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**Education as Event: A Conversation with John D. Caputo
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Abstract

This interview with John D. Caputo conducted by T. Wilson Dickinson discusses the implications of the event for the philosophy of education. It addresses various aporias the event poses for academic standards, protocols of writing, teaching as formation or transformation, the post-secular, the new technologies, the old versus the new asceticism in the face of the environmental crisis.

Contributor Note

John D. Caputo, the Watson Professor of Religion Emeritus (Syracuse University) and the Cook Professor of Philosophy Emeritus (Villanova University), writes and lectures in the area of postmodern theory and theology for both academic and general audiences. His latest books are *Hoping against Hope: Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim* (Fortress, 2015), *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (Polebridge, 2015), *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Indiana University Press, 2013), and *Truth: Philosophy in Transit* (Penguin, 2013). His major books have attempted to persuade us that hermeneutics goes all the way down (*Radical Hermeneutics*), that Derrida is a thinker to be reckoned with by theology (*The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*), and that theology is best served by getting over its love affair with power and authority and embracing what Caputo calls, following St. Paul, *The Weakness of God*, which won the 2006 AAR book award for works in constructive theology. He has also addressed wider-than-academic audiences in *On Religion* and *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* He has an interest in interacting with church and community activists and has long been interested in Emergent Church. He is currently working on a book entitled *Interpretation from the Margins: The Pelican Guide to Postmodern Hermeneutics*, which should appear in 2017.

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Education as Event: A Conversation with John D. Caputo¹

T. Wilson Dickinson: *Decades ago, Heidegger presciently observed that information – and the positivist epistemological framework that accompanies it – was coming to serve as a constricting limit for thinking (Heidegger 1996: 29). This constriction does not seem to be due merely to some kind of cognitive mistake or conviction, but it seems to be constantly reinforced by the practices of the university, extending from the classroom practice of lecture and examination, to the self-understanding of scholars as researchers (Heidegger 2002: 64). It seems that one of the more common forms of resistance to this tendency is to counter this secular model of the research university with a more confessional approach to education. So rather than simply serving as a conduit for the accumulation and communication of information, universities redirect their concern toward the formation of students. Might there be a third way forward, or one that hauntingly inhabits the boundaries between these secular and religious options? Could you imagine a sort of post-secular university?*

John D. Caputo: The first question for me would be: what is a 'secular' university? Today this word means a person or an institution not affiliated with or sponsored by a church or religious organization. We define it negatively but it is very positive. It is very important in the political order, where the constitution restrains the government from

supporting a particular confessional religion. We do not want to be 'post-secular' if that would mean undermining that constitutional restraint. In that sense, the Christian Right, and their claim that the United States is a Christian nation, could claim the mantle of post-secular. That is very dangerous and I do not want to be post-secular in that sense. Again, when it comes to universities, citizens without a religious affiliation have the right to study free from religious proselytizing or mandatory religious practices. So in the practical order, this word 'secular' protects us, even as it allows religiously minded people to found religious institutions from their own resources. Of course, this is easily said but carrying it out in reality involves difficult negotiations.

But as a philosophical theologian there is another sense of 'secular' and 'religion' that interests me, and in this sense I think the university should not try to be 'secular' and should expose itself to a certain 'religious' impulse. In fact, I think that if it does not, it will destroy itself. I would go so far as to say that, in this sense again, not only the university but also the political order should be 'post-secular'. Here everything depends upon seeing what I mean by 'religion', since I obviously do not mean 'confessional' religion. What I mean is what I call the religion of the 'event', a word that circulates felicitously among the great philosophers of our times. Without the 'event' I would run the risk of forgetting that I exist, as Johannes Climacus quipped. We must not forget the event, for it is the event that 'forms' or 'transforms' our existence. So if we search for a third possibility between secular 'information' and religious 'formation', this would be the possibility of the event. The crucial distinction for me is between the event and the lack of

¹ The following interview first appeared in *JCRT* (*Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*) 12. 2. Fall 2012. We are grateful to John D. Caputo, T. Wilson Dickinson, and Victor Taylor for permission to reprint this interview here.

the event. To be post-secular means that I do not want to lack the event, where this lack is what 'secular' would mean for me.

Let me add a word about 'event'. This word is all over contemporary philosophy but I mean it in Derrida's sense of the coming of something we cannot see coming, the coming of the unexpected, unprojected, unprogrammed, which of course we hope will make everything new but may make everything worse. With the coming of the event, things are reopened, reinvented, undergo a paradigm shift, a new being, and this happens everywhere, in history and everyday life, in philosophy, in art, in science. The Copernican Revolution, Picasso's cubism, the recent 'Arab Spring', these were transformative and unpredicted. Of course, we cannot make events happen – we cannot even see them coming. But we can prepare the conditions under which they happen by keeping things relatively unstable, in a state of optimal disequilibrium, not too much but enough, and this requires judgment and discernment. That I think is the condition in systems theory where the system is capable of innovation and reinvention without simply collapsing. If the system is too tight, too ordered, nothing new can happen. I admit this is risky business. But the point is that playing it safe all the time is also risky business – it risks the prevention of the future, of the event. Nothing is safe. Everything is risky. Now having said this, we can ask, is this structural exposure to the event not a perfect way to describe the institution in general and in particular educational institutions – the administration, the curriculum, teaching 'methods', testing and evaluation, everything that goes on in education. A teacher gives a class, or maybe just makes a comment in class, and a

student's life is changed. The teacher does not know she did this, and at the time neither does the student. That is the event.

WD: *I am thinking here not just about the idea of such a university, but about its practices. In The Weakness of God you drew a distinction not simply between an overly abstract theoretical reason and practical reason, but within practical reason you differentiated Aristotelian practical judgment (or phronesis) from the heart (or kardia) of the disciple of Christ. Whereas the former is capable of adroitly applying a general schema to a particular situation, the latter gives oneself over to 'the demands of singularity' (Caputo 2006: 142-3). So while the pedagogy of formation might exceed the limitations of information, it seems to still lead to some kind of conformity. I wonder what a pedagogy of radical transformation might look like? Is it possible to speak about the practices of a pedagogy of the heart?*

JC: I do not know if you intended just now to use the word 'transformation' instead of 'formation', or even in contrast to formation. If so, I approve. I think that the university must provide the milieu for the event and therefore I would prefer not to say a place of 'formation'. It must allow the event to happen, which is why I myself would speak of 'transformation' rather than 'formation'. I think 'form' and 'formation' work against the event. The coming or in-coming of the event – in French, this is *l'invention de l'événement* – is the occasion of a transformation. So instead of 'forming' 'habits' (literally 'havings') we have to do with transforming happenings, with events, and what we seek is a certain readiness for the event, which is paradoxical since the event is what we cannot see coming



and hence something for which we cannot be ready. We must make ready for what we cannot be ready.

