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# John D. Caputo: The Collected Philosophical and Theological Papers: Volume 3. 1997–2000: The Return of Religion, edited by Eric Weislogel

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[See table of contents](#)

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*John D. Caputo: The Collected Philosophical and Theological Papers: Volume 3. 1997–2000: The Return of Religion.* Edited by Eric Weislogel. Bolton, ON: John D. Caputo Archives, 2021. Pp. 341.

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*John D. Caputo: The Collected Philosophical and Theological Papers: Volume 3. 1997–2000: The Return of Religion* is the first publication in a planned series of seven separate books which contain key essays, reviews, and exchanges that document the development of the thought of Dr. John D. Caputo throughout his academic career. The series editor, Eric Weislogel, in conjunction with the John D. Caputo Archives Board which includes scholars such as Catherine Keller, Richard Kearney, Merold Westphal, and Drucilla Cornell, have set out to produce an easily accessible, affordable, and clear presentation of Caputo's thought. In this volume, Caputo's engagement with religion is given focus; specifically, this text provides readers with a glimpse into the major epistemological and hermeneutical tensions that helped shape Caputo's 1997 *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* and set the stage for his seminal 2004 *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*. This volume consists of fifteen essays, two "Conversations," one book review, and one final "Autobiographical" discussion. The editors divide these nineteen contributions into seven sections.

The first section, "Radical Hermeneutics," contains two essays that seek to amplify, clarify, and expound themes and issues central to Caputo's 1987 *Radical Hermeneutics*, as well as establishing key themes for his 2000 follow-up *More Radical Hermeneutics*. In the first essay, "A Philosophical Propaedeutic: On the Very Idea of Radical Hermeneutics" (1997), Caputo discusses the importance of Heidegger, Gadamer, and Derrida on his hermeneutical project. In the second essay, "Firing the Steel of

Hermeneutics: Hegelianized Versus Radical Hermeneutics,” Caputo addresses what he calls a metaphysical ‘drift’ in hermeneutical inquiry – evident in both Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur’s work – whose foundations he argues lay in suppositions aboriginal to G. W. F. Hegel’s philosophy. Metaphysics, for Caputo, arises from a desire to keep traditions “safe” from the instability of the real world – of factual life (22). Caputo’s radical hermeneutics, in contrast, develops as a response to this metaphysical urge and seeks instead to make evident the finite tensions – the “original difficulty” – that he argues texts, authors, and events, are always already founded upon (29).

Section two, “Heidegger,” contains three short articles on Heidegger which Caputo published in larger companion volumes and encyclopedias. All three articles are helpful introductions to the basic ideas of Heidegger; they also serve to highlight Caputo’s unique ability to synthesize and clarify complex philosophical discussions for broader audiences. This section ends with the article “People of God, People of Being: The Theological Presuppositions of Heidegger’s Path of Thought.” Here, Caputo details the overlap and influence of Christian ideas and themes on Heidegger’s project in particular, and phenomenology more broadly. Caputo’s aim with Heidegger is to show the generative aspects of Heidegger’s project while simultaneously condemning his pure “myth of origins” model, which Caputo argues is founded upon a set of assumptions that mirror the metaphysical tensions he identified in section one of this volume.

Section three, “Derrida, Levinas, Marion,” is composed of five essays which engage each philosopher. In each essay, for example, “God is Wholly Other—Almost: Différance and the Hyperbolic Excess of God,” Caputo seeks to extract and evidence in Derrida’s writing an image of God as both wholly other and utterly immanent. A key element in all these essays is the stress that Caputo places on the radical “undecidable” nature of God and of faith;

indeed, this undecidability is the very “condition that makes faith possible” for Caputo (89). Following Levinas, he argues that undecidability itself, or radical alterity, is the condition of God’s difference *as such* (103). This undecidability, however, is not engaged by the subject via resources aimed at unity with the transcendent – a desire which cleaves to the same metaphysical urges that early essays raised – but instead emerges via one’s interaction with the neighbour, i.e., the immanent other (106). This ethically obligatory comportment, situated via the language of hospitality, organizes Caputo’s engagement with each author here. Hence, via Derrida, Caputo thinks through the tension of “translating the name of God” into the language of hospitality; in short, he finds in discourse aimed at making obvious the necessity of productively engaging the neighbour, a means to think through what it means to welcome the transcendent Other (201). This focus on hospitality is ingredient to Caputo’s project as a whole; its effort allows him to image God and the link between God and subject via an economy of relation that assumes the centrality of finitude.

