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POSTMODERN APPROACHES TO RELIGION

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The postmodern condition

‘Postmodernism is passé! Like every other fad, its time came and went. But it had a disastrous effect on culture, politics and especially on education and serious scholarship, and so we are glad to have gotten rid of it, once and for all! Postmodernism is irrational and nihilistic, and now that we are over it there is no turning back!’

Perhaps that is how many look back on postmodernism today. Philosophers, and not only Anglo-American analytic philosophers (consider Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek), continue to be highly critical of postmodernism, although there remain some loyal followers who insist that the phenomenon of postmodernism was flagrantly misunderstood and viewed aight can be seen as a positive and salutary response to the deficiencies and failures of modern thought and society. In this chapter I wish to enter the fray but in a somewhat circumspect way, confining myself to a specific manifestation of postmodernism in contemporary philosophy of religion – viz., the work of John Caputo, and more specifically still, the later work of Caputo, which has been heavily inflcated by the postmodern philosophy of Jacques Derrida. But, to begin with, some clarification is required about the very term ‘postmodernism’ – a word which, as Caputo (1997: 119) notes, has ‘been ground into senselessness by opportunist overuse.’

Although it is an amorphous and notoriously difficult term to define, ‘postmodernism’ typically refers to a movement or cultural force which rose to prominence in the late twentieth century (especially the 1980s and 90s) and had a great impact on a diverse number of fields – including literature, literary theory, the visual arts, architecture, philosophy, and even the natural sciences. The prefix ‘post-’ is sometimes taken to imply a radical break or rupture with modernism, while on more moderate readings it signifies only a turn within or reconfiguration of modernism, not a complete rupture. As this account of postmodernism indicates, perhaps the best way of understanding this phenomenon is in relation to that which it supersedes (or opposes, or intensifies): modernism, modernity.

Understood fairly broadly, ‘modernism’ refers to the values, practices, and institutions of the West that begin to emerge at the end of the medieval period in the fifteenth century and become dominant in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is a period of profound socio-economic change, with the Industrial Revolution (begun in England in the eighteenth century) leading to major technological developments (in, e.g., transportation and communication – the
automobile, the radio, etc.) and a consequent shift from an agrarian economy to one dominated by industry and the mass production of manufactured goods. In some places (e.g., the United States) this coincided with the rapid development of capitalism, while elsewhere (e.g., in the former Soviet Union) these social changes were underwritten by the Marxist belief in progress and human emancipation. In either case, an older (medieval or pre-modern) worldview founded upon the Judeo-Christian tradition was being ‘disenchanted’ or secularized in favour of a new ‘faith’ – the Enlightenment of the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries. In the writings of Enlightenment thinkers (such as Kant, Hume, Voltaire, and Diderot) there is evident ‘a certain faith in reason, a reason that took scientific objectivity and method as its touchstones’ (Westphal 2001: 78). In the wake of the ‘scientific revolution’ of the fifteenth–seventeenth centuries, Enlightenment philosophers emphasized the primacy of rational and empirical enquiry as opposed to the authority of religious institutions and texts in yielding knowledge of universal truths and values. Tradition was now replaced by change and novelty, as witnessed in the attempts of modernist art to break free from past traditions of representation, so as to make room for experimentation, innovation, individualism and originality – values embodied in such movements as impressionism in France in the late nineteenth century, and cubism in the work of, e.g., Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque in the early twentieth century.

Soon after World War II, with the advent of the post-industrial age (globalization, consumer and multinational capitalism, mass media and information technologies, etc.), what became known as ‘the postmodern condition’ (after Jean-François Lyotard’s influential 1979 book) began to set in. Faith in the Enlightenment ideals of ‘truth’ and ‘reason’, and the grand ‘meta-narratives’ of historical progress to which they gave birth, began to be viewed with incredulous eyes as oppressive and ‘totalizing’. The Holocaust, the Soviet Gulags, the imminent ecological disaster and other ‘failures of modernity’ of course did much to bring about this paradigm shift. But other historical events that are often identified as watershed moments in this respect include the heated political climate of the late 1960s–early 1970s (e.g., the student riots in May 1968 in Paris, and more generally the counterculture movement and its opposition to the Vietnam War), and even the demolition in 1972 of several multi-story housing developments built in St. Louis, Missouri according to the ‘International Style’ of Henri Le Corbusier, who wanted homes to be ‘machines for modern living’. Dissatisfied with the cold formalism of such modernist architecture – with its minimalism (for Mies van der Rohe, ‘less is more’), repetition of simple shapes, uniformity of design, and use of harsh, industrial-looking materials with little ornamentation (just cubes and triangles) – architects sought to reintroduce elements of humanity and historical reference, and even playfulness and irony, in designs which mix the classical and the popular, thus collapsing the distinction between high and low culture. A similar eclecticism is found in the ‘Pop Art’ of Andy Warhol, with his use of ready-made imagery from advertising and magazines. Warhol also contested the value and indeed the very notion of originality (or ‘one-offs’) through his mechanical reproduction of images, produced in the assembly-line he aptly called ‘The Factory’.

Postmodern philosophy

The foregoing indicates something of the mood and sensibility, if not also the ideas and positions, of postmodern artists and thinkers. But now I wish to delve deeper into the theoretical basis of postmodernism, focusing in particular on its ‘philosophy’ – the specific philosophical assumptions and principles at play in postmodern theory. An initial problem faced by such an undertaking is that there is no single postmodern philosophy, but a multitude of versions and variations, some comparatively modest and modernist, others more extreme and anti-modern. Nevertheless, to
make a start and mainly for heuristic purposes, it may help to enumerate some of the elements that are often thought to make up postmodern philosophy.

In its origins (in the late 1960s and early 70s), postmodern philosophy was an almost exclusively French affair, dominated by the writings of Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard, and Luce Irigaray, before being transplanted to other parts of the world. In France, it was closely aligned to the poststructuralist movement, and was very much influenced by the so-called ‘new Nietzsche’, the post-World War II interpretations of Nietzsche inaugurated by Bataille and Klossowski (see Allison 1977, and Woodward 2011: Ch. 2). But how is the philosophical outlook of postmodernism to be characterized? Considered negatively, postmodern philosophy stands in opposition to modern philosophy as inaugurated by Locke and Descartes in the seventeenth century and culminating in Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant and the French philosophes in the eighteenth century. More specifically, postmodern philosophy opposes views such as the following (there is much overlap here, and some key terms will be explicated only very briefly):

- **Foundationalism**: the view that our beliefs can be grounded in firm and stable foundations, which provide absolute knowledge and certainty.
- **Essentialism**: the view that all things have essential characteristics or natures, which are universal and timeless in the sense that they transcend historical and cultural particularities.
- **Realism**: the commonsensical view that there is an objective world or mind-independent reality, and that there are facts regarding the nature of the world which hold true irrespective of the beliefs and investigative techniques of human beings.
- **Objectivity**: there are statements (or propositions) which are, in principle, true or false – that is, objectively true or false, and this especially applies to the statements of science and history.
- **Knowledge and Truth**: knowledge is a matter of accurate representation, and truth consists in correspondence to reality or the way things really are; in line with this view it is possible to find a perspective that finally gets things right and is universally binding for all rational people.
- **Rationality and Identity**: human reason may aspire to neutrality and sovereignty (over all domains of life); underlying this view is the idea of an autonomous, cohesive, rational self possessed of a timeless, disembodied essence and considered the ground of meaning, knowledge, and value (Descartes’ cogito is the typical example offered in this context).
- **‘Onto-Theology’** (Heidegger): a metaphysical tradition that has marked Western philosophy (particularly due to Aristotle and Hegel), which strives to render the whole realm of beings intelligible to human understanding, and does so by appeal to the supreme being, God.
- **‘Metanarratives’** (Lyotard): all-inclusive, overarching explanations or worldviews (e.g., Hegelian dialectics, Marxism, capitalism) which claim to be able to legitimate their creeds or theories by an appeal to universal (neutral, autonomous, objective) reason. Lyotard advocated incredulity and suspicion towards such ‘theories of everything’, as they mask their own status as ‘myth’ (not ‘myth’ in the sense of factual untruth, but in the sense of a narrative, non-scientific form of discourse). But metanarratives are also to be rejected because of their ‘totalizing’ tendencies, in the sense that they suppress difference and marginalize or even falsify opposing points of view, and thus pave the way towards silencing and oppressing whatever is ‘other’ (e.g., minority ethnic groups). Totality, in this sense, is but a small step from totalitarianism. Related to this is the tendency of overarching metaphysical systems to rationalise evil or suffering as necessary for some greater good, as in Christian (as well as secular, e.g., Marxist) theodicies – this providing further ethical motivation for resisting metanarratives.
Postmodern approaches to religion

