

## FROM RADICAL HERMENEUTICS TO THE WEAKNESS OF GOD

JOHN D. CAPUTO IN DIALOGUE WITH MARK DOOLEY

Edited by Ian Leask

Over the course of three decades, the American thinker John Caputo has proved a catalytic presence in English-language “Continental” thought—through his teaching, his writings, his public discussions, his editorial work, and his conference organisation. By confronting, consistently and unwaveringly, English-speaking academia with the fundamental significance of Continental philosophy, Caputo has contributed hugely to a substantial change in the wider academic landscape; if, today, reference to, say, Heidegger, or even Derrida, is no longer considered as exotic (and questionable) as it once was, this is in no small part due to Caputo’s multiform effort.

Not that Caputo—now based at Syracuse University, after thirty-six years at Villanova—should be viewed as “merely” helping to disseminate French and German philosophy. His own thought, it should also be recognized, is an important and original fusion of a certain American vernacular with a “European” sensibility: his writings are clear and concrete (to the extent of having a near-pragmatic quality about them); yet they are also cosmopolitan, catholic, and steeped in classical and Scholastic learning.

Caputo’s originality is more than a question of philosophical style, however. For, as well as the “how” of his approach, the “what” of Caputo’s philosophical interests make clear his pioneering status. Specifically, it is in his long-standing concern to rub Continental thought “theologically” that Caputo has helped blaze philosophical trails (across Europe as much as America): from the first of his monographs to achieve wide recognition and appreciation—on Heidegger and Aquinas<sup>1</sup>—to his most recent ruminations on “God’s weakness,”<sup>2</sup> Caputo has played a central role in turning contemporary thought towards religion (and vice versa). In Caputo’s case, this “turning toward” has never been about replac-

ing critical study with dogmatics or apologetics: as the following dialogue makes plain, he wants philosophy to ask as much of religion as religion might of philosophy.

The dialogue—the transcript of which we present below—was conducted as a public seminar at the Mater Dei Institute, Dublin City University, Dublin, in the summer of 2005, during a “working tour” of Ireland. Professor Caputo’s interlocutor was Dr. Mark Dooley, formerly a Newman Scholar and Visiting Research Fellow at University College Dublin, and himself well known for works like *The Politics of Exodus*, *Questioning God*, and, not least, his collection of studies on Caputo’s work, *A Passion for the Impossible*.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Dooley has also established a career as a commentator, within the Irish media, on national and international affairs; the robust and, at times, challengingly anti-liberal line he adopts as journalist is evident here in a fascinating and at times combative exchange with a philosopher who has never hidden his left-leaning sympathies. Dooley’s provocative probing ensured that what unfolded was no exercise in flannel or vanity but, rather, a genuinely critical encounter.

### Situating God’s “Weakness”

**Mark Dooley** [hereafter MD]: Jack, it’s now eighteen years since you published *Radical Hermeneutics*,<sup>4</sup> your first major book in Continental thought and—not to denigrate the quality of your previous books—the one that got you your name. Now you’re publishing a book called *The Weakness of God*. Can we very briefly—before we get into the nuts and bolts of the thing—chart how you made the trajectory from radical hermeneutics to this thing called “the weakness of God”? Was the “weakness of God” theory latent in *Radical Hermeneutics*?

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**John Caputo** [hereafter JC]: In retrospect, and I say this with the advantage of hindsight, *Radical Hermeneutics* was a turning point in my work. It was the book in which I really found my voice and it traced out the course of all the work that followed, especially in the last three chapters, where one can see a phenomenology of religion taking shape. *Radical Hermeneutics* is an attempt to begin with the hermeneutical situation, in the sense of our contextual, rooted, situated, finite point-of-view, and to build from the bottom up. It tries to reach an understanding of who we are, and what the world is, with a sense of modesty about the pretensions of our knowledge. As it turned out, and as you can tell from the last chapters of the book, that inevitably would take an ethical and religious turn—or more of one, since I have always worked in the space between philosophy and religion. To use the expression coined by Dominique Janicaud, I was about to take a decidedly “theological turn in phenomenology”—or, in my case, in a certain radically hermeneutic phenomenology. Janicaud, who was being critical, meant that phenomenology had been “hijacked” by theology. But nonetheless the phrase is quite a good description of what has been happening in hermeneutics and phenomenology and even post-structuralism, and certainly of something that happened to me—although in my case it’s not theology in the strong sense but, I’d say, theology in the weak sense. Indeed, in *The Weakness of God* I talk not only about “the weakness of God” but also about the weakness of any kind of religious or theological posture.

MD: Define weakness for us, in that context.

