

2007

# Postmodernism and religion

Center for Catholic Studies, Seton Hall University

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Summer 2007

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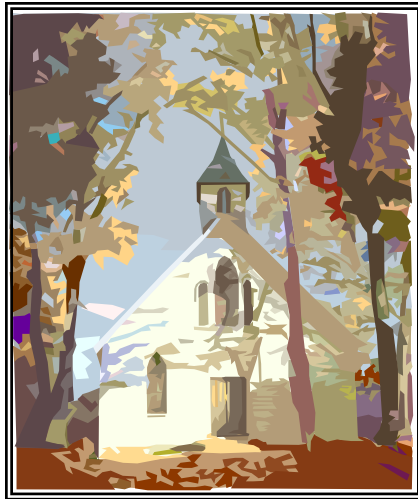
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*Post Modernism and Religion*



**2007 Summer Seminar**  
**Center for Catholic Studies**  
**Seton Hall University**

*Proceedings of the  
Center for Catholic Studies*

POST MODERNISM AND RELIGION

*Summer Seminar 2007*

*Seton Hall University  
South Orange, New Jersey*

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*for*  
***Monsignor Richard M. Liddy***

*Director of the Center for Catholic Studies*  
*University Professor of Catholic Thought and Culture*

***IL MIGLIOR FABBRO***

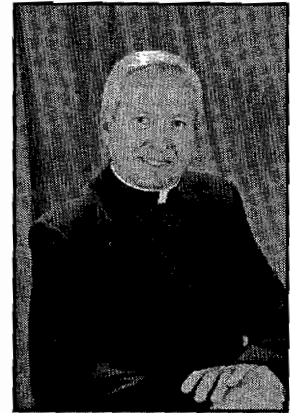
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**CENTER FOR CATHOLIC STUDIES**  
**Faculty Summer Seminar 2007**

***“Post Modernism and Religion”***  
**May 9-11, 2007 ( 9am to Noon)**



**Facilitator: Father Thomas G. Guarino, Seton Hall University**

*This seminar* will focus on postmodernism and religion, with the discussion of John D. Caputo's book, *On Religion*, as the central text. "Postmodernism" is a word that has been bandied about in virtually every academic field, often with multiplicity of meanings. Caputo, for his part, thinks that postmodernism, understood as the surpassing of the excesses of Enlightenment modernity, offers elbow-room for religion in contemporary secular/academic discourse. But (he contends) it must be a religion less sure of itself, even a "faith without faith". It is unsurprising, then, that Caputo is attracted to those maxims of St. Augustine indicating ambiguity: "I am a question to myself" and "What do I love when I love my God?" To what extent is Caputo right about postmodernity and religion? The seminar will discuss his thesis in general as well as its relationship to the identity of a Catholic university.

*Fr. Thomas G. Guarino* is professor of systematic theology in the School of Theology of Seton Hall University. He is the author of *Revelation and Truth* (University of Scranton Press, 1993) and, most recently, *Foundations of Systematic Theology* (T. & T. Clark, 2005). He has published scores of articles and reviews in theological and philosophical journals in North America and Europe, many relating to postmodern thought. For the last decade, he has been a member of the bilateral ecumenical initiative, Evangelicals and Catholics Together. And, in 2003, he was named a fellow of the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, N.J.

*How to apply:* The seminar is open to all full-time faculty. Participants will receive a stipend of \$500. for the seminar. Participating faculty will be expected to discuss certain texts and to write a short article about the topic from their own perspective and discipline. These articles will be collected and disseminated on-line. Articles will be expected eight weeks after the end of the seminar. Fifteen faculty will be accepted for the seminar, preference being given to those who have not participated in the past. Apply by indicating your interest to Anthony Scigliano, Religious Studies Department, at [sciglian@shu.edu](mailto:sciglian@shu.edu) tel. 973-761-9544. Deadline for indicating interest is May 1, 2007.

*This seminar is co-sponsored by the Center for Catholic Studies and the Center for Vocation and Servant Leadership at Seton Hall University. It is part of a series of such workshops focusing on the notion of "calling" in the various disciplines.*

*For information about the Center for Catholic Studies, please visit our website: [academic.shu.edu/ccs](http://academic.shu.edu/ccs)*

+++THE CENTER FOR CATHOLIC STUDIES at Seton Hall University+++  
is dedicated to a dialogue between the Catholic intellectual tradition and all areas of contemporary culture

## INTRODUCTION

*Anthony Sciglitano Jr., Religious Studies Department*

This year's Catholic Studies Seminar met from May 7-9<sup>th</sup> to discuss John Caputo's latest contribution to contemporary consideration of faith and reason issues called *On Religion*. Like many post-modern philosophers, Caputo sees our time as a post-positivist opportunity to expand the possibilities open to reason, and thus to open a new, and perhaps more friendly dialogue with religious discourse. Yet he also shares our time's anxieties with respect to religious fundamentalism and humanity's capacity to use religion to support or justify violence. With a profound knowledge of the philosophical and theological issues at stake, Father Tom Guarino expertly facilitated a lively and thoroughly enjoyable discussion over the three day period. Faculty members from a plethora of disciplines, including biology, theology, philosophy, sociology, english literature, history and more joined in. From the papers collected here, one issue rises above the fray as the central and organizing theme: the relation between religious truth claims and the inevitable contingency of human affairs and opinions. Al Hakim lays out the philosophical issues with his typical lucidity, and observes that the designation of a claim as contingent itself suggests a knowledge of the non-contingent; K.C. Choi enjoys Caputo's frank discussion of religious hypocrisy, but notes that Caputo's profound concern for justice is not helped by his theoretical framework; Anthony Haynor finds Christian love a truth that lifts us out of quotidian calculations to a non-contingent "impossible," while Maura Harrington focuses on gratitude,

communally expressed, in response to a divinely given gift perhaps best captured in several beautiful lines from E.E. Cummings. Tom Rzeznik extols Caputo's iteration of a vibrant religious sensibility, but wonders whether Caputo's position so marginalizes the discourses of any actual religious communities that it would give students only an idiosyncratic vision of religion and its possibilities; Marian Glenn sees in Caputo an opportunity for the beginnings of a rapprochement between the symbolic world of religious metaphor and scientific metaphor, and finds parental symbols in both their ideal and real state particularly illuminating. Rosemarie Kramer sees in Caputo's book a recommendation that religion remind itself, frequently, of its primary and practical mission to love God through concrete expressions of love of neighbor. Stephen Martin and Dick Liddy both argue that Caputo's discussion, while certainly entertaining, requires a more sophisticated and sustained reflection on what it is to know and to make intellectual judgments. Bernard Lonergan is much in evidence in their discussion, but so are Pascal, Karl Rahner, and Cardinal Newman. In short, the essays here comprise a rich array of reflections on the relation between faith and reason in our current intellectual landscape.

In closing I would like to thank several people for making possible both the Catholic Studies Seminar and the collection of papers contained here. First and foremost, thanks go to Dick Liddy for his inimitable ability to get people



together talking about interesting things in a spirit of genuine hospitality; thanks also to David Foster and the Center for Vocation and Servant Leadership for funding this seminar for several years now, and to the Seminary for allowing us to hold our discussions in the warm comfort of their second floor lounge.

Thanks also to Gloria Garafulich-Grabois for editing and collecting these documents. Finally, a word of thanks to Tom Guarino, whose gracious facilitation made this a particularly enjoyable three days.

THEMES AND READINGS  
FOR SUMMER SEMINAR 2007

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## Toward a Just Politics in a Truthless World?

A Reflection Essay

K. C. Choi

Let's face it, while our lives here at home are relatively peaceful, the larger world is on fire. While it is not exactly the return of something like Europe's thirty years war, and Samuel Huntington may be a tad bit alarmist in suggesting our present situation as a clash of civilizations, conflict, *real* conflict, particularly between various religious communities, is a reality around the globe. We fool ourselves into thinking that it is otherwise, for people's lives are truly at stake. The killings of many for the sake of religion, or partly because of religion—from Darfur, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Malaysia, Israel-Palestine, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Chechnya, Bosnia, Serbia, Northern Ireland, just to name a few—is testament to the culture of death that religious fervor can and, sad to say, often breeds. So can you blame someone for wanting a different kind of religion, if one “had” to be religious, one without truth, “real” truth? Can't you at least identify with John D. Caputo's desire for a religious sensibility that recognizes our inability to access *the* truth?

I can. And I bet others can as well, if they are honest with themselves about the way the world really is, that religion figures prominently in a vast number of wars around the world today (approximately one hundred; a conservative estimate). So, Caputo's *On Religion* can be an alluring text, and in light of pervasive religious violence, I find myself sympathetic to his claims. But one question that continues to dog me as I think about Caputo is the kind of political philosophy that might follow from his postmodern conceptualization of the religious attitude. Can his vision of the religious lead to a world

in which difference coexists without violence? Can it in fact foster and sustain a political life that supports human rights? Can it promote liberal practices central to democratic forms of flourishing? Is this possible without a commitment to Truth?

It all depends of course, which is to say that it depends on what sort of epistemology he ultimately settles on. At the very least, he would certainly be supportive of epistemic humility: that it is best not to be too sanguine about what you think you know about the way things are, since you may in fact lack some piece of the puzzle that someone else has been able to discern. But ultimately, Caputo's (political) epistemology is more radical than that, for he thinks that there is no such thing as knowledge about *the* way the world really is. As he claims, “The religious sense of life has to do with exposing oneself to the radical uncertainty and the open-endedness of life.” “The secret, on my hypothesis, is that there is no Secret.”<sup>1</sup> Our capacity to discern *the* truth is constricted indeed, for there is no truth beyond what *we* claim to be true, by virtue of time and circumstance.

This sounds a little unsettling. But should it? After all, do we not, at least in the States, live in a political and economic system that has its rationale in a profound suspicion toward the truth? Are we not capitalists and democrats? Are we not champions of liberty? (By liberty I mean the good old-fashioned kind within the “liberal tradition” and not the saccharine, bubbly freedom of our present popular culture) Consider just for a moment

the (“true”) father of modern, free-market capitalism, F.A. Hayek, an Austrian, who settled at the University of Chicago in the mid-twentieth century to inspire the enormously influential works of theorists such as Milton Friedman and Irving Kristol. Hayek held to the belief that since our knowledge of things can only be partial at best—we are hardly capable of global knowledge or knowledge of all the possible consequences of coordinating the different interests and desires of society’s members as a whole—the market is the most reasonable way of establishing and promoting society, without being authoritarian.<sup>2</sup> To advocate for the market, therefore, is to agree on what one might call principles of the rule of law. The legendary Harvard political philosopher John Rawls, while he would not have necessarily agreed with the “conservative” politics of someone like Hayek, would at the very least have agreed on the necessities of such principles, though wanting to instead call them procedures of justice as fairness that are agreed upon in the original position or a general state of intentional ignorance.<sup>3</sup> But whatever terminology one wants to use, the point for people like Hayek and Rawls is simply that the avoidance of authoritarianism, absent our capacity to know *the* truth, requires procedure—what we need above all else is to follow some basic, hard and fast, rules.

