Questioning God
By John D. Caputo, Mark Dooley and Michael J. Scanlon
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Questioning God is a collection of essays on the topic of postmodern theology which were originally presented at a conference held at Villanova University in 1999. This publication is the second in a series entitled ‘Religion and Postmodernism’, the first being God, the Gift and Postmodernism (Indiana University Press, 1999) which is also the result of a conference held at Villanova University. As Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion took centre stage for the first instalment in the series, only Derrida remains for the second, accompanied by twelve other scholars. The obvious danger to such an exercise is for Derrida (who says of himself that he passes for an atheist) and his work to be hijacked and trumpeted as an affirmation of orthodox theism. In the introduction to Questioning God the editors sound a pre-emptive note of caution regarding this possibility in warning that “one must resist co-opting Derrida’s work for religion” (p. 2) while at the same time pointing out that any philosopher who speaks so fervently about gift, forgiveness, hospitality, friendship, justice, faith and the messianic demands theological attention.

What sets this work apart from the majority of other publications on the subject of postmodern theology and prevents it from descending into a sanctimonious hagiography of Derrida’s genius is the presence among the contributors of Graham Ward and John Milbank, two of the founding members of the movement known as radical orthodoxy. This present work is the first to document supporters of radical orthodoxy critically engaging with proponents of Derridean deconstruction. The centrality of undecidability and suspicion as critical intellectual tools for the deconstructionists is something radical orthodoxy is itself sceptical of, convinced as it is of the core truth claims of Christianity.

Questioning God is split into two sections, one entitled ‘Forgiving’ and the other ‘God’. However, for the purposes of this review it will be beneficial to ignore this quite arbitrary delineation and instead focus on three sets of essay-response couplets, all of which are examples of the friction evident between radical orthodoxy and Derridean deconstruction. The opening essay entitled “To Forgive: the Unforgivable and Imprescriptible” is from the star of the show, Derrida. In it he draws our attention to a book by Vladimir Jankélévitch entitled L’imprescriptible (Editions Du Seuil, 1986). Jankélévitch claims that because the Nazis have never repented for the
Shoah they should not be forgiven for their crimes. According to Derrida such a notion of forgiveness is not forgiveness at all, forgiveness only attains its meaning when it forgives the un-forgivable. Derrida believes that the religious semantics of forgiveness are bound to the notion of repentance and are thus better described as an economy of calculation whereby my forgiveness of the other is merely conditional.

A roundtable discussion follows Derrida’s paper, though it is not until John Milbank enters the fray that the discussion attains a bit of intellectual ‘bite’. Milbank wonders whether the search for an utterly pure instance of forgiveness, purged of its religious and reconciliatory motifs, is in fact a moralistic egoism craving to be hyper-ethical solely for the sake of it. One can almost feel the tension in the room when Milbank charges Derrida with encouraging a kind of masochistic ethics, to which Derrida responds bluntly, “Masochism?” (p. 65). Milbank attempts his own deconstruction of Derrida by asking him why he does not consider the possibility that his own transcendental framework is not simply an interpretative construction. Derrida accepts he is a transcendental thinker of sorts and states that he is more than happy to hold a transcendental view of forgiveness, indeed such a view of forgiveness is entirely necessary for his overarching project of undermining the logic of sacrifice. The exchange between Milbank and Derrida ends on the question of priority. Milbank argues that priority of love must be given to some (e.g. family) ahead of others (e.g. strangers) by alluding to the Thomistic concept of charity. He believes that Derrida’s overly moralistic approach to the issue of priority—exemplified in the Gift of Death (University of Chicago Press, 1995) when Derrida asks “why should I look after my own cat and not someone else’s?” (p. 17)—makes morality impossible. In response Derrida raises the point that Milbank’s position is fertile ground for negative discrimination.

The editors were right to place these two contributions at the beginning of the collection as they provide a good insight into both the themes and tone present throughout the rest of the book. In an otherwise illuminating essay Derrida seems to misinterpret Christian forgiveness, especially in relation to its understanding of the economy between forgiveness and repentance. For Christian theology repentance is not simply a matter of God needing a reason to forgive a person, instead repentance can allow a person to interiorize the forgiveness they receive. By forcing a dichotomy between forgiveness and reconciliation, Derrida ignores the Judeo-Christian origins of forgiveness (the Greeks tied forgiveness to political expedience) and hypostatizes it, making it an aporia difficult to reconcile with concrete human life. However, his challenge to Milbank on the issue
of discrimination and priority is a powerful one, and one that seriously questions Milbank’s implicit assumption that the value of a person is directly proportionate to how closely related one is to them.

