

# CAPUTO'S POSTMODERN UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGION

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## Abstract

The most important characteristic of the age in which we live is the prominence of pluralistic and local understandings. In modern thought, the importance of reaching universal, objective, and precise knowledge is known. In postmodern thought, on the other hand, almost the opposite situation is put forward, and religion finds its place among pluralistic and local understandings. Religion no longer has valid, inclusive, and generalizable claims for everyone. In the postmodern age, religion is referred to as something between things. John Caputo, who has a very important place in contemporary thought, develops his thoughts from a postmodern framework. However, Caputo develops a hermeneutic approach to avoid falling into relativism. In doing so, he is under the influence of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Derrida. In particular, he develops an "event" theology based on Derrida's concept of "religion without religion". Combining

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this idea with hermeneutics, Caputo believes that life is always interpreted differently but that life still has a religious aspect. From this point of view, he puts forward an understanding of “weak theology”. Caputo’s “weak” theology rethinks various theological tropes and themes through a lens that significantly reshapes our understanding of the role and purpose of theology. In this paper, we address the concepts of weak theology and religion without religion and critically examine how religion and theology are situated within postmodern thought.

*Keywords:* Weak theology, hermeneutics, postmetaphysical thought, postmodernism

## Introduction

American philosopher and theologian John D. Caputo (1940-) is a prominent figure in postmodern theology. He employs a deconstructive approach that takes into account the insights of negative theology, reimagining the purpose of theology itself. This involves moving away from talking about God and toward talking to God and what God calls us to do. Working within the Christian tradition, John Caputo developed a strand of postmodern theology known as “weak theology” that challenges modern presuppositions within traditional or “strong” theology, particularly the sovereignty and omnipotence of God, with the aim of reawakening theology to its practical and ethical goals. Caputo largely avoids some questions by offering a view of religious experience that is relatively indifferent to the existence or nonexistence of God. Caputo’s work has had a significant impact on philosophical and theological discourse, and he is a key figure in bridging 20<sup>th</sup>- and 21<sup>st</sup>-century theology.<sup>1</sup>

Caputo’s first major works, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought* (1978; reprinted 1986), *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics* (1982), and *Demythologizing Heidegger* (1993), demonstrate his concern for the interrelation between religious experience and philosophical thought. These works highlight the

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<sup>1</sup> William E. Swart, *Religious Experience at the Limits of Language: Levinas, Marion and Caputo from a Post-Phenomenological Perspective* (Dallas: The University of Texas, PhD Dissertation, 2017), 20.

limits of systematic philosophical thinking through the use of mystical themes and tropes.

Caputo's writings reflect an experience of language resulting from the nonexistence of a divine Other. His philosophy and theology are founded upon an essentially Nietzschean view that there is no supreme being that corresponds to the definition of God found in Western religion. When discussing the relevance of deconstruction to religion, the author frequently quotes Derrida's statement in *Circumfession* that he could "rightly pass for an atheist".<sup>2</sup> Caputo does not make the same claim for himself, and such a claim may be an overstatement. Caputo has a passion for religion that differs from the views of most contemporary philosophers who deny the existence of God. Caputo describes God as an uncontainable and ineffable event, which contrasts with the name of God –an inadequate name– from our worldly perspective. In his book *The Weakness of God*, Caputo does not attempt to elevate the concept of God to a sovereign power beyond language but rather argues that theology is a "weak" enterprise pointing to a "weak" God.

Using Derridean deconstruction, Caputo provides an explanation of the human longing for the God of Western religion. By employing deconstruction, Caputo moves the discussion of the human perception of God to the realm of language through what he calls "radical" hermeneutics. According to Caputo, the experience of hoping for the presence of God is an experience of impossibility, a perplexing experience of language, but one that is still accompanied by meaning. Furthermore, the concept of "weak theology" developed by Caputo discusses how postmodernism can interact with theology and bring about a change in theological thought. This concept enables Caputo to address postmodernism from a theological perspective. Caputo's approach views postmodernism as a dynamic process of interpretation and considers it a perspective that needs to be constantly reinterpreted. This allows Caputo to treat postmodernism not as a fixed doctrine but as a perspective that is constantly changing and evolving.

John Caputo's concept of "weak theology" refers to an approach that questions and transforms traditional theological understandings. Caputo aims to reshape theology by deciphering the dogmas and

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<sup>2</sup> John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 35.

beliefs of the theological tradition. From his perspective, it is emphasized that God is not a sovereign being who rules over everything. In this context, Caputo argues that the name of God is an event and that theology is the interpretation of this event. He argues that God does not exist but continues to exist.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, in this study, after mentioning the relationship between deconstruction and religion, we discuss Caputo's weak theology and how it differs from traditional theologies.

### **1. Postmodernism, Deconstruction, and Religion**

Modern philosophy has been predominantly secular and humanistic, centering on the premise that human beings possess the unique capability to discover natural and social truths and subsequently construct their worlds in alignment with these truths. Modern theorists postulate the existence of a law and order in the cosmos and society, which govern nature and social conditions and can be discerned through the application of reason. Reason is conceived as a distinctive human faculty, the cognitive power enabling humans to subjugate nature and engender moral and just societies. This belief in rationality emerged during the Renaissance and the scientific revolutions of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, further solidified during the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and maintained its dominance, albeit contested, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, influential 19<sup>th</sup>-century philosophers, notably Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, critically challenged the foundational assumptions of reason and modern theory, thereby paving the way for a postmodern approach to philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

Both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche reduce egalitarian politics to herd envy of the strong or noble. However, Kierkegaard systematically champions passion over reason. According to Kierkegaard, there are three stages of existence: aesthetic, ethical, and religious. In each of these stages, passion and nonrational components are considered superior to rationality. In the aesthetic stage, sensual pleasures such as culinary taste, art, and eroticism provide the earthly delights of

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<sup>3</sup> Justin Sands, "Confessional Discourses, Radicalizing Traditions: On John Caputo and the Theological Turn", *Open Theology* 8 (2022), 43.

<sup>4</sup> Steven Best - Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn: Critical Perspectives* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1997), 2.

everyday life rather than the machinations of reason. In the ethical stage, Kierkegaard values the passions of resolve, choice, and commitment over universal principles and the faculty of moral judgment. According to Kierkegaard, the religious stage represents the highest mode of existence. He champions the infinite passion of choosing Christian belief, the absurd faith in Christian mysteries and paradoxes, and the subjective yearning for salvation and redemption as the heart and soul of religious life.<sup>5</sup>

Nietzsche agrees with Kierkegaard that contemporary thought, morality, and religion contribute to the leveling process. However, Nietzsche differs from Kierkegaard in that he views all existing forms of morality and religion, particularly Christianity, as repressive of vital life energies and hostile to individuality. Nietzsche radicalizes the Enlightenment critique of ideology. He advocates a relentlessly secular approach to values and theory. Nietzsche's philosophical critique mutated into modern existentialism and then postmodern theory. This makes him a master theorist of both traditions that links existentialism to the postmodern turn in philosophy. Nietzsche anticipated postmodern theory by critiquing the subject and reason, deconstructing modern notions of truth, representation, and objectivity, and presenting a highly aestheticized philosophy and mode of writing. His theory of perspectivism is also noteworthy.<sup>6</sup>

Nietzsche's legacy is complex and contradictory. He is one of the most important and enigmatic figures in the transition from modern to postmodern thought. His assault on Western rationalism profoundly influenced postmodern theorists such as Heidegger, Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, and Lyotard, who broke with modern theory and sought alternative theories.<sup>7</sup>

According to Caputo, postmodernism is often viewed by religious believers as a continuation of Nietzsche's philosophy, as it promotes the idea that God is dead and that everything is permitted. However, it has been criticized by the Christian right as frivolous skepticism that undermines the possibility of absolutes such as God, truth, or morality, leaving us vulnerable to relativism. Jean-Francois Lyotard famously described postmodernism as exhibiting "incredulity toward grand

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<sup>5</sup> Best - Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn*, 2-3.

