

THE INSISTENCE OF RELIGION IN PHILOSOPHY: AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN D. CAPUTO

John Caruana (Ryerson University) and Mark Cauchi (York University)

Introduction

When we were organizing the conference, *Varieties of Continental Thought and Religion*, on which this special issue is based, and we were trying to think of whom to invite to be the keynote, we very quickly decided on John D. Caputo (or Jack, as he is known among friends and colleagues).¹ That means, of course, that it was not a real decision, at least not by the standards of deconstruction, since there was no hesitation, no undecidability, no fear and trembling, which is to say, no other comparable contenders. The answer was obvious.

Caputo has, perhaps, done more than anyone, at least in North America, to establish “continental philosophy of religion” as a thriving field of enquiry, notwithstanding the major European continental philosophers of the last few decades who comprise the so-called “turn” to religion in philosophy. After writing a couple of pioneering books on Heidegger and Christian theology in the 1980s², and then inspired by the light of Kierkegaard and postmodern philosophy in the early-'90s³, Caputo began in the late-'90s to turn with more attention to the work and thought of Jacques Derrida, culminating in

¹ The *Varieties of Continental Thought and Religion* conference, organized by John Caruana (Ryerson University) and Mark Cauchi (York University), took place on 14–17 June 2012, at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada. See the conference website [<http://vctr.blog.ryerson.ca/>].

² See John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1978, rev. ed. 1986) and *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay On Overcoming Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1982).

³ See John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

the publication in 1997 of the ground-breaking book, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion*.⁴ With this work, Caputo not only wrote one of the best, most original, and most important books on Derrida, he also found his voice, as he puts it in the interview below, cemented his reputation, and generated and legitimated a novel approach to interweaving continental philosophy and religion.

Following this intensive engagement with Derrida, Caputo devoted himself in the 2000s to greater consideration of religion from the phenomenologico-deconstructive perspective he had cultivated, publishing three major books, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (2006), *The Insistence of God: A Theology of the Perhaps* (2014) and *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (2016).⁵ While Caputo labels these works theologies, philosophers would do well not to jump to conclusions, for they are, in fact, deconstructions of the tradition Heidegger named onto-theology, counteracting the metaphysical notion of God as the greatest of beings qualified as omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. For Caputo, God is, instead, a name inherited from a cultural tradition for an always *to come* sense which can be harnessed for all too human purposes. Consequently, thinking about God—or, rather, the *name* of God, since God, for him, does not exist—is thinking about the world in which we live. Religion, as he claims in the interview, articulates a *Lebenswelt*. That's why it would be hasty for philosophers to dismiss these works as theology and non-philosophy. Indeed, while they engage deeply with religious texts like the Bible, Augustine, and medieval, modern, and contemporary theologians, they also engage, beyond Derrida, with philosophers like Hegel, Merleau-Ponty, Deleuze, Agamben, Žižek, Latour, and Meillassoux.

Alongside and complementing all of this writing—not to mention the more than 200 articles and chapters he has published—is a more curatorial side. Around the time of his turn to the thinking of Derrida, Caputo started to convene a series of star-studded conferences on continental philosophy and religion at his home universities, first at Villanova and then at Syracuse, featuring luminaries such as Derrida himself, Alain Badiou, Hélène Cixous, Catherine Malabou, Jean-Luc

⁴ See John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

⁵ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); *The Insistence of God: A Theology of the Perhaps* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013); *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 2016).

Marion, Gianni Vattimo, and Slavoj Žižek, among other A-list scholars of philosophy and religious studies. At the same time, Caputo also began editing for Fordham University Press what would become one of the most important book series in continental philosophy, “Perspectives in Continental Philosophy.” While the ongoing series publishes works in continental philosophy more generally, it grants much space to works dealing with religion. To date, it has published several major works by the likes of Derrida, Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Luc Nancy, Dominique Janicaud, and Catherine Malabou, among many other important texts. By doing this curatorial work, Caputo has created a space for the continental philosophy of religion to grow and evolve.

Caputo has worked toward the dissemination of continental philosophy in another way, too. For, in addition to his major scholarly efforts, Caputo has been a fervent evangelist for continental philosophy of religion in the public sphere, giving scores of interviews to journals, magazines, blogs, and radio programs, and authoring a number of more accessible books for students of philosophy and theology, the lay public, and Christians fed up with traditional churches and dogmas.⁶ Connected to this writing, this Catholic atheist⁷ has also got involved in reforming organizations within American evangelical Christianity, giving talks, running workshops and seminars, and organizing events. As one will surely see in the interview, either because of or in spite of his deep learning, Caputo has a knack for distilling philosophical problems down to their essential issues, explaining complex ideas clearly, and putting things in a witty, poetic, and memorable manner.

So, when it came time to interview him, we had an embarrassment of riches we could draw upon. The interview was conducted last spring in Toronto before Caputo gave a lecture to the Philosophy Department at Ryerson University. We warmly thank John Caputo for his time, receptivity, generosity and conviviality.

⁶ See, for instance, John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001); *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernity for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); and *Philosophy and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).