Although I see a certain limit in Aristotle, still it was Aristotle who first taught us about this *aporia* and in this sense he was the first philosopher of the event. The *phronimos* is not merely the man (and we know he did not mean women) who knows the 'rule' and can 'apply' it. If the situation is rule-governed, a machine, a computer, a robot could apply it. The *phronimos* is the one who knows what to do when faced with an idiosyncratic situation, when the rules do not simply apply but have to be 'reinvented' in order to respond to the demands of the 'singular' situation. I have always thought of myself as some kind of an Aristotelian on this point, a dissident or heretical Aristotelian, to be sure, with all kinds of reservations about the conservatism by which we are threatened in Aristotle. But I am always trying to reinvent this *phronimos*, to expose a 'more radical *phronesis*' (Caputo 1987: 262). One way I do so is to say this *phronimos* fellow is a little too cool, too smart, too aristocratic, and that he needs a little less 'insight' and a little more 'heart', to be 'melted' by the demands of the other, not simply to coolly see what the demands of the situation are. There is nothing 'unmanly' in being tender. Now the 'heart' is the Biblical model, the prophetic model, and it shows up in the Christian 'Fathers' of the Church – here we must add 'sic!' – above all in St. Augustine's *Confessions*. Its opposite is 'hardness of heart'. That, I think, breaks the grip of the elitist and conservative streak in Aristotle and turns our hearts (and our minds) to what Paul calls *ta me onta*, the little nothings and bodies, the homeless and the hopeless, the 'rogues' and marginalized who never make an appearance in Aristotle's ethics (except as 'slaves' and 'women').

So if we say the university must be a scene of the event, not a place of formation, then it must take every precaution not to prevent the event. This means it risks a certain anarchy, an open-endedness of thought – the right to ask any question – and a proliferation of practices, a rainbow coalition, as Jesse Jackson says, of people of many different sorts, different cultures, etc. That is more easily accomplished with the resources of the larger urban universities. Furthermore, something like this is much more likely to happen when 'information' flows freely, across closed borders. So I do not think we should engage in caricatures about big universities – the large state university, large classes, no personal contact, a degree-processing factory, as opposed to a small confessional college, more intimate, more concerned with the personal character of the students – or even about 'information'. We would also need to rethink 'information' beyond Heidegger's criticism. I agree it was extraordinarily prescient of Heidegger to single out this word – not only did he thematize the 'T' in 'IT', but also the 'I' – but we cannot forget how reactionary Heidegger was about democracy and technology, and we need to recognize how much democracy requires the free flow of information. Furthermore, in quantum physics, 'information' may turn out to be the very nature of the universe. It may be that on the most elemental level, the most basic units of existence are bits of information, even as in genetic theory, the very basis of life lies in some kind of information system. That is what is so prophetic in the way that the young Derrida singled out the paradigm of a generalized archi-'writing', coded differential systems, which led him to the Heideggerian heresy that a '*techné*' lies at the very heart of the '*physis*' Heidegger celebrated. Maybe information is an





auto-deconstructing system of transformation and there is no difference at all between them.

But to return to the issue that you are concerned with in this question, no college or university can neglect the 'heart' because it cannot neglect the event, which is its heart. You see this quite vividly in Quaker and Anabaptist colleges, institutions of distinguished academic achievement that also have a heart. I remember once that a man named John Coleman, then president of Haverford College outside Philadelphia, took a leave of absence in order to spend time working as a trash collector, reminding himself and everybody around him of the privileged circumstances of most academic communities. This extraordinary act also reminds us also of the mission of community colleges and public urban institutions to serve the least privileged students. Our institutions must be open-ended and if 'open admissions' has not worked, we need a massive commitment of resources to prepare the least advantaged to meet admission standards. The Christian Right would object to this, of course, on the grounds that they do not want the Sermon on the Mount to mean that we are going to raise their taxes.

WD: *This distinction between information and formation is quite obviously a heuristic schematization that easily breaks down. Foucault, for example, traced the genealogical roots of modern disciplines of knowledge to the monastic technologies and Christian spiritual exercises. He often cites none other than Jean-Baptiste de La Salle as an intermediary figure between the ascetic attention to detail in the 'mystique of the everyday' and the 'discipline of the minute' that organized 'the school, the barracks, the hospital or the workshop'*

(Foucault 1995: 140). What seems to be at stake, then, is not an opposition between an overly theoretical way of proceeding and one that is practical, but a complex and contested differential field of practices. As your own education has its roots in De La Salle's order of Christian Brothers, I wonder if this historical connection was something that was readily apparent to you as a student and then a teacher, or do you see a stark divide between the life of the academic and that of the religious life? And on a more personal note, how have these various formations come to inform your work?

JC: Now you have exposed my allergy to the word 'formation' and why I prefer to speak of 'transformability' to signify an alternate order of practices. Yes, 'practices' is not a panacea. We must distinguish among different sorts of practices, as we have already done by distinguishing *phronesis* and *kardia*. I was born in 1940 into a church that had not changed in any significant way in four hundred years and, as you point out, I entered a Catholic religious order. That was in 1958, the year that Pius XII died and was succeeded by John XXIII. This seemed at the time to be the beginning of the end of a very conservative period in the Church. My novitiate life was, if I may say so, a very 'formative' experience for me, quite literally, especially since we were still steeped in the culture of the pre-Vatican II church. What will interest you to learn is that, in a religious order, the time spent preparing for entering the active ministry is called 'formation' and the novitiate is called a 'house of formation'. And they mean it! We might think of this as a Nietzschean camel stage or alternately, as you indicate, a very Foucauldian space and time. The hours of each day, the days of each week, are rigorously articulated and





structured, even as the grounds are walled in. Here the young person is 'formed' in the 'spirit' of the 'Order' by means of obedience to the 'Rule'. This is quite like a military boot camp, as your reference to Foucault on the 'barracks' indicates, and it works best with eighteen year olds. The individual novice is ordered, formed, disciplined, by a blanket of practices and micro-powers, affecting everything from what one reads and studies to clothing, a change of name, bodily posture, modes of expression, diet, table manners, including the very condiments one uses at meals, prescribed times when one is allowed to speak, even relaxation. One never relaxes the rule but the rule provides for fixed times of relaxation, where as a matter of religious obedience, one is told to relax. Of course, the idea, the 'form', is the *imitatio Christi*. They want to engender someone Christ-like not produce a robot, but it is a massive disciplinary operation which reaches down into the bones, 'forming' 'habits' that last a lifetime.

Foucault was interested in the way De la Salle transcribed analogous practices to the modern elementary school, the 'distribution of bodies' in 'grades', arranged by age, gender, etc. At the time, we were very proud of the place 'St. La Salle' held in the history of education, and in fact the American 'Christian Brothers' today run first-rate schools. I would say two things about this. First, as I have been saying, I would distinguish the practices of 'formation' in the singular, which suggests a single form to be inculcated – Christ, the warrior, the good Christian child, the good citizen, the good socialist, etc. – from the practices of 'transformation', which suggests a kind of endless transformability or reinventability. The latter for me is closer to the 'event'. Schools organized about the paradigm of transformability, not

houses of formation, will be more welcoming and open-ended places. (In fact, the places where teachers expected to 'form' students are called 'normal' schools, normalizing, inculcating norms.) Now the baroque, counter-Reformation pre-Vatican world in which I grew up – four centuries of Catholicism from the Council of Trent to the opening of Vatican II in October, 1962 – disappeared quite quickly. Today, the Catholic Church in the United States and Western Europe, as well as the religious orders, are today in a state of crisis. Orders like the Christian Brothers, which are 'active orders', have abandoned old models, which were taken from the 'contemplative orders', and have tried to 'reinvent' themselves for a modern or rather postmodern world. They have, I would say, abandoned the paradigm of monastic 'formation' for one more suited to contemporary life, but this may be too little too late. They are beset with a crisis of numbers that may finally see them all but disappear.