- ‘The Metaphysics of Presence’ (Derrida): the thesis that there are facts, meanings, propositions, and objects which can be clearly, distinctly, and incorrigibly perceived (they are immediately ‘present’ to us), without reference to the conditions (social, historical, etc.) which gave rise to them.
- Progress: the Enlightenment belief in human progress and emancipation, and teleological schemes, such as those of Hegel and Marx, which hold that history is moving towards some predetermined higher end.
- Scientism: the view that science provides the model for all legitimate forms of reasoning; or the belief that the assumptions, methods of research, etc., of the physical and biological sciences are equally appropriate and essential to all other disciplines, including the humanities and the social sciences.

This list may give the impression that postmodern philosophy is entirely reactionary, sceptical, and pessimistic. However, there is a strongly affirmative dimension to postmodern philosophy (despite the caricature that postmodern theorists refuse to take a stand or make a commitment on any substantive matter), and some of its more characteristic tenets and ideas may be summarized as follows:

- Anti-foundationalism: our beliefs and practices lack any absolute or transcendent grounds.
- Anti-realism: there is no objective, mind-independent reality, and what passes as ‘reality’ is nothing but a social or conceptual construct. Jean Baudrillard, for example, speaks of ‘hyperreality’ as having displaced or replaced (and not simply distorted or heightened) ‘reality’ by means of simulacra – i.e., technologically produced signs or images of the real, which take the place of reality in such a way that it is no longer possible to make any distinction between copy and original (or illusion and reality).

- The ‘Fictional’ Nature of Truth: if there is no objective reality, there can be no (objective) truth corresponding to that reality. Truth is rather to be understood, in the words of Nietzsche (1954: 46–47), as ‘a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms … truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are’. Or, as postmoderns like to say, the truth is that there is no (capitalised, absolute) Truth.
- Language as Non-Representational: language has a self-referential character, so that rather than representing or ‘mirroring nature’ (Rorty’s characterisation of the Enlightenment view), language only refers back to itself, or to the community or tradition within which it is embedded. The meaning of a word, for example, is not some object in the world or an idea in one’s mind, but is something that emerges as a result of the word’s relations (similarities and differences) with other words – and since there is an unending chain of such relations, meaning is forever deferred, never fully present to the speaker (this, in short, is Derrida’s notion of différence, a play of difference and deferral that is at work in all speech and writing).
- Perspectivism: there are no facts, only interpretations; there is no God’s-eye point of view where things can be seen sub specie aeternitatis, but only different perspectives (or ‘little narratives’, opposed to grand or meta-narratives) thoroughly conditioned by, e.g., gender, language, time and culture; truth also is perspectival rather than a matter of correspondence to an independently existing reality.
- Pluralism: if truth is perspectival, then it is multiple and plural, and so there is a radical and irreducible pluralism at the heart of things (an idea sometimes compared with Kuhn’s notion of incommensurable ‘paradigms’ in science, or the Wittgensteinian notion of ‘language games’).
- Difference: the category of ‘difference’ has philosophical primacy over the category of ‘identity’. In the work of Deleuze, this means that the logic of identity (evident in the Hegelian
dialectic where two terms in an opposition – e.g., being/nonbeing, speech/writing – are synthesized to produce a new, higher unity) is replaced with a logic of difference, where apparently fixed distinctions are eroded, and diversity and heterogeneity are celebrated. In a similar vein, Lyotard refuses the grand narrative for the sake of a multitude of local narratives, while ethical priority is accorded to alterity in Levinas’ account of ethics as that which is founded on the face-to-face relation with the Other.

- **The Plural Subject:** in line with the emphasis on difference, the notion of a universal and timeless subject that has a fixed identity or essence is replaced with the idea of historically embedded, malleable, and fragmented subjectivities (particularly evident in the anti-humanism of Foucault).

- **Deconstruction:** a way of reading or interpreting a text which uncovers a plurality of meanings which may be in conflict with each other, thus challenging or even undermining the apparent (or authorially intended) meaning of the text or the history of its interpretation. This interpretive strategy often involves a process of: (i) locating clearly-marked hierarchical oppositions (e.g., speech and writing, philosophy and literature); (ii) inverting these binaries by showing that their order of priority is not as secure as the text assumes, so that the subordinate notion may in fact be the dominant one; and (iii) then displacing the binary by means of a third term or ‘undecidable’ (e.g., ‘arche-writing’, ‘trace’, ‘khôra’), which cannot be subsumed within the old hierarchy.

- **Hermeneutics of Suspicion** (inspired by the ‘masters of suspicion’ Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud): the aim is to uncover the deep-seated motives, and especially the hidden biases and ruses that underlie claims to ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’. Foucault, for example, develops a ‘genealogical’ method to uncover the inextricable relationship between knowledge and power.

Postmodern philosophy as outlined above is open to criticism on a number of fronts. There are obvious concerns, for example, with the claims made regarding the nature of truth and reality. Like all global forms of relativism, the view that there is no such thing as objective truth or that truth is merely perspectival seems quickly to lead either to self-contradiction (for is it not an objective truth that there is no objective truth?) or to an ‘anything goes’ permissiveness (for if perspectivism undermines distinctions such as ‘belief/truth’ and ‘our understanding of reality/reality itself’, then the very distinction between truth and falsity is undermined and hence the notion of truth is effectively jettisoned – in which case no view is preferable to any other). Difficulties regarding the concept of truth will resurface in the following section, where I look at how postmodernism has taken shape when it has been crossed with philosophy of religion and theology. But for now at least, I will rest content with the foregoing ‘snapshot’ of postmodern philosophy and will reserve criticism for later.

**Postmodern philosophy of religion: John Caputo**

Postmodern philosophy of religion has taken a variety of forms, and it might be useful here to follow the typology developed by Merold Westphal (1998) in characterizing the varieties of postmodern theology: negative theology, Nietzschean ‘death of God’ theology, and phenomenological approaches. As this already indicates, postmodernism need not be atheistic or inimical to religion: if modernism involved a process of secularization, postmodernity seems to be marked by a return to God or an awakening of a new experience of the divine – hence the adoption of such terms as the ‘post-secular’ and ‘anatheism’. But as Richard Kearney (2010) explains in his use of the ‘anatheism’ label, this is not intended as ‘a return to some prelapsarian state of pure belief before modernity dissolved eternal verities’ (p. 7). We have now irretrievably lost the kind of
original naïveté enjoyed by our ancient and medieval forebears, where religious faith came easily and remained largely unchallenged. For since the Enlightenment we have built up an impressive tradition of scientific scholarship and critical inquiry (or a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’, in Ricoeur’s words) that has dismantled and demythologized the premodern world. But, for Kearney at least, we cannot rest content with this negative or at least critical posture, but must seek to surpass it so as to attain a ‘second naïveté’ (or a ‘second faith’), where awe and wonder are restored but are purified from credulity and superstition. Kearney therefore explains that the ‘ana’ in ‘anatheism’ ‘signals a movement of return to what I call a primordial wager, to an inaugural instant of reckoning at the root of belief. It marks a reopening of that space where we are free to choose between faith or nonfaith. As such, anatheism is about the option of retrieved belief (2010: 7, emphasis in the original). Somewhat unexpectedly, then, postmodernism is not just another ‘new atheism’ and may be compatible with and even of service to theology.6

