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Religion & Truth: Insights from John Caputo's Postmodern Religion of the Rose

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

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As an undergraduate, I was a double-major in philosophy and religion. In some ways those two fields are similar—*both* are interested in exploring the big questions:

- Who am I?
- What is the meaning of life?
- What really matters?
- Why is there something rather than nothing?
- What happens after we die?

There are also ways in which the two fields are different — as in the classic formulation, “**What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?**” Philosophy literally means love (*φίλο/philos*) of wisdom (*σοφία/sophia*), and can connote a focus on what we can know based on our human experience—along the lines of our UU Fifth Source, “Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.” In comparison, *religion* can connote more of an openness to faith, transcendence, and revelation that comes from *beyond* our limited human perspective—as represented by our UU First Source, “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.”

Most of my first two decades of being raised in a theologically conservative congregation in the midlands of South Carolina were like swimming around in a familiar lake. **Declaring a**

double major in Religion and Philosophy was like suddenly finding myself at the edge of the ocean for the first time—simultaneously overwhelming and exhilarating. As I lived into the tension between these twin perspectives, I increasingly sought to bring them into dialogue. I began asking my favorite religion professors about *religious* responses to twentieth-century philosophy and I began to ask my favorite philosophy professors about how postmodern philosophy might respond to twentieth-century theology. (I graduated college in 2000, so the twenty-first century was still in the future at that point.)

Around that time, I remember noticing a poster on the bulletin board outside the philosophy department about a conference on **“The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion.”** I was intrigued. Derrida (1930-2004), who died a few years later in 2004, was a French postmodern philosopher known for his work on “deconstruction,” which emphasizes *gaps* in knowledge, the *threads* we can pull to unravel ideas. And he was famously an atheist. So what was this about his “Prayers and Tears” and his “Religion without Religion”? It turns out that Derrida was Jewish by birth, and surprised both his fans and his critics with a post-structuralist autobiography that played on the life and writings of the fourth-century Christian saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430 C.E.). In so doing, Derrida never stopped being an atheist, but in the spirit of “deconstruction,” he was interested in exploring what he called “repetitions” with a “différance”: the ways we can start with the material that is around us in the world, and playfully and creatively make new meaning.

I came to learn that the title “The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida” was itself a play on tears (as in crying) and tears (as in to *pull apart*). And the subtitle “Religion without Religion” was about seeking the original, authentic, true experiences that are often the source of religious movements—but that can become corrupted and institutionalized over time. Derrida’s work is quite difficult to read, but as I researched further, I discovered **John Caputo (1940 -), a much-more-accessible, English-speaking philosopher doing intriguing scholarship in a similar vein.**

Now in his late 70s, Caputo has retired from full-time teaching, although as a scholar he does not show signs of slowing down anytime soon. If I were back in graduate school today and could sign-up for a course studying the work of one other contemporary philosopher, from what I

can tell, **the philosopher currently at the peak of her career who seems to be doing the most interesting, cutting-edge work along these lines is the French philosopher Catherine Malabou (1959-)**, who is a little less than a generation younger than Caputo.

At this point, I'm likely pushing the limits of the permissible nerd threshold, but thank you for indulging me in giving a shout out to any of my fellow religion and philosophy geeks out there. Now, allow me to pivot to use the life and thought of John Caputo as a way of reflecting on what the intersection of postmodern philosophy and religion may have to teach us today as Unitarian Universalists.

Looking back, Caputo writes that some of his earliest, strongest, and most visceral memories as a child were looking up at the vast, starry night sky and feeling a creeping suspicion arise within him that, **"No one knows we are here."** But he kept those doubts to himself since, as a pre-Vatican II Roman Catholic, he was taught that all the answers—and all the questions!—he needed to ask could be found in the Baltimore Catechism ([Hoping Against Hope](#), 1-2).

But as he grew older, similar to the intersection of religion and philosophy that I described earlier, Caputo's first serious academic work was a comparative study of the German existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and the 14th-century Christian mystic Meister Eckhart (26). An insight from that early work that stayed with Caputo decades later is a short verse quoted by Heidegger:

The rose is without why; it blossoms because it

blossoms;

It cares not for itself, asks not if it's seen. (26)

For those of us drawn to the big questions —Who am I? What is the meaning of life? Why is there something rather than nothing? — What might a *rose* have to teach us (27-28)?

Keep in mind that first line of Heideggerian verse, "The rose is without why." Caputo says that despite his childhood inkling of looking up and thinking, "No one knows we are here," he says that if someone had told him then that there was no "why"—no absolute, unchanging reason or purpose for human existence—then he would have left religion immediately. **He had been taught that you behaved in order to be rewarded in the heaven and/or to avoid punishment in hell—that was the *why*** (69).

But in the same way that Derrida riffed on both his Jewish heritage and Augustine's *Confessions* to gesture toward a paradoxical, postmodern "Religion without Religion," Caputo—who spent so much of his early life in Roman Catholic *private* school—has come to have a sense of what he calls "the emerging of a God who would have landed me in *public* school" (64).

