

## **Postmodern Kataphaticism: A Constructive Proposal**

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In this essay, I will offer the idea of *postmodern kataphaticism* as a constructive proposal for contemporary continental philosophy of religion. As I see it, this idea allows for what is right about the general continental resistance to onto-theology while allowing for more hospitality within the continental philosophical literature to be shown to determinate religious truth-claims, practices, and historical communities. Additionally, postmodern kataphaticism can stand as something of a corrective to the apophatic excess (or what I will term “an apophatic orthodoxy”) that is sometimes found in continental philosophy of religion, as well as the kataphatic excess that is sometimes found in analytic philosophy of religion. Accordingly, postmodern kataphaticism might serve as a middle-ground that can invite philosophers from both traditions to productive engagement.

Crucially, I do not think that apophaticism is fundamentally misguided; quite the contrary. It is in the name of what I take to be right about the apophatic tendencies in continental philosophy that I offer the idea of postmodern kataphaticism. In particular, I will suggest that the *postmodern* component allows for important apophatic insight to be cashed out at the level of epistemic humility and dialogical hospitality. At the same time, the *kataphatic* component allows that such humility and hospitality might be located *within* determinate religious traditions in which religious existence is often lived. Postmodern kataphaticism operates in light of the realization that one can be humble about something only if one affirms something to be true. Similarly, one can invite others to productive dialogue only if one’s view is something determinate enough to allow for such critical engagement by others.

### **On Possible Excess**

In *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*, an important text that is largely responsible for the contemporary prominence of continental philosophy of religion, John D. Caputo discusses what he takes to be the central structures of religion and then claims:

Deconstruction regularly, rhythmically repeats this religiousness, *sans* the concrete, historical religions; it repeats nondogmatically the religious structure of experience, the category of the religious. . . . it repeats the movements of faith, of expecting what we cannot know but only believe—*je ne sais pas, il faut croire*—of the blindness of faith *sans savoir, sans avoir, sans voir* in the impossible, but without the dogmas of the positive religious faiths.<sup>1</sup>

Caputo successfully challenges assumptions that deconstruction is anti-religious and fundamentally atheistic in its outlook and methodology. Indeed, claims Caputo, deconstruction is ultimately a philosophical trajectory “stirring with religious passion”<sup>2</sup> and displaying a fundamentally “religious aspiration.”<sup>3</sup> Rather than locating Derrida as hostile to faith, Caputo sees him as one of the faithful, as it were, “whether or not [he] rightly passes for an atheist.”<sup>4</sup> In this way, Caputo interrupts the idea that the split between atheism and theism is delineated by clear and stable epistemic criteria.<sup>5</sup> Faith, for Caputo and Derrida, amounts to a hope, a risk, and an invitation—to the Other, to the future, and to the impossible. Caputo, thus, argues that deconstruction yields a “generalized apophatics” according to which “negative theology is everybody’s business, that it has a general translatability, that we cannot trust any discourse that is not contaminated by negative theology.”<sup>6</sup>

Even if one is generally sympathetic to Caputo’s account of a Derridean “religion without religion,” especially when read as a critique of the arrogance that can accompany both theological and philosophical triumphalism, it is unclear that one has to go as far in the apophatic direction as do Caputo and Derrida in order to resist such triumphalist tendencies. Many analytic philosophers who side decidedly in the kataphatic direction countenance mystery while rejecting triumphalism. Indeed, Alvin Plantinga admits that “a danger we [analytic, Christian philosophers] now face, perhaps is triumphalism.”<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in his defense of the project of “analytic theology,” Michael C. Rea notes that “mystery is inevitable, and God is clearly much more than a mere explanatory posit.”<sup>8</sup> Rea goes on to say that “one might easily practice analytic theology while fully acknowledging that there are divine mysteries far beyond our ken.”<sup>9</sup> We might ask, then, whether “religion

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<sup>1</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), xxi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xx.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

<sup>5</sup> One might also look at Gianni Vattimo’s compelling argument that the death of God problematizes atheism as much as it does theism. See Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans., Luca D’Isanto and David Webb (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D’Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 28; see also 32, 41, 46, 55.

<sup>7</sup> Alvin Plantinga, “Response to Nick Wolterstorff,” *Faith and Philosophy* 28, no.3 (July 2011): 267-68.

<sup>8</sup> Michael C. Rea, “Introduction,” in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, eds. Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 9.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

without religion” is the only option for continental philosophers who would desire to avoid what we might call the “kataphatic excesses” that can sometimes be found in historical religious communities that claim to have unique access to divine revelation, and also in the contemporary philosophical literature that forgets the linguistic, historical, embodied, and cultural contexts in which God-talk occurs. If apophatic excess amounts to denying the possibility of having any knowledge of God, kataphatic excess amounts to affirming that such knowledge is easily achieved and known to be had.

As a possible example of such kataphatic excess, consider that even though Rea admits of the mysteries that will always “remain” about God, he also articulates “analytic ambitions” that would allow us to “arrive at *clear* knowledge of God,”<sup>10</sup> and which would “provid[e] a true explanatory theory”<sup>11</sup> such that (following Louis Berkhof) we might “endeavor to see the truth as God sees it.”<sup>12</sup> For those who are persuaded by the arguments of hermeneutic phenomenology, the idea that one could have “clear” knowledge of God and get beyond the perspectival limitations of embodied, historical existence in order to “see the truth as God sees it,” is likely to be viewed as at least problematic, if not straightaway naïve. Importantly, however, it is possible to read Rea as saying that the analytic ambition *is merely to aspire to* such clear knowledge and divine sight. Indeed, ambitions are goals that are not yet realized; and in this case, they may not be realizable. Hence, Rea’s account need not be seen as giving in to kataphatic excess, but it certainly illustrates what such excess might entail. Other thinkers, such as Richard Swinburne and William Lane Craig, say, might also be offered as examples of how analytic discourse sometimes can indicate *more than merely an aspiration* to see things as God sees them.

