

Excerpt from *On Religion*, by John Caputo

RELIGION IS FOR LOVERS

Any book entitled *On Religion* must begin by breaking the bad news to the reader that its subject matter does not exist. “Religion,” in the singular, as just one thing, is nowhere to be found; it is too maddeningly polyvalent and too uncontainably diverse for us to fit it all under one roof. There are Western religions, Eastern religions, ancient religions, modern religions, monotheistic, polytheistic, and even slightly atheistic religions; too many to count, too many to master, in too many languages to learn. I am not complaining or making excuses. Indeed the uncontainable diversity of “religion” is itself a great religious truth and a marker of the uncontainability of what religion is all about. I am just trying to get started and I have to start somewhere. I am not trying to begin at the Absolute Beginning. I have no head for that. I am just trying to get something on the table.

By religion, therefore, let me stipulate, I mean something simple, open-ended, and old-fashioned, namely, the love of God. But the expression “love of God” needs some work. Of itself it tends to be a little vacuous and even slightly sanctimonious. To put it technically, it lacks teeth. So the question we need to ask ourselves is the one Augustine puts to himself in the *Confessions*, “what do I love when I love God?” or “what do I love when I love You, my God?” as he also put it, or, running these two Augustinian formulations together, “what do I love when I love my God?”. Augustine, I should say at the start, will be my hero throughout these pages, although with a certain post-modern and sometimes unorthodox twist that might at times have provoked his episcopal wrath (he was a bishop, with a bishop’s distaste for unorthodoxy).

I love this question in no small part because it assumes that anybody worth their salt loves God. If you do not love God, what good are you? You are too caught up in the meanness of self-love and self-gratification to be worth a tinker’s damn. Your soul soars only with a spike in the Dow-Jones Industrial average; your heart leaps only at the prospect of a new tax break. The devil take you. He already has. Religion is for lovers, for men and women of passion, for real people with a passion for something other than taking profits,

people who believe in something, who hope like mad in something, who love something with a love that surpasses understanding. Faith, hope, and love, and of these three the best is love, according to a famous apostle (I Cor. 13:13). But what do they love? What do I love when I love my God? That is their question. That is my question.

The opposite of a religious person is a loveless person. “Whoever does not love does not know God” (I John 4:8). Notice that I am *not* saying a “secular” person. That is because I am out to waylay the usual distinction between religious and secular in the name of what I shall call the “post-secular” or a “religion without religion.” I include a lot of supposedly secular people in religion – this is one of my unorthodox tendencies that I hope to slip by the bishop’s notice – even as I think a lot of supposedly religious people should look around for another line of work. A lot of supposedly secular people love something madly, while a lot of supposedly religious people love nothing more than getting their own way and bending others to their own will (“in the name of God”). Some people can be deeply and abidingly “religious” with or without theology, with or without the religions. Religion may be found with or without religion. That is my thesis.

Thus the real opposite of a religious person is a selfish and pusillanimous curmudgeon, a loveless lout who knows no higher pleasure than the contemplation of his own visage, a mediocre fellow who does not have the energy to love any- thing except his mutual funds. That is what the philosophers call an abusive definition, but I do not feel any great compunction about that, because the people I am abusing deserve it. They do not love God. What is worse than that? What can you say on their behalf ? If you know, you should write your own book and defend them. This book is for those who love God, that is, for people who are worth their salt. The New Testament is peppered with references to salt (Matt. 5:13; Mark 9:50; Col. 4:6). Salt is my criterion of truth, and love is my criterion of salt.

But if my definition of irreligion, of the opposite of religion, is abusive, my definition of religion, the “love of God,” sounds slightly smarmy and pietistic. The love of God is my north star, but it only provides me with a starting point, not a finish, a first word, not a last. Everything depends on the follow through, on facing up to this beautiful and provocative Augustinian question, “*what* do I

love when I love my God?”. Love is the measure. Every historical and social structure, everything created, generated, made, formed, or forged in time – and what is not? – should be measured against the love of God. Even religion – *especially* religion – insofar as religion takes historical and institutional form, must be tested to see how loyal it is to itself, to its religious vocation, which is the love of God. But the love of God *itself*, if ever we could find such a beautiful and precious jewel, is beyond criticism. Of the love of God *itself* I will hear no criticism; I will cup my ears.

