

A.G. HOLDIER

University of Arkansas

“TEACH ME TO DO WHAT’S RIGHT”: FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE AS  
POST-RELIGIOUS VIRTUES

“God is the ‘beyond’ in the midst of our life.”  
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer<sup>1</sup>

“Are you lost, Father?”  
“Sorry?”  
“Are you lost?”  
“No, I suppose not.”  
- Darlene Sweet and Father Flynn speaking the first lines of *Bad Times at the El Royale*

Classically, philosophers spoke of Courage, Temperance, Prudence, and Justice as four key or cardinal virtues; following particularly from Christian scripture, theologians later added to this list the three theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love. According to Thomas Aquinas, what distinguishes the former four from the latter three is the nature of their object: teleologically, the cardinal virtues aim at the natural excellence of humans *qua* humans, whereas the theological virtues specifically direct us beyond ourselves to focus on the Divine; as Thomas says, “the object of the theological virtues is God Himself, Who is the last end of all, as surpassing the knowledge of our reason. On the other hand, the object of the intellectual and moral virtues is something comprehensible to human reason.”<sup>2</sup>

Seven centuries later, Jacques Derrida famously commented that the “constancy of God” throughout his life was often “called by other names” so that he could “quite rightly pass as an atheist” despite conceptualizing something he considered ultimately meaningful – even quasi-divine.<sup>3</sup> Throughout his book *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, John Caputo meditates upon what Derrida could have meant by this by exploring the religiosity infused throughout the Derridean corpus, finally framing his conclusion as a confession: the “sentence I have all along been trying to write,” says Caputo, in its most impassioned form reads as so: “I do not know what I love when I love my God.”<sup>4</sup>

If Thomas is right, then the absence of theistic commitment precludes the cultivation of genuine faith, hope, and love – any attitudes bearing such names, without God as their genuine object, are simply pleasant feelings

---

<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner for God: Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald Fuller (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), 124.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2nd ed, trans. the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, available online at <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/index.html>: I-II, Q62, A2.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Circumfession*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 155.

<sup>4</sup> John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 332.

devoid of further significance. Against this, Caputo insists that Derrida's faith is real, saying:

When something unforeseeable and unknowable, unpossessable and impossible drives us mad, when the *tout autre* becomes the goal without goal, the object without object, of a dream and a desire that renounces its own momentum of appropriation, when the impossible is the object of our love and passion, is that not what we mean by "my God"? Is that not the name of God? Is that not a name that we would bend every effort to save, with or without religion?<sup>5</sup>

For Caputo, the entirety of his deconstructive project has been motivated to unveil this religion-less God — this “restless passion” for something greater than oneself that, whether or not it is divine or even supernatural, offers the chance of a properly religious response. It grants the faithful person a standpoint from which the visible horizon of their lives has meaning, regardless of whether or not some deity might be found beyond that horizon.

This, I will argue, is the God we see in the cinematic work of Drew Goddard: not the deity of Thomistic theism, but a God of Derridean passion for something that transcends ourselves. God might well be dead to Goddard, but religionless religion can still function to undergird a meaningful life for those left behind after God’s wake. By focusing particularly on Goddard’s 2018 thriller *Bad Times at the El Royale*,<sup>6</sup> I aim to illustrate Caputo’s confession by demonstrating how, even after the death of God, the theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love still remain.

## II Religionless Religion in *Bad Times at the El Royale*

On its face, *Bad Times* is not a theological film, but a thriller about the chance meeting of seven (mostly) strangers at an unusual hotel on a stormy night. Nevertheless, it repeatedly evokes religious themes and is suffused with the concern for self-transcendence that Dietrich Bonhoeffer described as a “religionless” approach to piety. God makes no overt appearance in the narrative, but, following Bonhoeffer in perceiving the Divine’s proper place being “not on the borders of life, but at its center,” we can recognize in *Bad Times* the same “insistence” of existential meaning that unavoidably persists throughout human experience.<sup>7</sup> As Caputo explains:

My entire idea is to reclaim religion as an event of this world, to reclaim religion for the world and the world for religion. I have not annulled the religious character of our life but identified its content and extended its reach, by treating it as a name for the event by which life is nourished. In so doing we have redescribed and marked off religion within the boundaries of the world.<sup>8</sup>

In this way, *Bad Times* can offer a window into what post-religious theological virtues might look like, even in a world without God.