It is not without reason, then, that one might turn to the generalized apophatics that Caputo claims to be on display in Derridean religion without religion as a way of avoiding what might be seen as hermeneutic overstatement on the part of some analytic philosophy/theology. However, again, is religion without religion the only place to go to avoid such problems? Is it possible to appropriate the hermeneutic awareness of Derrida and Caputo *and also* the concern for religious truth expressed by Rea and Plantinga? Can one avoid the seemingly overly indeterminate posture of the one approach *and also* the seemingly overly determinate stance of the other approach? If we take hermeneutic necessity and epistemic humility to be key aspects of postmodernism, and the claim that there are truths about the nature and existence of God (and those truths might even be knowable) to be key aspects of kataphaticism (regardless of the tradition in which those truths are expressed), then we might ask: Is something like a *postmodern kataphaticism* possible?

Elsewhere, I have argued for a “religion *with* religion,”<sup>13</sup> which would maintain the deconstructive insights of Derrida and Caputo while also allowing

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 8. The Berkhof quote is from *Systematic Theology: New Combined Edition* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 15.

<sup>13</sup> See J. Aaron Simmons and Stephen Minister, eds., *Reexamining Deconstruction and Determinate Religion: Toward a Religion with Religion* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2012).

significant room for determinate religious belief and practice. Religion *with* religion is meant to be a postmodern alternative that resists both the possible apophatic excess of deconstruction and the kataphatic excess of those who might quickly reject deconstruction as doing nothing more than, as one critic has claimed, “contribut[ing] to the dehumanizing nihilism of contemporary culture.”<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, this essay is meant to be a further move in the general direction of religion *with* religion.<sup>15</sup>

### The Varieties of Apophatic Orthodoxy

My guiding thesis is that the important apophatic trajectory in some of postmodern/continental/deconstructive philosophy of religion has seemed to lead to its own problematic dogmatism. Specifically, in the crucial attempt to overcome onto-theology, for both philosophical and theological reasons,<sup>16</sup> some of continental philosophy of religion has seemingly given rise to what I will term an *apophatic orthodoxy*. As I see it, apophatic orthodoxy contains three aspects that are variously on display in the works of some continental philosophers. I will label these three aspects as *inquirational*, *epistemic*, and *ontological*. The inquirational aspect amounts to the fact that quite a bit of continental philosophy of religion has, generally, seemed to insist that there is only one approach to the truth-claims, religious practices, and determinate authority structures of religious communities such that postmodern faith occurs “without seeing, without having, and without knowing.”<sup>17</sup>

The epistemic aspect shows up in that some philosophers seem to indicate that the only way legitimately to understand religion is by placing it beyond a philosophical discourse about truth, such that *poetics* replaces *propositions*. Yet, even if one wants to resist a reduction of religious life to propositional expression, philosophers should be wary of even appearing to abandon a concern for truth. Kierkegaard might be right that faith is far more than a matter of weak belief, but faith surely involves belief to some extent, otherwise there would be no risk.<sup>18</sup> If one has faith, but not faith *in* something or someone, then it is not clear that holding such faith would make much of a difference one way or another. Though certainly not a sufficient condition of faithful existence, it might be a necessary condition that we

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<sup>14</sup> R.R. Reno, “Theology’s Continental Captivity,” *First Things* (April 2006).

<sup>15</sup> Kevin W. Hector might be read as proposing a similar sort of idea, though from a theological direction rather than a philosophical one, see *Theology without Metaphysics: God, Language, and the Spirit of Reconciliation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> See Martin Heidegger, “The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics,” in *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 42-74. For an extended discussion of Heidegger’s account of onto-theology, see Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001); and J. Aaron Simmons and Bruce Ellis Benson, *The New Phenomenology: A Philosophical Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), chapter 3.

<sup>17</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, xxi, 103.

<sup>18</sup> Caputo distinguishes between “faith” (*foi*) and “belief” (*croiance*) as two different orders of discourse, but it is difficult to see how a second-order faith would not involve, to some degree, first-order beliefs. See, John D. Caputo, “On Not Settling for an Abridged Version of Postmodernism,” in Simmons and Minister, eds., *Reexamining Deconstruction and Determinate Religion*, 271-353.

should strive to believe things that are true about God rather than things that are false about God. Nothing is gained when some continental philosophers act as if postmodernism moves beyond truth altogether; and quite a bit is lost at the level of being able to give good arguments in favor of postmodernism itself.

The inquirational and epistemic aspects tend to hang together. This connection can be illustrated by drawing on Johannes Climacus's famous statement that "existence itself is a system—for God, but it cannot be a system for any existing spirit."<sup>19</sup> Many continental philosophers of religion seem to have skipped over the first part of the claim and only read the second part. Even if we follow Merold Westphal and restate Climacus's assertion as the hermeneutically more restrained, "*may very well be*" a system for God,<sup>20</sup> rather than the stronger claim that it "*is*" that way for God, it is important to realize that for many postmodern philosophers, *since existence appears not to be a system for us, it simply is not a system at all*. Yet, as Westphal rightly points out, such a move is an obvious *nonsequitur*. Just because it is unlikely that an existing individual can occupy the "God's eye view," that does not mean that God does not occupy such a view. While there *are* a host of reasons for worrying that an overly determinate religious discourse would slide back into onto-theology and epistemic arrogance, whereby theology is made to answer to philosophical categories assumed to be objectively stable, there are *not* good reasons to think that *all* determinate religious discourse is necessarily *overly* determinate in such ways.