That would be a loss, and this brings me to my second point. The old monastic model of formation and the 'technologies' it deployed were construed around a 'vow', a promise, an affirmation, which I would now describe as a response to an event. So while I shed no tears over abandoning the old disciplinary system and its ascetic ideal, which I think is a world well lost for all but a very few people, the loss of these orders will mean the loss of the religious passion that drives the members of these orders to run schools and shelters and clinics in neighborhoods from which the rest of us keep a safe distance. It is these people above all else who serve *ta me onta*. That is also where celibacy (voluntary not mandatory!) has a role to play. If you have children to raise, it is very difficult to live and work in such





dangerous neighborhoods, the way celibate priests, nuns and brothers do. The De La Salle Brothers take a fourth religious vow, the Christian education of the poor. They renounce the choice of the priesthood in order to be completely committed to teaching, undistracted by the priestly duty to administer the sacraments. For them teaching is a religious vocation, a vow they have taken, their 'apostolate' or calling, and not only a job. That is the most precious thing I have learned from them, and it is something I still believe, although I would now use the word 'religious' in a more open-ended way. Here you clearly see the workings of the event and of people galvanized by the event. The disappearance of these people means that schools that serve the poorest of the poor are being closed and increasingly scarce resources are shifted to the prosperous suburban schools. Furthermore, the nuns are the most radical women in the Catholic Church today, women who both are deeply religious and acutely conscious of the violent patriarchy of the Catholic hierarchy. The bishops know that and they don't trust them and well they should not. Some nuns are being ordained in open defiance of the Church's prohibition – a kind of Christian disobedience, not civil but ecclesiastical – which is at least a first step in overturning the violent misogyny of the Church. Perhaps these nuns will be the Rosa Parks of Catholicism.

WD: *In On Religion you reject the division that is often drawn between the secular and the religious on the grounds that it appeals to the largely cognitive opposition drawn between reason and faith. Instead, taking a page out of Augustine's Confessions, you propose that religion is about passion and love (more specifically you appeal to the*

poetics of salt, which is always a little befuddling to my students when I teach the book in my introductory classes).² If this is the case, then even the seemingly secular practices of the classroom and academic life could be interpreted in religious terms. This is also something that Augustine does throughout the pages of the Confessions – interrogating the manner in which intellectual disciplines shaped his desires. This leads me to wonder, then, what is it I love when I undergo the typical practices of academic life? How do the specific practices of the classroom educate the desires of our students? What are different disciplinary mechanisms (tenure committees, accreditation reviews, and peer-reviewed journals) training us to love?

JC: I appreciate the irony of your question. You return us, in the context of the schools, to one of Derrida's most famous aporias, between justice and the law, but now the aporia is set between our love of philosophical and theological searching and the tenure committee, which is the law. Let us say, the aporia of the philosophical and theological quest and the quest for a job and tenure. So let us go back to the event. Teaching and writing, reading and learning, teachers and students, all are about the event. We may even speak of a pedagogy of the event. Everything is about the event, inside or outside the academy, religion, everyday life, in sacred space or secular space. Indeed, since the event as I have been discussing it has an inherently religious force, I would say there is no strictly 'secular' space, if that would mean a space without the event. For me, all the 'professions' – medicine, law, education – concern the event. The

² See especially Caputo (2001), 'Religion is for Lovers' in *On Religion*, New York: Routledge.





professions are made up of people who have been 'called' by one event or another; they are vocations, callings. As I have just said, I have no hesitation in calling them 'religious vocations'. I once was sure I had a religious vocation in the strict or narrow sense. But I have come to see that I had, that we all have, or should have, a religious vocation in the terms that I have been discussing, which means being visited by the grace of the event, in any of several orders. We can see this in the legal profession, where the event that galvanizes the law is the passion for justice, which give rise to the aporiae of the passion for justice and the rule or force of law so powerfully elaborated by Derrida. The law deals with matters of life and death, in the most literal sense, and so it deals with sacred or solemn matters, which is the event.

The same aporias are found there as in all the professions. In the medical profession, the event that insists in the name of 'healing', to which they all take an 'oath', by which everyone in that profession has been summoned (I am speaking optatively, I am dreaming), has to contend with a monster of laws – of hospital regulations, professional codes of conduct, health insurance company regulations, malpractice litigation, hierarchical conflicts among hospital administrators, physicians and nurses, and even the laws of the market, so that hospitals now advertise for patients. I have been invited to speak several times by nurses and nursing educators, and they have helped me see the religious quality of the medical vocation of the nurse. The nurse is relatively low on the hospital power chart but no one is closer, more intimately involved, with patients, with the singularity of the patient's situation, which lies below the rules up above. Those who nurse the dying in a hospice have a palpably

religious calling, whether or not the institution has any relationship to a confessional 'religion', as many hospitals in fact do. In Great Britain, in fact, the nurse is still called 'sister', and the garb of a nun and of a nurse are similar. You will recall that when the ministry of Jesus is first introduced in the New Testament, it is said he came 'teaching and healing'.

The questions you are raising arise from an experience of the same aporias, the same structural conflict between the events to which we in the university are all responding and the monster of laws, the flow of the academic power chart from the administration to the students, the requirements placed upon the students for graduation, the 'grading' system, etc., and upon the faculty to meet the standards of tenure and promotion. This is the conflict between our vocation, our religious vocation, and the disciplinary system, the distribution of micro-power across the bodies who make up the university, the administered society of the university. On the one hand, I am writing from my heart, writing something because my life is at stake, because I am confounded by the mysteries of my existence, and on the other hand, I need another publication for tenure. I am doing both of these things at the same time. Is that possible? It seems not. I am not sure. Maybe we regularly do things like that, something like the Knight of Faith who looks for all the world like a tax collector.

I am not sure I can improve upon Derrida's solution to such aporias, which is to say that we do not solve them but move in the distance between the two extremes. We must at one and the same time both prove ourselves according to the protocols of the university and also transform them from within. There are many experimental institutions, not



enough, which treat the rules with a measured suspicion, but those are at best limited solutions. They are not going to replace mainstream institutions, which cannot be replaced but can be renewed by inventive administrators and faculty who can devise new unprogrammable 'programs', new ways of meeting requirements, new 'requirements' that are duties without duties, new courses not merely in content but in method, new courses that do not proceed as a simple matter of 'course'. We must find new ways to weaken the protocols without jettisoning them, new ways to break down the barriers between the disciplines and the colleges, etc. One danger I see is the growing professionalization of people who run the universities, a separate culture of upwardly mobile professional administrators who move from university to university in search of higher positions. They do not arise from the faculty and return to the faculty and so they risk insulating themselves from the event, which can only take place in the classroom, which is the heart of the university.