<sup>5</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 332.

<sup>6</sup> *Bad Times at the El Royale*, dir. Drew Goddard (20th Century Fox), 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner for God*, 124.

<sup>8</sup> John Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 247.

Initially, the audience is introduced to most of the characters in the hotel lobby, split along the state boundary between Nevada and California, but first impressions are quickly revealed to be untrustworthy when the privacy of his own room reveals Laramie Seymore Sullivan, the brash and off-putting vacuum cleaner salesman, to actually be Agent Dwight Broadbeck, a sensitive father working for the FBI. In speaking with his daughter on the telephone, Broadbeck's alteration of a common bedtime prayer establishes the theological premise of the film: God's not here, so we must care for each other.

Typically, the familiar nighttime blessing runs as follows:

"Now I lay me down to sleep / I pray the Lord my soul to keep /  
If I should die before I wake / I pray the Lord my soul to take."

According to Broadbeck's daughter, his wife has determined the final couplet to be "morbid" and therefore replaced it with the lines:

"And when I wake in the morning light / *teach me to do what's right.*"

Although Broadbeck's later attempt to "do what's right" ultimately prevents him from seeing the light of the next morning, this benediction – and its explicit replacement of divine activity with imperfect human agency borne from relational ties – underlies each of the virtuous actions demonstrated in the remainder of the story. The fact that such virtue remains untethered from God does not diminish its virtuousness.

Broadbeck's conversation with his daughter is not the only prayer in the film; in different ways, Father Flynn, Darlene Sweet, Emily Summerspring, and (especially) Miles Miller each appeal to a higher power at different points, and – with one possible exception – no answer comes to any of them from On High. Instead, the psychopathic Billy Lee appears and takes control of the El Royale, manifesting a downright Nietzschean position of strength within a world devoid of God. In a flashback scene at a bonfire, after waxing poetic about moving beyond Right and Wrong, establishing himself as the leader of the cult-like "family," and setting up Emily's sister, Rose, to fight for her life, Lee makes the assertion that, in his view, "we get to be our own Gods." Although Billy is struck down before the credits roll – at the hands of the genuinely pious Miles, no less – at almost no point does Goddard suggest that Billy Lee's sermon is actually incorrect. No clear *deus ex machina* appears to rescue the innocent; no Hand of God smites the wicked with Divine Judgment, no surprise twist leads to a completely happy ending for "the good guys" – in the end, there is no one innocent, no one perfectly good, just a jazz singer helping a felon dressed as a priest flee into the rain with a bag full of stolen money.

Indeed, rather than setting out stark categories of 'heroes' and 'villains,' the film constantly complicates introduced dualities, showing how weak characters like Sullivan and Miles are actually heroic, how innocent players like Rose are, in truth, murderous, how the security of each hotel room is undermined by the hidden passageways behind the walls, and how the seemingly religious figure of Father Flynn is actually a criminal named Dock O'Kelly. Over the course of the film, the two people most clearly trying to do the right thing – Broadbeck and Emily – receive only their own deaths as payment. In a post-religious world, unmoored from the sort

of moral grounding that folks like Aquinas took to be necessary for firm ethical positioning, it might be unclear what constitutes goodness and its opposite. The very geography of the El Royale satirizes the unfounded dogmatic commitments to which the faithful might still cling — after all, only one side of the hotel can sell alcohol — but even this duality burns to the ground by the movie's end.

