Hass has proposed the category of 'becoming', which he traces in the thought of Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Whitehead. This notion of becoming, he argues, might help us in 'making our way back to God'.³²

²⁹ John D. Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos: A Theology of Difficult Glory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019).

³⁰ John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *Transcendence and beyond: A Postmodern Inquiry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 2.

³¹ Andrew H. Hass, 'Becoming', in *Resurrecting the Death of God: The Origins, Influence, and Return of Radical Theology*, ed. Daniel J. Peterson and G. Michael Zbaraschuk (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 155-158.

³² Hass, 'Becoming', 167.

A scholar who, conversely, has promoted the propriety of using the concept of transcendence, instead of avoiding it, is Merold Westphal. In *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, he argues that God's transcendence should be studied in close connection with human self-transcendence because 'what we say about God should have a direct bearing on our own self-transformation'.³³ According to Westphal, transcendence does not imply that God can only be found beyond or outside of the world. If the wholly other were actually completely other, this other would be so alien to our experience that there would be no way for us to relate to it. Therefore, Westphal defines the wholly other by stating that 'an other can rightly be said to be wholly other if it enters my experience on its own terms and not mine, if it *permanently exceeds* the forms and categories of my transcendental ego, and *permanently surprises* my horizons of expectation'.³⁴ Clearly, God's transcendence implies for Westphal his irreducible otherness. In opposition to Hass, I find that Westphal builds a convincing case for continuing to speak of God's transcendence because he shows its relevance to human self-transcendence.

To conclude this short review, I refer to a typology of transcendence by Wessel Stoker. In the opening contribution to the volume *Looking Beyond?*, Stoker identifies four fundamental types of transcendence.³⁵ It is important to note that Stoker's model is heuristic in nature, aimed at describing how views of transcendence function in a selection of different areas of culture. However, for the present purpose, his typology is also suitable to track similarities and differences between Sölle and Caputo with regard to their views on God's transcendence. The first type, 'immanent transcendence', understands God or the absolute as intimately related to the world, allowing a person to directly experience God in the world. The second type, 'radical transcendence', emphasises the radical difference between God and the world, including human beings. According to thinkers associated with this type, such as Kierkegaard, God is wholly other but not isolated from the world. The third type, 'radical immanence', no longer finds God 'beyond'. Rather, in this type God has completely emptied himself into the world. This type is associated with God-is-dead theology such as Altizer's. The fourth type, 'transcendence as alterity', emphasises otherness and can apply to both religious and non-religious contexts. Among its associated thinkers are Derrida and Levinas. The difference between the second and the fourth type is that the fourth type rejects the binary condition of immanence or transcendence. In what follows, I use the typology of Stoker to characterise both Sölle's and Caputo's conception of God.

Method

My thesis has focused on interpretations of the cross by two scholars as its main scope. In order to compare the two in a workable manner, I have delimited the comparison to the single category of God's dependence on the world. Furthermore, I do not consider the entire life and work of Sölle and Caputo, respectively; instead, I focus on Sölle's *Stellvertretung* and Caputo's *Cross and Cosmos*.

In order to answer my research question, I have closely read the texts of both Sölle and Caputo, thereby drawing out the main threads of their argument. My main method, then, has

³³ Merold Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence: On God and the Soul* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 2.

³⁴ Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, 3. Italics are by Westphal himself.

³⁵ Wessel Stoker, 'Culture and Transcendence: A Typology', in *Looking beyond? Shifting Views of Transcendence in Philosophy, Theology, Art, and Politics*, ed. Wessel Stoker and W. L. Van der Merwe (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2012), 5-26.

been literature review. I have subjected the core arguments that I found to conceptual analysis by identifying the different parts of each, examining their interconnections and sketching how they construe God's dependence on the world.³⁶ In this thesis, I aim to demonstrate how the arguments of the respective authors are related to the background of the (death of the) death of God. This part of my method is hermeneutical in nature because it implies the analysis of different interpretations and their interconnections. Subsequently, I use my analysis to compare both interpretations of the cross using the category of God's dependence on the world. One of the reasons that I selected Sölle and Caputo is that they have relatively similar interpretations of the cross (e.g. they both reject the impassibility of God). In my comparative research design, this choice of similar interpretations yields differences that can inform my answer to the research question.³⁷ If I had chosen two authors with completely different views (e.g. a traditional and an unconventional thinker), the many differences would have been less informative. Finally, I aim to analyse and compare Sölle and Caputo while remaining conscious of their historical context and to evaluate their contributions to the debate. For the evaluation, I use the criteria of consistency (is the argumentation consistent?), intention (what is the aim of these authors, is that aim fitting and well-argued, and do they each actually achieve their goals?), and usability (are the results and conclusions of each respective author actually useful?).

I have divided the research question into six subquestions:

1. What is Sölle's interpretation of the cross and how does it relate to the death of God?
2. What do Sölle's interpretation of the cross and its relation to the death of God imply for God's dependence on the world?
3. What is Caputo's interpretation of the cross and how does it relate to the death of the death of God?
4. What do Caputo's interpretation of the cross and its relation to the death of the death of God imply for God's dependence on the world?
5. How do Caputo's ideas and Sölle's ideas about God's dependence on the world compare to each other?
6. How can we evaluate the understanding of God and God's dependence on the world by both Sölle and Caputo against the background of the (death of the) death of God?

In the following chapters, I answer these subquestions with the goal of answering my research question in the conclusion. In the first chapter on Sölle's *Stellvertretung*, I discuss the first two subquestions. In the second chapter, I turn to the next two subquestions, which concern Caputo's *Cross and Cosmos*. The third chapter is dedicated to the comparison and evaluation of Sölle and Caputo, guided by the final two subquestions.

³⁶ Michael Beaney, 'Analysis', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2021), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/analysis/>.

³⁷ Therefore, my research design can be classified as a 'most-similar systems design' (Michael Stausberg, 'Comparison', in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler [London; New York: Routledge, 2011], 32-33).

1. The interpretation of the cross in Sölle's *Christ the Representative*

1.1. Introduction to Sölle's life and work

When discussing German theologian Dorothee Sölle (1929–2003), it is helpful to consider her motivations for writing her first work titled *Christ the Representative: An Essay in Theology after the 'Death of God'* in 1965.¹ According to the afterword she added in the second edition of the study, Sölle wrote this book primarily for herself. She simply wanted to formulate and ponder several related questions concerning identity, Christology, and theology. The way she frames these questions in the book – against the background of the death of God – stirred considerable controversy.² This had already been foreshadowed by the rejection of her manuscript after a long discussion in a publishing house in Göttingen.³ This testifies to her candid, challenging, and unapologetic way of approaching theology, always aiming directly for the heart of the matter. Although in her first published work the questions she discusses are her own and firmly embedded in her biography, the proverbial soil from which these questions sprang was widely shared among her generation in Germany.⁴ Sölle lived through the Second World War as a teenager growing up in a liberal Protestant household in Cologne. Her family was internally critical of the Nazi regime, but the young Dorothee was told not to speak about this to others. At a young age, she had already been exposed to the day-to-day discrimination of Jews in the streets and at school and to the knowledge of the concentration camps. These experiences had a considerable impact on Sölle both during and after the war. On the one hand, she found herself attracted to German writers such as Goethe and Hölderlin, who were considered the pinnacles of high German culture. When reflecting on her teenage diaries years later, she was baffled at the lack of references to the bleak war-time realities such as bombings and food shortages and at the wealth of German literature her younger self cited and discussed. On the other hand, Sölle was faced with an existential crisis in the direct aftermath of the war, resulting from the atrocities conducted under the Nazi regime and the responsibility she felt as a German. She then tackled her existential questions directly by independently studying Nietzsche's nihilism, which gave her a sense of freedom but for her did not sufficiently engage with the material and political causes leading up to the war. Her struggle with the memory of the war and especially the event of the Holocaust, which came to be symbolised by the concentration camp Auschwitz, took a different turn when she encountered radical and existentialist theologies under the guidance of her high school

¹ Dorothee Sölle, *Christ the Representative: An Essay in Theology after the 'Death of God'*, trans. David Lewis (London: S.C.M. Press, 1967). When citing, I will use this English translation of the German original text in the body text of this chapter. I will give the key German terms between parentheses or, in the case of a longer citation, I will cite the German original text in the footnote. For the German citations, I will use the newest available edition of the text (Dorothee Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, Dorothee Sölle: Gesammelte Werke 3 [Stuttgart: Kreuz, 2006]).

² Besides many reviews in different languages, the study even inspired a book-length response (Helmut Gollwitzer, *Von der Stellvertretung Gottes. Christlicher Glaube in der Erfahrung der Verborgenheit Gottes: Zum Gespräch mit Dorothee Sölle* [München: Kaiser, 1967]).

³ Sölle relates this story in the 1982 afterword (Dorothee Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 133-134), which is therefore not included in the 1967 translation.

⁴ In the current section, I take biographical details and the way they are framed from Sarah Pinnock, 'Dorothee Soelle', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology*, ed. Christopher D. Rodkey and Jordan E. Miller (New York: Springer, 2018), 367-369.

teacher, Marie Veit. Although Sölle had been very critical of Christianity up to that point, Veit helped her into a meaningful encounter with

‘the face of a man, tortured to death 2000 years ago, who did not choose nihilism. Actually, it was Christ who got me into theology, Christ who forced me to ask the question, can one really claim that all that matters is love?’⁵

This quote shows how nihilism and the closely related concept of the death of God enabled Sölle to encounter Jesus as a man prepared to die for love. It was not the institutionalised religion of the church that put Sölle ‘in the arms of Christ’ but rather her immersion into Søren Kierkegaard’s work when she was twenty years old. According to her, he had what later existentialists did not have: ‘radical religion, transcendence over what is, a passion for the unconditional.’⁶ These qualities provided the conditions under which Sölle encountered the cross.

1.2. *Christ the Representative in the context of Sölle’s life and work*

The short biographical sketch above shows how existentially invested Sölle was in the themes of identity and the death of God before she wrote *Christ the Representative*. This investment can be experienced when reading the text. The formulations are sharp and reflective, always revealing a thorough engagement with the topic that goes further than mere cognitive understanding. Sölle’s text requires a similar engagement from the reader. The questions of identity (‘Who am I? How do I find my true self?’⁷) raised in the introduction are posed to stimulate resonance with the reader. These questions take shape against the background of the experience of non-identity and concrete life in society. Sölle approaches identity from a theological perspective, not so much answering but complicating the questions from the assumption ‘that only the man [sic] who has learnt who Christ is knows and can say who he himself is’.⁸ Currently, Sölle proceeds, Christ is experienced under the conditions of the death of God, which is ‘[t]he historical condition [*Bedingung*] under which the absolute [*Unbedingtes*] appears today’.⁹ She contended that the questions of identity related to the experience of Christ had to be addressed anew in her historical situation, in which the experience of God had lost its previous direct certainty.¹⁰ One might perhaps fear that identity grounded in the experience of Christ, which is Sölle’s translation of the kingdom of God (*Reich Gottes*), would be lost when God died in this way. However, Sölle’s argument throughout the book is that the hope of the kingdom of God in which identity is possible really does not disappear when God has died. Instead, Sölle argues that identity grounded in Christ can be found under the new ‘post-theistic’ (*nachtheistischen*) conditions when the issue is approached from the perspective of representation.¹¹ Christ’s name of representative

⁵ Dorothee Sölle, *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian*, trans. Martin Rumscheidt and Barbara Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 20.

⁶ Sölle, *Against the Wind*, 20.

⁷ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 9 (‘Wer bin ich? Wie komme ich zu mir selber?’ [Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 10]).

⁸ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 10 (‘dass nur derjenige sagen könne, wer er selber sei, der erfahren habe, wer Christus sei’ [Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 11]).

⁹ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 10 (‘die Bedingung, unter der Unbedingtes heute erscheint’ [Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 11]).

¹⁰ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 12.

¹¹ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 14.

enables Sölle to elaborate on the identity of a person before God and God's identity in the world, in the situation after the death of God.

Although *Christ the Representative* is an early work from Sölle's career, it already contains seeds of many ideas she would cultivate later. Therefore, I focused on *Christ the Representative* while endeavouring to understand Sölle's interpretation of the cross and its meaning against the background of the death of God. Two leading questions have helped to structure the present chapter. As a first step, I describe Sölle's interpretation of the cross and ask how it relates to the death of God. In a second section, I inquire what her interpretation of the cross implies for God's dependence on the world.

There are several reasons for limiting the analysis in this chapter to *Christ the Representative*. First, as the title suggests, the book explicitly addresses questions of Christology, asking who Jesus Christ is for us today. Sölle's early interest in Christology coincides with the research topic of this thesis, which makes it an appropriate place to begin. It reveals the Christocentric impulse of Sölle's post-theistic theology, which continued to inform her later work even when her attention shifted from Christology to other topics.¹² Second, *Christ the Representative* contains Sölle's main exploration of the death of God, which for her is not a concept but an experience. Therefore, this study provides the main literary source for research into Sölle's interpretation of the cross in relation to the death of God. Only after closely reading this source can we fully appreciate how the death of God informs Sölle's post-theistic stance. Third, *Christ the Representative* emphasises the cross in the way Sölle spells the name of representative anew under the condition of the death of God. Even though there is a development in Sölle's interpretation of the cross which reflects more general developments in her theological thinking, this book contains the groundwork of Sölle's later interpretations of the cross that needs to be grasped before advancing to her later work. Before embarking on a more detailed analysis of how Sölle employs the death of God, the cross, and God's dependence on the world in *Christ the Representative*, I provide in the following section an impression of the methods used and the main steps of argumentation taken in the study.

1.3. Sölle's methods in *Christ the Representative*

As indicated previously, Sölle aims to rethink Christ's name of representative under the condition of the death of God. But how does she do this? What is her method? She begins by relating the human quest for identity to the experience of Christ. She asserts that we cannot prove that our identity can be grounded in Christ by experiencing him but rather that this relationship can surely be *thought* using the category of representation. This methodological assertion reveals the scope of the book because Sölle does not stretch her general thesis further. Indeed, she would argue that it is impossible to go any further than scrutinising our identity grounded in the experience of Christ because today faith can only take shape through Christ.¹³ This means that after the death of God, which is the loss of God's previous

¹² Dianne L. Oliver, 'Christ in the World', 113; 125. Another useful introduction to Sölle's Christology is by Luise Schottroff and Renate Wind ('Wie von Gott reden in einer Welt von Gewalt? Zur Christologie Dorothee Sölles', in *Christus und seine Geschwister: Christologie im Umfeld der Bibel in gerechter Sprache*, ed. Marlene Crüseman and Carsten Jochum-Bortfeld [Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2009], 190–205). Darren Cushman-Wood, 'Suffering with the Crucified Christ: The Function of the Cross in the Works of John Wesley and Dorothee Soelle', *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 43, no. 1 (2008): 194–199 focuses on Sölle's interpretation of the cross.