So the idea is not so much to eliminate these aporias but to make them maxims, the impossible conditions under which we must make something possible. We cannot, we ought not to try to separate justice and the law, the gift and the economy, the event and the systems in which it is always already found. Instead, we want to make them porous to each other. The aporias are inescapable, irreducible; we could even say 'structural', albeit in the paradoxical sense that the structure is de-structuring, that the event prevents the structure from closing over, from enclosing the event by submitting the event to rules, to the program. That means that the aporias are openings,

opportunities, albeit risky ones. Of course, churches, courts, hospitals, museums and schools are structures, institutions, economies, jobs, and they need money and they need rules. But there must always be something unruly about the rules, some anarchic energy, some event, for these institutions contain something they cannot contain, something uncontainable, which is the event. The justice is always found in the opening, the crack, the crevice. The rules must be 'plastic', to borrow Catherine Malabou's word; they must be welcoming, open-ended. Everyone must understand that the task is not to apply the rule but to reinvent it, that the individual is never a 'case' that 'falls under' (*cadere, casus*) a rule, but the rule is a finger pointing at a moon of singularity.

This can all be written down quite elegantly, of course, but the reality is never as elegant. I spent over twenty years on promotion and tenure committees and time and again we were presented with idiosyncratic situations. How do you evaluate the 'research' of a professor in the performing arts if, instead of writing critical essays the professor actually performs, as an actor or a director? Is a published book of poetry, or a text book, 'published research'? Those are the easy questions. The hard one is, how do we truly evaluate a teacher? How do you measure whether the students have been touched by the event of a teacher who has herself been transformed by the event? If this happens at all, it may not happen until many years later when someone realizes how a teacher has changed her life. But we cannot let such impossible conundrums turn us into 'beautiful souls', as Hegel called them, too beautiful for the harshness of the world.



WD: *In my own work, I have suggested that the writings of a number of continental philosophers, like Kierkegaard and Derrida, can be interpreted as contemporary transformations of ancient and Christian spiritual exercises and technologies of the self.³ So rather than being nihilistic theorists, they could be thought of as practitioners of a radical pedagogy. In what way do you think it is possible to recover and re-interpret these resources of philosophy and theology, and in what way would such a turn to the past run the risk of repeating its mistakes and shortcomings?*

JC: I like this expression 'radical pedagogy' and I think you do well to single out Derrida and Kierkegaard as prototypes. They are the most important philosophers in my work as well, in my own search for something radical: Kierkegaard because of his articulation of the 'single individual', which we today call 'singularity', and Derrida because of the account of the event, of the coming of the singularity of the other, as a basic structure of our experience. They are for me the prototypes of thinkers who write from the passion of life, who are touched by a transformative event, and that I think has been the source of our shared interest in them. They also share something in common that I very much treasure – they are both comic-tragic writers, both laughing through their tears, which I think the only style that is congenial to the event, that does not

³ See T. Wilson Dickinson (2011), 'Repeating, Not Simply Recollecting, *Repetition*: Kierkegaard's Ethical Exercises', *Sophia* 50, 4: 657-675; (2012) 'Teaching with *Fear and Trembling*: On the Classroom as a Space of Dramatic and Bewildering Trial', *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* 12, 2; (2011) *Specters of Truth: Exercising Philosophy and Theology*, PhD diss., Syracuse University.

prevent the event (and also makes for good teachers). The event is the most deadly serious thing of all and so it can be approached only or best in the comic mode, as when Climacus tells us about the man who accepts an invitation to dinner with the proviso that he is not in the meantime killed by a slate falling off a roof as he passes by. Everyone laughs but he is 'deadly serious'. The comic is the incognito of the religious. The style of their work is of course completely incommensurable with modernity and the rule of method, which is why we have both found in them echoes of premodern figures like Augustine, where the passion of the event is palpable and the rules of modernity had not yet been formed. I am not saying that Augustine or early Christian writers were humorists, of course, but that they write from the heart, I would say 'autobiographically', not as a strict literary genre but in the sense that they were not writing papers to deliver at conferences or for the advancement of academic careers. They were writing with their blood about matters of life and death. The earliest theologies were forged in the closest collaboration with the communities of faith, as opposed to the gulf that today separates the 'bishop', the official teacher of the faith, and the 'theologian', who is writing books and papers for fellow theologians and for tenure. Kierkegaard exposed the fraudulence of the academic setting in which philosophy and theology are housed in modern times and he recalls for us the apostolic passion of Christian antiquity. He once went so far as to question the Christian credentials of anyone who is not martyred!

You ask about dangers inherent in such a retrieval of the ancients. For me, in every case the danger is always that we will prevent the event, that mundane





forces, the powers of the world, will prevent the event, and so it is worth contrasting the different dangers in Christian antiquity and in the work of Kierkegaard. The times are different, the task is different, and so the danger, the forces of the world, are different. The early theologians were engaged in an apostolic struggle to construct a memory of Jesus in a theological edifice that would house a way of life, a way of repeating Jesus in their life. As you have shown, they are writing from an existential passion, which is why we love them. The danger here – a danger to which I think they finally succumbed – was the institutionalization of their passion. I think they allowed their passion for the event that took place in the name of Jesus to freeze over into an obsession with the construction of 'Christianity', with imposing doctrinal rectitude, as you have pointed out in your work. That allowed their theology, which is supposed to be a theology of the originating event, to devolve into heresiology. Although this may sound strange to orthodox ears, 'Christianity' was the mundane force that suppressed the event by which they were driven. Practically everything we know about the 'Gnostics', for example, comes from citations in the writings of the people who were denouncing them as 'heretics', the old story of history being written by the winners. I think that the fear of heresy is the fear of the event.

Kierkegaard, on the other hand, lived in an almost perfectly opposite time – not a church 'militant' but a church 'triumphant', a post-Constantinian time – when Europeans thought they were all Christian. That led Kierkegaard to make his famous distinction between a fraudulent and complacent 'Christendom', which is a power of this world, and a genuine apostolic 'Christianity', which

still breathed with the breath of the event, where you would risk your life to be a Christian. So Kierkegaard did battle with the mundane powers of the Church and the politics of the modern university. Accordingly, Kierkegaard ran the opposite danger, and by the end of his life I think he succumbed to it, a deeply anti-institutional condemnation of the church and the university which leaves no room for any institution, along with an elitist distrust of modern democratic institutions that he shared with Nietzsche and Heidegger. I do not mean to set Derrida on a white horse at this point but I have to say that Derrida does not make either mistake. He is insistent about the inside/outside structure, about the roguishness of democracy, and about the need for 'negotiations', for moving in the space between justice and the law, events and institutions. He is a lover of heretical dissent while at the same time he can even say that deconstruction is a philosophy of institutions. Still, it pains me to oppose Kierkegaard and Derrida, because what I love about the two of them, what you and I both love, is that they pose to such a 'scandal' to the business as usual of philosophy and the university. Their very names are a summons to do things differently, to reinvent the university under the impulse of the event, which is itself a heresy to the spirit of objectivism that hovers over the university today. They are consciously, intentionally eccentric and incommensurable figures. That is why I love them both and will not choose between them.