But regardless of what morality amounts to in the world of *Bad Times*, whether or not God exists to underwrite it, and even if those with good intentions are routinely defeated by supermen like Billy Lee, the story is drenched with the sort of spiritual content that grounds a post-religious understanding of Faith, Hope, and Love. Though after the death of God, theological virtues cannot take God as their object, Faith, Hope, and Love can nevertheless guide us in positive ways *even if* those virtues are directed towards *other people* instead of a divine person; as Caputo says, "If the name of God is a *how*, not a *what*, then the name of God is *effective* even when it is not used."<sup>9</sup>

So, post-religious theological virtues can remain differentiated from the cardinal virtues by way of their direction-of-fit (with the cardinal virtues directed inwardly and the theological virtues directed outwardly), but, *contra* Aquinas, the receiving targets of the external virtues do not ultimately need to be divine, provided that there are humans *qua* humans there to stand in God's place.

### III Faith

Consider first the virtue of Faith. To Aquinas, an act of faith is to believe in God where belief is "to assent to someone of one's own free will"<sup>10</sup> in a manner that, by definition, cannot be directed towards something false.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, faith is a function of an agent's intellect when that person is able to apprehend God and admit that God is God. As Eleonore Stump explains, to Thomas, faith entails forming "an assent to a group of propositions under the influence of a volition which has the effect of moving the intellect to an assent it otherwise would not have formed."<sup>12</sup> This sort of chain-of-reasoning that faith constitutes — what Dan Howard-Snyder has called "objectual faith" or "faith-in-x"<sup>13</sup> — amounts to something relatively simple; as Swinburne puts it, "to have faith in God is simply to have a belief-that, to believe that God exists."<sup>14</sup> Understandably, Aquinas is more specific about necessary contextual factors for faith *qua* faith to stand (for example: it is interdependent on the third theological virtue of love for God), but these comments should be sufficient to grasp the core element of Thomistic faith as a cognitive enterprise grounded in right judgment of God's identity.

In contrast, the characters in *Bad Times* do not come to recognize God for who God is, but rather they come to see *each other* for who they truly are. To different degrees, all seven characters begin their arcs behind a mask; by the end, the only ones to survive have been forthcoming in their revelation of

<sup>9</sup> John Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 138.

<sup>10</sup> *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Q65, A4.

<sup>11</sup> *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q4, A5.

<sup>12</sup> Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 361.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Howard-Snyder, "Does Faith Entail Belief?," *Faith and Philosophy* 33, no. 2 (2016): 143, doi: 10.5840/faithphil201633059.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Swinburne, *Faith and Reason*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 138.

their true identities. The most extreme masks are the alter-egos adopted by Broadbeck (Sullivan) and O'Kelly (Flynn), who go so far as to take on new names, professions, and histories to complete their charade. While Emily's profane signature in the hotel guest book might be loosely read as a humorous example of this, her mask is one of explicit ambiguity insofar as her desire to keep her brainwashed sister safe leads her to hide her true intentions and identity. Miles' mask is similar to this, though not of his own wishes: despite his persistent requests to confess his sins to "Father Flynn" and reveal the history of violence behind his mild-mannered hotel clerk mask, it is not until the fiery baptism of the final conflict (by which point, the buckshot wound on his face has given him a different sort of mask) that the other characters learn his truth. Appropriately, Rose and Billy Lee's masks come as a pair: she appears to be an innocent child, he seems to be an attractive charmer, but both turn out to be cruel sadists by the end (and, particularly for Billy Lee, those masks are marred by the violence of the final fight). And though Darlene Sweet is certainly the most honest character of the bunch, even she reveals herself to be wearing a wig at the start, removing it only after making her pact with O'Kelly and attempting to cover the sound of his crowbar with her song.

