

CHRISTOPHER BEN SIMPSON

Religion, Metaphysics,
and the Postmodern

William Desmond
and John D. Caputo

INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS

Bloomington and Indianapolis

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Introduction

I encountered William Desmond's work as a young would-be Derridean. It found me preoccupied, tracing the question—from Derrida to Levinas, Heidegger, Nietzsche—of how metaphysics became such a pervasive and malevolent force from which thought is to be freed with strange stratagems. Desmond's writing struck me as loosening the fetters and blinders—the assumed answers and latent liturgies—of these supposed liberations, and thus it presented me with an engaging and surprising (curious, perplexing, astonishing) vision . . . opening another way to see.

This work is intended to be an orienting opening into this other way—at once a systematic presentation of William Desmond's philosophical system and an argument for its viability and superiority relative to dominant alternate visions, here represented by those of John D. Caputo. The broad issue addressed is the status of religion and/or God-talk in the context of "postmodernity." It attends to the question: How should we think of religion and God today? How now—in the context of recent continental ("postmodern") philosophy—God? Within the broad outlines of this question, I wish to address the more particular issue of the relationship between religion and metaphysics—and, secondarily, ethics.

With regard to this relationship, there is a broad consensus within contemporary continental philosophy that is sometimes called "postmodern." There is a kind of post-metaphysical orthodoxy. The issue of the relevance of metaphysics for talk of God and religion is more often than not a non-issue. It is taken as given that "metaphysics" is no longer a live option for serious thinkers today, and that the task of thinking about religion relative to metaphysics is to learn to think God and/or do religion without or "after" it. Indeed, "metaphysics" seems to have become, in many quarters of contemporary continental thought, a pejorative term—a dirty word—meaning something like "what's been wrong with philosophy hitherto."

To put it more precisely, within the context of much contemporary continental philosophy, the *issue* of the nature of religion and God-talk has been treated in a post- or anti-metaphysical *manner*, informed by a certain "post-modern" philosophical *framework*. This particular treatment of this issue is worth addressing for several reasons. First, the question of the relation of metaphysics to religion in the context of postmodernity merits examination because of the perennial significance of the *issue* of the nature of religion and God-talk itself. Second, it is worth addressing because of the prevalence of a post- or anti-metaphysical *treatment* of or perspective on religion, as is evidenced in various ongoing conferences and publications in this vein (along with those

going against the flow, as it were). Third, it is worth addressing because of the prevalence of the informing philosophical *framework* of “postmodern” continental philosophy on the contemporary philosophical scene.

It could be said that the vast majority of contemporary so-called postmodern continental philosophy of religion is post- or anti-metaphysical. Beyond this, the more explicitly deconstructive form of “postmodern” philosophy of religion is likewise more explicitly and stridently anti-metaphysical. Thus, any metaphysical alternative that wishes to break into the discourse with any kind of plausibility should be able to deal with the strongest objections and critiques leveled against metaphysics from something like this most skeptical of quarters—from deconstruction. Thinkers that might fit in this dominant, hitherto anti-metaphysical frame would include the likes of Mark C. Taylor, Gianni Vattimo, Jean-Luc Marion, and John D. Caputo, who largely take their point of departure from Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida. For the purposes of this study, I will be for the most part limiting the scope of the discussion of such a post- or anti-metaphysical treatment of religion and God-talk to the particular work of John D. Caputo as a representative of the broader post- or anti-metaphysical trend in contemporary continental philosophy of religion as well as its more strident deconstructive form, incorporating and presenting clearly the anti-metaphysical religious ramifications of, say, Heidegger or Derrida (though the readings of such are, of course, a matter of contention).

Caputo treats the *issue* of the nature of religion and God-talk in a post- or anti-metaphysical *manner*, being so informed by a postmodern philosophical *framework*. Why Caputo? Caputo is a prime representative of the religion and postmodernism discourse in that he has hosted the Villanova “Religion and Postmodernism” conferences and edited the collections of essays that have come from them. He is also a prolific and broadly read thinker who has edited a reader on religion and postmodernism (*The Religious*) and has written works popularizing this position (*On Religion and Deconstruction in a Nutshell*). He has also written numerous scholarly works, such as *Radical Hermeneutics*, *Against Ethics*, and *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*. Furthermore, Caputo has a position of prominence in the Anglo-American continental philosophical arena as the representative of Derrida—especially bringing Derrida’s thought into the field of religious studies and/or philosophy of religion.

Caputo can be seen as representing one currently prevalent way of answering the question of how to think about God and religion in contemporary continental philosophy—a way, in particular, that uses deconstructive thought as a framework. He eloquently represents a “religious turn” in some postmodern philosophy. This prevalent way of thinking turns on two points, one negative and one positive. First (on the more Nietzschean side), there is the *rejection* of metaphysics and of any metaphysical notion of God as expressed in the pronounced death of the metaphysical God, and the critique of “onto-theology”—that is, use or instrumentalization of the idea of God to function as an univocal explanation/foundation that is primarily a projection of our power, a means of securing ourselves in the world. All metaphysics are considered to be one form

or another of “onto-theology.” Second (on the more Levinasian side), there is an affirmation of religion and God-talk inasmuch as there is *reduction* of religion/God-talk to one’s (largely contentless) ethical obligation to the other. Taken together, these two points represent a particular configuration of the relations between metaphysics, ethics, and religion/God-talk in which religion/God-talk is divorced from metaphysics (rejection) and fused—without remainder—with ethics (reduction) to produce a kind of “LeviNietzschean” religiousness.

That much said, in this work I will present a position that stands in contrast to this kind of broad post- or anti-metaphysical position in general and to Caputo’s position in particular. I will lay out a dissident metaphysical position on how to talk about religion and God today. Toward this end, I will examine the work of contemporary philosopher William Desmond. I will represent Desmond as providing a significantly different perspective—a dissident voice—in the contemporary continental discussion regarding God and religion. More specifically, Desmond treats the *issue* of religion/God-talk in a different, metaphysical *manner*, being informed by his own particular philosophical *framework*. The result is an alternative configuration of the relations between metaphysics, ethics, and religion/God-talk—an alternative whose difference is owed to a different, more positive (yet different than other metaphysical thinkers like Deleuze or Badiou) view of metaphysics than that of much of continental philosophy today and of John D. Caputo in particular.

The thesis of this work is that William Desmond’s approach to thinking about religion and God in relation to the domains of metaphysics and ethics provides a viable and preferable alternative to the like position represented in the work of John D. Caputo. To speak of the position represented in Desmond’s work as “alternative” implies a way for one today (in the midst of postmodernity) to look at the same thing (religion and God) differently (metaphysically—or at least post-post-metaphysically). Beyond this main thesis—of the superiority of a theistic metaphysical frame (such as Desmond’s) over the kind of late-twentieth-century postmodern anti-metaphysical frame represented by Caputo—I suggest that Desmond’s work can be seen as part of a larger emerging scholarly movement advocating such a theistic metaphysical frame.