¹³ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 139-140.

immediacy (*Unmittelbarkeit*), hope in God's kingdom in which identity is possible can only be mediated through Christ's representation of a person before God and of God before us. Therefore, as Sölle explains in the 1982 German afterword, she applies the method of Christological reduction typical for twentieth-century post-war theologies. According to Sölle, we can no longer take the presumed immediate relationship between God and the soul as the starting point of our theologies. Instead, we start from the 'godless zero point' (*gottlosen Nullpunkt*)¹⁴ of post-war bourgeois society in which God's unmediated presence can no longer be felt. Here Sölle agrees with dialectical theology in the sense that Jesus Christ is our only access to God; this is the Christological reduction. Furthermore, Sölle argues that we encounter Christ as a person who is our equal but simultaneously quite different from us.¹⁵ By emphasising the importance of living individuals in their relation to Christ, Sölle diverges from dialectical theology. A methodological reason for this is how she approaches history. She identifies two ways in which our view on history can impact how we interpret what Christ does for us. On the one hand, one could say that history unfolds according to God's preconceived plan that has become apparent in God's self-revelation in Christ. The subsequent development of history does not matter because Christ has already redeemed and liberated human beings. Therefore, concrete history dissolves into salvation history in which salvation comes 'vertically from above' (*senkrecht von oben*).¹⁶ Here, Sölle clearly references the theology of Karl Barth. On the other hand, she argues that there is another way to relate what Christ does for us to history. This approach focuses on the historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) of a person that has been made possible by Christ. What Christ does for us is to give us historicity, by enabling us to come to know ourselves and by liberating us so that we can take responsibility. Although Sölle admits that these interpretations of what Christ does for us in history cannot be separated in lived Christian existence, she does indicate that the interpretation one favours determines the Christological method.¹⁷ It is clear that Sölle herself starts from the latter interpretation. But if Sölle thinks that what Christ does for us can best be described with reference to the historicity of a person enabling their responsibility, what does this imply for her method? Does she take her starting point in anthropology or Christology?

A second way to gauge the method Sölle employs while considering representation is her constructively critical discussion with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, which focuses on the relationship between (theological) anthropology and Christology.¹⁸ Sölle describes how Bonhoeffer argues that taking responsibility always presumes representation because responsibility implies representation for others. Sölle's critique is directed at the Christological support Bonhoeffer gives to his argument. He argues that Jesus Christ lived representatively for us and that therefore all human life is now aimed at representation. Sölle objects that Bonhoeffer's argument is unclear because he does not clarify what is at stake phenomenologically in human life that makes it inherently representative. In other words, Bonhoeffer rejects taking the anthropological realities of human life into account from the start. The result is that certain beliefs must be accepted without being grounded in actual living faith, which is contrary to Sölle's understanding of theology as thinking through lived experiences with Christ. Furthermore, Bonhoeffer's purely Christological starting point causes him to overlook a specifically anthropological quality of human life, that is, being

¹⁴ From the 1982 afterword (Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 135).

¹⁵ Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 135.

¹⁶ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 14.

¹⁷ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 15.

¹⁸ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 93-94.

dependent on a representative. People not only take responsibility for others in their lives, but they are also dependent on others to represent them in turn. To his detriment, Bonhoeffer misses this fact and therefore ends up equating representation to responsibility. Sölle prefers to side with Paul Tillich, who asserts that anthropology is the question that is answered by Christology.¹⁹ What can phenomenologically be said about representation, then, includes both its Christological and its anthropological structure. This does not mean, however, that Sölle simply concedes the Christocentric orientation of her theology. Although she does not start this book with an exposition regarding who Christ is and what he does according to the Christian tradition, she consistently affirms that Christ is indispensable when addressing the question of how a person can come to identity through representation. Sölle's method entails starting with the anthropological structure of representation so that she can show why a person needs Christ, who does not replace but represents. The result is that she directs her Christological method toward illuminating what Christ does for us today and not that she mistakes human longings for salvation, as some of her critics (and critics of liberal theology in general) have claimed.²⁰

1.4. Sölle's argumentation in *Christ the Representative*

This section presents Sölle's argumentation in *Christ the Representative*. As was discussed above, Sölle starts from the question of identity and approaches this question from a theological perspective. Only a person who has experienced who Christ is can say something about their own identity. In the present situation after the death of God, which is the condition (*Bedingung*) under which the unconditional (*Unbedingtes*) now appears, we can only think about this identity grounded in Christ from the perspective of representation. Sölle addresses a Christological problem, 'the fact that the man of God represents us before God and God among us, and the manner of that representation'.²¹ In order to advance her solution, she starts by contrasting representation with substitution (*Ersatz*). She provides the following definitions: 'substitution is a final exchange of dead impersonal or depersonalized being, whereas representation is the provisional intervention of persons on behalf of persons'.²² Substitution entails complete disregard of what is being replaced, whereas representation is aimed at remembrance. Moreover, although in the modern world humans are highly replaceable, much philosophical thought still insists on the irreplaceability of a person. Two ways to underpin irreplaceable personhood have existed historically. Firstly, the religious-metaphysical approach understood the irreplaceability of a person as grounded in God. Individuals would play a role in the world theatre of God and fulfil this role to the best of their abilities, but their personhood would be secured in heaven, with God. Sölle identifies a dialectic in one's engagement with the role and the subsequent dissociation from it (as God truly knows the person beyond the role). This dialectic disappeared when, secondly, the modern approach based personal irreplaceability on achievements. The role-player was now

¹⁹ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 102-103.

²⁰ Jeannine Michele Graham (*Representation and Substitution in the Atonement Theologies of Dorothee Sölle, John Macquarrie, and Karl Barth* [New York: Peter Lang, 2005], 62-66) critically argues that Sölle lets her Christology be determined by anthropological assumptions.

²¹ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 16 ('dass und wie der Mensch Gottes uns vor Gott und Gott bei uns vertritt' [Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 17]).

²² Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 23 ('„Ersatz“ ist endgültiger Austausch von totem, dinghaftemoder verdinglichtem Sein, Stellvertretung dagegen vorläufiges Eintreten von Personen für Personen' [Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 21]).

understood as replaceable because the idea that God looks beyond the role had disappeared. This, Sölle argues, has led to a new tension that determines the structure of representation.²³

Sölle explains this tension by identifying another dialectic pattern. The idealistic thesis, which she derives from Hegel, is that a person is irreplaceable. This irreplaceability is not substantial but based on being-in-relation. A person is irreplaceable because God takes an interest in the subject which confirms its absolute importance and because this interest shows itself in the work a person does in society.²⁴ The positivistic antithesis, however, states that a person is in fact replaceable because they function as no more than a replaceable part of the machine. Therefore, a person's achievements can no longer show their irreplaceability; someone else can easily replace what they do and substitute them. In this framework, therefore, representation functions as substitution.²⁵ The synthesis that Sölle proposes is that a person is irreplaceable but also representable (*vertretbar*). This synthesis does not resolve the tension between idealistic irreplaceability and positivistic replaceability but instead dialectically connects the two by means of representation. Sölle argues that representation is necessary for a person to be considered irreplaceable. Every irreplaceable person exists in time and needs time to come to identity; if one were to exist outside time, this would result in their replacement in time. But being in time implies a person is not perfect (not yet fulfilled). Without representation, therefore, even a person existing in time would be replaced. By being represented, however, someone is granted time and thus not replaced. Therefore, to the extent that someone is irreplaceable, that person needs representation. In sum, the person who is seen as irreplaceable is dependent (*angewiesen*) on representation, which necessarily occurs 'in time', granting the person time. The conditions of representation that follow from this are personality (*Personalität*) and temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*). These conditions determine the structure of representation, which Sölle argues consists of both dependence (*Angewiesenheit*) and responsibility (*Verantwortung*).²⁶ This is how Sölle phenomenologically defines representation.

Before Sölle presents her post-theistic proposal to think of Christ as representative, she traces the concept of representation in the theological tradition. Two aspects she highlights are especially relevant with regard to her subsequent post-theistic interpretation of representation. First, she places Christian representation somewhere between the two poles of magic and substitution. Sölle argues that magical thinking devolves into exchange (*Austausch*) because magic replaces something or someone definitively and independently of time. Magic is in fact not representation because it is not personal and not temporal. According to Sölle, this magical understanding rooted in pre-personal thought resembles 'the technological substitution of post-personal thought'.²⁷ Modern technological replaceability is not personal and atemporal, which for Sölle means that it cannot be representation that fosters identity. However, secondly she does find this representation in the New Testament, reflected in the Pauline formula 'for us' (*ὐπὲρ ἡμῶν*). In the New Testament she finds four material characteristics that distinguish representation understood in the Christian sense from magic on the one hand and substitution on the other: 'universalization, historicity, voluntariness,

²³ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 24-30.

²⁴ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 31-38.

²⁵ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 39-42.

²⁶ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 50-56.

²⁷ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 66 ('dem technischen Ersatz des nachpersonalen Denkens' [Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 58]).

suffering'.²⁸ Representation, in short, is bound to a historical person who voluntarily makes himself the representative for many through suffering. This person is the dying God who can be recognised in history.

In her final step of argumentation, Sölle presents her way of thinking about Christ as representative under post-theistic conditions. According to her, Christ represents us without replacing us.²⁹ Sölle argues against the misunderstanding that identity occurs when we are replaced by Christ's perfect achievement; she terms this way of thinking 'Christological perfectionism'.³⁰ If we think of what Christ does for us in terms of substitution, our life does not matter anymore because it has been replaced by Christ's. In this way, Christological perfectionism reduces humans to replaceability. But it also substitutes God, who cares about us deeply and expects much from us, for an indifferent idol who is content with Christ the representative *only* and forgets about us. According to Sölle, however, God still expects us to learn from Jesus Christ and to do the same as he did for us. God did not forget us. He continues to wait for us in the hope that, one day, we will be like Christ. By representing God before us, Christ ensures that we experience God as someone who remembers and does not replace us. Therefore, Sölle argues that Christ represents not only us before God but also God before us. To explain this, she analyses what Christ does as representative using three basic features of personal and temporal representation: 'identification, dependence [*Abhängigkeit*] and provisionality'.³¹ One of the conclusions of this analysis is '[t]he [h]elplessness [*Ohnmacht*] of God in the [w]orld'.³² According to Sölle, Christ has changed the role of God to the role of the God without power (*die Ohnmacht Gottes*). Being represented by Christ, God has put himself at stake. He has made himself dependent on human beings and has identified himself with the non-identical (*den Nichtidentischen*). The discussion moves to this final step by considering the death of God in connection to Sölle's interpretation of the cross.

1.5. Sölle's understanding of the death of God

The death of God plays a central role in Sölle's argumentation. As was discussed previously, the death of God is the condition under which the unconditional (*Unbedingtes*) now appears. Sölle claims that she follows Nietzsche in saying that the death of God is in fact only the death of his immediacy (*Unmittelbarkeit*), or the death of an image of God that humans held earlier but that has since become unbelievable.³³ This previous image of God was based on God's direct, unmediated presence in the world. The death of God entails the end of this representation of God that had been produced by the human consciousness. For Sölle, this means that God's presence in the world is now always a mediated presence. Thus, the unconditional has become conditioned and what was unmediated is now mediated. Moreover, for Sölle the death of God is an experience rather than an observation made from a safe distance.³⁴ As an experience, the death of God ends all unmediated certainty, whether objective and universal or subjective and private. Indeed, people experiencing the death of God can no longer find a stable and certain worldview in either theism or atheism, although

²⁸ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 71 ('Entgrenzung, Historizität, Freiwilligkeit und Leiden' [Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 62]).

²⁹ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 101-106.

³⁰ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 103.

³¹ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 106 ('Identifikation, Abhängigkeit und Vorläufigkeit' [Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 91]).

³² Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 150-152 ('[d]ie Ohnmacht Gottes in der Welt' [Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 131]).

³³ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 133-134.

³⁴ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 11-12.

simultaneously the question of identity continues to disrupt them. This lived experience of the death of God therefore always contains uncertainty even though this uncertainty might be grounded in a deeper knowing (*Gewissen*). In this way, Sölle dialectically argues that the experience of the death of God leads people beyond either theism or atheism. That the death of God can be experienced, furthermore, brings a certain relationality to Sölle's theology. Sölle does not simply observe that God has died, but specifically asks how we relate to this death: '[f]or whom [...] is God dead?'³⁵ For Sölle, therefore, the death of God is not a distant or merely factual phenomenon but instead an experience that invites persons to relate to it.

Sölle mentions two causes (derived from Nietzsche³⁶) that enable many of her contemporaries to experience the death of God. The first cause is scientific and technological advancement. The unmediated relationship to God of persons and the society in which they live ends as soon as God is no longer needed as a working hypothesis for upholding morality, politics, or the natural sciences. Technology increasingly takes over the functions that God previously fulfilled, such as providing healing. This development renders God unnecessary. The second cause is philosophical rationalism. Rationalist critiques of religion have rendered naïve theism impossible since the Enlightenment. Metaphysical speculation regarding God's nature is now only reserved for private religious reflection or experience. In this context, if one expresses that God lives, this often falls on deaf ears. Unmediated religious certainty has therefore become impossible in view of the Enlightenment. Because we live in a post-theistic age, people increasingly experience the death of God. At the same time, the desire for meaning remains constant despite the destruction of any metaphysical foundation of meaning and value by this experience of the death of God.³⁷

According to Sölle, the experience of the death of God can evoke two reactions. First, a person living in society will often look for substitution for God. This, Sölle writes, happens when we take God's absence as his death. Rather confusingly, 'death' in this latter sense seems to mean something different from the 'death of God' that Sölle has hitherto described. This seems like a 'second death', in which society completely forgets about God and attempts to replace him fully. However, this substitution of God by society never succeeds. A gap shaped by a desire for meaning, truth and identity always remains and cannot be filled.³⁸ Second, the fact that God is absent can be taken as 'a possible mode of his being-for-us'.³⁹ This second reaction to the death of God leads to an experience of the relationship of God and humanity in which God is absent but his role is fulfilled in a new way. Sölle argues that God's role in the world cannot remain unfulfilled, in whichever way we react to the death of God.

There are several consequences to the second reaction to the death of God.⁴⁰ If God is absent but his role must be fulfilled without conceding the possibility of his being-for-us, God needs to be represented. In her book, Sölle argues that this representative of the absent God is Christ. Moreover, another consequence of the new experience with God paradoxically enabled by the death of God is that, as Sölle argues, the current condition of consciousness (*Lage des Bewusstseins*) can be characterised as post-theistic. Theology has to work from this post-theistic proposition. For Sölle, theology after the death of God should dialectically

³⁵ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 11 ('Wem ist Gott gestorben?' [Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 12]).

³⁶ Matthew Edward Harris, 'The Reception of Nietzsche's Announcement of the "Death of God" in Twentieth-Century Theorising Concerning the Divine', 150.

³⁷ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 130-132.

³⁸ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 131-132.

³⁹ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 131.

⁴⁰ The consequences noted in this paragraph are taken from Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 131-134.

connect the experiences of the death of God and faith in the resurrection of Christ. The resurrection means that Christ keeps God's future open; therefore, he is God's forerunner (*Vorläufer Gottes*) even until now. Furthermore, Sölle argues that a theology after the death of God should not make ontological claims about God. A God who can be confirmed to 'be', who can be known as he is in himself has truly died. Therefore, in Sölle's post-theistic theology, God is only mentioned with regard to his being-for-us. If Sölle thus places God's death and Christ's resurrection in dialectic tension, one wonders: What about the cross that preceded the resurrection? Does the cross also play a role in her theology after the death of God?

