

The Weakness of God. Interview with John D. Caputo

Presentation

John David Caputo was born in Philadelphia in 1940 to an Italian American Catholic family. He was educated in the Catholic tradition and belonged for a few years to the Congregation of the de la Salle brothers. There he learned the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas and the medieval mystics. During his philosophical training, he carefully studied Kierkegaard, later Heidegger, until completing his doctorate at Bryn Mawr College. He began teaching at Villanova University and Syracuse until his retirement in 2011.

His philosophy pretends to be a synthesis between religious experience and philosophical knowledge. See some of his works: *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (1978; reprinted 1986), *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics* (1982), and *Demythologizing Heidegger* (1993), however, his approach to the work of Jacques Derrida is what allows him to enter in the academic world with its own voice. His dialogue between religion and philosophy since deconstruction stands out as his philosophical contribution and that is why we decided to interview Emeritus Professor John Caputo. Among the most disreputable works of him we have: *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion with / out Religion* (1997); *God, the Gift and Postmodernism* (1997); *Questioning God* (1999); and *Augustine and Postmodernism* (2001).

Professor Caputo organized international conferences and congresses at Villanova University to bring Derrida himself to discuss deconstruction and religion with eminent philosophers and theologians. The result of these encounters was the development of contemporary religious thought in North America that Caputo himself continued after Derrida, dialoguing with philosophers such as Marion, Žižek, Badiou, Vattimo, among others. Therefore, it is worth listening to a philosopher who has made great contributions to philosophy and theology. We are grateful for the interview and his infinite generosity in answering our questions.

LN (Lucio Nontol) JC (John Caputo)

LN:—It would be convenient to start by commenting on what is meant by deconstruction, what is its objective and the possibilities of application to the different fields of knowledge.

JC:—I don't think that «deconstruction» is the best word for deconstruction. I would call it the philosophy of the event, that is, of the coming of what we cannot see coming. It is a way to keep things open to their future, anything, a belief or a practice, an institution or a tradition, by doing a micrological analysis of its constituent elements, discovering certain tensions within them, and releasing its hitherto pent-up possibilities. It is a form of hope in the future, of the reinvention of the event. So in this sense it is even a prayer, «come» *viens*.

LN:—What was the reason that led you to approach the deconstructive approach? What did Jacques Derrida's philosophy mean to you?

JC:—I was interested in Heidegger and Gadamer and I started out —believe it or not— reading Derrida in order to defend Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer against Derrida, against the critique that was being made of them by deconstruction. Then I saw deconstruction was not really a critique, but a reopening of these thinkers in a more radical way, which is what I have been calling «radical hermeneutics» ever since.

LN:—You have published a book entitled *The Weakness of God*. It seems that the background of the book contains a deconstructive approach, could you explain? What practical applications could it have?

JC:—Yes, that book is a deconstructive «weakening» of the name of God from that of a Supreme Supernatural Super-Being into an «event», a call or solicitation which is visited upon us, which we may or may not heed. It is at the same time a weakening of theology into theopoetics. That means that a theology is not giving us a *logos* of God in any strong conceptual way but is describing God in language that is symbolic or poetic, what the German Idealists call a *Vorstellung*, a figurative image, a narrative, of the «event» that is contained in the name of God.

LN:—Jacques Derrida is an essential name for current philosophy, as he reflects on very important topics such as fraternity (Christian, Judeo-Christian, humanist), forgiveness, hospitality, and in a large part of his work he shows psychoanalytic deconstruction of certain

versions of Christianity, do you think that deconstruction could help us to present a theology of hospitality, brotherhood and forgiveness that is closer than the «traditional» one for these times that we are living?

JC:—Yes, the interesting thing for me is the echoes of the Bible in Derrida, more Jewish than Christian, we have to remember, because Christianity was a problem for him. So the idea of the «event» is «messianic», the idea of the coming of a Messiah who never actually shows up and keeps the future open. His idea of hospitality is clearly prophetic in origin. What is interesting to me is his notion of the possibility of the impossible, so hospitality, forgiveness, the gift, all of these are possible just under the conditions that make them impossible —so to give a gift without expecting a return, to welcome the coming of someone who you are not sure is not here to do you harm, to forgive someone who is not sorry, and to love someone who does not love you, who may hate you. These have always been paradoxical ideas, but in midst of the tribalism of politics today, they are even more paradoxical.

LN:—In this difficult time that we are living in, where personal and community responsibility must be focused more strongly, what would be the approach on responsibility from Derrida's philosophy?

JC:—Derrida gives a different twist to responsibility. He does not describe straightforwardly as being responsible to a demand made upon us but as making ourselves responsible for our response, for what we say we are responding to and how we understand it. He is trying to avoid the excuse we make that we were «only following orders», that we don't make the laws, we just follow them, in which case our responsibility to these orders is actually irresponsible.

LN:—What is the reception that Jacques Derrida's work has had in the United States? How do you think Derrida's reception could «evolve»?

JC:—At first, in the 1970s, he was greeted warmly by the literature and comparative literature departments, and the philosophers thought he was a relativist and an aesthete. But then in the 1980s, he gained the attention of the philosophers in the USA who were interested in continental philosophy, and enjoyed great success. Then, in the middle 1990s, a lot of us, I included, convinced him that there was a growing wave of interest in him by the theologians and students of religion. So I ran a series of conferences at Villanova University

under the title «Religion and Postmodernism», and people working in religion and theology from all over the country came to hear him. So there were three waves. I worked this out in the new «Introduction» to the second edition of *Deconstruction in the Nutshell* which has just appeared from Fordham UP.

LN:—Finally, if we were to investigate the influence of Derrida on the work of John Caputo, what is the result of the main themes to highlight? In other words, could you explain your philosophical thinking to us?

JC:—Over the years Derrida has provided me with a way to understand, not just phenomenology and hermeneutics, but also religion and theology in a new way. It has been my basic frame of mind. Derrida led me to the thought that the concrete and particular beliefs—in religion or politics or ethics or anything—we entertain are constructions meant to signal an undeconstructible event, which makes those beliefs tremble with insecurity. But they are made insecure not in a relativistic way but by a more profound «faith» in the undeconstructible, which religious people call God, others call «justice» or «beauty», or so on. All of my books since *The Prayers and Tears of JD* have been working this out in terms of theology, religion, Christianity. Lately I have been creating a kind of dialogue of Derrida with Tillich, which shows up in a book like *The Folly of God*.