

The Seminar on God and the Human Future

A Report on the 2014 Fall Meeting

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The Seminar on God and the Human Future is not only a new seminar but also a new and significant direction for the Westar Institute. Since the end of the nineteenth century, Biblical Studies has developed independently from the study of Theology. The two occasionally dialogue, and a few scholars, like Rudolf Bultmann, were able to operate with skill in both fields. Still, one can do Biblical Studies without reference to Theology, and one can study Theology without much thought about or talent in Biblical Studies.

Today, there is a need for a new era of cooperation and an exchange of information between these two classical fields. Westar's Seminar on God and the Human Future is inaugurating this new age, addressing questions such as: What are the implications of important Westar accomplishments in Biblical Studies for the fields of Theology and Philosophy? How does a human, parable-telling, Jesus change the way Theology is considered? How might an historically accurate understanding of Paul change the nature and meaning of Christian dogma? How does the Book of Acts, regarded as historical fiction rather than factual history, challenge the very purpose of Theology as a human enterprise?

These questions not only challenge our understanding of the Bible, they also demand radical new thinking about the future of religion as a human value. They are at the heart of the Seminar on God and the Human Future.

The "God Seminar," as it is popularly coined, was launched in San Diego this past fall in the context of the Society for Biblical Literature/American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting. It consisted of panel discussions between and among members of the Jesus Seminar, Paul Seminar, and Acts Seminar, as well as papers outlining some thoughts about God, the Jesus Seminar, and the present state of thinking about religion.

Three basic openings to its future endeavors emerged from the first sessions of the God Seminar. The first involves the question of the value of God; the second is the

question of the nature of religion; and the third is the future of religion as a human value.

One strong impression coming out of the panel discussions was how each subject—the historical Jesus, the historical Paul, and the Book of Acts—involved at the same time a different God. The God of Jesus is most difficult to envision since the historical Jesus seldom talks about God, at least not overtly. The God of Jesus is only indirectly present, only a quiet implication, in the parables about the Kingdom of God. God as such never appears in the parables. They talk about the realm or perhaps life setting of God or God's reality. They invoke images of the everyday: a son runs away from home, a lone traveler falls among thieves on a dangerous road, a clumsy sower scatters seed this way and that, a woman bakes bread, etc. There are a lot of life images, but no God. It is almost shocking to have a Godless Jesus, and

yet this is exactly what one must confront when it comes to parables. This raises a fundamental and first question for the Seminar on God and the Human Future: Is God necessary in the Kingdom of God?

Yet, the God of Jesus, who makes no appearance, gives rise to the God of Paul who is a regime changer, and the God of Acts who is a regime supporter. How is that possible, and what does it mean

for the questions concerning God? These latter concerns hint at what is to come in the contemplations of the God Seminar.

If Jesus seemed not to need God to express his vision, why then was God necessary for Paul and fundamental for Acts? This raises questions about human nature and about the future of religion. Paul needs God because, for Paul, God is the order of things. God is the act of the Torah given to Jews, the isolation of gentiles from the Torah, and the reconciliation of this imbalanced social reality. God is the Roman imperial order changed from within by the event of Jesus Christ as the new being, as Paul Tillich (a pioneering twentieth-century theologian) would have put it. That is a very important God related to a new regime of equality and peace. That is the God of the Social Gospel who demands justice. A question for the Seminar on God and the Human Future is whether God has value for the human future. Is Paul's God, or something like Paul's God, still a worthy ideal for human contemplation? Or perhaps for us, as with Jesus, God is not really that necessary for such imaginings.

This brings up the third new area of inquiry: the question, why religion? It might be said that the Book of Acts changes God from the revolutionary energy of Paul into a stabilizing religion that sanctifies the social order. Acts in many ways created Christianity: it gave to the faith a God who lives well in empire and can even justify its self-serving functionings. Acts, for example, applauds charity, which

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Is God Needed in the “Kingdom of God”?

Celebrating the Work of Radical Theologian John D. Caputo

The Seminar on God and the Human Future gathered at the Spring 2015 meeting to launch a five-year project on what we mean by the word God.



John D. Caputo is Thomas J. Watson Professor of Religion Emeritus at Syracuse University and David R. Cook Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at Villanova University. His book *The Weakness of God* (2006) won an American Academy of Religion award for excellence. His other books include *On Religion* and *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*

is something every government prefers to social justice. A question for the God Seminar must surely be what value religion has to the social well-being of the human family. Is religion about avoiding justice or enacting it? Is it valuable as a factor that prods humanity to imagine new futures or a vehicle to justify the status quo? Is humanity better off without religion, or does it profoundly need new ways to think about religion as a human value?

The Seminar on God and the Human Future got off to a good start in San Diego. The questions raised there stir a developing agenda, and it all starts with a first big question: is God necessary in the Kingdom of God? **4R**

Westerners speak of God as many things—the Supreme Being, Creator, Lawgiver, source of all that exists, the energy or force that pulses through all reality, the “ground” of being. We speak sometimes, too, of a “God of the gaps,” that which surpasses human understanding. Rainer Maria Rilke called God “the primordial tower,” which we circle without ever figuring out who or what we are. Which concept of God makes the best sense today?

This celebration of the work of radical theologian Jack Caputo invites listeners to consider a new way of thinking about God as weak but potent, as “the great perhaps.”



The Problem with God

At the Spring 2015 meeting, Peter Steinberger challenged listeners to set aside as non-sensical the question, “Does God exist?” (see *Fourth R* 27-4) and addressed the implications of this thesis for ethics, the meaning of life, and the limits and aspirations for human knowledge of the universe. Steinberger is Professor of Humanities and Political Science at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. He is the author of *The Problem with God* (2013).