I think that we can see hints of the inquirational and epistemic aspects of apophatic orthodoxy when Caputo claims that deconstruction maintains "messianic promise and messianic expectation," but without "the concrete messianisms of the positive religions that wage endless war and spill the blood of the others, and that, anointing themselves God's chosen people, are consummately dangerous to everyone else who is not so chosen."<sup>21</sup> Here, Caputo appears to lump all determinate religious communities together and claims that any one is just as good, or as bad, as any other, which comes close to saying that the truth-claims of any particular tradition can be replaced with the truth-claims of any other. For Caputo, the problem seems to be that these "concrete messianisms" assume that they really do know truth and such an assumed knowledge leads to violence.<sup>22</sup> In order to overcome what he takes to be the necessarily violent tendencies of determinate religious messianisms, Caputo offers three theses that he thinks can be drawn from a "patient reading of a certain Jewish Augustine":

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<sup>19</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 118.

<sup>20</sup> Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology*, 190, emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, xxi.

<sup>22</sup> For good engagements with Caputo on the idea of determinate religion and violence, see the essays in James H. Olthuis, ed., *Religion with/ out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

- (1) *I do not know who I am or whether I believe in God.*
- (2) *I do not know whether what I believe in is God or not.*
- (3) *I do not know what I love when I love my God.*<sup>23</sup>

While a denial of religious knowledge —notice that all three claims begin with the claim “I do not know”—is perhaps a better alternative than the violent xenophobia Caputo takes to be on display in “the concrete messianisms of the positive religions,” is it really the case that the only two alternatives are either triumphalist theological certainty, on the one hand, or a complete lack of religious knowledge, on the other hand? Notice that such a dichotomy assumes absolutism in both directions: one either *absolutely does not* know or one *absolutely does* know. What about a middle-ground in which knowledge might indeed be possible, even granting that knowledge that one has such knowledge might remain unlikely? Could there be a philosophical perspective that would allow for positive claims about God while realizing that such claims are offered within contexts that demand hermeneutic awareness and critical attention? Why not advocate epistemic humility and discursive hospitality regarding claims both absolutely to know and also absolutely not to know? I think that such questions are worth asking by all philosophers of religion, regardless of upon which particular philosophical or theological tradition they might draw.<sup>24</sup>

Let’s turn now to the ontological aspect of apophatic orthodoxy. This aspect tends to follow from the inquirational and epistemic aspects insofar as it gets assumed that since one can’t know anything about God, God would thus be beyond all categories that would enable knowledge—in particular, the category of being. Many continental thinkers emphasize the “divine excess”<sup>25</sup> that outstrips human abilities to know, to express, and to understand. For example, consider Emmanuel Levinas’s “note” at the beginning of *Otherwise than Being* in which Levinas claims that the primary goal of his book is to “hear a God not contaminated by Being.”<sup>26</sup> Consider also Levinas’s suggestion in *God, Death, and Time* that God is best thought of as “transcendent to the point of absence.”<sup>27</sup> Importantly, such an apophatic conception of God might be true—viz., God *might not be* a being. The problem, however, is not that a particular conception of God is presented, but that a particular conception can sometimes get assumed without argument. Such assumptions are bad for philosophy because they make it difficult to appreciate the important contributions that continental philosophy’s apophatic tendencies offer to philosophy

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<sup>23</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 331-32.

<sup>24</sup> John Sanders and I have argued this point at length in “A Goldilocks God? Open Theism as a Feurbachian Alternative,” *Element* (forthcoming).

<sup>25</sup> See Merold Westphal “Divine Excess: The God Who Comes After,” in *The Religious*, ed. John D. Caputo (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 258-76.

<sup>26</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1997), xlviii.

<sup>27</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 219-24. Similarly, Jean-Luc Marion writes an entire book that attempts to think “God without being,” but, as I will discuss later, Marion explicitly notes that this does not mean that God is not a being (*God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991).

of religion. For example, must a generalized apophatics get cashed out as a rejection of what Caputo elsewhere terms “strong theology”?<sup>28</sup> Why can’t the “contamination of negative theology” be something that invites merely epistemic humility rather than metaphysical exclusion? Another way of saying this is that the ontological aspect of apophatic orthodoxy occurs when one moves, *without argument*, from what we might term a version of *epistemic* antirealism (i.e., that the task of hermeneutics always attends to any knowledge claim—in other words, it is unlikely that we can know that we have religious knowledge) to a version of *metaphysical* antirealism (i.e., that since God is absolutely beyond being, there really is no fact of the matter such that religious truth-claims could be legitimately affirmed). In Caputo’s work, what I am terming metaphysical antirealism is presented as a “hyper-realism” according to which it is problematic even to ask:

Is it *really* God who calls, or is it some hidden power in my own mind? Is it *really* the call of conscience, of some Socratic daimon, or of a Cosmic Spirit? How am I to say? Who has authorized me to preside over that debate, to decide that undecidable? I do not know the name or address of this address. To pursue that question is to treat the call like a strong force with a definite place on the plane of being or power, not a weak one that solicits me from afar.<sup>29</sup>

If Caputo’s point is simply that we always face epistemic obstacles and should display a robust humility such that these very questions might continue to be questions for us, even within our religious decisions, then “hyper-realism” is a way of expressing a sensible epistemic anti-realist view of human inquiry into religious matters. However, Caputo appears to go beyond such an epistemic interpretation when he indicates that even asking such questions mistakenly conceives of “the call” from the outset. Here I think that we can see the traces of a determinate metaphysical anti-realism such that “the call” is not something that is located “on the plane of being.” At fear of asking the sort of questions that Caputo wants to put off the table, we might wonder how Caputo *knows* that the call merely “solicits from afar” rather than issuing from an intimate and personal relation with an incarnate God, say?

