

Jack Caputo's insistent, nonexistent God

According to the radical theologian, "God's essence is in our hands."

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In Review

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IN RADICAL THEOLOGY

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What to Believe?

Twelve Brief Lessons in Radical Theology

By John D. Caputo

When the universe ends in trillions of years, will God still be here?

Jack Caputo says no. A post-theistic Christian, Caputo rejects the idea of an eternal Supreme Being towering over the cosmos. Instead there's "God," in scare quotes—the name of a symbol and an "imaginative personification" of what we love unconditionally. Caputo's God can't live without us.

I don't know if you're feeling turned on or nauseated. In *What to Believe?*, Caputo unspools his radical theology, like it or not. He does so in (relatively) lay terms, weaving in his personal journey as a working-class Italian American kid in Philadelphia who started down the road of Catholic priesthood but became a philosopher and heretical theologian. Now the former altar boy who made a short-lived vow of chastity goes around saying things like, "God does not exist; God insists."

His old teachers would probably shake their heads. But I'd say Caputo's contrarian perspective is critical in an age when the fastest-growing religious affiliation is "none." People are increasingly denying (or shrugging at) God's existence. Yet spiritual seekers abound. Perhaps some of those who can't swallow a metaphysical God would give the metaphorical "God" a chance. Caputo hopes this God will inspire us to heed that nagging call we feel to love others without reservation, show mercy to those in need, and dare to hope for things that seem impossible.

Caputo began philosophizing about religion several decades ago and has since evolved into a theologian. He's a leading figure in postmodern theology, standing alongside thinkers such as Carl Raschke, Mark Lewis Taylor, and Richard Kearney in applying Jacques Derrida's model of deconstruction to religion. Caputo is a pioneer in what he calls "weak theology," which says God has no power to make anyone do anything; the responsibility for improving the world lies with us. A number of younger theologians—Peter Rollins, for example—cite him as an influence. In the small world of intellectuals doing radical theology, Caputo is a giant.

Despite Caputo's intellectual grounding, *What to Believe?* targets a nonacademic audience. The book guides readers through a case for developing a new relationship with religion—first by breaking up with the all-powerful God from On High, then by

flirting with Paul Tillich's panentheistic "being-itself," and finally by settling down with a poetic God that requires us to dig deep to figure out what we really care about. This is a God for us to have and to hold, 'til death do us part and not a moment longer.

Caputo is an enviable writer. His style is charming, often mischievous, and sometimes poignant. He's the uncle who talks too much but whom you like anyway—with a glint in his eye that compels you to smile and sage advice that invites you to listen. *What to Believe?* has so many felicitous turns of phrase that I was annoyed by how much there was to underline. Try these:

I would rather be restlessly alive than resting in peace. I do need my rest, but not that much.

The name of God is the name of . . . a dream for which we are to provide the reality, of a promise on which we are expected to make good.

Prayer is paying attention. . . . Prayer is an ear pressed close to the breast of being, an eye opened wide by the wonder of it all.

God is not an independent agent-doer of mighty deeds who does things for us, like save us from our enemies, clear all the plastic bottles out of the ocean, and put a halt to carbon emissions, just so long as we pray hard enough and give up our favorite treats for Lent. If that is how you think of God, then you should give up God for Lent.

To be sure, Caputo can't help himself from indulging his academic instincts. His frequent invocations of Derrida, Hegel, and Tillich probably won't put him on the bestseller list. Yet his ability to make scholarly ideas generally accessible makes *What to Believe?* good grist for progressive pastors who are too busy to add another piece of dense academic literature to the to-do list. Some of them may be tempted to adopt radicalism if given a nudge, and others may already be closet radicals who don't know how to come out. As Caputo says, some pastors (among many others in contemporary life) "are pretending to believe what they no longer really believe; they are mostly just going through the motions, absent any alternative. Radical theology is the alternative."

Well, it's *an* alternative. It does carry risks for pastors who embrace it, like losing their members, donors, and jobs. Still, there is a point at which the riskiest thing is to maintain the status quo. I mean, look where we are: Churchgoers, especially mainline Protestants, are steadily shrinking in number and rising in age. In this environment, reaching skeptics and seekers might take something a bit more dramatic than the usual progressive sermon that says, "If you read this seemingly conservative Bible story in historical context, you'll see it's actually about social justice."

Caputo contends in *What to Believe?* that "God's essence is in our hands." We decide what matters to us and how to act on it. As the universe hurtles toward oblivion, and humanity much faster still, now is as good a time as any to ask how quickly we're willing to accept the same for a thoughtful, pro-science, adaptive Christianity. If we're going to extend the party for a while, the time may yet come for Caputo's post-theistic God. Excuse me: "God."