While Caputo’s *On Religion* is not a philosophical treatise on politics, one could see how his position on the truth, or lack thereof, can implicate a political philosophy similar to Hayek’s, maybe even Rawl’s. How else are we to live in a world where truth-claims are a dime a dozen? By following rules that maximize non-interference! But one of the problems with proceduralists, or people who merely follow the rules, is that they can be awfully boring people, lacking the chutzpah that Caputo seems to want so much. He advocates “a restless heart,” calls for “salt-giving,” pines for the “risk-taking” mentality,<sup>4</sup> almost like the X-Gamers who dare to ride

their skateboard up a ludicrously high half-pipe with nothing but a stomach full of Red Bull. In this way, maybe Caputo would agree more with the political liberalism of someone like the neo-pragmatist Richard Rorty. (In)Famous for saying that language/truth is contingent all the way down, he settled on a libertarian political philosophy that envisioned a society in which “[people were left] alone, to let them try out their private visions of perfection.”<sup>5</sup> This would be a society of risk-takers, experimenters, and entrepreneurs—cheerful people seeking constant re-creation of themselves.

But Caputo is surprisingly less audacious than Rorty, or maybe just a little more realistic. While he might enjoy the spirit of Rorty’s libertarianism, Caputo, I think, moves in a slightly different direction. For one thing, he would certainly want to place limits on the kind of visions of perfection that could be pursued (this is the case for Rorty too, I think, but it is harder to tell sometimes in his various writings). For example, he eschews religious fundamentalism of any stripe, for, as he says, no one “has the authority to Capitalize their way,” since there is no “the Way Things Are” to be known.<sup>6</sup> But for Caputo, there is justice, and what he wants is a society that is first and foremost committed to justice.

This is where things get interesting, for while he wants to propose that the idea of *the* truth is illusory, when he talks about justice, he seems to want to say that there is at least this truth: justice is what we ought to be pursuing. So, he says, “For a ‘religion without religion’ I do not mean a religion without truth.”<sup>7</sup> “[For] the name of God is the name of justice, and justice is not a thought but a deed, and its truth is attained in doing the truth, in making justice happen in truth. Justice is not had by talking the talk in solemn assemblies, but by walking the walk in inner cities.”<sup>8</sup> “Religion—with or without religion—wherever there are men and women

who love and serve justice, who love and serve God.”<sup>9</sup>

If there is a political philosophy lurking throughout *On Religion*, it is one that envisions a spirited, just society. It is a society of passionate souls (I keep thinking of flamenco dancers when I think about his call to salt-giving), one without fundamentalists, and all who are locked in agreement about justice. A fundamentalist is not concerned with Caputo’s justice because they are essentially totalitarians at heart. And it is just not good enough to work for justice out of some sense of duty, guilt, or to merely pass the time with something more meaningful than shuffleboard in a Florida retirement community. But rather, one has to really believe in the cause, that is, serve, care, and give with verve and conviction, *live* for a better future. As Caputo declares,

The love of God [or justice] has nothing to do with the idle curiosities...of well-heeled, middle-aged baby boomers looking for amusement. It has to do with the transformability of our lives, with the possibility of a transforming future, and with serving the poorest and most defenseless people in our society, with welcoming the strangers who make their way across our well-defended borders, the homeless and the abandoned, the ill and the aging.<sup>10</sup>

Who can argue with that? Only a cold-hearted soul, I would think. But I cannot help but wonder if a society committed to justice in the way Caputo envisions can really work? More to the point, can it really be worth it?

Maybe asking a question like that is the first step toward being cold-hearted. I hope not. But it is, I think, the first step toward being, at the very least, honest. By that I mean, for a person who claims that there is no “the Way Things Are,” it is

surprising, at least to me, that Caputo is a person who believes definitely in promoting human dignity; I find it difficult to see how this is not something akin to “the Way Things Are.” But more consequentially, my question really is whether one can come to recognize what constitutes human dignity and commit to its protection without a notion of truth that is more metaphysically real than Caputo’s? In saying that the truth about the “preciousness” of individual human life<sup>11</sup> is obtained *in doing* justice,<sup>12</sup> perhaps Caputo is suggesting that when we engage or encounter others in the concrete, the encounter itself elicits recognition of each other’s worth as persons to be respected. Such recognition, therefore, does not require some prior commitment to some truth “out there.” That may be so, but is it not just as likely that in encountering the other person—in her actual circumstance—we can be so repelled as to run away? (As the character Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov* observes, we are hardly capable of loving the beggar with Christ-like love, for do we not often avoid the beggar in our daily routines rather than embrace him in his filth and misery? When was the last time you invited the homeless into your home?<sup>13</sup>)

I share Caputo’s commitment to a just society, but my fear is that such a society is only possible with insight. What is required, as the twentieth-century, British philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch so passionately proclaimed throughout her career, is to have our attention directed properly, to have our vision fixed on the way the world *really* is. And we can only do so if we allow for what she referred to as the Good; we need to allow the Good to purify our vision. The Good for Murdoch was far from imaginary, but a metaphysical reality that offered transcendent insight into the real. And without allowing the Good to encounter us in our daily lives, we are left with a mere dependence on our own individual perceptions—perceptions, Murdoch argued, that are so ego-bound that we can hardly struggle to see anything except

our own interests. Egoism, she thought, perverts justice; it is the dissolution of a good society. Jonathan Edwards, arguably America's first great theologian and philosopher, thought as much when he wrote in the late eighteenth-century: "when a man is governed by a regard to his own private interest, independent of regard to the public good, such a temper exposes a man to act the part of an enemy to the public."<sup>14</sup>

Can a society be just without a commitment to the existence of Truth? Maybe, but I am inclined to think that unless we are so committed we will hardly be able to love our fellow humans, particularly those that repel us, for too long, or even at all. It is only in seeking *the* truth, pursuing to know and

love the truth more deeply can we love the other fully and comprehensively. For consensus on something as thin and amorphous as "the possibility of a transforming future" can hardly incite, inspire, and sustain, as Caputo thinks it can,<sup>15</sup> persons to love the other, for why would such a future have to include anyone else expect the others you *want* to love? Only a future that conforms to what is *indeed* true enables justice, gives meaning to justice, makes justice *as justice* worth pursuing. Only in loving that which is the "rightful supreme object of our respect," to refer to Edwards once more, can we love or, perhaps, *more likely* love in the proper respects: to struggle, strive toward a capaciousness we too often resist.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> See F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994, 1944).

<sup>3</sup> See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, Revised Edition (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Caputo, *On Religion*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 194.

<sup>6</sup> Caputo, *On Religion*, p. 20; see also pp. 101-108.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>12</sup> See Note 8.

<sup>13</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Constance Garnett, trans. (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2004, 1912), pp. 219-220.

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "Dissertation II. The Nature of True Virtue," *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 8, *Ethical Writings*, Paul Ramsey, ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 556.

<sup>15</sup> Caputo, *On Religion*, p. 136.

<sup>16</sup> Edwards, "Dissertation II. The Nature of True Virtue," p. 556.

## Faith Seeking Understanding in a Darwinian Cosmos

Marian Glenn

John Caputo's exuberant essay takes the reader on a journey of faith seeking understanding in a post-modern intellectual landscape. He leads us to explore critiques of Christian belief from the modern social sciences: Freud, Nietzsche, Marx, Kierkegaard and their critics. He reviews the sea change in religious imagination that accompanies a full acknowledgement of modern cosmology, and presents ample evidence that most religious people today continue to believe in a traditional, earth-centered, God-in-the-sky cosmos. The scriptures that form the basis of the world's major religions are narratives written for a metaphorical imagination of particular times, places and cultures. Yet we recognize that they also express truths fundamental to the meaning and purpose of life, and bear re-interpretation to inform new cultural settings. Religious people are working to re-interpret them in the midst of enormous and rapid cultural changes, desperately calling for renewed religious imagination.

Wandering in the wake of these waves, my thoughts turn to reconciling religious imagination and the metaphors of science, today's stormiest area of thought. Astrophysics has outstripped Theology as a science, leaving a fractured imagination to reconcile religious metaphors that are pre-scientific, with scientific models of a universe bereft of religious meaning. Neurobiology is close to describing the material basis for mind, calling for re-imagining concepts like love and the soul. Caputo's work challenges me to consider an itinerary for the journey of faith seeking understanding for a person who accepts the biochemical basis of life, the material basis of mind, as well as the primacy of love as a force in the world. I am seeking a roadmap that traverses this imaginative landscape.

Wisdom, enduring understanding, transcends metaphorical imagination of a particular time and place and culture. This wisdom, often embedded in metaphors of the divine, addresses the meaning and purpose of the world, and how one should behave. The challenge of the arts and sciences is to interpret the essential messages of humanity's accumulated wisdom by connecting them to human experience in our times and places. These interpretations reveal a deeply-held religious capacity that animates the human imagination. In this little essay I would like to explore Caputo's question, "What do I love when I love my God?" taking as my guide his conclusion, "God is love."

Caputo interprets Star Trek as a contemporary metaphorical narrative in the tradition of faith seeking understanding. When the Ptolemaic cosmos of traditional religious narratives is replaced by a physical universe centered on a big bang with earth as a speck rotating around a minor star in one of countless galaxies, the questions arise, who ARE we earthlings? What does it mean to believe that God cares about us in such a universe? Caputo suggests that science fiction explores the metaphysical questions in a narrative rather than an analytical form, a traditional medium of understanding accessible to most people. Philosophers take heed of Hollywood!

But what about the scientists happily exploring the material world in their labs and constructing their own narratives of the world? Take the biological definition of life on earth: "an organized genetic system capable of metabolism, reproduction and evolution."<sup>1</sup> This definition leads to a hierarchy of living complexity, beginning with atoms and ions, which form minerals, crystals and molecules.

This leads to the science of molecular biology. Elements such as iron and sulfur can react to form the mineral pyrite, which can transport electrons, and which forms the basis for biological energy systems. Life may have arisen from the minerals of clay.<sup>2</sup> Atoms of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen, can combine to form amino acids of various types, the units of proteins, which can catalyze other reactions, or with the addition of the phosphate ion, these elements can combine to make RNA and DNA. RNA and certain proteins spontaneously assemble into ribosomes the little machines found in all cells, that read the genetic code of DNA and translate it into specific proteins, which are the structural basis of life. Biologists write exciting narratives about their exploration of life at the molecular level. Astrophysicists, using mathematical "narratives," tell us that the physical conditions in our universe are finely tuned, and that if they were only very slightly different, the big bang would not have been followed by the formation of these elements.

The molecular reactions described above take place in a watery, membrane-bound cell, and together they constitute cellular metabolism, the basis for harnessing energy for animating living processes. And cells reproduce themselves. Cellular metabolism and reproduction is another form of life that biologists explore. But cells seldom live solo. They communicate with each other, they reproduce and differentiate, they cooperate to form tissues, and they compete, control and kill each other, all of which is enthusiastically studied and narrated, by biologists looking through microscopes.