1.6. Sölle's interpretation of the cross

In a review of *Christ the Representative* that appeared in 1968, Hamish Swanston notices that Sölle puts 'an unfashionable emphasis on the Crucifixion rather than on the Resurrection of Christ as the paradigm for our life.'⁴¹ For him, this emphasis not only is unfashionable but also seems 'retrograde'. Swanston questions whether Sölle has in fact advanced beyond the interpretations of the cross she quotes from Pascal and Bonhoeffer. Swanston's critique, whether warranted or not, is an interesting point of departure for an inquiry into Sölle's interpretation of the cross. What is her contribution to the way the cross has been interpreted, has her interpretation been conducive to the advancement of theology, and what, most importantly for the present purpose, is its relation to the death of God?

Although Sölle identifies the cross as 'the central event which forms the basis of the Christian faith',⁴² it does not function as a symbol or principle that guides Sölle's argumentation in *Christ the Representative*. The cross and its relationship to the resurrection primarily help Sölle to illuminate the Christological problem she seeks to clarify, namely what Christ's representation entails. When she writes that the cross is the central event of Christian faith and not the resurrection, she means that Christ continually represents us before God and God among us, to the present day. She resists pointing to the resurrection to say that Christ's task of representation has been brought to a definitive end. Instead, she asserts that Christ continually puts himself and his God at stake, thereby granting us and God time and thus an open future. Therefore, the cross is not 'simply an event in history, a transitional stage', absolving our historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*).⁴³ Rather, according to Sölle, on the cross Christ safeguards the continuing relevance of history because he continues his representative task. He still, to the end of time, hangs on the cross of reality. Here we observe how Sölle resists inserting the cross into a salvation economy which would reduce the importance of the cross now that Christ has been resurrected. She resists any attempt to spiritualise the cross, to interpret it as a victory (as has been proposed by so-called Christus Victor Christology), or to separate it from history, as it is still unfolding to this day. For her, the cross is not a symbol referring to some ultimate reality separated from the world or giving us unmediated access to God as he is in himself. The cross simply and crudely shows the suffering of love without sugar-coating, downplaying, or spiritualising it. Because Christ still hangs on that cross, refusing to give up on us or on God, all hope is not lost. We still have time, and God still has

⁴¹ Hamish Swanston, review of *Christ the Representative*, by Dorothee Sölle, *New Blackfriars* 49, no. 572 (1968): 213–15.

⁴² Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 125 ('das zentrale Ereignis, das christlichen Glauben begründet' [Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 109]).

⁴³ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 125 ('etwas bloß Historisches, ein Durchgangsstadium' [Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 109]).

time, because Christ still hangs on the cross of reality. We can continue to hope for the moment all will have found identity because Christ is representing us and God on the cross. This moment is signified by the symbol of Christ's resurrection. The hope of Easter is that one day, all will have found identity being represented by Christ, and this hope keeps us going today. The symbol of Christ's resurrection therefore does not abolish Christ's representation on the cross but rather casts its shadow over the entire world. By the symbol of Christ's resurrection as experienced and proclaimed by his disciples, the cross is interpreted and gains a general significance which can never be separated from its crude reality.⁴⁴ In sum, I propose that Sölle's interpretation of the cross in *Christ the Representative* has the following two main features: (1) its 'this-worldly' principle and (2) its eschatological orientation. Regarding these two features, at least a conceptual tension seems to exist between present and postponed salvation. In her later theological developments, Sölle would therefore shift away from the strong eschatological orientation of *Christ the Representative* toward a firmer focus on the present reality of suffering.⁴⁵

In *Christ the Representative*, Sölle's interpretation of the cross naturally closely follows her exposition of representation. To understand how Sölle interprets the cross in relation to representation and the death of God, we have to follow her treatment of Hegel closely, as he seems the most important philosophical influence on her interpretation of the cross.⁴⁶ Sölle engages with Hegel's discussion of Christ's sacrificial death in his *Philosophie der Religion*.⁴⁷ Hegel mentions that it is impossible to impute guilt or punishment to any other person than the person who did wrong if we work under the Kantian moral assumption that every person is responsible for their own deeds. In this Enlightened way of thinking, the death of Christ for us can only be understood as an alien sacrifice (*fremdes Opfer*). We have returned to magical thinking, Sölle argues, if the righteousness of Christ were simply conferred upon an irresponsible and undeserving individual. Sölle follows Hegel in proposing an alternative understanding of representation based on the cross that does not concede moral responsibility. The argument goes as follows: The death of Christ changes my consciousness and places me in relation to the Spirit. Consequently, I am no longer trapped by the moral understanding of imputation, because the new relation to the Spirit frees me from that bondage. Now, I can see myself as being in relation with something different from myself because the infinite Spirit cannot be contained in a single person. Therefore, I am reconciled. This reconciliation has been made manifest in the cross and resurrection of Christ. In Christ, God is shown to be reconciled with the world because it has become apparent that the estrangement and difference of the world is a moment in himself, a moment in God's self-differentiation and reconciliation. In his death, Christ manifests 'God's reconciliation in the otherness, in the strangeness of the human'.⁴⁸ Therefore, Christ's death on the cross enables me to experience myself afresh in relation to God because his representation manifests the

⁴⁴ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 124-126.

⁴⁵ Both Dianne L. Oliver ('Christ in the World: The Christological Vision of Dorothee Soelle', 117-118) and Sarah Pinnock ('Holocaust, Mysticism, and Liberation after the Death of God: The Significance of Dorothee Soelle', in *Resurrecting the Death of God: The Origins, Influence, and Return of Radical Theology*, ed. Daniel J. Peterson and G. Michael Zbaraschuk [Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2014], 94) observe this shift.

⁴⁶ This paragraph is based on Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 78-83.

⁴⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 122-131.

⁴⁸ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 83 ('die Versöhnung Gottes im Anderssein, in der Entfremdung des Menschlichen' [Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 73]).

reconciliation of God and humanity, of infinite and finite Spirit. This function of the cross as described by Hegel shows Christ as a mediator between God and humanity by means of representation because the death of Christ shows that the finite has been taken up into the infinite. By thus moving beyond the moral understanding of imputation, Hegel's interpretation of the cross has guided Sölle's post-theistic interpretation of the cross.⁴⁹

In *Christ the Representative*, Sölle understands the cross within the framework of Christ's representation, which results in a double interpretation of the cross. First, according to Sölle the cross signifies how Christ represents us before God. We need representation that respects both our dependence and our responsibility because we cannot make ourselves irreplaceable by what we achieve. On the cross, Christ identifies himself with us provisionally. As the true Teacher, he suffers our punishments (here understood as the historical circumstances of our deeds) together with us.⁵⁰ Furthermore, on the cross Christ identifies with the suffering of those God has abandoned and the guilt of those who have forgotten God. Hanging on the 'cross of reality' (this-worldly principle), Christ represents us by granting us time (eschatological orientation) so that one day we may find identity.⁵¹

Second, the cross manifests how Christ represents God among us. As was explained above, God needs representation because of the death of God, which according to Sölle means the end of his direct, unmediated presence. Therefore, Christ provisionally 'identifies himself with God in the area of non-identity'.⁵² Christ plays God's role in the world (this is incarnation) as his representative. He can do this because he is prepared to suffer the consequences of identifying with God's powerlessness in the world. In order to represent God, Christ is dependent on God, especially in his suffering on the cross that continues to this day. On the cross, Christ carries the pain that God experiences in the world because his existence in the world is not or only partly realised (this-worldly principle). By suffering on the cross, Christ keeps the hope of God's kingdom alive because he grants him, and therefore us as well, a future (eschatological orientation). We do not forget about the kingdom of identity, and we are able to continue to wait for it by virtue of what Christ does as representative. In effect, we are invited to wait together with Christ, to suffer God's pain caused by the godless world together with Christ, and to play God's role in the world together with Christ. Thus, we are invited to help the God who is helpless.⁵³ Although Sölle's argumentation resists defining who God 'is' in himself, it is clear that according to her the cross only says something about God to the extent that Christ represents (*vertritt*) God. What the cross reveals about God is mediated through Christ as representative. This, one could say in reaction to the critical review by Swanston, is where Sölle further develops the interpretations of the cross by Pascal and Bonhoeffer; she explains how Christ is God's representative in the world.

⁴⁹ Sölle's interpretation of Hegel sparked some debate after *Christ the Representative* was published. Falk Wagner ('Hegels Satz "Gott ist Tot": Bemerkungen zum D. Sölles Hegelinterpretation', *Zeitwende, die neue Furche* 38, no. 2 [1967]: 77–95) objects that Sölle does not follow Hegel precisely enough. However, Otto Reidinger heavily criticises Sölle in another book-length response (*Gottes Tod und Hegels Auferstehung: Antwort an Dorothee Sölle* [Berlin; Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1969]) for taking too much inspiration from Hegel.

⁵⁰ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 119–122.

⁵¹ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 126.

⁵² Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 137 ('identifiziert sich mit Gott auf dem Boden der Nichtidentität' [Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 120]).

⁵³ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 147–149.

The relationship of Sölle's interpretation of the cross to the death of God is perhaps different from what one might have expected. The cross does not function as certain evidence that God has taken suffering and death upon himself, because this would presuppose that God acts in the world through Christ in an unmediated way. On the contrary, Sölle argues that God is no longer experienced as an acting subject but as an absent God who needs our help so that he can be present. This is what she means by the death of God, not that the second person of the Trinity suffered and died according to his human nature. Her understanding of the death of God is more unconventional than that, arguing that after the death of God, God's role is played under the condition of powerlessness. Therefore, we must place Sölle's interpretation of the cross in the context of her understanding of Christ's representation necessitated by the death of God. Only when we understand Christ as representative can we understand what Sölle means when she says: '[o]nly in Christ does it become clear that we can put God to death because he has put himself in our hands'.⁵⁴ On the cross, Christ as God's representative manifests God's powerlessness in the world, to which we can respond either by leaving him for dead or by helping him.

1.7. God's dependence on the world in *Christ the Representative*

If our reaction to the death of God is that we take the absence of God as a way of his being-for-us, then God needs representation. Otherwise, society will continue to strive to replace God, even though it can never succeed at this. If God needs representatives in the world, then he is to some extent dependent on the world. This dependence of God on the world can be explained in several ways. First, because God is powerless in the world since he has died, he needs representatives to stand in for him. His cause, the kingdom of God, is in their hands. God has no other hands than theirs, which makes God dependent on what they do. Second, God's dependence in the world can be observed in Christ's role of representative. Christ is the main representative of God because he plays the role of God in the world. He has made himself – and consequently also the truth of his God – dependent on our 'yes' or 'no'. In this way, God has put his fate in our hands, which should activate us. Third, God suffers pain because his existence (*Dasein*) in the world is not or only partly realised. Christ represents this pain of God in the world on the cross, by making himself dependent on the world. This dependence is the precondition of his suffering, as 'the non-dependent person does not suffer'.⁵⁵ As can be expected, we cannot understand how Sölle approaches God's dependence on the world without reference to Christ, who represents both God and humanity.

To further illustrate the way God is dependent on the world in *Christ the Representative*, in this section I analyse what Christ's representation of God among us implies for how Sölle considers God. I argue that according to Sölle, there is identification but also difference between God and Christ and between God and the world. Furthermore, I identify an interdependence between God and humanity that roots in Sölle's relational approach to theology. I focus on Sölle's interpretation of the cross in relation to the death of God as laid out in the previous sections to answer the following question: What do Sölle's interpretation of the cross and its relation to the death of God imply for God's dependence on the world?

It must be stressed that even though Christ identifies himself with God, this does not render God and Christ the same. If Christ's identification with God had been definitive and

⁵⁴ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 151. ('erst seit Christus ist deutlich geworden, dass wir Gott töten können' [Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 132]).

⁵⁵ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 124 ('der Unabhängige leidet nicht' [Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 108]); 144.

complete, in effect he would not represent but replace God. Instead, Christ provisionally identifies with God. He plays his role for the time being, but he does not replace him. According to Sölle, we should not understand the incarnation as if God completely gave himself in the form of a human being, so that now we have no future to expect from him anymore.⁵⁶ God does not disappear in Jesus or in his cross, but rather Christ stands in for him, for his pains in the world, for his *Dasein*, and for his kingdom by means of the cross.

Similarly, if God is dependent on the world because he needs to be represented, this does not mean that he is dissolved into the world. To demonstrate this, I classify Sölle's conception of God using Stoker's typology, which has been described above.⁵⁷ In *Christ the Representative*, Sölle in principle agrees to the third type ('radical immanence'), following the God-is-dead theologians. For her, the death of God surely implies the end of the classical way to construe God's transcendence in some sphere beyond this reality. Rather, God has to be represented in the world by Christ on the cross and, in turn, by human beings. However, precisely this representation also allows God to remain different from the world because it prevents him from being replaced (*ersetzt*) by it. Through representation, God is allowed identity, which defines him in contrast with the world. Furthermore, Sölle argues that the world would look drastically different from the way it does now if God were equal to it. She explains:

God is not immanent in our history, because his identity in this history remains still future. Jesus continues to hang on the cross and will not let himself be persuaded to come down from the cross by those who would prefer him to do so, whether to ascend into heaven or to be buried, once and for all.⁵⁸

Therefore, while generally agreeing with the third type, Sölle retains several impulses more closely associated with the second type ('radical transcendence'). She emphasises the tension between God and the world when speaking of God's enduring suffering in the world, manifested by Jesus on the cross. Because Christ continues to play God's role in the world, we can still hope for God's kingdom. Still, God has not been replaced by society or by Christ himself, because Christ operates solely in God's name. Therefore, Sölle can write that God is dependent on us without *equating* him to us. She continues to think of God as a person with whom we can have a relationship. Even for Sölle, God has a certain independence. This independence, however, is never unmediated; Christ pays for God's independence with his own dependence (*Abhängigkeit*).⁵⁹

Not only God needs representation; a person in society needs it as well. Furthermore, Sölle argues that both God and humanity need to share in the conditions of dependence (*Angewiesenheit*) and (*Verantwortung*) in order to be represented. In this way, Christ the representative brings God and humanity together, functioning as a mediator between them. In Christ, God depends on humanity and humanity depends on God. This mutual dependence is manifested in the figure of the cross on which Christ suffered and died. On the one hand, on

⁵⁶ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 138.

⁵⁷ Cf. the historical and theoretical background in the introduction.

⁵⁸ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 147 ('Gott ist unserer Geschichte deswegen nicht immanent, weil seine Identität in ihr noch immer aufsteht, weil Jesus weiterhin am Kreuz hängt und sich nicht auf die einlässt, denen es lieber wäre, dass er herabstiege, sei es, um in den Himmel zu fahren, sei es, um endgültig begraben zu werden' [Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 129]).