⁷ We mean that in Paul Tillich’s special sense, a point that is touched upon in the interview.

Cauchi: Jack, a lot of your work has resided at the intersection of, or in the gap between, philosophy and religion. Recently, you have come out of the closet as a born again quasi-Hegelian; after years of negating Hegel, you now raise him up to a point. Hegel states in the Introduction to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* that religion and philosophy have the same “object” of focus, namely, God, but that they articulate and express that object differently (even though Hegel grants philosophy a kind of superiority over religion).⁸ Would you agree with any of that Hegelian formulation? If not, what for you is the difference between religion and philosophy? And why is it important for philosophy as a discipline and institution, and particularly continental philosophy, to think about religion? And, finally, what role did Paul Tillich play in your return to Hegel?

Caputo: Well, I’m glad you noticed my born-again Hegelianism. What emerged out of the debate I was having with Merold Westphal and some students of his was that I realized that the difference between his take and my take on postmodernism was pretty much the difference between Kant and Hegel when it comes to religion.⁹ And by that I mean the basic strategy of the Kantians is to say postmodernism plays the role of Kant in religion when Kant says “I have found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith.” Kant’s attempt to delimit the pretensions of dogmatic metaphysics in order to make safe our faith in the categorical imperative is exactly the move that the Westphalian approach to postmodernism makes. It uses postmodern theory to delimit the pretensions of reductionist materialism to knock religion out of the game, so that postmodern theory—let’s say, Lyotard’s notion of incredulity—is basically for Westphal and his students an epistemological skepticism that has an apologetic purpose. It allows them to defend themselves against materialistic reductionism. And, they’re willing to give up im-materialistic metaphysics, they’re willing to give up a speculative metaphysical knowledge of God, in order to delimit the pretensions of naturalistic materialism and thereby free up space for pretty much the traditional, orthodox, Christian religion.

⁸ See G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (one-volume edition), (ed.) P. C. Hodgson, (tr.) R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson, and H. S. Harris (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988), “Introduction,” §1, 77–79.

⁹ John Caputo, “On Not Settling for an Abridged Edition of Postmodernism: Radical Hermeneutics as Radical Theology,” in *Reexamining Deconstruction and Determinate Religion: Toward a Religion with Religion*, (ed.) J. A. Simmons and S. Minister (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2012), 271–353.

My approach is much more like Hegel's. My approach—I see *now*, I never realized this before—really descends from the way Hegel looks at religion. Which is to say, look, religion and philosophy are talking about the same thing. And so is art. Religion, art, and philosophy are all talking about the same thing, but they do so under different modalities. The difference between religion and philosophy is not the classical one between reason and revelation. It's not like reason takes it so far and then stops, and then revelation opens up knowledge that unaided human reason could never achieve. It's not like that. It's not a *regional* difference between what the natural light can see and what we need our supernatural light to see. It's a difference in *modality*. The difference is that religion thinks in terms of what Hegel calls a *Vorstellung*, which we translate as “representation”—I guess that's not the worst translation, but it means this imaginative embodiment of its subject matter, of what Heidegger would call its *Sache*. And philosophy parses it conceptually. But there isn't any regional difference between human reason and divine revelation, there's just a difference of perspective, a difference of approach. And art is also on that spectrum; it approaches things with a deep sensuousness, which doesn't have the conceptuality of philosophy. And so religion is really in the middle: it's got the sensuousness of art and it's got the conceptuality of philosophy. And so Hegel says, religion is saying something that is absolutely true, and it is the way that most people get their truth. Most people can't get past the stage of *Vorstellung*. They understand these stories, they understand the parables, they understand the narratives, they understand the figure of Jesus, they like the magic of resurrection and of the ascension and the miracles. All of that brings home to them, in a concrete, sensuous way—and pictorial way, and narrational way, and poetic way—the truth. Now, if you want the truth straight up, then you've got to go back to the philosophy department, and we'll give it to you straight without the pictures. It's sort of like the difference between mathematics and ordinary experience. I like these National Geographic specials on the science channel. If somebody explains the big bang to me with pictures, I get it. But if they start giving me the math, I don't get it. So when it comes to physics, I'm like Hegel's religious subjects, you know, who get the absolute truth, as long as you stick to pictures. Well, that's religion for him.

So, I think that Hegel is absolutely right, but with one distinction, with one little difference, and that is, I don't think that the people back in the philosophy department are giving us the straight truth. I don't think that there is any methodical, linguistic, absolute, conceptual knowledge of the way things are. I think that pictures are all