<sup>6</sup> John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (London, New York: Routledge Press, 2001), 49-60.

<sup>7</sup> Best - Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn*, 5.

narratives". In doing so, he contrasted it with the comforting notion of religious faith in divine providence – the belief in an omnipotent and omniscient God who oversees the world and works all things for good. Lyotard argues that such grand narratives are no longer believable.<sup>8</sup>

Caputo states that postmodernism creates much complexity and disturbs both theists and atheists. While postmodernism may challenge traditional beliefs, it also presents complications for modern atheism. Jacques Derrida cautions against "theological prejudices" not only in overtly theological contexts but also in "metaphysics in its entirety, even when it professes to be atheist". Therefore, Derrida warns us about the theologians of atheistic metaphysics. Theology extends beyond divinity schools, as it addresses the concept of a fixed center. Therefore, upon closer examination, postmodernism is not a welcoming environment for atheism, especially if it involves a metaphysical or definitive denial of God. Recently, a version of postmodern thinking has emerged that is unsettling to both the religious right and secularizing postmodernists. This version identifies "modernity" with "secularization" and sees in "postmodernity" an opportunity for "postsecular" and even "postmodern theology".<sup>9</sup>

Caputo reduces the concept of postmodernism to three philosophical items: "(1) the affirmation of radical and irreducible pluralism (of what Lyotard calls 'paganism'), (2) the rejection of an overarching, metaphysical, or foundational schema (of what Lyotard calls 'monotheism' and Derrida calls 'theology'), and (3) a suspicion of fixed binary categories that describe rigorously separable regions (typically characteristic of 'structuralism')".<sup>10</sup>

The concept of postmodernism in contemporary thought primarily includes the criticism of modern humanism and Enlightenment thought.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, it can be said that postmodernism is humanism, which makes humans, as the reference point of knowledge, morality, and value, the center of the universe. Postmodernism involves the criticism of Enlightenment thought, which claims that the only valid

<sup>8</sup> John D. Caputo, "Atheism, A/theology, and the Postmodern Condition", *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 267.

<sup>9</sup> Caputo, "Atheism, A/theology, and the Postmodern Condition", 267-268.

<sup>10</sup> Caputo, "Atheism, A/theology, and the Postmodern Condition", 268.

<sup>11</sup> Luc Ferry, *Apprendre à Vivre - Traité de philosophie à l'usage des jeunes générations* (Paris: Club France Loisirs, 2006), 136.

way to reach the truth is through rational reasoning and that this reasoning is a liberating power. However, postmodern thought, which is positioned within contemporary philosophy, involves a radical deconstruction of the claims of humanism that defend the transcendence of ideals. The term postmodernism is also related to major cultural and intellectual movements such as feminism, pragmatism, existentialism, deconstruction, and postempiricist philosophy of science.<sup>12</sup>

As Charlesworth notes, postmodernism, though in a sense provoked by modernity, is a movement that subjects Enlightenment rationality to a radical critique and points us toward beliefs and values that modernity rejects.<sup>13</sup> It refuses to view science as a supreme model or meta-narrative; it recognizes the diversity and pluralism of local knowledge and traditions that emerge from people's lived experiences; and it has developed a comprehensive critique of technology. For this reason, universal and definitive judgments are harshly criticized in postmodern thought. Similarly, claims about the existence of God are also criticized. Postmodern thought also includes the rejection of certain and final propositions about God. Classical proofs of God's existence depend on the assumption that we can take a totalizing view of the world as if creation were a systematic whole, where God plays the role of an ultimate or transcendent "foundation" or ground. However, no postmodernist can ground the religious order through a process of totalization and foundationalism. At this point, the influence of poststructuralists is especially evident.

"Poststructuralists" (who later adopted the title "Deconstructionists") reject the view that a fixed structure exists. According to this perspective, all literature depends on the reader's perspective. Meaning is derived from the text through a dialog with it. Therefore, there are as many readings of the text as there are readers. Deconstructionists provided postmodernists with a tool to advance their total rejection of the concept of objective truth. Jacques Derrida is credited as the "father of modern deconstruction". He is a philosopher who has had a major impact in the field of literary

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World Views* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 395.

<sup>13</sup> M. Charlesworth, *Philosophy and Religion: From Plato to Postmodernism* (Oxford: Oneworld Press, 2002), 156-157.

criticism.<sup>14</sup> According to Derrida, deconstruction is not simply a critical and destructive practice but rather a specific reading approach to the philosophical or nonphilosophical tradition's inherited legacy. Based on this approach, we can say that metaphysical existence and truth claims have historically separated their subjects from individuality, relationality, contextuality, and temporality by resorting to rationality within a dualist epistemology. Due to this tendency, the relationship between metaphysical thought and the deconstructionist view is cautious. Deconstruction aims to expose the violence inherent in metaphysical modes of thinking and reveal that claims of universal truth are merely constructs that can be interpreted in different ways.<sup>15</sup> Translation attempts related to deconstruction provide insight into possible interpretations. However, it should be noted that these translations may lead to misunderstandings and biases. The primary cause of these misunderstandings is that deconstruction is often viewed as playing a negative role. Deconstruction involves a radical critique of metaphysics, particularly the type of metaphysics found in Western philosophy. It calls into question the possibility of establishing a foundation for absolute knowledge, the reciprocity theory of truth, the notion of certainty, a center or starting point that ensures the authenticity of thought, and the apparentness of double opposition.<sup>16</sup>

Derrida's thought centers on the critique of metaphysics. He argues that Western philosophy, being Platonic/metaphysical, aims to eliminate time, history, difference, and contingency from the world.<sup>17</sup> While Western philosophy aims to uncover the basis of truth and stable values, it endeavors to transcend into an imaginary realm of pure and timeless universals. Philosophical concepts such as "ideas", "clear and distinct ideas", "absolute knowledge", and "transcendental subject" attempt to limit the range of meaning within a closed system of "truth". This limitation of meaning often leads to paradoxes, contradictions, and inconsistencies that are ripe for deconstruction. From this perspective, as Hollinger points out, the search for pure being is

<sup>14</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 113.

<sup>15</sup> Kasım Küçükcalp, *Jacques Derrida: Felsefenin Dekonstrüksiyonu* (İstanbul: Ketebe, 2020), 14.

<sup>16</sup> Recep Alpyağılı, *Derrida'dan Caputo'ya Dekonstrüksiyon ve Din* (İstanbul: İz Yayıncılık, 2017), 32.

