Discussions

Caputo in Europe (If There Is Such a Thing): How Does "Radical Theology" Look from Over Here?

The European Reception of John D. Caputo's Thought: Radicalizing Theology. Edited by Joeri Schrijvers and Martin Koci. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2023, 315 pp.

This work is a collection of contributions by different European authors discussing the work of US-American philosopher-theologian John D. Caputo. Though Caputo is by now a well-known figure in the USA, reception of his work in European academic contexts varies widely from place to place. This volume thus brings together fourteen theologians and philosophers in or from Europe to "gather Catholic and Protestant voices around Caputo's work to evaluate the match with the European context" and, in so doing, "add to the European reception of Caputo's radical theology" (1–2). Some might wonder if Caputo, though clearly a leading contemporary thinker, quite lends himself to this kind of reading as a "primary" author, but this volume shows that this is indeed becoming possible.

The authors of the thirteen contributions to this volume are thus Calvin D. Ullrich writing from Germany;[1] Rick Benjamins and Enrieke Damen from the Netherlands; Agata Bielik-Robson, Marie Chabbert, Maria Francesca French, George Pattison, and Barry Taylor writing from the UK (and Poland, in the case of Bielik-Robson); Nikolaas Cassidy-Deketelaere and Pascale Renaud-Grosbras, writing from France (and Australia, for Cassidy-Deketelaere); Erik Meganck and Justin Sands, from Belgium (and South Africa, for

1. Nearly each of these thinkers is *from* elsewhere than the place they are now *in* and from or about which they write in this volume. I have generally omitted these respective countries of origin to avoid making this enumeration too cluttered.

Marius van Hoogstraten, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1105, 1081 HV Amsterdam, Netherlands
m.m.van.hoogstraten@vu.nl 0000-0001-5920-8509

Forum Philosophicum 28 (2023) no. 2, 399–404 Subm. 17 May 2023 Acc. 31 May 2023
ISSN 1426-1898 e-ISSN 2353-7043 DOI: 10.35765/forphil.2023.2802.22

Sands); and finally Christophe Chalamet from Switzerland and Jan-Olav Henriksen from Norway. Each contribution is followed by a response by Caputo himself.

In the introduction to the volume, Schrijvers and Koci give a brief overview of the varying extent to which Caputo is read, translated, and discussed in (Western) Europe. In the Low Countries, a 2002 Dutch translation notwithstanding, Leuven has played the major role in the "serious academic reception" the past fifteen years or so. In the Netherlands, however, radical theology is "quickly gaining terrain" (3). In French, translations and reception remain somewhat limited to francophone Switzerland ("France … often suffices for the French"). Reception has likewise been relatively minor (or perhaps incipient) in Norway, Germany (but see below) and Spain (omitted from this volume because of the linguistic continuity with Latin America). Finally, despite Caputo's appearance in the debate between John Milbank and Slavoj Zizek (both for their part Europeans), and the apparent continuity of the English-language academic worlds of Europe and North America, "reception of [Caputo's] radical theology in the United Kingdom remained scarce" (4).

Though the chapters each of course have specific foci, there are a number of recurring themes throughout the volume. One such theme is the question of the place of radical theology vis-à-vis tradition and (for lack of a better term) traditional confessional theology. Schrijvers and Koci argue in the introduction that Caputo's emphasis has shifted in recent years, from the deconstructive second-order discourse of "religion without religion" to "a full-fledged radical theology" that stands more by itself, "raising radical questions and … prolonging the art of questioning" (5). This theme is taken up in several of the volume's contributions, perhaps most explicitly by Sands, who discusses the place of radical theology within theology, notably its relation to contextual and liberation theologies, as well as the operations (or "principles") by which radical theology addresses the conception of God as a metaphysical deity in more conventional theologies.

Chabbert similarly looks for the relationship between radical theology and the religious communities and institutions it remains, somehow, committed to. Precisely in challenging their institution's capacity to determine the "we," and thus instigating a pluralism beyond tolerance, their "dissidence itself arises from … deep care for—and passionate commitment to—their institution (and its radical instability)" (56). This sets it apart from Derridean deconstruction, which displays a "flypaper anxiety" about commitment (a term Caputo particularly appreciates in his response). Henriksen argues that perhaps indeed "Caputo is closer to an orthodox understanding

of God" than we might think (200), as even the otherness of God we address in prayer could not appear as such without positive religion. Perhaps counterintuitively, Caputo can help us understand prayer as a practice that "opens up to an experience of the world" (199) and as a chiasm in which God asks us for help even as we ask God.