One of the wellsprings of postmodern philosophy of religion has been the negative or apophatic tradition in theology, a tradition of mystics such as Pseudo-Dionysius (fifth or sixth century) and Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1327), who insist on the radical transcendence, in comprehensibility, and ineffability of God: God is holy other, the mysterium tremendum et fascinans, and is therefore also wholly other, tout autre. Given the radical otherness of God, our customary ways of using language become inapplicable, or even idolatrous and blasphemous, when approaching the mystery of God. The inability of the finite human mind to grasp the infinite God makes necessary the ‘way of negation’ (via negativa, or apophasis), an approach to religious language which questions the adequacy of the predicates we ascribe to God in the affirmative or kataphatic mode, as when we say ‘God is good, wise, and powerful’. Ascending from the kataphatic to the apophatic, the names traditionally applied to God are negated: God is said to be not good, not wise, not powerful, etc. – in the sense that these names are inappropriate as descriptions of the divine, or at least do not apply to God in the same way they are applied to creatures. However, for the mystics standing within this tradition, the goal of the via negativa was not merely the intellectual one of, e.g., discarding certain concepts, renouncing attachment to certain names of the divine, or overcoming certain forms of reasoning. Rather, it has a broader and more holistic scope (including the practices of meditation, prayer, silence, withdrawal and so on) so as to bring about the purification of mind and heart, and eventually ecstatic union with God.7 Although this practical or performative (even ascetical) dimension is sometimes neglected by postmodern philosophers and theologians, the apophatic tradition for many of them is an invaluable resource in overcoming ‘metaphysics’ in theology, a way of thinking about God that is inscribed or restricted by the categories of philosophy (such as ‘presence’, ‘cause’, ‘being’, etc.).8

A second important influence on postmodern philosophy of religion has been the ‘death of God’ movement that arose in American theology in the 1960s. Taking their lead from Nietzsche’s famous parable of the madman (in Gay Science §125), theologians such as Gabriel Vahanian, Paul van Buren, William Hamilton, and Thomas J.J. Altizer advocated a radically new, ‘post-Christian’ theology that sought to overturn or secularize traditional Christian doctrine (see Altizer and Hamilton 1966, and Altizer 1967). Altizer, for example, put forward a ‘Gospel of Christian atheism’, seeking to render the ‘good news’ of Christianity compatible with contemporary secularism and atheism (Altizer 1966). He attempted to do this by interpreting Christ’s death on the cross as the death of God himself, thus making atheism the logical conclusion of Christianity. As Altizer put it, ‘God has died in our time, in our history, in our existence’ (in Altizer and Hamilton 1966: 95). However, the death of God, on this view, signals not merely a cultural shift towards unbelief but, more radically, an ontological event involving the kenotic sacrifice of the transcendent God to the point of complete immanence and non-existence.
In a similar spirit, Mark C. Taylor blends this Nietzschean motif with deconstruction, which he introduces in his landmark *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* as ‘the “hermeneutic” of the death of God’ (1984: 6). In Taylor’s deconstructive a/theology, the death of God gives birth to the divine milieu of writing or the incarnate word (a radical christology), the self as the *imago dei* is dispersed in traces or markings, history as a process providentially directed by God comes to an end and gives way to direction-less erring and vagrant wandering, and the book as a self-contained, authoritative system is replaced by ‘texts’ that are open, broken, and errant. Negatively speaking, then, the death of God is a moment of nihilism, the moment wherein modern Western culture experiences a loss of belief in God but also a loss of belief in any absolutes, centres, or foundations, so that all our values are devalued and we lose our moorings; we don’t know any more who we are or where we are going. But on the positive side, the death of God creates unforeseen opportunities and openings – to revalue all our values, and especially to destabilize the traditional polarity between belief and unbelief so as to allow for previously neglected dimensions of the divine to appear within the space of undecidability signified by the slash in ‘a/theology’, and in this way to finally overcome the nihilism that the death of God inevitably brings.

A third major influence on postmodern philosophy of religion has been phenomenology, and particularly the so-called ‘theological turn’ said to have been inaugurated by Emmanuel Levinas and Michel Henry and then developed further in the writings of a more recent group of French philosophers, including Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Yves Lacoste, and Jean-Louis Chrétien. These ‘New Phenomenologists’, like those of old, follow the rallying cry of the ‘Master’, Edmund Husserl: ‘Back to the things themselves!’, which means they take as their overriding goal the description of phenomena as they present themselves to us. But at the same time the project of Husserl is modified and radicalized in significant ways. Heidegger already did this in giving phenomenology a hermeneutical twist so that it is not so much a rigorous presuppositionless science, but interpretative and perspectival (a matter of seeing-as rather than simple or pure seeing). But the recent crop of phenomenologists have gone further, arguing that Husserl and Heidegger had not sufficiently explored the possibilities of phenomenology and remained embroiled in forms of metaphysical thinking. But in seeking to develop a new phenomenology that breaks free from the restrictions of metaphysics, the work of these philosophers has taken a distinct theological character – and this despite their efforts (or pretensions) at strictly demarcating philosophy from theology.

A good example of this is Marion’s phenomenology of givenness (or donation), which seeks to broaden the phenomenological method so that no phenomena whatever are excluded as *a priori* impossible or illegitimate. Marion detects such prejudiced or exclusionary tendencies in both Husserl and Heidegger. For example, Husserl’s breakthrough ‘first (or transcendental) reduction’ takes for granted that consciousness or the intentional and constituting I is the only horizon within which phenomena may appear, while in the ‘second (or existential) reduction’ of Heidegger the horizon is formed by time and being. But, for Marion, these are artificial limitations, for they exclude (in the case of Husserl) any phenomena that cannot be constituted by consciousness as objects, or (in the case of Heidegger) any phenomena that do not have to be (or be in time). Marion sees this in fact as a betrayal of phenomenology, since the imposition of consciousness or being as a limit (or horizon) prevents us from truly returning to the things themselves. ‘It is forbidden to forbid!’ Marion (1997: 289) retorts, in which case no restrictions or conditions can be imposed on what can be given or appear. Marion therefore proposes a ‘third reduction’, where the sole horizon this time is that of *givenness*: ‘So much reduction, so much givenness’. Phenomena are given according to no horizon other than an absolutely unconditioned call, the call or the given as such. This principle of givenness, of the originary
and unadulterated givenness of a phenomenon, is now lauded as the real breakthrough of phenomenology.

Having broken phenomenology wide open in this way, Marion contends that what has often been excluded for failing to comply with criteria of phenomenality laid down in advance – including religious phenomena, and above all God – may be allowed to appear, to show up in phenomenology. It is in this spirit that Marion puts forward his concept of the ‘saturated phenomenon’: a phenomenon that is saturated with intuition and hence exceeds the Kantian categories that are thought to constrain how we can regard phenomena and what we can experience (i.e., the categories of quantity, quality, relation, and modality). The intuitive content of such phenomena, according to Marion, cannot be contained or objectified in any concepts or discourse, but demands an ‘endless hermeneutics’ that respects their multiple and indescribable excess. Although Marion allows for non-religious instances of saturated phenomena (including historical events, works of art, ‘the flesh’, i.e., that which establishes my ipseity or uniqueness, and the face of the other), he also wishes to make room for distinctly religious examples – above all, Christ as the revelation of God, which is, for Marion, a fourfold saturation, saturation to the second degree, exceeding all four Kantian categories at once.11 Taking the theological theme further, and extending his criticism of Heidegger’s reduction to being, Marion also wants to think God ‘without being’ – in other words, to think God not as one more object or being amongst others, or even as being-itself, all of which reduce God to creaturely proportions, to the finite realm of being and beings. Instead, Marion prefers to speak of God as ‘beyond being’ and ultimately as the ‘pure gift of love’, as something that overturns our moral and metaphysical categories. In thinking of God in this way, Marion seeks to challenge the very foundations of classical phenomenology.

The work (particularly the more recent work) of John Caputo combines elements from each of these three varieties of postmodern philosophy of religion, into a distinct and powerful brand of postmodernism which will form the focus of the remainder of this chapter.