Indeed, it must be recognized that, as Caputo represents a broader field of work, Desmond’s work stands in the midst (though being quite independent of) an emerging, though diverse, metaphysical field of thinkers. This field divides into (1) very explicitly theistic thinkers, such as Desmond and those who, under the (bold) banner of Radical Orthodoxy, all draw principally from the Christian, Platonic, and Thomistic traditions (though they are quite eclectic); and (2) very explicitly atheistic thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou, who largely take their point of departure from Marx and Nietzsche (though they too are intensively and extensively eclectic). Mindful of this, I address throughout the following the resonances (and possible dissonances) between Desmond’s thought and its parallels in that of Milbank, Pickstock, and others. Such subsidiary discussions suggest the fecundity and relevance of Des-

mond's thought for thinking about God, metaphysics, and ethics in this early twenty-first century. Part of the parallel here between Desmond and Radical Orthodoxy is a retrieval of certain pre-modern and counter-modern voices.¹ Beyond this, I consider briefly (in an admittedly minimal and initial manner) other presently ascendant (and either metaphysical or theistic) theorists such as Marion (a confessional anti-metaphysical thinker), Badiou, and Deleuze. Through these largely endnoted excursus, I occasionally locate Desmond's distinctive metaphysical perspective relative to these other projects.

The general strategy of the central argument of this work is as follows: Caputo, again as representing a kind of "postmodern" orthodoxy, is motivated by certain concerns such as wanting to avoid false totalities/absolutes (closure) and wanting to be honest to the way things are and to affirm concrete actuality/reality/existence and genuine otherness (openness). Caputo critiques metaphysics, ethics, and religion insofar as metaphysics, in his understanding, stands in opposition to his motivating concerns, and thus should be rejected and extricated from ethics and religion. Caputo provides an alternative, postmodern "LeviNietzschean" vision (a Levinasian ethical religiosity grafted onto a Nietzschean negation of any robust metaphysical belief issuing in a radical hermeneutics, an ethics without ethics, and a religion without religion) that he sees as addressing his concerns. *Desmond, I argue, provides a viable and preferable alternative to—and an alternative narrating of—this LeviNietzschean vision.* Desmond's vision is *viable* in that it answers Caputo's critiques—showing that they need not be the case. Here Desmond shows how metaphysics (and ethics and religion informed by metaphysics) *escapes* Caputo's narration/location. Desmond defeats Caputo's defeaters, as it were—negates Caputo's negations in order to make Desmond's vision a possible position. On a deeper level, Desmond's vision is arguably *preferable* inasmuch as it can be used to critique Caputo's vision—largely in that it (Desmond's vision) can be seen to fulfill Caputo's motivating concerns in a more satisfying manner than Caputo's own LeviNietzschean vision. It does this in two ways. First, from Desmond's vision one can see how the LeviNietzschean vision tends to, in fact, betray its motivating concerns. Second, Desmond's position shows how a metaphysical vision/stance/picture (like Desmond's) is, in fact, necessary for one to fulfill these concerns—or simply necessary, as such. In this manner, Desmond out-narrates the "postmodern" LeviNietzschean position, showing Desmond's as a preferable position—as possessing a broader explanatory reach.

Central to this discussion is an understanding of what metaphysics is or may be. My contention is that Desmond has a more helpful, more complex understanding of the domain (and history and possibilities) of metaphysics, whereas Caputo's understanding of metaphysics closes off some possibilities that would fit well with other fundamental elements or impulses in his own work (as I show). A broader understanding of metaphysics that can provide a ground for comparison between Desmond and Caputo (though they fill it out in very different ways and to different rhetorical ends) is that of an endeavor to think and come to some kind of knowledge of reality, of what is beyond or behind or re-

vealed within the phenomena of experience. The traditional topoi of this philosophical sounding include, most significantly, the self or the soul, the world, and God.

This work is intended to contribute to the present ongoing scholarly discussion by presenting the potential significance of Desmond's work as providing a theistic metaphysical alternative to (indeed, a kind of test case for putting into question the post- or anti-metaphysical postmodern orthodoxy of) a major strain in contemporary continental philosophy of religion. Developing out of this more general point, the specific contribution of this work is first and foremost its more systematic and unified presentation of Desmond's thought. Desmond's work can be complex, dense, meditative, and full of neologisms; and as such, it can sometimes be difficult to penetrate and understand fully. Thus, the present work operates on a dual level of presentation, as it were: first, there is my own synthetic and systematic presentation of Desmond's thought; and second, this is accompanied by representative selections of Desmond's own beautiful if sometimes enigmatic idiom in the copious endnotes. In addition, there are numerous references (included as parenthetical notations) to locations in Desmond's corpus where the ideas presented can be explored more in depth in their original context. As such, the systematic portions of chapters 2, 3, and 4 (which can stand on their own apart from the engagement with Caputo) are, at once, a digest of Desmond's ideas and a series of doorways into Desmond's texts. Secondly, this work makes the original contribution of the specific confrontation of Desmond and Caputo as presenting two emergent (increasingly popular) yet conflicting voices in Anglo-American contemporary continental philosophy that are writing about the same kinds of things—as in the relations between metaphysics, ethics, and religion.

Regarding a preliminary assessment of this project's broader contribution to scholarship, this project will contribute to several different discussions. It will contribute to the current religion and postmodernism discourse within the broader field of contemporary continental philosophy. Within the context of this discussion, Desmond advocates what has been (up until recently) the largely unentertained option of a metaphysical way of thinking about religion and God that yet resonates with certain basic postmodern concerns. This project will also introduce and recommend Desmond's work as fruitful resource (beyond the relative ghetto of Hegel studies where he is more well known). Finally, this project has the potential to contribute to the fields of religious studies and systematic theology (more particularly to what is called "foundations" or "fundamental theology" or "prolegomena" or "philosophical theology"), inasmuch as its subject matter relates to the proper way—the ground rules, so to speak—to talk about God today.

More concretely, I use the following methodological path in outline. In the first chapter, I systematically examine John D. Caputo's work to make clear his positions regarding metaphysics, ethics, religion/God, and their interrelation. I also analyze Caputo's position relative to his critiques (of metaphysics, ethics, and religion), his motivating concerns, and his strong conclusions. In the

second chapter, I systematically lay out William Desmond's metaphysics in part one, and show, in part two, how Desmond's thought can answer Caputo's critiques, address his motivating concerns, and critique his strong conclusions. In the third chapter, I give a similar treatment of Desmond's understanding of ethics and then relate this to Caputo's work on (or "against") ethics. In the fourth chapter, I treat, somewhat more extensively, Desmond's understanding of religion and God—again, in the second part of this chapter, comparing and contrasting this to Caputo's presentation. I conclude this work by drawing together the preceding results and briefly considering the significance of Desmond's alternate "divine hyperbolics" relative to the question of how to think of religion and God in the wake of postmodernity—indeed in the wake of its passing.²

1 Caputo

John D. Caputo's philosophical work over the last two decades can be organized around the task of exorcising a "faithless" metaphysics from our thinking. For Caputo, such a metaphysics is not faithful to life—to the factual reality of human existence—losing the task of living in the labyrinth of speculative thought. It is not faithful to the human other—losing the particular person in the matrices of universal laws. It is not faithful to "faith"—losing a properly religious faith and relation to "God" in its fixation on crafting properly proportioned propositions about the divine as a "thing" to be examined. This entanglement with the dishonesty and "bad faith" of such a "faithless" metaphysics—as it worms its way from metaphysics to ethics to religion—is the nemesis against which a new and postmodern way of thinking and being struggles. This way, for Caputo, is a truly honest, ethical, and (most of all) religious faithfulness without metaphysics.