Consider again Caputo’s claim “that we cannot trust any discourse that is not contaminated by negative theology.” Although Caputo seems to suggest that we *can* trust a discourse that is contaminated by apophatics, the epistemic anti-realism to which Caputo is committed would not immediately prescribe the content of such a contaminated discourse—i.e., it would need to remain, at least *initially*, metaphysically uncommitted. It is entirely plausible that theistic, atheistic, nontheistic, etc., accounts might all qualify if they are accounts held with requisite hermeneutic sensitivity, contextual appreciation, historicist sensibility, and perspectival understanding required of postmodern approaches to any topic, claim,

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<sup>28</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

practice, and experience. As Westphal might say, we are likely restricted to lower-case t “truth,” but that doesn’t mean that “the truth is that there is *not* Truth.” Indeed, it might be that “the truth is that there *is* Truth.” This would be the difference between the equally perspectival accounts of Kierkegaard on the one hand, and Nietzsche on the other hand. Deciding one way or another would always involve risk and, as Derrida would say, amount to a real decision, but only if we admit that there is a real difference between the two alternatives—i.e., that truth matters and that knowledge of such truth *might* even be possible (contra the epistemic aspect of apophatic orthodoxy) and, hence, a variety of models of God *might* be true (contra the ontological aspect of apophatic orthodoxy). Accordingly, postmodern philosophy of religion should not and, indeed, cannot start from a rejection of particular theological accounts, because that would be to assume the very thing it fundamentally challenges—a systematic and final view that is available for existing individuals. Rather, such philosophy can, *from the outset*, only critique particular *ways of relating to* such accounts: as held and affirmed with certainty.

Problems arise when, having moved from epistemic antirealism to metaphysical antirealism, one then assumes that only some metaphysical accounts, namely those which stress the ineffability, unknowability, and absolute excessiveness of God, are viable while others, namely those which stress the intimacy, personality, proximity, relationality, and historical incarnation of God, are not. That is not to say that one might not be able then to go on to provide good reasons for moving in one direction as opposed to another. Again, I think there is much that is right about apophaticism—all kataphatic accounts *do* need the contamination that Caputo advocates—but arguments are required to justify the specific model of God that is then affirmed. Just being a postmodernist, a deconstructionist, or a continental philosopher is not sufficient for being able to take a particular model of God (as not “on the plane of being,” say) for granted. When we realize the problems with the inquirational and epistemic aspects of apophatic orthodoxy, we are able to see the variety of theological options that might be on the postmodern table.

Now, we must not confuse the historical or the philosophical apophatic tendencies in continental philosophy of religion with the *practice* of apophatic theology. Importantly, then, I am not claiming that the apophatic orthodoxy sometimes on display in continental philosophy is an indication of a “theological turn,” as Dominique Janicaud might claim. As I have indicated, the question is whether, in light of Derrida and Caputo, in particular, but also in light of such thinkers as Levinas, Deleuze, Vattimo, and Badiou, among others, it has become acceptable simply to *assume* that God is *not* a being, that we *cannot* have any knowledge of God, and that the *only* way to speak about “God” is to do so in a poetic discourse that resists propositional expression such that getting things right about God is no longer the task. Again, while it very well might be the case that God is not a being (or that there is no God), that even if there is a God, we cannot know anything about the divine, and that poetic (or prophetic) discourse appreciates dimensions of religious life that propositional expression might miss, all of these

claims require good argumentative support that can be weighed and considered by one's dialogue partners.<sup>30</sup>

### Postmodern Kataphaticism

In line with the broader framework of a “religion with religion,” I contend that we need something like a *postmodern kataphaticism* as a constructive meta-philosophical alternative to the apophatic orthodoxy that appears to be operative within some of contemporary continental philosophy of religion. Let me make clear that the idea of postmodern kataphaticism is not new, though the phrase might be. I am drawing heavily on Westphal and other postmodern philosophers of religion such as Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Richard Kearney, Kevin Hart, James K.A. Smith, B. Keith Putt, and Bruce Ellis Benson, among others, who all warn against the dangers of self-protective theological insularity where claims to certainty insulate one from critique. These thinkers all rightly recognize that truth matters in one's faith-life and religious knowledge might be possible (contra the inquirational and epistemic aspects). Moreover, they realize the danger of assuming that only one model of God is in play when there are numerous determinate theological traditions worth taking seriously (contra the ontological aspect). So, although postmodern kataphaticism would certainly stress the importance of admitting epistemic limitation and hermeneutic necessity, while also resisting any reduction of religious existence to a matter of propositional assent, it would, nonetheless, still maintain the importance of *trying* to hold true beliefs about the nature and existence of God.<sup>31</sup> On the one hand, one need not think that we will “arrive at *clear* knowledge of God” to think that we might still be able to have knowledge of God. On the other hand, one need not think that a model of God as “beyond being” is the *only* viable option in order to think that such a model is perhaps still the *best* of the options.

Postmodern kataphaticism invites vigorous debates about various models of God by admitting that a variety of models are legitimate alternatives *within* continental philosophy, on the one hand, and also *between* continental and non-continental philosophers of religion, on the other hand. It is because I think that continental philosophy of religion gets so much right about God, faith, and religious life that I contend we need to defend the possibility of more than merely “generalized apophatics,” but even the possibility of quite a bit of specific kataphatics—even if such kataphatics would remain perspectival, risky, and revisable.

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<sup>30</sup> Some continental philosophers do offer good arguments in favor of such gestures. For example, see Westphal's defense of what he sees as the importance of “prophetic philosophy of religion” (“Prolegomena To Any Future Philosophy of Religion Which Will Be Able To Come Forth As Prophecy,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 4 (1973): 129-50). For more on Westphal's important postmodern kataphatic philosophy of religion, see B. Keith Putt, ed., *Gazing Through a Prism Darkly: Reflections on Merold Westphal's Hermeneutical Epistemology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009). See also, Merold Westphal, ed., *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Philosophy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> How one understands Rea's “analytic ambitions” would matter a great deal here regarding whether his account would be legitimately *postmodern* enough for defenders of postmodern kataphaticism.