JC: Strong theology, which I think causes a lot of trouble, means a powerful confessional identity and a powerful doctrinal content. Weak theology has a rather more indeterminate sense of God; its religious content is thinner. Consequently, it is somewhat less militant

MD: So an example of strong theology would be . . . ?

JC: Any traditional orthodox theology would be “strong.” The phrase “weak theology” is a polemical one I’m adapting from Vattimo when he talks about “weak thought.”<sup>5</sup> “Weak thought” provided him with a means of describing thinking “after” metaphysics,

which is strong thinking. So what would an analogous weak theology be? A way of thinking about God which is not held captive by a determinate confessional boundary. It’s also weaker in the sense that it’s less sure of itself, less certain, and less determinate. You know the work of Jacques Derrida very well, and you can hear me redescribing in other terms what he calls the pure or weak messianic as opposed to more robust concrete messianisms.<sup>6</sup> Hence “weak theology” as a purer and more formal theology.

When I speak of the weakness of God, and not just of theology, I mean something which, on the one hand, is very traditional. That is *kenosis*—the notion that God voluntarily empties God’s self in order to let the world flow forth, in order to give the world space, in order to give the world freedom and make us assume responsibility for our lives. And so, in Christian theology, you can view the Incarnation as a kenotic act of God’s self-emptying into a man who takes the form of a servant. Then I add: “But suppose we went further than that and said that by ‘God’ we really mean a weak rather than strong force.” That is, not an omnipotence that voluntarily restrains itself but a genuinely weak force. . .

MD: What’s the point in having a god, if you don’t mind me asking, if it’s a weak force?

JC: I don’t mind. That’s the right question. In what sense is God still God? My answer is that I am making a plea to shift the notion of God from that of a real force to an unconditional claim that the name of God places upon us. For me, the question of God is: Is there something that lays an unconditional claim upon us that is not sovereign power or metaphysical force? I’m worried about the notion of sovereign power. I’m worried about the sovereignty of a self that is a very powerful, self-asserting autonomous freedom. I’m worried about the sovereignty of a nation which is capable of acting unilaterally and out of its own

MD: Like Iraq?

JC: And like the United States, two very militant political sovereignties which ran afoul of each other. Political sovereignty, I think, has an ultimately theological paradigm. The implicit paradigm of this political sovereignty is the sovereignty of God. So what I want to know is: Would it be possible to think about

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what's going on "in the name of God" if we could dissociate God from force and power, while retaining the notion of an unconditional claim, something that claims us unconditionally and demands that justice flow like water across the land?

MD: But what's the point in following a god if it doesn't have sovereignty over you, if it's not a creator, if it doesn't have the omnipotence that we have traditionally ascribed to "God." What's the point?

JC: One is "following" a call, a command, a solicitation, which is not identified with a physical or metaphysical force. What does "God" mean? What do you want God to do? Do you want a god who's going to come in here and slay his enemies and do all the heavy lifting for us?

MD: It's neither all nor nothing. I mean, you can have a god who's omnipotent, who's powerful, who created heaven and earth, and we can still bow before Him, or Her, or It, and yet not have this weakling that we venerate . . .

JC: My objection to traditional omnipotence is in part a traditional one. I am just coming back to the old paradox in which we are caught up when we affirm a being with the power to intervene in human affairs when we are in trouble but who often does not. He could, we say, but we have to admit that a lot of the time He doesn't. I think this notion is theoretically questionable. Whenever God fails to respond to a desire for intervention, we explain this by saying there are mysterious divine reasons for this that we don't understand. When things turn out well we attribute it to God; when they do not, we say God has His reasons. So the notion is unfalsifiable: you would never be able to think of some counter-example that could in principle be accepted as a way to test the belief. The notion can't be tested or falsified, it's simply held with no possibility of contravening considerations. It's another case of what Kierkegaard said: metaphysics picks itself up by the scruff of the neck and declares something a priori!

The metaphysical idea of omnipotence goes back to the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*, which was introduced by the theologians in the second century. It's not found in the scriptures but arises in a second century debate between Christians, neo-Platonists and Gnostics. But when the idea is proposed, orthodox Chris-

tians, who at that point don't accept *creatio ex nihilo* but follow the Book of Genesis, make the following objection: If you make God the *creator ex nihilo* of everything, how are you going to get him off the hook for all the things that go wrong? How will God not be responsible for evil? So what's interesting is that before the second century there's a notion of God according to which, while God is the mightiest of all, God does not dominate things through and through, from the bottom up. God makes the world, but He makes the world out of something that offers a certain resistance. There's a notion of indeterminacy in things, that God's power does not go all the way down. Things are given a certain direction by God but they may just turn out in a way that God didn't plan on. And that's an account that is much closer to Genesis than to metaphysical theology, which really kicks into gear after the second century, and culminates with Augustine . . .