Life as we see it around us consists of multi-cellular triumphs of complexity, with tissues, organs and organ systems. Biologists imagine the biosphere, earth's zone of life, as an inter-connected cascade of genetic, metabolic, reproducing and evolving systems. Humanity rides the biosphere from a pinnacle

of complexity, set upon a foundation of an earthful of other interacting life systems, all with a common ancestor generated from the earth's clay minerals and driven by sunlight.

Darwin concludes his pivotal treatise *On the Origin of Species*, with this narrative of the biosphere. Picture the man walking his country estate, reflecting upon a lifetime of careful observations of the earth's life forms.

It is interesting to contemplate a tangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent upon each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth with reproduction; Inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the conditions of life, and from use and disuse; a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less improved forms. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most



wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.<sup>3</sup>

Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection rationalized the operation of the biosphere, harmonizing natural history with the music of the heavenly spheres. Darwin and Wallace provided a grand unifying testable theory that enfolded natural history into the rational, scientific cosmos as Copernicus had with the solar system.

Copernicus's letter to Pope Paul III, explains the rationale for a new system of the heavens, by drawing upon the accepted notion of a person as a unified living system. He uses the physical perfection of the human person as a metaphor for the perfection of the physical heavens.

Nor could [current astronomical theories] elicit or deduce...the structure of the universe and the true symmetry of its parts. On the contrary, their experience was just like some one taking from various places hands, feet, a head, and other pieces, very well depicted, it may be, but not for the representation of a single person; since these fragments would not belong to one another at all, a monster rather than a man would be put together from them. ... For if the hypotheses assumed by them were not false, everything which follows from their hypotheses would be confirmed beyond any doubt. Even though what I am now saying may be obscure, it will nevertheless become clearer in the proper place.<sup>4</sup>

For Darwin, Newton, and Copernicus, the "grandeur in this view of life," the great explanatory power of nature and nature's laws, the symmetry of the universe metaphorically a person, was the mark of the divine, an aesthetic mystery that continues to puzzle

scientists who hypothesize an anthropic principle in the cosmos.<sup>5</sup>

Nature and nature's laws as applied to the biosphere are being elucidated in fine detail through scientific investigation. Mendel's work in the garden formed the foundation for 20<sup>th</sup> century scientists like R. A. Fisher, J. B. S. Haldane, Sewall Wright, Ernst Mayr, and Theodosius Dobzhansky, who found a mechanism for natural selection in the mathematics of population genetics, leading to a synthesis of evolutionary theory with genetics<sup>6</sup>. Thus, nature and nature's laws, with or without a divine imprimatur, explain the operation of the physical cosmos. This perspective on the divine does not require God to be overseeing nature. In our imaginative landscape, God's domain is elsewhere. We continue the journey, as two questions appear on our roadmap. Who and what am I, as a product of nature, and as a child of God? What makes me think that God cares about me?

Biologists tell me that I am a genetic system connected in time to my ancestors from bacteria to apes, a product of eons of natural history, of the chance encounters of genetic systems capable of metabolism, reproduction, and evolution, with the biosphere and its other genetic and physical components. While I am aware of myself as an individual female human being, biology tells me that I am a composite on many levels of the biological hierarchy, made of cells that have a line of descent from some primordial form, living in intimate symbiosis with many other cells that arose through other lines of descent, like the thousands of bacteria in my intestines that supply vitamins, not to mention the parasites that exist at my expense. And of course, I am connected with other members of the human species for two of the essential life processes: reproduction and evolution. Interpreters of the book of nature describe an interconnected cosmos that blurs the definition of "me." The boundaries that

define “me” as a separate physical entity are cultural constructs. Thanks to Descartes, “me” exists as a spiritual entity, but Jung and psychological narratives have blurred the boundaries around “me” as an individual spiritual entity, too. The book of nature throws into question whether “I” am anything more than my own self-definition. What is it in this blurred product of nature, that God recognizes as me, God’s child?

To explore these questions, biology is supplemented by psychology. Psychology demonstrates the centrality of relationships with others in the development of a self, and the importance of love in this process. Among the many varieties of relationships, parenting is the most fundamental, both among humans, and throughout the biosphere. Any creature that currently exists is the product of a successful system of parenting as genetic transmission, or its line would have become extinct. There are a wide variety of parenting styles among living creatures, starting with simple clonal reproduction, where a parent’s “advice” is passed on to offspring as a genetic code that worked well enough that the parent survived to reproduce. More attentive parenting is demonstrated by species that select a favorable habitat for deposition of their offspring, whether or not the parent remains present to assist the young.

In more complex systems, parental care of the young is extended for a long period, and may include a population of caretakers that goes beyond the genetic parents. These gradations of parental care can be thought of as the evolution of what we recognize as love. Do these varieties of love and proto-love correspond to varieties of self-recognition? How does my descent from these ancestors help me understand who I am?

God, imagined as a loving parent, a traditional genetic relationship, thus becomes the basis for self-definition. Human parenting also carries forward a culture through care, education, and example. If our understanding of God’s love draws on the human experience of parenting, then nature provides a basis for the religious imagination of God’s love as the perfection of a parent, and the perfect foundation for self-definition. How I know that I am loved by my parents is that I recognize my self. And I know I am loved by God when I imagine my perfect self. God as the loving parent of the cosmos, I as an interconnected part of this whole, receive definition of my perfect self in the image of this perfect parenting. Thus, the metaphor of a parental God places God’s love within the narratives of nature, but of a perfection beyond anything nature has achieved.

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<sup>1</sup> Purves, et al. 2006 *Life: the Science of Biology*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. p. 2. The search for life on other heavenly bodies takes as the distinctive characteristic of life, “a system in thermodynamic disequilibrium with its environment.”

<sup>2</sup> A review of the iron-sulfur world theories on the origin of life was published in the journal *Science* in 2002.

<http://ajdubre.tripod.com/Sci-Read-0/y-OriginLife-82500/OriginLifeSci-82500.html>

<sup>3</sup> This quote is from the 6<sup>th</sup> edition; the 1<sup>st</sup> edition omits the phrase, “by the Creator.”

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Copernicus, *De Revolutionibus* (On the Revolutions), 1543. Full text on the web at

<http://webexhibits.org/calendars/year-text-Copernicus.html>

<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of the anthropic principle, see Stephen Weinberg, “Is there a Designer Universe?” *NY Review of Books*, Oct 21, 1999.

[http://www.stephenjaygould.org/ctrl/archive/design/weinberg\\_designer.html](http://www.stephenjaygould.org/ctrl/archive/design/weinberg_designer.html)

and these commentaries on the article <http://www.nybooks.com/authors/201>.

<sup>6</sup> Julian Huxley, *Evolution: The Modern Synthesis*, and Ernst Mayr, *Systematics and the Origin of Species*, both published in 1942 were inspired by Dobzhansky’s *Genetics and the Origin of Species* (1937). Huxley, in *Evolution in Action* (1953) and George Gaylord Simpson, in *The Meaning of Evolution* (1949) stress that evolution is non-teleological, that the emergence of humans is not pre-ordained. They espouse a positivist view of human ethics based upon scientific knowledge, in which human awareness places us as stewards of our surroundings.

## "Contingency" in Postmodern Vocabulary

Al Hakim

It's hard to come down comfortably on what it means to be living in a 'postmodern' world, mainly because of the shifts in the meaning of the word, and, to that degree, difficult to know what an accommodation between 'religion' and 'postmodern' should look like. But a convenient way to identify the postmodern and its style of references is to take the standard philosophy textbook division of western philosophy into three periods, ancient, medieval and modern, which is a division of thought patterns as well as chronology. Accordingly, the modern period is understood as beginning with Descartes in the seventeenth century, which then shades off in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This division, it's clear, made sense for texts written a hundred or more years ago when 'modern' meant 'where things stand now', so that textbooks written today have to bridge the time gap by adding a fourth period called 'contemporary', in which sense 'contemporary' means 'postmodern', again expressing a thought pattern sufficiently distinctive to justify some authors in calling it 'antimodern'!

Postmodern, by whatever name, purports to hold that all, or most, of philosophy in the past developed rigid pathways of thought impossible to get out of, generating systems uncongenial to new ways of thinking, impervious to fresh insights, and allowing institutions, interpretations, and cultural styles to take on lives of their own, all along building constructions resistant to change, -- some kind of attack on the past, it is said, was long overdue, whence *deconstruction*. In the past number of years, especially during the

70's and 80's, deconstruction has proven itself to be an active force. For many it is a genuine, brilliant contribution to current philosophy, while for others it does not differ in kind from traditional critical analysis though it differs in intensity and its passion for neologisms. Members of the summer symposium know that the name of *Jacques Derrida*, more than any other, is associated with the movement, for he was not only the coiner of the term but also a tireless and intriguing guru in a wide variety of disciplines, though he himself once said he had trouble recognizing the vast number of programmes undertaken in his name. Be that as it may, we know how forthright *John Caputo* is in acknowledging his indebtedness to Derrida as a mentor in shaping his philosophy of religion, and we in turn are indebted to Caputo for his book *On Religion*, a work that is reflective, passionate, and a miniature cyclotron of smashing ideas.

The vocabulary of postmodernism is extensive but among the recurring terms, as was evident during the seminar, there is one that, for various reasons, caught my attention, the term *contingency*. It's a word that can serve as an umbrella for a cluster of others, like particularity, temporality and historicity, which postmodern thinkers feel are the existentialist characteristics required to 'deconstruct' the static notion of human nature as a fixed and unchanging reality. Any claim made on behalf of necessity, universality, eternity or permanence is to be pre-empted in the same way, and so is any pretension to 'absolute' or 'trans-historical' truth. Traditional metaphysics

has had its day. Now this view requires more than the standing objection (that there are no absolutes is itself an absolute) because it often couches a matter of singular importance. Caputo, for example, rightly wants to maintain the sincerity of each person's prayer life, and so writes: "We should have many religions and many prayers, so long as all of them are true, so long as all of them are doing the truth. But none of them has absolute or transhistorical credentials. Far from it. Each is nested in a historical setting from which it cannot possibly be extricated without being destroyed. Each is an historical *how*, not a transhistorical *what*." (131) Clearly what Caputo is saying is important, but it is also clear that what makes it important is the very *necessity* 'historicity' is against; and ironically *transhistorical* is 'transhistorical' precisely because the sincerity of prayer is *not* tied down to any one historical setting. Said another way, the historical setting of prayer makes no difference to its sincerity: *how* prayer stands to its historical setting is the transhistorical *what* that is the test of its sincerity.

This brief critique is a kind of Q.E.D because it helps to show that it is impossible to think 'contingency' without thinking of its opposite, *necessity*. The very nature of contingency, its very definition, entails necessity. Contingency and necessity are a pair continually circling around each other, dancing to the music of time. The Presocratics, once more, have a lot to tell us. Heraclitus, the icon of change in western philosophy, was enthralled by the panflux of reality, yet he saw the need of a Logos, standing *outside change*, to account for it. And there is no greater champion of permanence, of being, in which 'is' precludes 'was' or 'will be'; yet the footprint for an unchanging reality was to be found in a changing reality. Change and necessity mutually

define each other; they co-exist, like a cube and its sides.