Caputo's Critique of Metaphysics

For Caputo, the problem with metaphysics can be summarized as follows: Metaphysics is not faithful to life insofar as it is an abstract system that privileges static unity in order to provide a stable foundation for life. Metaphysics endeavors to lift one above (*meta*) the flux (*physis*) of actuality—providing one with "a fast way out of the back door of the flux" (*RH* 3, 1). Such a metaphysics involves the elevation of knowledge of reality to a kind of absolute knowledge—a privileged access to the real. Caputo sees this metaphysical self-elevation as a fundamental tendency of philosophy as such.¹ Metaphysics is fundamentally a metaphysics of presence, bent on giving "elegant assurances about Being and presence even as factual existence [is] being tossed about by *physis* and *kinesis*" (*RH* 1).

Metaphysics, for Caputo, is *not faithful to life* in that its pretentious self-elevation supplants factual existence. Metaphysics claims a privileged access—a capitalized "Knowledge" of the fundament of reality, or ourselves, or whatever—of the capitalized Secret.² Caputo describes such metaphysics as an "essentialism"—as "the various claims to be *in on* The Secret and thereby to have surpassed the limits of offering a mere mortal interpretation" (*MRH* 3). This pretentious claim, for Caputo, is unjustified and ultimately dishonest to our severely finite human situation. In fact, metaphysics is a kind of code word for Caputo for just this arrogant philosophical posturing.³ "The secret," Caputo rejoins, "is that there is no Secret, no capitalized Know-it-all Breakthrough

Principle or Revelation that lays things out the way they Really Are” (OR 21).⁴ We humans have to deal with existing in a situation of “disaster”—of the loss of “one’s star (*dis-astrum*),” of being “cut loose from one’s lucky or guiding light” (AE 6).

Metaphysics’ pretension and concomitant lack of fidelity to life, for Caputo, largely arises out of its abstraction. For Caputo, metaphysics is an essentially abstract enterprise seeking to achieve understanding through disinterested speculation. Taking (Platonic) recollection and (Hegelian) mediation as the basic forms of metaphysical thinking, Caputo sees them both as a turn toward abstraction—“to pure thought and disengaged speculation” (RH 32). This, however, is metaphysics’ downfall: “The great mistake of metaphysics,” Caputo writes, is “to think that we can come up with a pure, interest-free rationality” (RH 262). Thus, the Western metaphysical tradition, from its opening gesture to its consummation, is a grand “intellectual illusion” (RH 19).

Metaphysics, for Caputo, is an abstract system that, as such, entails a certain fixation on universality. For Caputo, a philosophical system entails a fixed set of universal rules.⁵ Such universals obtain to reality in a necessary way that cannot be otherwise—following “the rule of essence and necessity” (RH 32).⁶ A system of necessary and universal propositions presents, for Caputo, a violent hierarchy—a set of structures “that flatten out, and level off, and exclude, and marginalize, and silence.” (Meta 223). What is “flattened out” and “leveled off” in the system is the particularity, singularity, and individuality that pervade and complicate concrete existence. Such “ineffable” singularities constitute “a breach in the surface of philosophy” (AE 73).⁷ Thus, metaphysical systems seek to “contain what they cannot contain”—that is, the singular, the individual, the fragment.⁸

Such an abstract metaphysical system, fixated on universality, functions in such a way that it *privileges static unity*. Caputo claims that philosophy, as metaphysics, from its beginning has sought intelligibility at the expense of movement and difference.⁹ Metaphysics is the “metaphysics of presence” that defines reality in stark terms as pure, present being and its negation. Inasmuch as any movement would call this binary opposition into question, movement as such is suppressed (RH 20, 34).¹⁰ With the suppression of movement, metaphysics can impose an order that escapes and/or arrests the chaotic flux of existence (RH 1).¹¹ Both recollection and mediation are examples of this movement against movement: recollection is a spurious “backwards” movement (RH 14), while mediation is a more cunning yet ultimately illusory movement in that it mimics movement under the guiding hand of a necessary logic (RH 17–19; HKFM 210–11). This privileging of static unity culminates in philosophy-as-metaphysics’ drive toward an abstract static system in which knowledge of reality is elevated to absolute knowledge—a unified totality and a totalizing unity.

Finally, metaphysics, presenting such a total knowledge of reality, gives an absolutely *stable foundation for life*. Because of this, Caputo charges that metaphysics effectively makes light of the difficulty of existence—it allays our fears

with the “assurances of the same” (*RH* 1; *PT* 5).¹² Instead, Caputo engages in the *deconstruction* of such metaphysical stabilizers—disabling them by showing “how the sausage is made”—that they are constructed, all-too-human products that are not eternal or self-evident or rationally necessary but are shot through with the certain arbitrariness and instability that attends any determination. Deconstruction hears the subterranean equivocal and indeterminate echoes in any univocal determination—and especially those that would serve as policing foundations that would arrest and fix the flux of existence and the play of meaning.

The motivating concerns behind Caputo’s critique of metaphysics and his seeking an alternative are twofold. First, seeking a properly humble way of thinking that is appropriate to where we in fact find ourselves, Caputo wants a way of thinking that avoids elevating knowledge of reality to a falsely absolute status. Second, wanting to be true to life and to enjoy an active engagement in life, he seeks to avoid any way of thinking that ultimately supplants the living of life (in the midst of the flux of actuality) with the knowledge of reality (so falsely elevated—against the first concern). In Caputo’s understanding, metaphysics fails on both scores.

Caputo’s Radical Hermeneutics: Metaphysics without Metaphysics

Against such a metaphysics (and, for him, metaphysics as such), Caputo presents a radical hermeneutics as an alternative way to think about reality and our place therein. Radical hermeneutics is a way of thinking about reality—a kind of “metaphysics”—that intends to be otherwise than traditional Western metaphysics—“without metaphysics.” As such an alternative to metaphysics (or perhaps an alternative kind of metaphysics), radical hermeneutics is faithful to life insofar as it is a way of thinking that is involved in (interested in, in the midst of) life in its particularity and difference toward the end of directing one toward the difficulty of one’s existence.