MD: But why do you bother talking about "God" at all, if it's so weak, if it's so indeterminate?

JC: I am trying to redescribe God, to shift our way of thinking about God from the plane of a force or power to the plane of an unconditional claim.

MD: Why?

JC: Well, let's put it this way. Derrida takes up a sentence from Augustine's *Confessions* in which Augustine says "quid ergo amo, cum deum [meum] amo"—"what do I love when I love my God?"<sup>7</sup> What's really interesting to me about the sentence, of course, is that Augustine is assuming we love God. He's assuming there's a God, and he's assuming we love Him. So the vocabulary of God, the notion of God, the intentional relationship to God, is in place, and in terms of a relationship of love, [it is] the love of something bottomless, mysterious—something that is, in my vocabulary, unconditional, something that unconditionally seizes us. In the first ten books of the *Confessions*, Augustine has not gotten into full swing as a bishop, not yet caught up in the defence of doctrine or an institution. He's not trying to run a diocese; he's just meditating. And the question Augustine is asking himself in the Tenth Book of the *Confessions* is: What do I love when I love my God? That's a question for anyone, for everyone. We may or may not be using religious discourse; we may or may not

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find the name of God the vehicle for configuring our concern or our passion. I think that life is a risky business and we don't in fact know in any deep way who we are, or what's going on. But what we do want, and what gives life its richness, is what Kierkegaard would have called passion, what Derrida calls the passion of non-knowing.<sup>8</sup> That represents a genuine existential engagement with things, with things in the most general sense: the physical world, one another, and God. From this point of view, the name of God is one way—and for many of us, an uncircumventable way—to give voice to this passion. But I do think it's entirely possible to give voice to this passion without using the name God.

MD: You really believe that we all have this passion?

JC: Yes, but I think that this passion is easily suppressed and that there are lots of times when we would be happy to avoid engaging that passion. It's not a comfortable thing but something disturbing. But I would say it's a depth dimension that constitutes us. My sense of a rich or genuine life is that it's a life of a passionate commitment to something the outlines of which are not entirely clear to us, which goes under many names, as Jacques Derrida says, one of which is the name of "God." So it would be a question of awakening something in us. It's a normative idea, the idea of something that commands or calls us.

### **Unconditionality, Christianity, Idolatry . . .**

MD: This thing that comes along and summons us in the dark of the night and is without form, without shape—how does it make itself present, apart from this passion? How do you know this that this unconditional call asks us to generate justice "like water across the land"? You obviously take this seriously—and therefore you obviously believe in some form of revelation . . .

JC: One way to think about this is to conduct a little mental experiment. Suppose that what concerns us were merely conditional. Take love, for example. Let's talk about love. Without having to define love, we can say that one of the features of love would be a certain kind of excess or unconditionality. What I mean is that when you say to someone "I love you," you're saying something very uncondi-

tional. When you get married and you're asked if you take this person, you say "I do." Well, we don't know if you do, we'll find out if you do—tomorrow, the next day, the next year, the next thirty years. It will take some time to find out. So this "I do" represents a movement of faith and commitment that exposes itself to a future that nobody can see, because neither person knows what the other one is going to become. People change, and the future is unforeseeable. But love makes this kind of unconditional, come-what-may commitment; it's an act of fidelity. It's either unconditional or it wouldn't be there at all. It doesn't come in a conditional form. So if two people reach a point of crisis in their relationship and the one says to the other "Do you love me?" and the other pauses awkwardly and says "Well, in a sense," or "In a certain respect . . ."—then whatever that is, it's not love. It might be better than nothing, but it's not love, because love is unconditional.

So the unconditional is in place for me in some kind of focal way, a central way. And the question would be not whether we are laid claim to unconditionally, but what it is that lays claim to us unconditionally. Is it the relationship of compassion that we should have for one another—and then we die and then that's that? Or is it something with a deeper metaphysical foundation? Is it what we in the West call "God"? Is it something else? I don't know. None of us does. But the structure of an unconditional claim seems to me—in a good hermeneutic of human life, a good account of what our life is like—a centerpiece of it. In that sense, I would say the unconditional is the heart of the religious, that it makes up the religious structure of existence. The question is: To what extent can we flesh it out? As a philosopher, I say "Well, you can say certain things about it." But I keep it in the weak mode, because to go too far would be to get yourself into the confessional theologies of particular religious traditions.