John D. Caputo (b.1941) is widely recognized as one of the most prominent contemporary philosophers of religion, particularly for his rigorous development and defence of a ‘postmodern faith’. After graduating from Bryn Mawr College in 1968 with a PhD on Heidegger’s Der Satz vom Grund, Caputo took up a position in the Philosophy Department at Villanova University, spending 36 years there before moving in 2004 to Syracuse University and retiring in 2011. His large body of publications, his passionate and eloquent teaching and writing style, together with the series of biennial conferences he led at Villanova and Syracuse played a pivotal role in relating postmodern thought to religious faith. But his journey to postmodernism was by no means an easy or direct one. Initially trained in Catholic theology – especially Aquinas and the French neo-Thomism of Maritain, Gilson and Rousselot – Caputo later turned to Heidegger’s philosophy and its links with the medieval mysticism and metaphysics of Aquinas and Eckhart (Caputo 1978, 1982). With the publication of Caputo’s Radical Hermeneutics in 1987, a decisive hermeneutic turn in his thought begins to take place, one that takes seriously the contextual and contingent nature of our beliefs and practices. But a turn against Heidegger was also taking place. Caputo (1978) had already argued that Heidegger’s ontology has little connection with morality and promotes an anti-democratic, anti-liberal politics. In the late 1980s–early 1990s, the critique of Heidegger became more devastating and definitive, partly due to the unsettling disclosures about Heidegger’s political activity in the 1930s, but also partly under the influence of Levinas and Derrida (Caputo 1993a). By the time his book on The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida was published in 1997, Caputo had well and truly departed from premodern Paris (Aquinas), was no longer wandering in the Schwarzwaldian woods with Heidegger, and had finally relocated to postmodern Paris (Derrida, Levinas), in the process establishing his own distinctive voice and version of postmodern philosophy and theology.12
However, my aim in what follows is not to chart Caputo’s intellectual adventure, but to examine some central ideas in his later work that cross theology with Derridean deconstruction, radical hermeneutics, and other postmodern currents. In the process, I wish to scrutinize one of the more vulnerable aspects not only of Caputo’s philosophy, but of postmodern philosophy more generally – and this will concern the capacity of postmodern thought to encompass and accommodate what variously comes under the labels of the concrete, the particular, and the determinate.

A word about Derrida’s ‘religion’ may be helpful at this point, as this has had a tremendous influence on Caputo’s own philosophy of religion. Derrida did not have much to say about theology in his early writings, such as Of Grammatology (1967) and Writing and Difference (1967), but what he did say tended to be dismissive of traditional (Judeo-Christian) theology, which he regarded as committed to the ‘metaphysics of presence’ and to God as a ‘transcendental signified’. Even negative theology, according to the early Derrida, denies being to God only to make way for the affirmation of God as a hyper-essential being and hence as a metaphysical entity. From the early 1990s, however, Derrida made what has been called an ‘ethico-religious turn’, moving away from a concern with the problematic status of metaphysics to a new interest and appreciation for ethics and even religion (this resulting in part from his reading of Kant, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Levinas, though there always remained a curious lack of any sustained engagement with more traditional theologians such as Aquinas). However this was not a turn to religion in any standard sense, but to (what he called) ‘religion without religion’, a phrasing borrowed from Blanchot and Levinas, although the idea goes back to Augustine and Kant’s Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason (1793), where Kant sought to free religion from the historical and particular (e.g., the creeds of the church) and to ground it in the abstract and universal (specifically, the moral law). Derrida repeated Kant’s gesture but radicalized it, departing from dogmatic (revealed) faith so as to make room not merely for reflective (rational, philosophical) faith, as in Kant, but for a broader notion of faith as the quasi-transcendental condition of any meaningful interaction and communication. In thus broadening, or desertifying and decontaminating, the historical and determinate religions (‘messianisms’), Derrida (2002: 56) sought to delineate an abstract and universal structure he called the ‘messianic’, which he defined as ‘the opening to the future or to the coming of the other as the advent of justice, but without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration’. Like Kant’s moral religion, Derrida’s religion is configured as a matter of ethics and justice, of responsibility to the other (conceived as holy because absolutely singular: tout autre est tout autre) – but it is a religion ‘without religion’, without priests and dogmas. Although Derrida consistently ruled out any appeal to revelation or determinate faith as violent and liable to fanaticism, his work increasingly engaged with theological themes and took on religious and even mystical overtones. For example, in his haunting and enigmatic ‘Circumfession’ (1993), a kind of Jewish Confessions written in the form of a journal he kept while his beloved mother lay dying in Nice, Derrida intriguingly talks about ‘my religion about which nobody understands anything,’ with the result that he has been ‘read less and less well over almost twenty years’ (p. 154), and yet he goes on to write that ‘I quite rightly pass for an atheist’ (p. 155). When questioned about this turn of phrase in an interview conducted in 2000 with Mark Dooley, who asked ‘Why do you say in Circumfession, that you “rightly pass for an atheist”, instead of simply stating that you are an atheist?’, Derrida replied:

I am being ironic. Firstly, I prefer to refer to what they say … So I feel free because I am not saying this … It is, however, not that simple. For I am more than one: I am the atheist they think I am, which is why I say that I ‘rightly’ pass for an atheist, but I
would also approve of those people who say exactly the opposite. Who is right? I don’t know. I don’t know whether I am or not.

(in Dooley 2003: 32, emphases in the original)

Caputo (2003c: 43), in commenting on this response, explains that Derrida does qualify as an atheist – ‘by the standards, say, of the local pastor, of the Pope or Jerry Falwell’. But given Derrida’s rejection of the unity of the self (‘I am more than one’), Derrida does not believe that we can ever achieve the kind of self-identity and self-transparency required by a religious credo, where we proclaim ‘I believe …’. Given, further, his commitment to deconstruction and hence to the undecidability of the theist/atheist opposition, Derrida refuses to categorise himself as an atheist (or a theist). It is not, therefore, a matter of being confused about what one believes, but of refusing the very parameters within which the question (Are you an atheist?) is set. Undecidability in this sense also runs deeply through Caputo’s work, as we will see.

Caputo borrows the notion of ‘religion without religion’ from Derrida, but extends and deepens it, with the aim of offering a religious faith that is credible in postmodern times. A systematic and detailed account of how Caputo achieves this across his voluminous writings is not possible here. But a beginning can at least be made by looking at the particularly clear exposition he provides of his general outlook in On Religion (2001). Bearing in mind that this short book was published as part of a series aimed at a broad readership, rather than scholars and specialists (hence its highly readable, polemical, and indeed humorous style and its many references to popular culture), the book nevertheless provides a good entry-point into Caputo’s attempt to delineate the meaning of God-talk in a high-tech, post-secular world, a world that has led Caputo in more recent work to develop a ‘weak theology’ which dispenses with powerful confessional and doctrinal identities in favour of those that are minimal, indeterminate, and pluralistic (Caputo 2006a).

Much of the philosophically pertinent material for my purposes lies in the concluding chapter of the book (Ch. 5: ‘On Religion – Without Religion’), and so it is this that I will focus on. Caputo there sharply distinguishes ‘religious truth’ from ‘true religion’ (2001: 109–10). The notion of ‘religious truth’, he notes, supports the notion of religious pluralism, the idea that the religions of the world represent different but equally valid ways to come to love and know God, so that none can claim exclusive possession of ‘the truth’. By contrast, the notion of ‘true religion’, in the sense of ‘the one true religion’, assumes that there is one and only one religion which possesses the full truth. This kind of exclusivism, according to Caputo, can only breed intolerance and violence (2001: 114; cf. 1997: 47–48, 2006a: 10–11). Elsewhere Caputo has stated that even if there were a true religion (or what he calls a ‘Secret Truth’), it is better that this truth remain a secret and not be given, for if it were given there would ensue a terrible fight over who would get to have it, interpret it, speak in its name, etc. (2003b: 16). This has led Caputo in more recent work to develop a ‘weak theology’ which dispenses with powerful confessional and doctrinal identities in favour of those that are minimal, indeterminate, and pluralistic (Caputo 2006a).