The essays in section four are grouped under the title “Postmodernism and Christianity.” Although this section is certainly connected with the previous section in theme and intent, the focus on postmodernism, Christianity, and Catholicism offers readers a more general picture of Caputo’s engagement with religion at this time. His essay “Postmodernism, Postsecularism, and the New World Disorder,” employs Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1993) to think through the conceptual overlap between postmodernism, Marxism, and Christian theology. In the essay “Metanoetics: Elements of a Postmodern Christian Philosophy,” Caputo argues that Christian philosophy begins by examining the “forms of life” that the New Testament gave to the religious imagination (238). According to Caputo, this form of life conspires to transform one’s mind

(*metanoia*) by constituting a lifeworld which prioritizes social justice and the perspective of “those without” (St. Paul’s *ta me onta* from 1 Cor. 1:28) (240). The last two essays in this section show Caputo engaging Catholicism more specifically. Via an analysis of Kenneth Schmitz’s critique of postmodern thought and its use by Catholic philosophers, Caputo seeks to show the productive space opened by postmodern philosophy (267). For Caputo, postmodernity allows Catholic thinkers the opportunity to “counter” the tensions of modernity without a “retreat into *premodernity* or *antimodernity*” (267). Caputo advances this claim via a discussion of St. Augustine and an ‘ethics of hospitality’ which he again extracts from his reading of Derrida and Levinas (271). The final essay in this section, “Philosophy and Prophetic Postmodernism: Toward a Catholic Postmodernity,” expands further on the productive status of postmodern thought for Catholic theology. Caputo, here, rightly indicates the Catholic pedigree of Continental philosophy – and thus of postmodern thought – and its impact on the development of theological and religious questions in the early twentieth century (274–276). Focusing on the theme of “the impossible” as expressed by Derrida and Levinas, Caputo finds in this theme’s philosophical structure a theological and indeed Augustinian kernel: “The impossible exposes a radical vulnerability and dependence in our being, submitting us to a future over which we have no power” (283). This impossible, i.e., that which calls us and overtakes us, Caputo argues, is the “condition of possibility of our most fundamental religious passions, of our faith, our hope and our love” (284). Published in the year 2000, this essay, I would suggest, functions as something like a propaedeutic to the themes and tensions that occupy Caputo’s 2004 *Weakness of God* text.

Section six, “Conversations,” begins with an email exchange between Caputo and the American philosopher of religion Edith

Wyschogrod. In this exchange, the issue of the post-secular in relation to the post-modern is discussed. Themes such as desire, the gift, the other, the tension between immanence and transcendence, and what that tension could mean within a post-secular framework, are unpacked (298–299). Wyschogrod’s statement that “God is an inside that is forever outside” (303) captures both a key moment in their exchange, and, I would suggest, represents a central theological element of Caputo’s own thought at this time. After this exchange follows a brief response essay from Caputo to Michael Zimmerman. Here, Caputo both fends off the charge from Zimmerman of being a “liberal” thinker, while nonetheless positioning himself within that basic conceptual framework (315).

The last two sections contain a book review of *Religion* (1998), a text edited by Gianni Vattimo and Derrida. This review provides insight into how Caputo frames Derrida’s interest in religion as well as providing detailed analysis on a key set of exchanges in the development of the Continental philosophy of religion at that time. The review is followed by an autobiographical sketch by Caputo entitled “Of Mystics, Magi, and Deconstructionists,” which was published in “1999 but written in 1993” (5). Here, Caputo details how his original interest in mysticism – as expressed by Aquinas and Eckhart specifically – was further propelled by his engagement with Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and the Continental tradition more generally (328–329).

Scholars interested in the development of Continental philosophy of religion in North America will find this book – and indeed the series to which it belongs – invaluable. Specifically, this text shines a light on Caputo’s engagement with themes of immanence, ethics, hospitality, and desire in Continental thought, and shows how he applies those themes to Christian theology with the aim of thinking its metaphysical suppositions via more immanent or

finite concerns. These themes and issues provide a snapshot into the larger tensions which motivated Continental thought at this time. Caputo's voice in these essays, as it is in all his writings, is playful, curious, critical, quizzical, challenging, and insightful. Weislogel, and the John D. Caputo Archives, have done a wonderful job of organizing, editing, and collating the writings of one of the most important thinkers in the modern reception of the Continental tradition.

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