Importantly, then, postmodern kataphaticism ought not to be exclusively understood as a movement within “continental” philosophy of religion. Many philosophers of religion working more in “analytic,” or “pragmatic,” modes are also likely to be sympathetic with the general shape of my proposal here. From the generally analytic tradition, I am thinking of scholars such as William Hasker, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Dean Zimmerman, and C. Stephen Evans, who all make room for determinate religious truth-claims while avoiding propositional reductionism.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, from a generally pragmatic perspective, one might variously look to Cornel West’s account of “Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity,”<sup>33</sup> Hilary Putnam’s engagement with Jewish philosophy,<sup>34</sup> and Jeffrey Stout’s influential considerations of religious belief within democratic societies.<sup>35</sup> While West, Putnam, and Stout have widely divergent individual religious identities, they all take seriously what I am terming the “kataphatic” dimensions of religious belief and existence such that it matters that we try our best to get things right about God so far as is possible for us “existing individuals,” as Climacus says. However, they also appreciate the hermeneutic turn within postmodern philosophy more broadly as something that should give us pause about too quickly thinking that we are able to escape our particular perspectives in order to know things *as God knows them*, as it were. For example, Putnam admits that

like Dewey, I do not believe in an afterlife, or in God as a supernatural helper who intervenes in the course of our lives to rescue us from disasters. . . . But God is not an ideal of the same kind as Equality or Justice. The traditional believer—and this is something I share with the traditional believer, even if I don’t share his or her belief in an afterlife, or in the supernatural—visualizes God as a supremely wise, kind, just person. Although many intellectuals are afraid of this sort of “anthropomorphism” because they are afraid . . . that it will be taken literally, I feel that it need not be “taken literally,” but is still far more valuable than any metaphysical concept of an impersonal God, let alone a God who is “totally other.”<sup>36</sup>

Putnam realizes that it matters how one conceives of God and that overly apophatic conceptions might strip away the riskiness and even potentially the joy that one might find in religious existence. Importantly, postmodern kataphaticism does not entail a particular set of truth-claims about God, religion, or faith—one can be an

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<sup>32</sup> Here one might also look at the work of William P. Alston and Michael Polyani regarding the personal dimensions of religious knowledge. See Alston, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Polyani, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

<sup>33</sup> Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

<sup>34</sup> Hilary Putnam, *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life: Rosenzweig, Buber, Levinas, Wittgenstein* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>36</sup> Putnam, *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life*, 102.

atheistic proponent of postmodern kataphaticism or a theistic proponent, etc.—but it takes seriously that holding different truth-claims about such things really does make a difference. For example, Putnam denies that there is an afterlife, but he admits that he could be wrong about this and, as such, leaves in place the important commitment to religious truth that would make his stance on the afterlife one that could be considered and either adopted or critically rejected by others.

### **Historical and Philosophical Apophaticism in Continental Philosophy of Religion**

With the basic framework of postmodern kataphaticism in place, it is important to realize that not all apophatic discourse in continental philosophy leads to the apophatic orthodoxy about which I am concerned. Jean-Luc Marion claims that “the theme of ‘negative theology’ has resurfaced in philosophy in recent years, at least in a vague manner.”<sup>37</sup> Marion continues on to explain:

Among other indications, one can cite Heidegger, who was unable to avoid “comparing” the step back of the thought of presences toward that of giving (*Geben*) “with the method of negative theology.”<sup>38</sup> Or Wittgenstein, who states, with a different accentuation: “There is the ineffable. It shows itself. It is the mystical.”<sup>39</sup> It remains simpler, however, to rely on the most explicit testimony—Derrida’s arguments . . . for a new pertinence for “negative theology” in the forum of contemporary philosophy.<sup>40</sup>

Following on Marion’s account, there are two general ways of understanding the “resurfacing” of such apophatic themes in contemporary continental philosophy. On the one hand, one might consider the frequent appropriation of themes and thinkers in the history of apophatic theology by contemporary continental philosophers. For example, new phenomenologists such as Marion, Chrétien, and Michel Henry make significant use of mystical and apophatic theology in their own phenomenological inquiries into what Heidegger might term “the inapparent.”<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, one might refer to apophatic claims being made by some continental philosophers *about* God, or minimally the claims being made about the limits of human language and conceptuality when it comes to speaking/thinking about “God.” Accordingly, we could locate the first way of speaking about apophaticism in continental philosophy

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<sup>37</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner and others (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 102.

<sup>38</sup> Marion’s note: Martin Heidegger, “Protocole á un séminaire sur la conference *Zeit und Sein*,” *Questions IV*, ed. Jean Buffret (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 83.

<sup>39</sup> Marion’s note: Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus* 6.522 (see also 6.432 and 6.44).

<sup>40</sup> Marion’s note: Jacques Derrida, “Comment ne pas parler: Dénégations,” in *Psyché: Invention de l’autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), 535-95. This block quote itself is from Marion, *The Visible and the Revealed*, 102-3.

<sup>41</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Four Seminars*, trans. Andrew Mitchell and François Raffoul (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 80.

as *historical* and the second way as *philosophical* (and, for some critics, maybe even *theological*<sup>42</sup>). Though historical appropriation need not give rise to philosophical affirmation, it often does so. It is primarily the philosophical sort of apophatic discourse that I think can more easily slide toward orthodoxy. I will briefly give examples of the historical deployment of apophatic archives and then turn to a particular mode in which the philosophical deployment frequently appears: the relation between God and being.