As a philosopher, his starting point is the love of wisdom that we can speculate about based on what we have observed for ourselves. And for Caputo one consummate example is the "**evidence of the rose**" (107). From a certain point of view, one might suppose that it would make sense for *nothing* to have ever existed. Think about it: for anything to exist, there would need to be something pre-existing before that to create it, and something before that to create it, causing an infinite regression. (These are the sorts of things that young philosophy and religion majors talk about at 3:00 a.m. Full disclosure: it's what they talk about at 3:00 p.m. too!) But it is not the case that nothing exists. Quite the opposite: the world — the universe— is a whirling, buzzing wondrous spectacle. (How many of you saw the recent photos of Jupiter from NASA's Juno mission? Incredible!)

For Caputo, the "evidence of the rose" is the proof that there is not merely "not nothing," but that the *something* of this world is so often breathtakingly beautiful, even as there is also immense pain and suffering. Caputo's next step shifts from philosophy toward religion, which will be a step too far for some of you. But his intention is a Derridean "Religion without Religion" — a recapitulation of the "God" of his childhood, but with a critical "difference." To adapt a famous quote from Derrida, **if what you mean by the word "God" is an old white man in the sky—some combination of Santa Claus and Zeus—then both Derrida and Caputo would "rightly pass for an atheist."**

In that spirit, Caputo's clever turn of phrase is that, "**God does not exist. God insists**" (114). Remember that he's trying to take the inherited tradition that has built up around the word "God" in Western Civilization— then creatively extend it with a critical, postmodern difference/*différance*. So instead of asking the question of whether a Supreme Being with the name "God" *exists*, Caputo would instead invite us to open ourselves to the possibility that there is an "**event**" that is "**getting itself done *under* that name**" God (118). This event is more

subjective than objective, more *experiential* than intellectual, more a *verb* than a noun, more *becoming* than being.

Let me give you another repetition with a critical difference, this time on that young Caputo who grew up looking up at the night sky with a closely guarded secret of wondering that perhaps “No one knows we are here.” He grew up to have a two sons. When his older son with seven, they were watching tv and a beloved character on that show died. He son turned to him and asked, “Dad, does everyone die?” Caputo confesses that, “His question threw me into a panic. I wanted to disappear into thin air, even though, in a way, that was my field of specialization!” He writes,

I did not say I have spent my life starting into this abyss, that when he heard me upstairs typing in my study, that is what I was writing about. **I have never written about anything else than death, God and death, whatever difference between those two spectral companions may turn out to be, if there is any difference at all.**

Eventually, in response to his son’s question, “Dad, does everyone die?” he managed to say one word “Yes.” But in the way of young children, another question followed: “Everyone?” Caputo says: “I could feel his reply rising from a disbelief that an abyss so immense and inescapable could be so commonplace. My God, was there no way out of this question, no way to escape from this room?” Eventually Caputo writes, that he said, “‘Yes,’ still keeping my composure, but knowing that his life was about to change” (156).

Here in the early twenty-first century, we know that *this blue marble* on which we find ourselves — floating in orbit amidst the inky blackness of space around our fiery sun—*this planet* is not the center of the universe. We are merely the third rock from the sun. We are but a tiny part of a much larger universe story that has been evolving for more than 13.8 billion years, across more than two trillion galaxies. But Caputo’s “religion of the rose” invites us to consider that so much beauty is nonetheless possible. **Like a rose, anything we create or achieve (individually or collectively) will not last forever, but that makes it all the more valuable and precious in the meantime** (182). May we embrace, cherish, and celebrate one another and this life in time that we do have together on this Earth.

Normally, I might end at this point. But given the events of the past week, there are a few more words that I feel compelled to add. **President Trump’s announcement that he plans to withdraw the United States from the Paris climate accord is a world-historic act of hubris.** In the scope of the known universe, this planet — and the biodiversity on it — are rare and precious. But here’s the truth, in the words of the contemporary environmental prophet Wendell Berry: **“Whether we and our politicians know it or not, Nature is party to all our deals and decisions, and she has more votes, a longer memory, and a sterner sense of justice than we do.”** Some cynical politicians, seeking their own short-term gain, may deny that climate change is real — they may try to convince us that climate science is “Fake News” or “Alternative Facts” — but as the science fiction writer Philip K. Dick used to say, **“Reality is what doesn’t go away when you stop believing in it.”**

For Further Study

- If you are interested in learning more about John Caputo’s “Philosophy of Religion,” **the most accessible starting point is his philosophical autobiography Hoping Against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim** (Fortress Press, 2015).
- A more straightforward introduction to his philosophy that is still quite accessible is his book **Truth: The Search for Wisdom in the Postmodern Age** (Penguin Books, 2013).
- A more scholarly starting point for his philosophy (that remains fairly accessible, especially compared to many other philosophers) is **The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps** (Indiana University Press, 2013).