The task of radical hermeneutics is to reexamine and rethink the situation (and situatedness) of human existence—“to reconstitute a more radicalized notion of this being ‘which we ourselves are’”—to get a fix on “the radicality of the fix in which we poor existing individuals find ourselves” (*RH* 289; *MRH* 12). This reappraisal of human existence focuses on the necessity, the incapability, of interpretation (*MRH* 3; *OR* 21). Furthermore, Caputo describes radical hermeneutics as “a hermeneutic more deeply construed” in that it provides no grounding or foundation for interpretation to guide it and ensure its stability and fidelity.¹³ But, on the telling of radical hermeneutics, this precisely is the fidelity of radical hermeneutics—for we have no access to a reality outside of interpretation. Thus, radical hermeneutics stands as a kind of strange bulwark—a foundationless, slippery thing—against the assurances of traditional metaphysics that are betrayals of factual human existence.¹⁴

Caputo’s radical hermeneutics takes its bearings from Heidegger and

Derrida—with continual reference to Nietzsche. The “hermeneutics” of radical hermeneutics largely takes its meaning from Heidegger as an examination of human facticity and the “the groundless play of Being’s comings and goings.”¹⁵ However, the increasingly dominant resource for Caputo’s work is Jacques Derrida. For Caputo, Derrida is “the philosopher of the flux par excellence” (*RH* 116). With Derrida, “radical” hermeneutics takes on a Nietzschean affirmation of flux and becoming, of the endless play of signs and texts, that stands against metaphysics’ stabilizing the flux and stopping the play (*RH* 116–18). It is thus that radical hermeneutics “situates itself in the space that is opened up by the exchange between Heidegger and Derrida” (*RH* 5).

For Caputo, radical hermeneutics provides a *minimalist* understanding of human existence. Recognizing that one cannot fully do away with metaphysics altogether, Caputo seeks a “minimalist metaphysics”—for it is best “to hold metaphysics to a minimum” (*AE* 93). A minimalist metaphysics does not overestimate the status and scope of its knowledge (*GA* 1–2). It is concerned with staying with modest “finite facts” as they appear, if indefinitely, on the surface of experience—not speculating about founding depths (*GA* 1, 3; *AE* 38). In order to accommodate this restrained posture, the minimalist seeks a minimally restrictive or constraining idiom (*AE* 71).¹⁶ This minimalist metaphysics follows “the logic of the *sans*” that Caputo appropriates from Blanchot and Derrida.¹⁷ Thus, radical hermeneutics seeks to present a “metaphysics without metaphysics”—the minimalist metaphysics of a “postmetaphysical rationality” that acknowledges (contrary to traditional metaphysics) “the uncircumventable futility involved in trying to nail things down” (*RH* 211). This minimalist metaphysics without metaphysics favors such constitutionally inadequate basic metaphors as flux, fluidity, movement, free play, instability, events, and happenings as providing the best vocabulary for talking about reality—if we must (*RH* 257, 262; *MD* 140; *MMD* 28).

Whereas, for Caputo, the representative philosophical (non-)movements of metaphysics are recollection and mediation, the representative movement (and movement indeed) of radical hermeneutics is *repetition*. Recollection, taken as the exemplary movement of traditional metaphysics, seeks an original and pure presence that is uncontaminated by the arbitrariness of our all-too-fluid human existence. Repetition, however, sees every “presence”—rather than as something “prior” to lesser, shadowy copies or repetitions thereof that one must trace back to their pure source—as an effect of “repetition.”¹⁸ Following Derrida and Heidegger (against Husserl), Caputo sees the “essences” to be found in consciousness—as, in fact, constructed through an always-different linguistic and historical process. This is a break with metaphysics’ drive toward a static unity insulated from the vagaries of life and an embracing of a creative and productive movement *into* the difficulties of life (*RH* 3; *HKFM* 206, 210n). Repetition points to the fact that any unity, identity, or actuality in life is one that is *produced* and not *found* (*RH* 17). With repetition there is the possibility (contrary to metaphysics) of novelty and movement (*HKFM* 12). Repetition is

a movement that makes its way in and through and not out of the flux. As occupying the core of a radical hermeneutics, repetition entails coping with the flux of life without metaphysical “certification” and facing up to the difficulty of life (RH 239; MMD 28).

A radical hermeneutics seeks to be *faithful to life*—to be honest about the situation in which we find ourselves. As such, radical hermeneutics is a “work of dis-illusionment” that frees one from illusory comforts and leaves one exposed to the hard (difficult) truth that there is no hard (solid) truth—“the cold, hermeneutic truth, the truth that there is no truth, no master name which holds things captive” (RH 146, 192). Before such a realization of our “poverty” as individuals within the limits of existence, radical hermeneutics provides a “lesson in humility” regarding the kind of finish we can put on our ideas—not to put “too high a polish” or “a more sanguine gloss” on our grasp of reality that we ought—for it “understands the power of the flux to wash away the best-laid schemes of metaphysics” (MRH 2, 12; RH 258; AE 224–25). The modesty of this “ascetic ideal” that is faithful to life revolves around a basic “non-knowing” or “structural blindness”—a lack (want) that gives rise to desire (want)—that gives rise to a passion driven by not knowing who we are or where we are going (AE 225, 230; MRH 2, 5).¹⁹

The faithfulness of radical hermeneutics to our existence counters metaphysics’ abstraction, seeking to get above the flux with a basic *interestedness* in the midst of the rush of things. “The existing spirit,” Caputo writes, “exists (*esse*) in the midst (*inter*) of time . . . in the midst of the flux. Its *esse* is *inter-esse*; its being is being-between, being-in-the-midst-of” (HKFM 220). The repetition at the heart of radical hermeneutics embraces this basic locatedness in the midst of temporal becoming (this passive *inter*, being-in-the-midst) and takes up the proper task of forging ahead in this situation as an active *being*, *esse* in the context of the between (RH 33). This repetition as interestedness is “the way of the existing individual” (HKFM 208). As aware of our being-between, radical hermeneutics brings a new emphasis on difference and otherness as occupying a space of priority—as that of which we find ourselves in the midst.