We can perhaps see the tension between contingency and necessity best of all through the eyes of Plato. Without trying to develop an argument for an unchanging level of reality, as Aristotle and St. Thomas after him would do, a mind like Plato's simply relied on the intuition that where there is a transitory world there must be one that is not; a bi-level reality, one lower and one higher. It is true that at times the wonder of the World of Forms prevails in Plato's vision of reality to such an extent that he seems to be disparaging the pedestrian things found in the World of Opinion where we live. That's what prompted W.H. Auden to write his charming disclaimer *No, Plato, No*:

I can't imagine anything  
that I would like less to be  
than a discarnate Spirit,  
unable to chew or sip  
or make contact with surfaces  
or breathe the scents of summer  
or comprehend speech and music  
or gaze at what lies beyond.  
No, God has placed me exactly  
where I'd have chosen to be:  
the sub-lunar world is such fun,  
where Man is male or female  
and gives Proper Names to all things.

But it's the same Plato who writes of the inherent dignity of things in lower-case reality because they share the goodness and beauty of the higher, they are its reflections, its images, so that through the images you come to know what they image, whence, in the *Timaeus*, he uses the incredibly powerful description of time as "the moving image of eternity". And in his most appealing dialogue, *Symposium*, Plato has Diotima instruct Socrates as to how the love-worthiness of the limited goods around us serves as a ladder for

ascending to higher goods and higher loves until the possession of the highest good is achieved and, with it, the highest love.

Caputo has an abundance of subtle and thought-provoking insights into religion, and hovering over them all is what gives them their meaning, namely the making *possible* of the Impossible. The expression, or its equivalent, is found throughout the book, such as the one on p. 67: "In this little treatise *On Religion*, which is turning out to be a treatise *On the Impossible*, I have been arguing that the impossible has recently become possible again ..." The *need* for the Impossible has outlasted its critics and has reasserted itself! I could not agree more, but the problems remaining for me are how the author arrives at such a necessity, where it comes from, how it is founded, in what way it is discovered, since, for him, to discover it in contingency is out of the question. Is the need, or the necessity, for the Impossible a matter of intuition?, or feeling? or mystical certitude? If so, it is beyond articulation. If it's a matter of faith, then it is beyond a rational foundation but still open to rational appreciation, and so we would have the interesting paradox that in the Caputo/Derrida project of making the impossible possible, or the incomprehensible comprehensible, we have a retrieval of the forever project of Christian theology, *faith seeking understanding*, formally put forward under that logo since the time of St. Anselm. The 'old' theological venture (like 'old' Europe) has a role to play in the 'new'!

For my part, the clue to the project of making the Impossible *possible* has to be found in what we already know, and experience is the place to begin with. Experience is our entrée into the horizon of the Incomprehensible. Any experience, because it is not self-explanatory, requires

reflection as to what explains it, why it is the way it is, what lies beyond it to enable it to be the way it is. My experience, for example, of freedom of choice is a summons to inquire into the mutuality between freedom and the good; my experience of my imperfection (that I am not a 'perfect' human being) means that growth entails a deepening of self-understanding; my experience of love is the foundation of what it means to be human.

Our experience of contingency is an assemblage of strands all pulling in the same direction. Our awareness of 'before' and 'after', though strophes in the *durée* of the same person, tells us that we are bound in time. We are aware that we are subject to the ills of the body, to the vagaries of social life, to the onslaughts of outrageous behavior, to psychological and spiritual impairment, and so on. But all these strands are vectored in the radical contingency of our existence: *we are and we do not have to be*. Whatever is and doesn't have to be cannot be self-explanatory, therefore, the answer as to why such a thing is must be sought outside the range of experience. Caputo agrees with this, otherwise he couldn't write, "The impossible ... is what makes experience to be *experience*, makes it truly worthy of the name 'experience'." However, he still insists that in the face of the Incomprehensible human comprehension recedes to zero because the moment we say we comprehend *anything* of the Incomprehensible we have delimited it. In consequence, the crowning glory of man, as *capax Dei*, will always default into *incapax Dei*, a conclusion Caputo would abhor, but it's what we're left with when contingency is stripped of its signposts to Necessity. The fear of saying too much about God (Wittgenstein's "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.") does not disqualify our saying

something. It comports more with human self-understanding to have some knowledge of God than none; far more comforting to have a *learned* ignorance of God than *total* ignorance; and far more loving to speak about the beautiful truth that man is *capax Dei* than to leave it unspoken, and to realize that this truth is

the mirror image of the divine truth that God is *capax hominis*.

In sum, Caputo's is a wonderful book, but he cannot have his Impossibility and eat it too!

**Gratitude as Antidote to Relativism:  
The Necessity of Religious Devotion in the Postmodern Era**

Maura Grace Harrington

As a teacher of English and a student of literature, my contact with postmodern ideas has been more constant than I acknowledged before I encountered my colleagues' and my own intensive reflections on the topic during May's seminar. Many times have I heard my students, debating an ethical or religious topic in a College English I class, attempt to take the relativistic high ground by insisting: "It depends on the circumstances of the situation!" While I am quick to write such a pseudo-viewpoint off as moral or intellectual laziness, I see that this viewpoint is one which contemporary America inculcates into children from a young age. Relativism, fundamentally based on a desire for universal respect, informs many contemporary modes of inquiry. The valiant notion that everyone's point of view should be treated with consideration underlies new historical literary criticism, through which many of today's students of literature, including myself, work to piece together alternative contemporary interpretations of literature, focusing on the viewpoints of people who previously were not believed to be of consequence. This notion of inclusiveness underlies most of today's postcolonial studies. Recently it has been occurring to me that many practitioners of today's *en vogue* modes of literary criticism undertake their methods as a result of the view that there is more than one truth to be found, and that one reading is no better than another, as long as all can be supported. I can comfortably concede that it is difficult for human observers of events to see the complete truth about these occurrences, since each individual comes to life's events with a set of presuppositions. However, unlike many who might use research methodologies similar to mine, I do not take this imperfection of human perceptual abilities as an indication

that there is no absolute truth to be found. Despite my realization that I do not know everything about a given situation, I do not feel, as John D. Caputo does, that it would be best to join with my fellow ignoramuses to confess our lack of knowledge, and then to take this excited ignorance as a call to action. Instead, the recognition that there are fields left for me to explore reminds me that I have been graced with the tools that allow me to better understand my situation and to respond to it in a sensitive and sensible way.

While in our mortal state we cannot understand everything about the cosmos, much truth about the world, about ourselves, and about God is accessible to humans; God has designed us, and the universe, this way. We can access reality through reason, which allows us to understand something of God's motivation: love. And we can access it through revelation (through the Church, scripture, and all of our lived experiences), which inspires and engenders faith. These two impulses, toward faith and toward reason, can go on informing each other, leading to quite a decent understanding of the truth. Inklings of such a view are held by reasonable people the world over; scientist Carl Sagan, a skeptic when it came to matters of traditional religion, noted in "Can We Know the Universe?: Reflections on a Grain of Salt" that "A universe in which everything is known would be static and dull, as boring as the heaven of some weak-minded theologians. A universe that is unknowable is no fit place for a thinking being. The ideal universe for us is very much like the universe we inhabit. And I would guess that this is not really much of a coincidence" (576). Our world, to Sagan and to Christians, is not haphazard. It was created for a good purpose; as I believe that Caputo would agree, God created the universe out of



love. The law of the universe, then, is love, as Caputo aptly notes. What to do with this love, however, is another issue. Caputo is enamored of the idea of being diligent in action but keeping this love quiet, so that no one is offended by the imposition of another person's response to the love that he has been given by God. Caputo is zealous that each person, incited by the love of the Great Who-Knows-What, act individually to actualize more perfect justice. Is it really wise, however, for humans to deny their communal nature and to avoid sharing the revelation with which God has graciously gifted us? Does not this silence stifle the true enactment of justice and slow the pace of work toward peace?

Certainly, it is wise, as Caputo does, to raise an eyebrow at those who presume to have all of the answers about matters metaphysical. However, the key to realizing that we can, in fact, live in a state of relative enlightenment about the nature of the universe, and that we can and should promote understanding of the universe and the concomitant actions, comes from a concept that Caputo embraces wholeheartedly: a passion for the impossible. Caputo poetically explains that "The Scriptures are filled with narratives in which the power of the present is broken and the full length and breadth of the real open up like a flower, unfolding the power of the possible, the power of the impossible beyond the possible, of the hyper-real beyond the real" (15). Caputo details various passages from the Bible in which the power of the love of God breaks into humdrum human life, offering to mortals a glimpse of something beyond the quotidian quagmire. For someone who is so entranced with the idea of that which is beyond the apparent possibilities of daily life, Caputo takes a rather dim view of the ability of God to break through our expectations to make special deliveries of love and grace, to which gifts we can and must respond. For example, in his diatribe against fundamentalism, which religious movement he nearly equates with all

organized religion, Caputo derogates God's ability to convey revelation through the medium of Scripture: "The textual character is preeminently true of the Scriptures, whose original context and authorial intention it is impossible to reconstruct with certainty, whose polyphony is the product of layer upon layer of authorship from very different communities and times, which are impossible to unravel" (100-01). Is the God of omnipresent love truly able to be boxed in by the limitations of human language, as Caputo suggests? Can we ensnare God in the nets of our language, preventing Him from communicating His love to us through a means that He has chosen? The power of the word of God is further called into question when Caputo asserts that we are individually responsible for accepting Scripture and for our interpretation and application of it, and that we cannot "claim...divine authorization" (99).

The concept that the impossible can happen is central to faith, and a true acceptance of the idea that, to quote Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Cinderella*, "impossible things are happening every day" indicates that God is active in our world, and is not limited in his interactions with us by our human condition. Caputo believes that religious people work to break down the wall between the possible and the impossible, and that "religious people...are hyper-realists, in love with the impossible, and they will not rest until the impossible happens, which is impossible, so they get very little rest" (92). Is the removal of the wall between that which is expected to happen and that which has the potential to happen but is beyond the scope of our expectation really such a difficult task, and is it impossible that it will occur? The truth of the matter is, as Caputo himself admits, that God's love is working to do the same thing. Postmodern in his sensibilities, Caputo encourages us to avoid taking too personally any inclination toward the Truth that God might provide. However, it seems to



me that it would be an error of pride to ignore the revelation that God has provided for us, instead choosing to believe that anything God can divulge of Himself becomes muddled because he conveys it through humanly accessible channels, and then we interpret it imperfectly. Reason should tell us that the impossible includes a transcendence of reason, and that “nothing will be impossible with God” (Lk 1: 37), even the reaching out of God to man in a manner that man can understand. The Transubstantiation, even though we cannot completely understand it, is not made any less real by its taking place among humans, but is instead a hyper-reality, in which we receive, by a means that we can sense, the true presence of God’s love.

