

A restless search for truth: Philosopher John Caputo

“Truth is in constant transit. The difference between a liberal and a conservative, I think, is the stomach you have for the journey.”

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [Dec 24, 2014](#) issue



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN CAPUTO

*For several decades philosopher John Caputo has been mixing postmodern philosophy with Christian theology in books like *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, and most recently, *The Insistence of God*. He believes that the postmodern turn in philosophy can help Christians reckon with their particular moment in cultural and philosophic history and with the radical pace of change. He has a new book for nonacademic audiences called *Truth*.*

Why did you start writing about esoteric postmodern theory for nonacademic audiences?

It began through contact with the emerging church movement. I realized that there were people trying to translate postmodern theory into practice. They were interested in contemporary philosophical hermeneutics, but they weren't professional academics. They didn't want to have to make a career of trying to understand Jacques Derrida. They needed a translator.

These people want to reach an intellectual clarity about what they are already doing. They have already, to some extent, figured it out in praxis, but they can use my work to help them articulate what they are already doing. It provides a vocabulary. They are already forming alternate communities, engaging in alternate practices, and playing minor chords in Christianity.

Where do you find these people?

These are people inside and outside the church who are restless with established religion. They are horrified by fundamentalism: its violence, its Grand Inquisitor purges. But they are also put off by mainstream religion. I have been invited to mainstream church discussion groups—ten years ago I would have been astonished at this—to meet with churchgoers who have not given up on going to church, but who secretly or not so secretly don't quite swallow the dogmas of the church.

Yet they do think that somehow religion should translate into practice: into communities of hospitality, peace, and justice, to provide support for people who have questions and doubts and are dubious about a big, encompassing story about the meaning of life. They take the official teachings of the church with a grain of salt. They think: if I were born somewhere else, I wouldn't be a Christian and that wouldn't make much of a difference. This is why I speak of religion without religion, where the name of God is the name of a call rather than the name of an entity.

I have a friend who is a member of a Catholic religious order who says he is a "lapsed Catholic." I asked, "How does that work?" He said, "Well, I follow my community rule and I do what I am supposed to do, but I don't believe much of it any more." "Why don't you leave?" I asked. He said, "The essence of my vocation is these kids." He lives and works with really troubled children who live in impossible situations and are victims of terrible circumstances.

That's what Wittgenstein called a "form of life" and what Heidegger called our "mode of being in the world." This friend sums up what I am trying to articulate. That's the kingdom of God, with or without churches.

Why did you decide to write a book called *Truth*? That sounds like something an 18th-century philosopher would do, but not a 21st-century one.

It happens that 2013 was the 150th anniversary of the London Underground, and Penguin had the idea of putting out a series of philosophical books in honor of this occasion that would employ the motif of transportation and that were short enough and written in an accessible style so people could read these books as they commuted on the Tube. They invited me to address the question of truth.

I have spent so much time trying to take the air out of the word *truth*, trying to debunk and deconstruct its absoluteness, its unchanging, eternal, and transhistorical aspects, that I had never said much in an affirmative way about what I think it does mean. I took this to be an invitation to do something that I wouldn't have necessarily thought of doing myself.

Transportation is also a central metaphor in your book. What is the relationship between transportation and truth?

Our nonstop travel has created a crisis in truth. With our modern transportation systems, we can travel almost anywhere, and with our modern information systems almost anything can travel to us. Truth is in constant transit. And it is unnerving. The fundamental difference between a liberal and a conservative, I think, is the stomach you have for the journey. Your willingness to explore the unnamed; your willingness to expose yourself to the future, to put what you've inherited at risk for sights unknown and places unvisited. Our experience of truth is an experience of that constant mutation.

When Jacques Derrida would come to Philadelphia, I would say to him, "Let me take you on a tour. Let me show you the Liberty Bell or Valley Forge." But he didn't want to go. His way to explore a city was to walk until he got lost and then try to find his way back. In the process, he would discover all kinds of things. Both personally and as a philosopher, he thought that being genuinely lost and seeking something is a crucial part of the journey. We expose ourselves to the unknown and the unforeseeable. Truth is like that.

Why do you focus so much on Derrida and Augustine?

Derrida's heart is very close to Augustine's "restless heart" at the beginning of the *Confessions*. That restlessness is the soul of the search for truth. It is religious. The religion-secular divide does not hold up when you search for truth. We can see this same restless searching in many places, in an artist or in a scientist in front of some great mystery. This link between Augustine, a father of the church, and Derrida, an

atheist and a Jew, bears endless reflection.

Human beings stand on the border between the knowable and the unknowable. The universe was a relatively knowable place in the 19th century; it was just a question of getting enough research done to know it all. But in the 20th century, that concept of the closed containable universe shattered. Now in the 21st century, we have physicists talking about stuff that if a philosopher talked about it they would laugh him out of the room—things like alternate universes where every possibility is actualized, and infinite multiple universes. And it is the math that is leading them to say these things.

What do you think religious people most need to know about truth from this point of view?