MD: Well, why do you call yourself a Catholic?

JC: Catholicism is for me the form in which this unconditionality takes shape, without which I would have never learned of it. I think that first of all what I'm talking about is a certain structure of existence that is more a kind of "how" than a "what." The "what" of what we

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do—Catholic or Protestant, Christian or non-Christian, religious or non-religious—is always what we have been given by the tradition in which we find ourselves. That’s an important part of what I mean by radical hermeneutics: we are always radically contextualized, in a hermeneutical situation. I speak a language that is not mine, within a tradition that I inherit, that is deeply embedded with meanings and institutions and structures and beliefs and practices that I’ve inherited. I find myself here, I didn’t put myself here. It’s the tradition to which I belong, and I hold to it, but I hold to it with a certain coefficient of “irony” (to use a word from Richard Rorty). And this means I understand that if I were born in some other place, in some other time, in some other world, then, on my hypothesis, the structure of unconditionality would still be in place, but what I would believe would be quite different.

I have the idea of writing a pseudonymous “Letter of St Paul to the Spaniards.” You know Spain is the place Paul never got: he intended to preach to the whole known world, and he had covered Asia Minor, and he was heading for Spain,<sup>9</sup> which was the last place he wanted to get to. Of course, he had to get there fast because he thought that the world was going to end soon and he had only so much time, but he never made it. He died in Rome, or so the tradition has it. So I have in mind this hypothetical letter that Paul would write to the Spaniards, that is, a letter to those who never heard or will never hear the saving word of Christ crucified. In this letter Paul would have a phrase like he does in his Letter to the Galatians, when he says there’s neither Jew nor Greek, master nor slave, male nor female.<sup>10</sup> But to that list I would have him add also that there are neither those who have heard the word nor those who have not heard the word. The world would end and the Spaniards would never have heard the determinate content of a specifically Christian way. Yet God is not partial, according to St. Paul, and God is not frustrated, and everyone is saved. So it would be entirely possible for the structure of the unconditional to be realized in their lives without their knowing what we call Christianity.

MD: But you’d obviously privilege Christianity, you’d privilege Catholicism. You privilege Jesus. Do you believe that Jesus was the Son of God?

JC: Christianity certainly is my way. But for me, and for a lot of New Testament scholars, by the way, the Jesus handed down to us by the high metaphysical theology of the later Councils is only one interpretation of Jesus. For me, it makes only limited contact with who Jesus was.

MD: So explain to us the “dirty” and non-metaphysical in what Jesus says . . .

JC: My guess is that I think about Jesus just about what Jesus thought about Jesus, and what the first followers of “the Way” back in Jerusalem thought about Jesus, which is that his message was about God, not about himself. Later on, the Christians made him into the message. I like Paul’s formulation, that he was the icon of the invisible God.<sup>11</sup> He gives historical flesh and blood to this unconditional claim. I think Jesus is a very powerful icon, but the problem is, he gets converted into an idol. His very masculinity, for example, becomes something that’s supposed to be timelessly important instead of testimony to contingency of the times: “He’s the icon of God, but he was a male, therefore to be the icon of God you’ve got to be male.” I say: No, that’s idolatrous. The attitude of the Church to women is based on an idolatrous understanding of the masculinity of Jesus. I look upon Jesus of the icon of the invisible God, not an idol.

I do confess to a privileging of Christianity in my work. That is a function partly of the hermeneutical situation of which we have been speaking and partly of my own limitations. It is the tradition that I have inherited but I do not expect everyone to share it. But I am simply less ignorant about Christianity than I am about other things. Occasionally, I venture into saying things about which I’m even more ignorant, but I try to do so with a sense of trepidation and modesty.

### **The Other, Politics, Evil . . .**

MD: Here’s a political question that ties in with all this. You may or may not know that Europe is depopulating itself at a rate of knots. We have a serious population crisis on our hands. And many commentators and population experts believe that by 2100 or thereabouts Europe will be predominantly Islamic. They’ve blamed this on liberal thought, relativism, the sexual revolution, etc., etc.—all the

things you love and that you're trying to blend with this old-style Catholicism that still is in your DNA, by the way, I don't care what you say . . .

JC: I don't say it's not in my DNA: it is.

MD: Okay, but the people who are concerned about Europe want strong faith, strong belief, they want to reassert their Christian identity, they want a strong moral and religious identity to fend off external threats from other faiths, and so on. How can your work help these people? What can you say to these people that will help them change their minds, given this concrete situation facing Europe?

