

# POSTMODERN THEOLOGY: AN OPEN CANON

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The meaning for radical theology should be clear: our hope does not rest in the world beyond or in the world to come but in the *world here and now*. *Our hope is in change, not in an exchange*, whether that be an exchange of one world for another or one self for another. *Transformation is the means, not transcendence.*

- Jeffrey W. Robbins, *Radical Theology: A Vision for Change*

There is no better way to save the world than with religion, and also no better way to burn it down.

- John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*

**T**raditional theology, from a Western perspective, is the study and engagement with the ideas, teachings, and belief in God. It is a discipline which uses its canonical texts in order to understand what it is that the practitioners should make of the world around us, our role in it, and the rules therein. The death-of-God movement changed this, however, with the claim that God is "dead," that is, our literal belief in God is no longer necessary. The secularization of our society has lessened the dogmatic necessity which was a literal belief in God. That blind faith has become something of a difficulty for many; thus, we have the death-of-God movement and its subsequent effects. There was

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a splintering within the field of Theology. With the "theos" of "theology" being put under high scrutiny, the very basis of what this discipline had assumed was and is looked upon from new perspectives. This has led to the development of a growing number of subfields to theology. While many of these now don the cloaks of atheism, there is still a reluctance to leave "God" behind. In the words of Jeffrey W. Robbins, an explorer of this reborn theology, "the idea of God and the desire for God outlive the death of God," (Robbins, 6).

Postmodern Theology is one such post-death-of-God theology that has shifted its focus from an outside God/Other to the world in which we live, with the goal of reclaiming the essence, the insistence, of religion in order to learn from that insistence. This tradition is a unification of methodologies which allow for reinterpretation, through deconstruction and hermeneutics, of traditional theology in a manner that draws out the real meaning "behind the curtain" of the mythologies therein. It is a theology which is not beholden to traditional orthodoxy, yet it swims in the literature of that orthodoxy. Likewise, it is not strictly subject to the death-of-God movement. It takes an amorphous, transformative form, which allows it to slip past the limits of its predecessors. In doing so, it recognizes that we must move beyond a literal belief in God. However, it fervently acknowledges the implications of God, the insistence of God, and works to (re)apply a reinterpreted theology back into our society so that we do not lose that insistence.

First, I would like to elaborate on the phrase "insistence of God". With this, I am calling upon John D. Caputo who, in *The Insistence of God*, defined a postmodern theology invested in an intimate relationship with philosophy. Caputo defines this insistence as being "the insistent way that God calls upon us," (Caputo, 27). He offers us an implicit understanding, though I will further this with my own words. I call to attention here the ideas of love, compassion, kindness, justice, truth,

honor; but also death, uncertainty, possibility, impossibility, existence, non-existence. I am discussing concepts which do not physically manifest themselves in our world but are, nonetheless, prevalent and evasive simultaneously. These are the "truths" which are shown to reside within the name of "God". To discuss absolute Truth is a conversation which has been forever ongoing. But, all the while, we have an understanding of "truth", in some capacity. Now, replace "truth" with "God" or "love". They are there, else we would not have use for them, not recognize them in their various forms. This insistence is the deeper truth found within religion. This is what it is that these new theologians are articulating, what they are trying to capture. An essence of religion which reveals more innate facets of our world and how we should live in that world. The insistence of God is the "call" of the world; the absolute coming of death, the passions of love, the sorrow of one lost, the enjoyment of a meal with family and/or friends. This insistence is the acknowledgment of life, in all its truths, and then the utilization of that life while it is.

If you were to ask someone if God exists, they would likely have one of three answers. Either he does, does not, or there is no way to know. There is obviously a lack of evidence to support the literal existence of God. The lack of evidence would, therefore, lead to the idea that God does not exist. The point I make here, however, is that this question is not as important. It is not something we can answer now and should be understood as such. As Caputo puts it, "We will only be able to determine whether God exists after the fact." (Caputo, 37). Although in the context with which he uses that quote, he is discussing the idea of God as an event, the meaning still upholds my argument. God's existence is not provable in our lives here, in the material universe in which we find ourselves. That existence is not something we can know prior to dying. To answer this question has potentially negative consequences, as well.

To state that God does not exist is fair. The argument is sound, I believe, though, as stated, is not important. To broach that subject, to lay claim to the non-existence of God, I fear then leads to the dismissal of God. That is, that when one says “God does not exist”, they are potentially losing the meaning behind God, the insistence of God, which is of utmost importance. This is the exact claim which Postmodern theology is seeking to stray away from. Caputo captures this well in the statement, “The denial of God ... is the foolishness of thinking that the world is the whole answer where there is no question,” (Caputo, 30). Though we can say that God’s existence is not important to us here and now, what is of terrifying importance is the insistence of God; of what that insistence means. We should leave behind the question of God’s existence and fully embrace the idea of his insistence, and everything wrapped up in that statement.