It would be foolish to disavow the gifts that we possess which allow us to have greater access to reality. Should we relinquish reason and recant community? Would the perpetual reinvention of the wheel deepen our individual spirituality or would it, in a transgenerational Sisyphean exercise in futility, hold us back from further development? Sincere devotion to love, given by a specific God who has shared some very significant facets of His existence with us, should engender definite actions, undertaken communally, and in a spirit of humility and gratitude. As a result of the reflections I have undertaken through this seminar, I have realized that I can help my students to appreciate the truths that they know, and to use any uncertainties as an impetus toward using the gifts of faith and reason in order to understand the truth more completely. I can take as my model the persona of e. e. cummings’ “i thank You God for most this amazing,” an inhabitant of the earth who is

willing to accept his human condition with humility and who remains in wonder about truth which is revealed to him:

how should tasting touching hearing seeing  
breathing any—lifted from the no  
of all nothing—human merely being  
doubt unimaginable You? (ll. 9-12)

I would consider it a sign of ingratitude, as well as a sign of ignorance, to pay no heed to the impossible possibility that abounds before us and to not share this possibility, in all the richness of faith, reason, and informed tradition, with those whom I meet.

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## Religion as Historical and Eternal Consciousness: A Response to Caputo

Anthony L. Haynor

John Caputo in his provocative book, *On Religion*, explores the complex and seemingly unfathomable relationship between two aspects of religion—its historicity, on the one hand, and its eternal essence, on the other. I will first review how Caputo conceptualizes each domain of religion, and then examine how he interrelates the domains. In the main, I found his approach to reconciling and connecting these two dimensions less than satisfactory in crucial respects.

A major theme of *On Religion* concerns religion's fundamental historicity. For Caputo, religion clearly is a form of historical consciousness:

We are social and historical beings, concretely situated in one historical, cultural, and linguistic tradition of another, formed and forged by one religious tradition or another. Our religious aspirations have been given one determinate form or another by the traditions to which we belong and by which we have been nourished, by the way the name of God has been given flesh and substance for us. I affirm that. I have no desire to twist free from such historical situatedness in the name of some purely private religion or of some overarching ahistorical universal religious truth...A God without historical flesh and blood, a religion without the body of a community and its traditions, is a bloodless abstraction. (p. 34)

Such an emphasis casts religion as an unavoidable "prejudice" (in Gadamer's terms), against which modernity clearly has a prejudice. He is referring here of course to the Enlightenment belief that empirical inquiry represents the antidote to human prejudice, of which religion is one conspicuous manifestation. (For Gadamer and Caputo, the Enlightenment "faith" in science is but another "prejudice.")

One point that is implied in Caputo's book but which merits greater emphasis is that the "tradition" through which God is "given flesh" is in a modern context chosen by the individual. It can become part of the life "trajectory" (Anthony Giddens' term) through we live out our life plans. Alternatively, individuals can choose to reject the tradition into which they are born. Choice, then, can take the form of assent to or the withholding of assent to communities of faith. Caputo also points out that one's chosen religious perspective (reflecting an "assent" to or a withholding of assent to a religious tradition) competes against other perspectives (science, art, and secular ethics) in the life planning in which individuals engage.

For Caputo, there is also the "eternal" dimension of religion that stands as it were alongside the "historical" dimension. He does argue that "We have not, to my knowledge, been visited by some Super-Revelation, some Apocalyptic Unveiling, that settles all our questions" (p. 20). This is the post-modern side of Caputo's approach to religion, namely, the

outright rejection of any and all Grand Narratives. However, the historically grounded religious perspectives that we choose are not “true” or “authentic” religion according to Caputo. This is reserved for the quest for the “impossible,” for the “absolute future,” rather than the “relative future,” the latter being concerned with the practicalities of everyday life (our professional, civic, and familial lives). I found Caputo’s framing of religion in terms of the “impossible” intriguing, but it raised serious problems for me. One can infer from Caputo’s positing of the historicity of religion that our path to the “impossible,” our very openness to the impossible can only come through traditions that are situated in time and space. But, how can we approach the impossible through the possible, the eternal through the historically contingent? I did not see a convincing answer to this question in *On Religion*. What he does suggest is that religion as a tradition that is located in time and space invariably entails an us vs. them mentality that results in violence and genocide. This tendency can be mitigated through a dialogical and conversational attitude in which one’s more or less closed position encounters the closed positions of others in a climate of mutual respect (a position that Gadamer, for example, adopts). However, such a dialogical process leads at best to a “negotiated order,” not the impossible (or perhaps this is the impossible in human terms).

This is the conundrum that I see in Caputo’s argument. Religion is by definition historically situated; however, authentic religion is one that is open to a transcendence of its historical contingency. The transcendence of the boundedness and prejudiced nature of religion as historical consciousness can only occur, however, through resources that the community of faith can provide. How can a bounded religion foster a path toward the

unbounded? There are two answers to this conundrum. The first is to argue that historically situated religion works against the search for the ultimate and eternal, the implication of which is that the only path to the impossible is through a distancing from any and all religious traditions. Such a posture can of course lead to new religious structures that institutionalize such a posture. This relates to Georg Simmel’s distinction between “life” and “form.” The former represents the dynamic energy that foster human creativity; the latter to structures and traditions that routinize human existence. As Simmel points out, the dynamism of life inevitably produces new forms, against which new life processes can be directed. This position does not really escape the confines of historical contingency.

A second position, and one to which I am more sympathetic, involves the necessity of building the search for the impossible into the everyday life of religious traditions. The challenge is to make our religious communities less “profane” (that is, less concerned with finances and mechanistic rituals) and more “sacred,” in the process fostering ruptures from the “natural attitude” (Husserl’s phrase). Prayer and other forms of devotionism can support the creation of “finite provinces of meaning” (also Husserl’s phrase) that rip us out of the pedestrianism of everyday life, as can concrete expressions of love for one’s sisters and brothers. What is more “impossible” than Christian love, for example? By definition, it is non-contingent, that is, it is meant to extend to all members of the human family (and to non-human living things as well). One enters the sacred realm, one is catapulted into the domain of the eternal, to the degree that one recognizes in words and deeds the inherent sacredness and dignity of all beings with whom one comes into contact. In doing so, we make

the impossible possible, the eternal historically real. In so acting, we resist the "disenchantment of the world" (a phrase used by Max Weber) by infusing our everyday lives with mystery and majesty.

In conclusion, the impossible becomes a part of our temporal existence to the degree that we institutionalize its realization in vital historically bounded religious traditions, when our historical situatedness is oriented in practical ways to the eternal and to the non-contingent, when our religious traditions are more attuned to God's standards than to human standards. To draw on a baseball meta-

phor, the batting average of human beings will never be all that high, given our propensity to control and dominate. Our sole purpose (one could also say our soul purpose) in this life is to raise our batting average, to institutionalize love in our everyday life activities, utilizing in the process the resources that our religious tradition can uniquely make available to us. I found Caputo's argument sociologically naïve. *On Religion* provided us with very little that could assist us in this process of institutionalizing the impossible within the context of historically specific religious traditions.

## The Implication of Caputo's book: *On Religion*

Rosemarie Kramer

John Caputo, a post-modern philosopher has written an engaging and at times hard to understand treatise. He talks about the love of God and the love for God, but he does so not so much from a faith perspective as from an intellectual one. He seems to disparage a personal God and also is seemingly disparaging toward fundamental religions. His premise – a religion without religion – is such that a more apt title for this book would be *Against Religion*. Caputo seems to be questioning the need for fundamental religion in today's technologically-driven world.

Caputo begins with a very thought-provoking question from St. Augustine's, *Confessions*, "What do I love when I love my God?". This appears on the first page and continues throughout the book until he changes it to "How do I love my God, when I love my God?" in chapter five. Caputo believes that only through loving others and helping them can one truly love God.

Before he comes to that conclusion, Caputo describes the world of the fundamental religions. He sees them as ever narrowing in their perspectives. In a world that is becoming more and more familiar and comfortable with pluralism, feminism, and secularism, the only "ism" accepted by the fundamentals is literalism – the "Word of God" aspect of religion with its rigidly authoritarian base. Caputo suggests that the fundamental religions are not

necessarily paths to God since they tend to be exclusive rather than inclusive. Each fundamental religion claims to possess the one "truth". But this "truth" has provided the rationale for excluding all those who don't agree with them. It is his contention that fundamental religions – "Western religions, Eastern religions, ancient religions, modern religions, nontheistic, polytheistic and even slightly atheistic religions ..." sets up restrictions, actually barriers, for loving God. He likens them to rafts on the sea, each one similar; no one raft having a better or best construction for navigating that sea. In that sense, Caputo sees all fundamental religions as being, basically, the same and none containing the real truth.

What he is saying is not new. Sociologists of religion have been concerned with the emergence of fundamentalism since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It has been seen as a reaction to modernism and intellectualism. Fundamentalism's emphasis on anti-intellectualism was strengthened by the 1925 *Scopes Trial* regarding how human beings began. Fundamentalists defended the creationist stance as against the evolutionist. Basically, according to sociologists of religion (and also Caputo though he does not use the same concept), a return to fundamentalism is a reaction to globalization.

To counter this, Caputo suggests a type of humanism, which brings alive

what he terms the impossible where people are compelled to do their best. Caputo sees this quality as a religious one inherent in all humankind. To prove his case, he uses the *Star War* movies as an example. In defending his position on religion without religion, Caputo presents his interpretation of the *Star Wars Trilogy* as a religious narrative. In his brilliant and fascinating analogy, Caputo sees the first episode of *Star Wars – the Phantom Menace* as a reproduction of a

.....

“high tech version of [the] ancient Christian narrative [the virgin birth] in which the impossible happens, again. .... [This movie] is part of a piece of a popular science fiction that is laced with religious import and trades on religious structures.

..... the enormous popularity of *Star Wars* over the years derives in no small part from its reproduction of elemental mythic structures and its transcription of classical religious figures into a high tech world.”<sup>2</sup>

The main theme throughout these movies is something known as “the Force”, a vague concept which could be conceived of as a god and is the connection between human beings. Caputo is not quite certain if he should refer to this concept as God but he does attempt to show how important “the Force” is to humans .....

But the Force is not God, not a transcendent creator of the visible heavens and earth, which is a pre-Copernican figure, but a pervasive mystico-scientific power that runs through all things.....

..... On the contrary, situated at the heart of the world of *Star Wars*, the Force is a mystico-religio-scientific structure that gives life mystery and unpredictability and provides a setting for the human drama for everything depends upon how human beings cooperate with the Force. The Force is the subject of both science and mysticism and it requires a spiritual discipline and a long preparation to become adept at its ways.<sup>3</sup>

The above strongly suggests that this structure is spiritual and one needs to be indoctrinated into it to fully participate in it. It may not be a religion but it is spiritual. Here, Caputo seems to be saying that it makes no difference whether human beings believe in the fundamental religions or not, there is a spiritual connection between humans, which may or may not be called God. A religion without religion. Caputo makes a good case for his beliefs, but all through this narrative, there runs an unspoken concept which might dilute his contention of a religion without religion. That concept is the term *world view*. This term, so dear to sociologists, is seen by them as a characteristic of religion that provides ...