Radical hermeneutics counters metaphysics’ urge to subsume everything within a singular, universal system with the awareness of abiding *difference*—it is “a philosophy of ‘alterity,’” with “a relentless attentiveness and sensitivity to the ‘other’” (GNA 453). Caputo describes radical hermeneutics as a philosophy of difference in terms of its being a “heterology.” This heterology takes two forms: the heteronomic and the heteromorphic. Heterology in the sense of *heteronomism* views difference in terms of the particular and singular other that stands against metaphysics’ universal system of sameness—it is the serious “Rabbi” vigilantly on the lookout for the singular other (AE 42–43, 59). Here, humility takes the form of restraint toward the singular. Heteronomic heterology continues the minimalist project of radical hermeneutics as seeing reality as being made up of particulars and indigestible singularities.²⁰ Such a singular is “marked by its idiosyncrasy, its idiomaticity, its uniqueness, its anomaly, its

unclassifiability, its unrepeatability” (*MRH* 179). Reality is to be seen in terms of concrete, singular, idiosyncratic events happening to particular individuals (as the subjects of particular events) without there being any deeper structure (*AE* 94–95).²¹

Heterology in the sense of *heteromorphism* views difference in terms of the plural, the multiple, the diverse that stands against metaphysics’ unity—it is the exuberant “Dionysiac” celebrating alteration and the many (*AE* 42–43, 59). Heteromorphic heterology continues the minimalist project of radical hermeneutics as seeing reality in terms of “a kind of felicitous nominalism” that keeps things open-ended, celebrates diversity and alteration, and happily greets unanticipated pluralities—it is a “minimalism” that seeks to “maximize the possibilities and keep the door open to results that have not come in yet” (*MRH* 6; *RH* 206). Here, humility takes the form of caution so as “to keep as many options open as possible” (*RH* 258). Radical hermeneutics as heteromorphic heterology is liberating—for oneself as freeing one to a multiplicity of options²² and for the other as keeping the free-play of diverse and changing reality free of the closure of metaphysics’ urge to static unity (*RH* 262). As a fundamentally “otherwise” way of speaking, radical hermeneutics as heterology in both its heteronomic, “Rabbinic” mode and its heteromorphic, “Dionysian” mode, is what Caputo calls a “jewgreek” metaphysics without metaphysics.²³

Radical hermeneutics’ awareness of difference leads away from metaphysics’ stabilizing function toward a proper understanding of *the difficulty of life*. Factual life—anxious because of its lack of hard truths—is difficult, not made safe by a metaphysical canopy (*RH* 1, 189; *MRH* 4; *AE* 4). Life is difficult, for we poor existing individuals have to make judgments, but such judgments or decisions are made against the backdrop of “undecidability.” Undecidability—signaling the inescapability of the flux—is the condition of the possibility of real decision (*AE* 63, 99). Real decision is difficult precisely because we do not know the right answer in advance.²⁴ Living life and making decisions in the face of the flux and undecidability brings us back to radical hermeneutics’ central (quasi-)concept of repetition, which moves from thought to existence—to the task of moving ahead as an existing individual (*HKFM* 208) and forging a self—of seeing one’s self not as a thing to know (via metaphysics) but as a task (*RH* 21, 29).

Radical hermeneutics as a thinking about reality after metaphysics, a metaphysics without metaphysics, moves in the opposite direction from metaphysics—from an abstract escape from the vagaries of existence to an interested involvement in the living of life. As such, radical hermeneutics as an awareness of the difficulty of life leads one from metaphysics (as thinking about reality) to ethics (as regarding how one is to relate to others)—from “what” to “how” (*RH* 257). This much is evident in the strong conclusions of Caputo’s radical hermeneutics. The first conclusion is the denial of the possibility (and/or propriety) of any robust knowledge of reality (or metaphysics) because such is a mask for absolute knowledge of reality—that the only acceptable “metaphysics” is one that recognizes that we do not (and cannot) know who we are or what is go-

ing on or what is true—in short, “without metaphysics.” The second conclusion is the denial of the importance of such a robust knowledge (metaphysics) for life—that metaphysics stands in a position of fundamental opposition to our living of life as it truly is, in all of its ambiguity and difficulty, and we can and should (and ultimately cannot but) make our ways without it.

Caputo’s Critique of Ethics

While radical hermeneutics presses powerfully toward ethics as its goal and consummation, Caputo admits that he has serious problems with ethics as well—so serious that he could be said to be “against ethics.” The basic problem with ethics for Caputo is that it is based on metaphysics and functions toward the same end—to give (false) stability to life. In brief, Caputo contends that not being faithful to life leads to not being faithful to the human other.

For Caputo, ethics is fundamentally *dependent on metaphysics*. Ethics is “a certain *episteme*”—“a (certain) metaphysics (of morals), a metaphysics charged with making obligation safe” (*RH* 5, 73). Ethics—the kind of ethical theory based on metaphysics—seeks to elevate knowledge of its subject matter through metaphysics. Caputo sees the situation now as the “end of ethics.”²⁵ Ethics as depending on failed metaphysics for its grounds ends up being groundless—as being “without why” (*AE* 24–25, 237).

Just as traditional metaphysics is not faithful to life for Caputo, so ethics—as building upon and complicit in such a faithless metaphysics—is not faithful to the other. Ethics, like metaphysics, ends up supplanting (ethical) existence with a kind of abstract knowledge. Caputo contends that life and one’s relation to the other is more difficult and risky than ethics would allow (*AE* 4). Regarding the difficulty of ethical existence, he writes that “we always proceed in the blind, divested of the sure guidance [that] theoretical seeing feigns to lend in advance as we negotiate the ups and downs of existence” (*MRH* 173). As with metaphysics, ethics’ abstraction from ethical existence entails a preoccupation with unity, sameness, and universality.

Ethics, for Caputo, seeks to be a *system of universal rules*. The “mainstream metaphysics of morals” must “invoke universal, rational, or natural laws” (*BA* 66–67). Ethical systems, like and as metaphysics, privilege a kind of static unity to make their knowledge absolute—and this by finding a fixed point of reference to absolve ethical reflection from the arbitrariness of existence. Yet this belief “that what we do . . . admits of formulation in hard and irrevocable rules” is an obstacle to understanding truly ethical living (*RH* 212). The problem with ethical laws and principles is that they have to say something about individuals making particular choices in particular situations (*AE* 73); but such ethical rules (1) do not directly apply to singular situations (i.e., they must be interpreted), (2) do not get away from the internal instability that shadows any universal structure, and (3) are not available as fully understood and fully justified in time for the individual to use them.²⁶ Ethical existence is instead entangled in groundlessness, singularity, particularity, novelty, transcendence, and in-

comprehensibility that resist any kind of universal ethical rules (AE 14; MRH 173). This focus on unity, sameness, and universality intends but fails to provide a sure footing for ethical relations.

Ethics, like and as metaphysics, seeks to provide a stable foundation for life but ends up making light of life's difficulty. Ethics seeks to make ethical relations "safe."²⁷ "But judgment," Caputo contends, "is not safe" (AE 97). Life (and obligation) is more difficult and risky than ethics would allow—"a film of undecidability creeps quietly over the clarity of decisions" (AE 4).

For Caputo, the (metaphysical) knowledge of ethical norms supplants the difficulty of ethical living. Thus, the conclusion of Caputo's critique of ethics and the motivating concerns behind his seeking an alternative can be understood in terms of the following: first, he wants a humble and realistic approach to ethics that avoids elevating the knowledge of ethical guides to a falsely absolute status; and second, he wants an honesty and an engagement that avoids supplanting genuine ethical existence in all its difficulty with the knowledge of ethical guides (so falsely elevated). Metaphysically buttressed ethics fail with regard to both of these concerns.

