God after God
An Anatheist Attempt to Re-imagine God


Richard Kearney examines the philosophical possibility of returning to the notion of God after the death of God. He calls this possibility ana-theism, suggesting a third way beyond both dogmatic theism and atheism. To this end, he explores a number of paths: the hermeneutic path inspired by Paul Ricoeur who spoke of a movement from religion to atheism to faith; the Messianic-eschatological path of Levinas, Derrida and Benjamin; and the aesthetic path of a number of poets and artists. The essay investigates the ana-theist wager under three main headings: time, space and imagination.

1. Ana: A Question of Time

‘Ana’ is a prefix defined in the Shorter Oxford English dictionary as: «Up in space or time; back again, anew». So understood, the term supports the deeper and broader sense of ‘after’ contained in the expression ‘God after God’. The poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, describes the moment of imaginative creation as «aftering, seconding, over and overing»

forward, professing new life to memory, giving a future to the past. What Hopkins means by this, I think, is that certain deep experiences can undergo disenchantment after which we may return again to them again in a new light, over and over. As a religious poet, Hopkins is speaking of a specifically sacred reimagining. But, though himself a Catholic, this notion of sacramental repetition is not confined to a particular religion. It refers, I suggest, to any poetic movement of returning to 'God after God' - God again after the loss of God. As in child's play, 'gone, back again'. 'Fort/Da'. We learn young that what disappears as literal comes back again as figural – that is, as sign and symbol, as a second presence in and through absence. And symbol here does not mean untrue or unreal. The return of the lost one – in the case of religion, the lost God – may well be one of a more real presence. It may in fact be much more powerful and moving a presence precisely because of its return through absence.

Thus in the prefix ana- we find the idea of retrieving, revisiting, reiterating, repeating. But repeating forwards not backwards. It is not about regressing nostalgically to some prelapsarian past. It is a question, rather, of coming back 'afterwards' in order to move forward again. Reculer pour mieux sauter. So it is in this sense that I use the term ana-theism as a 'returning to God after God': a critical hermeneutic retrieval of sacred things that have passed but still bear a radical remainder, an unrealised potentiality or promise to be more fully realised in the future. In this guise, ana-theism may be understood as 'after-faith', which is more than a simple 'after-thought' or 'after-affect'. After-faith as eschatological – something ultimate in the end which was already there from the beginning. And that is why the after of ana is also a 'before'. A before that has been transposed, so to speak, into a second after.

Some people misread anatheism as a dialectical third term which supersedes theism and atheism. They construe it as a sort of Hegelian synthesis or final resolution. But I don't see it like that. It is important for me that anatheism contains a moment of atheism within itself. As it does a moment of theism. Or should I say, anatheism pre-contains both: for it operates from a space and time before the dichotomy of atheism and theism as well as after. The double 'a' of anatheism holds out the promise but not the necessity of a second affirmation once the 'death of God' has done its work. But it differs radically from Hegel's 'negation of the negation' which sees the return as a synthesis or sublation (Aufhebung). My argument is that the moment of 'ana' is actually a risk and a wager – a dangerous drama that can go either way. And can also go wrong. It is up to us. It is a matter of discernment and decision on our part. The event does not take place behind
our backs, irrespective of our agency, like theodicy or Hegel's dialectic of Absolute Spirit. There is no 'Ruse of Reason'. Anatheism is not some ineluctable dialectic leading to a Final Totality. It is not about Upper Case Divinity: Alpha and Omega Gods. Au contraire! Anatheism is about re-imaging and re-living - the sacred in the least of these. It is lower case from beginning to end.

Anatheism concentrates, therefore, on unrealised or suspended possibilities which are more powerfully reanimated if one also experiences a moment of a-theism; the 'a-' here being a gesture of abstention, privation, withdrawal. A moment which is less often a matter of epistemological theory, dogma, creed or proposition than a pre-reflective lived experience of ordinary lostness and solitude, a mood of Angst or abandon, an existential 'dark night of the soul' - and who has never tasted such moments? This privative moment - the first 'a' - is indispensable to anatheism. But in 'a-n-a' we have two A's. And if the first 'a' is the 'a' of a-theism, the second 'a' is the 'not' of the 'not'. The negation of the negation. The double A-A of anatheism. A reopening to something new. After all.