⁵⁹ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 144.

the cross Christ represents those whom God has abandoned and those who have forgotten their dependence on God. On the other hand, Christ represents God's pain in the world that is inflicted on him since he is no longer present in an unmediated way (the death of God). This interdependence between God and humanity is rooted in Sölle's relational approach to theology. We find this relationality, for instance, in the idealistic thesis of irreplaceability which Sölle derives from Hegel; irreplaceability is not a substance but a being-in-relation.⁶⁰ Furthermore, we have observed that Sölle thinks about God in relational terms when she speaks of the death of God. This approach to theology, which is relational in its core and presupposes a mutual dependence of God and humanity, would develop into Sölle's conversation with mysticism in her later work.⁶¹ Retrospectively, traces of this mysticism are evident as early as *Christ the Representative*. For example, Sölle describes how love does not want heaven; it does not cling to God. However, love finds God again in a way most properly manifested in the cross, 'along the way of mediation, the way of alienation into existence for others (which always means existence in the far country, in pain, and in renunciation of one's own possibilities)'.⁶² God is found when we let go of him; we find him in mediation (*Vermittlung*). In this way God is dependent on the world; he only comes to identity in mediation, through representation.

⁶⁰ Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 33-34.

⁶¹ Cf. Pinnock, 'Holocaust, Mysticism, and Liberation after the Death of God'.

⁶² Sölle, *Christ the Representative*, 146 ('auf dem Wege der Vermittlung, der Entäußerung in das Dasein für andere, das immer Dasein in der Fremde, im Schmerz und in der Einbuße an eigenen Möglichkeiten ist' [Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 128]).

2. The interpretation of the cross in Caputo's *Cross and Cosmos*

2.1. Introduction to Caputo's life and work

Before turning to the interpretation of the cross by the American philosopher and theologian John D. Caputo (1940–), it is helpful to consider his life and career.¹ Caputo, after having grown up Roman Catholic in the era before the Second Vatican Council, became a novice with the De La Salle Brothers of the Christian Schools after high school. After obtaining his B.A. degree from LaSalle University, Caputo decided he wanted to pursue further studies elsewhere. However, his monastic superiors did not support this decision, and he left the order in 1962. A long academic career followed, in which mysticism and religion were always important foci. A major turning point occurred when Caputo encountered the work of the philosopher Jacques Derrida in the 1980s. Derrida became an important influence and showed him new directions, as is first apparent in his 1987 publication *Radical Hermeneutics*.² A decade later, Caputo identified a religious element to Derrida's notion of deconstruction in the 1997 study *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, which subsequently directed him toward doing some more explicitly theological work.³ In *The Weakness of God*, which appeared in 2006, Caputo admits that the direction he takes in this study is undeniably theological, although he had been trying to resist it. For Caputo, 'theology signifies a passion in which everything is at stake', even though he concedes that '[t]he word *theology* has always been for me a double bind, a promise of my youth that I could never quite make, yet never quite break'.⁴ Subsequently, Caputo completed *The Insistence of God* (2013) and *The Folly of God* (2016), which are two further studies operating at the cutting edge of philosophy and theology.⁵ His latest book-length publication is *Cross and Cosmos: A Theology of Difficult Glory* (2019), which sees Caputo both connecting major tenets in his earlier work and venturing into dark and unexplored areas, all under the heading of the cross.⁶

2.2. The development of Caputo's interpretation of the cross up to *Cross and Cosmos*

Although this section on Caputo's interpretation of the cross after the death of God focuses primarily on *Cross and Cosmos*, this was surely not the first time Caputo engaged with the topic of the cross. While researching Caputo's interpretation of the cross, I encountered an article from 1999 titled 'Toward a Postmodern Theology of the Cross', already containing the outline of the book that would appear twenty years later.⁷ In this article, Caputo notes that

¹ I take biographical facts and the narrative of Caputo's academic career from Katharine Sarah Moody's introduction to Caputo's work ('John D. Caputo', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology*, ed. Christopher D. Rodkey and Jordan E. Miller [New York: Springer, 2018], 95–96).

² John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

³ John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

⁴ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 1.

⁵ John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); John D. Caputo, *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (Salem: Polebridge Press, 2016).

⁶ John D. Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*.

⁷ John D. Caputo, 'Toward a Postmodern Theology of the Cross: Augustine, Heidegger, Derrida', in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ed. Merold Westphal (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 202–225. In what follows, I refer to the new edition of the essay (John D. Caputo, 'Toward a Postmodern Theology of the Cross: Augustine, Heidegger, Derrida', in *The Essential Caputo: Selected Writings*, ed. B. Keith Putt [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018], 266–81).

both Heidegger and Derrida decided to comment on Augustine's *Confessions* in 'this age of the death of God'.⁸ He notices that Heidegger's account of the 'hermeneutics of facticity', the attempt to grasp life concretely in its original difficulty and with the corresponding struggle, is heavily influenced by Luther's distinction between theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*) and theology of glory (*theologia gloriae*). This becomes apparent when Heidegger relates the phenomenon of the cross and the phenomenon of factual life to each other. He contrasts the elements in the *Confessions* that speak of factual life with those that take a more Neoplatonic route. For Heidegger, the latter metaphysical elements correspond to the theology of glory and deserve *Destruktion*.⁹ In this way, Heidegger appropriates Luther's distinction in order to read Augustine in the key of his own hermeneutics of facticity.

Caputo, in turn, uses Luther's same distinction to critique Heidegger's reading of Augustine, although without undermining it. According to Caputo, Heidegger overemphasises the never-ceasing struggle of the soul with the irreducible difficulty of life. This individualism results in the glorification of the struggle (*Kampf*) that Heidegger observes in the cross. It seems that Heidegger's understanding of the difficulty of life has thereby devolved into a theology of glory, instead of being a theology of the cross. Alternatively, Caputo points to Derrida's reading of the *Confessions* (*Circonfession*), which points away from the individual struggle of the soul toward the love and desire for the other, toward what is always 'to come' (*à venir*). Derrida's reading of Augustine reveals an interpretation of the cross that emphasises compassion, such as that shown by the woman weeping at the foot of the cross, and not Heidegger's battlefield of the soul. The name of God points Derrida to the name of a secret: the secret that there is no big Secret answering all questions. The questions, the tears, and the difficulties are the secret of love and desire, of doing the truth (*facere veritatem*). *Circonfession*, Caputo suggests, thus amounts to a Derridean deconstructivist theology of the cross.¹⁰

We can observe that in this article, Caputo employs Luther's theology of the cross to evaluate Heidegger's and Derrida's reading of the *Confessions*. In doing so, Caputo is set on track toward a postmodern theology of the cross, which twenty years later he would develop further in *Cross and Cosmos*. Therefore, it is fitting that the front cover of this book features Van Gogh's painting *Pietà* (after Delacroix, 1889), in allusion to the painting Derrida discussed in the text accompanying an exhibition at the Louvre Museum (Daniele da Volterra's *Woman at the Foot of the Cross*, ca. 1545).¹¹ A notable difference is that the crucified body of Jesus features prominently in Van Gogh's painting selected by Caputo, while the body of Jesus is not visible in the artwork chosen by Derrida. Indeed, the crucified body of Jesus plays an important role in *Cross and Cosmos*, which gives the impression that Caputo has come full circle in his theological journey.

When considering the intricate weaving of philosophical and theological ideas in Caputo's early article, however, one wonders: Did Caputo lose sight of the cross on which Jesus died and the actual tears that were shed? Did the *historical* crucifixion vanish from this postmodern radical theology of the cross? In order to answer, we must consider Caputo's developing interpretation of the cross in more detail. In *The Weakness of God*, he dedicates a chapter to 'St. Paul on the Logos of the Cross' (1 Cor. 1:18). The weak theology that Caputo

⁸ Caputo, 'Toward a Postmodern Theology of the Cross', 266.

⁹ Caputo, 'Toward a Postmodern Theology of the Cross', 271-274.

¹⁰ Caputo, 'Toward a Postmodern Theology of the Cross', 274-280.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 125.

proposes in this book is, fundamentally, a theology of the cross because ‘the event that calls to us and overtakes us in the name of God arises crucially from the cross’.¹² Caputo argues that *in* the crucifixion, an event transpires that is closely connected to what we mean when we say ‘God’.

‘Event’ is a technical term that Caputo uses often to express something of ultimate value looming in what happens and in the names we give to it.¹³ Although the event does not take shape as a concrete occurrence or a thing in the world and cannot be contained by such things, it is what makes them tick. The event calls forth what happens and inspires the names we use to describe it because it is the promise preceding what is and longing to be realised. In this way, the event continues to inspire new occurrences and new names, without itself ever becoming fixed or fossilised. Similarly, as the promise of what is, the event is what is called for in what happens and the names we give to it. The event, as I understand it, calls forth being and the event is called for in being, and as such it is its ultimate value. This is not completely clear however, because Caputo does not provide a sharp definition of the event. Of course, he explains what he means when he uses the term event, but his explanations are descriptions of the event rather than exact definitions. This conceptual difficulty seems to be inherent to Caputo’s idea of the event because he understands it as the excess of what happens and the names we give to it. The event is embedded within what happens, but as its excess it can never be reduced to or contained by it. The event is the promise that is called for in a name such as ‘justice’, but as its excess the name ‘justice’ and what we currently think justice is might not be sufficient for the event. Caputo’s event, then, keeps us in a permanent state of longing for what is getting itself called in a name such as ‘justice’ or ‘God’. The event inspires our longing, and as such it is what we long for. It does not have the worldly strength to cause change directly, but it restlessly keeps disrupting being from within and calling forth (in the sense of inspiring, not causing) new occurrences and new names that might suit its promise better. This is the weak force of the event. While Caputo’s understanding of the event lacks clarity, he makes up for this by the ability to describe this weak force that can hardly be expressed. When the event is expressed, it has been fixed into a definite name, and what has been fixed cannot be the event.

The event consists of a weak force that Caputo applies to God as well. What he means by God he understands in terms of the event. Theologians are interested in the event harboured in the name of God, although by nature of the event there are other names for it as well. However, the event in the name of God relates to being in a particular way, turning it upside down and inside out, not unlike Derrida’s method of deconstruction turns the meaning of language upside down and inside out.¹⁴ The event harboured by the name of God, thus understood, rises up from the cross. The historical, ‘factual’ crucifixion manifests a powerlessness that is more than it seems, for the powerlessness of Jesus on the cross houses the weak force of the event. Jesus’ powerlessness manifests a call for protest, justice, and forgiveness, and thus the cross calls for more than it actually is. It releases the event; in the occurrence of the cross, something of ultimate value manifests itself that paradoxically overtakes the occurrence itself. This ‘something’ is what Caputo calls the kingdom of God. In this way, Caputo uses the notion of ‘event’ to explain the meaning of the cross.

¹² Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 42.

¹³ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 2-5.

¹⁴ Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 123.

2.3. Caputo's methods in *Cross and Cosmos*

I now turn to *Cross and Cosmos* because in this study Caputo connects previous lines of interpretation and attempts to form a coherent whole. The goal of *Cross and Cosmos* can be understood in line with the goal of Caputo's project of radical hermeneutics, namely 'restoring life to its original difficulty'.¹⁵ How, then, does Caputo aim to contribute to this goal? Most importantly, he proposes a radical theology of the cross as a 'general model for thinking'.¹⁶ This method (even though Caputo himself is hesitant to use this word)¹⁷ results from the triangulation of three texts (by Paul, Luther, and Derrida respectively), which inspire Caputo to radically embrace the difficulty of the cross. 'Radically' literally means 'to the root'. Therefore, Caputo wants to subject *everything* to the message (*logos*; 1 Cor. 1:18) of the cross as he understands it, even theology itself. This is how he defines the task of a theologian. He understands the cross as a symbol of the irreducible difficulty of life, and its message is that this difficulty should never be denied. Throughout the book, therefore, we observe Caputo's continued attempt to stay true to the difficulty of the cross, in order to find the glory hidden *in* the difficulty. His ultimate goal is to describe how God is reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19) without conceding the message of the cross.

As I have argued in the previous section, the event is the ultimate value implied in the name of God that manifests as a weak force. Caputo employs the term 'event' to describe what the cross means; the cross releases the event harboured in the name of God. In order to describe this event, Caputo uses the method of theopoetics.¹⁸ Theopoetics attempts to circumscribe poetically the event in the name of God by attuning itself to its call. We cannot describe the event in a more precise and direct way, Caputo argues, because that would allow the event to disappear out of sight. If we start making objective claims regarding the event and use logic to determine what the event is or is not, we are no longer talking about the event but about an occurrence fixed in history or a name fixed in language. Therefore, instead of a 'theo-logic', Caputo needs a theopoetics. The theopoetic method is open to the call of the event that inspires what happens, that makes being tick and calls for more. A propositional method would miss this call because it focuses on making and confirming objective claims regarding what happens. Caputo's theopoetic method, however, aims to be open to *being* claimed by the call. Thus, the theopoetic method is less precise than a propositional method, but more attuned to the event in the name of God. Caputo establishes the theopoetic method by referring to phenomenology, in the following way: The theopoetic discourse can be described as a phenomenological *epoche* (suspension of judgment) or reduction that leads us back to the things themselves. By suspending judgement, our ears are opened again to the call of the event that addresses us. We go beyond the subject-object divide and enter a theopoetic, symbolic space in which the call can be heard and answered. It is in this regard and by this hermeneutical key of theopoetics, Caputo argues, that we should understand the event released by the cross of Jesus Christ: 'When they killed him, they killed the man, but not the poem'.¹⁹

¹⁵ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, xii.

¹⁶ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 4-5, 75. Italics are by Caputo himself.

¹⁷ About method, Caputo writes the following: 'I agree to call this my "method" only under protest, not in the Cartesian sense, but rather in the elemental sense of how to follow along (*meta*) the way (*hodos*) of the cross' (*Cross and Cosmos*, 106).

¹⁸ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 106-111, 121.

¹⁹ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 112.

2.4. Caputo's argumentation in *Cross and Cosmos*

In this section, I provide an overview of the argumentation Caputo presents in *Cross and Cosmos*, even though his prose can sometimes be less than crystal clear. The main question addressed in the study is how we should understand Paul's statement that God has reconciled the world to himself without, on the one hand, somehow denying the difficulty of the cross and, on the other hand, without denying reconciliation itself. Caputo argues that we can discover how reconciliation works by embracing the difficulty of the cross and discovering its hidden glory.

In two steps, Caputo elucidates God's reconciliation of the world in the face of the message of the cross. First, he addresses the Christus Victor narrative from this perspective.²⁰ If Christ has accomplished victory on the cross, why is this indiscernible in history? What, in other words, are the implications of a radical theology of the cross when we consider history? According to Caputo, the cross does not imply that God will enforce or has enforced Christ's victory with a strong hand. His problem with the mythological Christus Victor account and with the rationalisation of this story by Hegel is that it necessitates an omnipotent God to fill in the current gap between reconciliation and concrete liberation in the world. Instead, Caputo lets the cross determine the reality of God. He allows the name of God to be weakened by the cross, which leads to the discovery of a weak force at work in this name. This force does not have the worldly power to enforce liberation because it is weak. Rather, it is manifested as an insistent call that cannot be extinguished but depends on the world to respond to it. In this way, Caputo argues that the gap between reconciliation and liberation can be understood as 'the phenomenological difference between a call and a response'.²¹ I would clarify this idea as follows. We currently do not see many signs of God's reconciliation with the world, because this reconciliation manifests itself in the form of a call. Liberation will come about only once we respond to the call of the event in the name of God. The death of Jesus on the cross, therefore, did not effect the defeat of evil as a matter of causality, as the Christus Victor narrative has it. Rather, the glory of Christ's victory is embedded *in* the worldly defeat of the cross in the form of an insistent call that demands a response.

