

# Philosophers Find God

EXAMINING THE IDEAS OF MODERN  
PHILOSOPHERS WHO LOCATE GOD  
IN THE HEARTS OF WORSHIPERS



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seeing, flesh, and face. Certainly phenomenology cannot apriori rule out this possibility.

Theistic investigators, who want to preserve the ability of worshippers to describe God as creator, lord, judge and savior, will object to Marion's claim that god is not a being. This claim by Marion is shared by many postmodern philosophers of religion. For those who still want to talk about God as a being, however, it is necessary to point out that the claim that God is a being will center on understanding that God is a very special kind of being, an icon constituted in a truth event that establishes a religious way of life in which people respond to the call of the infinite by worshipping God. This iconic God is indescribable with merely non-theistic language because it points to the infinite. In the God that theists worship is focused all of their attitudes and responses towards the whole normative world and to those aspects of human life that are other to all beings describable with non-theistic concepts. The God they worship as creator and savior is for them an expression of the gift of love that transforms theists into loving theists. Although there is always the danger that this icon will be transformed into a metaphysical or superstitious idol, a danger of which theists must always be aware, still this is a danger that theists can overcome as they continue to say, in prayer, worship, service, and theological reflection, all the theistic things they have said about the God they worship in word and deed.

The Theistic way of life consists of attitudes towards the whole normative world in which we live and towards our own mortality. It also consists of responses to that world's otherness as revealed by tears in its social fabric, black holes in its subjects, by our enjoyment of living, and by the existential and ethical singular uniqueness of people with such attitudes and responses. As part of that theistic way of life theists constitute themselves and the God they worship in covenantal terms in a God-worshipper relationship. Their linguistic practices using the word 'God' are parts of

that religious way of life. Without these uses of the word 'God', their linguistic and prophetic worship practices would not be what they are and their theological reflections would be without subject matter.

As Levinas and Marion point out, for theists, the focal point of all their responses to the otherness of the non-religious conceptual and perceptual world will be the God they worship, responses that in truth events constitute themselves and the God they worship in a religious covenantal relationship. The God they worship will be a theistically constituted, non-physical icon of the infinite, the non-finite, what is other than a conceptualized being, an icon in which there will always be a tension between the conceptual character given to God in the theist's worshipful response to the infinite and the infinite otherness to which God always points. God, as the master icon of the infinite, will centrally focus all of the theist's responses to encounters with the infinite aspects of human living. All icons perform a twofold function, being centrally focused on the one perceiving them and pointing beyond themselves to what is not perceived. Worshippers will have a living understand of God seeing them and calling them to worship, even as the conceived God points beyond itself to the infinite. God is conceived by worshippers as a good creator and a loving judge and forgiving re-creator, while also being conceived as one who cannot and should not be imaged and who can only be known through what the worshipper affirms God has done.

### C. RICHARD KEARNEY

Richard Kearney seeks to function as a philosopher, nourished by existentialism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction, who seeks to move beyond thinking of God as a being who does or does not exist, and to reflect instead upon existential encounters with sacred radical possibilities and with incarnations of the sacred in

everyday life. He studied under Levinas and he has been friends for years with Derrida and Caputo. Like Marion, he is a Catholic Christian who is philosophically trying to critically reflect upon his faith. Given his intellectual heritage, Kearney has to walk a very thin tightrope as he tries to find middle ground between a variety of extremes in philosophy of religion. He seeks to get beyond ontotheology, and he charges that we must “overcome the old notion of a disembodied cause.”<sup>476</sup> He claims that “God neither is nor is not but may be. God . . . might be better thought as possibility.”<sup>477</sup> Using Derrida’s language, he declares that it is God who makes the impossible possible.