WD: *In Against Ethics you drew a distinction between bodies and flesh – with the former designating the aspects of our existence that are characterized by intentionality, agency, and strength, while the latter is associated with that which is weak, vulnerable, and subject to*





suffering (Caputo 1993: 203). *You have used this distinction to criticize the philosophical and theological fantasy of a body without flesh, of a form of existence that is able to rid itself of its limitation, weakness, and vulnerability. Are there pedagogical practices that reinforce this fantasy, that imagine the professor to be an authoritative font of knowledge, that presume the classroom to be a place where fleshless intellects interface, where frailty and limitation are examined, graded, and if found wanting, failed? How might the body and the flesh remain integrated in the classroom?*

JC: When I write, and when I teach, I always want to touch the event, or rather to let the student or the reader be touched by the event, and so there is a 'homiletic' element in my 'pedagogy', for which my writing has been criticized (instead of being congratulated). I want to evoke the event, to let the event happen, but of course I cannot and I do not want to abandon my 'training', my 'formation', in the 'discipline'. I want to be faithful to the discipline while not allowing the discipline to prevent the event. First and foremost, it is the event that has assembled the students and the professors in the same classroom, that has assembled us as colleagues in the 'college', meaning those who associate under a common calling, who have responded to the event. That is the 'religious' dimension of the college or university. It is like a religious assembly, an 'ekklesia', meaning that it is the event that calls (*kalein*) and assembles the students and the professors who respond, who are the ones that are called together, the *ekklesia*. That is why, and we all know this, the teacher teaches by contagion, by contact, which means by touching. It is the evident fact that the teacher has been touched by the event that touches the students in

turn. Teaching is a matter of being touched by the being-touched of the teacher, not mind to mind but flesh to flesh.

As you can see I am putting the student and the teacher or professor in the same position, in the position of responding, of saying yes to something by which they have been touched, of receiving the event, rather than positioning the teacher as a sovereign subjectivity who has 'mastery' of her field. This is the position of flesh not body, of the patient not the agent, of receptivity and responsiveness, of being exposed, vulnerable to the coming of something unforeseen. Of course, it is dangerous for the young teacher to assume such a posture because the sociology of the modern university is centered on a series of agencies, of teaching 'effectiveness', of having a mature research 'program', and having credentials that assure everyone that she is a 'master' and a 'doctor' of her field. But, the truth is that we serve the event, are in bonds to the event, and we are not a 'master', just as we are not a 'doctor' of the event but a patient. But confessing on such non-agency, receptivity and non-knowing is not a recommended course at a job interview or a conference presentation and it is not a path to tenure. At such times we are expected to be upright bodies not beings of flesh. The best advice I can give you on this point is this. For a long time, at least, this confession may be permitted only as an aside, an apostrophe, when for a moment, an *Augenblick*, in the midst of a lecture or a dialogue one notes, by the way, just in passing, as if this were not a serious point, almost as if we were joking (the comic as the incognito of the religious), that we none of us know who we are. Then we get back to 'business'.





By the way, just as an aside, allow me to note in passing the presence here of what Derrida calls the implicit theologeme that accompanies this distinction between body and flesh. I am not modeling the teacher after a sovereign, strong God, a supreme 'agent' (*actus purus*) the governor of the universe, who creates things *ex nihilo*, which would in turn be the model of the 'magisterium', the teaching authority of the church, as well as of the college, as an administered society, administered of course by the administration from the top down. The implicit theologeme is rather to think of the teacher as one who has received a 'grace', as a patient not an agent, who has said yes to a grace, who welcomes it, and that I think is not merely an analogy. It is the grace of the event. That is what 'binds' – if we accept the old and now questionable etymology of religion as *re-ligare* – the teacher and the student as such, and it is their common bond to the event, so that neither is a master. As you know, I do not think of either God or the event as an 'agent', as 'somebody', 'someone', some 'thing' doing something, but rather as a happening, as the happening of a promise and a memory, which is wispy even spectral thing. Both agent and patient need to be rethought in terms of the grammatology of the middle voice, as we have learned from Heidegger. That means an intermediate state between the much vaunted 'autonomous individual', the self-sufficient agent, and pure passivity. This is the state in which something is getting itself said in a discourse, or getting itself done in a series of actions, but it is impossible to identify the one doing it but it is happening. Something is happening in what is going on, but no one individual can be said to do it. For example, a promise is getting made in language with words like 'democracy' or 'justice' – but it

is impossible to identify who is making the promise and impossible to deny that we are being given a promise. That is what Heidegger meant when he said 'language speaks', although 'democracy' was not a word of promise for him as we all know.

WD: *Do you think there is a desire for bodies without flesh that is often operative in academic writing, which demands complete authorial control, and pursues the ideal of clarity (of making the fleshy matter of our language transparent for the sake of communicating meaning)? What would it mean to abdicate the assumed authority of the author and to admit one's weakness? Are there ways that you try to perform this type of pedagogy in your own writing?*

JC: As I have just said, such authorial command is expected and it is therefore dangerous, especially for young professors, to assume a position of non-knowing. But your question allows me to add an autobiographical point which may be of interest to others. When I started teaching, I was more interested in teaching than in publication, and I first felt impelled to publish in order not to perish, because it was expected of me. But I have always loved to write, ever since high school, where I learned I was a better writer than an athlete. So it was very easy, almost natural, that the work of publication took on a life of its own for me and I became quite swept up in it, which is one of the marks of the event. But it was not until I got to *Radical Hermeneutics*, where my first sustained encounter with Derrida took place, that I even conceived a desire to write differently, to push up against the limits of academic propriety. So *Radical Hermeneutics*, was something different for me, both in terms of style and of



content, of what I said, when I spoke for the first time in what Derrida would call a 'circum-fessional' way. This is seen clearly at the end when I say, we do not know who we are, none of us, not if we are honest, or whether we believe in God, or whether what we believe when we say 'God' is God at all. I make a confession of not knowing, a profession of learned ignorance.

If you look at my first books, I was already very much interested in apophatic theology, but the authorial voice is different. It is much more the assured voice of the scholar, of the dispassionate investigator, of someone whose 'research program' is that of the relationship between philosophy and apophatic theology. The voice of *Radical Hermeneutics* is circum-fessional. I speak from the heart and I was criticized for this. An academic friend at a seminary once told me that when he read *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* he said to himself, 'that will preach'. This was meant as a congratulation, but for many, perhaps for most people, in the 'academic' community, this would be an accusation, a violation of the protocol, a kind of pandering or purple prose, replacing thought with edification, etc. Am I to be 'accused' for what sometimes sounds like preaching – or congratulated? Should I, like Kierkegaard separate works of edification from the other works? I write in such a way that the objective and the edifying are mutually contaminated by the other. Each has its own danger, but I think that it is the one without the other that is most dangerous. I think that the 'homiletic' is a risk, that the danger of preaching, is real but I think it is a salutary risk, because there is an opposite risk in simple academic propriety, which is greater. There is always something dangerously and

instructively homiletic about the event, and in theology what is true of the event as such is all the more salient.

At that point in my life, I was a tenured full professor and I was annoyed but unphased by such criticism. The only viable way for a young person, who still depends upon 'peer review', is to emphasize the learned in the learned ignorance and to make sure there are plenty of footnotes. In my own case, this was neither cowardly caution nor a cunning strategy. I was not waiting until I was in a protected position as a full professor. Before that, before I got to know Derrida well, I did not conceive or nourish a desire to write differently, which means for me at least to write more directly from the heart. It is this incommensurability of the 'heart' with the institutional system that, I think, is behind all your questions.