I think that postmodern theory is a way out of the modernist concept of truth, which kept everything locked up in boxes: religious and secular, public and private, subject and objective, fact and value. It opens up the space of truth and allows it to assume a more plastic form, and a richer mien, which is comfortable with ambiguity. Faith becomes a form of life, a way of doing the truth.

I make a distinction between faith and belief. Belief is a proposition, a creed formed by a council, leaders agreeing on a belief system. I don't think creeds are unimportant, but I think they rigidify. To be true to faith, you have to keep those things flexible and recognize their contingency. What matters is the form of life, what Heidegger called our mode of being in the world. Belief systems don't capture this. They tend to congeal, contract, and rigidify faith. Faith is a deeper and more fundamental structure.

Are you saying that faith is somehow less specific than belief?

Faith is a form of life and so it also has a specific form. I wouldn't say that faith is more general; I would say it is deeper. It gets expressed in a specific form like liturgy. It is an exercise of the whole person: affective, bodily, performative. It is making the truth.

If we didn't have the specific historical religious traditions, we would be much the poorer for it. Without Christianity, we wouldn't have the memory of Jesus. We wouldn't have the books of the New Testament. You need these concrete, historical traditions that are the bearers of ancient stories and are cut to fit to various

cultures. But I don't want to absolutize them or freeze-frame them. I don't think of one religion being true at the expense of another in a zero-sum game. I am not saying that if you burrow deeply enough under each religious tradition, you will find they are all the same. They are quite different. They are as different as the cultures and the languages out of which they come. There is an irreducible multiplicity.

This is one of the hallmarks of postmodernity: you can't boil everything down to one common thing. There are many ways of doing the truth. There can't be one true religion any more than there can be one true language. The truth of religion is not the truth of a certain body of assertions. It is not about a core set of agreements. That's not relativism, and it is not saying that there is nothing true in religion. It is saying that religious truth is not like the truth of mathematics. It is a different sort that is deeply woven together with a form of life.

In your book you say, "The future is always better." What do you mean?

If you had to single out one of the theological virtues that would apply to postmodernism, it would be hope. Postmodernism has important things to say about faith, like the distinction between faith and belief. And love is important because postmodernism turns on love for the other. But I think that its keynote virtue is hope. It goes back to what we started by talking about: the true journey is exposed to the unforeseeable future. We put ourselves at risk for the future.

The world is transforming itself at such an unprecedented rate that we are terribly anxious about what is ahead. Today we have an acute sense of radical change. The virtue you need in that time is hope. Fear of the future needs to be answered with hope.

The future is unnerving. Things have changed more in the last 100 years than they had in the last 2,000, and the rate of acceleration is increasing. Imagine 1,000 years from now! People will look back on this time as just the beginning of a radical transformation. It is transforming what we mean by human life itself. It is just the beginning of something we can hardly imagine.

Who are your theological or religious heroes?

For me, the most important theologian is Paul Tillich. Operating inside the confines of theology, he nails it for me when he says God is not a being. To the idea that God is the highest being, the proper theological response is atheism. Tillich is

posttheistic: religion is found wherever there are people who probe the depths of being, people who address matters of ultimate concern. You either go with Tillich or against him—I go with him as far as I can.

As a Roman Catholic, I admire Hans Küng, who challenges the self-appointed and self-authorizing power grab of the Roman Catholic Church. Bonhoeffer is important because of the idea of religionless Christianity.

In the classical tradition, my heroes are the mystics: those men and women who give the established church trouble and are constantly harassed and martyred. Marguerite Porete is someone I have been reading more of lately, and I am deeply impressed by her. The very first book I ever wrote was on Meister Eckhart and Heidegger. There is a provocative resonance between the mystical tradition and the radical philosophical postmodern theory.

And there are many activists that are heroes of mine: the Berrigan brothers, Dorothy Day, and Desmond Tutu. People who translate this stuff into political action.

Ever since Mother Teresa published the book on her doubts, she has become a hero of mine. Before that I admired her as a heroic woman who translated her faith into action. But in these letters to her confessor, she doubts everything except her work. Her work is the kingdom of God.

I don't think she abandoned her faith. The content of her religious beliefs began to waver while her confidence in her work never wavered. The name of God is not the name of a being; it is the name of the call.

How do you yourself put this into practice?

I am an inveterate intellectual, so my practice will always be writing, thinking, and communicating. But my own personal community is Catholic. I grew up in a Catholic world, and I am intellectually and culturally formed by the Catholic intellectual tradition. I taught in a Catholic university for almost my entire career. My friends are leftist Catholics, wary of church authoritarianism. I am one of those people who is inside of a community with a certain amount of irony. I am a Catholic writer with an asterisk, although my critics might say, a dis-asterisk. The root word is, of course, *star*, and a dis-aster is when you lose your star. So I may be a Catholic with a dis-asterisk. Either way, I am saddened by the things done within the church and saddened when it is attacked from the outside. But I do love this new pope! He seems to have read the New Testament!