Since the Death-of-God movement, our society has grown ever more secularized. The literal belief in God is dying. As Jeffrey W. Robbins discusses in *Radical Theology: A Vision for Change*, there has been a stampede of best-selling books which have been labeled the new atheism (Robbins, 7). These new atheists push the agenda that “religion has been one of the principal causes of human suffering and that it promotes extremism and has led to violence,” (Robbins, 7). They shun the idea of religion, preferring to be rid of it entirely so that we can progress further, uninhibited by the shackles of the mistake that they believe religion to be. As he notes, however, it is more the idea of religious literalism which these new atheists are against. The mistake here is in allowing the idea of God, the more base truth behind that name, to be lost due to the errancies of some particular literature. Robbins goes on to specify how most religious individuals of today “would now concede that religions are *true* not in the same way that science or mathematics is true but in the way a Picasso portrait conveys a *subjective* truth,” (Robbins, 8). It is this “subjective truth” of sorts

which I say is wrapped up in the name of God, in the insistence of God. This is what our new theologians are after.

Now, when someone answers the question of God's existence with the positive, when someone says that God does truly exist, they then endanger themselves of losing the materiality of this world. The story of Mary and Martha, from the Gospel of Luke, captures this. These two sisters, met by Jesus, serve as representations of the two ways to respond. Mary is depicted as hearing God's call and then becoming tranquilized by it. She sits at the feet of Jesus, idolizing him, recognizing his call, yet she doesn't do anything with that recognition (Lk 10:38-42 [NIV]). She forgets herself and her duties in the face of God. Mary slips into the confines of a "worldlessness" (Caputo, 45). This is what religion does, in some cases. This is a potential consequence of religion.

"Religion is out to soothe hearts, to pacify and appease, ... no matter how grim the forecast," (Caputo, 24) To ignore the world around you in preference for an ignorantly blissful understanding of life is to lose out on the essence of that life. Like Mary, you recognize the call of God, but you do not respond. That response is vital. It is everything. You must actually live your life, not dismiss the responsibilities of this world. This world is to be taken seriously, and when you say "yes" to God's existence, you are losing that response to the duties, the mandates, of this world. Martha, contrary to her sister, recognizes this.

Martha offers a response to the call. She is able to recognize what is important, what is real. When she sees the "animal that Jesus is," she is recognizing that simply hearing Jesus's call is not enough; she is aware that Jesus, as any of us, is beholden to the duties of the world (Caputo, 167). He needs material care, a response, beyond the initial interaction of hearing his call. Caputo uses this analogy to convey that this new theology is to respond in kind with Martha. This is the precarious line in which this theology walks. It is the recognition that, rather than simply following in the presence of God, in the insistence of

God, *we must do more*. This is what Caputo is calling us to do. This call and response to the insistence of God is our duty. Herein is the kernel of this new theology. Instead of dismissing the religious experience, we must endorse it, *adapt it*. Yet we must adapt it in the proper way. Its sights must be set on the world in which we live.

This is how our new theology can surpass its predecessors. It is taking into account both halves; the call and response. It wishes not to abandon religion entirely, as that would be to lose one half of this necessary dialectic. Rather, it seeks to accomplish a form of redemption. "It is instead a more ancient or archaic understanding of redemption by which we regain possession of something we have lost. A debt is cleared, specifically the debt we owed not to [God] the man but to the thought--the thought that was hijacked and distorted by [God] himself, the thought that we ourselves have been scared away from by the cautionary tale that is [God]," (Robbins, 52). This is a redemption of the essence of religion. We are indebted to the call of the world, and yet we have shied away from that call due to the mask of religion. It is important to get behind this, to move beyond it, in order to respond accordingly. The manner in which we should respond can be captured in the story of the death of Lazarus.