WD: *In your more recent work you have noted the uncanny resonance between the medieval theological imaginary concerning bodies without flesh (in both resurrected bodies and angels) and recent scientific breakthroughs in the fields like robotics, biological engineering, and computer technology.⁴ As you observe, these technological breakthroughs are often accompanied by hopes of bodies without suffering, individuals without place, and of life without death. Computer technology is*

⁴ See, for example, John D. Caputo (2010), 'Bodies Still Unrisen, Events Still Unsaid: A Hermeneutic of Bodies without Flesh', in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation and Relationality*, ed. Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller, New York: Fordham University Press, 94-116; and (2011) 'On the Wings of Angels: Post-humanism and Info-technotheology', *The Twenty-Sixth Annual Symposium of The Simon Silverman Phenomenology Center*, ed. Jeffrey McCurry, Pittsburgh: The Simon Silverman Phenomenology Center Duquesne University, 8-28.



already transforming the organization and practices of the contemporary classroom, sometimes locating the entire educational experience within the virtual domain of the internet. In what ways do you think that these technological changes hold the risk of seeking to form bodies without flesh? Could fears about such changes simply be a repetition of the 'metaphysics of presence'? Does this technology also hold promise of transformation and hospitality?

JC: This is a complicated question and it is one that I am still thinking about. I keep promising to say what I have to say in a book on bodies without flesh, which I keep postponing. In the simplest terms, it is the problem of the dangerous supplement. My point of departure for this discussion has been to develop the analogy between the new information technologies and the figure of the angel, which I first learned from Michel Serres' book on angels. What is the angel (*angelos*, messenger) if not an instant message system? When the Lord God needs to get an instant message to Abraham to stay the patriarch's hand, and there is no time to lose, he sends his angel. Nowadays the Most High could have used an iPhone. The analogy is elaborate. It is not just 'information', a word about which you and Heidegger are very suspicious, but also 'guidance' (guardian angels, global positioning systems), war (warrior angels like Michael and 'smart bombs'), and interestingly the nature of the 'body' itself. Thomas Aquinas said angels are purely immaterial, not bodies at all, while the Franciscans said they were made of some kind of ethereal matter, which is quite like what I call bodies without flesh. On this point, the Franciscans are more interesting because today, in age of quantum physics and relativity, the very meaning of matter, space and time have

been thrown in question, thoroughly revolutionized, which is why it is nonsense to say that science does not think. It may very well be that what we call 'matter' in ordinary experience comes down to vibrating filaments called superstrings, which is not so very far from the image that the Franciscans had of angelic bodies. The old mockery of medieval angelology, how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, has a close contemporary counterpart in computer miniaturization: how much information can be stored on a microchip the size of a pinhead? Mock that! In both cases, medieval Franciscan angelology and contemporary info-technology, the model of the body is pure agency, action and activity, insulated from suffering and even mortality itself.

The advances made by science and technology are steady, swift and irreversible (unless we blow ourselves off the face of the earth). They are changing everything and pushing up against the horizons or thresholds of our very carnality and mortality, producing a series of what Donna Haraway calls 'border breakdowns'. The seemingly crazy sci-fi idea which we see in *Battlestar Galactica* (the new series, 2002-2005) of 'downloading' 'consciousness' onto computer chips and 'uploading' it into shiny new robot bodies (which would mean that one could store a back up 'copy' of yourself in case of an accident or computer crash) is actually being pursued by perfectly respectable scientists. I am not a specialist in the analysis of popular culture, but I find *Battlestar Galactica* quite instructive in this regard. The new technologies are meant to be supplements but they threaten to take over, like the 'Cylons' who were created by humans but who overtake their human creators. The



obvious 'battle' in the title, then, is this war between the humans and the Cylons, whom (which?) the humans mock by calling them 'toasters', stupid machines. This is something that always comes up, the fear that we will be enslaved by our own creation. But there are several other battles going on in this series that I find instructive. One of the more interesting things is that the Cylons have the ability to synthesize human bodies for themselves, which they do in order to infiltrate the human race and spy on them. But in the process of so doing they discover human feelings and the pleasures of the human flesh. Then the Cylons have another battle on their hands, between their rationally programmed Cylon self and loyalties to their 'race' and their acquired human feelings and passions, making them something of a 'monstrous compound', we might say. The quite voluptuous woman in red on the cover of the CD collection is a Cylon and her sensuality is central to the story, as is the sympathy of another Cylon character whose 'sympathies' lie with the humans. When the Cylons assume human form, they expose themselves to human suffering and death. It is possible to kill a Cylon, but only temporarily, as he or she will be reduplicated and in the process get very annoyed at you for being put through such a painful ordeal. The suggestion is that even were info-technology to realize this seeming fantasy, it would retain the life of flesh as an available option, almost like a vacation one would take or nostalgic visit to an outdoor museum like Williamsburg, Virginia, which tries to reproduce a by-gone world. The pleasures of the flesh are made available, and even death and suffering are possible, but they are reduced to strictly temporary inconveniences. Finally, and this is also very interesting, the battle between the humans and the

Cylons is also theological. They both have religions and occasionally they argue about theology. The Cylons are monotheists while the humans are polytheists, which suggests that religion survives even when 'consciousness' is digitalized, where it takes a monotheistic form, while 'flesh' is polytheistic. That is worth thinking about.

The current transformations taking place in info-technology are deeply confounding. What we can be sure of is that everything we think about birth and death, about sickness and health, about materiality and carnality, sexuality and gender, will be affected, and maybe even totally transformed or even 'overcome'. We are approaching a technological 'event' which, interestingly, has been dubbed the 'singularity', using a word (inadvertently of course) that has a special prestige in continental philosophy, to describe a radical technological transformation that will render debates like the current one between *zoe* and *bios* obsolete and parochial. Here would be the ultimate body without flesh, pure deathless agents, achieved not by the 'resurrection of the body' but by information technology; theology, angelology is realized by technology. But is this truly an 'event'? The futurists and the sci-fi writers can see it coming already. They say the singularity is near, and some techno-apocalyptic prophets even have a date in mind, predicting it will take place in 2045. So it is not an event. But what is coming, perhaps, is a change so vast and transforming that we cannot see what it is that we think we see coming. That would be the event. Furthermore, if we object that this will be a disaster, that does not mean it is not an event. There is nothing about the idea of the event that says it will not be a disaster; indeed

the event is constituted by the risk of disaster.

Now, as professors of the 'humanities', you are asking what are we to do? We cannot afford, as a pragmatic matter, to be reactionary and to fall behind the pace of change or we will quickly fall out of touch with our students. My little four year old grandchild is completely comfortable with remote controls and touch-screens. Whether we like it or not, we must incorporate the new technologies as far as possible into the classroom, with all the attendant dangers this poses. As a theoretical matter, we – and here I have particularly in mind those of us in the 'humanities' – must get past obsolete ideas of science as atoms-in-a-void mechanism and come to grips with the profoundly revolutionary character of contemporary speculative physics. As a curricular matter, I think this means we need to make sure that humanities students get a level of scientific education that is at least at the level of being able to read the works of people like Brian Greene. One cannot understand these matters thoroughly without mathematics, but there is a great deal we can and must understand. There are 'picture theorists' and 'equation theorists' and we can understand the 'picture theorists'. Sean Carroll, one of the popular expositors of these ideas, puts the equations in the footnotes.