Before taking the second step, from cross to cosmos, Caputo prepares his later argument. He takes the notion of *Deus absconditus*, which is God absolutely concealed behind his revelation on the cross, from Luther.²² Caputo understands Luther's *Deus absconditus* as God being so anonymous that he might have ceased to be God at all. By subsequently radicalising and demythologising Luther's *Deus absconditus*, Caputo argues that there is a deep non-knowing destabilising all knowledge. This theological nihilism functions as the gateway between the first part of the study and the second, in which Caputo attempts to describe reconciliation on a cosmic scale. For Caputo, therefore, the theological nihilism of the *Deus absconditus* is closely related to the cosmological nihilism of a dark force aimed at total cosmic destruction. These, Caputo thinks, 'might be different names for the same mystery'.²³

This is the second step; according to Caputo, we must rethink God's reconciliation of the whole world in the face of two cosmic concerns (climate change and the predicted 'heat death' of the universe). In order to accomplish this, Caputo makes two subsequent moves.²⁴ In

²⁰ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 247.

²¹ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 121.

²² Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 142-156.

²³ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 166.

²⁴ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 209-211.

the first place, he goes from theism to panentheism. He does not agree with the theist understanding of God as the highest being. For him, the mystery of God is the same as the mystery of the universe; this is his definition of panentheism. In the second place, this panentheism must be subjected to the message of the cross in order to be freed from its cosmological pretensions. Caputo calls this weakened form of panentheism ‘cosmopoetics’. In cosmopoetics, God is no longer a power that can cause cosmic events but instead a call that is issued by the world itself. Like theopoetics, cosmopoetics is attuned to the call and open to being claimed by it. By adopting this term, Caputo emphasises that, for him, God and the world are part of the same mystery.

Caputo not only sees a continuity between God and the world with regard to their mystery, but he also observes a symmetry between their ‘crucified bodies’. By this he means that both God and the cosmos are mortal according to the message of the cross, just as Jesus Christ is. If the universe dies, God also dies, and there will be no one to remember it. Although this argument seems to abolish any possibility of God’s reconciliation with the world, for Caputo it paradoxically enables it. Ubiquitous mortality makes it possible to truly love because there will be no reward for it at the end. All that remains is to say ‘yes’ to life in response to the insistent call. All is mortal, even God, and there is difficult glory in accepting this fact. This difficult glory, Caputo claims in *Cross and Cosmos*, is what constitutes God’s reconciliation of the world; death is reconciled with life because death is now seen as intrinsic to life.²⁵ This is the conclusion of his study, in which the cross features prominently. Therefore, we now move to Caputo’s interpretation of the cross in relation to the death of the death of God.

2.5. Caputo’s understanding of the death of God, the death of the death of God and the mortality of God

At the outset of *Cross and Cosmos*, Caputo clearly marks his break from God-is-dead theology. He believes that direction of thought has already been explored and that the death of God is no longer self-evident. Instead, he is looking for ‘coming theologians of a *mortal God*’.²⁶ He is looking for a God who is not dead but mortal, and therefore still very much alive. He distances himself from God-is-dead theology although his theology of a mortal God simultaneously seems to be an innovation of it. The goal of this section is to consider the relationship between the death of God, the death of the death of God, and the mortality of God.

In the volume *After the Death of God* mentioned above, Caputo reflects extensively on the notion of the death of God, in conversation with Gianni Vattimo and Jeffrey W. Robbins. Although he is critical of God-is-dead theology, he retains a certain notion of the death of God, ‘the death of the God of power’.²⁷ For Caputo, this understanding of the death of God reflects the critique of idols as it has been done for ages, but now in the form of the critique of ontotheology.²⁸ The fundamental problem of God-is-dead theologies, according to Caputo, is that they are idols themselves. They are, and here Caputo uses a term coined by Jean-François Lyotard, grand narratives (*grand récits*) pretending they know the course of history. For Caputo, the grand narrative of the death of God has itself lost its power to persuade and ‘died’; in this way, the death of the death of God has been inaugurated. Compared to God-is-

²⁵ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 246-249; 263-264.

²⁶ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 4. Italics are by Caputo himself.

²⁷ Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 66.

²⁸ Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 69.

dead theology, Caputo claims to filter out the grand narrative of God becoming immanent in history. In other words, the grand narrative of the death of God has itself died because it cannot substantiate its own sweeping claims.²⁹ In the introduction to *After the Death of God*, Robbins characterises this death of the death of God as the postmodern ironic realisation of the death of God.³⁰ The deconstructive potential in the death of God is brought to the fore in the death of the death of God, but simultaneously the death of God crumbles under its own pressure; that is the irony. In sum, Caputo moves the discussion about the death of God in two ways. First, he asserts that God-is-dead theology ends in the death of the death of God, the postmodern ironic realisation of the death of God. Second, he argues that the death of the God should be understood in a limited way as the death of the God of power.

Because of this understanding of the death of God, it is not surprising that Caputo finds an ally in Mark Taylor. Caputo applauds Taylor's operationalisation of deconstruction as 'a hermeneutic of the death of God' because this allows him to go beyond the distinctly Hegelian tendencies of previous God-is-dead theology. However, Caputo does not follow Taylor all the way, however. He worries that Taylor's understanding of deconstruction will not only purge the ontotheological tendencies of God-is-dead theology but also destroy what is of enduring value in the name 'God', namely the event. Here again, Caputo uses the notion of event to clarify his position. He thinks that 'a certain death of God', the death of the God of power, always has to be accompanied by the release of the event. The name of God might be unable to contain the event and the desire for God might find other expressions than the word 'God', but for Caputo the desire itself firmly stands. Therefore, Caputo attempts to refute Taylor by stating that an application of the death of God should never prevent the release of the event.³¹

From this background, we can better understand how the death of God operates in *Cross and Cosmos*. Previously, Caputo had already moved away from God-is-dead theology while retaining the death of the God of power. In line with this, he began to think of God in terms of the event harboured in that name. The event in the name of God manifests itself in the world as a weak force without worldly strength but of ultimate value. The omnipotent God of classical theology has disappeared from the stage so that now the weak force of the event can be noticed. As a consequence of his thinking about God in terms of weakness, in *Cross and Cosmos* Caputo introduces the notion of the mortality of God. Because the God of power has disappeared, we encounter a God who is vulnerable, nonsovereign, and therefore mortal.³² By understanding God as mortal, Caputo wishes to process the death of the God of power without preventing the release of the event in the name of God (as he fears occurs in Taylor's understanding of the death of God). He desires to critique the idol of ontotheology without doing away with God altogether, so he understands God as weak and, consequently, mortal.

Caputo's terminology of theopoetics and cosmopoetics can shed further light on what he understands as the mortality of God. When he speaks of God in terms of a weak, 'eventive' force, Caputo uses theopoetic discourse. According to him, this discourse is well-suited to describe poetically how the event is released after the death of the God of power. When the event is released, God is born (or, one might say, reborn) as a mortal God; accordingly, '[t]heopoetics is the hermeneutics of the birth of God'.³³ However, when Caputo considers the

²⁹ Caputo, 'Atheism, A/Theology, and the Postmodern Condition,' 4-5.

³⁰ Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 19.

³¹ Caputo and Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, 66-70.

³² E.g. Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 4; 17; 106.

³³ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 111.

cosmological implications of God's mortality in cosmopoetic terms, the story takes a sinister turn.³⁴ If God is mortal and his 'crucified body' is symmetrical to that of the universe, God will die when the universe burns out. In this way, Caputo postpones the final, conclusive death of God to the future.

I believe that Caputo has already prepared his understanding of God's mortality by introducing and adapting Luther's figure of the *Deus absconditus*.³⁵ The *Deus absconditus* is God so thoroughly concealed in Jesus Christ's death on the cross that he might have ceased to be God altogether. In this way, Caputo subjects our understanding of God to the point of deep unknowing, so that we lose all pretensions of knowing God in an objective way. The *Deus absconditus* thus allows Caputo to argue for a certain death of God, the death of the God of power. His interpretation of Luther's figure enables him to show that God is not above or beyond the suffering manifested in the cross but instead vulnerable and even mortal. Furthermore, the deep unknowing implied by the *Deus absconditus* humbles us, so that we might allow the event in the name of God to be released.

Even though Caputo does not engage in detail with the notion of the death of God in *Cross and Cosmos*, presumably because he no longer sees the philosophical value of the term in the era of the death of the death of God, we can conclude that the notion still lingers in his affirmation of the mortality of God. To better understand how Caputo's understanding of the mortality of God relates to the cross, we now must consider his interpretation of the cross in *Cross and Cosmos*.

2.6. Caputo's interpretation of the cross

As we have established by now, the cross is of central significance in *Cross and Cosmos*. In this section, I consider in more detail how Caputo interprets the cross in this study. What is Caputo's interpretation of the cross and how does it relate to the death of the death of God? I propose that his interpretation can be explained in three steps: 1) the cross inspires his theological method; 2) the cross is important as an historical phenomenon releasing the event; and 3) the cross reveals the symmetry of the 'crucified bodies' of Jesus, God, and the cosmos.

First, the cross inspires Caputo's theological method. As I have mentioned previously while identifying the methods he uses in *Cross and Cosmos*, Caputo proposes a radical theology of the cross as a general model for thinking.³⁶ His main goal is to describe God's reconciliation with the world without reducing the message of the cross to something that denies its difficulty. The general difficulty of life manifested by the cross is irreducible, and therefore the theological task is to follow along the way of the cross until the very end. In Caputo's radical theology of the cross, even God does not escape this message of the cross. This results in a certain death of God in the sense that the God of being has been crucified on the cross of nonbeing.³⁷ In this way, the message of the cross as Caputo understands it makes room for a vulnerable and mortal God emerging from the cross.

Second, for Caputo, the cross is important as an historical phenomenon releasing the event.³⁸ The powerlessness of Jesus Christ on the cross is more than it seems, as it calls for more, for protest, justice, and forgiveness. The historical occurrence of the cross, rather than being the end of the kingdom that Jesus announced, paradoxically releases a weak force that

³⁴ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 220-221.

³⁵ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 142-152.

³⁶ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 4.

³⁷ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 17.

³⁸ E.g. Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 72; 77-83; 123.

cannot be contained by any single occurrence or name. The cross thus points beyond itself to the event. When theologians fixate our knowledge of God on what is merely visible, the cross haunts and contradicts them. When we instead observe the cross with an openness to the event arising from it, Caputo believes that we can at last hear its inextinguishable call.

In this second step, Caputo does not advance his interpretation of the cross considerably beyond his understanding before *Cross and Cosmos* that I have outlined in Section 2.2. One example, however, showing how the cross releases the event is in place. Caputo insists that a theology of the cross should start from below, so that the cross on which Jesus died sparks compassion for the difficulty of those who suffer. Therefore, Caputo's interpretation of the cross has a political dimension. Jesus' concrete and real suffering on the cross sparks resistance against innocent and unjust suffering and inspires salutary suffering on behalf of others, which, according to Caputo, is 'the theology of the cross of liberation theologians like Jon Sobrino and Dorothee Soelle'.³⁹ In other words, the death of Jesus has a prophetic quality that is a confirmation and witness of his prophetic life.⁴⁰ His death is more than it seems; an event arises from it that had already been expressed by Jesus, announcing the kingdom of God while he was still alive. This is how Caputo understands resurrection; Jesus was killed but his murderers could not silence the call for protest, justice, and forgiveness. Although nothing seemed to be left after the crucifixion happened, something still emerged from the cross. Thus, life (the resurrection) can be found within death (the cross).⁴¹ Moreover, according to Caputo the release of the event happening in the historical occurrence of the cross testifies to the fact that God identifies with unjust suffering.⁴² This identification reinforces the political meaning of the cross because God is revealed as the inextinguishable call for justice emerging from the unjust suffering of the cross.

Third, the second part of *Cross and Cosmos* focuses primarily on the symmetry of the 'crucified bodies' of Jesus Christ, God, and the cosmos.⁴³ Building on the analysis of the historical crucifixion releasing the event, this part relates the cross to the cosmos. Not only God but also the whole universe must be subjected to the message of the cross, for Caputo's method entails embracing all difficulty so that a glory embedded *in* the difficulty might appear. The result is that Caputo observes a symmetry among Jesus Christ on the cross, the crucified notion of God, and the cosmos heading for its own destruction. Both God and the cosmos have their own cross to bear; by that expression, Caputo means that they are equally affected by the weakness manifested in the cross. Caputo's interpretation of the cross thus culminates in a symmetrical understanding of Jesus Christ, God, and the cosmos. For him, the cross functions as an icon or symbol, just as a different lens can change the way we see things.⁴⁴ The iconic cross reflects the reality that everything is mortal and nothing is eternally stable, and its message is that we should embrace this fact. In this way, the cross reveals a

³⁹ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 82.

⁴⁰ As Caputo has learnt from Dolores Williams (*Cross and Cosmos*, 102).

⁴¹ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 116-117.

⁴² I find it rather striking, however, that Caputo describes God as entering into suffering *from* somewhere, presumably from heaven. This account seems to contradict (1) Caputo's later critique of the dualism inherent in kenotic thinking and (2) his argument that theo-poetics must restrict itself to the plane of flesh (Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 131-132).

⁴³ E.g. Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 248.

⁴⁴ E.g. Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, xiv. Caputo already introduced his interpretation of the cross as an icon (inspired by Col. 1:15) in an earlier essay ('The Weakness of God and the Iconic Logic of the Cross', in *Cross and Khôra: Deconstruction and Christianity in the Work of John D. Caputo*, ed. Marko Zlomislíć and Neal DeRoo [Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2010], 15-36).

mortal God and a mortal universe. Therefore, Caputo's remarkably radical conclusion regarding the symmetry between God and cosmos is that God will die when the universe does; God shares the fate of the cosmos.⁴⁵

I propose that the relation of Caputo's interpretation of the cross to the death of the death of God is as follows. In the era of the death of the death of God, Caputo understands the cross as a symbol of deconstruction. The cross relativises constructed realities by showing that nothing escapes the general condition of mortality. Under the pressure of the message of the cross as Caputo understands it, all constructions crumble because they are revealed to be relative and temporary. This allows Caputo to speak of God again, but now in terms of the event. The cross is the symbol of God's own crucifixion, which reveals him to be weak and mortal. The death of the death of God makes this interpretation of the cross possible. Because the claim of the death of God is no longer self-evident, new possibilities emerge (1) to mine the deconstructive potential of the cross and (2) to speak of God after the death of God.

