

**The Possibility of a World without Absolute Truth:  
Caputo and Kierkegaard on Faith and Religious Belief**

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Religious belief is a subject that comes to the surface time and time again in the world today. This is due to many factors, the most important of which is that what we believe in has so much to do with who we are as people. It is sometimes hard to separate the particularly devout believer from whatever he or she believes in, so much so that it is sometimes impossible to tell who the person is independent of their faith. People so closely tied to their belief sometimes have trouble making the separation themselves, and become inclined to believe that if someone challenges their faith, the person is challenging them. The same incorporation of religion into identity can be true of certain countries or areas of the world, where religion is particularly important. The separation of church and state in the U.S. is often a principle that is disregarded on the basis that the founding fathers intended the country to have a certain moral code; a moral code that just happens to resemble and favor Christianity. Are we a Christian country, or simply a country founded by Christians? Sometimes it is hard to tell. As a result of the increasing diversity of this country, and the increasing diversity of the world at large, it has become imperative that we find a way to live among each other without feeling challenged by the simple existence of those with different religious beliefs than our own. How this can possibly be accomplished will be the focus of the following discussion.

John D. Caputo's book *On Religion* (2001), in my opinion, is a very important work and also has significant insight to offer regarding the subject at hand. It challenges the common conception of religion in several ways, the most important of which deals with absolute truth. Absolute truth is the belief that there is one right, one way, or one answer. Absolute truth takes what someone believes from the realm of the personal into the realm of the universal, making it true for every person, in every situation, at every

time. This leads to exclusivism, the belief that what an individual believes excludes all opposite beliefs, allowing a person to believe that they are right, and everyone else is wrong.

I agree with Caputo in that this idea is a very problematic one. The very notion of absolute truth, in practice, seems impossible. One only has to look around to see that all over the world there are a plethora of very different beliefs, held by very different groups of people, all of whom believe that their way is the right way. It almost seems that most people are blind to the fact that their way is not the only way; even more so to the possibility of their way not being the right way. Everything would be just fine if most people believed that their version of the truth was just that; their version. This would imply that going around trying to spread that version of the truth would be unnecessary. Why would anyone need to spread the truth if everyone accepted the idea that while they have a version of the truth, everyone else has their own version? This is the pluralist ideal, which John Hick supports. He says of the religions, "...they are all, at their experiential roots, in contact with the same ultimate reality, but ... their differing experiences of that reality, interacting over the centuries with the different thought-forms of different cultures, have led to increasing differentiation and contrasting elaboration..." (Hick 2003, p. 506).

Unfortunately, when you are dealing with absolutes, pluralism simply does not work. Absolute truth, along with the implied concept of absolute right, has another implied concept embedded within it. Silent, but often deadly, this is the concept of absolute wrong. It is here that the problem lies. If something is absolutely right, for every person, in every situation, at every time, then the opposite of that thing is wrong, for every person, in every situation, at every time. Once you claim to have "The Answer," in capital letters as Caputo put it, then it cannot just stop there, you must give everyone else "The Answer." If they have their own answer, then you must somehow convince them that their Answer is not the *real* Answer, because that would go against the very idea that your answer is *The Answer* in the first place. Absolute truth is claiming to know "The Secret," an idea of which I think is in the best interest of humanity to let go. Caputo agrees, saying, "Confessing that we have no access to The Secret introduces a salutary caution into our lives which tends to contain the violence, the intellectual 'road rage', that threatens to break out whenever we run up against something 'different'" (2001, p. 23).

What we are left with when we subscribe to the idea of absolute truth is, in essence, a competition. Being alive puts us at a disadvantage in this respect we are forced to choose sides based on something we have not yet experienced, namely death. Insofar as the competition is one of who has the correct view of the nature of the afterlife, we cannot possibly know who wins because the only people who have the information that could settle the score are those who are already dead. Caputo says of this, "The secret is that there is no Secret, no capitalized Know-it-all Breakthrough Principle or Revelation that lays things out the way they Really Are and thereby lays to rest the conflict of interpretations" (2001, p. 21). In the absence of empirical evidence about what happens in the next life, what Caputo calls the Absolute Future, we must create our

own truth, and hold on to it with fierce determination, lest it be proven wrong by some other competing truth. According to Caputo, "With the 'absolute' future we are pushed to the limits of the possible, fully extended, at our wits' end, having run up against something that is beyond us, beyond our powers and potentialities, beyond our powers of disposition, pushed to the point where only the great passions of faith and love will see us through" (2001, p. 8). Here is where religion steps in.