The second couplet is again focused on the issue of forgiveness. Its first part comprises John Milbank’s essay “Forgiveness and Incarnation”. Milbank argues that strictly human (immanentist) forgiveness is impossible and it is only because of the Incarnation that genuine forgiveness becomes a real possibility. Theological forgiveness sees no reason to rent forgiveness and reconciliation apart from one another. In contrast, Milbank claims that any account of purely immanent forgiveness will face five irresolvable aporias, which may be summarized as follows: (a) if I forgive a murderer I betray his other victims, and if I simply forget his crime I avoid the question of forgiveness. Secular forgiveness is tantamount to forgetfulness and as such cannot act as a prolegomenon to authentic peace; (b) I cannot forgive on someone else’s behalf, nor in fact can I forgive on behalf of my former victimized self. This is an aporia concerning the irreversibility of time and the rootedness in history of past crimes. Crucially for Milbank, Augustine’s account of the inseparability of time and memory allows the theological worldview to successfully negotiate this aporia by leaving the past open to possible re-narration and hence to an inscription by forgiveness on the tombstone of hate, “Time as remembered in its ontological positivity is only real because it participates in the divine infinite eternal memory” (p. 103); (c) the immanentist conception of forgiveness arrogantly values purity of motive above reconciliation. Christian forgiveness is not simply ‘economical’ because forgiveness restores charity among creatures and is only possible as an immeasurable gift from infinite divine charity.

In what is the one of the most disappointing essays of the entire collection, Mark Dooley spends the first half of his response, “The Catastrophe of Memory: Derrida, Milbank and the (Im)possibility of Forgiveness”, providing the reader with a summary of Milbank’s own arguments. When he finally offers an original contribution to proceedings he does make two important points. Firstly, he draws attention to the rigid dichotomy Milbank presupposes to exist between theism on the one hand and secularism and nihilism on the other. Secondly, he points out that Milbank’s heavy reliance on the Augustinian account of memory is highly contested by deconstruction’s critique of presence—memory is a fragmentary composite of signs, traces, archives and museums which are impossible to disentangle from one another and always to some extent incomplete. Yet the essay has difficulty clarifying the distinction between the possibility-impossibility dynamism inherent in Derridean deconstruction: Dooley seems to contradict himself
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within the space of three pages; compare “What inspires deconstruction is the hope against hope—the passionate faith—that one day the impossible might become possible” with “What worries Derrida about all this is the fact that it (the Incarnation and Resurrection) is predicated upon the belief that the impossible can become possible…” (p. 141-43). He also fails to grapple sufficiently with Milbank’s thesis of the five aporias of strictly human forgiveness by offering only a half paragraph towards the end of his essay, the content of which conveniently sidesteps Milbank’s argument, “…because we cannot rise from context, divine forgiveness is an impossible dream” (p. 144). Surely Milbank could reply to Dooley by asking if theists are doomed to wade through the swamps of ‘context’, then what angelic wings are in the possession of the deconstructionists who soar above to announce theirs as a more authentic understanding of forgiveness?

Despite the brevity of Dooley’s response to Milbank, the exchange between the two is still quite illuminating. However, the complexity of Milbank’s essay, by some distance the most difficult piece in an already challenging collection, means that his many interpenetrating arguments tend to obscure each other and thus lessen the overall impact. As for Dooley, it is unfortunate that he did not take more time to critically examine Milbank’s appeal to Augustinian memory, a concept on which Milbank is almost totally dependent. He might well have asked why, if time and memory are inseparable for the human being, is it necessary to safeguard the stability and interdependence of both by appeal to divine memory? Could the stability of time and memory not just as easily be a transcendental of human cognition?

The final couplet to be looked at contains what are probably the two most impressive essays of the entire book. Graham Ward opens his essay “Questioning God” with three questions from three different figures concerning the divine: Job, “Why then do you hide your face and regard me as your enemy?”; Augustine, “What then do I love when I love my God?”; and Derrida, “Is this place created by God? Is it part of the play? Or else is it God himself?” (p. 274). Ward points out that Job’s and Augustine’s questions spring from a prior relationship of faith in God whereas Derrida’s question originates from a completely contrasting Sitz im Leben. Ward bemoans the fact that for all the investigations undertaken by Frege, Quine, Putnam, and others into semantics and language there has been a paucity of analysis concerning the logical structure of the question. He tells us that every question presupposes a particular conceptual framework, ontology, orientation towards the field of investigation and also a particular understanding of the relationship between the question and some sort of
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possible answer. The point is that a questioning of the deistic God of the Enlightenment or questioning God after Heidegger’s critique of onto-theology is not the same as Augustine questioning the triune God of love.