But there is a further, and perhaps more philosophically important, reason as to why Caputo rejects the idea of ‘true religion’. In Caputo’s view, religion does not involve proposing quasi-scientific hypotheses or explanations in the hope of getting the ‘facts of the matter’ right. Rather, religious discourse is best seen as a ‘theopoetics’ or a ‘poetics of the impossible’, where truth is not correspondence with the ways things really are, but is something that expresses the virtue of being genuinely religious, truly loving God, loving God in spirit and in truth (2001: 110–13). Truth in religion, then, is not to be found in creedal pronouncements, but in ‘serving the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in the worst streets of the most dangerous neighbourhoods’ (2001: 114). Underlying this view of religion is a pragmatist or performative
(as opposed to a cognitivist or representational) conception of truth: *facere veritatem* (an expression used by Augustine and often cited by both Derrida and Caputo), truth as something that we make happen as in ‘doing the truth’ or ‘making the truth happen’. Truth, in this sense, belongs to the order of love and action, not knowledge and metaphysics – in which case whether a religion is true will depend on the fruitfulness or sanctity of the form of life to which it gives rise (or, to put it in Caputo’s Levinasian terms, the degree to which we are open to serving the needy and the stranger). But if this account of religious language is correct, then the very idea of there being a ‘one true religion’ commits a category-mistake: the notion of ‘the one true religion’ makes no more sense than ‘the one true language’ or ‘the one true poetry’ or ‘the one true culture’. Indeed, on Caputo’s view, there is no reason why the various world religions cannot all be true (2001: 110; cf. 2006a: 118).

Caputo proceeds (in Ch. 5 of *On Religion*) to consider a threat to religion that is even greater than the fact of religious plurality – this he calls the ‘tragic sense of life’. This is a nihilistic view of the world as cruel and uncaring, a play of blind forces without purpose and value, where everything will eventually be reduced to dust and ashes, including the comforting illusions of religion and morality (2001: 118–25; cf. 2003b: 8–11). Opposed to this despairing view stands the ‘religious sense of life’, which is expressed as the faith that there is something (love) or someone (God) that renders life meaningful and worthwhile. What Caputo wishes to stress in this context is the inescapable ‘undecidability’ between these competing worldviews. We can never be sure that we have worked things out, once and for all. Final knowledge finally eludes us. As Caputo puts it, ‘we must all “fess up” that we do not know who we are or what is going on, not “Really”, not in some “Deep Way”, although we all have our views’ (2001: 124). Therefore the religious believer, if they are honest with themselves, can never entirely eradicate the disturbing possibility that the tragic view is the right one – the tragic view is like a ghost or spectre: we cannot make it go away, it will always haunt us (and so Caputo speaks of ‘hauntology’). The answer to the central question (of which of these two visions is the correct one) is therefore undecidable: no-one really knows the answer. However undecidability does not lead to indecision or paralysis, but is rather the condition of possibility of a decision. For the opposite of undecidability is not decision or decisiveness, but ‘programmability’, making a decision mechanically by following an algorithm or decision-procedure. Undecidability therefore means that human judgment, decision-making and faith are required, since no decision is dictated or programmed beforehand.\(^{14}\)

Caputo puts this notion of undecidability to work in the following part of the chapter where he outlines ‘the faith of a postmodern’ (2001: 125–32), a faith that has lost its faith in what is ‘really real’. In considering Augustine’s question, ‘What do I love when I love my God?’, Caputo identifies three different answers which could be given:

- **Pre-modern response:** when we love anything, it is really God whom we love.
- **Modern response:** ‘God’ is really just one of the many names we have for love.
- **Postmodern response:** what is really real is undecidable, thus making ‘God’ and ‘love’ endlessly substitutable and translatable.

The first two answers are forms of reductionism, attempting to unmask reality, to show what is really going on beneath the surface. And it is only in the last case, with the admission of undecidability, that the strategy of unmasking is renounced – but it is this very undecidability that makes faith (albeit of a postmodern sort) possible.

Caputo concludes *On Religion*, with characteristic rhetorical flourish, by identifying the ‘axioms of a religion without religion’ (2001: 132–41; cf. 1997: 331–32). These axioms are...
presented in terms of the following threefold ascent, with each step taking one closer to postmodern faith:

Axiom 1: I do not know who I am or whether I believe in God.

A state of uncertainty where, like Augustine, I become a question unto myself and I can’t decide whether to stake my lot with the believers or the unbelievers. For Caputo ‘this is a start’, but ‘it is too cognitivist and not passionate enough … Undecidability here runs too close to the edge of complacency and indecision’ (2001: 132–33).

Axiom 2: I do not know whether what I believe in is God or not.

Now I do make a decision in the direction of belief, even though I do not know in what I believe. This is more engaged and committed, but it is still not passionate enough, for it is overly concerned with the epistemic issue of identifying what we believe in, rather than the practical problem of how to live.

Axiom 3: What do I love when I love my God? Or better: How do I love when I love my God?

Only now do I arrive at the postmodern recognition that God is not a ‘what’, something to be captured by a concept, but a ‘how’, a deed of love and justice, so that ‘God is served in spirit and in truth, not in propositions’ (2001: 135).

As an initial reaction to Caputo’s account of religious language, it may be thought that this account massively misrepresents the nature and function of language about God – or at least it greatly distorts what the majority of ordinary believers understand themselves to be saying and confessing. It seems clear and obvious, for example, that when Christians confess the Creed (‘I believe in one God, the Father Almighty …’) they are making truth-claims of the sort that are more than mere poetic or performative utterances. In this instance they are, at a bare minimum, asserting that there is a God – that there ‘really’ is a God, whose reality is objective and mind-independent (not a purely human construct). Even if there is a performative and practical dimension to such creedal confessions (as is the case when, for example, the Creed is proclaimed in the context of liturgical prayer and is therefore embedded in a network of spiritual disciplines), and even if such creedal utterances should not be reduced to a species of scientific theorizing, there remains an inescapable factual and perhaps even explanatory dimension in such language. Therefore it seems implausible to draw a radical disjunction, as Caputo wishes to do, between (to borrow his own labels) ‘religious truth’ and ‘(the one) true religion’.

This kind of criticism has often been leveled against Wittgensteinian or nonrealist accounts of religious belief, which resemble in many ways the account given by Caputo. A common riposte (by D.Z. Phillips and others) has been that philosophy of religion is not something that can (or should) be done by popular questionnaire or referendum. For the matter at issue has to do not with the ‘surface grammar’ of religious utterances (or what believers seem to be saying, at face-value), but with the ‘deep grammar’ of religious beliefs, or their underlying conceptual structures and how these are related to various activities (e.g., prayer, liturgy, etc.). Caputo would, I suspect, offer a similar reply but in language more indebted to Continental philosophy than Wittgensteinian ordinary language analysis. He would speak, for example, of seeking to understand the underlying limit experiences – or ‘events’ – that are harboured in the narratives and practices, in the texts and institutions of religion. To this end he develops a ‘radical
hermeneutics’, a hermeneutics radicalized by deconstruction so as to produce a structural ‘blindness’ or non-knowing, where privileged access to Meaning, Truth, or Being is forever foreclosed by the inescapable play of signs. In the very opening page of his book, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, Caputo (2000b: 1) describes this as the thesis that

we are not (as far as we know) born into this world hard-wired to Being Itself, or Truth Itself, or the Good Itself, that we are not vessels of a Divine or World-Historical super-force that has chosen us as its earthly instruments, and that, when we open our mouths, it is we who speak, not something Bigger and Better than we. We have not been given privileged access to The Secret, to some big capitalized know-it-all Secret, not as far as we know. (If we have, it has been kept secret from me.) The secret is, there is no Secret.15

This, of course, has much in common with the Nietzschean doctrine of perspectivism, mentioned earlier. Caputo applies this doctrine to all attempts to crack the Secret, whether they take the form of the creedal formulations of Christianity, or the ‘unvarnished reductionism’ of the Enlightenment, where religion is held up to be (for example) *nothing but* the expression of perverse psychological desires (Freud) or *nothing but* a way of keeping the ruling authorities in power (Marx). These, according to Caputo, are ‘just so many contingent ways of construing the world under contingent circumstances that eventually outlive their usefulness when circumstances change’ (2001: 59).16 It is Caputo’s radical hermeneutics, then, that compels him to refuse religion with religion: any commitment to a determinate or concrete religion as ‘the one true religion’ is a violent and presumptuous gesture, one that claims to have privileged access to a God’s-eye view of things when no such view is possible for mere mortals. Truth is rather to be seen as perspectival, and talk of ‘The Truth’ is best replaced by talking of competing truths and interpretations. Rejecting the notion of truth as correspondence with the way things really are then paves the way for (re)figuring the meaning of ‘truth’, especially in religion, in performative terms as doing justice and loving truly, as serving the neighbour and stranger.