... cognitive ordering of concepts of nature, of self, of society, of the supernatural. Religion creates not only intense feelings...of awe...[but also a particular view of the world, a particular mode of interpreting the meaning of suffering, pain, death and injustice..... The world view represents an intellectual process by which people can affirm that life makes sense, that suffering is bearable, that justice is not a mirage

-that in the end, good will be rewarded.<sup>4</sup>

Fundamentalists have world views. But so does Caputo. His world view is a religion without religion. So, When Caputo changes his question from "What do I love when I love my God?" to "How do I love my God?" he is giving testimony to his world view. He states that it is in doing for others that one expresses her/his love of/for God; in sheltering the homeless; "serving the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in the worst streets of the most dangerous neighborhoods"<sup>5</sup>

It has been suggested that Caputo is "watering down established religion". Perhaps. But he also could be challenging established religions to transcend themselves to do/perform the love of God.

Though world views may be diverse, there is an underlying supposition of shared values as suggested by Thomas Kuhn in his book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Writing about paradigms (world views) of the scientific community he states .....

.... To a greater extent than other components of the disciplinary matrix, values may be shared by men who differ in their application. ....shared values can be important determinants of group behavior even though the members of the group do not apply them in the same way.<sup>6</sup>

Could it not be that these different world views share a common value – to serve one's neighbor? Perhaps that is the implication of this treatise. Loving God is an action not a type of worship. It is a reaching out to others in their need.

What are the implications for Seton Hall? This institution is a part of an established religion – it is a faith-based community. Its world view may differ from the others including John Caputo, but, like Kuhn suggested, its values are similar – to serve God by serving others. Seton Hall educators have always had a special commitment to helping and serving others. John Caputo's book should remind these educators that .....

... Religion is for lovers, men and women of passion, for real people with a passion for something other than taking profits, people who believe in something, who hope like mad in something, who love something with a love that surpasses understanding.<sup>7</sup>

And this is what they do every time they walk into a classroom.

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 Roberts. Keith, *Religion in Sociological Perspective, 4<sup>th</sup> edition*. USA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2004.

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<sup>1</sup> John D. Caputo, *On Religion*, New York City: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 2001. , p.1

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 78, 79

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 83, 85

<sup>4</sup> Keith Roberts, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition. Belmont, Ca.: Thomson Wadsworth publishing, 2004., p.11.

<sup>5</sup> Caputo, p.114.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, enlarged. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970., pp. 185, 186.

<sup>7</sup> Caputo, p.2.



## On Religion: Assessing Caputo

Richard M Liddy

The Catholic-Studies seminar conducted by Professor Thomas Guarino and involving the reading of John Caputo's *On Religion* sparked in me sentiments of both admiration and annoyance. Admittedly Caputo is an excellent writer and some of his passages are well nigh lyrical. I am thinking in particular of the passage where he concedes all the good accomplished by genuinely religious people.

If, on any given day, you go into the worst of neighborhoods of the inner cities of most large urban centers, the people you will find there serving the poor and the needy, expending their lives and considerable talents attending to the least among us, will almost certainly be religious people – evangelicals, Peteconstalists, social workers with deeply held religious convictions, Christian, Jewish, and Islamic, men and women, priests and nuns, black and white. They are the better angels of our nature.<sup>1</sup>

Or take his extravagant praise of authentic religion as rooted in the love of God as unconditional, “our true north,” the source of “the impossible.” Such love regards not the future that is present through our planning, but rather the absolute future, the future beyond human control.

The only problem, Caputo contends, is that religious people tend to become dogmatic, to form oppressive institutions,

to assert their convictions in such absolutist ways that they offend others, sometimes in the extreme provoking violence towards others.

Religion is for the passionate lovers of the impossible, lovers of God, who make the rest of us look like loveless loafers. But at the same time and along with that, these unhinged and impassioned lovers of the impossible are also impossible people who confuse themselves with God and threaten the civil liberties and even sometimes the lives of anyone who disagrees with them, which they take to be equivalent with disagreeing with God.<sup>2</sup>

Caputo's solution is to hold religious convictions “lightly” – that is, in such a way as to allow room for the equally fervent – though opposed – beliefs of others. Caputo's is a religion of “passionate uncertainty,” of *docta ignorantia*. Take, for example, his enigmatic definition of revelation as “the secret is that there is no Secret.”

By confessing up front that we do not know who we are, that we are cut off from The Secret, we find ourselves forced constantly to traffic in “interpretations,” the inescapability of which is a good way to define “hermeneutics,” a word that has had some currency among contemporary academics. I do not recommend ignorance

and I am not saying that there is no truth, but I am arguing that the best way to think about truth is to call it the best interpretation that anybody has come up with yet while conceding that no one knows what is coming next.<sup>3</sup>

## I

To Caputo I oppose, in my own mind, some quotes from Bernard Lonergan and John Henry Newman. In an interview Lonergan was once asked to “critically ground” his “being in love with God,” which plays such a prominent role in his theological methodology. His basic response was that you do not critically ground love; it grounds everything else. “If you are in love, it doesn’t need any justification. It’s the justification beyond anything else. Just as you don’t explain God, God is the ultimate explanation.”<sup>4</sup> To which the interviewer responds with basically Caputo’s response: “Might not one then be deceived?” To which Lonergan replies:

One can be deceiving himself. If one is deceiving oneself one is not in love. One is mistaking something for love. Love is something that proves itself. “By their fruits you shall know them,” and “in fear and trembling work out your salvation” and all the rest of it. Love isn’t cocksure, either.

“Love isn’t cocksure.” It is the people that are cocksure that Caputo has a problem with. And, according to Lonergan, these are just the people that are mistaking something for love.

But is that to say that we cannot make any sure judgments? Would it not seem that love itself would lead to certain truths about the world and oneself? Truths that

one would not have known if one had not been in love? Truths arrived at through Pascal’s “reasons of the heart?” “The heart has reasons that reason does not know.” Truths that are just as “objective” as the probable conclusions of natural science?

## II

And now to add some quotes from John Henry Newman. Admittedly, even from his teenage years when he experienced a profound conversion to Christianity, Newman’s religion was “dogmatic.”

When I was fifteen (in the autumn of 1816), a great change of thought took place in me. I fell under the influence of a definite Creed and received into my intellect impressions of dogma, which, through God’s mercy have never been effaced or obscured.<sup>5</sup>

“Impressions of dogma.” Newman’s was a deep personal experience of religious conversion, but it was not unconnected to intellect. There is a content to faith’s discernment; it is not amorphous. Newman gives expression to this conviction in the section of the *Apologia* where he identifies dogma as the fundamental principle of the Oxford movement.

The main principle of the Movement is as dear to me now, as it ever was...From the age of fifteen, dogma has been the fundamental principle of my religion: I know no other religion; I cannot enter into the idea of any other sort of religion; religion, as a mere sentiment, is to me a dream and a mockery. As well can there be filial love without the fact of a

father, as devotion without the fact of a Supreme Being.<sup>6</sup>

Elsewhere in his writings Newman states that no one would ever put his life on the line merely for the conclusion to a syllogism. A person dies for realities that are personally attested to. There is an "idea" to Christianity, an intelligible whole, and it involves an appeal to the whole person, not just to reason. In a passage from "The Tamworth Reading Room" of the early 1840s, quoted in the *Grammar of Assent*, Newman writes:

The heart is commonly reached, not through reason, but through imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description. Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us. Many a man will live and die upon a dogma; no man will be a martyr for a conclusion...No one, I say, will die for his own calculations; he dies for realities. This why a literary religion is so little to be depended upon; it looks well in fair weather but its doctrines are opinions, and, when called to suffer for them, it slips them between its folios, or burns them at its hearth.<sup>7</sup>

You need strong doctrine, "real assent," in order to put your life on the line. In a powerful expression of what might be called the existential implications of the dogmatic principle, Newman writes in the *Development of Christian Doctrine*:

That there is truth then; that there is one truth; that religious error is in itself of an immoral nature; that its maintainers, unless involuntarily such, are guilty in

maintaining it; that it is to be dreaded; that the search for truth is not the gratification of a curiosity; that its attainment has nothing of the excitement of a discovery; that the mind is below truth, not above it, and is bound not to descant upon it, but to venerate it; that truth and falsehood are set before us for the trial of our hearts; that our choice is an awful giving forth of lots on which our salvation or rejection is inscribed; that "before all things it is necessary to hold the Catholic faith;" that "he that would be saved must thus think," and not otherwise; that, "if thou criest after knowledge, and liftest up thy voice for understanding, if thou seekest her as silver, and searchest for her as for hid treasure, then shalt thou understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God," - this is the dogmatical principle, which has strength.<sup>8</sup>

Such truth, far from being antithetical to love, is the very form of love. Newman in the *Apologia* says that he learned from John Keble, following Bishop Butler, that "probability was the guide of life" and religious faith, inspired by love, led to discerning in the midst of the events of life where the hand of the Lord is leading.

Butler teaches us that probability is the guide of life. The danger of this doctrine, in the case of many minds, is its tendency to destroy in them absolute certainty, leading them to consider every conclusion as doubtful, and resolving truth into an opinion, which it is safe to obey or profess, but not possible to embrace with full internal assent. If this were to be allowed, then the celebrated saying, "O

God, if there be a God, save my soul, if I have a soul!" would be the highest measure of devotion: but who can really pray to a Being, about whose existence he is seriously in doubt.<sup>9</sup>

Newman, following Keble, met this objection by invoking the power of faith and love.

I considered that Mr. Keble met this difficulty by ascribing the firmness of assent which we give to religious doctrine, not the probabilities which introduced it, but to the living power of faith and love which accepted it. In matters of religion, he seemed to say, it is not merely probability which makes us intellectually certain, but probability as it is put to account by faith and love. It is faith and love which give to probability a force which it has not in itself.

Thus, the difference between slaves and friends is that the latter are able to pick up the slightest clues of their friend's intentions. Newman himself improved on Keble's reflections by his own teaching on the "convergence of probabilities" whereby through an accumulation of bits of evidence someone can become certain of a fact. A farmer, by numerous indications, too varied to be traced, can be virtually certain that it will rain tomorrow. Such a convergence of probabilities, perceived by the "illative sense," can lead the mind to certainty.