Regarding the historical appropriation of apophatic theology, consider the ways in which Henry draws deeply on Meister Eckhart as he attempts to unpack the invisibility of phenomenality.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, Henry appropriates the motif of Novalis's account of the "holy, ineffable, mysterious Night" as a metaphorical description of how invisibility yet gives itself.<sup>44</sup> Ruud Welten has even suggested that Henry's use of "the Night" echoes the mystical poetry of John of the Cross.<sup>45</sup> Appropriations of Novalis and John of the Cross are not limited to Henry, however. Chrétien's *L'Antiphonaire de la nuit*, *The Call and Response*, and *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, all feature apophatic gestures as illustrative of the excess that might occur in phenomenal givenness.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, Chrétien goes as far as to claim that "religious and mystical thought and speech" is an important resource for thinking through the call and response structure because of the way in which mystics have "frequently seen and spoken higher, farther, or otherwise than metaphysics in the form that Heidegger has defined for us."<sup>47</sup> Far from being an optional archive upon which phenomenologists can draw, Chrétien claims that "it is necessary to hear [its] promises" as crucial to contemporary phenomenological research.<sup>48</sup> Chrétien also draws upon such thinkers as Pseudo-Dionysius,<sup>49</sup> John the Scott,<sup>50</sup> John of the Cross,<sup>51</sup> and Philo of Alexandria.<sup>52</sup> Derrida, too, speaks of "nocturnal light" in the context of his discussion of "khora."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> See Dominique Janicaud, "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology," trans. Bernard G. Prusak, in Dominique Janicaud, Jean-François Courtine, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, and Paul Ricoeur, *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn: The French Debate* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2000), 16-103. Elsewhere Bruce Benson and I have argued that Janicaud's critique of new phenomenology as really just a turn to theology is misguided—see Simmons and Benson, *The New Phenomenology*, chapter 3.

<sup>43</sup> Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, trans. Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), chapter 424-56.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 442.

<sup>45</sup> Ruud Welten, "The Night in John of the Cross and Michel Henry," *Studies in Spirituality* 13 (2003): 213-33.

<sup>46</sup> Jean-Louis Chrétien, *L'antiphonaire de la nuit* (Paris: Eds. De L'Herne, 1989); *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, trans. Jeffrey Bloechl (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002); *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004).

<sup>47</sup> Chrétien, *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, 125.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 116; see also *The Call and the Response*, 15-16.

<sup>50</sup> Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, 17.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-7.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 26; see also *The Unforgettable and the Unhoped For*, 38-9, 108-112.

<sup>53</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone." In *Religion*, eds. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford: Stanford University Press,

Regarding philosophical appropriations of apophaticism, perhaps the most famous examples occur in Derrida's complex authorship. Let's look at just two passages, one from Derrida's early essay, "*Différance*,"<sup>54</sup> and one from a later essay titled "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials."<sup>55</sup> In both of these passages, Derrida explicitly denies that what he is doing is legitimately considered "negative theology," but admits that there will likely be confusion on this front:

The detours, locutions, and syntax in which I will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology. Already we have had to delineate *that différence is not*, does not exist, is not a present-being (on) in any form; and we will be led to delineate also everything *that it is not*, that is, *everything*; and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent. And yet those aspects of *différance* which are thereby delineated are not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies, which are always concerned with disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence, and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being.<sup>56</sup>

What I write is not "negative theology." First of all, in the measure to which this belongs to the predicative or judicative space of discourse, to its strictly propositional form and privileges not only the indestructible unity of the word but also the authority of the name— such axioms as a "deconstruction" must start by reconsidering. . . .

Next, in the measure to which "negative theology" seems to reserve, beyond all positive predication, beyond all negation, even beyond Being, some hyperessentiality, a being beyond Being. . . No. I would hesitate to inscribe what I put forward under the familiar heading of negative theology, precisely because of that ontological wager of hyperessentiality that one finds at work in both Dionysus and in Meister Eckhart.<sup>57</sup>

In both of these representative passages, Derrida distinguishes his work from negative theology because he refuses to affirm a "hyperessentiality" ("superessentiality") that would remain in place in the negative move. Like traditional apophatic theologians,

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1998),1-78.

<sup>54</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press), 1-28.

<sup>55</sup> Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," trans. Ken Frieden, in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, eds. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 3-70.

<sup>56</sup> Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 5-6.

<sup>57</sup> Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," 7-8.

though, Derrida worries about any conception of God as limited by the category of Being. But, like Levinas, Derrida indicates much more than an epistemic appreciation that it is likely that God is always beyond our concepts of “God.” What are we left with, then? For Derrida, the answer is unclear. As illustrated in Caputo’s inclusion of the “I don’t know” in all of his three Augustinian theses, a “generalized apophatics” is meant to be more radical than apophatic theology: *it puts apophatic theology itself in question as still being too determinate and stable.*

Let’s pursue this line of thought a bit further by looking at how Caputo and Derrida both go beyond merely critical gestures about human limitation (which might invite the excesses of the epistemic and inquirational aspects of apophatic orthodoxy) and actually recommend a particular model of God (which might invite the excesses of the ontological aspect). Despite having described deconstruction as a “generalized apophatics,” Caputo importantly adds that generalized apophatics involves a “deeply affirmative desire for something that is always essentially other than the prevailing regime of presence, something *tout autre*—too, too other, *oui, oui*—is of general interest. A passion for the impossible is a matter of general concern.”<sup>58</sup> In other words, as he says of Derrida, in particular, “it is necessary to get past [Derrida’s] dialogues with Christian Neoplatonism to his more biblical, prophetic, Jewish side, past the apophatic to the messianic.”<sup>59</sup> This is an important claim because Caputo suggests that Derrida is not *merely* apophatic. Indeed, Caputo and Derrida both offer positive visions in their philosophy of religion. My worry, though, is that such positive accounts still might occur within the meta-philosophical framework of apophatic orthodoxy. Let’s see how this *might* be the case regarding Caputo’s own deconstructive “theology of the event.”

In *The Weakness of God*, Caputo claims that he offers “no final opinion” about God “as an entitative issue,”<sup>60</sup> which would be consistent with his overall deconstructive commitments and also with a postmodern kataphaticism tending in an agnostic direction. Yet, Caputo’s account of the “strong theology,” to which he is so strenuously opposed, ends up looking a lot like *any* perspective that understands God as a personal being. Indeed, Caputo’s suspension of judgment regarding whether God is a being is offered just one page after his claim that “The name of God is being’s aspiration, its inspiration, its aeration, for *God is not being or a being* but a ghostly quasi-being, a very holy spirit.”<sup>61</sup> Moreover, it is offered just two pages prior to his claim that “the name of God is the name of an event *rather than* of an entity.”<sup>62</sup> Accordingly, it becomes difficult to know what to make of Caputo’s seeming allowance for what we might term a “divine personalism” within a deconstructive frame.<sup>63</sup> Though Caputo says that he has not excluded such a

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<sup>58</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 28.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, xxvii.