there is, it's *Vorstellung* all the way down. That's what you're getting, a *Vorstellung*. You get what we phenomenologists would call a *Lebenswelt*, you get a mode of being-in-the-world, a life-world, but it's a religiously charged life-world, it's not Husserl's sort of secular life-world, it's a religiously charged life-world. So, the kingdom of God in the New Testament—that's a *Lebenswelt*, it's a form of life, what Wittgenstein would call a form of life, Heidegger would call it being-in-the-world, and Hegel calls it a *Vorstellung*. I just don't think that there's some meta-formula which conceptualizes the absolute, absolute knowledge. So, my criticisms of Hegel from the past, I don't take them back. I've always criticized absolute knowledge and I like the way that Derrida sort of makes fun of "Hegel the eagle," *aigle*, *savoir absolu*, this bird of absolute knowledge descends upon things and grasps them with its claws, which is the absolute *Begriff*. So, you know, I think all of that necessary Kierkegaardian mocking of Hegel, I think that that's sort of true, but it rejects the absolutely revolutionary approach that Hegel takes to religion which I think completely changes everything. For me, there's no speculative analysis of that *Vorstellung*, there's just a phenomenological interpretation, where we can illuminate the contours of the life-world, but have no pretensions to gaining absolute knowledge. So, sometimes I'll call it a headless Hegelianism, because it's Hegel without absolute knowledge, which is missing a lot.

So, at the end you ask, what about Tillich? I say, well, that's when I also realized Tillich was important for me as well... If there is a single theologian in the twentieth century that I would feel very, very close to, it's Tillich. Tillich was giving us this Hegelian line, but from a deeply theological point of view, although he was critical of Hegel's rationalism. But even Tillich for me would be still too much metaphysics. I really would want to make this a phenomenological structure, rather than a metaphysical one. I think the ground of being in Tillich had phenomenological resonance, but it also, I think, had metaphysical resonance. So, my line is, the wages of Kant is Barthes, the wages of Hegel is Tillich.

Cauchi: Following up on that: Because this interview is going to be published in a continental philosophy journal, what would you say to those readers who might be wondering *why continental philosophy should be concerned with religion?*

Caputo: Well, in the first instance, I think religion needs to be taken up in the terms, in the language, of continental philosophy, because I think hermeneutics, phenomenology, deconstruction, and

various kinds of post-structuralist analyses are very helpful in illuminating religion in a way that religion itself is not used to. It's used either for apologetics, or what we call onto-theological analyses, as you'd see in scholasticism or contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. It was taken up with proving the existence of God, and the problem of evil. Now, I think the resources of continental philosophy are indispensable for understanding religious experience, for understanding what's religious about religious experience and what's experiential about religion. But even the continental philosophers, well, you know, they're still philosophers... If you want to clear a room of philosophers and you're looking for a seat, just shout "THEOLOGY!" and they're gone!

Cauchi: The reverse madman...

Caputo: Yes! Continental philosophers can be every bit as ornery and averse to religion and theology as analytic philosophers. All their stuff about the postmodern... Postmodern is supposed to mean, among other things, the breakdown of rigorous barriers, meaning that classical distinctions between faith and reason, public and private, subjective and objective, leak, they're porous. So, if all of that's true, then do what you say! Why doesn't the religion/secular divide also leak? For philosophers, religion's leaking into the secular order is poison, it's contamination, it's Ebola, it's the worst kind of degradation of philosophy. And you got someone like Heidegger who is, in so many ways, profoundly important for understanding religion and theology saying that the theologians, you know, they have all the answers and no questions, they can't raise the question of Being. So what has happened in the last two decades or so is that continental philosophers have realized the implications of their own critique of modernist method. Their own critique of modernist method has enabled them to see that there is no rigorous distinction between philosophy and religion, there can't be, *on their principles!*

Caruana: In many important ways, your work is very close to that of another radical philosopher-theologian: Kierkegaard. But a common concern that has been expressed over the decades concerns Kierkegaard's excessive emphasis on the individual, often at the expense of the community. It has been (jokingly) suggested that you're more Protestant than you are Catholic. That like Kierkegaard, your starting point is the *coram Deo*, standing alone before God—with all the strangeness and unknowingness that name is supposed to invoke—in fear and trembling. But, as you yourself would readily

agree, that stance doesn't come naturally to the human being. It has to be cultivated. That's where community and tradition come in. You would no doubt agree with that. But the worry remains nevertheless that there is little room in your thought for a community of the faithful or, for that matter, community in general. You have made it repeatedly clear that you share Derrida's strong reaction to the very idea of "community"—reminding us, as he does, of the term's etymological links to war and closure. As an alternative, following Derrida again, you speak of an open "quasi-community." But to some ears this sounds quite thin, even anemic. If there is a positive role to be played by a community of those—as you've recently put it—committed to a faith of 'perhaps,' what would it look like for you?

Caputo Yeah, that's a good question. Let me say that this is a criticism I've heard before and that I've tried to take to heart and, therefore, to rework some of what I'm saying. I made a very special effort in *The Insistence of God* to do that. So, yes, if it weren't for institutional, structural Christianity—that history, that tradition and that community, and in my case, my own Catholic legacy—we wouldn't have the memory of Jesus. Jesus would have just disappeared, dissipated into the fog of history. So, these structures are indispensable. Institutions are indispensable. Traditions are indispensable. The question is of inhabiting them properly. So I have taken this criticism to heart. I even made this criticism of Kierkegaard, actually. I wrote a little book called *How to Read Kierkegaard*.¹⁰ At the very end of it I said that he had taken up a very extreme position on celibacy, sexuality, and community. There is no possible way that I could imagine that some community could come about that would be Kierkegaardian. It would have to be a community against Kierkegaard. But all the same, the word *community* literally means—in old classical Latin—a fort. It is the *munis*. There is also a second and pious genealogy of that word, *com-* + *unio*. Get a good Latin dictionary and look up the derivations. That *munis* is ammunition. So it means a fort that defends itself against the coming of the other from all sides. It's the community of killing. They'll try to kill anybody who tries to break out and they'll try to kill anybody who tries to break in—according to the etymology of the word.