In short, then, despite the absence of God in *Bad Times*, the characters all come to experience each other in painfully open ways and several even develop bonds akin to what Ryan Preston-Roedder has described as "faith in humanity," insofar as Sweet and O'Kelly (and, for a time, Miles) come to genuinely depend on and believe the best about each other in a manner that fosters solidarity in the face of the villainous Billy Lee. In particular, Miles' (and Sweet's) faith in O'Kelly-as-Flynn offers the most important moment in the film's theological trajectory, something that will be discussed in Section VI after an analysis of the film's retreatment of love.

For Howard-Snyder, this sort of Thomistic objectual faith consists in Sweet's and O'Kelly's disposition to rely on each other, but, naturally, this faith category is fully coherent without recourse to a divine object.<sup>15</sup> Like Aquinas, Preston-Roedder is clear that proper faith has both a cognitive and a volitional element, but – unlike Thomas – Preston-Roedder explicitly identifies human beings as the proper object of such attitudes.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, just as with Aquinas, Preston-Roedder's secular faith is reliant upon something like "love for the other;" as he explains, "the relation of dependence between caring about people and seeing them in a favorable light runs in both directions; that is, our concern for our loved ones focuses our attention and shapes our behavior in ways that make us more apt to see what is admirable about them, and seeing what is admirable, in turn, reinforces our concern."<sup>17</sup>

Of course, faith in humanity can turn out to be misplaced; in *Bad Times*, Emily's faith in her sister, Rose, turns out to be tragically unfounded (in a manner roughly in line with Preston-Roedder's cautionary characterization of faith's riskiness), but when faith is able to take root in a relationship untainted by the manipulations of a character like Billy Lee, it promotes the betterment of everyone involved. That is to say, this secular faith seems to qualify as virtuous.

<sup>15</sup> Howard-Snyder, "Does Faith Entail Belief?," 144.

<sup>16</sup> Ryan Preston-Roedder, "Faith in Humanity," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 87, no. 3 (2013): 666, doi: 10.1111/phpr.12024.

<sup>17</sup> Ryan Preston-Roedder, "Three Varieties of Faith," *Philosophical Topics* 46, no. 1 (2018): 185, doi: 10.5840/philtopics201846110.

#### IV Hope

What, then, of hope? For Thomas, "the object of hope is a future good, difficult but possible to obtain," so, because through God all things are possible, Thomas concludes that "our hope attains God Himself, on Whose help it leans."<sup>18</sup> The positive feelings of hopefulness for mundane things are useful passions that motivate action, but Thomas denies that these sensations - however similar - are equal to hope *qua* hope in God; only those "movements of the appetitive faculty" which have their end in God qualify, on Thomas' view, as the theological virtue of hope.

*Bad Times* subverts this treatment of hope in at least two ways: one explicit and one more subtle. The first is embodied in the character of Miles, whose persistent hopefulness to seek absolution through Father Flynn subtends much of his narratival arc. Even on a Thomistic conception of hope, Miles' anticipation of the possibility to receive forgiveness might qualify as proper hope, were it not for the consummation of this hope in the fiction of Flynn's false identity. This, however, seems odd; the fact that O'Kelly is not a member of the clergy should have little effect on whether or not Miles' hopes were satisfied before his death; this is a puzzle that Aquinas cannot seem to solve (without distending Miles' experience down to merely a false belief — that is, Aquinas would have to say that Miles died under a delusion).