<sup>17</sup> Best - Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn*, 11.



something that can never be realized, it finds itself constantly postponed, because the search for pure beginning, origin or pure being, the attempt to name or express it, the search for being, the search for naming or expressing it. This attempt is an impassable quagmire, because it results in the naming or denotation of other elements in the system of signs.<sup>18</sup>

Deconstruction is not negative. It is not destructive; it does not aim to separate or disrupt to reveal the inner eye. It asks questions about the essence, about being here now. It does not aim to destroy or disrupt but to open up new possibilities of discourse.<sup>19</sup> Rather than destroying, it was also necessary to understand how an "ensemble" was constituted and to reconstruct it to this end.<sup>20</sup> The main concern is the potential impact of deconstruction on religion and theology. According to Hart,

Deconstruction provides a critique not of theology but of the metaphysical element within Theology and any discourse for that matter. If we take the phrase 'God is dead' as a statement about the impossibility of finding a transcendent point that can serve as a basis for discussion, then deconstruction is truly a discourse on the death of God. But if we treat the phrase 'God is dead' as a formula for belief or disbelief, then there is no reason to associate it with deconstruction.<sup>21</sup>

It is also through some form of the process of deconstruction that we are able to speak, in a sense, of transcending our world and "going beyond being". There is a suggestion in Derrida that, in this way, we can make sense of the religious sphere or of "the divine". Deconstruction arose as a response to the structuralist theory of interpreting literary texts. According to this theory, cultures develop literature to give meaning to their existence and make sense of the meaninglessness of reality.<sup>22</sup> Structuralists believe that all cultures use a common structure, and by analyzing this structure and reading texts

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<sup>18</sup> Robert Hollinger, *Postmodernism and the Social Sciences: A Thematic Approach* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), 164.

<sup>19</sup> Alpyağıl, *Dekonstrüksiyon ve Din*, 42.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Letter to a Japanese Friend", *Derrida and Différance*, ed. David Wood - Robert Bernasconi (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1985), 2.

<sup>21</sup> Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 39.

<sup>22</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 78.

with this understanding, one can make sense of experiences of reality. According to structuralism, a linguistic theory popular in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the relationship between words or signs and their meanings is not intrinsic.<sup>23</sup> Instead, it is determined by the way people in linguistic communities use them. Jacques Derrida, a proponent of Deconstructionism, took structuralism to its logical conclusion: if there are no ultimate relationships, there is no ultimate reality. Therefore, words are the only existing reality. Words do not have an objective truth beyond their cultural and social context, and they merely point to other words.

Deconstruction is a form of radical reductionism that originated with Aristotle's metaphysical reduction of things to "first principles". It has become prominent in Western thought and is applied in the scientific validation of phenomena through data analysis and dissection, as well as in literary and art criticism and factual or Heideggerian thinking. Modern philosophy owes much to Descartes' idealist reduction of reality to the cogito, as well as to the twentieth-century reductionist methods of Husserl's idealist epoché and Wittgenstein's positivist reductionism. However, deconstruction takes this further by asserting that the constitution of something is accidental, arbitrary, or illusory, thereby undermining order and meaning. This marks the difference between modernist reductionism and postmodernist deconstruction. Deconstruction occurs automatically, as evidenced by the space between written words, time between spoken words, punctuation, voice inflections, and unhinged time and space. Language automatically deconstructs meaning. John Caputo observes that "nobody has to come along and deconstruct things."<sup>24</sup> According to Derrida, objects are deconstructed by their own inherent truths. He also argues that anything that is constructed can be deconstructed.<sup>25</sup>

Deconstruction occurs –and must occur– because reality and being itself are undermined by arbitrariness and difference. Caputo says that

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<sup>23</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Theology and the Condition of Postmodernity: A Report on Knowledge (of God)", *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 17.

<sup>24</sup> John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2007), 30.

<sup>25</sup> Jim Hanson, "Surviving Postmodernism: A New Ontotheology", *American Journal of Sociological Research* 5(3A) (2015), 13.

différance “contains and transcends onto-theology” and combines onto-theology with negative theology, which is the dualistic counterpart of affirmation to negate onto-theology and is therefore full of “hyperousiology”. Caputo places différance in a kind of intermediate realm above being but below the divine, a kind of inexorable purgatory in line with Derrida’s definition of différance as “having neither existence nor essence”. Différance “is not derived from any category of being, whether present or absent ... It contains ontotheology, registers it, and transcends it irreversibly.”<sup>26</sup> According to Caputo, différance, when defined as a concept that neither exists nor does not exist, has sometimes been understood as the *deus absconditus*\* of negative theology, as the condition of the possibilities of words and concepts that supposedly transcends the limit of human consciousness. Derrida, the originator of différance, suspects that the adequacy of language is a logocentric exercise that conceals rather than reveals being. Written words are mere “traces” that have lost their connection with their original referents; thus, the essence created by language has been shredded by différance. “Différance provides the reminder that the word or form differs from what it represents and keeps open the discovery of new and ever-changing meanings that result from further or hermeneutic interpretation.”<sup>27</sup>

Words only refer to other words; hence, Derrida’s well-known statement, “there is nothing beyond the text.” To borrow a line from Leonard Cohen: There is a crack (of différance) in everything (of existence), that is how the light gets in (to disclose being). What predicative subjects and objects language constructs, différance deconstructs in the course of everyday language, as evidenced by a pause in voice or a comma in text that can let in new light.<sup>28</sup>

Caputo also puts forward Derrida’s idea that there is nothing outside the text in this sense. Additionally, the text should adhere to conventional academic structure and formatting, and technical terms should be used when necessary to convey precise meaning. Words do

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<sup>26</sup> Hanson, “Surviving Postmodernism”, 16.

\* The Hidden God, which the human mind cannot comprehend through rationality or logic.

<sup>27</sup> Hanson, “Surviving Postmodernism”, 14.

<sup>28</sup> Hanson, “Surviving Postmodernism”, 14.

not have an objective truth beyond their cultural and social context, and they merely point to other words. According to the theory presented, “reality” is a social construct that is created through language. This interpretation is subjective and varies between individuals and societies. Therefore, a text in and of itself cannot contain meaning; rather, the reader creates meaning by interpreting the text through their own understanding and cultural background. Finally, the text should be free from grammatical errors, spelling mistakes, and punctuation errors. The language used to construct meaning should be clear, concise, and objective, avoiding the use of biased or emotional language.<sup>29</sup> According to Caputo, deconstruction is again used to strip God of his name and voice and to remove God or the divine from being and cast it into inaccessible nothingness. Caputo states that being and God cannot be connected, and therefore, any onto-theological stance toward God is idolatry: “We must always and ceaselessly criticize the idols of ontotheology.”<sup>30</sup>

Initially, it was assumed that deconstruction and religion had a negative correlation. However, deconstruction has primarily been understood in the English-speaking world in a secularist and atheist context, particularly in a Nietzschean context. This may be due to understandable reasons. Since deconstruction presents itself as a critique of Western metaphysics, it is reasonable to subject theology to this critique. However, as Armor suggests, it is premature to apply deconstruction to the field of theology. Deconstruction may limit the classical concept of God as the guarantor of truth, but it does not necessarily challenge the idea of God.<sup>31</sup> It is rather a practice that helps us understand and decode the workings of metaphysics in any discourse.<sup>32</sup> For Hart, it is clear that deconstruction includes a critique of theism, but it is a critique of its “ism”, not its theos. It should be noted, however, that it does not make any claims about the reality of God. If deconstruction is a critique of theism, it is also a critique of atheism.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Best - Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn*, 13.

