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*RELIGION, METAPHYSICS,  
AND THE POSTMODERN:  
WILLIAM DESMOND  
AND JOHN D. CAPUTO  
(CHRISTOPHER  
BEN SIMPSON)*

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Nietzsche's assertion, "God is dead," in the late nineteenth century ushered in a new age of Western philosophy. Prior to the Enlightenment, metaphysical questions were viewed as prior to epistemological questions. As story goes, the Enlightenment converted the order of priority, not only giving epistemology priority over metaphysics, but also relegating metaphysical questions to the proverbial back burner. Because metaphysical questions are unobservable to and unapproachable by one's sensory experience, one studies them only through the lens of Enlightenment epistemology. Western philosophy in the twentieth century, particularly Analytic philosophy, eventually reduced metaphysics to philosophical relics of ages past. Continental philosophy eventually followed suit.

Though presumed dead, metaphysical questions gained a new life in the last third of the twentieth century. Both Continental and Analytic philosophy

approached metaphysics with fresh eyes and a renewed sense of purpose. Yet, despite metaphysics' new life, debate remains among philosophers regarding its value and purpose. Christopher Ben Simpson's *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern* is set squarely in the middle of this ongoing debate regarding metaphysics.

Simpson's work addresses the work of John D. Caputo, an American Continental philosopher who teaches at both Syracuse University and Villanova University. Caputo focuses on both philosophical and theological themes that "deny fixed and rigorous boundaries" between the two disciplines.<sup>1</sup> Of particular interest to Simpson's book, Caputo operates within the vein of Jacques Derrida's "religion without religion."<sup>2</sup>

Per Simpson, Caputo is a "prime representative" of the current anti-metaphysical strain in modern Continental philosophy (2). Caputo affirms the Nietzschean declaration of God's death (and thus of metaphysics), placing the discussion of God within onto-theology. Caputo does affirm talk of God and metaphysical questions, but only in its reduction to "one's... ethical obligation to the other" (3).

In answer to Caputo's and like-minded Continental philosopher's anti-metaphysical approach, Simpson appeals to William Desmond. An Irish philosopher who teaches in both Belgium and the United States, Desmond operates from a more "positive" view of metaphysics. Contrary to most anti-metaphysical philosophers, Desmond rejects viewing metaphysics in "terms of a rigid, totalizing univocity—a fascism of concepts" (24). Instead, metaphysics lacks an "end" or a "completion," for metaphysical questions and tasks are "perennial" and defy completion (24). Metaphysics is "inescapable" and arises from one's need to think (24). Questions regarding God and other metaphysical matters are interpreted through one's *being* in the "middle of things, and represent a turn toward "pure thought and disengaged speculation" (50). Such an approach frees one from the Enlightenment's unnatural objectification of reality.

*Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern*, though a short work (134), is a significant contribution to the ongoing debate regarding metaphysics (in general) and of God (in particular) as worthy of philosophical investigation in

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1 "John D. Caputo," *Syracuse College of Arts and Sciences Faculty Directory*. Accessed April 24, 2017, <http://asfaculty.syr.edu/pages/rel/caputo-john.html>.

2 *Ibid.*

today's post-modern world. One should note, however, that Simpson's book assumes that a reader brings to the table some background in Continental philosophy to be conversant with his thesis. Without this working background, one can quickly become lost in the discussion. Further, Simpson assumes the validity of the postmodern approach to understanding reality—an approach not without its own problems and controversies. For many (including this reviewer), postmodernism does not sit well with Christianity's appeal to absolute truth and the reality of a metanarrative. Nevertheless, Simpson's work should be commended for its attempt to take seriously the question of God's existence and its impact on other metaphysical and philosophical questions.