Caputo's Post-Metaphysical Ethics: Ethics without Ethics

For Caputo, a post-metaphysical ethics—as an ethics (a way of thinking about relating to the other) without ethics (without any metaphysical ethical system)—is faithful to the other insofar as it is a way of thinking that is involved in the relation to the other in its particularity and difference toward the end of directing one toward the difficulty of such a relation.

A post-metaphysical ethics proceeds from the foundationless foundation of radical hermeneutics—it takes place in the withdrawal of foundations, of any deeper grounding, of any metaphysical certification (AE 37; RH 236, 239). Following radical hermeneutics, a post-metaphysical ethics is ethical repetition—the task of constituting, producing, forging, becoming oneself as an ethical self in the midst of the flux of existence without the knowledge of any prior guide or foundation (RH 17, 21, 28–30, 58; HKFM 207, 209–10). The ethical self that is forged is a self in relation to the other without metaphysics. With the end of metaphysics comes "the end of ethics," which "clears the way for a more ethical ethics, allowing the ethicalness of ethics to break out, while insisting that most of what passes itself off as ethics is an idol" (MRH 174). Such an ethics after the end of ethics—"a morals without a metaphysics of morals"—is, as following the project of radical hermeneutics, a minimalism—seeking a maximally "open and undetermined" and "weak and nonconstraining" notion of the Good (RH 257; AE 33, 41). Such a post-metaphysical ethics succeeds in being more faithful to the other than its metaphysical counterpart.

Post-metaphysical ethics seeks to be *faithful to the other*. The project of radical hermeneutics, of seeing the fundamental instability of life, calls on the

virtue—not only of humility regarding our knowledge of reality, of a “generalized *Gelassenheit*” that lets “all things be what and how they are” (*RH* 288)—but also the virtue of compassion arising from our common, comfortless fate with others (*RH* 259). This compassion fundamentally entails a sensitivity—“a hyperbolic sensitivity or hypersensitivity”—to the other (GNA 266). This sensitivity to and interestedness in the other entails a deeper awareness of difference—of the other as other.

An “otherwise” ethics, a post-metaphysical ethics is, for Caputo, a *heterology*. Caputo summarizes such a heterological ethics using Augustine’s dictum: “*Dilige, et quod vis fac*”—“Love, and do what you will” (*AE* 41, 121–22).²⁸ This dictum—as a kind of “principle without principle” proposing “a maximally weak and nonconstraining notion of the Good”—follows the dual trajectory of the heterology of the project of radical hermeneutics, that of heteronomism (*dilige*) and heteromorphism (*et quod vis fac*) (*AE* 41, 121).

The first kind of difference, of *heteronomism*, is the sober, self-effacing, “Rabbinical” posture of being responsive to the call of the other and the call to love (*dilige*) the other—of placing one in the position of a “*non-coercive heteronomy*” (*AE* 42–43, 55, 61; *MRH* 186). For Caputo, this ethical heteronomism—displaying heavily Levinasian overtones—takes the form of *obligation*. Obligation “happens to” one inasmuch as something—some transcendent alterity—seizes and disrupts one from without and demands one’s response (*AE* 7, 8, 14).²⁹

Caputo reiterates the *minimalism* of radical hermeneutics in the “event” or “happening” of obligation. “Obligation,” Caputo writes, “happens”—and this happening is groundless, in a void, without any evident further “why” (*AE* 6, 14, 25, 192, 225, 237). Obligation is a “responsible anarchy”—a “perspective” or “*hermeneia*” that grapples with the abyss (being without any first principle or *arche*) in seeing or hearing in it the call of the other upon one (*BA* 60; *AE* 85, 190, 238). Beyond this, we cannot—or, at least, Caputo admits that he does not—know what obligation “is” (*AE* 192). On this minimalist account of obligation, the locus of the event or happening of obligation is simply the vulnerable and suffering “flesh” of the other (*AE* 196, 209, 214).³⁰

This first kind of difference, of *heteronomic* obligation, finds expression in a radical partiality to the singular, individual other that is before one (*AE* 191, 225). Caputo, following Derrida, speaks of this obligation to the singular other in terms of “the undeconstructibility of justice”—that the ideal of justice is to respond to the needs of the radical singularity of the particular other (GNA 465; *DH* 200).³¹ This ethical privileging of radical, ineffable, unanticipated singularity in obligation is represented by Caputo, following Derrida, in the “hyperbolic” statement: *tout autre est tout autre*—“every other is wholly other” (*MRH* 175, 179; *AE* 74–75; *DH* 196–206).³²

A post-metaphysical ethics is an ethics of obligation. “Obligation,” Caputo argues, “is what is important about ethics, what ethics contains without being able to contain” (*AE* 18). Obligation is the core of ethics that metaphysical

ethics is based upon and betrays, that scandalizes metaphysical ethics, and to which post-metaphysical ethics seeks to be faithful (AE 5).

The second kind of difference or heterology, that of *heteromorphism*, is the exuberant, carnivalistic, Dionysiac posture of celebrating difference (*et quod vis fac*) as multiplicity and diversity (AE 42–43, 61, 121–22). Such an ethical heteromorphism is an “ethics of *Gelassenheit*” that enjoins humility and caution before the play of things—a “letting be” that is maximally nonconstraining and proceeds “in such a way as to keep as many options open as possible” (RH 258–59, 264; AE 41, 121). This “ethics of *Gelassenheit*” (from the Heideggerian side of radical hermeneutics) also opens toward an equally heteromorphic “ethics of dissemination” (from the Derridean side). The humble letting-be makes one a more active advocate for toleration of plurality—of nonexclusionary egalitarianism that seeks “to let many flowers bloom” (OR 62; RH 254–55, 260, 288; AE 39).³³

For Caputo, such a heterological, post-metaphysical ethics—an ethics without ethics that follows radical hermeneutics’ metaphysics without metaphysics—functions to place an accent on the *difficulty* of ethical relation. Post-metaphysical ethics sees that we act lacking unshakable metaphysical foundations, and thus with a heightened awareness of our insecurity—of our “fear and trembling” (RH 239; AE 191). We are, again, in a situation of undecidability, in which we have to make ethical decisions and judgments without any sure guidelines that would answer our questions ahead of time (AE 3, 63).

Caputo’s post-metaphysical ethics effectively re-inscribes ethics within the “repetition” of radical hermeneutics. In ethical repetition the individual seeks to constitute, to produce the self (whose existence precedes its essence) (RH 30, 58; HKFM 207). However, in seeking to constitute the self *as ethical*, ethical repetition presses toward a privilege for the other that is also a de-centering of the self. Ethical repetition is in need of—focused/centered around—the other.³⁴ Thus, ethical repetition deconstructs its own project, in that in order to achieve itself, it has to become something else. To put it another way, if the other is only a function of a project of self-becoming, it is not truly other—ethics is not ultimately about self-becoming (even this constructed stability is too stable). This “something else” is a “hyperbolic” ethics—a religious ethics—that is even further purified of metaphysics. It is thus that an awareness of the difficulty of ethical life leads one to the use of religious language. Disentangling oneself from a faithless metaphysics in order to be faithful to life and to the other brings one more and more into the realm of “faith”—the domain of properly religious faith.