<sup>30</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 87.

<sup>31</sup> Alpyağıl, *Dekonstrüksiyon ve Din*, 63.

<sup>32</sup> Alpyağıl, *Dekonstrüksiyon ve Din*, 63-64.

<sup>33</sup> Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 27.

Caputo's main concept is expressed through the term "religion without religion", which refers to a religious perspective or attitude that is not limited to any particular creed. Although Caputo was a Christian, he uses biblical quotes to illustrate his point and does not believe that adherence to a specific creed is essential for being religious. Caputo believes that the pressure to maintain orthodoxy applied by religious authorities is antithetical to the kind of religious faith he espouses. He respects religious traditions and creeds but sees them as historically contingent forms that do not take precedence over the direct and unmediated expression of genuine faith. It consists of love for God without knowing what we love. According to Caputo, what does true belief or religion consist of? This is a stance that reaches toward what Caputo calls the "impossible" without having any propositional knowledge of what we love is or what we actually love.<sup>34</sup> Caputo constantly returned to the question asked by Saint Augustine: "What am I loving when I love God?" This question is posed by those who claim that we cannot answer it, but we must continue to ask it to form our true religious beliefs. Furthermore, it is claimed that what we are looking for when we pursue this question is not an epistemological truth but a truth in action: a truth that we realize through love and devotion in our lives.

Religion is re-ligare, that is, the one-to-one bond of the existing individual with the Absolute, its absolute relation to the Absolute. Re-ligare is ob-ligare, absolute bond, obligation, but without the shelter provided by the universal.<sup>35</sup>

Here, we are confronted with several problems. Indeed, the nature of a deconstructed God is a serious problem. According to Hanson, Caputo states that God's "persistent call" is made in the name of God, but God has no name or attribute. This is not surprising since Caputo represents a God who has been deconstructed and cannot be found. Caputo's approach raises the question of whether there is anything theological about a mysterious call from an unidentified God. Caputo's call is a minimal call that makes no sense and is not based on any source or reference, and he faces such a situation because of the excesses of deconstruction. Hanson, therefore, views Caputo's

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<sup>34</sup> Caputo, *On Religion*, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 18.

approach as no different from baseless mysticism. He can look for such a call in being, in the immanence of being, or in the natural laws of the world. Meaningless calls, having no referents, are not theological. How can one know what connection any calling has with reality? Usually, when one hears mysterious, eerie calls without seeing anyone, a psychiatrist is consulted, not a theologian. Without verification and validation, God is a ghost of our own creation.<sup>36</sup>

In response to these criticisms, Caputo argues that religion is a human construct and that the bonds and obligations it involves are inherent in the nature of life. In other words, religion can be understood without the need for religious teachings. Caputo suggested that the love of God, or religion, can be discovered without being preached. He posits that love is the means of this discovery. Caputo argues that individuals can be deeply and permanently religious with or without theology or religion. This idea of “religion without religion” is the central thesis of his argument. He suggested that religion can be found in various forms, regardless of the presence or absence of traditional religious structures.<sup>37</sup>

According to Caputo, religion, when defined in a simple way, has meant the “love of God” since classical thought. Of course, this expression is not enough to explain Caputo’s point. For this reason, Caputo asks the question, “What do I love when I love God?” In our opinion, this question, when interpreted in a sense in connection with God being love, points to loving everything because of God.

I love this question in no small part because it assumes that anybody worth their salt loves God. If you do not love God, what good are you? You are too caught up in the meanness of self-love and self-gratification to be worth a tinker’s damn. Your soul soars only with a spike in the Dow-Jones Industrial average; your heart leaps only at the prospect of a new tax break. The devil take you. He already has. Religion is for lovers, for men and women of passion, for real people with a passion for something other than taking profits, people who believe in something, who hope like mad in something, who love something with a love that surpasses understanding. Faith, hope, and love, and of these three, the

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<sup>36</sup> Hanson, “Surviving Postmodernism”, 13-21.

<sup>37</sup> Caputo, *On Religion*, 3.

best is love, according to a famous apostle (I Cor. 13:13).

However, what do they love? What do I love when I love my God? That is their question. That is my question.<sup>38</sup>

According to Caputo, a person without religion is, in fact, a person without love. Religion is ultimately love. This is what makes all religions religions. In every religion, there is definitely both hospitality toward the other and love. This love also means loving everything, loving the other. God is love, and love is God. According to Caputo, who calls this translatability, there is an ambiguity here. Notice how easily it slips from stating that God is love to stating that “love is God”. This shift is provocative and creates an important ambiguity, allowing for infinite substitution and translation between “love” and “God”.<sup>39</sup> According to Caputo, religious belief is fundamentally concerned with passion –or, more specifically, with a passion for the impossible– which constitutes the structure of experience through the “passion of not knowing”. This structure of experience is a passion for and commitment to *tout autre*, to something new and unexpected, something that breaks the existing horizon of possibility and looks toward the impossible, the wholly other. Caputo goes so far as to say that what constitutes experience as experience is religious – it is only with the impossible that one can truly experience something new. According to Caputo, this “religious side of experience”, “the notion of life at the limit of the possible, at the threshold of the impossible, constitutes a religious structure, the religious side of each of us.”<sup>40</sup> Following Derrida, Caputo calls this fundamental passion for the impossible in human experience “the love of God”, which is religion.<sup>41</sup> For Derrida and Caputo, “the name of God” is “the name of that which we desire and love without question – “God” is the impossible that we passionately desire (without seeing, possessing, or knowing).<sup>42</sup> The passion for life, therefore, leads us to the love of God.

Caputo's philosophy and theology are based on the deconstruction of the Nietzschean view of God, which denies the existence of a supreme and absolute being corresponding to the definition of God

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<sup>38</sup> Caputo, *On Religion*, 2.

<sup>39</sup> Caputo, *On Religion*, 5.

<sup>40</sup> Caputo, *On Religion*, 11.

<sup>41</sup> Caputo, *On Religion*, 113.

<sup>42</sup> Christopher Ben Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 18.

found in Western religious understanding or theistic religions. Caputo attempts to counter Nietzsche's perspectives on the death of God through deconstruction. Deconstruction can incorporate "religiosity" into the human experience of joy and suffering without the dogmatic structure of religious belief and the concrete belief system of Western religion that Nietzsche sought to refute.<sup>43</sup> Deconstruction allows for religiosity, but it is a postmetaphysical religion, not a metaphysical religion. According to Caputo, deconstruction is not amenable to metaphysical and dogmatic structures in which it questions the possibility of a historical, pure, prelinguistic experience and perception.