But why, one might ask, does Caputo go through all this trouble? Why does he interpret the cross as an icon presumably holding the key to reality? The answer relates to his understanding of the message of the cross, which is that we should not evade the difficulty manifested in the cross but rather embrace it, as there is difficult glory embedded in defeat. If we embrace mortal life in all its beauty as long as it lasts and if we affirm the world unconditionally, Caputo thinks we will find life *in* death. Furthermore, ubiquitous mortality makes love possible because it prevents us from expecting a reward, which would not be true love. Love, according to Caputo, is always 'without why'. This is the difficult glory communicated by the iconic cross, and this is how he describes reconciliation while attempting not to evade the message of the cross.⁴⁶ If Caputo thus understands salvation as the embrace of mortal life, what are the implications for his conception of God? How, in other words, does a mortal God relate to the world?

2.7. God's dependence on the world in *Cross and Cosmos*

Caputo's interpretation of the cross invites a discussion of God's dependence on the world because it concludes that if the cosmos will taste death like physicists expect, God will too. Here we encounter Caputo at one of his most radical points; God is mortal, a human, and will suffer the same consequences when the cosmos disappears in a void, sharing in the same fate.⁴⁷ This crucified conception of God immediately invites fundamental theological questions. The main question has been formulated by Caputo himself, on behalf of 'the theologians': '[i]f the power of God is a powerless power, [...] is not the result some kind of nihilism of weakness, death and defeat, a kind of theological masochism, a story that ends on Good Friday? What is left? How is God still God?'⁴⁸ This 'niggling question', as Richard Kearney puts it,⁴⁹ is the reason we need to elucidate how Caputo construes the dependence of God on the world. What is left of God if he is crucified on the cosmic cross? What do Caputo's interpretation of the cross and its relation to the death of the death of God imply for God's dependence on the world?

⁴⁵ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 210; 220.

⁴⁶ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 249-250. One could object, of course, that love has rewards *before* death and that these rewards might be the 'why' motivating our love.

⁴⁷ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 210.

⁴⁸ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 32.

⁴⁹ Richard Kearney, 'A Game of Jacks: Review Essay of John D. Caputo's Recent Works', *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 47, no. 5 (1 June 2021): 573.

While closely reading *Cross and Cosmos* with the category of God's dependence on the world in mind, I found that Caputo takes the relationship between God and the world in two different directions. These directions broadly correspond to the first and the second parts of the book, and therefore I present them consecutively. To assist in this endeavour, it is useful to consider how Caputo's conception of God fits into Stoker's typology of transcendence.⁵⁰ Caputo's views regarding God's transcendence in *Cross and Cosmos* seem to be best categorised under the fourth type ('transcendence as alterity') in Stoker's typology. He is not only heavily influenced by Derrida, who Stoker associates with fourth type, but he also adopts Levinas' emphasis on the wholly other. However, while we find most similarities to the fourth type in the first part of *Cross and Cosmos*, the second part bears better comparison to the third type ('radical immanence'). In this section of the book, Caputo argues that the cross reveals a symmetry between God and the cosmos and that God will therefore die together with the cosmos. In this way, he minimises the difference between God and the world, which puts him in the third type. Of note, the God conception of God-is-dead theology can be classified in this same type. This shows that Caputo may not have moved as far beyond this theology as he professes.

I continue by identifying Caputo's first direction. I argue that Caputo defends a mutual dependence of God and the world in the first part of *Cross and Cosmos*. A key term that Caputo coins in this regard is the *existence* of God, which I will address briefly.⁵¹ According to Caputo, we cannot say that God has existence, as if God were a proposition that we can prove or disprove by observation. Caputo believes we cannot speak of God in such a way anymore because the God of power who is described as a metaphysical being has died. He prefers to say that God is an insistent call that has ultimate value but lacks worldly power. Because this call cannot change the world on its own, it needs the world, and specifically us, to respond. In other words, God needs us to give him existence by responding to the insistent call, by letting it claim us and lead us to the kingdom of God. Caputo uses the notion of God's *existence* (a word play on Derrida's famous neologism *différance*) to denote how the world would look if it were to respond to the event in the name of God. It means that God needs the world to respond to the call and that therefore he is dependent on the world.

In short, *we* are responsible for God's being in the world. Does this mean that Caputo allows humanity to sit on God's throne, resulting in a conception of God that does not transcend human subjectivity, as critics of liberal theology have repeatedly argued? With regard to *Cross and Cosmos*, I would answer 'no' to this question. The *existence* of God is not a necessary being independent of the world, but it also cannot be reduced to the realm of existence (such as the finite or the infinite). Rather, it is constituted by a 'dangerous perhaps', an open call that has a profound impact because it keeps insisting.⁵² Therefore, our responsibility to give existence to God's being in the world is not *autonomous*, as Caputo emphasises, but *theonomous*.⁵³ We are not asked to shape God in our image; rather, we are to be claimed by an insistent call. The notion of 'perhaps' that Caputo mentions is always open for new, even dangerous possibilities and will not fade as long as we open our ears to the call of the event. This shows that while God depends on the world for his *existence*, he is

⁵⁰ Cf. the historical and theoretical background in the introduction.

⁵¹ Cf. Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 126-141.

⁵² Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 138.

⁵³ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 138. Paul Tillich used the word 'theonomous' to characterise a way of theologising, cf. Hartmut von Sass, 'Between the Times – and Sometimes Beyond: An Essay in Dialectical Theology and Its Critique of Religion and "Religion"', *Open Theology* 6, no. 1 (17 August 2020): 488.

nonetheless still God because the insistent call to which we respond is not something we can control.

Tillich's Protestant principle, to which a chapter in *Cross and Cosmos* is dedicated, can clarify how God can depend on the world and simultaneously still be God according to Caputo's account.⁵⁴ Tillich believed that on the object side, the Unconditional (God) is what claims us, and on the subject side, the Unconditional is our matter of ultimate concern. Our beliefs and practices are nothing less or more than a conditioned reaction to the Unconditional that reaches us in these ways. If that is the case, we must always be self-critical and suspicious because our conditioned reaction necessarily always falls short of the Unconditional. Tillich's Protestant principle expresses why, according to Caputo, our responsibility to answer the unconditional demand calling in the name of God is theonomous and not autonomous. God is not only dependent on us; we are also dependent on God because our response to the unconditional demand will always remain conditional, falling short of what it asks us. Although *we* respond to the call, for Caputo something *more* (something unconditional) is happening in what we do (conditionally); this is the event.⁵⁵ I would argue that this relationship between call and response is constituted by a mutual dependence which allows God to be God. This relation of mutual dependence is what Caputo calls 'the chiasmic intertwining of God-with-us and of us-with-God, of our being-in-the-world with the being of the world in us, where the world rises up to meet us and we welcome the world [...]. Our yes comes in response to the address that calls on us without invitation'.⁵⁶

However, in this last citation the second direction in which Caputo takes the relationship between God and the world can already be discerned because he seems to use the words 'God' and 'world' interchangeably. In the second part of *Cross and Cosmos*, Caputo adds another element to the symmetry of the crucified bodies of Jesus Christ and God, namely that of the cosmos. Therefore, he can take God as a 'nickname for the universe' and the story of the mortal God as the entire cosmic process ending in heat death.⁵⁷ Here, Caputo's 'certain death of God' seems to refer to the future death that the mortal God will suffer when the cosmos has consumed itself and only a cosmic void remains. Whereas the emblematic understanding of Christ's crucified body from the first part implied that God, while mortal and vulnerable, manifests himself as an insistent call, the crucified body of the cosmos from the second part implies God's definitive end in the future. At that point, God will have disappeared into the cosmic void, with no trace left behind. The cosmos will have pulled God along into oblivion. At this point, there is no sign of mutual dependence or chiasmic intertwining because God's dependence on the world has been taken to the extreme. Whereas the cosmos is not dependent on God in any meaningful way, conversely God's mortal fate is determined completely by the cosmos.

I believe that the reason that Caputo takes this direction is that in the second part of *Cross and Cosmos*, God and cosmos have become synonymous and their differences minimal. This is related to his version of panentheism adapted from Catherine Keller, to which he dedicates a chapter.⁵⁸ As I have explained previously, Caputo subjects panentheism to the

⁵⁴ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 157-166.

⁵⁵ With regard to the event, I notice that Caputo goes beyond Tillich's division of subject and object with the help of Heidegger's hermeneutical ontology. He explains this by referring to 'onto-hermeneutical events' (*Cross and Cosmos*, 228).

⁵⁶ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 263.

⁵⁷ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 220.

⁵⁸ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 193-215.

message of the cross in order to undo its cosmological pretensions. Caputo argues that if we state that God is not determining everything from above (as an omnipotent God), we also should avoid stating that God is determining everything from below (in the form of ‘omnipotentiality’). His weakened form of panentheism implies that we cannot speak of God in terms of causality and that our God-talk instead articulates the world around us. In effect, God and the cosmos are known by the same name and have become indistinguishable. Therefore, Caputo argues that the God of panentheism will disappear the moment the universe disappears.⁵⁹ Thus, God has become radically dependent on the world, to the point of being substituted by it. Now, we can no longer speak of a mutual dependence between God and the world because God cannot be distinguished from the world. The spectre of a coming cosmic death, signified by the cross, has silenced the call in the name of God that was supposed to be inextinguishable.⁶⁰ In short, by embracing weakened panentheism Caputo has changed the direction of his study. He no longer defends a mutual dependence of God and the world, in which each retains its respective qualities, but rather a synonymy of God and the world that has allowed God to become unrecognisable.

One might object to my analysis by saying that Caputo does in fact retain a certain independence of God by means of the *Deus absconditus*. Indeed, the deep unknowing that remains after Caputo has deconstructed Luther’s *Deus absconditus* has an independent quality to it. It destroys any expectation that the cross might not be what it seems or that it might be a trick or a strategy yielding greater returns in the future. For Caputo, the *Deus absconditus* is important because it shows that the difficulty is irreducible.⁶¹ The question, however, is how the *Deus absconditus* and God as insistent call relate to each other. Although Caputo’s position regarding this conundrum is not clear, I believe that we cannot speak of God as deconstructed *Deus absconditus* and insistent call simultaneously. While the *Deus absconditus*, by definition, remains concealed and therefore unknown, the insistent call requiring our response has to be known in order to be heard. Furthermore, it is impossible that God is both mortal and vulnerable *and* the enigma that one-sidedly causes this weakness. In sum, rather than manifesting a certain independence of God, Caputo’s *Deus absconditus* so thoroughly conceals God that nothing remains of him. The violence of the *Deus absconditus* destroys the weak force of the call. If we follow Caputo’s account, no call will be heard and no event will arise from the occurrence of cosmic death, as this occurrence will also destroy the insistent call of the event harboured in the name of God. Therefore, although Caputo’s appeal to embrace our mortal condition is indeed commendable, in the process he allows the difference between God and the world to dissolve so that God vanishes into the world. I believe that Caputo did not have to allow this to happen to be faithful to the message of the cross, as I aim to demonstrate in the next chapter by comparing him to Sölle.

⁵⁹ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 210.

⁶⁰ An inconsistency on Caputo’s part seems to be that the inextinguishable call turns out to be extinguishable.

⁶¹ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 148-149.

3. Comparison and evaluation of Sölle and Caputo

After having surveyed the interpretations of the cross of both Dorothee Sölle and John D. Caputo in the previous chapters, this chapter aims to compare and evaluate their viewpoints. As indicated in the introduction, the point of comparison is the category of God's dependence on the world. The following subquestion is central to the first section: How do Caputo's ideas and Sölle's ideas about God's dependence on the world compare to each other? This comparison allows us to evaluate their contributions to the debate, which is the goal of the second section.

3.1. Comparison

Both interpretations of the cross have their own related but distinct characteristics, which I now summarise for the purpose of comparing them. In *Christ the Representative*, Sölle's interpretation of the cross is guided by her perceived necessity of representation. She notices that God's unmediated and omnipotent presence has dwindled under the influence of modern developments; in other words, God is absent. Therefore, Sölle believes that God needs representation, or else he would be substituted (*ersetzt*) by society. In a similar way, Sölle argues that a person living in society needs representation in order to come to identity. Accordingly, Sölle interprets the cross in terms of Christ's representation of God among us and us before God. As I have argued in Chapter 1, her interpretation of the cross has two features. First, for Sölle Christ's suffering on the cross shows the continuing relevance of history as it continues to unfold. The cross reveals the crude reality of the suffering going on in the world because on it Christ represents both the pain of the world and the pain of God in the world. This is what I have called Sölle's 'this-worldly principle'. Second, because Christ still hangs on the cross, we are given time and God is given time so that identity and the kingdom of God are still on the cards. Because of Christ's representation on the cross, the hope for the future is still keeping us going. This is what I have called Sölle's 'eschatological orientation'. From this interpretation of the cross, a mutual dependence of God and humanity ensues, mediated through Christ.

In *Cross and Cosmos*, Caputo presents his radical interpretation of the cross in three steps. For him, the cross is first and foremost a way of thinking that he adopts as his theological method. He argues that the message of the cross entails that the difficulty of life is irreducible. Mortality is a general condition from which there is no escaping. We should not try to avoid this hard fact, Caputo says, but rather attempt to embrace it. Then, he believes we can find a difficult glory embedded *in* defeat, which is symbolised by the cross. The theological task, therefore, is to apply the message of the cross to everything, including God. Accordingly, this method leads Caputo from the death of God to the mortality of God. He no longer believes that the death of God is self-evident, and this 'death of the death of God' creates space for a mortal and vulnerable God to arise from the cross. This is the second step Caputo takes; he argues that an event is released through the historical crucifixion. From the cross, seemingly the final endpoint of God's kingdom that Jesus announced, an inextinguishable call rises up that we should answer. Caputo's third and final step concerns the symmetry of the 'crucified bodies' of Jesus Christ, God, and the cosmos. Based on the message of the cross as he understands it, Caputo argues that God and the cosmos share in the general condition of mortality and that they are therefore part of the same mystery. Caputo draws the radical conclusion that God will die as soon as the cosmos dies.

When we compare the findings from Chapters 1 and 2, we find both similarities and differences. First, similarities are not difficult to find by nature of the comparison. Because both interpretations of the cross share the background of the (death of the) death of God, they share many features, not all of which are relevant to this thesis. Importantly, however, Sölle and Caputo agree on what they aim to avoid. For both of them, the cross does not refer to Christ's victory over death or to an objective exchange between God and Christ; instead, they propose that God needs the world in order to be God. Both Sölle and Caputo believe accordingly that God is powerless or weak. Moreover, we have seen that both interpretations entail a certain mutual dependence between God and humanity. According to Sölle, both God and humanity require representation in order to find identity. Human beings need to be represented before God because they cannot ground their own irreplaceability. God needs to be represented among us because of the death of God. Both God and humanity cannot find identity without the other, and without Christ mediating between them. This is the mutual dependence of God and humanity in *Christ the Representative*. Similarly, Caputo's interpretation of the cross demonstrates mutual dependence between God and humanity. God is the weak force of call, soliciting human beings to respond to it, thereby giving God existence in the world. In this way, God is dependent on our response to his call. However, humanity is also dependent on God. The demand that we respond to the call, our responsibility, does not entail a complete autonomy on our part. Instead, Caputo calls our responsibility theonomous; whether or not our conditional response is adequate will always be determined by the unconditional call. Therefore, Caputo identifies a 'chiasmic intertwining of God-with-us and of us-with-God' on the basis of his interpretation of the cross in *Cross and Cosmos*.¹ A final similarity has to do with love. For both Sölle and Caputo, the salvific meaning of the cross is love. Sölle describes how love does not cling to God but nonetheless finds God again on the way of the cross. Similarly, Caputo describes how our embrace of the difficulty symbolised by the cross enables true love. For both of them, the cross cannot be separated from love.