This further disentanglement of ethics from metaphysics can be seen in the strong conclusions of Caputo’s post-metaphysical ethics (without ethics). The first strong conclusion is the denial of ethics inasmuch as it entails a metaphysical knowledge of ethical guides—the only acceptable ethics is one that operates without metaphysics—that is, without the aforementioned “ethics.” Following closely is the second strong conclusion of Caputo’s post-metaphysical

ethics—echoing that of his radical hermeneutics—which is the denial of the significance of metaphysical knowledge for truly ethical living.

Caputo's Critique of Religion

Religion, for Caputo, is also susceptible to metaphysical faithlessness. Such metaphysical religion is detrimental to a properly religious faith insofar as it is an abstract system of certain propositions that privileges static unity in order to provide a stable foundation for life that undercuts a properly religious faith.

Metaphysical religion elevates the knowledge of God or the divine or the absolute to an absolute level. Such metaphysical religion inscribes God into an onto-theo-logical (metaphysical) framework in which God functions as a highest being and first cause. It forgets that religion is a human practice and that all such onto-theo-logical frameworks are never more absolute than their finite makers (*Rel 2*).³⁵ This metaphysical religion is detrimental to a properly religious faith in that it supplants religious existence with a metaphysical knowledge fixated on abstract propositions—confusing “religious life with assenting to certain propositions” (*Rel 2–3*).

Metaphysical religion's fixation on abstract propositions entails talking of God in terms of a systematic universality and sameness. Metaphysical religion absolutizes propositions about God that are but contingent human artifacts—it confuses the infinite transcendence of God with human religion, elevating the latter to the status of the former (*MRH 255; OR 93–94*). Such religious systems present themselves as attaining a rigorous and certain status that is, in fact, beyond human capacities.³⁶ This kind of theological system presents God as an ultimate static unity—as a “God of the same”—that is subordinated to Greek ontology (*HKFM 223; PT 113*).³⁷ For Caputo, such a systematically constructed “God of the same” functions to privilege an exclusivist hierarchy (*AE 34; OR 110*).

Metaphysical religion's fixation on conceiving of God in terms of unity, sameness, and universality functions to give life a stable foundation that makes light of and thus undercuts the difficulty of a properly religious faith. Metaphysical religion seeks a “Secret” or a “heavenly hook” to “bail us out and lift us above the flux of undecidability” (*MRH 193; PT 334*). The radically finite situation of human life in the midst of the flux that is recognized in the radically hermeneutical concept of repetition severely limits the kind of claims theology can make (*HKFM 222–23*).

For Caputo, the metaphysical knowledge of God supplants religious life—living religious faith. Thus, the conclusion of Caputo's critique of religion can be summarized in that metaphysical religion (1) elevates the knowledge of God to a falsely absolute status, and (2) ultimately supplants a properly religious faith. The motivating concerns behind his seeking an alternative to this kind of religion are (as with metaphysics and ethics), first, a desire for a properly/

realistically humble regard for our knowledge of God and, second, an interest in preserving the properly existential/lived character of religious faith.

Caputo's Post-Metaphysical Religion: Religion without Religion

For Caputo, post-metaphysical religion, or “religion without religion,” is faithful to “God”—is a properly religious faith—insofar as it denies the knowledge of God and the significance of such knowledge for religious faith and thus opens the way for a passionate love of God that is embodied in the love of the other. Post-metaphysical religion, as a “more chastened” notion of religious faith, begins with the death of the God of metaphysics—of onto-theo-logy—the God that is tailored to fit knowledge (*RH* 271; *Rel* 2; *MRH* 174). This post-metaphysical religion consists of a properly religious faith that is free from faithless (to life, to the other, to faith) metaphysics. Such religion is a “religion without religion” in that here one can “be deeply and abidingly ‘religious’ with or without theology, with or without the religions”—that is, with or without any particular or determinate claims to religious knowledge (*OR* 3).

Experience and the Love of God

Properly religious faith is fundamentally concerned with passion—or, more specifically, a “passion of non-knowing” (*MRH* 5)—a passion for the impossible that constitutes a (if not the) structure of experience. This structure of experience is a passion for and affirmation of the *tout autre*, of a wholly other that breaks open the present horizon of possibility—that looks forward to something new and unlooked for, to the impossible (*PT* xxiv, 202; *MRH* 258). Caputo goes so far as to say that the religious is what constitutes experience as experience—in that only with the impossible does one truly experience something new (*OR* 9, 11). This “religious edge to experience,” Caputo writes, “that notion of life at the limit of the possible, on the verge of the impossible, constitutes a religious structure, the religious side of every one of us” (*OR* 11). We can thus see a similar movement in Caputo’s treatment of repetition as a fundamental structure of experience that is religious insofar as genuine repetition only occurs when one sees that repetition is not possible for one to achieve—when one sees that repetition is impossible—and then opens to that beyond the self for the transformation of the self (*RH* 30; *HKFM* 217).³⁸ Following Derrida, Caputo names this fundamental passion for the impossible in human experience as “the love of God”—which is religion (*OR* 1, 113; *PT* 332). For Derrida and Caputo, “the name of God” is “the name of what we desire and love without question, *sans voir, sans avoir, sans savoir*”—“God” is the impossible (without seeing, possessing, or knowing) that we passionately desire.³⁹ Thus, the passion of life leads us to the love of God.

From “God” to Love

The passion of life that is the love of God entails a deep attunement and directedness toward “the other.” God, as “the impossible,” is “the coming (*l’invention*) of the other” (*PT* 71–76). For Caputo, post-metaphysical religion is to be (with radical hermeneutics and post-metaphysical ethics) heterological. The heteronomism of post-metaphysical religion is evident in that the God of properly religious faith is “an absolute heterogeneity that unsettles all the assurances of the same within which we comfortably ensconce our selves”—in short, “the God of the other” (*PT* 5).⁴⁰

At the heart of Caputo’s reflections on “God” and “the other” is the close relationship between religion and obligation. In both there is a bond between the singular individual and the singular other. Following Levinas and Derrida, Caputo recognizes a structural identity between religion and obligation. Religion is obligation to a singularity that is higher than the universal.⁴¹ Religion is

the *re-ligare*, which means the one-on-one bond of the existing individual with the Absolute, the absolute relation to the Absolute. The *re-ligare* is the *ob-ligare*, the absolute bond, the obligation, but without the shelter afforded by the universal. (*AE* 18)⁴²

In obligation and religion, one is subject to a call, an unconditional solicitation. As religion reflects obligation, so does obligation reflect religion, in that with obligation we experience an *other* that commands respect and has a mysterious depth to it.⁴³ In both, one is structurally “on the receiving end” (*AE* 11). The “power” in both obligation and religion is that of the call, the appeal, not that of the ontological (metaphysical) status of the caller. Thus, in both obligation and religion “something unconditional happens, without sovereignty and without being, without force and without power”—“whose only power is the power of a powerless but unconditional appeal” (*WSWB* 9, 26). Caputo’s religious project can thus be seen as an effort to conceive of a God “without sovereignty” in terms of obligation to the other (*WSWB* 12).

