

Beyond Atheism and Theism: John Caputo's Image of God

by Glenn Patrick Ambrose

The question of God's existence is no longer just a professorial debate or something limited to intimate conversations. It has been vigorously debated in the public arena with both sides making their case in books, films, and other forms of social media. The younger generation that we find in our classrooms and churches has grown up in a culture where belief in God can no longer be taken for granted. The act of faith must be made in a world in which the individual is well aware of other viable options, ranging from outright disbelief to different beliefs found both in and outside of religious traditions. In other words, being a person of faith today eventually requires a more intentional decision for most of us, and the faith that is emerging is not untouched by the presence of both atheism and religious pluralism. In what follows, I am more interested in the impact that atheism has on contemporary faith and belief—an impact that may be for the better or for the worse.

The senseless brutality, suffering, and horror of the two World Wars and above all the Holocaust shook the very foundations of Western theism in the twentieth century. While some Christians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries may have been aware of the atheism that arose in some Enlightenment thinkers and other cultured despisers of religion, few people lost faith in God's existence and traditional doctrines about God. The trauma of modern warfare made the existence of God something doubted and debated by a larger portion of the population. For many, God, especially after the *Shoah*, could never be the same and any continued faith in God's existence required a new way of thinking about God and a renewal of some traditional themes that had been neglected in theological discourse. For example, the image of a suffering God that emerged in Jurgen Moltmann and others was a reversal of the traditional view of God. Can God suffer? In the past, it may have been unthinkable to answer yes, but now it was difficult to believe in a God that did not suffer. Renewed emphasis on the Absolute Mystery of God also appeared, and the new appreciation of this fundamental aspect of the doctrine of God was surely shaped by the encounter with the mystery of suffering and radical evil.

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The challenge of a morally inspired atheism shaped by the encounter with the face of evil—either God does not exist or God is not good—impacted not only what was believed about God, but also how people believed in God. The outcome of this wrestling with atheism, or at least serious doubt about God's existence, yielded some positive results. In many ways, modern theism had produced an unbelievable God and even traditional creedal affirmations about God needed to be reexamined in light of new discoveries about the origins and evolution of the uni-

verse and life itself. Both the intellectual and moral objections to the existence of God led to creative explorations of the doctrine of God as well as new images of God, much for the better.¹ As for how people believed, Karl Rahner noted in his day that the very experience of God was shaped by agnosticism.² In other words, in the background of the belief in God there was an awareness that God might not be or at least an uncertainty about the nature of God. Perhaps “I think I believe in God” captures this more humble and honest expression of the birth of faith.

Today a new trauma shapes the debate about God’s existence. The events of 9/11 and subsequent examples of religiously inspired violence, equally horrifying and from all sides, have reinvigorated and emboldened the atheist. Unfortunately, the trauma and debate of the role of religion in our violent history has sometimes had a deleterious impact on the faith of many Christians. This is because much of the public discussion tends to polarize between the two extremes of religious fundamentalism and atheism.³ Both sides have been combative and have fallen into an absolute dogmatism. As a result, both faith and reason suffer “for the worse” in this debate. For example, increasingly I encounter young people who feel like that must now choose between “science” and “religion,” which in the context of this polarized debate, becomes a choice between naturalistic empiricism or an authoritative fideism. The long-standing tradition of the affirmation of both faith and reason, especially in the Catholic tradition, is at risk.

Furthermore, faith threatened by this new challenge of atheism and traumatized by religious violence often becomes more exclusive in nature. This contrasts with the inclusivism that developed in the latter half of the twentieth century was evident in many of the documents of the Second Vatican Council. It was further developed in John Paul II’s striking affirmation of the presence of the Holy Spirit in other peoples, cultures, and religions.⁴ Put otherwise, in the face of religiously inspired conflict, or simply conflict legitimized by religion, the more radical monotheism that supports interreligious dialogue and a more humble expression of faith is increasingly challenged by a nationalistic or tribal henotheism.⁵ In this henotheism, religion binds together a particular culture and/or country with a god. Of course, this only exacerbates the debate with atheism, making atheism understandably all the more appealing to some. From this perspective of a henotheistic faith, the atheist is not only ungodly, but also unpatriotic, and actions of the state or one’s cause become irreproachable.