In contrast, the perceptual model of hope proposed by Michael Milona and Katie Stockdale argues simply that "hope involves a perception of practical reasons" that an agent possesses.<sup>19</sup> In addition to desiring an outcome and believing said outcome to be possible, the perceptual model says that the hopeful person sees "the possible-but-uncertain desired outcome as encouraging to varying degrees" in a manner that happens to provoke hopeful feelings.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, those hopeful feelings are simply a perception of the encouraging nature of one's practical reasons for action — *not* necessarily the likelihood of those reasons genuinely obtaining or even the nature of the thing being hoped for; instead of proper hope needing to target the good *simpliciter* (or even needing to target a good-for the hoper), the perceptual model assesses the propriety of hopeful attitudes simply by reference to their fittingness to contexts.<sup>21</sup> This treatment of hope as an emotion allows Stockdale to discuss the sort of *fearful* hopes that arise from powerful experiences of danger that appear unlikely to end.<sup>22</sup> Altogether, such a model of hope shifts the axis of concern once again away from a necessarily divine target to land instead on a coherent model focused fully on human relationships. Given the shape and size of Miles' attitudes regarding his past, he has plenty of reasons to seek assistance in the form of O'Kelly-as-Flynn, even once he becomes cognizant of O'Kelly's ecclesial inability to actually offer absolution; nevertheless, Miles' hope persists because his practical reasons persist.

---

<sup>18</sup> *Summa Theologica* II-II, Q17, A1.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Milona and Katie Stockdale, "A Perceptual Theory of Hope," *Ergo* 5, no. 8 (2018): 219, doi: 10.3998/ergo.12405314.0005.008.

<sup>20</sup> Milona and Stockdale, "A Perceptual Theory of Hope," 211.

<sup>21</sup> Milona and Stockdale, "A Perceptual Theory of Hope," 214.

<sup>22</sup> Katie Stockdale, "Emotional Hope," in *The Moral Psychology of Hope*, eds. Claudia Blöser and Titus Stahl (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield), 122.

On a more subtle note, Miles' repetitious recitation of the hotel's welcoming speech in his introductory scene indicates that, while California is the land of "warmth and sunshine," the great state of Nevada is one of "hope and opportunity." O'Kelly's brother buried the stolen money — the movie's Macguffin — in Nevada and, with the exception of Broadbeck (who insists on staying in the honeymoon suite on the California side to collect the government's wiretaps), each of the characters — including Miles — are given rooms in hopeful Nevada. Even at the end, after Miles' death, Sweet and O'Kelly escape the burning hotel by leaving through the Nevada door. Throughout the film, hopefulness as a theme is subtly underscored — regardless of the absence of the divine as its purported object.

## V Love

But, of course, among the theological virtues, "the greatest of these is love."<sup>23</sup> For Aquinas, the love of God is a "special virtue"<sup>24</sup> precisely because it consists in the loving friendship of humanity for and with the divine and, more specifically, for the communication of God's happiness to humanity.<sup>25</sup> As the precondition for true faith and true love — as well as for all other intellectual and moral virtues — the *charity* of love as a theological virtue is the greatest virtue of all, underwriting and preceding each and every other virtuous habit.<sup>26</sup> Aquinas is explicit that this love is distinct from goodwill, given that the latter is purely an act of will while love *qua* love "adds union of affections" to the habit, thereby sanctifying both the passion and intellect of the lover.<sup>27</sup> However, Aquinas is also explicit that, although God is the proper object of virtuous love, we are also called to love our neighbor (as well as angels and ourselves) in precisely the same manner — grounded in what he calls "the fellowship of happiness," Aquinas indicates that everything with which we can share in such a relationship deserves to be shown this kind of love.<sup>28</sup>

In this way, we have returned to Caputo's Derridean impassioned confession of a self-confessed atheist:

To dream, perchance to desire and to love. And what is that dream, desire, and love if not the love of God, if not the desire for God ("God as the other name of desire")? What is this passion for the impossible if not the passion for God, for "my God," even if one were rightly to pass for an atheist?<sup>29</sup>

Even in the absence of a transcendent divine, Derrida — and perhaps even Aquinas — would agree that the fellowship of happiness persists between us and our neighbors. Even after the death of God, we can — and must — still love each other.

This Good News lies at the heart of *Bad Times* as shown in Emily's love for her sister, O'Kelly's love for his brother, Broadbeck's love for those in need, and — most profoundly — in the sacrificial love displayed by Miles. Despite his hatred of his past sins, Miles sets aside himself to rescue the people in front of him — not because Sweet pleads with him to do so (quite

<sup>23</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:13.