In his contribution, Benjamins notes there are really two contradictory motions in Caputo's schema: On the one hand, there is the Derridean "future-oriented" sense of call, to-come, and event, but on the other hand, there is the "Heideggerian" sense of nihilistic grace and life "without why." A resolution to this tension can be found in Bultmann's "eschatological life … of grace which opens us up to love" (165). Chalamet's critique of Caputo is stronger still, arguing he "misses the mark … not by a small margin." Though Caputo builds on a sharp dichotomy between "strong" and "weak" theology, speaking of God in traditional theology "entail[s] speaking both of God's unveiling and God's hiddenness, not of one *or* the other" (177). Further, Chalamet argues, the way Caputo makes mankind responsible for God's existence and strength in the world makes the human being "almost omnipotent" (178). Must theology not also envision a living God acting, inspiring and shaping human action, beyond the mere weakness of a call? In sum, "[s]ome of the rooms that Caputo wishes to see closed once and for all in various theological buildings may still deserve a visit" (186).

The second theme that stands out in this collection concerns the relation between radical theology and ethics and the political. After an insightful discussion of the extent of and reasons for Caputo's rather mild reception in Germany, Ullrich argues that "weak theology *is* political theology" (26), one that "poses a challenge to the hegemonic political theologies of our time, whether sovereign politics, racial white supremacy, capitalism, or environmental domination" (31). Damen discusses the possible resonance between radical theology and the Black Lives Matter movement in Europe, particularly the "difficult glory" of Black suffering and the "accusative that is placed upon white people" (84). However, she asks, perhaps Caputo could do more to recognize the privilege of his (white) body—a difficulty he affirms in his response: "[H]ow can a white person say something—about Black Lives Matter—and also unsay it, that is, not presume to be speaking on behalf of black people, as if they cannot speak for themselves?" (92).

Pattison discusses the "foolish call of love," placing Caputo's sense of a "folly of God" alongside the figure of the holy fool in Shakespeare and Dostoevsky. Especially the latter's Prince Myshkin "offers a possibility for transforming unaccommodated man's ontological distress into a call of love," however with "not a hint of glory" (105). Relating Caputo to Barth,

Bultmann, and Bonhoeffer, Renaud-Grosbras inquires what determinate practices of hospitality to God we can form, even knowing such hospitality can never fully arrive. In response, Caputo stresses, perhaps more than elsewhere, the "*potens* in hos-*pitality*" (271), the way hospitality requires the host to be master of the home—something Barth does not recognize in the divine-human relation. Cassidy-Deketelaere, finally, asks about the place of embodiment and the flesh in Caputo's thought. Discussing queer bodies and the "HIV-positive flesh," he gives special attention to the humanity of suffering human flesh, and the communities of care that spring up to defend and honor the dignity of that humanity. In his response, Caputo notes that while "dehumanization"—a term Cassidy-Deketelaere criticizes him for using—never means the suffering person is no longer a person, we must also note that not only human suffering places us in the accusative.

In spite of the different localities and backgrounds of the authors, there is thus a clear coherence to the different contributions. Many readers may find the more critical chapters, such as those by Bielik-Robson, Cassidy-Deketelaere, and Chalamet, to be the most engaging. These also make the most of the conception of the book, as we can immediately read Caputo's response to the critique. The longest such response (rivaled only by the equally critical Chalamet) is merited by Bielik-Robson's chapter. She argues that Caputo's sense of divine weakness remains operative within the same basic schema as "strong" theology, which it simply reverses in a kind of kenotic operation. A more profound figure of God becoming "*Dieu sans Dieu … ein gottloser Gott*" (119), creating without creating and giving space as nothingness, can instead be found in the idea of divine retreat (Tsimtsum) of Isaac Luria. In response, Caputo argues his schema is not kenotic at all: "if I thought that God exists, which I do not, and that in God there are three Persons, which I do not, I would end up in kenoticism, which I do not" (133). Nevertheless, the theology of tsimtsum is nonetheless "an inviting imaginative trope" (136).