Organized Religion is a collection of absolutes. Religion, in its institutional forms, most often relies on a text. This is especially true of the three largest religions in the world, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. What many fail to realize is that the text itself does not contain the truth. Whenever a human being reads a text, the text is being interpreted. This is impossible to avoid. Caputo says, "A text is just about the last thing one should choose if one is in search of an 'absolute' instead of an interpretation" (2001, p. 100). Two people can read the exact same words and interpret them in totally different ways. Religion takes the words out of the hands of the individual. Can you imagine what Christianity would be like if people studied the Bible, not in churches, but on their own? How many different interpretations would there be? As it is right now, particularly in Christianity, every time an ambitious individual reads the text, interpreting it in a way that is significantly different from the existing interpretations, that person must start their own church. For now they have what they deem to be the absolute truth, often claimed to be sent from above, and they must share it with as many people as possible. Catholics and Protestants tend to forget their roots. Protestant faiths stemmed from Catholicism, they simply protested the Catholic version of the truth. Although all Christian truths stem from the same text, Protestantism has opened up a can of worms resulting in the formation of more factions of Christianity than anyone could have anticipated, all in competition for the claim to The Absolute Truth. Religion in its institutional forms seems to place groups perpetually on the defensive in this fight for the truth.

Institutionalized communities are defined by their identity and by the power to maintain their identity, which includes the power to excommunicate the different. If the community is hospitable to too many "others," it will cease to be a community. Hospitality, welcoming the other, is something that religious institutions passionately preach but practice with a carefully calibrated caution. (Caputo 2001, p. 33)

The inability to fully accept the other is due in part to another important ingredient in institutional religions; that of passion. If you are going to have so much faith in something that you are going to let it control every thing that you do your whole life, then you have to believe it passionately. It is this passion, in combination with absolute truth, which can sometimes create a deadly formula. Caputo brings up the example of people bombing abortion clinics in the name of God, who they believe is absolutely against taking a human life, which they also believe starts at conception. Anyone with the capacity for rational thought can see the contradiction there. Killing: to prevent killing. This example illustrates the problem in a very vivid way, but often the

results of the mixture of passion and absolute right and wrong can manifest themselves in more subtle ways.

Many people who hold to this very exclusivist view of the truth would say that it is perfectly reasonable and doesn't create any problems at all. Alvin Plantinga, for one, defends this position, saying the exclusivist is completely justified because it is the only rational way to believe. He says, "I propose to argue that exclusivism need not involve either epistemic or moral failure and that, furthermore, something like it is wholly unavoidable, given our human condition" (Plantinga 2003, p. 509). Plantinga and other exclusivists believe that holding one belief logically excludes all opposite beliefs, making pluralism an absurd concept. On the other hand, I am under the distinct impression that this type of exclusivism, leads to many problems. It limits the ability of people, in a rapidly shrinking world, to live together peacefully. Today, people are constantly coming into contact with others who don't share their religious views. We are seeing more and more people react with Fundamentalism, which Caputo describes as "...the passion for God gone mad, a way to turn the name of God into the name of terror" (2001, p. 107). If a person believes very passionately in the concept of absolute wrong, and sees a person committing what they deem to be a sin, then the person they are looking at is no longer a person. That person is a sinner; someone that God himself will eventually throw into hell to burn for all eternity. No matter how good one would like to be, there is always the possibility of a situation like this turning into a hateful one, also opening up the door for violence. In Caputo's example from the movie *The Apostle*, he says of the main character that "he moves about in a world of absolutes," and "...that unqualified passion is at once his great strength and his weakness and it is not unrelated to his wild and volatile swings between evangelical ardor and seething anger" (2001, p.107).