Caputo finds in deconstruction a means by which the practice of religion can exist independently of dogma. He refers to this as "religion without religion", borrowed from Derrida. In a sense, Caputo tries to save religion through deconstruction.<sup>44</sup> In *On Religion*, Caputo continues to develop the religious implications of this affirmative deconstruction. Religion is the loving, the desiring, the hoping that animates our life, rather than a belief in some intellectual propositions. It is not the love of this or that particular God but rather the loving of or desiring for "God," where "the name of God is the name of love, the name of what we love".<sup>45</sup> Caputo, as a theologian, must explain his own faith tradition in a way that is consistent with his notions of khôra and radical hermeneutics. This project begins in earnest for him with *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*. In this work, he challenges the traditional picture of God as a sovereign (hyper) being with unlimited abilities such as omnipotence and omniscience. Instead, he conceives of God as the 'weak force' of desiring or loving, as described in *On Religion*. Caputo critiques the omnipotence of God by equating God with an event that occurs in the name of God. He even questions whether God can exist in the traditional sense of that term. Our traditions contain the promises that drive us, so there is no need for an immaterial or supernatural realm that can be distinguished from the plane of human experience. Instead, this life is all there is, with its promises and events that require contemplation, action, and

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<sup>43</sup> Caputo, *Religion without Religion*, 15.

<sup>44</sup> Jeffrey W. Robbins, "Introduction: After the Death of God", *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 17.

<sup>45</sup> Caputo, *On Religion*, 6.



manifestation by existing entities. God represents one such call, promise, or event.

## 2. Radical Hermeneutics and Weak Theology

Historically, hermeneutics has referred to the task of interpreting facts with certainty in the notion of truth as correspondence. In the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a movement emerged in hermeneutics that suggested that interpretations are responses to contingent questions and that the value of interpretations lies in their function as a coherent picture. Gianni Vattimo describes hermeneutics as a “nihilistic vocation” that is held in tension by the relationship between linguistics (Gadamer) and ontology (Heidegger). The theory of interpretation now begins with a disclosure of how we experience the world. The concept of interpretation arises from a significant change in the understanding of truth as proposed by Jeffrey W. Robbins:

The phrase weak thought refers to the gradual weakening of being that has transformed contemporary philosophy from its former obsession with the metaphysics of truth to its current and more limited understanding of itself strictly as an interpretative exercise.<sup>46</sup>

For Caputo, hermeneutics has a very important function. This function also leads to a weakening of metaphysics.

Hermeneutics wants to describe the fix we are in, and it tries to be hard-hearted and to work “from below.” It makes no claim to have won a transcendental high ground or to have a heavenly informer. It does not try to situate itself above the flux or to seek a way out of physis, which is what the fateful “meta-” in meta-physics always amounts to, but rather, like Constantin, to get up the nerve to stay with it.<sup>47</sup>

Caputo views hermeneutics as the key to the postmodern shift in the idea of truth and considers language games and paradigm shifts to presuppose a theory of truth based on hermeneutics. Interpretation is defined as a tool that questions the concept of absolutism and leads to the perspective of relativism. This approach functions like a thumbtack that pierces the bubble of absolutism before and after it drops us into

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<sup>46</sup> W. Robbins, “Introduction: After the Death of God”, 16.

<sup>47</sup> John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 3.

the pit of relativism while rejecting the inflated privileges of pure reason. This explanation emphasizes how hermeneutics influences the postmodern era and the understanding of truth. "Absolutism supposes that truth must be presuppositions; relativism agrees that this indeed is what truth is, and adds, 'but it is impossible', so think whatever you like. Hermeneutics says truth is not a matter of presuppositionlessness but of having the right presuppositions and avoiding the wrong ones."<sup>48</sup>

Caputo's approach, which emphasizes the differences between postmodernism and theology, combines theological reflections with postmodern philosophy to address the understanding of religion and God. Caputo's work shows that he considers postmodernism not only as a philosophical current but also in a theological context. Caputo's approach to radical theology takes a radical approach to understanding religion and God, questioning and transforming traditional theological concepts. This requires a theological depth and commitment that transcends the critical and volatile nature of postmodernism.<sup>49</sup> Again, Caputo states that hermeneutics began with Heidegger. According to Caputo, the starting point of hermeneutics can be seen when we go back. However, the main issue is the meaning of hermeneutics for life. This meaning can be seen in the works of thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. According to Caputo, hermeneutics does not evaluate life in certain frameworks. It states that life should be open to risks.

Hermeneutics starts out in Heidegger as radical thinking, and it is the process of its radicalization that I want to pursue in the pages that follow. I do not approach hermeneutics in the usual way, by following its historical genesis from Schleiermacher and Dilthey; that has already been done well and elsewhere. I am concerned here not with its historical genesis but with its radicalization, not with where it came from but with its innermost direction and momentum. That is why the protohistory of hermeneutics for me is to be found in radical thinkers like Kierkegaard and Husserl, Nietzsche

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<sup>48</sup> John D. Caputo, *Truth: The Search for Wisdom in the Postmodern Age* (London: Penguin Press, 2013), 194.

<sup>49</sup> Sands, "Confessional Discourses, Radicalizing Traditions: On John Caputo and the Theological Turn", 46.

and Meister Eckhart, and why its late history has to do with the late Heidegger who drops the term from his vocabulary and criticizes hermeneutic phenomenology and Derrida, who is an outspoken critic of hermeneutics. For hermeneutics always has to do with keeping the difficulty of life alive and with keeping its distance from the easy assurances of metaphysics and the consolations of philosophy.<sup>50</sup>

In the past two decades, Caputo's philosophical endeavors have focused on excising "faithless" metaphysics from our conceptual framework. According to Caputo, such a metaphysics fails to be faithful to life, neglecting the facticity of human existence by losing sight of the lived experience amid the complexities of speculative thought. It is equally unfaithful to the human other, as it obscures the individuality of persons within the abstraction of universal laws. Furthermore, it is not faithful to "faith" as it undermines genuine religious belief and the relational understanding of the divine, reducing "God" to an object of theoretical scrutiny through an obsession with formulating proportionate propositions. This entanglement with the duplicity and "bad faith" inherent in such "faithless" metaphysics, as it permeates metaphysics, ethics, and religion, constitutes the adversary against which a novel, postmodern mode of thinking and existence contends. For Caputo, this emergent approach is characterized by an authentically honest, ethical, and, above all, religious fidelity that operates independently of traditional metaphysical structures.<sup>51</sup>

Both Caputo and Vattimo aim to radicalize hermeneutical philosophy in their works. They differ in their views on the philosophical and theological significance of the death of God. Vattimo sees the death of God as having a nihilistic implication,<sup>52</sup> while Caputo has a different perspective. Caputo believes that the death of God enables deconstructive readings, emphasizing the re-evaluation and repetition of religious ideas. Caputo argues that religion has been degraded and devalued, particularly with the absolutist and monist understandings of Enlightenment thought. However, he believes that this situation is no longer valid today. Although religion has been purged from a powerful structure, it has not been completely

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<sup>50</sup> Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern*, 7.

<sup>52</sup> W. Robbins, "Introduction: After the Death of God", 14.

eradicated. Caputo opposes the idea of absolute reason and universality created by the Enlightenment but acknowledges its achievements. He proposes a new Enlightenment, suggesting that the role of reason should change and that the absolutist understanding has been shaken.