JC: Well, there's a great deal there in what you are saying that has to do with what I mean by weak theology versus strong. That sense of confessional identity and struggle, of threat and rivalry which spills over into a more material violence is precisely what I want to neutralize. The Biblical model, the practice of Jesus that you find in the New Testament, is hardly reflected by that portrait of Christian Europe trying to fortify itself against the coming of the other. That's what Kierkegaard called "Christendom," not Christianity. The predominant figure in the New Testament is one of hospitality: the insiders are out, the outsiders are in . . .

MD: Yes, but as you know, we have a European Union, we welcome in new nations the whole time, but there are other people who take advantage of Western guilt trips, leftist guilt trips it has to be said, who are intent on assuming the vogue of the other merely to suit a religious-cum-political aim—which, by the way, has a very strong theology behind it, a very hard theology, and one that is not too restricted in how it achieves that aim . . .

JC: Well, you see, on those matters, I follow a very good book that I read one time, called *The Politics of Exodus*,<sup>12</sup> which lays to rest all these anxieties about the immigrant. The figure of Christianity that I'm most familiar with, and the notion of unconditionality that I'm interested in, is the one concerned with the risky business of hospitality to the other and it subscribes to the idea that the earth belongs to all humankind. It is the barriers that we build up between nations that makes this question of sovereignty so questionable to me. The barriers we build up among ourselves by way of sovereign national boundaries, the kind of in-

humanity we show one another, in nationalist matters and ethnic identity and religious confessionalism, is very destructive and dangerous. It has nothing whatsoever to do with Jesus, who is a figure of openness and hospitality. What calls itself Christianity in many places, and many times, and certainly on the Christian Right, is, I think, an idol, not a genuine reflection of the Christianity of the New Testament. It calls itself Christian gospel but it's anything but, if that means the Good News of Jesus' commerce with everyone who is excluded, marginalized, down-and-out . . .

MD: But do you believe the Saudi royal family are the other?

JC: All of us, every person, is an other. And every person lays claim upon us. That doesn't mean we have to cooperate with evil, it doesn't mean we can't resist violence. But every person, structurally, demands our respect . . .

MD: Josef Stalin? Saddam Hussein?

JC: What would Jesus do with someone whose heart was turned to evil? If we want talk about . . .

MD: So Jesus is your ethical paradigm?

JC: Yes, he's my ethical paradigm. I can't expect that he would be the ethical paradigm of every soul who has ever lived or breathed, but he's the icon from whom I try to draw my inspiration. Even so, I don't think that's enough: we still have to think for ourselves, and we have to do philosophical analysis, and we have to reflect and be critical. But you're talking about Christian Europe and I say: If you want to talk about Christianity then let's talk about Jesus. What does Jesus do with regard to evil? I think his position is reflected in what Derrida would call "the impossible." That is, Jesus' position is largely non-violent, although he does say that he comes to bring the sword not peace. I've got a book in my suitcase, called *The Politics of Jesus*, by a man named John Howard Yoder, a Mennonite theologian who has a very eloquent account of non-violence and pacifism.<sup>13</sup> I can't bring myself to go that far, and there are even things about Jesus that suggest that he didn't either, because there are moments when he showed his anger. Anger is part of the structure of our life and is sometimes needed to protect us. Sometimes the right response to the other, the way to respect their humanity, is resistance. But for a Christian it has to be a resistance without hate. I mean the core

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paradox in Christianity is forgiveness in loving those who hate you. We have no idea of the historical veracity of the famous seven last words, but the one that impresses me the most is: "Forgive them, Father, for they know what they do."

MD: So let's imagine you're the first postmodern president of the United States, you're faced with Kim Jong-Il firing a nuclear weapon at Japan. What do you do?

JC: You choose the lesser evil. I think politics is largely a matter of choosing the lesser evil. You hardly ever get to choose the Good.

MD: What does that mean?

JC: Politics is the art of the possible. A good deal of politics and ethics is choosing the lesser evil between two evils. And so you have to calculate. What's going to spill less blood? What's going to cost fewer lives?

MD: So you believe in evil?

JC: I'm a firm believer in evil.

MD: But is it traditional evil? Is it what the metaphysicians used to call evil? Is it what Thomas Aquinas used to call evil? What is evil?