History speaks for itself. Religious wars have been going on forever; it seems, with no end in sight. From the Israelis and the Palestinians fighting over the holy land, to the recent gay marriage controversy, religious conflict abounds in the world today. It seems so obvious to me that a change is in order. Caputo says we have to admit that our version of the truth is not absolute, but indeed a fallible construction, and "Absent that admission, God and death-dealing, religion and violence, will never be far apart" (2001, p. 100). I believe Caputo is on the right track. The problem with the belief in absolute truth is that it is simply a belief. A person is not judged on their actions, but instead they are judged by what they accept as the truth. People become so blinded by the passion they have for what they believe that the rational side of their thinking process often goes out the window. They can't see that beating or killing someone because they are gay or bombing an abortion clinic are actions that go against the very thing they believe. They become concentrated on the absolute wrong in the world outside of themselves, and believe they *are* absolutely right simply because they *believe* what is absolutely right.

I wholeheartedly agree with Caputo's call to religious people to take their struggle away from the others and inside themselves. Things would change significantly if religious people channeled some of that unbridled passion into doing good things for other people. Maybe if religion concentrated less on the acceptance of a collection of absolute truths and more on the actions of each individual, people would think before

they committed an act that went against what they believed in the name of what they believe. I don't think this will ever happen as long as people subscribe to the idea of absolute truth.

As long as people are fighting to prove that their way is the right way, that they have found the answer that beats all other answers, they will never be free to start practicing the very truth they have accepted. They will always and forever remain too busy defending it. Why not live and let live? Stop trying to prove that you are right and everyone else is wrong and start simply trying to be a good person, regardless of whether the person next to you agrees with you on how to be a good person or not. I am not saying that people should just be allowed to do whatever they want, no matter what harm it could bring upon others. Governments and laws are there to make sure no one gets hurt, and in the interest of being fair, people should leave the government alone to protect people's rights, free of religious influence, which unfortunately taints many governments today. The world at large may never accept this idea, but if individuals start to put it into practice, we will all be the better for it.

The question now becomes, how do individuals put such an idea into practice? How does one believe wholeheartedly that something is the truth on the one hand, and on the other hand, accept that even if someone else believes something completely different, they have the truth as well? This may seem difficult, but I believe there is a way. The key is to change the way we look at the concept of faith. Faith, indeed, is what is at stake in trying to accept "the other." When a person is confronted with a truth that differs from their own, then he or she may be inclined to feel his or her faith has been challenged. I believe that this would cease to be such a large problem if people would accept faith for what it truly is. Faith is, in essence, belief in something you cannot prove. No matter how far you go in proving the existence of something that is infinite and eternal, such as God, it never ceases to exist outside of the realm of human possibility; therefore there is always a point you will reach where there will be an end to what you can prove. There then becomes a gap between what you believe and what you can see. In that gap fits faith, and faith is really the only way anyone can believe anything.

For those who might think this discussion in some way toys with presenting religion as some sort of figment of the imagination, I will offer some comfort. By referring to faith as the only way anyone can believe anything, I do mean anything. Descartes' method of doubt taught us that almost everything could be a result of our senses deceiving us or the masterwork of an evil genius. No doctrine is exempt, not even atheism, which also cannot be proven beyond a doubt to be a reflection of the way things truly are. It is important, however, to note that religious faith is of unique character in that it differs from person to person. If you were to gather one hundred people randomly in a room and have them sit on chairs and fill out a survey asking them about their current position, they would most likely all agree that they are, in fact, sitting in a room with 99 other people and filling out a survey. If you were to then ask those same people about their beliefs as they pertain to religious matters, you are likely to get a number of different answers. Religious belief requires more than simply accepting that we can rely on our senses to give us accurate information about the world around us. It requires that

we believe in something we cannot sense or cannot prove to others by appealing to their senses.

Faith is absolutely essential in describing the belief of a religious person. It is faith that leads people to hold one set of values exclusively, and often to defend those values against others. Here is where the inclination to prove something comes into play. If one has faith that God exists, for instance, and someone else disagrees, then the person may be inclined to prove to the other that he or she is wrong and God actually does exist. I believe this will always cause a problem precisely because of the fact that God's existence cannot be proven without a leap of faith of some sort. Given this knowledge, it would seem to make sense that the one who believes in God, instead of trying in futility to prove God's existence, should simply explain their belief as a matter of faith and leave it at that. This would make proving God's existence obsolete, solving the problem of conflict arising from the inability to prove such a thing.