But what if anything can we learn from this current unproductive debate over God’s existence? Rather than reproaching both sides for certain intellectual errors, like the biblical literalism of the creationist or the naturalistic empiricism of the new atheists, attention should be drawn to the conventional image of God that they both share. Often, the god at the center of the public debate between theists and atheists is no more than a divine monarch that is all-knowing and all-powerful. This is a god whose demise has been noted before, perhaps as early as Paul’s reflection on the weakness of God in the First Letter to the Corinthians. It certainly has been a common target of critique in various

1 See Elizabeth Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006), for an account of some of the more creative and groundbreaking twentieth-century works in theology.

2 Karl Rahner, “Thoughts on the Possibility of Belief Today,” trans. Karl-H. Kruger, in *Theological Investigations 5* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1970), 3–22.

3 See John F. Haught, *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), for an excellent account of the contemporary debate over the existence of God.

4 Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, rev. ed. (Northport, NY: Costello, 1996), 569–74. The universal presence of the Spirit is affirmed on several occasions in Vatican II documents, especially in *Gaudium et Spes*. It is also a common theme found in several of John Paul II’s encyclicals. See Nathan Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery: Liturgy, Worship, Sacraments* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 140–41, 254–55.

5 H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture: With Supplementary Essays* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993). Henotheism was defined by Niebuhr as that social faith that makes a finite society the object of trust and loyalty. In his own time, he saw henotheism as the chief rival of monotheism. It is also, I would argue, a greater threat today than atheism or secularism. See, for example, Michael Jinkins, “The Church’s Real Competition Is Henotheism,” *Call & Response Blog*, <http://www.faithandleadership.com/blog/03-07-2010/michael-jinkins-the-churchs-real-competition-henotheism>.

theologies that developed in the latter half of the twentieth century. But this image has risen again, rather fiercely in the twenty-first century. Truth be told, it probably has always been the popular idea of God despite the maturation of the doctrine of God that is evident in contemporary theology. But today it is reinforced by the public debate about the existence of God and the religiously related trauma that is part of our post-9/11 world.

There is a quest for power behind this image of God as a divine monarch under whom nothing is left to chance. This is not new. It is found in the primordial origins of religion insofar as it was guided by a belief and hope that spiritual and cosmic forces could be harnessed. It is even in the foundational texts of Western monotheism. For example, the Exodus narrative can be read as a power struggle between Yahweh and the Pharaoh. Why does God continue to harden Pharaoh's heart? The rationale provided by the biblical text itself tells us it is in order to provide more opportunities for Yahweh to further demonstrate his superior power.⁶ A great love of power seems to always seep into religious traditions that can eclipse the power of love encountered in their foundational events. Christianity is no exception to this. While we are taught that God is love our doctrines and creedal statements concerning God tend to emphasize power and providence, the key attributes of a monarch.

The Apostles' Creed begins with "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth." We should note that this is an admission of our dependency on something Other for our existence. It is also an honest confession of our limits. This is important to keep in mind because it can help us critically discern the image of God as all-knowing and all-powerful that has been the central target of both intellectual and moral arguments against God's existence. Perhaps God has those attributes, but what can be said with certainty is that we often desperately desire those things, especially in troubling times. If God is a symbol of, as the theologian Paul Tillich said, our Ultimate Concern, of what is in fact of ultimate value to us, then we should pause and think for a while about how our images of God may simply reflect some of our wishes and desires, such as power and control. We need to ask ourselves, as Augustine did centuries ago, what do I love when I love God?⁷ Or what does it really mean to say "I believe in God" in our times?

John Caputo, a contemporary American philosopher, has spent his career studying Continental philosophy. But following in the footsteps of many of his European colleagues, he has made a theological turn and published several books and articles on religion and theology over the past decade. While rooted in the Catholic tradition, his theological reflections are often unconventional and at times, some would say, unorthodox. He has especially challenged us to not only rethink our notion of God, but indeed to reject the metaphysical conception of God that has influenced our theological traditions. We must, he would say, think of God in terms "otherwise than being."⁸ The question of God's existence that is being publicly debated is really wrongheaded from his point of view. Everything *created* exists, but this existence does not apply to God. God is something different and this difference must be recognized as more than simply a difference of degree. For that reason, Caputo has argued provocatively that God does not exist, but rather insists.⁹ Or, to put it another way, God is not a being, not even an Infinite Being, but rather a call.¹⁰

6 See Ex 7:3–5, 9:14–16, 10:1–2, 11:9. The most glaring text that supports this reading can be found in chapter 14. After instructing Moses to set up camp in a vulnerable spot between Migdol and the sea, God reveals that "I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, so that I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD." (Ex 14:4.)