Let us speak then of love. What does it mean to “*love*” something? If a man asks a woman (I am quite open to other permutations of this formula) “do you love me?” and if, after a long and awkward pause and considerable deliberation, she replies with wrinkled brow, “well, up to a certain point, under certain conditions, to a certain extent,” then we can be sure that whatever it is she feels for this poor fellow it is not love and this relationship is not going to work out. For if love is the measure, the only measure of love is love without measure (Augustine again). One of the ideas behind “love” is that it represents a giving without holding back, an “unconditional” commitment, which marks love with a certain excess. Physicians counsel us to eat and exercise in measured moderation and not to overdo either. But there is no merit in loving moderately, up to a certain point, just so far, all the while watching out for number one (which is, alas, what we are often advised by a decadent “New Age” psychology). If a woman divorces a man because he turned out to be a failure in his profession and just did not measure up to the salary expectations she had for him when they married, if she complains that he did not live up to his end of the “bargain,” well, that is not the sort of till-death-us-do-part, unconditional commitment that is built into marital love and the marital vow. Love is not a bargain, but unconditional giving; it is not an investment, but a commitment come what may. Lovers are people who exceed their duty, who look around for ways to do more than is required of them. If you love your job, you don’t just do the minimum that is required; you do more. If you love your children, what would you not do for them? If a wife asks a husband to do her a favor, and he declines on the grounds that he is really not duty bound by the strict terms of the marriage contract to do it, that marriage is all over except for the paper work. Rather than rigorously defending their rights, lovers readily put themselves in the wrong and take the blame for the sake of preserving their

love. Love, St. Paul said in his stunning hymn to love, is patient, kind, not puffed up or boastful; it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (I Cor. 13). A world without love is a world governed by rigid contracts and inexorable duties, a world in which – God forbid! – the lawyers run everything. The mark of really loving someone or something is unconditionality and excess, engagement and commitment, fire and passion. Its opposite is a mediocre fellow, neither hot nor cold, moderate to the point of mediocrity. Not worth saving. No salt.

Then what about “God”? What about loving *God*? One of my main arguments in this essay is that “love” and “God” go together, for “God is love,” as the New Testament tells us: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. . . . God is love and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them” (I John 4:7–8, 16). That is my Archimedean point, my true north. But notice how easily saying “God is love” slides over into saying “love is God.” This slippage is provocative and it provides us with an exceedingly important and productive ambiguity, opening up a kind of endless substitutability and translatability between “love” and “God” that I shall also be exploring as we go along (and raising the eye-brow of a bishop or two along the way). As love is the first name of God, “of God” is also the best name we have for those who love. To love God is to love something deeply and unconditionally. But it is also true – there is no stopping this slippage or reversal – that to love deeply and unconditionally is to be born of God, to love God, for the name of God is the name of love, the name of what we love. That is why I will hear no criticism of this idea and why those who do not love God are loveless louts. That is also why the central and most pressing question is not whether I love God or whether there is a God to love, but “*what do I love when I love my God?*”.

But where do we start – I am always trying to get started – if we want to get an idea of what we mean by “loving God”? An old and daunting problem, but my advice is as follows. When the Virgin Mary was told by the Angel Gabriel that she would conceive and bring forth a child, the first thing that Mary said, according to the gospel of Luke, was what any expectant virgin mother might be expected to say: “What are you talking about? I guarantee you, angel or not,

that's impossible" (loosely translated). To which Gabriel responded, with characteristic archangelic composure, don't worry, "nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:37). The second thing Mary said is what made her famous: "here I am," "fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum," in short, "yes, oui-oui" (in Franco-Aramaic). I will come back later on to the "yes," which I regard as an important and deeply religious notion and also closely linked to the idea of God, but for the moment I am interested in Luke's linking of "God" with "nothing is impossible." With God, all things are possible, very amazing things, even things that are, I am tempted to say, "unbelievable" (which are the things that most require belief), and even, God help us, "impossible" things. After Jesus told the story that it would be harder for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom of God than it would be for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, he added, "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible" (Mark 10:27). So to get a start on the idea of loving God, let us take a closer look at what is for me, following Luke and Mark, a closely connected idea, "the impossible."