Although these similarities are undeniable, the differences are also pronounced. For example, the cross has different functions in their respective theologies. The cross takes centre stage in *Cross and Cosmos* as it inspires Caputo's theological method. His radical theology of the cross is a general model for thinking that Caputo hopes to apply as broadly as possible, whereas it takes a background role (albeit an important one) in *Christ the Representative*. I note that Caputo attempts to 'short-circuit'² what Luther called theology of glory by means of the cross. It appears to me that he inserts the message of the cross as he understands it into existing theological constellations to determine whether he can cause some radical effects to the system. Conversely, I find that Sölle does not apply the cross directly but instead takes the precaution of inserting a fuse to prevent the overcurrent causing a short circuit (to continue Caputo's short circuit metaphor). The fuse or isolator that she uses is the theological concept of representation. This concept prevents her 'system' from short-circuiting (i.e. becoming unbalanced) as a result of the challenge of Christology. By this metaphor, I hope to show how considerably the approaches of Sölle and Caputo in both studies that I have closely read for this thesis differ.

Turning to God's dependence on the world specifically, I wish to distinguish and compare the approaches that Sölle and Caputo take to this theme. Sölle, on the one hand,

¹ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 263.

² Caputo typically calls his method a 'short-circuiting', cf. Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 13.

understands God's dependence on the world in a relational way, in close connection to the theological concept of representation. Sölle argues that dependence is embedded in the structure of representation because together with responsibility (*Verantwortung*), dependence (*Angewiesenheit*) is a condition of being represented. Furthermore, in order to represent someone, representatives need to make themselves dependent (*abhängig*) on the one to be represented. Clearly, the one needs the other and vice versa, but this mutual dependence does not end with replacement (*Ersatz*) because the identity of each is safeguarded by representation. Through Christ's representation on the cross, God and the world are dependent on each other without replacing each other. God and the world are intimately related to each other without the one being reduced to or overpowered by the other.

While Sölle thus considers God's dependence on the world in a relational way, Caputo, on the other hand, considers it in a radical way. His approach is informed by his application of a radical theology of the cross as a general model for thinking. Caputo subjects everything to the message of the cross; that is, the cross symbolises a difficulty (the general condition of mortality) that conditions all things. Caputo's theology of the cross, and therefore his understanding of God's dependence on the world, is radical in the sense that the mortality symbolised by the cross is truly limitless, determining even God to his core. In *Cross and Cosmos*, then, the cross does not function as a mediation between God and the world as in *Christ the Representative*. Rather, for Caputo the cross signifies that the most important thing we can say about God and the world is that both are subsumed under the same condition of mortality. This then enables him to say that God is a 'nickname for the universe',³ which is a statement Sölle cannot make in *Christ the Representative* because this would amount to a replacement (*Ersatz*) of one for the other. Caputo, however, is focused on embracing the difficulty until the very end rather than on the possibility of identity through representation. In this way, we can distinguish Caputo's radical understanding of God's dependence on the world from Sölle's relational approach.

The root of this difference in approach is situated in Sölle's and Caputo's respective conceptions of God. We have already seen that both interpret the death of God as the end of God's unmediated, omnipotent presence. However, both authors have a different conception of what comes after this death of God. In *Christ the Representative*, Sölle mostly asserts that God is absent; one is hard-pressed to find a positive statement about God after his death. The apophatic quality of the theology she presents in this book testifies to her mystical and relational conception of God. According to Sölle, God is found when we least expect it, not directly but indirectly in mediation. Although we had thought we had let go of God, we nonetheless find ourselves in relation to him through Christ's representation on the cross. Even when we realise God has died, according to Sölle we can take this death as a way of God's being-for-us when we ask for whom God has died. The absence of God, then, has to be understood relationally. Even though he is absent, God invites us to play God's role in the world through Christ, his representative. Therefore, Sölle's understanding of God's dependence on the world is rooted in a relational conception of God.

Conversely, Caputo presents a more explicit and radical conception of God. As we have seen, Caputo moves from the death of God, via the death of the death of God, to the mortality of God. The mortal God's lack of power, or weakness, suggests his dependence on the world. God insists, but he needs the world in order to exist. Furthermore, Caputo understands God as radically dependent on the world, without reserve or limit. God is nothing

³ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 220.

without the world, as becomes clear in Caputo's understanding of the cosmic death by which God will be wholly consumed. Whereas Sölle has some apophatic reservations granting God a certain independence, Caputo is more radical. According to him, God is dependent on the world to the extent that the world can one-sidedly determine God's fate. This radical conception of God is elaborated by Caputo in the second part of *Cross and Cosmos*, in which he proposes a weakened (one might say radicalised) form of panentheism. This is a form of panentheism that, according to Caputo, does not state anything definitive about the causes for the effects occurring in the world. Rather, it is a poem about God and the world that does not discriminate between the two. Therefore, when the world causes itself to disappear, the God of panentheism will disappear as well. Unlike Sölle, Caputo does not give God more time. Christ on the cross does not stand in for God when he seems to disappear; instead, Christ's death on the cross is a prefiguration of the future death of the mortal God. This is how God's dependence on the world appears from the perspective of the second part of *Cross and Cosmos*. Whereas Sölle's interpretation of the cross keeps God's future open, for Caputo God's future defeat (prefigured by the cross) sets a limit to the Christian hope that can be experienced today.

As a preliminary conclusion, we might say that for Sölle, Christ's death on the cross of reality *mediates* between God and humanity. This results in a relational understanding of God's dependence on the world. God and humanity can be represented and are mutually dependent, but they remain different. For Caputo, Christ's death on the cross *symbolises* the general condition of mortality that affects both God and the cosmos. The cross, understood as a symbol or emblem, methodically determines everything that can be said about God and the cosmos. This results in a radical understanding of God's dependence on the world. It is radical in the sense that it applies the symbolic meaning of the cross to God without limit or reserve. Caputo even states that God and cosmos share the same mortal condition and that they are different names for the same mystery. Combined with Caputo's interpretation of panentheism, this claim minimises the difference between God and the cosmos. On the one hand, Caputo seems certain that the difference between God and humanity – or more precisely between an unconditional solicitation and the conditional response – cannot be closed.⁴ On the other hand, however, this difference between God and humanity is consumed by the lack of difference between God and the cosmos, fuelled by the certainty that both God and the cosmos will disappear in the cosmic void.

3.2. Evaluation

We have compared the interpretations of the cross of Sölle and Caputo using the category of God's dependence on the world. Now that we have a clearer understanding of how this category functions in both Sölle and Caputo and in relation to each other, we are in a position to evaluate their respective understanding of God's dependence on the world. I have based the evaluation on the analysis presented thus far, using three criteria to interpret it (consistency, intention, and usability). Because all preceding analysis has been carried out against the backdrop of the (death of the) death of God, the evaluation shares this background. How can we evaluate the understanding of God and God's dependence on the world by both Sölle and Caputo against the background of the (death of the) death of God?

We have already found that Sölle understands God's dependence on the world in a relational way. According to her, God is fully dependent on the world without being reduced

⁴ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 35.

to it. She has a personal understanding of God, and she argues that God's identity in the world has not yet been fully realised. God has not been replaced (*ersetzt*) by the world, so his future is still open. Something remains to be expected from God; the hope of God's kingdom still stands.⁵ This is the case because Christ represents God and humanity on the cross of reality. On the cross, Christ mediates between God and humanity. Thus, for Sölle God retains his irreducible otherness and recognisability while simultaneously fully depending on the world. If we play God's role in the world, this does not reduce God to our actions because we equally need Christ's representation, through which we are dependent on God. In this way, Sölle corrects the immanentism of God-is-dead theology (the third type of Stoker's typology) without turning back to classical solutions that no longer seem appropriate after the death of God. Even though God depends on the world, we can still speak of him as transcendent. Sölle understands God to be personal (which means we can have a relationship with him) and in tension with the world until both God's and our identity can be fully realised in the world. In short, Sölle's theological concept of representation retains difference between God and the world. Her relational understanding of God's dependence on the world ensures that God is, in Westphal's terms, permanently exceeding who we expect him to be. On the cross, Christ pays for God's independence. Therefore, God is not the same as the world, even though Sölle does not construe this difference in the same way as proponents of classical transcendence would have done. She understands the difference not in terms of God's omnipotence but rather of his powerlessness (*Ohnmacht*). Therefore, Sölle understands God to be dependent on the world without being reduced to it.

Regarding God's dependence on the world, Sölle's contribution related to God-is-dead theology is that she retains God's irreducible otherness. The dynamics of representation keep the possibility of God's transcendence open, even as he is dependent on the people who play his role in the world. God is represented without being replaced; in other words, he can still be recognised as God. This is important, considering that Sölle intended to speak of identity grounded in Jesus Christ, the man of God, after the death of God. Although God is dependent on the world, he is also differentiated from it through representation. Similarly, human beings are differentiated from society (i.e. they are not replaced by it), while being dependent on God. God depends on us, and we depend on God, so that both can come to identity in the world. This mutuality thus demonstrates the advantage of Sölle's relational understanding of God's dependence on the world.

Sölle achieves her goal to resist replacing God and instead to take his absence as a way of his being-for-us. Even though her study shares the modern inclination to focus on the subject, Sölle is sufficiently critical of modern conceptions of the subject to make her theology a voice that cannot be missed, even in the current postmodern intellectual climate. A more critical remark regarding *Christ the Representative* might be that Sölle tasks the reader to fill in the open spaces she leaves between the different parts of the book. The result is that she can give the reader the impression of inconsistency, although in reality the connections might only be implicit. While this provided few difficulties for the current endeavour, one might struggle more with other questions and topics in mind. Most importantly, Sölle continued to publish many more books during her life that helped clarify, develop, and diversify her theology.

I have also argued that in distinction to Sölle's relational approach, Caputo understands God's dependence on the world in a radical way. He argues that Christ's death on

⁵ Sölle, *Stellvertretung*, 120.

the cross is a symbol determining both God and cosmos. For Caputo, God is radically dependent on the world because he argues that the symbolic meaning of the cross determines God without limit or reserve. Therefore, in *Cross and Cosmos*, Caputo radically applies the logic of the cross to God. An inextinguishable call arises from the cross when the cross is interpreted theopoetically. This call that calls in the name of God urges us to respond. The phenomenological difference between the call and the response is what differentiates reconciliation and liberation. God's crucifixion, of which Jesus' death on the cross is an emblem, renders God into the weak force of the call. As such, God has no power in the world, but he remains irreducibly other. We have seen that Caputo uses Tillich's Protestant principle to illustrate how God remains God while being dependent on the world's response.

In the second part of *Cross and Cosmos*, Caputo understands the cross as a symbol of the general condition of mortality determining both God and the cosmos. In effect, God is mortal in a manner that is similar to the cosmos. When the cosmos dies, God will inadvertently die as well. In the second part, Caputo adopts a panentheistic conception of God which he has weakened to become reflective of God's mortality. Whereas in the first part Caputo conceives of God in terms of 'transcendence as alterity' (fourth type of Stoker's typology), in the second part he places this conception of God in the broader framework of radical immanence (third type of Stoker's typology).⁶ Therefore, God and the cosmos become closely tied together, which means God is radically dependent on the world. The cosmos, however, is not dependent on God and sustains itself until it causes itself to disappear. Because of this unequal relationship between God and world, God becomes unrecognisable in the world. One might argue that the wholly other is transposed to the deconstructed *Deus absconditus* or cosmic void in which both God and cosmos will disappear. However, it is unclear that this cosmic void could be called God in a way that can be seen as related to the Christian tradition. And even if this were the case, Caputo does not describe how God and the cosmic void would be related to each other.

I wish to be clear. It is commendable and faithful to Col. 1:20 that Caputo incorporates the cosmos in his account of the cross. In that sense, Caputo is pushing the frontier. The first part of *Cross and Cosmos* could stand alone as a postmodern theology of the cross, and the second part creatively engages with panentheism and the notion of a cosmic cross. However, the two parts do not form a consistent whole when we consider the understanding of God and his dependence on the world at play in each respective part. The inextinguishable call that Caputo relates to God's name in the first part turns out to be extinguishable by cosmic death in the second part. The lack of differentiation between God and the cosmos in the second part contradicts the affirmation of God's alterity in the first part and does not suit Caputo's intention to retain the phenomenological difference between call and response. We are reminded that Westphal called the wholly other an other who '*permanently surprises my horizons of expectation*'.⁷ The notion of the 'perhaps' that Caputo defends is similar to this description by Westphal but cannot be sustained in the face of God's future death. In *Cross and Cosmos*, this death functions as a certainty, and therefore the future is closed down by Caputo's proclamation of the theo-cosmic death. God and the cosmos become so closely associated with each other that God's otherness dissolves by being reduced to the world; the wholly other no longer *permanently* exceeds what we expect of it (Westphal). This

⁶ He states that cosmopoetics 'is the counterpart and larger context of theopoetics' (*Cross and Cosmos*, 165). However, to me it is unclear how an entity can have a corresponding counterpart, implying similarity of scale, which simultaneously forms its larger context.

⁷ Westphal, *Transcendence and Self-Transcendence*, 3.

development begins to attack the first part of the study as well because we must try to discern a coherent conception of God in the whole argument and because we may assume that God is one. Unfortunately, the conclusion from Caputo's radical understanding of God's dependence on the world is that in the end, God has become unrecognisable. This is regrettable not only because it is inconsistent with the first part but also because it reduces the usability of the study in the context of salvation for (post)modern beings. A God who is unrecognisable as God, a God who might just as well not be God but cosmos, cannot be considered a God who can help us. Admittedly, the difficult glory that comes from accepting the bleak reality and the subsequent call to live and love 'without why' could be understood as salvation. However, because this salvation is not in any way related to God, it cannot be considered a reflection of Christian hope. Furthermore, accepting the future theo-cosmic death does not activate us; to the contrary, it is even demotivating and depressing to be confronted with the fact that one day no call will rise up anymore from what occurs.

In my view, things did not have to be this way, especially now that we have studied Caputo in connection with Sölle. I agree with Caputo that we must apply the symbolic meaning of the cross to God. I further agree that we must come to terms with the fact that the cosmos will probably vanish at some point. If we expect salvation to look generally similar to this reality multiplied by infinity with perhaps some improvements to make life somewhat easier, that can only demonstrate the privileged position of the person expressing that expectation. These beliefs and desires are rightly crucified, and Caputo rightly encourages us to live in the moment and 'without why'. However, I believe that it is not suitable with regard to these valid points to interpret the cross as God's dissolution into the world. Caputo could have retained an understanding of God's identity as a person distinct from the world without having to sacrifice any of the aforementioned advantages. In *Christ the Representative*, Sölle proves that it is possible to conclude from the cross that God is dependent on the world without letting our conception of God dissolve into our conception of the world.