<sup>24</sup> *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q23, A4.

<sup>25</sup> *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q23, A1.

<sup>26</sup> *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q23, A6.

<sup>27</sup> *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q27, A2.

<sup>28</sup> *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q25, A12.

<sup>29</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 332.

pointedly, she does *not*), but simply because they need to be saved. In return, O'Kelly (at the imploring of Sweet to "HELP him") encourages the dying Miles to confess his sins before it's too late; standing in the place of God's anointed priest, surrounded by the fires of hellish violence, the trio of humans invoke the name of the Trinity to absolve the faithful penitent before he dies on the border of good and evil (the Nevada-California state line). God is nowhere to be found, but the fellowship of happiness between the survivors persists and prevails; love, if nothing else, does not fail.

## VI "Teach Me to Do What's Right"

Ultimately, Miles' confession acts as a *circumfession* of sorts to encompass the film within the sanctity of two prayers: Broadbeck's blessing baptizes the film with a call to "teach me to do what's right;" Miles' absolution demonstrates that the lesson is complete. The absence of God does not free us from the expectation to care for each other; to the contrary, it in fact amplifies the weight of our responsibility to do so — if we don't, then there is literally no one else who will.

One note remains hanging: a paradoxical thread threatening to unravel this purely post-religious sketch of the theological virtues; Christina Gschwandter has said that "God is weeping in [Derrida] and continually haunts him" — something like this point lingers in *Bad Times at the El Royale*.<sup>30</sup> Goddard suggests the possibility of a divine presence in the film at almost no point, but "almost none" is not "none" and two ghostly touches resound. Recall how "Father Flynn" decided which room to rent at the hotel in the first place: he flipped a coin and left the rest to chance; one cannot help but wonder how differently the events of the evening might have gone had fate tipped that quarter in the opposite direction.

More profoundly, however, is the most ghostly complication of all: just after Sweet tells Billy Lee she's "bored" of men like him, and right after O'Kelly's forgetfulness happens to re-manifest at the most inopportune moment (at the end of Billy Lee's gun barrel), the lightning storm flashes and knocks out the hotel's electricity just as Billy Lee calls for Darlene to "pick a color" in the game that would have led to someone's death. In the silence of the power outage, Darlene's singing sets off the events that culminate in the climactic gun battle. If there is but one eucatastrophic breath in *Bad Times*, it lies within that thunderclap.

Ultimately, Caputo spins the threads of Derrida's nascent religiosity into a more comprehensive theological structure than Derrida himself ever did, arguing that an exploration of Derrida's *diffrance* in explicitly theological contexts reveals that, "In deconstruction God and a perceptual object do not differ from each other as the uncertain from the certain, or the fictitious from the verifiable...[t]he undecidability that befalls our beliefs and practices in virtue of *diffrance* is not the last word, but the first."<sup>31</sup> *Bad Times at the El Royale* deconstructs the roles of 'god' and 'human,' interchanging them in a way that opens up the theological virtues to remain vibrant, even in the absence of the religion that might be expected to undergird them. In this way, it accomplishes the Bonhoefferian notion that "What is above the world is, in the Gospel, intended to exist for this world."<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Christina Gschwandter, *Postmodern Apologetics? Arguments for God in Contemporary Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 67.

<sup>31</sup> Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prisoner for God*, 126.

Put differently: even in a post-religious world, Faith, Hope and Love remain.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> My thanks to Vern Cisney, Jim Stockton, and our audience at the 2020 Central APA colloquium (hosted by the Society for the Philosophic Study of the Contemporary Visual Arts) for constructive feedback on earlier drafts of this article, as well as to the participants at the 2019 Gettysburg College Philosophy and Film Seminar where the core ideas of this paper were born.