In these responses, Caputo is very clear about his current positions ("I want to make it abundantly clear that … I am saying that God does not exist" [41]). But he also reflects on his work retrospectively, and when Cassidy-Deketelaere criticizes the never-appearance of a promised work on the flesh and embodiment, Caputo seems almost to ask for forgiveness: "I said I would do it and I did not" (292).

Besides the nearly consistently very high quality of its chapters, this volume's main contribution to the field compared to other edited volumes engaging with Caputo's work is that it does this with a European focus. Schrijvers and Koci thus welcomely bring together a community of authors

and readers on this side of the Atlantic. Of course, there will always be continuity between English-language academia in Europe and North America. Yet this volume in a sense (perhaps paradoxically) liberates European discussion of Caputo's themes and works from its continuing dependence on the North American scene. At the same time, the title perhaps slightly overpromises the "Europeanness" of this work, which is embodied in the location of its authors more than in the content of the contributions. After the introduction, only a few chapters take up explicitly European themes, such as Caputo's local academic reception (which Ullrich and Benjamin address in the beginning of their chapters) or the place of religion in Europe (about which French and Taylor give a number of suggestions).

I do not intend here to critique a work of this quality for what it (inevitably) leaves out. So this is just to say that this volume makes one curious for more reflection on the interaction between Caputo's work and European themes. What can Caputo's deconstructive theology do to help us grapple with Europe's colonial history, for instance (especially in light of the Derridean commitments of much of postcolonial theory)? What is divine weakness and "difficult glory" amid Europe's haunting and violent memory of fascism, war and genocide, some of it not at all long ago? Russia's attack on Ukraine gets an occasional mention in this volume, but how could Caputo's radical theology help us think more seriously about "democracy to come" amidst the specters of Marx and communist oppression?

Further, the question of religion in Europe, certainly in Western and South-East Europe, cannot be addressed without inquiry into religious difference and pluralism. Reading Bielik-Robson reflect from a Judaic perspective, and reading Chabbert's thoughts on a pluralism beyond tolerance, one inevitably becomes curious to think further about the worth (and possible pitfalls) of radical theology for religious pluralism. How does Caputo's work speak to Europe's increasingly pluralizing religious context, where in many places Christianity, though only recently the religious option *par excellence*, is learning to take its place as simply one tradition among many? Is a Muslim, Hindu or indigenous radical theology conceivable, considering many of the Europe's suffering bodies are not Christian?

Finally, and perhaps more academically, one might wonder how Caputo's reading of (e.g.) Derrida, Deleuze, Hegel, and Heidegger stand up to the conversation with Franco- and Germanophone academic philosophy. Meganck's insightful chapter on the relation between Caputo and the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo already takes up a question of this kind, and the result is intriguing: "in the end, the voice of Vattimo … [has] completely disappeared" (244), as the two thinkers take markedly different paths. In

his response, Caputo disavows any significant relation to Vattimo, which makes sense, but may still come as a surprise to more casual readers of his and Vattimo's work.

Again, this is not to fault Schrijvers and Koci for not having produced a different kind of book as much as to highlight how the book they have produced may set alight further questions ("prolonging the art of questioning" indeed!). At least some of these further questions would also make one curious to hear from authors from a broader geographic spread. Though Schrijvers and Koci describe having invited scholars from all over Europe, the contributions in the volume stem from a close cluster of countries in Western Europe: The UK, the Netherlands, France, and Belgium are home to eleven of the fourteen contributors. Though these countries are of course already diverse, they only make up one corner of the titular "Europe." One can't help but wonder what reflection might also come from places like Slovenia, Italy, or Greece, or indeed the countries that once made up the Soviet Union.

In sum, this is a collection of high-quality contributions, both varied and coherent, giving detailed, thoughtful, and challenging discussions of Caputo's thought written by thinkers in or from Europe. Caputo's responses add further coherence and an engaging kind of dialogical character. In bringing together authors in Europe, this volume works to establish Caputo's themes here, with continuity but perhaps less reliance on the North American scene. The questions it asks also invite further radical questions about Europe, the difficult glory of its haunting past, and the promise of its insistent future (perhaps).

MARIUS VAN HOOGSTRATEN