So, I repeat, the ana- is not a guarantee of ineluctable progress or blind optimism. It is not just something that arises in the wake of religious collapse but also something that brings us back to the beginning - to a foretime before the division between theism and atheism. And in this respect, I think of Kierkegaard's affirmative reading of 'repetition' as a reliving of the past forward. This repetition of the former as latter, of the earlier as later,

3 Ricoeur acknowledged the indispensable passage through atheism (at least for us moderns) on the way towards what he called a new kind of «post-religious faith.» But the drama of atheism at the very heart of anatheism is not a matter of going from primary religious faith through atheism to a second religious faith, which could be seen as some final triumphant summation. Anatheism is the move beyond the naïveté of first faith - one's childish certainties, facile assumptions, acquired presuppositions or dogmas - into an open space of possibility. An Open which may lead either to a choice of atheism or a theism after atheism. That is the space or time of anatheism and it is always open - for no atheism or theism can presume to be certain of itself without falling back into another dogmatism (of belief or anti-belief). So whether it is a matter of what I call 'anatheist atheism' or 'anatheist theism' - a second theism or a second atheism - it is for us to choose: it is a wager, a hermeneutic task. The anatheist moment is to be understood accordingly as the moment before a choice between theism and atheism in so far as it liberates into wager, action and commitment. And in this sense it comes 'after' we have abandoned the dogmatic unfreedoms of first theism or first atheism. In moving from religion through atheism to faith, a hermeneutic moment of 'suspension' is indispensable. Or to put it in terms of Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutic arc, unless one allows the 'masters of suspicion' - Freud, Marx, Nietzsche (and I would add De Beauvoir and the feminist critique) - to unmark the inherited theological corpus, one is less likely to reach a faith worth living, intellectually speaking. Such iconoclastic atheists may be deemed allies in the process of hermeneutic suspicion which can lead in turn (for those who so chose) to a hermeneutic reaffirmation of the sacred. See P. Ricoeur, The Symbolism of Evil, transl. by E. Buchanan, Beacon Press, Boston 1968 and Id., Religion, Atheism, Faith in Its, The Conflict of Interpretations, ed. by D. Hede, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1974, pp. 440-467.
meant for Kierkegaard retrieving the event of faith not as a regression to some original position but as a originary disposition of openness towards the radical Other. What he calls a ‘leap of faith’ in Fear and Trembling. Abraham has to lose his son as a given in order to receive him back as a gift; he has to abandon Isaac as possession in order to welcome him back as promise. Isaac is not his (as extension, acquisition, projection) but another’s, another, an Other (a return gift of what Kierkegaard calls the ‘Absolute’). In short, it is a matter of repeating forwards rather than backwards, a second retrieval of something after you’ve lost it. This goes beyond chronological time – that is, the notion of different moments succeeding each other in linear fashion from past to present to future – in favour of kaiological time, a time out of time focusing on an epiphanic moment (Augenblick) of grace where eternity crosses the instant. Thus ‘ana’ is a prefix that seeks to capture this enigma of past-as-future, before-as-after.

To say this is not, however, to deny that _ana_ also involves historical time. Infinite time is in-finite, it traverses finite temporality and cannot exist without it. As I understand it, ana-theism in its current manifestation does indeed coincide with a concrete historical situation that comes after the death of God, culturally, socially and intellectually. It is marked by the announcements of Nietzsche, Marx and Freud, by the atheist exposés of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the modern critique of religion as ideology and so on. Anatheism expresses a typical modern anxiety in the face of what Max Weber terms the ‘disenchantment’ of the world, the desacralising of society, the general malaise of the abandonment of God, loss of faith etc. In this sense anatheism is indeed an historical-cultural phenomenon which engages with our contemporary secular humanist culture. But not in any teleological manner – the idea that we were ignorant and have now seen the light: all faith was delusion but we have finally reached the ‘end’ of religion and are free at last! In sum, it is not complicit with the current anti-God squad of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris or with Fukuyama’s neo-liberal _hybris_. For me, to have lost the illusion of God (as sovereign superintendent of the universe) is to enjoy the possibility of opening oneself, once again, to the original and enduring promise of a sacred Stranger, an absolute Other who comes as gift, call, summons, as invitation

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2 In this sense Christ can say «Before Abraham was I am» and «Remember me until I come.»
3 I think that several thinkers after Kierkegaard – such as Benjamin, Derrida and Agamben – are saying something similar when they talk of ‘messianic time’. (Though I personally prefer the notion of ‘kaiological’ or ‘echatological’ time). This ana-time translates the sacred enigma that the Kingdom already was, is now, and is yet to come. It is always already and is always still to come.
to hospitality and justice. In short, anatheism is a radical opening to someone or something that was lost and forgotten by western metaphysics – to cite Heidegger and Derrida⁶ – and needs to be recalled again. And here, I think, we can translate from the historical formulation of the anatheist question – what comes after the disappearance of God? – to the more existential one: how might any contemporary self-experience this in his/her concrete lived existence? That is, in one’s personal, as opposed to impersonal, being?