### III

So much depends on the correct analysis of human judgment and Caputo seems to have little sense of the

implications of personal judgment and "real assent." Without judgment as the doorway to truth and reality we are at the mercy of the latest "bright idea." As Bernard Lonergan often said, "Bright ideas are a dime a dozen; what counts is if they are true!" And most modern philosophy, though strong on experience and interpretation (= Caputo), are oblivious of judgment. Parallel to Heidegger's forgetfulness of being, there has been in empiricist, idealist and postmodern relativist philosophies a general forgetfulness of judgment. To this Newman represents a major antidote. As Charles Hefling has commented on Newman's doctrine of assent:

There are any number of philosophers who either have failed to notice any distinction between meaning and truth, understanding and judgment, apprehension and assent; or else have denied that such a distinction exists. Newman, by contrast, would seem to be pushing, apparently on his own and perhaps without altogether knowing it, towards something he could not, in any case have learned from any modern thinker who preceded him: a significance, beyond the copulative, conveyed by *is*. Grant that *is* has such a further significance, correlative not with apprehension but with assent, and quite a lot of the *Grammar* falls into place.<sup>10</sup>

Without an adequate account of judgment there can be no adequate account of truth – not as the representation of the "already out there now real" world, but as attained through fidelity to questioning, reflecting and evaluating. Such activities take place within the horizon of being and – when

unbiased – assert being. Nor are the salutary admonitions of the cultural community – parents, traditions, etc. - unconnected to such assertions. It is by such activities that we reach the real world, the world that is independent of our cognitional activities yet that towards which our cognitional processes by their native orientation lead.

Not that we should not often make probable judgments, but it is our commitment to the real that leads us to qualify our judgments as probable. We obviously do not know everything; our judgments are shrouded in the darkness about which we have an inkling and the darkness beyond that. Still, we know some things and we can guide our lives on the basis of what we can come to know certainly is true.

The passion in Caputo's book, a passion directed against passionate defenders of the truth, itself reflects a commitment to truth. Such a commitment not only reflects a certainty about certain common sense truths and beliefs ("this is a computer"), but there is even an implicit certainty about the value-reality of this whole process of trying to think clearly. Caputo's passion reflects an awareness that "he knows that he knows" some truths. And it is possible to have certain knowledge of the conscious dynamics of knowing that. Following Bernard Lonergan's lead, I can become certain, not only of descriptive accounts of my own conscious interiority – as in Augustine's *Confessions* - but I can also become certain of an explanatory account of the basic structure of my own interiority. On that basis I can be certain of some truths – for example, that the flock of philosophies such as empiricism/materialism, idealism and Caputo's relativism, do not capture my reality. I can know my own knowing and I can know with certainty some of the

implications of that knowledge: for example, the spirituality of my own reality, its openness to the transcendent, etc.

If I basically agree with Caputo that one should go light on judgment, I would not agree that we go so light that we overlook the possibility of certain key judgments about myself and the world. I can know that I know. Caputo seems to have a bit of that; otherwise he would not be so assertive.

#### IV

Another final reflection. Perhaps concomitant with Caputo's lack of appreciation for the role of true judgment, there is a lack of appreciation for the role of institutions in human life. Caputo would perhaps contest this assertion – there are passages where he admits our debt to the heritage of the past – but his almost single-minded paean to the charismatic dimension, leads one to suspect his less than adequate appreciation of the institutional. Closer to the mark for my money are Barbara Carter's remarks in the introduction to her translation of Luigi Sturzo's *Church and State*:

...in every form of social life and in society as a whole two currents are invariably present, the "organizational" and the "mystical" or ideal, the one tending to conservation, to practical constructions that perpetuate an established order, the other to renewal, with sharpened awareness of present deficiencies and impellent aspirations towards a better future. The distinction between them...is never absolute, for they are made up of human individuals and reflect the complexity of human

minds; their action is interweaving, the one eventually consolidating something of what the other conceives, yet they come together only to part anew; the conflict they manifest is the conflict between the deal and its always only partial realization, between the letter that kills and the spirit that quickens...<sup>11</sup>

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transformation/conversion always find expression in new institutional structures.

All in all, I would say that Caputo's book, while laudatory in its praise of love of God, is short on the important role of doctrinal judgment (though it is filled with judgments), and short on the role of historical institutions in instilling the formational structures that can highlight what the love of God is all about.

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<sup>1</sup> John Caputo, *On Religion*, New York: Routledge, 2001, 92.

<sup>2</sup> Caputo, *On Religion*, 93.

<sup>3</sup> Caputo, *On Religion*, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Lonergan, *A Second Collection* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1996), 229-230.

<sup>5</sup> John Henry Newman, *Apologia pro vita sua*, New York: Doubleday, 1956, 127.

<sup>6</sup> Newman, *Apologia pro vita sua*, 163

<sup>7</sup> John Henry Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, New York: Doubleday, 89.

<sup>8</sup> John Henry Newman, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, London: Sheed and Ward, 258.

<sup>9</sup> Newman, *Apologia pro vita sua*, 139.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Hefling, "On Apprehension, Notional and Real," paper presented at the Lonergan Workshop, Boston College, March 18-19, 1988, 7.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Carter, introduction to her translation of Luigi Sturzo's *Church and State*, London, 1939, 6. Quoted in Bernard Lonergan, *A Second Collection*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996 reprint, 157. Cf. also Rosemary Haughton's very fine book of 1972, *The Transformation of Man* (Templegate, 1980) clarifies the distinction between transformation and the structures of formation. Admittedly, the charismatic and transformational go beyond the structures of formation, but the structures of formation always prepare the way for moments of transformation or conversion, and such moments of

## “Transcendental” Post-Modernism: Extending Caputo’s Heuristic

Stephen Martin

It may not be common place to locate Augustine’s search for God in algebraic terms, but heuristically, Don Caputo embarks on a post-modern quest to “solve for x,” however mysterious that “x” is. As Caputo puts it – “what do I love when I love my God” (Caputo 6). The “answer” to what does it mean to love God is for persons to embrace the impossible following the Archangel Michael’s reply to Mary in the Annunciation that “what is impossible for mortals is possible with God.” In other words to love God is “embrace the absolute future” (Caputo 8). He then seeks to unfold pragmatically and existentially what that means vis-à-vis an authentic, postmodern religious life – “a religion without religion” (Caputo 11, “borrowing a phrase from Jacques Derrida) that enables us to have faith, to hope and love when all seems hopeless (Caputo 13). For Caputo, knowledge, either of the world or knowledge of God that organized faiths claim to provide, will not save us – “non knowing is the inescapable horizon in which we must act” (Caputo 19).

The rich and rhetorically excellent *On Religion* has much to commend itself: its strong but critical defense of religion’s place in modern consciousness, its refusal to explicitly pit religion against science (though the role of scientific knowledge is problematic), and most importantly its emphasis on the practical, yet prophetic role of religion in revealing the “possibility of the impossible.” Central in this “argument” (postmodernists tend to reject the notion that they are “arguing” something, since refutable arguments are part and parcel of

enlightenment thinking) is that the human is not only a questioning being but in the end we are and will always remain questions to ourselves – the secret is that there is no secret. This allows him to deconstruct familiar but outworn notions of knowledge and help keep us open to the “impossible” – Caputo’s ultimate aim is simply to help humans love God better. In his negative critique of certain religionists (e.g., fundamentalists) he seeks to eliminate complacent, easy, triumphant and exclusivist answers. In his positive critique, he makes central the social possibilities of recognizing God as confronting us with the possibility of the impossible. However, this does not leave much room for a positive substantive contribution to the central problems of our time in that he leaves a central issue unanswered: how do we get from the possible to the impossible? I argue that the possibilities of human knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, are shortchanged by Caputo, that this is engendered by his choice of “God-talk,” and that his solving for “x” (what do I love when I love God) needs to be extended to “what do I *know and* love when I *know and* love my God?” I believe that this project can be better joined through an alternative religious philosophical anthropology – that of the “transcendental Thomism.”

Though transcendental Thomism can not be considered a coherent school, or even categorized as one of the types of Thomism such as neo-Thomism, there is a certain family resemblance between thinkers such as Joseph Marechal, Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan, Emil Coreth, David Burrell, and David Tracy

and others in that they seek in one way through a critical philosophy to ground transempirical knowledge and metaphysics. As Gerald McCool writes, for transcendental Thomists, “properly understood and consistently employed, Kant’s transcendental method could vindicate a Thomistic metaphysics of man and being” (McCool 110), though transcendental Thomism goes beyond Kant to ground theoretically, not just practically or conceptually, knowledge of the world and God through acts of judgment by human subjects. I wish here to concentrate, however briefly, on Rahner’s thought because he is a more specifically religious approach to truth, as does Caputo, though for Lonergan as well as Rahner, every insight is a grasp of God.

At the heart of Rahner’s (and his most influential other fellow “transcendental Thomist,” Bernard Lonergan) is also questioning – the difference between Rahner and Caputo being “what question?” and “what can/does that question reach?” In the space allotted here, I make a brief and necessarily overly simplified argument that Rahner’s approach helps us better than Caputo to love God, because loving God “is in the details” of examining and transforming what is truly possible.

### Rahner's Transcendental Method

After extensively studying Kant, Heidegger and Marechal, Rahner's dissertation on Thomas' metaphysics of the judgment was not approved because of its transcendental orientation (e.g., Kantian *a priori* constructs of human knowledge). Still he published his dissertation in 1939 as *Geist in Welt* (*Spirit in the World*), which was followed in 1941 by *Hörers des Wortes* (*Hearers of the Word*) on the philosophy of religion. Rahner quickly began to build his systematic theology on his religious

philosophy and anthropology, and collections of his monographs on theological themes were collected and published in the sixteen volumes of *Theological Investigations* (1954-1984). *Geist in Welt* contrasted Thomas Aquinas with Kant and Heidegger, arguing that Thomas' dynamism of the human mind grounds the mind's affirmation of the real (as shown by Marechal against Kant). Rahner's more analogical use of God-language links explicitly categorical knowledge to transcendent knowledge, linking the “possible” to the “impossible” in a way that works to correct Caputo's overly dialectical relationship between the possible and impossible.

Rooting itself in human experience, reason for transcendental Thomism can “discover and display a dynamism reaching out towards God” (Masson 69)– with all Thomism, it reaches objective categorical knowledge. Unlike the direct realism of neo-Thomism, knowledge is critically mediated for transcendental Thomism through human experience, intelligence and judgment. While this dynamism itself involves mainly an implicit, unthematic, and unconscious grasp or anticipation of God, by using hindsight this process can be made explicit, conscious and yield thematic and objective judgments. Unlike Caputo, Rahner is interested in the question whether God exists because the answer tells us something about our capacity to reason about transcendental reality *and* our ability to ground objectively judgments about categorical reality. Our process of knowing is linked closely with our reaching out to God and the world in freedom and love.

Despite its connection with the Copernican subjective starting point of Kant, Enlightenment thinker *extraordinaire*, transcendental method has a distinct post-modern orientation, or at least avoids the



other post-modern *beet noire* – the Cartesian duality between mind and world that has also helped laid the foundation of modernity. Like Lonergan, knowing for Rahner is not an activity which “bridges a kind of gap between ourselves and the world around us” – the mind does not reach out and grasp something outside of itself – in Lonergan’s terms, there is no thing that is “already out there now real” (Lonergan 276). Consciousness and identification of these distinctions between self and other beings only comes later when we scrutinize and sort out our knowing, choosing and loving.

