

John Caputo, *Hoping against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim* (2015)

In *Hoping against Hope*, Caputo grafts an autobiographical story upon a philosophical and theological argument, all figured around three voices, the “Jackie,” the little boy growing up in a very Catholic neighborhood of Philadelphia, which it turns out to be birth name of one Jackie Derrida; “Brother Paul,” the name he took when he entered a Catholic religious order where he spent four years of his life, and “John D. Caputo,” the professor of philosophy and the author of many books. He is a master of communicating ideas of deep theological import in readable American English and made available for intelligent, literate people who cannot spend a lifetime trying to read the philosophers and theologians behind them. Writing in the tradition of classical American stylists like William James, the professor is a figure of theology meeting philosophy, of someone from a religious tradition daring to think, just as the Enlightenment urges, but one with a feel for religion and theology from the inside. So instead of an Enlightenment Critique, Caputo undertakes a rereading, a reinventing of religion, repeating its tropes, its mood, its heart, its confessions, its inner life, but in another way. He cuts through to what the name of God really means, in practice, in life, what it is doing, what is getting done in speaking and thinking of God—but without illusion. The name of God is the name of a form of life, a way of living in the world, and the “kingdom of God” is what the world would look like if the name of God held sway. To be faith to itself this name must be extricated from the system of rewards and punishments, which is religion in a puerile state. This problem is condensed in Matthew 25, where the hungry are fed and the naked clothed—why? Because the hungry are hungry.

Taking up medieval mystics like Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart, he builds a theology around this insight by saying that love is “without why,” we love because we love, not because we will be rewarded if we do and punished if we don’t. Life is a pure gift, and it is not given to us *for* something else. It does not have a trade-in value. We live because we live, *for nothing* else that comes in exchange for life. The “nihilism of grace” means that life is a pure gratuity to be celebrated for itself, a marvelous, mysterious cosmic event, a grace which we have good reason to think may be widespread in the universe. The religious sense of life is to honor the depths of this mystery. The specifically Biblical version is that this takes the form of the folly of the cross, of lives lived with uncompromised mercy and compassion and forgiveness.

The name of God is not the name of a Big Being in the Sky who is coming to save us, to make straight the crooked, and see to it that all turns out well, which means that the economy of rewards and punishments is going to be strictly enforced. This theology is done from below, not like something that has dropped from the sky and fallen into our laps, but built up from the difficulty, the messiness, the confusion of life. The name of God puts us on the spot, calls upon us, and asks us to transform our lives and uplift the lives of others, without illusion, without the mythology and the semi-blasphemy of this Big Being. The book is written for people who are making the kingdom of God come true in the concrete, community organizers and peace and justice activists, pastors,

“recovering” fundamentalists in search of a vocabulary of a conceptuality, which will assist in their recovery.