This is why I constantly try to come back to ‘examples’ and ‘testimonies’ of the anatheist moment. To descriptions – scriptural, literary, testimonial – of lived abandonment, disillusionment, disorientation, followed by moments of turning around again (what Socrates called perìagoge, what Augustine called conversio). The negative moment of letting go is indispensable. It is key to a proper appreciation of anatheism. Without that we have cheap grace – God as comforting illusion, quick fix, opium of the people. I often think here of the mystics’ ‘dark night of the soul’, of Dostoyevsky’s sense of radical alienation, of Hopkins’ dark sonnets («I wake and feel the fell of dark not day!»), or of Christ’s abandonment by the Father on the cross.

⁶ There is a certain deconstructive moment here of which Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, amongst others, have much to teach us. Levinas talks about atheism in Totality and Infinity as the greatest gift which Judaism has given humanity. What I think he means is that Judaism is a prophetic prohibition against idols and illusions; its promissory messianism signals a atheistic moment of ‘separation’ from fusion with being, including fusion with God (sacrificial paganism); and that separation gives the ‘I’, the self, a freedom and a responsibility to respond to the other, the stranger. If there is no such ‘atheistic’ separation, there can be no ethical encounter with the stranger, who, Levinas argues, bears the face of the wounded, the destitute, the naked – ‘the widow, the orphan, the stranger’ – which is itself, for Levinas, the ‘trace of God’. Derrida, for his part, talks about a ‘religion without religion’. And if there is a difference between Derrida and myself here, it is a difference between ‘without’ (Derrida’s sans) and ‘after’ (ana). I talk about religion after religion where he talks about religion without religion. But as he himself said in his discussion of my ‘God-of-perhaps’ (Peut-être), there is but the ‘thinnest of differences’ at times between his atheism and my anatheism. Cf. my dialogue with Derrida, entitled Terror, Religion and the New Politics which took place in New York University in October, 2001, and was published in R. Kearney, Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers, Fordham University Press, New York 2004, pp. 3-15. See also my related essay, Derrida’s Messianic Atheism, in E. Bering and P. Gordon (eds.), The Trace of God: Derrida and Religion, Fordham University Press, New York 2014.

⁷ Read anathetistically, the Cross is not some expiatory sacrifice by a bloodthirsty, patriarchal God, bent on ransoming his son for our sins. It is a moment of surmounting such an injurious ‘theistic’ temptation in a moment of ‘atheistic’ letting go so as to open up an ‘anatheistic’ disposition towards the new, the surprising, the gracious, the gift – resurrected life. Yet one more radical discovery of God after God (conceived as the Alpha-God of theodicy). And I say ‘one more’, for as Christ himself revealed, it has been going on from the beginning and will never end: «Before Abraham was I am» and now I must go so that the Paraclete can come». Christ-here-and-now is always Christ-before-and-after: ana-chronic, ana-Christ. In other words, on the Cross and in all his human woundedness, Christ abandons the Omnipotent Father God who has abandoned him. His final ultimate lesson is one of radical kenosis and
These are all concrete moments of radical emptying which signal a return to the inaugural moment of anathem: the wager of yes or no to the Stranger. This primal wager is first and foremost an existential wager – not a purely logical one à la Pascal (which is more a wager of knowledge than being, epistemological rather than ontological). I claim this anathema wager – to turn hostility into hospitality – is the inaugural moment of all great wisdom traditions. Though, admittedly, I tend in Anathem to focus mainly on the Abrahamic tradition in which I grew up – trying to reimagine certain ‘primal scenes’ of hostility-hospitality by revisiting the inaugural wagers of the scriptural narratives: namely, Abraham and Sarah as they encounter the strangers in Mamre; Mary faced with the stranger called Gabriel; Muhammad faced with a voice in the cave. But this brings me already to my second question – anathesis as an act of re-imagining.

2. Re-imagining God - A Question of Fiction

‘Ana’ is not just a question of returning in time but also in space. It involves a topos as well as a kairos. It needs images. When it comes to re-imagining the sacred, I travel the third of the three paths which I sketched out letting go of lost illusions and attachments, so as to open himself to the new, the other, the strange. «My God my God why have you forsaken me?» is the atheist moment of negation and negative capability which opens the space for a reallization and liberation into new life beyond old life – «Unto thee I commend my spirit». In this anathem return, Christ is entrusting himself to the ‘thee’ of each God after God, every stranger who seeks or receives food and love as announced in Matthew 25 – his hungry disciples at Galilee (come and have breakfast), Mary Magdalene at the garden tomb («Myrimation»), his fellow travelers on the road to Emmaus. Christ keeps coming back (ana) to his followers after (ana) he has left them, as a guest they do not recognize – until he hosts them with food and touch. Only as guests again (ana) do they recognize the divine host.