Caruana: Blanchot, Nancy, and Derrida, in their respective idioms, all speak of a community that counters these dangers...

¹⁰ John D. Caputo, *How to Read Kierkegaard* (London: Granta Books, 2007).

Caputo: Community without community. That's not a bad expression. And I think something like that is the case, so long as it doesn't dissolve into isolated pockets. After all, the theory of *différance* is a theory of interweaving, interstices, and interconnecting surfaces. But not atomic units. There are sort of nodules in the network. But there is no atomized unit—it's not a form of liberal individualism. Though it's sometimes criticized in those terms, I don't think it is that. I think it's a theory of interweavings. The way things happen in deconstruction is I think by interventions in systems in which we are always and already implicated. So you pull a certain thread in the fabric and you alter it. That requires collaboration and it requires preexisting systems within which we can then work to make things happen. I was reading about Rosa Parks because we're celebrating the 50th anniversary. And Parks walked into a bus one day and said, "I'm not giving up my seat to this white guy," and set off a chain reaction. As Lyotard says, "it links"—it started pulling other things together. And then as others came together it became a citywide strike and they said: "Let's get this young fellow down there on Dexter Avenue. He is running a Baptist church. His name is Martin Luther King. He looks like he has some promise. Let's get him to head this thing up." So there are all these things that come together. Now I'm sure that Rosa Parks had refused to sit at the back of a bus fifty times before that and a thousand other people had tried the same—but nothing happened. But if you're in the right place at the right time and do the right thing "it links," as Lyotard says. So that's how I think of action in a deconstructive way. You're interested in events. And you let *events* happen by a sort of strategic *intervention*—words that are etymologically linked. And that clearly requires systems, traditions, inherited practices and protocols. You have to reinvent what you've received. You're not creating *ex nihilo*. You're intervening in inherited legacies. So, we need to recognize all of that. Samir Haddad has a wonderful book on Derrida and legacy.¹¹ He takes up Derrida's notion of choosing your inheritance, choosing your legacy. So you inherit a legacy but then you intervene upon it. That requires communities, traditions, and a notion of the self, not as an individual *coram deo*, but as linked. *Différance* is a theory of linkings.

But you're right. I think I did that in the beginning. I tended to exaggerate that dimension that I found in Kierkegaard because I was in the beginning interested in religious mystics. He is still a central figure for me. His delimitation of the universal and his identification

¹¹ Samir Haddad, *Derrida and the Inheritance of Democracy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013).

of the singular is *sine qua non*. But he doesn't leave any room for thinking about communities. Žižek speaks of collectives. He won't use the term community for all these good reasons, Derridean reasons, actually. But the thing that gets galvanized under the impact of the event, which in Hegel is the community, for Žižek, in more Marxist language, is a collective. So collectives get organized when things happen. Rosa Parks does something and then a collective forms itself auto-deconstructively. In other words, there is no single agent. It's things coming together, like crystallization. And so there is no absolutely autonomous doer doing everything. I don't have a strong theory of a magnetic personality taking the wheels of history in its hands. It's interwoven, situated, contextualized action. But I think that now because I got criticized for what you're asking...

[laughter]

Cauchi: Just following up on that, as you already mentioned, Derrida always argued that inheritance and mourning were active undertakings, that an inheritance always involves a break from that which we inherit, whether it's to reaffirm it or to leave it behind. So, I'm now wondering, given that it's been eleven years since Derrida has died, what it means for us today to inherit Derrida's thinking and Derrida's work? What's important to reaffirm and is there perhaps anything that should be left behind and moved beyond?

Caruana: Or to adapt a famous title from one of Benedetto Croce's works, *what is living and what is dead in the philosophy of Derrida*?

Caputo: I hate it when people say, well, what do you disagree with in Derrida. It's the hardest question you can come up with. I think it's really just biography. He was a little farther out than I realize.

Cauchi: Like the Peeters book?¹²

Caputo: Yeah... When Derrida got married, he just announced to his wife and to her family that he had a different idea of marital fidelity than they did. And his notion of the singularity of the other meant that there could be a lot of singular others when you're married. He dealt badly with his son, his illegitimate son. So, he probably

¹² Benoît Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography*, (tr.) A. Brown (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2012).

was farther out, more radically anomic than I am. I didn't get that from his writings, but reading his biography, I thought, wow, he really is out there. But, in his writings, I've never found anything, never had any strong disagreement.

There are certain things I think that he... he got himself into some unnecessary trouble with the way he formulated the distinction between the pure messianic and the concrete messianisms. He made it sound like an essence-fact distinction and like he wanted to know, *Which came first, the fact or the essence?* I thought that was all a dead end. That's as much as I can come up with! I try to think of things I disagree with, but...