<sup>60</sup> Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 10.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 9, emphasis added.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, emphasis added.

<sup>63</sup> Elsewhere I have argued that such a personalist conception of the divine might be required in the thought of Levinas (see J. Aaron Simmons, “In Whom, Then, Do We Put Our Trust?—Thinking About Levinas with Drew Dalton,” *The Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 11, no.3 (Fall 2011): 37-

possibility, he then seems to deny that very possibility twice within three pages. In this way, Caputo appears to follow quite close on Derrida's suggestion that "We should stop thinking about God as someone, over there, way up there, transcendent, and, what is more—into the bargain, precisely—capable, more than any satellite orbiting in space of seeing into the most secret of the most interior places."<sup>64</sup> This proximity to Derrida is explicit when Caputo goes on to say that

I do not think of God as some super-being who out-knows, out-wills, out-does, out-powers, and out-exists every entity here below, a higher super-entity, a hyper-presence dwelling in a higher world. I do not think of God as an omnipotent onto-theo-cosmo-logical power source for the universe, but as the unconditional demand for beneficence that shocks the world with a promise that is not kept, as the heart of a heartless world, as the call from below being that summons us to rise beyond being, beyond ourselves.<sup>65</sup>

"By 'God,'" Caputo continues,

I do not mean a being who is there, an entity trapped in being, even as a super-being up there, up above the world, who physically powers and causes it, who made it and occasionally intervenes upon its day-to-day activities to tweak things for the better in response to a steady stream of solicitations from down below (a hurricane averted here, an illness averted there, etc.). That I consider an essentially magical view of the world.<sup>66</sup>

Lest we think that we have now made sense of Caputo's account as denying that God is a being, which given the three passages above would seem like a safe assumption, on the very next page he again insists on his neutrality on that issue:

Whether over and beyond what we might call the hermeneutics of the event, the lived experience of the call and of being on call, there is some entitative cause calling, some entity or hyper-entity out there with a proper name, verifiable by a metaphysical argument or certifiable by a divine revelation, is no part of my hypothesis, one way or another (for or against).<sup>67</sup>

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45), and even in new phenomenology more broadly (see Simmons and Benson, *The New Phenomenology*, chapter 6).

<sup>64</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death and Literature in Secret*, Trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 108.

<sup>65</sup> Caputo, *Weakness of God*, 39.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

Richard Kearney nicely points out the problems that Caputo faces when he seems to suggest both that he remains neutral on the “entitative issue” and also that any notion of God as a being amounts to “strong theology,” which ought to be rejected out of hand:

I am suggesting, in short, that Caputo cannot have it both ways. He cannot claim on the one hand that Derrida takes the path of a-theological desertification and then reclaim him as a saintly anchorite father. Nor will it do to refuse the two alternatives altogether and declare the issue undecidable—God and/or/neither/nor *Khora*? That too is having it both ways. Not an option, I would submit, for the believer. (Though a perfectly consistent one for the deconstructionist). By believer I mean, incidentally, not just a believer in God but also—why not?—a believer in *khora*. Perhaps *khora* is no less an interpretative leap in the dark than religious faith is? God and *khora* are conceivably two different names for the same thing—the same nameless, indescribable experience of the abyss. But the choice between names is not insignificant. Which direction you leap surely matters. . . . There is a genuine difference between anchorite fathers and deconstructive sons. A healthy difference to be sure; but one that can’t be magicked away or turned into a soft-shoe-shuffle of undecidability. One cannot sit on double-edged fences forever.<sup>68</sup>

While it is crucial to appropriate the postmodern apophatic suspicion that Caputo hopes to cultivate, it is equally important to understand that such suspicion is always directed toward something. Caputo himself recognizes that *apophatics can only contaminate something if there is something there to contaminate*. But, then, even Caputo’s own “weak” theology and the radically apophatic account of God presented therein, would be better understood according to a postmodern kataphatic framework. So, when Caputo defends a notion of “weak theology,” as an alternative to “strong theology,” this must be done with argument and not with assumptions about what postmodernism entails—for it does not entail anything metaphysical in such ways. As Kearney rightly notes, one might be a “believer in *khora*,” but such belief should be backed up with good reasons for believing—even if, as Kierkegaard would insist, such “belief” is not sufficient for “faith.” Postmodern kataphaticism helps us to realize that believing in *khora* and believing in the God of classical theism, say, really are different and stressing undecidability doesn’t eliminate the importance of trying to “leap” in the direction of what one takes to be true.

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<sup>68</sup> Richard Kearney, “*Khôra* or God?” in *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus*, ed. Mark Dooley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 107-22, 111.

## Conclusion: Strong Claims, but Held Weakly

One can be *determinately negative* and *determinately positive*—and both gestures can be found in historical theological archives as appropriated by continental philosophy of religion. The key, however, is to resist the temptation to *immediately* think, or to take it *as obvious*, that *only* such a “weak” model would be viable within postmodernism. Postmodern kataphaticism invites serious consideration of the variety of models on offer and attempts to understand them as always apophatically interrupted. As Kevin Schilbrack says, whether one defends strong theology or weak theology, it is important to “make strong claims weakly.”<sup>69</sup> To say that postmodernism necessitates exclusively defending a weak theology such that it would itself end up being “held strongly” is going too far (again, I am *not* saying that Caputo does this, but as a representative case study, his work provocatively illuminates the stakes of such questions).