I promise to be faithful to the progress created by the Enlightenment, which freed us from the Church, superstition and the authority of royalty and replaced it with human rights, scientific research and technological advances. It is useless to object to the Enlightenment. However, I think the old Enlightenment has done all the good it could do, and we need a new Enlightenment, not anti-Enlightenment.<sup>53</sup>

Caputo contrasts and blends the Enlightenment with the uncertainties of the postage. The aim is not to extinguish the light of the Enlightenment but to bring forth a new, revised version of it, complicating its pure light with shadows, black holes, and other unexpected nuances and challenges.\* Caputo argues that God alone can have an absolute perspective, perceiving only one mind and truth, while human beings are limited to their own interpretations, resulting in multiple perspectives. He rejects the notion of a universal reason or truth, instead emphasizing the existence of individual minds and truths. This concept is central to his hermeneutic philosophy. As products of their time and place, human beings are inherently limited to multiple perspectives. Otherwise, we must acknowledge that our perspective is limited to our earthly existence. We must address our truths in a contextual manner, considering factors such as time, place,

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<sup>53</sup> Caputo, *Truth*, 19.

\* The following can be said about Caputo's ideas about the Enlightenment. According to Caputo, postmodernism should be viewed as a continuation of the Enlightenment and not just an opposition to it. In this context, postmodernism should be regarded as a different form of Enlightenment, and it is necessary to re-evaluate the basic principles of Enlightenment from a different perspective. While Caputo emphasizes that postmodernism is a continuation of the Enlightenment, he also highlights three main ideas of postmodernism, which include a radical and indispensable pluralism, a rejection of a general metaphysical or grounding scheme, and skepticism of fixed binary categories. These ideas constitute the basic philosophical content of postmodernism and shape the approach of postmodern thought to religion, metaphysics and other issues. The following works can be consulted on the subject: Caputo, *Truth*; John D. Caputo, *Modernity and Its Discontents* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992); and Caputo, *On Religion*.

language, culture, gender, and caste. Our understanding is always situated and, therefore, constrained. However, this limitation is not necessarily negative. In fact, it is necessary for human beings to remain open to interpretation. However, this limitation provides us with an entry point, approach, perspective, and interpretation. It is important to note that while God does not require a point of view, we, as mortals, do. A point of view allows us to access truths that would otherwise be inaccessible.

Originally, the word “hermeneutics” was a theological one, having to do with interpretation of the Scriptures. But what we today mean by “hermeneutics” is a more general theory, that every truth is a function of interpretation, and the need for interpretation is a function of being situated in a particular time and place and therefore having certain inherited presuppositions.<sup>54</sup>

Caputo argues that postmodernism challenges the modern use of reason, and this has significant implications for religion. The Cartesian subject, according to the author, has been dismantled by postmodern thought. According to Caputo, truth cannot be confined within the bounds of modern thought. The postmodern perception of truth cannot be limited to reason alone. This is not because it is identified with the infinite God, as it was before modernity, but because it has acquired a different kind of infinity in itself, namely, endless difference and diversity. However, as we have stated above, Caputo tries to distinguish himself from postmodern thought, especially by presenting a hermeneutical theology. Therefore, the difference between Caputo's view and that of postmodernism becomes evident primarily through his theological focus. Caputo's work often focuses on theological issues and emphasizes the theological dimension of postmodernist thought. This shows that Caputo prefers to address postmodernism in a theological context. Caputo argues that metaphysical and humanistic thought must also be subject to criticism. If religion is to have a place in the postmodern era, it will only be possible through the critique of metaphysical thought, including onto-theology.

According to Caputo, the problem with metaphysics can be summarized as follows: To provide a stable basis for life, metaphysics

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<sup>54</sup> Caputo, *Truth*, 23.

proceeds from the idea of a fixed and static first cause, unity, or uniqueness. This misses life because it is an abstract system. Metaphysics seeks to take an individual above (meta) the flow (physis) of reality – to provide him or her with a “quick way out the back door of the flow”.<sup>55</sup> Such metaphysics involves elevating one’s knowledge of reality to a kind of absolute knowledge – privileged access to the real. Caputo is uncomfortable with this use of metaphysics in philosophy.

I find the word ‘metaphysics’ in philosophy. I use the word ‘metaphysics’ rhetorically to indicate what makes me uneasy in philosophy. When philosophy becomes transcendental, when it becomes pretentious, when it thinks it has everything in its place, that is exactly what I am after.<sup>56</sup>

Against such a definition of metaphysics, Caputo offers a radical hermeneutics as an alternative way of thinking about reality and our place in it. Radical hermeneutics, unlike traditional Western metaphysics, is a way of thinking about reality, a kind of “metaphysics” that aims to be “nonmetaphysical”.<sup>57</sup> As 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 engages with life in its particularity and difference to orient the person to the challenge of his or her existence. Caputo’s radical form of hermeneutics is about “keeping alive the difficulty of life and avoiding the easy assurances of metaphysics and the consolations of philosophy”.<sup>58</sup>

According to Caputo, radical hermeneutics provides a minimalist understanding of human existence. Recognizing that it is not possible to do away with metaphysics altogether, Caputo seeks a “minimalist metaphysics” because, for him, it is best to “keep metaphysics to a minimum”.<sup>59</sup> A minimalist metaphysics does not exaggerate the status and scope of its knowledge. It is concerned with modest “finite phenomena” as they appear, however vaguely, on the surface of experience and does not speculate about constitutive depths.<sup>60</sup> It seeks a minimalist, minimally restrictive, or limiting experience to

<sup>55</sup> Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern*, 1.

<sup>56</sup> Caputo, *Modernity and Its Discontents*, 137.

<sup>57</sup> Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern*, 9.

<sup>58</sup> Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 3.

<sup>59</sup> Caputo, *Against Ethics*, 93.

<sup>60</sup> Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern*, 10.

accommodate this constrained stance. Thus, unlike traditional metaphysics, radical hermeneutics aims to offer metaphysics without metaphysics, a minimalist metaphysics of a “postmetaphysical rationality” that recognizes the “inevitable futility of trying to fix things”.<sup>61</sup> This minimalist metaphysics is important in that it makes room for religion. As a matter of fact, Caputo states that life has a religious structure and that this religion is not the religion that is known and supported by the holy books but rather that it contains the element that exists within them.

This raises questions about the extent to which weak theology can truly escape the confines of traditional theological structures and whether it inadvertently imposes its own limitations on the interpretation of faith experiences. From a hermeneutical-poststructuralist view, the concern may be that any form of theology, even if characterized as weak, inherently carries with it certain assumptions and biases that influence the understanding of religious concepts.<sup>62</sup>

Caputo referred to his theology as “weak”. This concept draws heavily on Derrida’s “weak force” and Vattimo’s “weak thought”.<sup>\*</sup> The content of the improved text must be as close as possible to the source text, and any additions must be avoided at all costs. The language used in theology should be clear, objective, and value-neutral, avoiding biased, emotional, figurative, or ornamental language. The text should adhere to the conventional academic structure and formatting conventions, with clear titles and consistent technical terms. Caputo is

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<sup>61</sup> Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics*, 21.

<sup>62</sup> Swart, *Religious Experience at the Limits of Language*, 176.