Mostly, for me, Derrida's legacy for me is that he is my muse. He gives me a style of thinking and gives me my voice. I found my voice when I found him, whereas when I was under the influence of Aquinas as a young Catholic, and then later of Heidegger, I was forced into the mode of a commentator, expositor. And I just go places with Derrida, Christian places that he wasn't interested in and didn't care about or even worried about, although he thought it was interesting to see people do that. So I take him in a much more Christian direction than he would go. Christianity, for him, was always a threat, a menace. And I take him in a direction that... He helps me understand, for example, the Jewishness of Jesus, which virtually all the New Testament people tell us we have got to get right so that Christians will stop using the New Testament to demean Jews and portray Jews as the stereo-typical legalists. So, he helps me with that. He helps me work out ideas in which he would've had only a passing interest. So I'm sort of taking him somewhere that he didn't go himself. I de-part from him that way, in both senses of the word "depart."

And I think his legacy is that he was so successful, or deconstruction was so successful, that it's just part of our inherited discourse and frame of mind now. He succeeded. But the word deconstruction will lose its currency, although if you do Google counts on it over the course of twenty years from the time he died to twenty years hence, you know, it would probably be there every year. But I think it's because he got absorbed. His way of thinking about things, approaching things, close reading, inhabiting things internally, keeping systems from closing down and closing over—all these things. I think, he is sort of... he's just one of our grandfathers.

Now, the other thing that could happen is that this whole, new speculative realism thing will actually succeed. And then I will just be a dinosaur bone.

Cauchi: You'll be an arche-fossil at some point...¹³

Caputo: Derrida and I—yeah, that's right!—we'll be arche-fossils!

Caruana: We'll come back to the speculative realists in a moment. But for now I'd like you to flesh out a little bit more your thoughts on the current state of thinking about religion. In "Continental Philosophy of Religion: Then, Now, and Tomorrow,"¹⁴ you provide an impressive overview of some of the theological underpinnings of contemporary continental philosophy. Janicaud famously lamented a "theological turn" in contemporary continental philosophy.¹⁵ It's impossible to deny the religious resonances of thinkers like Levinas, Marion, and even an "atheist" like Derrida, as you have cogently shown in your own work. But couldn't one legitimately say that this "turn" is nevertheless exaggerated. There are after all entire swaths of contemporary continental philosophy that are utterly indifferent to religion. A figure like Jacques Rancière comes to mind. Or much of the work that is done in the wake of Deleuze, for example. And even some of those who have written on religious themes, Badiou, for example, do so for very strategic reasons that have little to do with a genuine desire to engage theology. To what extent, then, in your view, has religion made substantial inroads into contemporary continental philosophy?

Caputo: Well, it was never part of my agenda that religion ought to be the dominant subject of discourse. It wasn't my agenda to do anything. I didn't have an agenda. My own interest was in the religious dimension. There are largely autobiographical reasons for that, I'm sure. From the get-go the very first serious work that I did was on Heidegger and Meister Eckhart. That was followed by a book on Heidegger and Aquinas. It was always the mystico-religious element in things that interested me. I wasn't trying to change the course of continental philosophy. But it happened that a lot of other people had interests like that and then Jean-Luc Marion came along with

¹³ The allusion is to Quentin Meillassoux's notion of the "arche-fossil." See his *After Finitude: On the Necessity of Contingency*, (tr.) R. Brassier (London: Continuum Books, 2008), 10.

¹⁴ John Caputo, "Continental Philosophy of Religion: Then, Now, and Tomorrow (Extended Version)," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2012): 1–24.

¹⁵ Dominique Janicaud, "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology," (tr.) B. G. Prusak, in Dominique Janicaud et al., *Phenomenology and the 'Theological Turn': The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 16–103.

this very powerful version of phenomenology that pushed in the same direction. I think the close attention continental philosophy pays to experience makes that development almost inevitable.

Caruana: But there was and still is a lot of pushback...

Caputo: Gilbert Ryle wrote a review of *Being and Time*—I hadn't thought about this in a long time—and he thought it contained a lot of original analyses but he also said that it was going to end up in religion. If you talk like *that*, he said, you're going to end up in religion—because it wasn't analytically crisp, technical, close to the ground empirical analysis. It was a much fuzzier discourse. That was the criticism. I think Ryle was right, *but* I don't think that is a criticism. Because religious discourse is one of those ways in which we articulate our mode of being in the world. It's very close to art and very close to the ground in terms of lived experience. When philosophers talk about religion traditionally they screw it all up because they speak about it as if it were—as T. S. Elliot said, the patient etherized upon the table—you know, an object. But it's not an object. All that being said, I don't have any interest in making it the dominant topic of conversation in continental philosophy. And, I think, as a matter of fact that there is a lot to be said about *not* making it the dominant topic. Religion is fire—it can make everything warm and comfy or it can burn the whole place down.

Caruana: What about Janicaud's objections?