JC: I wrote a book called *Against Ethics*,<sup>14</sup> in which I tried to work out an idea of evil which turned on the idea of gratuitous suffering, of avoidable suffering. Suffering is part of the structure of our lives and a good deal of suffering is certainly not avoidable. But gratuitous suffering is more about the kind of evil we unnecessarily produce—the evil we produce when we taunt people who aren't like us, for example. A good case in point for me is homosexuality. If you have two people, two consenting adults, that is, who love each other but their love offends others, where would Jesus be as regards that situation? If you look at the New Testament, where was he? There was the mainstream religion, and then there were the people who were outside. Where was Jesus? Not with the mainstream but with the people who were outside. So where would Jesus be today? Defending homosexual rights, that's my bet. The wrath of the Christian Right against homosexual love is a good example of "producing" evil where there is no evil. Where's the evil in homosexuality, except in the evil that is committed against homosexuals, in what is done to them? It's not in what homosexuals are doing, which is loving one another. But they don't love one another in a way that

suits others. That's too bad for these others: they'll have to get over that. When you taunt and attack and impose yourself upon that kind of thing then you're producing evil where there is no evil. The evil in that situation is being created gratuitously by people who don't respect the right to be different.

That's what I mean by gratuitous suffering, which is how I characterize evil. There's a great deal of suffering which isn't gratuitous, it's just the human condition: you die, you get old, you get sick, children are born with incurable diseases, people get incurable diseases, life is a sort of incurable disease eventually, and so a lot of suffering is perfectly natural. But evil as gratuitous suffering, or the suffering we produce in animals, is another case . . .

### Marx, the Papacy, Forgiveness . . .

MD: You insist on talking about this weak, indeterminate unconditional obligation that we all fall under, and yet you seem to formalize it or make it determinate within the space of Christ. If you go out and speak to a Jew, to a Protestant, a Muslim—what do you say to them?

JC: It is not the unconditional that is weak but the physical or metaphysical force with which it is endowed. But I don't usually bring up Jesus Christ the same way you're doing. You're bringing up Christianity . . .

MD: Because that's the way you write, in that mode . . .

JC: Yes, you're right. But I also try to maintain a more general and biblical mode and to avoid Christian supersessionism. As you know, a lot of this goes back to the Jewish philosopher Levinas, so it has to do with a wider biblical paradigm. In Levinas, there's the figure of the orphan, the widow, the stranger. And it's even wider than that: in the Islamic tradition there's a tradition of radical hospitality. So it's a much broader paradigm.

Indeed, in other contexts, when I'm not talking in a religious context, I don't make any use of scripture at all. I just analyze phenomenological structures, like the structures of suffering. There's a wonderful book by a woman named Elaine Scarry, where she analyses a lot of human rights violations and gives a powerful phenomenology of the human body under torture.<sup>15</sup> And without invoking any religious

categories at all, she produced very similar results to the one we could produce if we used more religious paradigms. It's not simply Christian, it's not even ultimately biblical: I think you could argue this on a hermeneutical-phenomenological basis.

MD: Okay, so it could easily be Marxism?

JC: It would be, at most, the spirit of a certain Marxism. I was never a Marxist and have never shown the least sympathy for doctrinaire or hard-line or orthodox Marxism, even when Marxism was more fashionable. Marxism is just more "strong" thinking for me, like the Vatican. But the spirit of Marx—the prophetic spirit of commitment to those who are ground under by economic systems that are just simply machines for producing wealth—I would say that we owe fidelity to that Marx and to that spirit and sense of prophetic justice.

Derrida is a good example in this regard, because in the 1960s, when every intellectual in Paris was a Marxist of some sort, he kept his distance from Marxism, because he thought of it as a totalising schema that he distrusted. But he didn't attack it. It's a little bit like Thomas Aquinas on Augustine: Thomas had his differences from Augustine, but he would never attack him; he would say "What Augustine means is this . . ." and then he would give you Aristotle! Derrida was a little bit like that with Marx in the 1960s: he would never criticize Marx, but he didn't agree with a good deal of it either. When did he write his book on Marx?<sup>16</sup>—after the break-up of the Soviet Union and when Marx had become a bad name and there was this "liberal euphoria" which made Marx a bad name. When he wrote his book about Marx it was meant to brush against the grain. Then he said: "Look, Marx is the name of a spirit of justice that we have no business forgetting."

MD: Even though it's produced mass graves all over the world?

JC: Well, state communism has. But the spirit of a certain Marx hasn't.

MD: But you can only judge an ideology by the way it fleshes out . . .

JC: Well, what we would then need is someone who can really count bodies and then we'll have to figure out who has spilled more blood, created more bodies—the Christian churches or state-Marxism.

MD: So you're seriously saying that there are more despots in the great tradition of Judeo-Christianity than there have been in the tradition of Marxism? Is that what you're maintaining here?

JC: I'm saying that you can't sense or evaluate the impulse or power or claim that's made upon us by Christianity by the number of dead bodies that the Christian churches have produced (and over the centuries they have produced many), nor what Karl Marx was saying by the number of dead bodies that were produced by Stalin, in particular.