Though postmodern kataphaticism would be suspicious of thinking that human cognitive and linguistic abilities are adequate to the task of understanding God, and in this sense would continue to maintain an apophatic dimension in at least apparent contrast to some interpretations of Rea’s account of “analytic aspirations” toward “clear” knowledge of God, it would not give in to the temptation of thinking that since we might not understand God fully, we cannot understand God at all. Even when Levinas claims that the Other “overflows comprehension,”<sup>70</sup> he is careful not to suggest that the Other is *absolutely* incomprehensible, for that would eliminate the very possibility of an encounter with the Other in the first place. Similarly, when postmodernists rightly stress the problems with thinking about God as a being, they should be wary of going further and saying that God *does not exist* or that God *cannot be a being*. Instead, with Marion, we should admit that it is *possible* that God is *at least a being*, though Being is likely not the best category in which to think of God, and probably not the primary name for God. When Marion suggests that Love is a better name for God than are “prime mover” or “*causa sui*,” he does not mean this as empty rhetorical play, but instead as a determinate truth-claim about the divine life. Marion is putting forth that “God is Love” is a better way to understand God than other alternatives on offer. Even if we endorse the importance of poetics, Marion understands that some propositions are likely better than others. Caputo and Derrida also seem to admit this when they stress the link between the name of “God” and the notion of “justice.” But, then, when Caputo claims that the name of God is “endlessly translatable,”<sup>71</sup> it is important to add the qualifier that not *just any* name will do.

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<sup>69</sup> Kevin Schilbrack, “Process Thought and Bridge Building: A Response to Stephen K. White,” *Process Studies* 40, no.2 (2011): 369-75, 373.

<sup>70</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 6; and *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 51.

<sup>71</sup> John D. Caputo and Gianni Vattimo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

Postmodern kataphaticism rejects the false dichotomy of *either* overly determinate classical onto-theology *or* overly indeterminate “religion without religion.” Instead, determinate religious identity (Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, or whatever) is still possible for those who have embraced Derridean deconstruction. There can be a “religion *with* religion.” Following Derrida on *some* things need not mean that one follow Derrida on *all* things. Being deconstructive in terms of language, textuality, and identity need not entail that one also “rightly passes as an atheist.” Indeed, if Caputo is right to say that one’s religious identity is a difficult matter of hermeneutic risk, then it seems that being an Episcopalian, say, is no less risky than Derrida’s own description of his complicated religious identity. Risk abounds and to say that only some religious identities are legitimately risky is to limit the riskiness from the outset. That said, an important upshot of postmodern kataphaticism would be that atheism would also be a determinate (non)religious identity that remains possible as well. Kierkegaard was right to stress the importance and difficulty of “Becoming a Christian,” yet Sartre was just as right to stress the importance and difficulty of “Becoming an Atheist.” The apophatic orthodoxy that threatens postmodern philosophy of religion would make Kierkegaard’s notion a non-starter and Sartre’s notion entirely too safe. Postmodern kataphaticism appreciates both as real alternatives and invites serious conversation between advocates of each.

My hope in calling for a postmodern kataphaticism is that Caputo’s “theo-poetics of the event” and something like James K.A. Smith’s Pentecostally oriented Reformed version of Radical Orthodoxy would *both* be recognized as options worth weighing and considering within postmodern philosophy of religion (whether within a continental or analytic mode). Or, alternatively, William Hasker’s account of open theism and Catherine Keller’s eco-feminist version of process theology would *both* be alternatives worth taking seriously, even if one ultimately decides in favor of one instead of the other. The debate about what reasons one might offer for choosing to affirm any of these alternatives over the others is a debate well worth having and, I believe, would productively help to overcome the overblown opposition between continental and analytic philosophy of religion, which is frequently overstated by philosophers on both sides.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> For a continental example, consider Philip Goodchild’s claim that “philosophy of religion, in English-speaking countries, has a clear and distinct identity, and has been enjoying a resurgence: it focuses largely on the truth-claims, rationality, and coherence of religious propositions, and particularly those of ‘classical theism.’ Yet, for those who work in the tradition of philosophy derived from Germany and France, the problems, tasks, concepts, reasoning, and cultural location are *markedly different* from this identity” (“Continental Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction,” in *Rethinking Philosophy of Religion: Approaches from Continental Philosophy*, ed. Philip Goodchild (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 1-39, 1-2, emphasis added). For an example from the analytic side, consider Michael Rea’s claim that “part of the problem” underlying why continental philosophy of religion is largely ignored by analytic philosophers is that “many (though hardly all) of the arguments that would speak against analytic theology are couched in a rhetorical style that analytic philosophers and theologians (henceforth, ‘analytics’) will find objectionably opaque. But it is also because the arguments in this [continental] literature often depend upon claims and attitudes which are handed down from figures largely dismissed by analytics and which many analytics find to be inaccurate, insufficiently motivated, or wholly unintelligible” (“Introduction,” in *Analytic Theology*, 3). For a

Even if postmodernism, in general, invites hesitation in the face of dogmatism, one cannot sit on fences forever, as Kearney rightly notes. Postmodern kataphaticism helps us to understand that even the most radical apophatic discourse is dependent upon positive claims. Apophaticism only occurs within kataphatic frameworks, but kataphaticism is always threatened by apophatic worries that we have overextended ourselves. Our claims about God may or may not be true—hence the need for continued conversation and good arguments—but that they *might* be true is what is important. It is important in order that we take each other seriously as conversation partners, and also in order that we take our own beliefs as worth being considered by those with whom we are in conversation. Indeed, only when we overcome apophatic orthodoxy could one plausibly defend apophaticism.<sup>73</sup>

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discussion of the distinction of analytic and continental philosophy of religion that tries to draw on both traditions, see Nick Trakakis, *The End of Philosophy of Religion* (London: Continuum, 2008). See also, Nick Trakakis, “New Phenomenology and Analytic Philosophy of Religion,” *Heythrop Journal* (forthcoming); and J. Aaron Simmons, “On Shared Hopes for (Mashup) Philosophy of Religion: A Reply to Trakakis,” *Heythrop Journal* (forthcoming).

<sup>73</sup> I would like to thank Martin Shuster, Kevin Schilbrack, Jessica Corey, and John Sanders for helpful comments and criticisms on earlier drafts of this essay.