

Religion & Philosophy

DECONSTRUCTION IN A NUTSHELL:

A Conversation with Jacques Derrida.

Edited by John D. Caputo. Fordham University Press. 200 pp. \$25 cloth, \$17.95 paper

Though now on the wane, deconstruction raged like wildfire through departments of literature and philosophy a few years ago. It injected a racy spirit of rebellion into otherwise settled academic pursuits. Practitioners of this often murky critical method were clear enough when it came to saying what deconstruction did. They relished terms such as “transgression,” “disruption,” “undermining,” “dangerous rereading,” and “risky undertakings.” Poems, plays, novels, philosophical works—now called “texts”—were scrutinized for fault lines and self-destructing forces lurking within them. It became common to claim that what was absent in a text carried more weight than what was present.

Nor was deconstruction mere literary exotica. In the campus culture wars, deconstruction seemed uniformly to take aim at the “West” while promoting a variety of causes: radical feminism, gay rights, *tercermundismo*, and the generic appeal of anyone (or anything) construed as the Other. Because these causes were seen as inverting traditional categories of thought, they themselves remained (temporarily, at least) out of the line of fire. Deconstruction’s rhetoric, when not opaque, urged revolution, melodramatic aggression, even terrorism.

This volume suggests that deconstruction has been misunderstood. It records a conversation with Jacques Derrida held at Villanova University in 1994 at the inauguration of a doctoral program in philosophy. A long commentary by philosopher Caputo follows. Derrida declares his admiration for Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and the institutions that teach about them. He adds, however, that deconstruction does not merely seek to reproduce the past but to open up the new

even as it remains in contact with the old. If so, then why all the fuss? Philosophers have always reread and reconceptualized their predecessors in search of other truths. In this new mode, Derrida sounds like a politician practicing spin control.

The intemperate tone of Caputo’s commentary belies—one is tempted to say deconstructs—Derrida’s effort. At one point, he repents of the “violence” he himself inflicted on Derrida at Villanova—meaning not that he assaulted the philosopher but that he asked him to speak in English for a limited time. It is typical of deconstruction to characterize the constraints of ordinary social events as “violence.”

Deconstruction has been misunderstood by many critics as mere nihilism. In theory, it claims a perpetual openness to greater understanding and new perspectives. In practice, though, it has had all the effects of nihilism. The rhetoric of its advocates, by turns impenetrable and reckless, and their refusal of “premature closure” (meaning acknowledgment of truth), have often been wielded as weapons of intimidation. After such fireworks, it will take more than one conversation or commentary to clear the air.

—Robert Royal

INSIDE THE VATICAN:

The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church.

By Thomas J. Reese. Harvard University Press. 317 pp. \$24.95

As you walk from Saint Peter’s Square along the Via di Porta Angelica toward the entrance to the Vatican Museum several blocks away, the massive Vatican City wall on your left rises higher and higher, until it is no longer possible to see over the top. In this, his third book on the government and politics of the Roman Catholic Church, Reese, the author of *Archbishop* (1989) and *A Flock of Shepherds* (1992), takes us behind that wall. Combining historical research, on-site observation, and interviews with more than 100 key