7 Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Book X.7.

8 Caputo, of course, is not alone among contemporary Catholic voices seeking to speak of God apart from the category of being. Chief among them would be Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Text*, second ed., trans. Thomas A Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012) and Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001).

9 His most thorough treatment of this theme debate can be found in John. D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013).

10 John Caputo, "The Insistence and Existence of God: A Response to DeRoo," in *Cross and Khôra: Deconstruction and Christianity in the Work of John D. Caputo*, eds. Marko Zlomislisic and Neal DeRoo (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 320.

This leads Caputo to make a distinction between “strong theology,” which is metaphysical discourse about God understood as an all-knowing and all-powerful Being, and “weak theology.”¹¹ He draws inspiration for his weak theology from St. Paul’s notion of the “weakness of God.” For Paul, God’s power is so radically different than what we think of as power, and above all what we often desire, that it would best for us to think of God’s power in terms of weakness. His interpretation of God’s weakness may go beyond what Paul could imagine in the first century, but Paul could not have anticipated the post-Enlightenment, post-Darwinian and Postmodern world we live in today. Caputo steps back from confessional theology and all its doctrines about a strong God and returns to the Augustinian question—what do we love when we love God? From there, inspired by his good friend Jacques Derrida, he ponders the power and call of the name of God. He asks us to consider “what we are dreaming of or hoping for or desiring when we call upon the name of God, what summons us or calls upon us in this name, what demands are made upon us when we are visited by the name of God.”¹²

In this phenomenological approach to theology, God remains an Absolute Mystery, so much so for Caputo that faith in the reality of God is always haunted by a “perhaps not.” His fullest account of his theology to date, *The Insistence of God*, is even given the subtitle *A Theology of Perhaps*. This goes beyond Rahner’s observation concerning agnosticism and the birth of faith in his own time. Here the knowing that you do not know is a constant companion of the act of faith. The question as to whether or not Caputo really believes in God naturally arises in many theists because his conception of God is so at odds with conventional wisdom. But the atheist in the contemporary debate about God’s existence would be mistaken to think Caputo is on their side. He asserts that no one is authorized to say that God exists, nor that God does not exist. By this he means, belief in God is necessarily an act of faith and can never be a necessary consent to demonstrable knowledge, that is to say, a proven fact. Of course, Thomas Aquinas recognized this with equal clarity centuries ago. That God can be only an object of faith is not a new idea. The problem as noted above is that faith can quickly turn into belief in a particular image of God, or particular recognized authority on God (e.g., the Bible, the Pope). When this happens faith gets intellectualized and is reduced to believing this or that doctrine—and indeed often very particular interpretations of a doctrine. In other words, faith becomes less a trust in what the name of God symbolizes and more an intellectual assent to propositions about God that different confessions develop. Such propositions about God, even if inspired by a revelatory event, are nevertheless human interpretations conditioned by the accident of birth.

Caputo is not out to develop a new confessional theology with a distinct doctrine of God. He is interested in a radical theology that can rehabilitate confessional theology, especially his own Roman Catholic tradition. He calls his radical theology a theology of the Event and in it God cannot be thought of in terms of a noun, whether a being, a thing, or a divine person. God is more like a verb, that is, God happens anywhere and anytime, usually without notice and in ways not anticipated. While there is some novelty in his thought, it is not unprecedented in Western monotheism. Paul Tillich, for example, emphasized the importance of understanding God as a verb, and Caputo’s theology of the Event has certain kinship with the biblical theology of the Word, contemporary pneumatology, and sacramental theology.

If Caputo appears faithless to many today it may be because confessional theology has lost its roots in its foundational events for them. Faith has become belief in their provincial god (henotheism) and morality has been reduced to a “to do” and “not to do” list (mostly a not to do list). Caputo wants to restore faith in the Event and in the

11 Caputo, 319. A fuller account of “weak theology” can be found in John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

12 Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 320.