Caputo: Janicaud's reaction was misleading. He was thinking like a sort of pure phenomenologist—a pure Husserlian phenomenologist—in a way which is hostile to the whole idea of the *Lebenswelt* as, what Merleau-Ponty calls, a scene of ambiguity. *Everything is political, everything is sexual*—they just run together. And I think that's the sense in which everything is religious. People who do phenomenology should recognize the ambiguity of things and not try to expel religion or ban religion. That's the only point I was making. It certainly should be the case that we should be able to conduct our analyses without necessarily bringing to a close those questions. Janicaud was behaving like a Kantian, making regional distinctions, not like a Hegelian, seeing the way things interweave.

Cauchi: This is a two-part question that follows from one idea in *The Insistence of God*. You argue there for a chiasmic interdependence of God and the human. Human and God are alike in a precarious

situation, praying and weeping over the world, each needing the aid of the other, each dependent on the other in order to be what it is. The first question I have following that set-up is that it seems to establish a kind of reciprocity or equality between God and the human that would appear to be at odds with the more common deconstructive sensibility of dissymmetry and disruption and more in keeping with a Hegelian mutuality. Is this a reciprocity? And, if not, how not?

Caputo: Nobody's ever asked me that before, and I think that's really good. And it never occurred to me that anyone would say that. And the answer is, I think, Levinasian. I don't think of it as a reciprocity. I mean, I do think that God needs us, and we fill up what's missing in the name of God. There's a mutual relationship between the two, but not an equilibrium or reciprocity or sort of Hegelian dialectical balance or fusion or synthesis. But I think of it much more in a Levinasian way, where we're always in the accusative, on the receiving end. So there's the name of God, the insistence of God, this call that is visited upon us that we can never be adequate, we can never make ourselves commensurable with it. It is infinite, not in the sense of classical metaphysical theology where God is an infinite being, but it's infinite, I think, in the infinitival sense, that is, it's always asking us for, it's announcing to us, demanding of us, what is to come. So that the word of God is the word of the kingdom to come, of justice to come, the messiah to come. It's unfulfillable and in-finite. We are the finite ones who conjugate the infinitive, as it were, and respond to what is calling upon us, and calling upon us unconditionally. We bring to conditional reality what is unconditionally expected of us. And so consequently, I don't see it in terms of reciprocity, but in the asymmetry or dissymmetry that Levinas describes. Because it's very Levinasian, what I'm saying, it's got a very Levinasian twist. Once it goes back to this call and response structure.

Cauchi: Following up on that, throughout *The Insistence of God*, and consistent I think with your previous answer, you describe God as the undeconstructible at one point, and the human world and the human being as deconstructable. Parallel with that, you describe God as not existing, but rather as insisting, whereas the human world and the human being exist. I'm wondering, to push a little bit on that structure, to what degree it maintains a traditional distinction? Because you do also say throughout the text, and I think this is consistent with the entire development of phenomenology and deconstruction, that both God and human are in this precarious situation,

both are being affected by events—Derrida’s whole later project to try to imagine a God that could be affected by the event. You don’t hold an idea of the human being as structured according to a metaphysics of presence, so if human and God are being thought of, if they’re both able to be affected by an event, to what degree can that distinction be made? How do you think the formulation you’ve given, “God insists, humans exist,” how do you hold that given that both are precarious, both are susceptible to the event?

Caputo: Well, the only way God is deconstructable is if God exists. The only thing deconstructable is something constructed to begin with. So any incarnation of God, any realization of God, any response to the call that God addresses to us that comes to be, is deconstructable. The church is literally *ecclesia*, the ones who are called out, called together. And, insofar as they exist, they are deconstructable, or the structure or organization as people. But the name of God is the name of what is to come, though it never exists, and so it’s never constructed. It’s not a construction, it’s a call to construct, to live on the neighbour’s behalf, to let something happen, to make the kingdom come. But it itself, insofar as it does not exist, since it is the mere or pure call of the *to come*, it would not be deconstructable. Just the way that Derrida would say justice is not deconstructable. Not deconstructable, not because it’s the eternal form in Plato’s sense, but because it doesn’t exist. It’s a... it’s not an ideal form, it’s a solicitation. But insofar as God comes to be in any way, shape, or form, God is deconstructable. Derrida wrote stuff about the coming God, so you could say, the God to come.

The other thing would be this. The pure structure of that call doesn’t mean that it’s simple, that it’s unambiguous, because that call is a promise/threat. The undeconstructible is not absolutely true, the unconditional is not absolute reality, not a Platonic form, not an essence. It’s a promise, and every promise is a threat. So, it’s inherently divided. What is undeconstructible may be undeconstructible, but it’s divided because it doesn’t exist, like “perhaps.” It’s like the old line that the spiritual masters give us: be careful what you pray for, you may get it, it maybe the worst day in your life. God is like that: a promise could turn out to be the worst thing that ever happened to us. Every promise is a threat.

God belongs on the side of the *to come*, of the infinitival, of the call. Not an existing being. Once God is an existing being we ruin everything. He becomes an omnipotent being who goes to war and punishes, who is on the hook for all the evil in the world, all the problems of theodicy, all the conundrums of theology, all of that—it’s

kicked off by the misunderstanding that God is some-body. For Tillich, the proper religious and theological response to the idea that God is an existing being is atheism. That's my theological, unshakeable, *fundamentum inconcussum*.