Fundamental to this structure of knowing is our awareness of ourselves as not only conscious and self-present but also self-determining. This self-presence is not some thing we grasp as distinct from us, it is only made manifest during our acts of knowing; awareness of an object is at once awareness of our consciousness – there is not one without the other and is “implicit from the start and intrinsic to every act of knowing” (Masson 71) In this act of knowing or judgment, reality is disclosed through objective or categorical knowledge. However, what is presupposed in this knowing are, 1) the self, and as Rahner seeks to demonstrate 2) God, are both transcendental knowledge.

Central to Rahner’s epistemology is the distinction between being and *being*. Beings are things in the world (not the self or God) while *being* is not a thing but the “thing’s way of existing”; each being or thing has a particular way or process of *being*. Knowing consist of grasping something distinct from ourselves (grasping our self-awareness and the object as two different “objects” in the same activity); conceiving it as a way of *being*; and judging its way of *being* to be an “instance, a limitation or confinement of a way of *being* that is broader and more inclusive than this particular or

embodiment of it. However, this grasp of something definite is at the same time a grasp of it as a limit. For example, using Masson’s examples, we could not “grasp” a tree without also grasping the way of being peculiar to trees: “When we grasp the particular object of our attention, we are already anticipating and grasping these further possibilities. If I judge that the thing before me is a desk, I must already have grasped or anticipated the way of *being* peculiar to desks. That grasp or anticipation, we could say, is the horizon or backdrop against which I know the object for what it is” (Masson 74). Our intellect knows beings but also reaches for a way of *being*, which is not objective knowledge because it transcends our intellectual grasp. But it is not “nothing” either because in my affirmation of this tree or desk as an instance of something real, it is an instance of a “real and actual way of *being*” (Masson 75).

Further, the fact that we can and do willfully “close ourselves off to entire dimensions of reality”, or as for Lonergan, we never cease questioning, shows that the horizon of our knowing is not limited to any particular realms or particular ways of *being* – our “reach extends itself and beyond every concrete being” (Masson 76). In other words, we know and reach for something beyond our horizons, an expanding, ultimate and final horizon,” which itself cannot be an object or even the totality of objects for it is only within this horizon that objective knowledge of things is grasped. So, getting to the most salient point of comparison I would like to make between Rahner and Caputo is as Masson puts it, “Knowingness is an openness for actual beings and for real ways of *being*, or for possible ways of being projected by the imagination on the basis of what the intellect has grasped as real” (Masson 77). The key to loving God then is not to do as Caputo does – to narrow our consciousness of ourselves as

“questions to ourselves” and denigrate social and hard scientific knowledge (actually he mainly talks about technology, not science) as belonging to an impoverished horizon of the possible, but to broaden and deepen our understanding of ourselves and the world about us.

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## Safe for Classroom Use?

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In the fall of 2006, Harvard University made an important discovery: faith and religious belief guide people's lives and shape world events. Not wanting their students to be untutored in this matter, a faculty committee recommended that all undergraduates be required to take a course that would introduce them to this perplexingly powerful phenomenon. As one member noted, "Twenty years ago...we might not have thought it was that important that students need to understand something about religion." Now, he conceded, it was something universities should be preparing students to contend with. As news traveled from Harvard Yard, institutions that had not eliminated theology and religious studies from their general education requirements were pleased that Harvard seemed finally to have seen the light.<sup>1</sup>

The revelation that caused such a stir at Harvard would not have surprised John D. Caputo, who was already aware of the prevalence of "the religious sense of life." It is the focus of his lively book, *On Religion*.<sup>2</sup> Speaking to those who find the topic unfamiliar or who harbor doubts about its relevance, Caputo seeks to convey the essence of this thing called "religion" and explain what makes "religious people" tick. He reminds steadfast secularists not only that reports of religion's demise have been greatly exaggerated, but that meaningful existence relies on its very vibrancy. In today's post-secular age, robust religion is not just possible, but necessary. In thinking about Caputo's work, this essay takes up a rather straightforward question: Is *On Religion* a useful primer on religion? How well might it serve as a text for an introductory course on

religion? Is it a beneficial guide to those who do not understand religion or worry about its potency?

One of the main strengths of Caputo's work is its ability to capture the spirit of the religious life. Caputo provides a much more heartfelt discussion of the "stuff with which religion is made" than the cold clinical analysis that sometimes dominates scholarship.<sup>3</sup> In her well-regarded textbook on American religion, for instance, Catharine Albanese adopts a framework that sees religion as a matrix constructed along four C's: creed (an official theology), code (an ethical system), cultus (a body of symbols and ritual), and community (a sense of peoplehood).<sup>4</sup> Breaking down religion into these composite parts allows her to study religion and religious traditions in a comparative context, but such dissection can lead to desiccation. Religion withers. Caputo, in contrast, recognizes the emotional intensity of the personal religious quest. For him, the essence of religion is better captured in the form of a question: "What do I love when I love my God?" Religion, he asserts, does not provide clear or simple answers. Rather, it forces a person to delve deeper into the perplexities of life. It is an experience that is both demanding and transformative. It is "salt and passion."<sup>5</sup>

Caputo has a talent for conjuring images and metaphors that communicate traditional religious concepts to a modern audience. Rather than hauling out daunting terms like eschatology and *metanoia*, Caputo speaks of looking towards the "absolute future" and becoming "unhinged" through the transformative encounter with God. His reflections on modern technology are

particularly tantalizing, bringing to life questions about the “real” and what, if anything, exists beyond the material world. Instead of rehearsing metaphysical arguments, he awakens the imagination to the possibility of the spiritual realm by pointing to cyberspace as an example of the “hyper-real.”<sup>6</sup> He recognizes an affinity between the virtual world and religion in their way of inviting individuals to move beyond themselves. Students should also be drawn by his discussion of the religion of *Star Wars*, where he brilliantly reveals the perennial theological questions posed by the films, such as the source of mystical knowledge and the nature of the eternal. Like the best evangelists, he speaks the language of popular culture and taps into currents of religious thought that permeate everyday life.

Caputo also helps students recognize religion is not esoteric theology, but a lived experience. For religion to be religion, he asserts, it must testify to the love that is God. Belief must be turned into action. As he writes in his concluding lines, “The love of God is not explained or explicated in a proposition but testified to, enacted, performed.”<sup>7</sup> He is quick to caution, however, that not everything done in the name of religion qualifies as truly religious. For an act to be authentically religious, it must work towards a particular end—namely, justice. While critics might fault Caputo for restricting religion to a single criterion, it speaks powerfully to those who might otherwise deny their religiosity. By defining religion as the work of justice, Caputo reaches out to those who might not identify as “religious,” encouraging them to recognize their essential commonality with those who do. He invites students to reclassify their community service, social activism, and secular crusading as essentially religious acts.

Caputo ultimately seeks to demonstrate that one can be authentically religious in contemporary society. Indeed, he

argues that we have entered a post-secular age in which faith and reason are no longer corded off as separate spheres. The overweening rationalism of the post-Enlightenment period has exhausted itself, allowing religion to blossom anew, much to the dismay of secular philosophers and other “learned despisers of religion.”<sup>8</sup> Having put their faith in an illusory “pure reason,” it was the intellectuals, rather than the religious masses, who seem to have been duped. While Caputo may overstate the triumph of secularism to make its downfall all the more dramatic, his work is welcome corrective to those who interpret religion as false consciousness, or who attempt to explain belief as anything but a response to the divine.

To reclaim religion and make it palatable, however, Caputo has to free it from the taint of extremism. He recognizes that many have lost their faith in religion because of its association with violence and intolerance. He speaks to those who cannot understand how religious people can kill in the God’s name, or why religious leaders seem so eager to condemn. In their minds, religion is the problem, not the solution. Sharing their concern about “religious intolerance and the violent return of religion” in today’s world, Caputo seeks to discredit religious extremists by showing how they do not reflect the true essence of religion.<sup>9</sup> He contends that they “confuse their own opinion for God’s own word,” claiming to know the answer rather than embracing the question.<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, Caputo tends to be too quick to dismiss. He sets up fundamentalists and other religious extremists as straw men, using those who represent the worst in religion to brush aside anyone who defends exclusivist claims as one of the “impossible people.” In so doing, he effectively denies “religious people” a legitimate voice in public discourse.

This points to one of the main failings of Caputo’s work. He does not provide students with the intellectual resources they

need to come to terms with religious people as many understand themselves. His framework cannot accommodate those whose religious identity is based on assent to particular doctrinal formulations or allegiance to a particular religious authority. He leaves students in the dark about those who adhere to a creedal religion, or for whom faith is denominationally bound, since he does not think that religion can be confined to such narrow parameters. Nor can he appreciate the virtue of those who are willing to defend—even to the point of death—what they believe to be true and holy. One must distinguish between dangerous extremists and those who lay down their lives to bear witness to the work of justice. Violence and intolerance do not necessarily follow when individuals or groups profess that certain aspects of their faith cannot be compromised. Rather than being allowed to dismiss these groups, students must be called engage them in good faith.

Caputo's difficulty coming to terms with "religious people" also reflects his ambivalence towards organized religion. Although he recognizes that religious groups have made many positive contributions to society, he remains skeptical about their necessity. Religion, for Caputo, is an individualistic enterprise. One does not need to be nurtured by a particular faith community to acquire a religious sensibility. Indeed, as his final chapter attests, he believes it is possible to have "religion—without religion." This raises questions about what Caputo is affirming when he answers God with a profound "yes." He asserts that he is responding to the "deeply religious element within us all," but it is not clear how one comes to know what that religious instinct demands.<sup>11</sup> He criticizes fundamentalists and religious extremists for turning religion into a reflection of their own ego, yet he can be faulted for falling into a similar trap. His schema offers no substantial check on an individual's religious impulses. By privileging the individual, Caputo's work likely

will trouble students who have come to recognize religion as essentially communal or dependent on historical tradition.

Many students, however, will find Caputo's commentary *On Religion* alluring. Caputo's work may not provide students with the theological literacy they need to formulate a rigorous defense of religious belief, but it does help to make people comfortable with religion. At its best, Caputo's writing is essentially invitatory. He reaches out to those whose reservations about organized religion and fear of religious extremism might preclude them from affirming their own essential religious yearnings. While some may find him at times too slick and glib, students will revel in his non-conformist tone and caustic wit. Caputo's argument may not resonate with those comfortable with a more convention understanding of religion and its demands, but it encourages engagement with a subject too often dismissed as irrational, dangerous, or simply baffling.

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<sup>1</sup> Harvard later modified the proposal, replacing the course on "reason and faith" with one on "culture and belief," which would not be religion-based. Robin Wilson, "Harvard Panel Proposes Requiring the Study of Religion and American History," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 13 October 2006, p. 40; and Shari Rabin, "Harvard Cans Required Religion Classes," *The Daily Free Press*, 10 July 2007.

<sup>2</sup> John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 9.

<sup>3</sup> Caputo, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Albanese, *America: Religions and Religion*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Caputo, 19.

<sup>6</sup> Caputo, 68.

<sup>7</sup> Caputo, 141.

<sup>8</sup> Caputo, 66.

<sup>9</sup> Caputo, 91.

<sup>10</sup> Caputo, 94.

<sup>11</sup> Caputo, 109.