Promise that the name of God holds.¹³ But given the conventional wisdom about God, we might say that Caputo, like his friend Derrida, rightly passes for an atheist. However, this is an “atheism” that questions and challenges both the theist and atheist in the contemporary debate. Caputo can be counted among a new group of thinkers that have learned from and moved beyond this unproductive debate. They are what Richard Kearney calls anatheists.¹⁴ Perhaps enjoying the fruits of Meister Eckhart’s prayer to rid me of God, they represent a kind of theological thinking that seeks to understand God after God.¹⁵ Touched by the challenge of atheism and the insights of a postmodern age, they have recognized the foolishness of so many of our dogmatic certainties and presumptions in science and religion that often simply defend our turf, usually with a strong dose of sexism, racism, nationalism, and cultural chauvinism. They are opening up new horizons that invite us to forge new meanings about God and ourselves.

It is important to include ourselves in this discussion. For those confessions that share the creation story in Genesis that speaks of human beings as made in the image of God, theology and anthropology are mutually implicated. For the Christian confession, the belief in the incarnation of God takes this even farther: theology is anthropology, as Rahner noted. Trust that human beings are the *imago Dei* (image of God) is a central element of the Christian faith. Because Caputo proposes a very different way of thinking about God, it stands to reason that this would yield a different view of that creature said to be made in the image of God. And it does. For Caputo, the God–human relationship is not one between an infinite agent and a finite agent. In other words, it is not the relationship between a perfect being and a less than perfect being that generates the theodicy problem and is at the heart of moral objections against the existence of God that we find in both the old and the new atheists. True to his phenomenological method, the relationship between God and human beings is to be understood in terms of an event—and more specifically, an event of a call and a response. Caputo writes:

I am contending that the name of God gives words to an address, that the event that stirs within this name is the event of a call, a call that may occur under other names but occurs irreducibly under the name of God. This call overtakes us, calls upon us, calls up what is best in us, and calls for a response, while we ourselves are the ones who have been called upon, made responsible, called to hear, called to act, asked to heed the call, which means both to hear and to act.¹⁶

God speaks insistently and we hear and respond (or not). In one way, this call is weak. It cannot on its own accord part the Red Sea or steer an asteroid away from earth. Its impact is really at the mercy of our bodies! Will the call be heeded and acted upon? We can only hope and pray. In another way, however, this call is unstoppable. While it is a call that can be ignored, it will not be silenced. Furthermore, this call may be weak, but one made strong when it is heeded. Those who heed this call are made strong; strong enough to face evil, to resist the lust for greed and power, and ultimately, strong enough to face the death that may result from answering the call. In the end who is more powerful—Jesus, that peasant from Nazareth, or Pontius Pilate, that vicar of another declared “son of God” like Pharaoh? Disciples of the crucified God must ponder the call and from whom they hear this call. Who and what elicits our Ultimate Concern? Clearly, for Jesus, his Ultimate Concern—not set apart from his love of his Father—was for the hungry, the naked, the sick, and the marginalized. It was not for those who elicit imitation and receive so much of our attention today: the powerful, the wealthy, and the famous.

13 Caputo is especially interested in those Events focused around a poor peasant who created such a stir in Jerusalem over 2000 years ago. See, for example, John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernism for the Church* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

14 Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

15 Caputo specifically cites Eckhart’s prayers as one of his guiding inspirations. Caputo, *Insistence of God*, 43. Eckhart’s prayer was “Therefore let us pray to God that we may be free of God.” “*Beati Pauperes Spiritu*,” in *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. and ed. Maurice O’C Walshe (New York: Crossroad, 209), 422.

16 Caputo, “Insistence and Existence,” 320.

In the light of this Event of the call and response, we are challenged to rethink the question of the existence of and nature of both God and ourselves. Caputo writes:

The question of the existence of God for me is the question of the extent to which we are able to make God exist in the world, to make God actual in the world, to make the world a place that has been touched by God, touched by the event that stirs within the name of God. The name of God is a summons to make God live in the world. The “death of God” for me would mean that we have entirely failed in this regard, that every trace of God has been erased from the world.¹⁷