Cauchi: In framing God that way, though, doesn't it require that you're imagining the human world as not inherently structured by a call or insistence? You've attributed these features to God and set up the human as existence...

Caputo: Yeah. Well, you wouldn't, truth to tell, then, you really wouldn't need God for this. In calling upon the name of God I'm calling upon an inherited, traditional, formulation of the event. I mean you could have a culture in which God doesn't play this kind of role at all, and the word would not even appear in the singular. I mean, what we're talking about is: this is a phenomenology and constantly it's constricted to the traditions in which the word works like that—basically, the great monotheistic traditions. Outside the monotheistic traditions, the word wouldn't work necessarily like that at all. My wager is that, nonetheless, the structure of event, of solicitation and call, would still take place but in other ways. Although... we're talking about the nature of time, the structure of time itself—expectation. What would be more interesting would be to look at a culture like Buddhism where time is thought of very differently. Then I'll bet you the notion of the *to come* would either be missing or it would be very different. And then what would the structure of hope and promise be with a notion where time has a kind of irreality? This is a very temporal approach... it goes back to a phenomenology of time. And, of course, it starts out in Husserl in *The Phenomenology of Time-Consciousness*, and then in Heidegger temporality becomes the structure of Being and Dasein. And, in Derrida, it's very much a philosophy of time, of the *to come*, *les arrivants*, and of *les revenants*. But, if you had a different idea of time, deeply different idea of time, I don't know what good any of this would be. There was an Indian philosopher who said to me one time—I was going on about how great I thought being and time was, the book *Being and Time*—he said, "I don't get it, I just don't get it. I just don't experience it that way. I am not filled with anxiety and being toward death and all that. I just think I'm going to go away and become part of the universe, go back to the cosmos. I just don't have it, I don't share this Augustinian, Lutheran anxiety."

Caruana: So, in what sense can we say that these events have the power to provoke, solicit, if they're so contingent on particular horizons? As you just conceded, these sorts of questions and issues, as you formulate them, don't even enter into certain cultural frames, like those of the Buddhist traditions. In what sense can we then say that these events do insist and provoke for people in general and across historical periods of time if they're so radically contingent?

Caputo: They insist, they provoke, within our inherited traditions, which are inescapable. The traditions have us before we have them. But I'm just prepared to admit that they're not necessarily universal. I could imagine alternate experiences. In which case I think all of these things would be different. But our inheritance has the necessity of facticity. In other words, a heritage is a fact that you've made a necessity. It is inescapable. If you were to say to me "why do you talk about God all the time?" I would say "I can't help it," "I can't stop." It's partly my generation, of growing up a Catholic, and entering a Roman Catholic religious order. I talk about this in a new book which takes up this autobiographical element.¹⁶ But more broadly it's part of our culture. It's changing. It will be interesting to see how it changes. Even in the United States now, church affiliation and official institutional religion is weakening. A recent Pew study—I think just in the last week or two—shows that Americans continue to be less and less affiliated with church, but they pray, continue to pray. They say that they pray at the same rate as twenty years ago. Now that's great from my point of view, that's terrific because praying without a clear sense of whether there is anyone to whom to pray, or anything, that's religion without religion. That's that deeper structure. Once again I'm going to say that Tillich is the man of the hour, because he's given us the right analysis of secular culture and provided the basis for a secular theology. He asks, "where do you find religion?" and he says the answer is religion is in art, religion is in science, in the depths of the culture. The one place you may not find religion is religion! Religion is the deep dimension in our lives whether we are an artist or a scientist or political activist. For Tillich, the fact that religion is something separate in our culture is itself a defect. If it weren't, if it were properly appreciated, there would be no such thing as religion as a separate cultural institution. There is no temple in the heavenly Jerusalem. There would just be varieties of cultural forms of life, each of which would have a religious depth of

¹⁶ John D. Caputo, *Hoping against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015).

their own. I love that.

Cauchi: I often say to my students that none of the Israelites walking around in the Bible called themselves “religious.” They just lived their life...

Caputo: And as a Catholic, I know that in the Middle Ages the word religion did not function like that. It meant a religious order, with “religious vows” of poverty, chastity and obedience. Or it meant “with discipline,” something closer to its non-pious etymology, like when we say “I brush my teeth religiously.” It’s an absolutely perfect use of the word according to that etymology. And so then when does it become an important word and a separate category? It becomes important... in modernity, the age of categories, of finding a box to put things in. And then you even get this colonial dimension where it becomes a way to set up the difference between the “true” religion and the pagan ones—the “false” religion. It then becomes an instrument of colonialism. It becomes possible for the pope to say that only the people who have the true religion have the right to own the land and Europeans are free to dispossess the pagans of their land. And, *Jesus is with you.*

[laughter]

Caruana: In recent years, you have been making the case that continental philosophy ought to concern itself more with the natural sciences. As part of this prompting, you have engaged with the theoretical developments of so-called speculative realism, new materialism, object-oriented ontologies, and animal studies. Many of the major theorists in these movements—Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Graham Harman, Cary Wolfe—do not look too kindly upon religion. And yet, you, very interestingly, don’t see an opposition between your radical theology or theopoetics and the underlying concerns of these discourses. One of the chief ways you reconcile these is through linking the contingency and malleability (plasticity) of the material world, and the scientific claims made about it, to the deconstructive notion of *différance*. Order is disorderable (deconstructable), and that is a chance of the event of grace (or the grace of the event). Perhaps you can say a little bit more about that.

