The Insistence Of God: A Theology Of Perhaps

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Recommended Citation
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which one might assess the strengths and weaknesses of the various options, and states (quite tentatively) the author's own preference.

As a textbook, Langley's book has quite a bit going for it. It is well and clearly written, and the frequent references to science-fiction provide a good hook to connect with students' interests. There is a lot of philosophical content here, served up in a way that will be largely painless to assimilate. Students, I predict, will enjoy the book and will learn from it. It could be used in one segment of an introduction to philosophy course, or perhaps in a course on philosophy of mind or philosophy of the person. (In this case, it presumably would be supplemented with other texts that provide a more rigorous philosophical approach.) There is, however, a significant limitation that needs to be pointed out. The book is really intended for use at a Christian college or university, in a context where the instructor and most of the students are committed Christians. As has been noted, the first "frame" for the discussion is the Bible, and it is assumed throughout that readers will be concerned to harmonize their own view of these matters with biblical teachings. In a more neutral setting this assumption would just not be viable, and this constitutes a limitation on the book's usefulness as a text. In the contexts for which it is appropriate, it should perform excellent service.


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I've said it before and I'll say it again: I love Caputo.¹ I read Caputo for multiple reasons: his passion, his rigor, his style, his accessibility; he is a provocateur, not only motivated by the joy which I suspect he derives from shocking us (a joy that all good thinkers should enjoy), but also because the thoughtful can't avoid scandalizing a herdlike humanity (consider Jesus, Nietzsche, Žižek, etc.). To be sure, I do not love Caputo for his thinking alone: he not only writes about aporias like the gift and

hospitality—he practices them. But I must also add that this love is not simply one of a blushing devotion but also of a fierce wrestling with his work. I recall here Nietzsche’s words: “to attack is with me a proof of good will, and sometimes of gratitude”—when it comes to Caputo, always proof of my good will and gratitude.

What, then, is there to “attack” in The Insistence of God? After all, it’s a beautiful, truthful, playful, incisive, and provocative piece of theological writing—or, as Caputo insists, “theopoetics” or “radical theology.” As the book title suggests, the core trinity of terms are “perhaps,” “insistence,” and “God” [sic]. Divinity is figured here as a “perhaps” which insistently calls. This radical “perhaps” does not purportedly refer to “agnostic indecisiveness” (10) (obviously I value such “indecisiveness” more than Caputo) but rather a desire, a prayer—Caputo is always praying—perhaps even a hope in the divine “event,” something which is “still coming, is structurally to-come” (10). Caputo proposes that the divine does not exist but insists: “God is a spirit that calls, a spirit that can happen anywhere and haunts everything, insistently” (13). The caller of this insistent call is anonymous, “unidentifiable” (15), so it may not be divinity calling. There may be no divine at all, perhaps. I’ll have more to say about “the call” shortly, but for those of you uninitiated in the thematics of the call, perhaps one may begin to understand what Caputo is trying to say by recalling the somewhat crude analogy of responding to one’s conscience: this call is “weak” or “powerless,” so weak or powerless that we often ignore it, but the call of our conscience insists.

Caputo’s inexistent but insistent deity is radically unlike the omnipotent Old Man in the Sky: it is weak, needing us humans for the realization of divine call/ings and for divinity itself: “God needs our response to be

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2 I experienced Caputo’s hospitality when, as an intimidated doctoral student, I interviewed him in 2001, a dialogue and a hospitality that inspired a collection of dialogues (With Gifted Thinkers), and he continues to give the gift of his time as if it’s limitless. Refer to With Gifted Thinkers: Conversations with Caputo, Hart, Horner, Kearney, Keller, Rigby, Taylor, Wallace, Westphal (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009); the dialogue with Caputo is titled “Good Soup and Other Gifts: With John D. Caputo,” 51-73.


4 Caputo insists on utilising the rather masculine and therefore gender-exclusive term “God”; I shall therefore substitute this term with “divine,” “divinity,” “deity,” and, given the persisting charge of a word like “god,” one may even employ the gender-inclusive “Goddess”—this is perhaps not only gender-inclusive but gender-transgressive, the hyphen suggesting that the divine may be both genders, gendered otherwise, and/or between/beyond gender.

5 Another example of a/the call is witnessed in Derrida’s figuration of Marx as a “specter” (or ghost) whose communistic call continues to “haunt” us, continues to upset our capitalistic slumber. Refer to Derrida, Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994). I return to the question/call of radical politics below.
God” (162). As shocking as this depiction may be to one’s orthodox sensibilities, it makes much sense: Caputo’s carefully developed argument is quite rationally compelling, perhaps even convincing, augmented by his recollection of a potent range of philosophical, scriptural, theological, and scientific resources.  

I myself am very open to, sympathize with, and even advocate a theology with so many good elements to it. To begin with, I have been drawn to a logic and lexicon of the “perhaps,” the “maybe,” the “if” for quite some time now (my book is tellingly titled If Creation is a Gift). Other highlights include Caputo’s powerful deconstructions of conventional theology and atheology, his very ecologically rigorous and theologically daring recollection of Jesus as an “animal” (45), his accessible summation of Hegel’s impenetrable thought (chap. 6), his praise of science, and his absolute affirmation of life, of life “without why” (237), that its transience is what gives it its intensity (227).