The Bible tells us that in the beginning God created a world. This was a risky act, but also a most promising adventure. The risk is in no way minimalized by Caputo. His world is indeed a frightening and precarious place. But does not that just make him a realist given our knowledge of cosmology and the history of life on planet Earth? It also reveals another thing that both sides of the debate over God’s existence commonly share—namely, a fear of uncertainty and ambiguity. The trouble that some Christians have with evolution has less to do with a literal reading of scripture than it does with a rejection of the role chance can play in existence. The very antithesis of a “theology of perhaps” religious worldview that rejects evolution is as deterministic as the scientific belief in a theory of everything grounded in naturalistic empiricism. Caputo would surely tell Albert Einstein that God does roll dice and point out that the new atheists’ faith in science alone is more than just naïve¹⁸. Hasn’t science as much as religion brought as much pain and suffering into the world as it has contributed toward a better and fuller life? Both religion and science have a lot of blood on their hands!

Still, life goes on, even after at least seven major extinction events on our planet. But there is no guarantee that any one species will carry on for any significant amount of time on the cosmic scale. Given the specter of climate change, I sometimes fear that the human species has already squandered its intelligence and deeper awareness for immediate and selfish short-term gain. In light of this reality, the act of faith is truly a prayer, sometimes a lament full of tears, but also hopeful that something may come.¹⁹ A faithful prayer reveals a trust and hope that God does not just create, but draws goodness from being again and again. But in order to make good on this promise, God drew forth a creature in God’s own image from the dust of the stars, not just to share in the goodness of creation, but to maintain it and add to it. The *imago Dei* commissioned to be God’s eyes, ears, and hands is the place of God’s existence (or not) in creation, which is why Caputo says, “I do not say that God is but that God calls. Existence is our responsibility, which is also to say that it is by responding that God exists.”²⁰

So here we are, alive in a dynamic, evolving, and sometimes scary universe. God anything can happen and you can regard that as a prayer. Christians should have faith in the promise that there is more goodness to come and that evil will never have the last word. To this end, perhaps especially when facing suffering and evil, Christians pray “for thy kingdom to come,” which is in part recognition that at any moment this is not it. It is still coming and more work always needs to be done. In the Christian confession, Jesus is the inspiration and the guide. It is believed that he heard and responded to the call with great clarity in his time. He therefore not only announced its coming but also embodied its arrival in his life and in the community he gathered. Back then he proclaimed that God’s reign was at hand, but it is always at hand—our hands. It is the insistence that makes existence a dynamic and evolving reality. Ultimately, the creature made in the image of God is called upon to be the place and face of the existence of God. Caputo leaves us with this challenge:

17 Caputo, “Insistence and Existence,” 322.

18 Caputo, *Insistence of God*, 261.

19 Caputo, *Insistence of God*, 12. Also, for insight into Caputo sense of prayer and tears, see John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997)

20 Caputo, “Insistence and Existence,” 322.

The kingdom of God is what we will have made of it, what it will have made of us, [and] what it will have become among us. The event happens, is supposed to be happening already, in us. The event is supposed to be dwelling among us, in the flesh, in our flesh.²¹

Although many may question the orthodoxy of John Caputo's theology of perhaps, and some may rightly doubt that he even believes in their God, I believe his pursuit reveals a deep faith in the event. In a very profound way this Catholic philosopher, without the language of metaphysics, may have found a new way to uphold a sacramental worldview and a Eucharistic theology that Augustine reminds is as much about the transformation of the bread and wine into the body of Christ as it is about the transformation of the human community into the same body. Or as Caputo puts it: "The divine life is incarnated in us, and God's weakness requires that we do all the heavy lifting."²² God insists, and this call demands a response so that God's empowering power maybe emptied into the world again and again.

While paradigm changes like the one Caputo is proposing can be exciting, they are also admittedly a little unnerving. But I have come to welcome much of the postmodern age, especially the way it has made so many of our absolutes obsolete. Of course, how we respond is of utmost importance and there is no guarantee that the human community will become more welcome and affirming of difference, as almost daily tragic events reveal. But Caputo's deconstruction of the debate about God's existence helps pave the way for a new kind of theological thinking that promises to be a more responsible way to seek and respond to the call. It creates an opportunity to gain fresh new insights and, yes, perhaps even new religions, but it also, more importantly, can serve to rehabilitate some of the world's most venerable religious traditions, like Roman Catholicism, in way that speaks to many in the generation growing up today.

21 Caputo, "Insistence and Existence," 326.

22 Caputo, *Insistence of God*, 13.