Soren Kierkegaard addresses this very concept in much of his work, summing up the idea in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. He presents religious truth as subjectivity, something that cannot be contained within the confines of objective and scientific reasoning. He actually presents objectivity as the enemy of religious faith, saying "...when faith falters and begins to lose its passion, when it begins to cease to be faith, then proof becomes necessary in order to command respect from the side of unbelief" (Kierkegaard 2003, 381). For Kierkegaard, faith is something that is already lost if one decides it is something they must prove. Faith is not faith if it needs to be proved. What he says later is of utmost importance to our discussion. He claims that faith, since it is based on an assumption, is free from all challenges that may arise from those who would try to prove that a particular faith is unfounded or not based in reality. Any proof of this sort would take nothing away from a person who knowingly believes in spite of the facts. He says "In so far as faith perdures, the believer is at liberty to assume it, just as free (mark well!); for if he accepted the content of faith on the basis of evidence, he would now be on the verge of giving up faith" (Kierkegaard, 2003, 381).

This argument has come to fit into the category of the absurd within the philosophical community. In Gregory Schufrieder's article, "The Logic of the Absurd" (1983), he acknowledges the category of the absurd as having a basis in logic and being the result of reason. He presents the idea of holding something of which one is objectively certain as a belief as illogical. This I find to be true. How can one believe in something and simultaneously know it to be a fact? Uncertainty seems to be a prerequisite for faith or belief of any kind. Schufrieder points out, "It is as if the objective uncertainty of an idea constitutes a gap which I must fill with my commitment when I assert my belief in the claim" (1983, p. 64). The gap he speaks of here, again, is filled by faith. Faith is a passionate commitment to a particular idea; one that is true for an individual despite what others may place in its opposition.

What is really going on when a person has faith in something is a matter of personal choice. So many people are completely separated from their belief because the choice has been made for them. People who believes in a particular religion, purely on

the basis of enculturation; because others have presented it as the Absolute Truth, have forfeited their autonomy as human beings. This is why I believe there is a problem with religions in their organized forms. They hinder people from making a choice to believe in something based on faith, thus hindering their ability to believe at all. A person who never acknowledges the uncertainty of their belief is in jeopardy of losing their faith as soon as it is successfully challenged. Kierkegaard understood the religious journey to be an inner struggle, independent of any outside objective reality. His position as stated in his journals and quoted in Schufrieder's article (1983, p. 62) was this; "The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes me to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die." In this way, truth is something that every person must find for themselves. Once they find it, it is unchallengeable, because it exists outside the realm of objective reality. It is not some great truth out there somewhere, but an inner truth, established aside from objectivity.

If all people were to accept that their faith is not provable, and better yet, does not need to be proven, then a world without absolute truth is possible. We could live in a world where two people could confront each other with completely differing religious views and one would not feel in the least bit challenged by the other. Perhaps organized churches could be recognized no longer as the place to find the great truth, but as a place where people gather who have accepted the same inner truths, things like the existence of God, or the accuracy of the Bible, or a belief in reincarnation. The search for truth would become something to find within oneself and outer influence would be something one would seek only after the belief is cemented. I suppose then we would really see what people are naturally inclined to believe. We would see if the idea of God would arise in a person who never heard of such an entity from an outside source. It is impossible to say what things would really be like in such a world; however, it is certain that a change is in order if people are to live more harmoniously in the world as we know it today.

Human beings must come to terms with the fact that there are some things that cannot be proven, and accept faith as an alternative to objective certainty. Schufrieder (1983, p. 69) quotes Kierkegaard's notes on this subject, saying:

[I]f human science refuses to understand that there is something it cannot understand, or better still, that there is something about which it clearly understands that it cannot understand it—then all is confusion. For it is the duty of the human understanding to understand that there are things which it cannot understand and what those things are.

I think it is important to understand religious belief as one of those things Kierkegaard says we cannot understand, and accept faith as sufficient to make up the distance between objective reality and what we hold to be true.

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