Kearney also seeks to avoid those positions that make talk about God impossible, whether it be negative theology, which locates God so far beyond human conceptualization that God cannot be either described or named, or what he takes to be the religious positions of Lacan and Zizek who, he thinks, focus on the abyss that is the real that can’t be captured by symbolic systems.<sup>478</sup> In addition, Kearney hopes to find a place for a religious way of life that affirms life and our desire to be, by avoiding “pretense religions” based on constructing taboos grounded in a fear of divine punishment or based on constituting a god who can protect people fearfully seeking to escape the dangers inherent in the vicissitudes of life.<sup>479</sup>

Kearney names the position he is introducing as “Anatheism”, a position that returns people to worshipping God after one has moved on after the death of the god of metaphysics. He writes that “there are three basic elements to anatheism: protest, prophecy, and sacrament.”<sup>480</sup> It consists of protesting against tying religion to any metaphysical idols, prophetically condemning injustice and pretense religions, and living joyously in the ordinary things of life as if one were participating in one continuous sacrament with the sacredness of ordinary things. In his 2002 book, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*, he accents thinking of God

as possibility, whereas in his 2010 book, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*, he focuses on how religious people respond to the strangeness of the world constituted when impossibilities in a non-religious world become possibilities in a religious world, possibilities that are welcomed and accepted as marvelous gifts. Kearney’s early reflections on possibilities become the background for his later thoughts about loving and welcoming strangers while participating in the joyful sacrament of living in the world. It is with his comments on God as possibility, therefore, that we need to begin.

When he writes that God is possibility, Kearney also points out what he does not mean by ‘possibility’. He is not talking about what Aristotle called “potentiality”, the material possibilities that might be actualized, the potential in an acorn to become an oak tree. Neither is he talking like some modern logicians and “possible world” ontologists about representable possibilities. Neither is he talking about what Derrida identified as possible in our current economically dominated way of living.<sup>481</sup> Rather he is talking about two other distinguishable but related kinds of possibilities. First, he is talking, like the later Heidegger, about the possibility of a new world being poetically constituted, about a world, enframed by a will to power treating everything as usable materials, being replaced by a kingdom of God. God is the possibility of such a world calling people to live in such a world, calling people to realize possibilities that are impossible in our current power centered, economically dominated way of living.<sup>482</sup> Second, he is talking about the possibilities that would arise for those who would be living in such a world, were it to be constituted. Being called to realize such possibilities, to move toward a promised future, would be a matter of being called by God, and realizing such possibilities would be a matter of being God’s people living as his incarnate body.<sup>483</sup> As a philosopher, Kearney writes that he can only poetically imagine such a possible world of people realizing possibilities

while moving towards such a future; it takes religious people realizing religious possibilities to make it actual.<sup>484</sup>

Kearney runs into difficulties when he tries to spell out the relations holding between God, as possibility, and people living prior to the event that founds the kingdom of God as well as people living in the kingdom of God. On the one hand, he acknowledges that the new possible world that he imagines would be thoroughly social and thus that the worshippers in this new world and the God they worship would be socially constituted. He writes that "God can be God only if we allow this to happen."<sup>485</sup> "God depends on us to be. Without us no Word can be made flesh."<sup>486</sup> "Faith must inhabit the world and give back to God the being he has not."<sup>487</sup> On the other hand, he seems still to want to say that God is the one who "causes" this new kingdom of God world to become more than just an imagined possibility. "God makes the impossible possible."<sup>488</sup> "For if God's future being is indeed conditional on our actions in history, God's infinite loving is not."<sup>489</sup> "God, it seems, is the other who seeks me out before I seek him."<sup>490</sup> This can be the humble confession of worshippers in the new world, but can it be the assertion of a philosopher talking from outside the circle of faith about God's infinite love?

Kearney's difficulties here may be due to his wearing of two hats, and not always keeping in mind which hat he is wearing. As a philosopher, he talks about the possibility of a world constituting event happening, one which is social through and through, one in which worshippers and their God are socially constituted. As a worshipper, whose entire way of living is now focused on the God being worshipped, God is thanked for the gift of this whole way of living. As a philosopher, he endorses the insight of Levinas that people in their ethical unique singularity are radically other to beings that are used in power driven economic worlds, and that it is in our ethical encounters, even in such worlds dominated by a will to power, that sometimes the idea of God comes to mind.<sup>491</sup>

As a worshipper, Kearney can look back and see such encounters and the ideas to which they give rise as God's way of poetically constituting this new kingdom of God world. "God, it seems, is the other who seeks me out before I seek Him."<sup>492</sup> In our ethical encounters it is possible that the idea of God will come to mind, that a world destroying and world creating truth event will occur. For Kearney, the worshipping philosopher who is thinking in the wake of Hegel, that possibility is God.