\* The term weak thinking can be expressed as an attempt to reconstruct rationality in a postmodern, postmetaphysical way. With this concept, Vattimo aims to move away from modern reason’s claim that absolute truth, reality, and absolute objectivity are attainable. Weak thinking asserts that the world is not “given” to us as a pure, uninterpreted and unmediated reality. Vattimo states that the world is always “given” to us as an already-interpreted reality. In addition, it is precisely for this reason that strong thought must be avoided, with its avoidance of the claims of Western metaphysics to truth, certainty, objectivity, and absolute knowledge, and the accompanying historical contingency. For details, see Thomas G. Guarino, *Vattimo and Theology* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2009) and Gianni Vattimo, *The End of Modernity - Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

interested in the act of calling on the name of God rather than the response to that call. He neither confirms nor denies the existence of God. Instead, he suggests that theology should concentrate on what God requires us to do rather than on God's existence or nature. Caputo refers to this as a theology of the event, rather than a theology of God, due to its focus on insistence rather than existence and on provocation and the call rather than indication and the Being (who is called God).

Caputo's understanding of 'weak theology' stems from his belief that traditional theological systems often convey an image of God as an all-powerful and all-knowing being, with a fixed set of attributes and a clear understanding of how God operates in the world. This view is criticized by Caputo as a form of "strong theology" that limits our understanding and experiences of the divine. Caputo's weak theology emphasizes the need for openness and humility in our approach to theological inquiry, acknowledging the limits of human understanding and embracing the uncertainty and ambiguity that come with exploring the divine. By embracing the concept of "weak theology", Caputo suggested that we should not attempt to fully define or comprehend God but rather embrace the mystery and unknowability of the divine. Throughout this debate, until recently, both traditionalists and modernists have remained committed to the notion of transcendent otherness, even though their views on what it involves differ. Caputo argues that a "weak theology" allows for a more dynamic and transformative understanding of God, one that is not constrained by fixed notions or dogmas but is open to continuous questioning and reimagining. Both Caputo and Vattimo embraced the idea of weak thought and explored its implications for philosophy and religion. Caputo's interest in weak thought led him to develop the concepts of weak theology or radical hermeneutics. This is related to his interest in the place of religion in the postmodern era. When Caputo speaks of the postmodern return of religion, he almost always invokes the qualifier he learned from Derrida, namely, "religion without religion". Caputo argues that a postmetaphysical religion exists, which he refers to as "religion without religion". This type of religion highlights the religious aspect of life without monopolizing truth as traditional religions do. Caputo believes that religions, rather than a single religion, contain truth and that life can be religious without adhering to a specific religion. He expresses this idea as follows:



The idea is to move beyond literalism, fundamentalism, and outright superstition without simply repeating an Enlightenment critique of religion whose presuppositions, as I have argued, have been widely discredited. For a religion without religion requires a full charge of “religious truth” where that is to be sharply distinguished from “true religion” in the sense of “the one true religion” (by which we always mean, invariably, mine-not-yours). The several religions, in the plural, are unique and irreducible repositories of their distinctive ethical practices and religious narratives, representing so many different ways to love God, but without laying claim to an exclusive possession of “The Truth.” In the Confessions, Augustine said that the Scriptures may have many meanings, so long as all of them are true. That I would say also goes for religion. We may and need to have many religions, and many “sacred scriptures,” so long as all of them are true.<sup>63</sup>

Caputo suggests a closer collaboration between hermeneutics and deconstruction, as both depart from the metaphysics of being and aim to overcome it. Although there is a return of religion, it does not necessarily imply a return to monist religions, as revealed by revelation or in the traditional sense. The term “return” refers to the resurgence of religion and faith in social and intellectual circles, as well as the rejection of the idea of “the death of God” and the discrediting of those who oppose religion.<sup>64</sup>

In contrast to religions and religiosity, which assert themselves in a strong and absolute way, Caputo presents a postcritical religion. This religion seeks to affirm faith without absolute or certain knowledge, valuing religious tradition while avoiding faith communities based on a historical origin. Caputo’s theology is not one of power but of weakness, combining the ethical imperative to serve the poor and needy with the weakness of God. Caputo’s theological reflection presents God as a calling, a weak power, rather than a cause endowed with omnipotent metaphysical power. However, Caputo does not leave us with an impotent God who has no claim on the lives of human beings. The weak God and weak theology view rejects the dogmatic,

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<sup>63</sup> Caputo, *On Religion*, 110.

<sup>64</sup> Caputo, *On Religion*, 56-66.

confessional, nonpluralistic, and intolerant understandings that define the modern intellectual tradition. The concept of a weak God invites the world to obtain justice through love and forgiveness, as exemplified in the “logos of the cross”. According to Caputo, the paradox of a weak God, as exemplified in the suffering on the cross, contrasts with strong theologies of victory. In justifying his theology, he speaks of the desire to reach God. For Caputo, religion is the desire for an unknown God, which represents a future, a hope, and a promise.<sup>65</sup>

Think of it as a “theology without theology” to accompany what Derrida calls “religion without religion,” a “weak theology” to accompany Vattimo’s “weak thinking,” or perhaps a weak messianic theology to accompany Benjamin’s “weak messianic power.” In defending weakness, I am clearly lumping Derrida, Vattimo and Benjamin together, but I am also shamelessly quoting St. Paul on the “weakness of God” (1 Cor. 1:25), all in the hope of provoking a holy revolt, as Paul was sometimes wont to do.<sup>66</sup>

The concept of weak theology involves rejecting a strong theological understanding that emphasizes a dogmatic and absolute reality. According to Caputo, weak theology provides a more flexible perspective that is open to interpretation and not universally valid. In his defense of weak theology against theistic theology, Caputo criticizes the strong standard version for belonging to the dominant order of power and presence and favoring a grammar consisting of large universal nouns and hyperverbs.<sup>67</sup> In contrast, weak theology is content with the use of a small verb such as “perhaps” that is unable to do more than interpret or intervene. It focuses on “how” rather than “what” and on small prepositions rather than big propositions. Weak theology acknowledges that theology can be inherently open to ambiguity, contradiction, and questioning.<sup>68</sup> This allows for the development of critical thinking where theology intersects with philosophy. Caputo developed his weak theology in relation to

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<sup>65</sup> Caputo, *On Religion*, 4.

<sup>66</sup> John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 22.

<sup>67</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 9.

<sup>68</sup> Hanson, “Surviving Postmodernism”, 17.

Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction. Derrida's deconstruction posits that texts do not have fixed meanings and that every interpretation can contain contradictions and multiple meanings. Caputo views weak theology as a theological interpretation of deconstruction. It offers a way to critically question religious texts in light of deconstruction. For Caputo, who defines deconstruction as the experience of the impossible, theology is the hermeneutics of the experience of the impossible as the experience of God.<sup>69</sup>

Indeed, Caputo's approach involves a form of atheism that rejects the notion of a metaphysical deity that is in control of everything. This form of atheism serves as a starting point in his work, leading to a deeper exploration of how the concept of God insists upon humanity rather than existing independently. By questioning the nature of justice and the motivations behind actions in relation to the divine event, Caputo prompts a reflective and autodeconstructive exercise that challenges static beliefs and rigid pronouncements.<sup>70</sup>

Chalameet argues that Caputo's rejection of theistic concepts of divine power stems from his belief that such concepts lead to atheistic rejection. He argues that the type of theism one subscribes to influences the type of atheism one may encounter. Despite the importance of exploring the theme of God's power in contemporary theological discourse, Caputo is quick to dismiss this theme in favor of highlighting God's weakness. One of the key points of contention in Caputo's theology is his denial of God as an agent who actively intervenes in the world. He argues that the weakness of God implies that God is not an agent who performs actions or fails to do so. While Caputo acknowledges God's role in calling and provoking, he seems to downplay the idea of God as an active agent with agency. However, the critique raised against Caputo's perspective is that by disconnecting God from agency, there is a risk of diminishing the interest and significance of God's role in human lives. Some argue that God should be viewed as one with a constant, invisible agency that invites and

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<sup>69</sup> Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 114.

<sup>70</sup> Justin Sands, "Radical Theology's Place within Theology", *The European Reception of John D. Caputo's Thought*, ed. Joeri Schrijvers - Martin Koci (London: Lexington Books, 2023), 219.

urges individuals to transform.<sup>71</sup> The emphasis on human response in Caputo's theology is seen as overly anthropocentric, with the burden placed too heavily on human actions rather than acknowledging a broader creaturely response to God. Critics suggest that the imbalance between human response and God's action in Caputo's theology is striking, with the human response being portrayed as more significant than God's call. There is a call for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between God's actions and human responses, moving beyond a compartmentalized view to envision a dynamic interaction between God and humanity in shaping and inspiring human lives. In summary, Caputo's concept of the weakness of God challenges traditional views of divine power and agency, emphasizing God's vulnerability and the importance of human response. However, critics argue that his theology may overlook the broader scope of God's agency and the intricate dance between God and humanity in shaping and inspiring human existence.<sup>72</sup>

Using the notion of weakness in Caputo's theological reflections, he argues that weakness can, in fact, have a powerful influence on theological reflections and contribute to a deeper and more meaningful understanding of faith. This can be considered as keeping the weakness strong. This approach reflects the idea of discovering the potential of elements that are characterized as weak and using this potential effectively to create a strong impact. Thus, the idea of a structure similar to traditional theologies and religions, which are actually expressed as structures, also emerges.

In response to this criticism, Caputo emphasizes that philosophy and theology cannot be effectively applied in isolation from each other. However, with this statement, it is indicated that both must be weakened. For theology to be meaningful and for people to begin to trust it, it is stated that it must be freed from the 'supernatural attitude'. This means that theologians must give up the illusion that they have privileged knowledge through communication from supernatural forces that transcend the natural order. Deprived of the supernatural

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<sup>71</sup> Christophe Chalamet, "Caputo and the Unidentifiability of God", *The European Reception of John D. Caputo's Thought*, ed. Joeri Schrijvers - Martin Koci (London: Lexington Books, 2023), 181.

<sup>72</sup> Chalamet, "Caputo and the Unidentifiability of God", 182.

attitude, theology becomes theopoetic and presents a vision in which “God” and “the kingdom” rule the world.

Caputo refers not to “God” but to the ‘event’ occurring in the name of God, thereby attributing to God (as well as theology) a certain “weakness”. However, Caputo does not mean weakness in the sense of being weak-kneed, indecisive, or anemic. Instead, he refers to what St. Paul called God’s folly or the “weakness of God”, that is, the “logic of the cross”. The concept of weakness in relation to God is expressed through the paradoxical logic of the cross, which does not exert power or might but rather challenges the wisdom of the strong and stands in solidarity with the weak. This idea is drawn from various sources, including the New Testament, Jacques Derrida’s reference to Walter Benjamin’s “weak messianic force”, and Gianni Vattimo’s development of “weak thought” (*pensiero debole*).<sup>73</sup> Caputo critiques classical notions of divine transcendence and omnipotence and develops a weaker theology that emphasizes immanence and hopeful uncertainty. According to Caputo, to think about God, we must abandon all metaphysical frameworks, especially the idea of God as a “final cause”, and instead be open and comfortable with the “allure” of the possible God. Caputo does not present a theology of the death of God that assumes the failure of all God-talk. Instead, he aims to free God-talk from metaphysics, deconstruct it, and direct it toward the “event”. This “event” refers to a call, demand, claim, objection, promise, or attraction. The goal of this approach is to deconstruct all “powerful” structures of identity and domination that exclude or dominate others. Caputo considers this work to be a matter of justice and, like the Kingdom of God, an ongoing process.

### **Conclusion**

John D. Caputo’s idea of weak theology is based on a postmodernist perspective. Instead of a traditionally defined, rigid, and fixed theology, Caputo advocates an approach suggested by weak theology. Weak theology opposes dogmatic and definitive belief systems and emphasizes uncertainty, doubt, and openness. In this sense, Caputo’s theological approach rejects the rigid boundaries of religion and adopts a more flexible, open-ended understanding. Caputo’s idea of

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<sup>73</sup> Calvin D. Ullrich, *Caputo on Radical Political Theology* (England: William Temple Foundation, 2022), 27.

weak theology questions the dogmatic elements of tradition and encourages a constant reassessment of the meaning of religion. Drawing on postmodern thought in particular, this approach argues that religion should not be understood in terms of a fixed and absolute reality but rather as a product of individual and social experiences.

In contrast to contemporary religiosity, which asserts itself strongly and triumphantly, Caputo offers a postcritical religion. He affirms faith without absolute or certain knowledge and values religious tradition while maintaining his distance from actual historical faith communities. In summary, this is not a theology of power but rather a theology of weakness that links the weakness of God with the ethical obligation to assist the impoverished and needy. Unlike the strong Christian, Jewish, or Islamic theologies that are historically determined and specific, Caputo presents a more flexible theology that is “weakened by the flux of undecidability and translatability”. Caputo describes it as a “theology of the event”, which can be thought of as a “theology without theology”. The aim of Caputo’s radical hermeneutics is to update hermeneutic philosophy for the vastly different cultural milieu of the postmodern condition. This radicalization demonstrates the continued relevance of hermeneutics in the postmodern world. Caputo’s approach sees postmodernism as a dynamic process of interpretation and considers it a perspective that needs to be constantly reinterpreted. This enables Caputo to treat postmodernism not as a fixed doctrine but as a perspective that is constantly changing and evolving.

In essence, the discussion around weak theology underscores the ongoing dialog and critique within theological and philosophical circles regarding the nature of faith, interpretation, and boundaries of theological inquiry in a postmodern and poststructuralist landscape. Of course, we can say the following: Caputo’s understanding of religion offers a more flexible and open perspective rather than a rigid and clear structure like those of traditional theologies. His ‘weak theology’ approach aims to approach religious experiences and concepts in a more critical and open way by questioning and transforming traditional theological frameworks. Caputo’s understanding of weak theology focuses on elements such as fragility, uncertainty, and openness when dealing with religious issues. This approach aims to interpret religious experiences and make sense of religious concepts with a questioning attitude. While traditional

theologies are often associated with rigid dogmas, specific belief systems, and rigid structures, Caputo's weak theology approach is important because it offers a more flexible, open-ended, and constantly reconfigurable perspective.

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