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Book Review

The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps

by John D. Caputo

Bloomington/Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013

John Caputo, Thomas J. Watson Professor of Religion Emeritus at Syracuse University writes this remarkable work. As a prominent philosopher of religion and a constructive theologian, Caputo, through this book, greatly contributes to scholarship of religion and of theology by presenting his provocative ideas of God's insistence, drawing on his notion of "perhaps." Though perhaps may sound uncertain, skeptical and too timid for many theologians and preachers who desire to find something certain and definite, it is indeed a core of Caputo's suggestion of how to navigate the wave of postmodernity, which has characteristics of the instability of traditional foundations, the ambiguities of the old absolutes, and the complexity of endless linking systems without closure. Caputo asserts, "to say 'perhaps' is to expose ourselves to a possibility that for all the world seems impossible, that may also turn out to be a disaster." (6) Then, "perhaps" forms a concrete shape in his notion of event that emerges from Khora, the groundless ground of the trace, of the play of differences, of spacing-and-timing. According to him, "the event is God,...what I mean by the event is the surprise, what literally over-takes me, shattering my horizon of expectation." (10) In sum, we can say that perhaps, God, through events (from Khora), points in the direction of the promise, of the possibility of what neither is nor is not (or [im]possible). Employing the term perhaps, we are able to start our new venture toward the understanding of realizing reality/promise beyond the scheme of classical (strong) theology based on Kantian rationalistic thinking.



Then, what does "the insistence of God" mean? He proposes to rethink the notion of God based on God's insistence, not on God's existence. God does not exist or subsist, but God insists, while God's existence is a human responsibility, which may or may not happen. Thus, he says, "[T]he insistence of God requires our existence and so depends on us." (13) While metaphysics makes a distinction between essence and existence, Caputo does it between insistence and existence. Caputo asserts that we are assuming responsibility to "convert what is being called for in the name of God into a deed." (14) In other words, he understands that God and humans are bound up in a mutual dependent and beneficial relationship, since God needs us to be God, and we need God to be human. As an appropriate form to speak of God, perhaps or the insistence of God, Caputo suggests the use of theo-poetics, since he believes that poiesis should replace the logos of theology because the logos nurtures a sort of dualistic thinking that is guided by a separation between God and humans or God and world. On the contrary, a poetics is a creative and descriptive discourse about the chiasm between insistence and existence. Thus, Caputo indicates, "I restrict myself to a poetics and maintain that theology has to clear its head of metaphysics." (18)

Comprised of three parts, this book reveals Caputo's extremely thick understanding of the insistence of God, so I am only able to roughly describe the overall structure and contents in this book review. In Part One, Caputo elaborates what he calls the insistence

and his poetics of the “perhaps” by identifying the chiasm between God’s insistence and our existence, which is a double binding or mutual intertwining of God to us and of us to God. Then he illustrates this chiasm based on Meister Eckhart’s interpretation of the story of the hospitality of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42). In Part Two, Caputo formulates an idea of a “radical theology” as a “theo-poetics,” not “theo-logy,” drawing on a sort of Hegelian theo-poetics against the Kantians. However, he also differentiates himself from Hegel, since Hegel cut off the chance of the event, the possibility of the perhaps, while his God on earth is still too powerful and providential. Caputo clarifies this view in dialogues with two Hegel’s successors, Catherine Malabou, who proposes the possibility of the event in Hegel and Slavoj Žižek, who think that the Spirit is just a spook and who promotes instead a radically negative dialectic spelling the death of God. In sum, he argues that they, like Hegel, fail to restore the prevented event. In Part Three, while returning to Eckhart’s Martha to present a new realism and materialism, Caputo brings about a transition from the chiasmic to the cosmic, from theo-poetics to cosmo-poetics since the former is too humanistic and anthropocentric. In addition to this, there is another transition from being-nothing of nihilism to being-for-nothing, which means life for anything else other than itself or life “without why.” (238, 240) Then, Caputo concludes this book by asking “what, then, of God?...Is it God that insists? Is it life? Is it the worlds?” (262) “Perhaps what is coming is ‘perhaps’ itself. Perhaps, all that will remain of ‘religion’ and ‘God’ will be left clinging to the grace of ‘perhaps.’” (23)

Among many, I will mention three contributions of this book. First, Caputo shows one of the very persuasive trajectories of how to navigate the postmodern wave against modern (or late modern) objectivity, rationalism, universality and closure. As a clearly articulated postmodern approach, the notion of perhaps overcomes the dualistic-rationalistic binary, based on the event in time and space. Event as God beyond our expectation is indeed God’s grace for us, bringing about our understanding of the possibility of impossible from the event in a fresh way. Second, while this notion can raise the consciousness of every believer about the affirmation of life and life’s contingency that are happening as events here and now, regardless of their result as promise or threat/risk, the notion of the insistence of God can make them realize not only their assumed responsibility of converting what is being called for in the name of God into a deed but also the mutual dependence of God and humans. Third, Caputo’s emphasis on poetics over logic (of metanarrative) can be employed as a language not only within the walls of the church but also in the world. As he mentions in this book, the change in language (to poetics) can contribute to the bridging of the widening gap between God and human, human and non-human, and God and the world. As Caputo insists, without relying on metaphysics, the theology of perhaps can bring about the harmony among the entire creation along with God. I highly recommend this book for theologians, ministers, laity or anyone who want to resolve the postmodern impasse experienced in the life.

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