* Anathetically considered, the Bible is a battleground of interpretations, a site of endless conflicts of interpretation between hostility and hospitality. One does not need to recite the long litany of hostilites that have been waged – and suffered – by the three Abrahamic religions over the centuries. Something true, I suspect, of all religions. No faith is exempt, purer than pure. There is no hospitality that is not haunted by the dark demon of hostility. That is why anathem is always a recurring call for renewals and retrievals of the inaugural moment of grace and good, in every potential moment. There is no hospitality once and for all. Hostility is a continuing betrayal of the first promise of hospitality – the inaugural creative moment repeated in the stories of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Christ etc. and in every instant of our own everyday lives. Hostility – violence, intolerance, fear, aggression, egoism – is a constant temptation for theists and atheists alike that needs to be overcome again and again in acts of ‘aftering’, of turning and retrieving the inaugural moment of hospitality that we witness in the great stories of breakthrough and new beginning. Civilization begins with the handshake: choosing to extend an open palm rather than reach for the sword. As Emmanuel Levinas says, the face of the stranger in its nakedness presents the trace of God: the poor one, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. Cfr. E. Levinas, Totality and Infinity, transl. by A. Lingis, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburgh 1969.
in my book Anatheism (philosophical, religious and poetic) – namely, the path of poetic imagination.9

I am interested in re-imaging the sacred as a space of ‘negative capability’. I take the term from the poet, John Keats, who defined it as the ability to be in «mystery, uncertainty, and doubt without the irritable reaching after fact and reason»10. I see the poetic refiguring of the sacred as somehow occupying that open, empty space; and it’s not something confined to Keats and Romanticism. It’s something that goes right back to the beginning of culture, as Aristotle acknowledged in The Poetics when he defines drama as a cathartic movement back and forth between pity and fear.

If pity (eleos) is the identification with the suffering characters on the stage, fear (phobos) is the withdrawal or withholding of participation. Belief becomes quasi-belief. Tragedy, as Nietzsche and others remind us, originally derived from Dionysiac sacrificial cults; but in the transposition from religious rite to dramatic representation a radical shift takes place. The work of mythos-mimesis (emplotment-redescription) intervenes to turn the literal into the figural. The term ‘tragedy’ originally meant ‘goats head’ because the main protagonists wore masks which impersonated the sacrificial animals which themselves stood in for the pharmakoi, the sacrificial god-men (like Dionysius) who would have been celebrated in the ancient cults. In other words, the move to dramatic imitation opened up the fictional space of ‘as if’ where we suspend our ‘belief’ in the gods and our ‘disbelief’ in fiction. Or to quote Coleridge, we «willingly suspend our disbelief» in the imaginary in order to act as if we believed in the fictional characters11. This requires a simultaneous, and equally willing, disbelief in the religious – in so far as the latter implies truth claims. So as we watch the great Greek tragedies unfold, there is already a realization that the religious-cultic-sacrificial acts taking place on stage – the sacrifice of Oedipus, Iphigenia, Antigone etc. – are not making any claims to ‘reality’ as such. We respond to the play as if the gods were present before us but knowing full well they are not. The figural has replaced the literal. Now it is this detour through the kingdom of as-if – where all kinds of possibilities can be explored in a ‘free variation of imagination’ – which allows for an attitude of anatheist disposition. We bracket our religious beliefs (provisionally at least) on entering the theatre, in order to be able to believe in the theatrical make-believe. This, as I read it, is an Aristotelian foreshadowing of Keats’ negative capa-

9 Cf. R. Kearney, Anatheism, cit.
bility (and, in a sense, Husserl's phenomenological epoché). Namely: the agnostic liberty to explore all kinds of different views and attitudes without the constraints of orthodoxy, morality or censorship. But that is not the end of the affair for anatheism. Once we exit from the theatre, once we suspend this poetic detour in turn, we find ourselves back in the real lived world with the option to believe in the gods or not to believe. But without such a negative capability - as form of poetic licence - it is difficult to freely choose which, if any, religious 'truth claims' to embrace. Authentic faith commitments are better guaranteed, perhaps, by the hiatus of aesthetic atheism which contains the anatheist option within itself and reanimates a real sense of existential drama in the relationship between the divine and the human. Some kind of letting go of one's received beliefs - even provisionally, momentarily, hypothetically - is something that I consider central to the re-imagining of the sacred. And to the possibility of genuine faith, which as Dostoyevsky reminds us, comes forth from the 'crucible of doubt'.