A related point: I think that everything is dangerous. Whenever someone says something important, it's dangerous and it can go in different directions and it can spill blood. That's what Derrida means by undecidability: there is nothing in the name of which we are unable to kill. We can kill in the name of God, we can kill in the name of justice and democracy, we can kill in the name of love. We're very good at killing in the name of anything. And the name won't keep us safe.

MD: Yes, but think of the strong determinate faith of Catholicism . . . By and large, the vast majority of the 1.1 billion Catholics in the world don't go around killing each other for their beliefs nowadays, unlike other faiths—so why your difficulty with the institutional church?

JC: I have many difficulties with the institutional church, its authoritarianism, its attitude toward women, for example. But I don't think religion can exist without institutional form, without determinate historical structures.

MD: As a Catholic, do you owe fidelity to the Pope?

JC: I like popes a little better before Pio Nono.<sup>17</sup> I reject the papacy's self-interpretation after Pio Nono. I think that's a distortion of the historical papacy. I think the pope's self-understanding is overly centralized and authoritarian. It is another case of idolatry. What's idolatry? Idolatry is when the conditional is treated as something unconditional. Idolatry is when the church ceases to be an icon and starts to be an idol. When does this happen? When its human structures dominate its iconic character. When do its human structures dominate its iconic structure? Well, for example, when it starts to reflect contingent, historical social configurations—like monarchy—instead of

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the message of Jesus. There's nothing monarchical about Jesus, but the papacy regards its monarchical form of government as given by God. I think that's a misunderstanding, a distortion, and I reject it. The monarchical crown that the Vatican has placed upon its own head is a distortion of the message of Jesus. It's the particular distortion to which Catholics are prone. The particular distortion to which Protestants are prone is biblicism and biblical inerrantism, which is an alternative form of idolatry. You can have the idolatry of an institutional monarch, or the idolatry of a book. Jesus warned us about both. I don't think Paul had either. Why? Because the religious form of life has to be kept open to the divine. It's dangerous when it contracts the divine to something "human, all too human," when it contracts the unconditional to something conditional. That's what Catholics are prone to in their way, Protestants in their way, Muslims in their way. It seems to be the way religious people do business; in fact, it is the way everyone does business. I'm not out to eliminate institutions but to ask them to start doing business differently—and that is with a sense of the contingency and conditionality of their own convictions, openness to what others have to say, and with a sense of the open-ended possibilities of the future. I don't want them to make idols out their own beliefs and practices.

MD: Would you not be more honest if you just said "Right, I'm ditching all this religious stuff, I'm not going to talk about God—God is so weak for me, so flimsy, that I can't convince anyone else to follow this. The source of the unconditional obligation is so indeterminate that I'll get rid of it. Instead, I'll talk about moral sentiment in terms of David Hume, or Annette Baier, or people like that." Because that's what it basically comes down to: your fidelity to lessen human suffering can be done without resorting to religious categories, muddying the waters with God . . .

JC: The first answer is that I think it's entirely possible to work out a fair amount of what I'm saying outside of a "religious" discourse in the narrow sense, and that's because I don't think religious discourse has hegemonic authority over other points of view. I think it would be possible to do it in other ways. I think at the end of his life Dietrich Bonhoeffer reached a very similar conclusion, when he

talked about a religion-less Christianity, a Christianity which would turn upon what he called righteous action in the world.<sup>18</sup> So I think your question brings out that this could be done in other ways. The main idea of radical hermeneutics is that there isn't a single overarching meta-narrative. I don't claim that religious discourse is exclusive or the only way it can be done. I'd say it's irreducible: you can't chase it away by saying it's a disguised form of economic oppression or it's a disguised way of desiring your mommy. Religious discourse is an irreducible way of embodying this notion of unconditionality that I'm advocating. But I don't say it's the only way. There are others: too many ways! I certainly don't have mastery of them all, and I'm not in a position to discard or disparage them.