But I’m also hoping you can share your thoughts on another related question: Science is a discourse and methodology, and, as such, belongs to a particular ordering of the world or a “worlding of the world,” to borrow a Heidegger phrase that you frequently invoke. It is a particular frame of intelligibility, in other words, that makes

science possible. And, moreover, a number of philosophers, sociologists, and historians over the years—Max Weber, M. B. Foster, Herbert Butterfield—have attempted to make the case that, strange as it seems, it is the biblical frame of intelligibility that has disenchanted the world and made modern science possible. Do you accept that idea at all? How might it impact on the relationship between continental philosophy of religion and continental philosophy of science?

Caputo: Ok, well, there are several different things in there. I think you would have to say that the defining feature of the Greco-Christian culture that lead up to the modern sciences is Greek: *Greek* philosophical inquiry, *Greek* mathematics. And that seems to be the difference between the culture that produced science and the cultures that didn't. The ones that started with the Greeks—that tradition got science. But on the other hand, it's certainly true that there is really interesting work done in showing the interweaving of Christianity with the development of science and Christianity with secularity. When I was a grad student Harvey Cox's *Secular City* had just come out, everyone was delighted by that book. And I think that story is still true. But it also goes deeper than that. There's a history of technology that shows the interweaving of architecture of churches, the studies of the discovery of the laws of perspective in religious art, of the invention of clocks and the hours that the monks kept. And so there is this wonderful interweaving of the history of Christian culture that meshes with technology. So it would be a mistake to simply just oppose them. And had the Church had more sense, which no one ever accused it of, it wouldn't have reacted to Galileo the way that it did. Galileo was a good Thomist. He was saying that mathematics picks out things in reality. Thomas Aquinas was a realist. And Galileo was a realist about mathematics. And if they had just sat down and thought about it for a while, this opposition of Christianity and science would not have emerged. So I'm not in the least bit uncomfortable with saying that Christianity has contributed to our scientific tradition.

Caruana: And the speculative realists...

Caputo: The speculative realists themselves I think are doing us a favour so long as they don't win. [laughter] I am like the Dowager Lady Grantham, the character played by Maggie Smith in *Downton Abbey*—of course the other side has a right to argue, they just don't have a right to win! If they're absolutely triumphant, they're going to put continental philosophy out of business. I think that they're bring-

ing us back to something that might have developed early on in phenomenology, but it just didn't go anywhere. Husserl's interests were such that they could have led to an interest in the philosophy of science in continental philosophy. Even the young Heidegger had some interest in the philosophy of science and the foundations of mathematics. Today I think that some of the most interesting work that's being done with science and religion, science and theology, is in the panentheist tradition, people like Catherine Keller.

So science is a way of ordering the world, but it's a way of ordering the world that is subject to the event. Maybe some evidence will show up that the big bang was not the way it all happened. And, a year from now, or ten years from now, some other fundamental change will come upon us. And then things will reconfigure. Science has got to keep order and methodology because that's the way it works. But these orders are contingent and historical. They're driven in part by luck, by insight, and by historical circumstance. I think Kuhn is right. And Heidegger saw that, too. He said that scientific inquiry depends upon a conception of the *Grundbegriff*, which orders the thing in a certain way until it doesn't—until something happens. And then the thing gets rocked and it's got to reconfigure. At first it resists this anomalous intervention. When someone a couple of years ago said that neutrinos could move faster than the speed of light, the entire scientific community lined up against this claim to prove that it was wrong. And they did. Because it would have meant that physicists would go bananas—as someone said. So we hold on to this order until we can't. If you ever say that physics is not deconstructable then physics would have become dogma. This could be very fertile territory for someone who knows this stuff, who could do the philosophy of science well—and there are a few people like that in continental philosophy, I am thinking of Patrick Heelan and Robert Crease, but they are few and far between. People like Don Ihde have done wonderful work with phenomenology and technology, and this work links up well with Bruno Latour, whom Harman admires a great deal. But the speculative realists are calling us out on our neglect of the philosophy of the natural sciences right now. And I think that they're right about that. But I think what they did was they came back to a kind of premodern, earlier old school scientific realism. Which is where I came in. When I got into phenomenology back in the '60s we were all arguing against scientific reductionism. Back then we thought we had put that fire out. And now it's back! One other point. While I agree that they are right about our neglect of the hard sciences, and even about what they call "fideism" and the Kantianism of continental philosophy—that's the argument I am having

with Merold Westphal—when they criticize what they call “correlationism,” I think they are all wet!

Thank you so much for these questions.