A more challenging criticism of Caputo’s ‘religion without religion’ is that it is not postmodern enough, that it is compromised by modernist assumptions and ways of thinking. This objection has been expressed in different ways. Kevin Hart (2010), for example, argues that the idea of ‘religion without religion’ follows Kant in reducing religion to morality, and presumes along with much Enlightenment thought that there is a genus ‘religion’ of which Christianity is an instance. On this view, Caputo ‘follows the Enlightenment program of passing from the positive religions to a universal religiosity that has always remained pure because it has always abided in the realm of possibility’ (Hart 2010: 95). Caputo has, in turn, responded to this line of criticism, and here I only wish to consider one of the points he makes by way of reply, as this is a line of argument that gets repeated in much of his work.17

Caputo states his main thesis in the following terms: ‘only as hauntology is revelation possible’ (2010: 113). He goes on to elucidate this as follows:

I do not think of this ‘pure’ faith or ‘religion without religion’ as a faith that somebody believes, or a religion that somebody can inhabit, or a position that somebody takes, or as a proposition that somebody can propose. I am not an advocate of religious abstractionism or an abstractionist religion. I take this pure foi as a ghost, a spectre, that haunts us in the sorts of concrete positions – philosophical, political, and religious – that we do take, displacing the place (khôra) in which they are situated. A religion without religion is not an abstract religion that anyone actually holds – you can’t
report it on the next census or expect to get a tax break by making a charitable con-
tribution to its cause – but a spectre that disturbs the hold our various faiths have on
us. It is a spook that haunts the concrete religious faiths and keeps them up at night,
with a sharpened sense of their contingency, with the result that we hold them in a
heartfelt way while also conceding an ironic distance from them, because we know
full well how easy it would have been to be holding something else in an equally
heartfelt way.

(2010: 114)

On the next page, he continues in a similar but more humorous vein, this time responding to
Hart’s habit of speaking of ‘the revelation’ – i.e., a single, definitive revelation:

The Revelation, ‘la’ revelation, … commits us to thinking of something that happens
to just those of us (and notice it is always us, not the other guy) who happen to have the
luck (grace, gift) to be standing in the right place at the right time as the divine motorcade
goes speeding by so that we could catch a glimpse of the god, while those poor chaps
down the street missed it entirely. But if this grand idea is de-capitalized we can hold
on to the idea that God is not partial, and that it is we who are the partial ones.

(2010: 115)

Clearly, Caputo is not simply repeating the Enlightenment program, but is seeking to radicalise it
through his version of ‘hauntological’ hermeneutics. But there is a curious and faulty logic lying
behind his defence of ‘religion without religion’, one that is often found in philosophical defences
of religious pluralism. This comes out clearly in the previous two quotations, especially in the last
one (due to its biting sarcasm), where Caputo is arguing for the highly conditioned and con-
tingent nature of religious belief. John Hick, from the standpoint of the very different analytic
tradition, has made a similar argument when defending his hypothesis of religious pluralism,
which he formulates as the hypothesis that the great religious traditions of the world represent
different human perceptions of, and responses to, the same infinite divine Reality. Hick defends
this hypothesis by, in part, appealing to the following epistemological principle: the genetic and
environmental relativity of religious perception and commitment (see Hick 1985: 73). According to this
principle, what religious faith one subscribes to depends to a significant extent on the accidents of
where and when one is born. As a result, one should adopt a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ – i.e., a
suspicious, if not agnostic, attitude towards one’s own religious tradition, as it might simply be the
product of one’s birth and upbringing.

But it is not difficult to see how this reasoning goes wrong. As Plantinga (1997) has pointed
out in response to Hick, the mere fact that you would hold a different set of beliefs if you were
born at a different time and place does not mean that the process by which your beliefs were
produced is unreliable. One can therefore respond to Hick (and Caputo) in tu quoque fashion: if
you, Hick, had been born, say, to Buddhist parents in Thailand in the twelfth century then you
probably would not be a pluralist; so you should give up or take a suspicious attitude towards
your own pluralist beliefs. Indeed, if, as a general principle, a person must give up or suspend
judgement on any such beliefs, then they would have to give up most of their beliefs. But that
is hardly a sound epistemological strategy.\(^{18}\)

As indicated earlier, Caputo also rejects religious exclusivism on socio-political grounds, for
he alleges that such exclusivism inevitably leads to Crusades and Inquisitions.\(^{19}\) This of course is
a common criticism of exclusivism, and although historically there has been an unfortunate
correlation between exclusivism and violence, it’s not clear that there is a necessary connection
between the two. (This is particularly the case if religious exclusivism is understood simply as the claim that there is one religion, and only one religion, which is true; and not as the additional claim that only one religion is soteriologically effective.) Followers of the ‘determinable faiths’, who typically adopt an exclusivist stance towards other religions, are not always fanatics or fundamentalists – and this is quite often due to the resources within their own religious tradition which teach the value of humility and questioning, and of hospitality and openness towards the other. It seems perfectly possible, then, for an exclusivist to adopt an ‘ethics of Gelassenheit’ (to use Caputo’s term: 1987: 264–67), a letting the other be, respecting their singularity and difference and their freedom of conscience and religious expression, and willing to engage in genuine dialogue with them.

On this diagnosis, Caputo remains entangled in the Enlightenment prejudice of prioritising the ‘pure’ (or what he calls the dry, desert-like messianic) over the ‘impure’ (the living, concrete messianisms) – and what underlies this is the ‘scandal of particularity’, the scandal that truth may take (in religion and elsewhere) historical and determinate form. This is a peculiar situation for any postmodern philosopher to find themselves in, given that postmodernism lays great store by the concrete and the singular. But perhaps there is another and deeper source lying behind Caputo’s difficulties with determinate faith – and this relates to the fact that any commitment to a determinate faith does not cohere with the typically postmodern claim that the truth is there is no Truth’. Given what Caputo calls ‘the cold, hermeneutic truth, the truth that there is no truth, no master name which holds things captive’ (1987: 192), then there cannot be any (ultimate, non-perspectival) Truth, in which case – contra exclusivism – there cannot be any religion which possesses the Truth.

Merold Westphal (2001: 75–88) has contested the way in which, in his view, secular postmodern thinkers tend to reach the conclusion that ‘the truth is that there is no Truth’ (that is, when they don’t simply assert it as a given!). According to Westphal, postmoderns are often guilty of a non-sequitur when making claims of this sort, for they move from ‘We have no absolute insight’ to ‘There is no absolute insight’, or from ‘Our perspective is not absolute’ to ‘There is no absolute perspective’. In other words, a metaphysical claim is illegitimately deduced from an epistemic claim. For Westphal, all we can claim is that we do not have (pure, undetermined) access to Truth: ‘The truth is that there is Truth, but in our finitude and falleness we do not have access to it’ (2001: 87). The correct conclusion to draw is that we are not God, not there is no God.

Admittedly, it’s not difficult to impugn some postmodern philosophers with the fallacy identified by Westphal. Even Caputo often slides from the epistemic claim that we have no privileged access to the way things really are, to the far stronger metaphysical (anti-realist) claim that there is no way things really are. The former, epistemic claim does not necessarily lead to relativism (with respect to truth), for as Westphal points out there may well be an absolute Truth even if our knowledge of it can never be absolute. It is only the latter, metaphysical claim which leads to relativism. For if there is no way things really are, then there cannot be any statements which correspond to the way things really are – which is to say there cannot be any absolute truth, but only relative truths (true statements whose truth is relative to a conceptual scheme, perspective, language game, or something of that ilk).