Caputo's account of Jesus's, or, as he writes "Yeshua's", reaction to the death of Lazarus in the tale of Mary and Martha demonstrates the way that religion, and all of us, should operate. In arriving after the death of Lazarus, Yeshua "did all that he could do," (Caputo, 254) He sat with the two sisters. He helped them grieve. He took their pain upon himself and gave them the strength, somehow, to continue into their new world; a world without Lazarus. He did not perform mystical powers to revive their brother. He operated within the world. He responded to the insistence that these two lost someone, permanently, and their worlds were shattered because of it. He took hold of the responsibilities of living in accordance to the insistence of God, of the

temporality of life, and helped them to cope with the ending of their worlds, but to also move on through that pain. He did not spin the two sisters a tale of their brother happily residing over them. Instead, he helped them to overcome the reality, the truth, of the situation. He did not lead them astray but helped them to accept their new worlds, the world of the insistence of God, a world of "life/death" (Caputo, 236).

Within the field of Religious Studies, there has been a reconsideration of a thesis which believed that "the more modern we become, the less religious we would become," (Robbins, 145). However, this secularization thesis has been reconsidered, due to the manner in which it has proven inaccurate. To quote Robbins reading Caputo, "what the persistence of the religious or the postmodern return of religion reveal is that beyond or after the death of God there remains the *desire for God*," (Robbins, 79). Is this not true within our society? Consider those who have donned the label "Spiritual but not Religious." These individuals are of the mindset that organized, institutionalized religion is unappealing. They do not have a central, unified set of beliefs besides, perhaps, the one in which they feel that it is their right to think of "religion" on their own terms. Those who identify in this way have grown by eight percent over the last five years, now representing twenty-seven percent of American adults, according to a Pew Research Center study released in 2017 (Lipka and Gecewicz, 2017). This is the "religion without religion" of Derrida and Caputo. This loosely defined "group" of like-minded individuals is a manifestation of proof to the fact that the desire for God, for God's insistence, surpasses his existence. These individuals often do not hold a literal belief in God. They are often atheists and agnostics who still feel that there is an insistence which they hear and respond. The "death of God is not the final word, and religion is more fundamentally about desire," (Robbins, 79). That desire is intrinsically intertwined with God's insistence.

The “Spiritual but not Religious,” I believe, serve as a representation of one of the many ways in which traditional theology has been and will continue to be (re)interpreted into our secularized world. For them, traditional theology is broken down into what is applicable for *themselves within the world*. They hold that the importance of the world is evident, and therefore, they choose how and when to define and respond to the call therein. This is, after a fashion, a religion of Martha. A religion extrapolated from itself that it hardly represents the original Thing that it was, while still maintaining the essence, the *insistence*. It is religion put through a perspectival shift, from the masculine to the feminine, in which our society has naturally decided that change was necessary.

This group serves as another example, in that it seems that religion is innately tied to humans. Consider how pervasive religion is in its different forms across our species. It has a long historical influence and continues to be a part of our lives today. What's more is that it continues to change, manifesting in new ways as we can see with this group. Humans have an innate tendency to question, wonder, search for a meaning of life, for what comes after life, of death, and more which leads to religion in its various forms. On some level, religion is tied to humans, to life. It is a part of our life and therefore is confined to us. As Caputo states, "But we now have good reason to believe that, on a cosmic scale, life is a local and interim phenomenon, something found here or there and that comes and goes, which means that 'religion' is as well," (Caputo, 256). Religion is something that is, ultimately, the product of the insistence of God. Like us, religion is not pervasive across the entire universe. It instead surfaces within us, where life had the chance to come to fruition in the manner that it did.

Furthering this, as Caputo states “If the cosmic dice were rolled again, they might never again have produced life, and certainly not the life which we ourselves have here, at this moment,” (Caputo, 244). In



the same manner that life would, perhaps, not be the same, so, too, would religion look drastically different, if it arrived at all. What wouldn't change, however, is the idea that the insistence of God calls upon those who live. The material world demands certain responsibilities of which life cannot ignore. What is being called, though, can, perhaps, change in ways as unforeseeable as that life. The insistence is pervasive; religion is not.

This is a theology which suffers a double-excommunication. It is not allowed to frolic with the orthodox theologians, as the beliefs of this theology are heretical. It is shunned from the academics, as it uses the name (of) "God" to discuss our world. This is a theology with an open canon. It is fundamentally (de)constructed to allow for interpretation. The tools are there; it is now up to *us* to create that change. This theology recognizes itself as "strictly a human enterprise," (Robbins, 21). In doing so, it opens itself up. It subtracts from the structure that it was, yet it is fully aware that this subtraction is to its benefit. In doing so, it slips between areas of discourse, freeing itself from the walls that its orthodox ancestors built. This theology also accepts that "there is no exit, no exchanging this world for another," (Robbins, 130). It resides in our world, the world of Martha, ready to respond to the call of that which is, as the late Charles Winquist put it, "real and important," (Robbins, 130).

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