But where is the 'event' in this amazing scene? Does the coming of the new technologies spell the death of the 'teacher', of the person to person contact, of students touched by teachers who have been touched by the event? We cannot imagine that happening but it is a real threat. 'Distance learning' means one learns in isolation, by staying at home, on a computer, removed from human contact. This has many

advantages for many people in different situations but it is also very dangerous, threatening to produce atomized, unsocialized and unhappy people and stunted learning, learning without heart. Do the new technologies induce the illusory ideal of the perfectly programmed autonomous self, a digital version of Descartes' *res cogitans*? That is also a real risk. But the risk will not be averted by cupping our ears and saying that science does not think. It will be averted by understanding science better and differently and by abandoning this reactionary slogan. For those of us who are interested in religion, I think that the right posture has been struck by the Dalai Lama, who loves contemporary physics and sees all kinds of convergences between his meditative life and speculative physics, where he thinks that what we call the 'mystery of Being' is alive and well and flourishing. Please do not tell me that these are 'problems' not 'mysteries', which I think is a kind of postmodern dualism. These are investigations into the very make up of matter, time and space that leave us breathless. Of course these mathematical problems are problems, but they are also mysteries and they are latent with the event. That is why I think that continental philosophers must look to new models, to people like Catherine Malabou, whose work represents something genuinely continental but importantly new, and Zizek, despite his outrageous caricatures of what he calls postmodernism, and Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, who was deeply influenced by Serres. When Malabou discusses the neurosciences in terms of 'plasticity', and when Zizek speaks in terms of parallax shifts and the non-all, and when Latour describes the historical construction of the natural sciences, they provide openings within which the event can take place. In my recent work, *The*



Insistence of God, I have tried to think the event as an event of grace, and to extend this model beyond a theo-poetics to what I call a cosmo-poetics, where I treat the sheer stupid luck of life on earth, a completely fortuitous happening, cosmically speaking, as the stupidity of grace, the grace of the event. It just might be that God does play dice with the world, or rather, since God is not an agent who does things like play dice, it is better to say that the dice game, the being-played of the dice game, in the middle voice, which is not being played by someone, the element of play or chance, or what Derrida calls the 'perhaps', *peut-être*, is the divine element in things. This I believe was first pointed out by Heraclitus, in a saying that was beautifully interpreted by Heidegger in the same book in which he frets over the age of 'information'.

WD: *I must confess that the recent findings of the natural sciences that have gripped my imagination speak of a different future. The emerging accounts of global climate change seem to confront us with the material realities and limitations of human life. In this case it is the presumption of science – or its use by other cultural forces – that there are no limits to what we are capable of that have led to immense destruction and waste. So I wonder if this notion that our material limits are coming undone is more the business of science fiction than of an inevitable future. When my physicist brother and I have our perennial science versus theology debates I like to chide him that I am still waiting for the flying cars and teleportation devices. All I have seen coming out in my lifetime are smaller computers, bigger televisions, and wider varieties of Viagra. So when we look to the future, should we assume that everything is up for grabs, or is there not*

a demand that we begin to take certain limits seriously?

The in-breaking of the event in our future, then, might be less the possibility of angelic bodies, and more a matter of the unpleasant reminder of our flesh – of our frailty and vulnerability. In this configuration, philosophy might not simply need to study up on the natural sciences, but it might provide resources that would help people cultivate simpler forms of living. This might mean that theology needs to be less systematic and more ascetical (while remaining skeptical of old modes of discipline and formation). So might there, then, be a different Franciscan legacy – one not of angels but of apostolic living – that is needed to accompany the findings of science?

JC: Your anxieties are well founded. As I said above, nothing guarantees that the event will not be a disaster. The event *is* the very possibility of disaster. So your anxiety is integral to the picture I have just been imagining. My guess is that, although I have not done an empirical survey on this matter, the scientists are on your side. It is they who brought the threat of global warming to our attention before anyone noticed it and they who have been alarmed and who can prove we have reason to be alarmed. The roots of the problem are multiple. It is first of all the cooptation of science by techno-capitalism, the vast amount of money that is to be made by exploiting the environment, and the politicians whom that money has baldly, brazenly bought. It is also the refusal of the people who live in the technologically advanced societies to restrain their indulgence, and so you are right to call for a new kind of asceticism. And we cannot forget it is also the result of very poor people in poor nations to get out of poverty by





exploiting their national resources. The solution is to be found in the optimal mix of conservation and vigorous research into new clean technologies. That would require a degree of enlightenment in public policy that we find impossible to imagine in the degraded politics of today, where the common good is up for sale to the highest bidder. I myself am worried that the steady advance of miniaturization along with Moore's Law, that we double computer capacity about every two years, is hastening the advent of hand-held nuclear weapons, which will make it all but impossible to prevent a catastrophe.

I am trying to imagine the 'to come', what today many theorists do not shirk from calling the 'post-human' age, or what Donna Haraway called the coming age of 'cyborgs', in which the rigorous distinction between the human and the technological breaks down, which is also a point upon which Derrida has insisted right from the start. But I am not endorsing everything I can see coming in this future we cannot see coming. What you are saying tests the faith that I have in what Derrida once said, that 'the future is always better', not because it *is*, which is certainly false, but because that is our hope, our faith. So this is a hope against hope, a faith in something impossible to believe, which is what faith and hope are, just the way love means loving the unlovable, loving the enemy. I think that what we have called God up to now means a kind of immensity against which we measure ourselves and then feel our finitude and mortality. I think that the work of that immensity, that infinity, is now done by the infinitival 'to come', the vastness of what lies before us in history but also, as we are beginning to realize, in the universe, in universes endlessly spawning other

universes. The more we learn, the more we should appreciate our limits. Science is on your side; it tells us we are very finite, all headed for entropic oblivion. Even were we in some unimaginable future to come up with robot bodies and manage someday to escape the earth, that would be temporary – we can run but not hide from entropy. N. T. Wright tells us that the coming heaven is actually earth, that when Jesus comes again, we will not go up to heaven, but he will come down to rule here on earth. Therefore we should conserve the earth. Well, I agree we should conserve the earth, with or without this story, but even that would provide only a temporary residence for Jesus, since in five hundred million years or so the earth will be toast! I think we should see our lives on this little corner of the universe as an event of grace, the grace of an event, a lucky break – the stupidity of grace – nothing but a passing moment in the immense history of something, we know not what. In the meantime, we should show some gratitude for this grace and foresight about the planet we leave to our children and grandchildren. But I think that science gives us new reasons for saying that. I think that science is on the side of the philosophers, accompanying them, as you say.

WD: *In a recent essay, 'Theopoetics as Radical Theology', you differentiate between confessional theology – which 'reports back' to religious communities – and radical or postmodern theology that reports back to the academy. Surely, this relationship with the academy is one that is fraught with ambiguity. In Radical Hermeneutics, for example, you spoke of the necessity for reason and philosophers to be 'able to slip back and forth' between the confines of an institutional setting and roaming freely on the streets (characterizing these two*





possibilities as 'forms of life') (Caputo 1987: 228-9). What is the relationship between theology and the academy, and in what ways does embracing the task of theology (rather than just philosophy) make this slipping back and forth between both more necessary and more difficult?