At the core of Caputo’s conception of the relation between religion and obligation is the Derridean understanding of the *tout autre*. “*Tout autre*,” Derrida says, “*est tout autre*.”⁴⁴ In other (English) words, every other is wholly other. The relation that is obligation—that we have with every singular, human “other”—is identical with the relation that is religion—that we have with a singular, “absolute,” wholly “Other.”⁴⁵ Caputo writes approvingly that for Derrida “it is enough for ‘God’ to be the name of the absolutely other, a place holder for the *tout autre*”—this is “the work done by the name of God, the value of religious discourse and religious stories” (*PT* 101, 102).⁴⁶

Thus, religion—the kind of relation one has with God—is a *hyperbolic* way of speaking of obligation—of one’s “hypersensitivity” to the demands of the other (*GNA* 466). This is Caputo’s understanding of Levinas’ “unlikely story” of the other and absolute alterity.⁴⁷ The absolutely Other is “a poetic and hyperbolic name for the fact, as it were, of obligation, of heteronomy . . . a way of say-

ing: obligation happens, *emphatic!*” It is a way of speaking of “an extreme of responsibility, of responsiveness and sensibility to the demands of singularity” (AE 83; DH 200).

God or Love?

On the more heteromorphic side of this post-metaphysical, heterological religion, Caputo sees religious faith as an essentially (even radically) hermeneutical enterprise that deals with certain basic undecidable situations. Religious faith, for Caputo, is a kind of hermeneutics (MRH 236). As such, faith operates under the “disconcerting conditions” of undecidability—with the reading of ambiguous traces that cannot be absolutely tracked down—with making its way in the dark flux of existence (RH 281; MRH 200, 210; PT 57–61). Religious faith has to deal with the tragic sense of life—the persistence of the abyss—that perpetually throws it into question. Religion is anxiously “co-constituted” with its non-religious other that sees an abysmal, anonymous nothing behind life—that sees life and its suffering as an innocent and meaningless becoming (OR 120, 124; AE 245; RH 282, 288; GA 16). The tragic view, in which flux rules all, cannot be excluded or silenced. Faith must own up to it—include it in itself. Whereas Caputo, in his earlier work (i.e., up to *Radical Hermeneutics*) could resolve the tension, in a sense, by conceiving of religious faith as a (quasi-Heideggerian) mystical experience of the flux, the abyss itself, he prefers a fundamental and persistent (Derridean) undecidability between the religious and the Nietzschean tragic view in his subsequent work (RH 269, MMD 28–29). Thus, the love of and obligation to the other that constitute the heart of a post-metaphysical religion are themselves construals—seeing compassion as meaningful—on the face of an anonymous and loveless force/flux/nothing/abyss (OR 118; AE 244–45).

The other and, in his more recent work, more prominent undecidability inherent in properly religious faith is that obtaining between “God” and “love.” We ultimately do not and cannot know whether “love” is an example of, a way of telling us something about, God or if “God” is an example of, a way of telling us something about, love.⁴⁸ This reflects the undecidability intimated above between the other and God to whom we are absolutely obligated.⁴⁹ Properly religious faith exists in the “endless substitutability and translatability” between “God” and “love” (PT 52; OR 126).⁵⁰

“God”/“Love”

A key point to which Caputo repeatedly returns is that undecidability is not a recipe for indecision and inaction, for the abolition of faith and deeds, but the condition for the possibility of faith (MD 192; AE 244; RH 281, 288; MRH 220–21). The “post-metaphysical” non-knowing that puts our knowledge of reality in a permanent state of undecidability is what makes post-metaphysical religious faith other to (all-too-metaphysical) knowledge. For Ca-

puto, faith, as a decision in the face of undecidability, is fundamentally tied up with action.

In the end, the basic and inescapable undecidability between God and love functions to elicit loving action and deed. Ultimately, it does not matter what exemplifies what: it does not matter which is ultimate (*PT* 138). What does matter—what follows, regardless of which is which—is action. Either or both call us to become different, actively loving people.⁵¹ In fact, Caputo goes so far as to say that “God” is less a name of a “what” than a “how,” an invitation to action, “the name of a deed”—whose force is more pragmatic than semantic (*OR* 115, 135, 141; *PMDG* 304). Thus, in the end, it does not matter if a properly religious faith is “religious” (talking about God) or not, as long as it is loving.⁵² Properly religious faith is reducible to loving obligation to the other, without remainder. It is thus that one can “be deeply and abidingly ‘religious’ with or without theology, with or without the religions” (*OR* 3).

In sum, Caputo’s religion without religion is marked by certain strong conclusions. The first strong conclusion is the denial of metaphysical knowledge of the absolute or God, in that such is a mask for absolute knowledge. What is emphasized instead is one’s fundamental position of non-knowing. The second strong conclusion is the denial of the significance of metaphysical knowledge for religious life. What is important is the passion. A genuine religious faith (or love) that is dragged down by or hoisted up into a “faithless” metaphysics is thus betrayed.

“Faithless” Metaphysics or Genuine Religious Faith

In Caputo’s work, one is ultimately faced with a choice between a “faithless” metaphysics and genuine religious faith—true religion. This “bad faith” metaphysics is not faithful or honest to life (to “who we are”), and as such it leads to bad faith in relating to others and to God. On the other side, metaphysics without metaphysics, ethics without ethics, and religion without religion coincide in a single way of being that is faithful to existence in the flux and is faithful in obligation to the singular other, which is the same as being faithful to “God.”

This progression from metaphysics to its/the other is manifest in how Caputo presents several positions—or rather, “denials”—regarding metaphysics, ethics, and religion. Regarding metaphysics, Caputo—motivated by concern about metaphysics’ elevation of knowledge of reality to a falsely absolute status and supplanting the living of life (in the midst of the flux of actuality) with the knowledge of reality (so falsely elevated)—denies any robust knowledge of reality (or metaphysics) as well as the significance of any such robust knowledge (metaphysics) for life. Regarding ethics, Caputo—motivated by concern about ethics’ elevation of the knowledge of ethical guides to a falsely absolute status and supplanting genuine ethical existence in all its difficulty with the knowledge of ethical guides (so falsely elevated)—denies any ethics that entails (metaphysical) knowledge of ethical guides and the significance of any

such ethical knowledge for truly ethical living. Regarding religion, Caputo—motivated by concern about metaphysical religion’s elevation of the knowledge of God to a falsely absolute status and supplanting a properly religious faith—denies any metaphysical knowledge of the absolute or God and the significance of metaphysical knowledge for genuine religious faith.