But before we pounce on Caputo for promulgating what Pope Benedict XVI called the ‘dictatorship of relativism’, it must be borne in mind that postmodern philosophies like Derrida’s and Caputo’s are far more subtle and nuanced than these quick and all-too-common denunciations suppose. Caputo, in particular, wishes to circumvent the entire realism/anti-realism divide by means of a ‘realism without realism’, following the same strange logic of ‘without’ as in his ‘religion without religion’. He does, therefore, wish to reject realism in some sense – for
example, he states that he would reject realism ‘if realism means essentialism, the claim that our universals and eidetic types correspond to real ontological orders’ (2000a: §27), or ‘if realism means the affirmation of the transcendental signified, of some Ding an sich which is left standing when the play of signifiers collapses in a heap’ (2000a: §28). But he doesn’t think that what follows from this is some pernicious form of relativism or linguistic idealism, where we are locked within the prison-house of language or subjectivity, as he points out in defence of Derrida:

Derrida’s much abused observation, il n’y a pas de hors-texte does not mean there is no reference, but that there is no reference without difference, without différence, without the operations of textuality, differential spacing, and contextuality. ‘When I say there is nothing outside the text,’ he tells the Dubliners, ‘I mean there is nothing outside the context’ (QE, 79). That means not that there is no reference but that reference is not what it is cracked up to be, not what it passes itself off for, not the serene operation of an autonomous subject-archer picking out objects with unfailing accuracy by means of signs wholly submissive to its intentional aims.

(2000a: §28)25

The rejection of classical forms of realism, according to Caputo, does not open the door to some nihilistic denial of truth and reality, but makes it possible for us to see that these notions are much more complex and elusive than we may have presumed. So, in place of classical realism, Caputo (2000a) advocates the affirmation of what he calls ‘hyper-realism’, where hyper-reality is described in terms of: (i) singularity, the hyper-real as that which is singular and unrepeatable, and so swings free of our proper names; (ii) inaccessibility, the hyper-real as other to the degree that it cannot be subsumed within our horizons; (iii) secrecy, the hyper-real as that which cannot be accessed, thus consigning us to endless interpretation; and (iv) messianicity, the hyper-real as what is to come (not present), whose coming we cannot imagine or foresee.

In his more recent work, The Weakness of God (2006a), Caputo applies hyper-realism to theology to produce a theology of the event, according to which ‘the name of God is an event, or rather that it harbors an event, and that theology is the hermeneutics of that event’ (p. 2). Caputo explains that this is not a form of realism: ‘I am methodologically abstaining from treating God or God’s kingdom as a res or a realissimum inasmuch as I am refraining from making any entitative or ontological claims about God-the-being or the Being of God’ (p. 123; cf. p. 10). But neither is his theology a form of anti-realism, where God is reduced to (say) a metaphor, or a projection of human wishes, or a fiction (p. 123). The name of God, for Caputo, does not pick out an entity (realism), or an illusion (anti-realism), but an ‘event’ that takes place in ‘hyper-reality’. By this ‘hyper-realism’, Caputo explains,

I mean the excess of the promise, of the call, of the endless provocation of an event that calls us beyond ourselves, down unploted paths and into unexplored lands, calling us to go where we cannot go, extending us beyond our reach. Hyper-reality reaches beyond the real to the not-yet-real, what eye has not yet seen nor ear yet heard, in the open-endedness of an uncontainable, unconstrictable, undeconstructible event.

(2006a: 11–12)

Clearly, this cannot be read in purely epistemic terms, where the hyper-real is simply that which is beyond our epistemic and conceptual grasp. For the negative theologian would want to say the
same about God, and Caputo fervently wishes to distance his hyper-realism from the hyperousiology of the mystic (2006a: 302, n16). So, the hyper-real occupies a different plane from the real: it is otherwise than being, not assimilable to garden-variety existence, and may even be called a ‘wonderland’ (2006a: 109), though it is not for all that ‘unreal’ (a mere fantasy).

But what sense can be made of this penumbral reality that is neither real nor unreal in any standard sense? Caputo seeks to clarify his notion of hyper-reality by way of the distinction between a ‘logic of the possible’ and a ‘poetics of the impossible’. The former is the kind of formal language typically employed by scientists and analytic philosophers – a discourse based upon logical principles delineating what is possible, probable or necessary at the level of (real or possible) entities or beings. A ‘poetics of the impossible’, by contrast, is not governed by logical laws and rational argumentation (and hence ‘impossible’ does not in this context refer to a logical contradiction). Rather, this is a discourse brimming with a variety of literary techniques and idioms (e.g., parables, paradoxes) with the aim not of describing occurrences in the world of physics and metaphysics, but of summoning the irruption of events in the ‘kingdom of God’. Such a poetics, then, is ‘a non-literalizing description of the event that tries to depict its dynamics, to trace its style, and to cope with its fortuitous forces by means of felicitous tropes’ (2006a: 4).

A poetics lies outside the order of being or metaphysics, and so it makes no (propositional, cognitive) truth-claims, whether of a relative or an absolute sort. The charge of relativism is thereby blunted. This, however, gives rise to other problems, including that of distortion mentioned earlier: How many believers (other than erudite postmoderns) would recognise themselves, and the beliefs and practices they cherish, in the symbolic space that is created by the ‘poetics of the impossible’? Perhaps not many. But this might leave Caputo unmoved, given that he does not see himself as answerable to any confessional community (and hence to their criteria as to what counts as a valid interpretation of their beliefs and practices), but rather sees himself as reforming and reframing our approach to the religious, rescuing it from the idols of metaphysics so as to make possible a passion for the impossible.27 But now the problem becomes one of pragmatics and politics. To see religious discourse as a poetics that makes no truth-claims (in the standard sense) is to divest religion of its potential to provide genuine meaning and to effect radical change. For if religious language swings free of how things really stand (with us, with the world), then it has no resources to transform the way things are. Those who wish to understand the world, as it really is, so as to enrich their lives and to create a better and more just life for others will be therefore left without answers – since religion (without religion) is simply not in the game of asking the relevant questions. Postmodernism was often charged in its heyday as thoroughly apolitical, or as even militating against political reform. It is this ironic collusion of conservatism and radicalism that is also present in Caputo’s postmodern philosophy of religion.28

Notes

1 In 1999, Caputo could joke about the word ‘postmodernism’: ‘I use it only when I need to draw a crowd’ (quoted in Carlson 2000: 391), but I doubt the word would have the same pulling power today. For an overview of the early uses of the term ‘postmodernism’, see Drolet (2004: 4–9), where the first reference to postmodernism is said to be found in the 1926 work, Postmodernism and Other Essays, by Catholic theologian Bernard Iddings Bell. However, Sim (2005: viii) traces the word back to the 1870s, when the English painter John Watkins Chapman used it in reference to art that went beyond impressionism.

2 On the influence of postmodernism on a range of disciplines and cultural areas, see Connor (1997, 2004) and Sim (2005). In-depth accounts of postmodernism now of course abound – some of the
better of these include Harvey (1990), Bertens (1995), Best and Kellner (1997), and Malpas (2005). For shorter introductions, see Butler (2002) and Hart (2004).

3 A distinction is often drawn between postmodernism and postmodernity (and also between modernism and modernity), with the former indicating a theoretical project (or even an attitude or style) one is adumbrating or recommending, and the latter delineating a cultural milieu or historical epoch. In this section I go back and forth between these two senses, outlining some of the cultural manifestations of modernism and postmodernism, and also saying something about their theoretical underpinnings (while going into greater detail on the theoretical dimension in the following section).

4 I do not wish to give the impression that all of the views delineated below would be accepted by all (or a majority of) postmodern philosophers. To be sure, some of the ideas listed below would be rejected by some postmodern thinkers, or accepted in only modified or attenuated form (as, indeed, the following footnote suggests).