Ward takes exception to the Kantian dualism Derrida sets up in his essay “Faith and Knowledge” (Acts of Religion: New York and London, 2002), one between dogmatic and moral religions. This dualism helps to sideline the rationality of faith and paves the way for Derrida to claim that faith in historical revelation can only arrive as an “absolute interruption” (Ward, p. 282; Derrida, ‘Faith and Knowledge’ p. 99), i.e. as something completely divorced from creation and history and thus divorced from reason also. For Augustine revelation begins with creation and therefore has a necessarily rational and immanent dimension to it.

He also accuses Derrida of confusing the God Augustine worships with the God of a static logocentrism. Only a Kantian type God, i.e. God as regulative idea, can be accused of being a transcendental signifier. Augustine’s God is not implicated in this metaphysics because to question God is for him to pray. Hence he accuses Derrida’s questioning of being closed to the economy of exchange, to the possibility of receiving a revelatory answer and is instead a self-gratifying exercise in questioning for the sake of questioning. Derrida’s is a “hermeneutical meontology” (p. 286) as opposed to Augustine’s hermeneutical ontology. For such a scholarly and incisive contribution it is unfortunate that Ward ends on a highly polemical note.

The Derridean apologist John. D. Caputo responds with “What Do I Love When I love My God? Deconstruction and Radical Orthodoxy”. Caputo is keen to stress that the undecidability inherent in deconstruction is not the nihilistic polar opposite of Augustine’s decidability. Undecidability is the condition of possibility of a decision. Its opposite is decidability, a term Derrida first learned of in relation to Gödel’s theorem about the undecidability of formal systems. If a decision is decidable in this sense then all that is needed is an algorithm, certainly not human involvement. So the difference between Augustine and Derrida is that Augustine decides on a specific and determinate historical name for the object of his faith, hope and love, and that for Derrida, far from revelling in the vainglorious undecidability of aesthetic questioning, faith, hope and love can always be determined otherwise.

One of the strengths of Caputo’s paper is his clear and sincere presentation of the goals which inspire deconstruction. He summarises deconstruction under two movements: (1) historical association: we must always remember that we belong to a certain tradition or set of traditions from which we
inheriting both limiting and possibilizing horizons; (2) messianic dissociation: because of historical association we must beware the constant threat that our tradition may become petrified and sustained by violence. Therefore, we must dissociate ourselves from the determinate names contained in the tradition in order to prevent these names from becoming too limiting and perhaps even vehicles for violence. That is why deconstruction constantly keeps watch for that which is yet to come, for another possible reincarnation of justice and love. It is an eschatology without escathon.

Though one of the highlights of the entire work, Caputo’s essay poses as many questions as it answers. Why is it that a tradition must surrender its faith in a determinate figure so that this proper name does not become distorted? Francis Schüssler Fiorenza has argued convincingly in Foundational Theology: Jesus and the Church (New York, 1984) on behalf of a type of hermeneutical theology which, via an appropriation of Rawl’s ‘reflective equilibrium’, can act as a corrective to the distortions of a faith while maintaining faith in a determinate revelation. Caputo is convinced that deconstruction is necessary for the renewal of authentic love and justice, yet does not the indeterminacy of deconstruction act as a serious impediment to its hopes of recognizing justice and love, and hence renewing them? If justice and love do not possess sufficient determinate content then they are in danger of being dismissed as ‘merely’ poetic speculation. Turning to Ward, in his attempt to place Augustine beyond the criticisms of modern and postmodern philosophy of religion, he seems to have unwittingly surrendered intellectual ground to those who claim faith is irrational. The God of the philosophers may not be the God whom Augustine worships but it is the God most readily available to reason—notwithstanding the fact that a complete separation of philosophy from theology is itself the consequence of a kind of (a)theological understanding of reason.

Among the other essays of note in this volume is Richard Kearney’s synopsis of his work The God Who May Be (Indiana University Press, 2001), an absorbing although ultimately confused attempt to place God between onto-theology and radical eschatology by redefining him as possest, or possibility-to-be. Elsewhere Kevin Hart’s “Absolute Interruption” is a well executed piece on the dynamics of faith but one which draws a forgettable response from Derrida.

All in all, Questioning God does a good job of just that. It may not maintain a consistently high quality throughout and the work as a whole does suffer a little from some unnecessary complexity and esotericism. But these criticisms do not negate the considerable achievement of providing a platform for a stimulating encounter between radical orthodoxy and
deconstruction. One of the few things that radical orthodoxy and Derridean
decomposition have in common is that neither thinks faith and reason
oppose each other, but as Questioning God shows, for quite different
reasons.

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