JC: Yes, there is ambiguity from beginning to end and it is precisely the ambiguity that allows for the event, and it is precisely the event that calls for the nimbleness of slipping back and forth. To answer this question, let me start by saying that I like this expression 'reports back' because it suggests the circle of an economy, reminding us that the 'expenditure without return' is inevitably drawn back into a certain 'contract', and hence is expected to return a dividend after all. The ambiguity is that there is no question or possibility of simply leaving an economy behind; the question is rather of making economies more open-ended and flexible and less contracting. When I say that radical theologians report back to the academy I am saying this as a reminder, a qualification, which comes after first contrasting them with confessional theologians. The latter do theology within certain confessional constraints and their livelihood (and sometimes even their very life) depends upon the ability of the community to recognize itself in their work. By contrast, the 'radical' theologian seems free as a bird, no bishops, no excommunications, no heresy trials. But then to be free as a bird is an illusion, even for the bird itself, as Kant once pointed out, since the bird is inclined to feel the wind by which its flight is sustained as a resistance without which it could fly all the more freely. For if the truth to be told, when we speak of radical theologians, if we started to make a list, we would find that virtually all of them have day jobs as academics, which

presumes they are lucky enough to find a job. So even though they do not have to report back to a confessional community, that does not mean they do not report back to anyone. They do not have to deal with bishops but they do have to deal with search committees, tenure committees and deans. They do not have heresy trials, but they do have 'referees' who read the manuscripts they submit for publication and scrutinize them for 'errors' of method or content, which makes for a certain counterpart to the Vatican's 'Syllabus of Errors'.

Both the confessional theologians and the radical theologians are in an 'ambiguous' position. It is never a question of simply and unambiguously leaving behind an economy but of making the economy more open-ended and auto-revising, of giving economy a chance, as Derrida says. Give economy a break and do not dismiss it as the work of the devil. Construct an economy that allows for the event. Of course, that is a paradox, since it demands that we provide for the unforeseeable, which is a grammatical contradiction as well as a real one, since to provide is to foresee. So we are always negotiating these ambiguities, everyone, not just theologians.

The confessional theologians know about the need for constant negotiation very well. I say this because their work, when it is sustained and earnest, very often causes them to test confessional limits, think up against the borders of the community, skirting the edge of 'heresy'. My own explanation for this is that radical theology is implicit in confessional theology, that when we dig deeply enough, we find it lying there in wait for the confessional theologians to stumble upon it, expose it, expound it and maybe even espouse it, and when





they do that, it can cost them their jobs. Radical theology spooks the confessional theologian, and the confessional theologian spook their communities, and ideally this can take place without a heresy trial or exorcists to drive out the spooks. Many confessional theologians reach a point where they say things like, 'we do not know what we mean when say "God"'. They are not saying this in a safe way, as a higher form of praise for God, but they are saying, we really do not know what we mean. Perhaps it is an illusion, a neurosis, a projection, etc., and this 'we do not know' qualifies everything else we say. If they say this clearly and publically they risk the wrath of the community. Elizabeth Johnson, a distinguished Catholic theologian at Fordham University, has recently run afoul of the American Catholic bishops. This is testimony to the authoritarianism and ignorance of the bishops and it has managed to make them look even worse than they did before, if such a thing were possible after the recent scandals by which the Church has been engulfed. In the course of this controversy a spokesman for the Bishops said that theologians are sometimes a 'curse and a plague upon the Church'. That to me is a sign that the theologians are doing their job. To be a curse upon such power is a blessing and the church should be always grateful for blessings.

The radical theologians on the other hand are negotiating with the disciplinary systems of the university, with external systems like the politics of state supported public universities or of the wealth of donors to private universities, but also with systems internal to their discipline, like the normalizing force of the scholarly protocols, of standards for tenure and promotion, the standards of journals and academic presses, professional societies, and the rest. This

is another kind of orthodoxy, to be sure, but it is real. One must meet certain standards, submit to a 'discipline'. It is not an accident that we use the same word to describe both an ominous 'disciplinary' power, a force of normalization, and to describe our chosen field of study, the 'discipline' we love and to which we devote our lives. One must learn to operate within the university. That is not the devil. It is only diabolical if it is totalizing, if it encloses everything, for then the system will only produce clones, more of the same. Then there is no event. So I would advocate the 'weakness of the university', meaning that the system, the discipline must be weak, open-ended, pliable, reinventable, which means eventive, while the individuals are called upon to be bold, inventive, reinventive. Sometimes bold young people can break the molds and still manage to break into the system. More often, I am inclined to think, there is a sliding scale here, that with each step along the academic way, each hurdle scaled on the academic path, the more freedom there will be to speak and write and act differently, to blur established disciplinary borders. The idea is to violate academic protocols but not to simply smash them, neither idolatory nor sheer iconoclasm. As Aristotle says about the *phronimos*, we start by imitating the one with mastery, and his example is learning archery by first imitating the skilled archer. Or we can use the example of a good metaphor: we bend the rules, shock the system of established use, while drawing upon the resources of the very system we are shocking, which we must first learn. First the camel, then the lion, then the child, Zarathustra says.

Now what I am saying holds true for every academic, not just for academic theologians, confessional or radical. But I



think it is especially true, or let us say revealingly true – it's a revelation! – in the case of theologians because what they are talking about, *theos*, God, is in an especially poignant way not reducible to an object of disinterested scholarly research. I hasten to add that such disinterest is an illusion in *any* research, *any* discipline. Latour shows that Louis Pasteur was deeply and passionately devoted to his faith in microbes (and in protecting public health)! God or microbes, either one, spells passion. But it is easier to see with God. The name of God is the name of an event, or of a deed, Johannes Climacus said, to quote a hero you and I share. That means it is a matter of life and death, of what Tillich called a matter of 'ultimate concern'; it touches upon the passion of our lives. I think of 'God' in terms of the event, and I think of the 'event' in terms of God, because I think each is in a certain way a helpful paradigm for the other. 'God' signifies the claiming power of the event, its power to address us, but the event signifies that God is a weak force, that God's power is a weak force because it is the power of a claim, a call, an invitation, a solicitation, an 'insistence', but without an army to enforce it. Calls can always be ignored. The event signifies what is going on, what insists, in the name of God; it means that the name of God is not the name of a being that does things but the name of a claiming event. So 'God' and 'event' are each in their own way paradigmatic of something that is going on not only in 'theology' but everywhere, in the other 'disciplines', and outside academic life, which is why the event that overtakes us when we use the

name (of) 'God' can take place with or without religion.

I think the question you are raising, all your questions, circulate around the tension between the event and the 'object', purely objective, disinterested thinking, which I think is what 'secular' would finally mean. In that case, the event is the ultimate resistance to the 'object' and 'secularism'. Were there to be such a thing as a pure object, that would mean something devoid of an event, and that would be possible only if we were dead. Objective thinking means, we try to think of how things are if or when we are dead. This has its place. I am not trying to run it off the grounds. I am just trying to stop it from taking over and driving everything non-objective off the grounds. I am trying to prevent it from preventing the event. So the event means how things lay claim to us while we are still alive, how they call upon or are visited upon the living, who are of course living mortals. Things happen in our lives *by* the event. By the impossible, Derrida says, things begin, in whatever order – art, science, ethics, politics, religion, no matter what, inside or outside the university, inside or outside what we call in Christian Latin 'religion'. There is always the event and the university is the assembly, the collegium, of those who have been overtaken by the event. Everything really important in our lives happens by the event and in that sense, to come back to your first question, there can be no purely secular university. We have never been secular. Secularity will set in only about fifteen minutes or so after we are dead.

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