That's the first point. As to your second point, let's talk a little about what we mean by this weak force, because I think we need to be clear about that. A paradigmatic example of what I mean by a weak force and the weak force of God, in particular, is forgiveness. When we are beset by evil, when we're attacked, when we're assaulted, when we're aggrieved in one way or another by the other, the human, all-too-human, response is retaliation, and the cycle of retaliation is endless. It's a series with no first cause, nobody ever admits they started it; it's an unbroken chain of retaliating for previous violations. But, as Hannah Arendt says, what forgiveness does is release us from the past, from the chain of retaliation, and it makes the future possible.<sup>19</sup>

I call it a weak force because forgiveness represents an ethical claim made upon us not a physical force; it rejects the obvious strength of a "strong" response, of literal retaliation. It's like when St. Peter picks up the sword in the garden and is about to cut off the ear of the Roman soldier and Jesus says: "That's not the way it works in the kingdom. The kingdom does not proceed by strong force; if it did I would have legions of angels here and they would take care of everything." We don't play by strong forces, we invoke weak forces. Weak in the sense of physical material power. But it's an unconditional claim, a "force without force." And so what I hope for, what I hope to offer, is a certain kind of phenomenology of structures like forgiveness or hospitality that will touch us, will touch me, will make me

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better. And that's what I think is divine about Jesus, and divine about us when we manage to behave well. I don't think we are an icon of what we mean by God when we resort to strong force.

### Endpiece: In the Beginning . . .

MD: You were once in a religious order. What happened?

JC: It was an active order, not monastic one, the French De La Salle Christian Brothers, not the Irish Christian Brothers. We had to use French in much of our study and conversation. We were training to be high school teachers and I attended La Salle University in Philadelphia. But before going to the University we had a fifteen month novitiate in which we followed a monastic routine with a great deal of silence! We could speak for three hours on Thursday and three hours on Sunday afternoons, because that was an older French convention; it wasn't the modern American weekend. It was very difficult, but it transformed me. I'm eternally in the debt of that training. It plucked me from the streets of southwest Philadelphia and made me into someone else. But after four years we parted company, largely because the Brothers taught in high schools and after I discovered philosophy I no longer wanted to be a high school teacher. I wanted to teach philosophy. I had a very memorable life-determining conversation with the "Brother

Provincial," which means the boss, and I said—and remember, this was pre-Vatican II—"I think I've figured out what I want to do, I want to teach philosophy. I want you to send me to Fordham University in New York City, it's a good Catholic university, and I'll come back and teach philosophy at La Salle for the rest of my life, and I promise I'll be good at it." And the Brother Provincial said: "Well, maybe. But maybe we'll send you to work in the orphanage [an institution conducted by the Brothers in Pennsylvania] and you'll spend the rest of your life serving in the orphanage, because what's important to you is the will of God as it's expressed by your superiors." And I said: "Well, actually, no. I want to teach philosophy." And we could not reconcile those differences . . .

MD: Now what would Jesus have done in that situation? Would he have taken the road to the lofty heights of academe, or would he have gone to the orphanage?

JC: That's a telling question. You might say—in retrospect—the Brother Provincial was making a Levinasian point, about serving the widows and the orphans. But on that occasion, the model of Jesus I adopted is Jesus driving the money-changers out of the temple and doing what he thought he must do. In radical hermeneutics everything is interpretation.

MD: Thank you.

### ENDNOTES

1. John D. Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics* (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 1982).
2. John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).
3. Mark Dooley, *The Politics of Exodus: Søren Kierkegaard's Ethics of Responsibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001); John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *Questioning God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Mark Dooley, ed., *A Passion for the Impossible John D. Caputo in Focus* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004).
4. John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).
5. Gianni Vattimo's expression "weak thought" (*il pensiero debole*) was first used in his *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991); it has since become the defining watchword and characteristic of a broad "school" of Italian (and wider) postmodernism.
6. See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 59ff.
7. See Derrida, "Circumfession: Fifty-Nine Periods and Periphrases," in Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 122. For Augustine's original quotation—which is not quite what Derrida cites—see *Confessions*, X, 7. Cf. John Caputo, *On Religion* (London

- and New York: Routledge, 2001); idem., "What Do I Love When I Love My God? Deconstruction and Radical Orthodoxy," in *Questioning God*, 291–317; and Keith Putt, "What Do I Love When I Love My God?: An Interview with John D. Caputo," in *Religion With/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*, ed. James H. Olthuis (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 150–79.
8. See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Resistances of Psychoanalysis* (Stanford University Press, 1998).
  9. See Romans 15:24.
  10. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).
  11. "He is the *eikon* of the invisible (*aoratou*), the first-born of all creation" (Colossians 1:15).
  12. See note 3, above.
  13. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus noster* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans, 1972).
  14. John Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).
  15. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
  16. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.
  17. Pope Pius IX (1792–1878), pontiff from 1846 until 1878, was the "Scourge of Liberalism" and organizer of the first Vatican Council of 1870, which enshrined the dogma of papal infallibility.
  18. Bonhoeffer's notion of a radically demythologised "religionless Christianity" is outlined in his final prison writings, particularly in letters to Eberhard Bethge. See, for example, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: SCM Press, 1971), 280–82.
  19. See, especially, Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), 212–19.