5 Baudrillard, for example, provocatively entitled his 1991 book La Guerre du Golfe n’a pas eu lieu (The Gulf War Did Not Take Place), claiming that the Gulf War was more of a media spectacle than a real war. However, there are other, and perhaps more plausible, ways of construing Baudrillard’s view – e.g., as an epistemological rather than a metaphysical claim: though there is an objective reality, we now live in an era where we no longer have any means of distinguishing this reality from its simulated counterpart. Derrida’s infamous statement, ‘There is nothing outside of the text’ (1967/1974: 158), is also often discussed in this context. It has been argued, however, that Derrida was not thereby advocating a form of anti-realism or linguistic idealism, according to which texts have no referents, or there are only words, not things. Rather, Derrida’s point was to emphasize the mediating role of language: our access to the world is always filtered by language or ‘textuality’, the system of signs and interpretations we rely upon to navigate ourselves in the world. On this view, Derrida’s statement is a form of perspectivism: there are no facts, only interpretations (Hart 2000: 25–26; Smith 2006: chapter 2).

6 Ursula King (1998: 7) has similarly noted that ‘postmodernism can … be seen positively as a challenging task, an opportunity, even a gift for religion in the modern world’. Caputo (2007: 266) likewise writes that ‘postmodernism turns out to be not a particularly friendly environment for atheism … if atheism is a metaphysical or an otherwise fixed and decisive denial of God’.

7 This is why in the traditional theology of the divine names, the via negativa is followed by the via eminensia, where predication (whether in the form of affirmation or negation) gives way to praise and prayer. Marion has done much to emphasize this ‘third way’, beyond kataphasis and apophasis – see, e.g., Marion (2002a: chapter 6). See also Ellsworth (2002) for an excellent account of the connections between the apophatic tradition and spiritual practices.

8 This is especially the case in Hart (2000: 104), which counters the assumption that deconstruction is necessarily atheistic by presenting negative or mystical theology as a form of deconstruction: ‘negative theology performs the deconstruction of positive theology. In doing so, negative theology reveals a non-metaphysical theology at work within positive theology.’

9 The term ‘theological turn’ was originally applied in a derivative fashion to these phenomenologists by Dominique Janicaud (2000). On the theological turn, see also Janicaud (1998/2005), and Benson and Wirzba (2010).

10 For excellent introductions to Marion’s phenomenology, see Horner (2005) and Gschwandtner (2007).

11 On Marion’s notion of the ‘saturated phenomenon’, see Marion (2000, 2002a).

12 See Caputo (1999, 2003a) for his intellectual autobiographies. For a good overview and analysis of Caputo’s thought, and especially his ethics, politics, and critique and appropriation of Heidegger, see Zimmerman (1998).

13 For more detailed discussions of Derrida’s thought on religion, see Hart and Sherwood (2005), Hart (2009), and Shakespeare (2009). For a collection of some of Derrida’s writings on religion, see Derrida (2002).

14 Caputo himself decides in favour of the religious vision, on the grounds that the tragic view cannot make room for moral evaluation, and hence resistance and protest against injustice (2001: 121–23). But he has often been read as surreptitiously deciding in favour of the tragic vision (see, e.g., Kearney 2003).

15 See also Caputo’s discussion of ‘the Secret’ on pp. 17–24 in On Religion.


17 In addition to the reply I will proceed to outline, Caputo also comments that he, like Derrida, does not oppose the Enlightenment, but favours a ‘new Enlightenment’, the continuation and improvement of the Enlightenment ideals (Caputo 2010: 109; cf. Putt 2002: 166). He also points out that, far from
wishing to reduce religion to morals, in the manner of Kant, he has declared himself ‘against ethics’ (as the title of his 1993 book indicates) (2010: 116). (However, Caputo does wish to retain an ethics of some sort – viz., one of obligation, justice and responsibility – even if it is an ethics without metaphysical grounding.) Finally, Caputo notes that he rejects the Kantian notion of a purely formal a priori of revealability, to which the historical revelations stand as concrete instantiations, but rather sees foi (arché-faith, what corresponds to Derrida’s messianic) as a Heideggerian ‘formal indicator’ that is not free from historical conditioning (2010: 112–13; cf. 1997: 142).

18 See also Plantinga (2000: 437–57) for Plantinga’s response to criticisms of religious exclusivism. There is a further problem relating to the coherence or internal consistency of Caputo’s account. Caputo, as we saw, compares the tragic sense of life with the religious view of life, and points out that we cannot settle the question of which of these two visions represents the ‘real truth’. But if, as Caputo himself proposes, truth in religion amounts to doing something, rather than (say) correspondence with reality, then how could a conflict between the religious vision and the tragic vision even arise? The religious vision, on Caputo’s view, is not in the fact-stating business, and so how can it be contradicted or refuted by anything in the tragic vision? This perhaps explains why, in Caputo (1987: 285, 287), the two visions are presented as being incommensurable.

19 Caputo is here following Derrida’s rejection of determinate religion as inherently violent (see Smith 1998: 207–10).

20 Ironically, Caputo (2003b) himself testifies to this in his intellectual autobiography when he describes how his own Catholic religious tradition has been a major driving force behind his philosophical work.

21 For a criticism of Caputo (and Derrida) along similar lines, see Smith (1998) and Kuipers (2002). Smith puts the matter particularly well when he enjoins us to ‘understand religion, in a fundamentally deconstructive gesture, as pharmacological, site of both poison and cure’ (p. 211). Interestingly, Caputo (2002: 128) has conceded that ‘the main rhetorical failure’ of The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida is this tendency to downplay the positive and peaceful potentialities of the determinable faiths. Another difficulty with any blanket rejection of exclusivism is that some form of exclusivism seems unavoidable. For as soon as one commits oneself to a particular position (whether it be exclusivism or even pluralism), one thereby makes an exclusionary (if not violent) gesture by ruling out all views that are incompatible with this position as false or irrational.

22 The messianic for Caputo is a quasi-transcendental (not a pure transcendental), a ‘formal indicator’ of the concrete messianisms, in which case the messianic too is to some extent determinate and conditioned. Despite this, the messianic remains privileged over against the messianisms due to the former’s comparative indeterminateness or ‘purity’.

23 Caputo (2005) has responded to Westphal by arguing that Westphal has not fully appreciated the radicality of Derridean postmodernism, which holds that ‘Deconstruction is not only the continuous reminder that we are not God but it is the claim that the name of God is endlessly translatable into other names, like justice, and that we are in no position to stop this fluctuation’ (p. 294). Caputo’s point, I take it, is not that undecidability and translatability entail that any decision in favour of theism or atheism is ruled out in advance. Rather, the recognition of undecidability is recognition of the many risks and complexities of making any such decisions, forever exposed as they are to prejudices and influences that distort rather than track truth. It might seem, therefore, that Caputo is not rejecting (absolute) Truth, but only privileged access to such Truth – something Westphal has no difficulty accommodating (see Westphal 2005: 300). But this would be to miss Caputo’s radical reconceptualization of ‘truth’ in religion, which seeks to make nonsense of the idea of there being an exclusively true religion.

24 See, for example, Caputo (2001), where on one page he endorses the epistemic claim that ‘We cannot, by science, philosophy, or religion, situate ourselves safely in some privileged spot above the mortal fray below having gained the high ground of a Privileged Access to the Way Things Are’ (p. 20); while on the very next page he supports the metaphysical thesis that ‘The secret is that there is no Secret, no capitalized Know-it-all Breakthrough Principle or Revelation that lays things out the way they Really Are and thereby lays to rest the conflict of interpretations’ (p.21).


26 See Caputo (2006a: 2–7), for his somewhat technical understanding of ‘event’.

27 I am relying here on Caputo’s recent response to critics in Simmons and Minister (2012).

28 Admittedly, Caputo has attempted, in Against Ethics (1993b), to develop an account of ‘obligation’ that does not depend on the kind of metaphysical foundations I am suggesting here are necessary.