In *Anatheism*, Kearney enlarges his analysis of ethical encounters with people in their singular uniqueness that is other than any conceptualizations, and he augments this account by drawing upon another one of the aspects of the infinite that Levinas finds in our finite living, enjoyment and the love of life. Here again Kearney switches back and forth the hats he is wearing. As a philosopher, he writes about encountering strangers and strangeness. Since people in their singular uniqueness cannot be kept inside conceptual boxes, they cannot be conceptually pigeonholed and reduced to being the same as others with whom we are familiar. They remain strangers to us. As a religious worshipper, he criticizes those who respond to strangers with hostility, and he proclaims that love of the stranger, welcoming the stranger as a guest, is love of God.<sup>493</sup> As a philosopher, he points out how strange and impossible life in the kingdom of God must seem to those living in a world centered on will to power and economic exchanges. As a worshipper, looking back to life before the occurrence of the truth event constituting the kingdom of God, all of what then seemed so strange now is seen as divine strangeness, and all strangers, all people, in their radically strange otherness, are now seen as strangers to be welcomed and loved, even as the strange otherness of their singular uniqueness is respected and cherished. As a philosopher, Kearney points out how strange the image of people feasting on life in the "kingdom of God" must seem to people living with Kierkegaardian sickness onto death or the nihilistic fear

of Nietzsche's "nay sayers." As a worshipper, Kearney talks about an "epiphany of the everyday"<sup>494</sup> and "the presence of the holiness in the flesh of ordinary experience . . . [of] eternity in the epiphany of each moment."<sup>495</sup>

Writing as a philosopher/worshipper, Kearney characterizes worshipping God in the kingdom of God as a return to God after the God of metaphysics is removed from people's living. Encountering people in their strangeness, encountering joyful living that is so strange to so many people, are remnants, never totally removable from the most unreligious forms of life, that can occasion social world forming truth events and individual religious conversions and transformations. Looking back from within theistic forms of life, worshippers understand that no conversion will have taken place if they were to take credit for the change; they proclaim that only by the grace of God did these changes occur. In addition to encounters with aspects of the infinite in the finite that are universal in all human living, although attention to them is often pushed to the margins by will to power, economic exchanges, fear, resentment, and confused metaphysical thinking, there also remain marginalized religious people and activities focused on the God of worship who is no metaphysical god. The lives, activities, and professions of faith by worshipping people can be the occasion for reformation truth events and personal conversions. The worshipper proclaims that God, working through such religious phenomena, is to be praised and thanked. Thus, philosophers who also are worshippers can talk about returning to God after God, a return that is a response to a call from God.

Given all the noise generated by the talk about god by dogmatic literalists, metaphysicians, and atheists, the critically minded religious person in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has to function as a philosopher, theologian, and worshipper all at the same time. There may be some people, like my late mother, who are so lost in their religious

living that they pay no attention to all this marginalizing noise, but many religious thinkers understand that they have to reflectively think about their religious faith and why these dogmatisms have no place in it. The central focus of the worshipper's way of life is the God they love, but the reflecting worshipper finds it necessary daily to ask with Augustine and Derrida, "What is it that we love when we love God? How are we to live and what are we to think in our loving of God?" The critically thinking religious person, therefore, in appropriating Kearney's many rich insights, says "Amen" to John Caputo's invitation, "Think of philosophy and theology as fellow travelers so that whatever theoretical distinctions or even oppositions there may be between the two, they are not opponents but companions on a dangerous sea, attempting to make their way through life's riddles."<sup>496</sup>