So much to love, which doesn’t mean there is nothing to attack. My basic problem with Caputo—indeed, my basic problem with postmodern theory; indeed, with philosophy “in general”—is the lack of any decisively constructive, prescriptive, or programmatic content. Caputo insistently talks about “the call,” but if/when the divine calls, what is it calling forth? Caputo provides what may be construed as a few examples but does not explicate/develop them. He recalls the opening verses of Genesis, whereby Elohim invites/interacts with the tehomic deep, calling forth the becoming of Creation (which obviously challenges the dominant/dominating doctrine of creatio ex nihilo, the creation of a strong “God”), but how are we to apply this story to ourselves atomically and collectively, if/since we creatures are part of a Creation who are responding creatively and discreatively? Caputo also focuses on the biblical story of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38–42), subverting the traditional privileging of the “spiritually” attentive Mary for the materially attentive Martha, but Caputo doesn’t explore the ethico-political ramifications of the Marthian response of attending to the material needs of Jesus (food, shelter, etc.).

Caputo might respond by insisting that not only is the caller of the call anonymous, but that the content of the call itself is (somewhat?) anonymous, perhaps requiring interpretation or even construction. But what are the tools with which we can interpret and construct? What is the relation between the call and its discernment? Caputo might respond by recalling his insistent emphasis throughout the book that the divine/“divine” has led to the greatest horrors as well as to the noblest ventures—this is all part-and-parcel of religiously responding to the call. But this doesn’t

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6Philosophical resources include Derrida, Hegel, Heidegger, Žižek, Quentin Meillasoux, and others; the pivotal scriptural resource is the story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38–42) (discussed shortly); key theological figures include Meister Eckhart, Paul Tillich, and others (including Hegel); and Caputo devotes significant time to scientific discourses, particularly quantum theory and astrophysics.

7Mark Manolopoulos, If Creation is a Gift (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009).
necessarily/adequately respond to our question; Caputo doesn’t suggest how our responses to divine callings may be (more or less) good rather than (more or less) evil. How, in other words, are we to be better “listeners” to the divine call?

I contend that the lack of any substantial ethico-political content is traceable to Caputo’s insufficient attention to Reason—even perhaps a certain “anti-rationality” that inhabits his work. If Caputo’s “theopoetics” (note the absence of any logos here) is “also” a “radical theology” (something he insistently repeats), then there is too much emphasis on the theo and not enough emphasis on the logy—certainly little/no emphasis on a universal logy that may be ethico-politically deployed in an age of multiple and accelerating crises (environmental, political, economic, ethical . . .). Caputo’s “anti-rationality” may be indicated by the text itself: “The presuppositions of rationalist theology are transcendental and ahistorical, invoking a so-called ‘pure’ reason which proclaims its universal immunity from any possible ‘perhaps’” (72–73). I am certainly not insisting on a “pure reason,” but I wish Caputo considered, confirmed, and explored the possibility of a Reason that exceeds the polarities of hyper-rationalism and fideism: a not-so-pure Reason that is simultaneously not immune from the perhaps and immune from an epistemic-hyper-humility which produces a philosophical cowardice afraid of being programmatic and prescriptive; that is, a rationality “contaminated” by the perhaps but not so overridden by it that it loses its universal potency or force. A radical rationality, then, that is simultaneously “strong” and “humble,” both capable of discerning (more or less) what is good and ethical and true, and recognizing its own limits and doubts and perhapses.

This Reason or “neo-Reason” is what we thinkers should employ and advocate, deployed in the conception—both in terms of the thinking and implementation—of a transformed global society, i.e., revolution. To contribute to changing the world: this, I contend, is one of Reason’s calls—perhaps/probably its noblest, its most divine calling, and one that is rarely answered. We recall (and modify) here Marx’s (in)famous call: that philosophy should not only interpret the world but also change it.8 And despite whatever is erroneous in Plato’s thinking, at least his Republic demonstrates his conviction in the power of Reason, having the courage to envisage what he considered to be a better society.9

To be sure, there are signs of the ethico-political import of Caputo’s theology of the perhaps: he admirably recalls the nomination of Jesus as “a socialist” (26); he notes that “the value of . . . possessions will be dwarfed by a new being” (78); he speaks of “emancipating the oppressed” (171); that the divine khora (traditionally rendered as the problematically patriarchal-monarchical “kingdom of God”) has been “reduced to the role

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of spiritual consumerism and capital accumulation” (241). In the seventh-last paragraph of the book (which perhaps suggests something of an aside or afterthought), Caputo also warns us that his theology of the perhaps should not be “mistaken as quietism” (261), that the perhaps “provides the makings of a politics” (261), but Caputo could have contributed to ameliorating its misinterpretation as quietism by even tentatively and summarily constructing a radical political theology of perhaps.

If Caputo were to make such a contribution, then he would be responding to one of Reason’s calls—and perhaps one of divinity’s calls, if there is any—a call that has only very rarely received responses. In the context of Reason’s most ambitious call/ing, Caputo’s book may be radical, but not radical enough, and certainly not revolutionary—which is what the Earth and its inhabitants are calling for, more than ever. Without a doubt.