

# On Religion - Thoughts On Chapter 1

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One of the reasons I like working on different projects with my friend qohelet (AKA "Jim" from the CrossPointings.org podcast) is that he makes sure that I'm not skating through my life and faith (there really isn't a difference anyway - but there you have it). This post is a case in point. We're both going to the Emergent Philosophical Gathering at Eastern University next month and so have been reading some works by John D. Caputo in preparation for that event. The reading has been fun, but Jim is insisting that I blog my thoughts on it before the gathering so I'll be even better prepared to interact during the conversation. Normally, I wouldn't hesitate to take someone up on such an idea - but during Lent I've been shutting down my laptop for somewhere between 6 and 8 hours a day (which, ironically, gives a lot of time to read but not much to write). I've finally given in to the temptation to get some thoughts out in the ether. Here's my thoughts on Chapter One of On Religion.

One of the first things to note about John D. Caputo is that he writes in order to be read. That might seem like a silly statement, so I'll make a negative statment in order to give it some context. Caputo is not writing for only those of the Academy who are privy to the particular language game of philosophy. If you have the desire to read what Caputo is writing, you will not find his prose to be an obstacle to following along. That's a gift - and yes, I'm gushing.

On Religion, is a thought-provoking book in which Caputo puts himself into the shoes of Saint Augustine. In a very real sense, he his attempting to chew on the very same question that lead Augustine to write his Confessions. Specifically, "What do I love when I love my God?" This is a question that leads many religious people (of all religions) to gaffaw and bleat, "God, you doofus!" OK, maybe not "doofus," but close. The fact that many "religious" people would scoff at such a question, however, is one of the reasons why I agree with Caputo (and, Augustine before him) that it is a question which is begging to be asked.

At this point, I'm not sure where Caputo is going with his discussion, but as I read chapter one I noticed several times that Caputo seemed to be looking over his shoulder a bit, making sure that the Bishop he holds a soft-spot for wasn't suddenly getting ready to strike him down for thinking unorthodox thoughts. To be honest, at this moment, his glances seem a bit out of place - nothing he's written so far is outside the Orthodox mystical tradition of Christianity. Of course, I haven't finished the book yet so I don't know if his glances are well-founded or not. Time will tell.

At the center of this chapter is the idea that religion is something that tends to "unhinge" people. Far from being a negative, however, Caputo posits this unhooking as being what makes religious people "salty." Religious people, according to Caputo, are people who love - and people who love, as many people freely admit, are an unhinged lot. The love Caputo sees in a genuine religious expression is what leads people to seek out the "impossible" -to hope for an "absolute future" which none of our systems, management skills, or financial planning can prepare us for. Religion is love, love means being unhinged, and being unhinged means being outside the realm of "safety" (which is where our financial advisors want us). At this point, I want to follow Caputo's advice and simply start shouting "oui, oui!" Yet, before I do it Captain Kirk shows ups and says, "Excuse me..." (one of only two good lines in ST:IV).

As I mentioned, Caputo is frequently glancing over his shoulder at what he calls "confessional faiths." In Caputo's thought, while confessional faiths have kept religious passion alive, and have done much in the wya of service to others in the world, they also have tended to spend more time answering the "what" of Augustine's questions than they have spent in actually asking it. He makes a good point, but then I wonder if he doesn't paint himself into a bit of a corner.

What I mean is this. Caputo's point in using Augustine's question is that we can never truly answer the question. God is too wonderous, and the absolute future too impossible, for us to truly codify or identify. We love this God, we say yes to this God, but we can never really know the way to God or presume to speak to God. Again, these are all good points which fall firmly into the Christian tradition, as well as make an honest attempt at humility in religious discourse. The problem is, Jesus throws a wrench into the system.

Caputo beautifully describes Jesus through the use of questions at the end of the chapter one, "Who is this man who counsels us to forgive, to give up with is our due, who asks, who did, the impossible? What does his life and death tell us about ourselves, including those among us who, because of an accident of birth, have never heard his name? What is happening in and what is opened up by our memory of Jesus, by the mystery of his unaccountable teachings of forgiveness and who told us to be of a new heart(metanoia)?"

I love these questions, but they lead me to another one. "If the absolute future really is beyond our grasp, and the longing for the impossible is a longing for something that is beyond us (two ideas which are certainly worth chewing upon) - what does that mean for the incarnation?" What if Jesus didn't simply do the impossible, what if he was the impossible? What if Jesus' call to forgive were simply unaccountable teachings, what if they embodied him who is the absolute future? Is it possible to accept these questions as worth asking without undermine Augustine's question, "What do I love when I love

my God?" I certainly think so, and I'm looking forward to the rest of On Religion to see if Caputo touches on these questions at all. At any rate, chapter one is a wonderful start. If you're going to the conversation and you haven't started reading yet, then you are missing out.