Conclusions

In the preceding chapters I have outlined and compared two interpretations of the cross against the background of the (death of the) death of God. The category used in this endeavour has been God's dependence on the world. The question guiding the research has been: How do Dorothee Sölle on the one hand and John D. Caputo on the other understand God's dependence on the world in their interpretations of the cross, against the background of the (death of the) death of God? In order to find a place to land after this analysis, I draw several conclusions and provide a discussion of the results.

I have found that while Sölle's understanding of God's dependence on the world is relational, Caputo's is radical in nature. In the context of the death of God, Sölle speaks of God in relational terms; she argues in *Christ the Representative* that the absence of God should be taken as an experience that deserves attention from theologians, and asks for whom God has died. Because God has died, Sölle argues that he needs representation. We thus find God in mediation through Christ's representation on the cross and are invited to play his role in the world. In Christ, God depends on humanity and humanity depends on God; they are mutually dependent. The one cannot find identity without the other and without Christ mediating between them on the cross.

In his interpretation of the cross in *Cross and Cosmos*, Caputo understands God's dependence on the world in a radical way. In the context of the death of the death of God, Caputo can speak of God again, now in terms of the event, because the claim of the death of God is no longer self-evident. Therefore, he can interpret the cross as a symbol of God's own crucifixion rendering him powerless and mortal. For Caputo, the cross has a symbolic function; it symbolises the general condition of mortality that affects both God and the cosmos. Caputo, like Sölle, understands God and humanity as mutually dependent on each other in the sense that God is an insistent call requiring our response. However, his understanding of God's dependence on the world is more radical than hers. Because God and cosmos share in the general condition of mortality symbolised by the cross, Caputo assumes that God will cease to be God the moment cosmic death occurs. In Caputo's understanding of God's dependence on the world, God and cosmos are closely tied together. For him, this conclusion is required if we wish to embrace the difficulty symbolised by the cross until the end and find a difficult glory within.

I conclude from these findings that God can remain different from the world and recognisable while simultaneously being dependent on it, as long as this dependence is understood as mutual dependence. In *Christ the Representative*, we saw that God can be fully dependent on the world without being reduced to it. Sölle resists the substitution (*Ersatz*) of God for something else, arguing that God needs representation to prevent this. Therefore, Christ represents God on the cross so that he does not dissolve into the world. In the second part of *Cross and Cosmos*, Caputo removes the difference between God and the world by assuming that both God and cosmos will disappear in a cosmic void. As we have seen, this assumption is rooted in his interpretation of panentheism; according to Caputo, the name 'God' is a nickname for the universe. I have found that Caputo's understanding of God's dependence on the world in the second part of the book is at odds with the first part. The inextinguishable call of the first part turns out to be extinguishable in the second, and God's alterity is dissolved through a lack of differentiation. Although, as I have shown, Caputo's radical approach has its advantages, the way he understands God's dependence on the world in his interpretation of the cross does unfortunately render God unrecognisable.

In this thesis, I have argued why I cannot follow Caputo when he minimises the difference between God and the world in the second part of *Cross and Cosmos*. I have found that the key to keep God recognisable after the death of God, and therefore to find language to discuss salvation for (post)modern beings, is an understanding of mutual dependence between God and the world that thereby retains the difference between them. The comparison with Sölle has shown that it is indeed possible to state both that God is involved with the world to the point that his way of being God is affected and that God remains different from the world. In her interpretation of the cross, Sölle has contributed the important observation that both God and humanity need representation to come to identity (which implies differentiation from each other). This has allowed her to continue speaking of God even after the death of God. In the era of the death of the death of God, Caputo continues to speak of God as an insistent call released by the cross requiring our response. But once his understanding of dependence is no longer based on mutuality in the second part of *Cross and Cosmos*, Caputo understands God as dependent on the world to the point of disappearing in it. Both thinkers have thus heeded the challenge of Christology that I have introduced above and accordingly concluded from the cross that God is powerless and dependent on the world. However, I conclude that Sölle has been the most successful in translating the fruits of this challenge to the era after the death of God because her theological proposal in *Christ the Representative* keeps God recognisable as God, whereas in *Cross and Cosmos* Caputo has allowed God to dissolve into the cosmos. While Sölle thinks that Jesus Christ grants God more time by representing him on the cross, Caputo interprets the cross as a symbol that God's days are numbered.

Discussion

The methods used in this thesis have allowed me to formulate an answer to the research question and to partially engage with the broader research problem of how we can speak of God after the death of God and how interpretations of the cross can assist in this conundrum. As predicted, the results highlighted relevant differences between two relatively similar interpretations of the cross which could subsequently be evaluated using three criteria. Although the methods were therefore adequate in relation to the goals formulated in the introduction, several of their limitations must be mentioned as well. First, I have compared only two works, one by Sölle and one by Caputo. In order to make the current findings more robust and account for developments in their careers further research could include more of their books, which was beyond the scope of this thesis. Second, more possibilities than the (death of the) death of God to frame the historical contexts of Sölle and Caputo could be explored. Third, I believe the comparison could have been more focused if my goal in comparing the two was more pronounced (e.g. comparing the two for the sake of updating Sölle using Caputo). A more focused and comprehensive comparison could be the topic of further research. This research could explore how Sölle's understanding of God's dependence on the world would relate to the (postmodern and postsecular) context of the death of the death of God.¹ Fourth, in the process of performing research for this thesis I discovered that God could be understood as dependent on 'humanity', 'cosmos', or 'world'. In further research, it is important to find appropriate terminology and methods that can address these

¹ Two articles discussing Sölle in relation to 'postmodernism' could be a starting point for further research: Beverly Wildung Harrison, 'Dorothee Soelle as Pioneering Postmodernist', in *The Theology of Dorothee Soelle*, ed. Sarah K. Pinnock (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 239–55; Sarah K. Pinnock, 'A Postmodern Response to Suffering After Auschwitz', in *The Theology of Dorothee Soelle*, ed. Sarah K. Pinnock (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 129–44.

different elements more directly. Lastly, a remark related to research design. I have indicated the necessity of positing God's dependence on the world in order to continue speaking of God after the death of God in the introduction. However, my research design did not allow me to inquire if it is indeed necessary to posit God's dependence on the world, although I could compare the ways Sölle and Caputo have done it in their interpretations of the cross. To find out the necessity and usefulness of the category a different research design is needed that would incorporate more different interpretations of the cross, including ones that do not find it necessary to speak of God's dependence on the world.²

Now that I have evaluated the methods used in this thesis, I propose several other directions for further research. First, additional research could thematise and evaluate attempts to think about the cosmos from the perspective of Christology. More precisely, it is a fascinating question how hermeneutically oriented theologies such as those of Sölle and Caputo engage with questions about the cosmos, and what their potential is in this regard. Second, more research is needed to fully understand why Sölle left the eschatological orientation of her interpretation of the cross (and her theology in general) behind after *Christ the Representative*. Third, the role of the cross in liberal theology deserves more scholarly attention. More liberal interpretations of the cross need to be brought to the fore, so that the prejudice in churches and society that there is only one way to interpret the cross (the dominant Anselmian way) can be overcome and the cross can be rehabilitated in liberal Christianity. A potential focus of this further research is soteriological in nature. The quest to find language that articulates what salvation for (post)modern beings might entail after the death of God was present in the background of this thesis, but it deserves more direct attention, especially in relation to liberal interpretations of the cross.

² While her study has a different topic than this thesis, Graham (*Representation and Substitution in the Atonement Theologies of Dorothee Sölle, John Macquarrie, and Karl Barth*) has taken such an approach.

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DATAMANAGEMENTPLAN

1. Algemeen

NAAM STUDENT: Jesse de Bruin

NAMEN SCRIPTIEBEGELEIDER(S): prof. dr. Rick Benjamins

DATUM: 22 augustus 2022

VERSIE: 1.0

2. Algemene gegevens over het onderzoek / scriptie-onderwerp

(WERK)TITEL ONDERZOEK / SCRIPTIE:

A POWERLESS GOD: INTERPRETATIONS OF THE CROSS BY DOROTHEE SÖLLE AND JOHN D. CAPUTO

KORTE OMSCHRIJVING VAN ONDERZOEK EN ONDERZOEKSMETHODE(N) :

Het onderzoek vergelijkt de interpretaties van het kruis van Sölle en Caputo. De methode die daarbij gebruikt wordt is literatuuronderzoek.

TYPEN ONDERZOEKSDATA:

Standaard data

PERIODE WAARIN DATA VERZAMELD WORDEN:

November 2021 – augustus 2022

3. Technische aspecten

HARD- EN SOFTWARE:

Hardware: PC, laptop, iPad

Software: Word, Adobe Reader, Zotero, OneDrive, Dropbox, Google Drive

BESTANDSFORMATEN: DOCX, PDF

OMVANG VAN DE DATA (SCHATTING IN MB/GB/TB): 1 GB

OPSLAG DATA TIJDENS ONDERZOEK: Laptop SSD, OneDrive, Dropbox, Google Drive, USB-stick

OPSLAG DATA NA AFLOOP ONDERZOEK: Laptop SSD, OneDrive, Dropbox, Google Drive, USB-stick

4. Verantwoordelijkheden

BEHEER DATA GEDURENDE HET ONDERZOEK:

De data worden door de student opgeslagen en beheerd op de volgende manieren: Laptop SSD, OneDrive, Dropbox, Google Drive, USB-stick. De bedoeling is om zo veel mogelijk back-ups te hebben.

BEHEER DATA NA AFLOOP ONDERZOEK:

De data worden door de student gearhiveerd op de volgende manieren: Laptop SSD, OneDrive, Dropbox, Google Drive, USB-stick.

5. Juridische en ethische aspecten

EIGENAAR DATA:

De student

PRIVACYGEVOELIGE DATA: ~~JA~~ / NEE

INDIEN JA: HOE WORDEN ZAKEN ALS VEILIGE OPSLAG EN TOESTEMMING VAN BETROKKEN
PERSONEN EN/OF ORGANISATIES GEREGLD?

6. Overige zaken

=====

(In te vullen door thesisbegeleider:)

Goedgekeurd

Niet goedgekeurd, omdat: _____

Naam, handtekening: _____

Datum: _____

=====

TOELICHTING

Ad 1. Algemeen

Noteer de datum waarop het datamanagementplan is ingevuld en noteer de versie bijv. 1.0. In de loop van het onderzoek kunnen mogelijk zaken als de onderzoeksmethode wijzigen of bij nader inzien toch privacygevoelige issues gaan spelen. Wijzig dan naast de betreffende paragraaf ook de datum en het versienummer.
Vul alle velden in, of vermeld expliciet: niet van toepassing/n.v.t.

Ad 2. Algemene gegevens over het onderzoek / scriptie-onderwerp

Geef een korte omschrijving van het onderzoek en beschrijf welke onderzoeksmethoden gebruikt gaan worden.
Omschrijf het type onderzoeksdata, zoals schriftelijke bronnen (archieven, literatuur), transcripties, interviews (bijv. beeld- en geluidsopnamen), verslagen, vragenlijsten, enquêteresultaten, afbeeldingen.
Vermeld ook als het bijvoorbeeld ruwe data of afgeleide data betreft.

Ad 3. Technische aspecten

Wordt specifieke hardware gebruikt naast pc/laptop? Wordt specifieke software gebruikt bijv. voor data-analyse? Bestandsformaten kunnen bijvoorbeeld zijn: DOCX, TXT, XLSX, PDF, WAV, JPG.
De omvang van bestanden kan weergegeven worden in megabyte, gigabyte of terabyte. Geef in ieder geval een globale schatting indien bij aanvang van het onderzoek nog niet precies de omvang te bepalen is.
Sla data tijdens het onderzoek op de juiste (veilige) locatie op. Bijvoorbeeld privacygevoelige data op de Home-directory van de Vrije Universiteit. De H-schijf van de VU is overigens altijd de meest veilige opslaglocatie. Sla privacygevoelige data nooit in de cloud op. Gebruik clouddiensten uitsluitend voor het opslaan van standaard data, zoals een wetenschappelijk artikel in PDF. USB-sticks en de eigen laptop zijn eveneens ongeschikt voor opslag van (privacygevoelige) data. Deze kunnen immers verloren of gestolen worden of beschadigd raken.
Denk ook aan een goede, veilige en regelmatige back-up van de versies van je masterscriptie.
Na afloop van het onderzoek kunnen data gepubliceerd worden als onderdeel van de masterscriptie, bijvoorbeeld in een bijlage. Dat geldt met name voor kleine dataverzamelingen, die geen privacygevoelige gegevens bevatten. Via de bibliotheek PThU kunnen (geanonimiseerde) data als losse bestanden bij de scriptie worden gearchiveerd. Via de bibliotheek PThU kunnen bestanden met privacygevoelige data worden gearchiveerd in een speciaal daarvoor beschikbare data-opslag faciliteit van de VU (ArchStor/DarkStor).

Ad 4. Verantwoordelijkheden

In het kader van wetenschappelijke integriteit is het belangrijk om te beschrijven op welke wijze data veilig opgeslagen zijn en beheerd worden. Daarmee wordt o.a. de controleerbaarheid van de data gewaarborgd. Zie ook de Nederlandse Gedragscode Wetenschappelijke Integriteit 2018 (te vinden op www.pthu.nl/Onderzoek-PThU/Academic_Integrity/).
Geef aan wie de data tijdens het onderzoek beheert. Dat zal veelal de student zelf zijn. Heeft echter de scriptiebegeleider ook toegang? Na afloop kan de student het beheer overdragen aan de PThU (bibliotheek).
Laat ook geïnterviewden weten, hoe (privacygevoelige) data worden beheerd en door wie.

Ad 5. Juridische en ethische aspecten

Omschrijf wie (mede-)eigenaar is van de data.

Indien er sprake is van privacygevoelige gegevens is het noodzakelijk zeer zorgvuldig om te gaan met de verzamelde onderzoeksdata. Denk daarbij aan persoonsgegevens (naam, adres, leeftijd, geslacht), maar ook aan het BSN of religieuze overtuiging.

Sla deze dus altijd veilig op (zie ad 3). Voorkom datalekken! Laat geïnterviewden weten hoe met de data wordt omgegaan. Vraag hen via een zogeheten *Informed consent-formulier* vooraf om toestemming te geven voor het onderzoek en het gebruik en de opslag van de onderzoeksdata. Geef aan dat je de verzamelende data uitsluitend gebruikt voor jouw onderzoek.

Anonimiseer zo veel mogelijk de data.

Ad. 6 Overige zaken

Vermeld hier onderwerpen die niet ondergebracht konden worden bij eerdere onderdelen.

Overleg te allen tijde met je begeleiders indien zaken niet helder zijn, je twijfelt over de juiste wijze van data verzamelen of over het opslaan van data. Of vraag advies aan de bibliotheek PThU.

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