So how might this hypothesis of suspended belief relate to more contemporary literature? In Anatheism I look at Joyce, Woolf and Proust as three modernist writers who 're-imagine the sacred'. In Ulysses we have Stephen replying to the question 'What's God?' with the response: «A cry in the streets»12. (A street noise retrieved in Molly's cry at the end of the book). Theos is echoed as eros. But what does Joyce mean when he describes God as a 'cry in the street'? What is the sense of the sacramental, the Eucharistic, the sacred, that Joyce is teasing out in that phrase and in the constant revisiting and rewriting of a grammar of transubstantiation throughout the book? There are a whole series of eucharists - black Masses, parodic Masses, failed Communions - and then, finally, we have Molly's own retrieval of a 'cry in the street': her climactic 'Yes' along with the remembered exchange of seed cake with Bloom as they kiss on Howth head. Is this not a powerful example of what Joyce calls 'epiphany'? The sacred at the very heart of the profane? The infinite in the infinitesimal? The sacramental in the quotidian?

With Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse I believe there are also poetic epiphanies at work. My question is: what does Lily Briscoe mean when she talks about the little, daily miracles, the «match struck in the darks»13, the ordinary illuminations? What's going on in the text? And what is Lily's relationship to Mrs Ramsay who prepares and performs a quasi-Eucharistic feast in the first part of the book, which is then followed by the disen-

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chanting 'interlude' of death and war, before we return to Lily's final brush stroke which completes her portrait of Mrs Ramsay – «It is finished»¹⁴ – in the third part of the book. Is Lily Briscoe not somehow retrieving the lost experience of the opening banquet anathetically? Is it not only when Lily has let go of the mystical Mrs Ramsay – after her death and disappearance – that she can resurrect her in her portrait? What does 'It is finished' (as she completes her painting) signify? In what sense is it finished? What exactly does it mean for Lily to engage in that sacramental gesture of eucharistic memory?²¹⁵

And what, finally, does Proust mean by le petit miracle in Remembrance of Time past? Here again we find recurring idioms of sacramental repetition, transubstantiation, resurrection, epiphany. The return of 'inexperienced experience' as a second experience, as ana-experience in an ana-time (le temps retrouvé). I have in mind the various retrievals of forgotten moments when Marcel visits the Guermantes' salon at the end of the novel – the stumble on the cobblestones, the clinking of cutlery, the reading of the George Sand story and so on. What are these past moments that, repeated, return as epiphanies which open up a future (the meeting with St Loup's daughter)?

What does it mean for all three authors (Joyce, Woolf and Proust) – who were avowedly atheist, agnostic and apostate – to open up an imaginary space for re-writing the grammar of transubstantiation? I am interested in exploring here the relationship between imagination and faith – faith as wager, freedom, narrative, empathy. And there is more here than a play of words. My wager is that the play of sacramental language in certain artists and writers (Joyce, Woolf, Proust, Keats, Hopkins etc) opens up a sacramental space of experience: a textual world of epiphany. And as my philosophical mentor, Ricoeur, taught me: if writing is the movement from action to text, reading is the movement from text back to action. We move in a hermeneutic arc from existential prefiguration to textual configuration back to existential refiguration (the reader's appropriation of the text in his/her life). In this odyssey from author through text to reader we may witness certain possibilities of transfiguration: namely, the conversion from the Powers-That-Be to the power to be anew. Or what I call the opening to the transformative call of the Stranger.

Let me give one last example of re-imagining the sacred. In the second chapter of Anatheism I revisit the primal scene of the Christian event – the

¹⁴ Ivi, p. 207.
¹⁵ Ibidem.
Annunciation. I do so not just theologically but poetically. Why? Because I believe the Annunciation, as we have received it over time and history, is in great part a scene of religious imagination, in the deepest sense of that term: a primal anatheist scenario which can be revisited in poetic imaginations which may lead to a new faith. To be more precise, I am struck that the most effective ways of returning to this founding event of Christianity are through poets and painters (rather than preachers and theologians). The text of Luke is just a few lines, but we have countless poems about the Annunciation throughout the centuries – and more recently extraordinary verses by the likes of Denise Levertov, Andrew Hudgins, Kascha Semonovitch etc.\(^{16}\) – which explore the original moment when Mary encounters the stranger in Nazareth and ponders whether she will say yes or no. Just as Kierkegaard gets into the mind of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* (a work of theo-poetics if ever there was one), and Kazantzakis gets into the mind of Christ in *The Last Temptation of Christ*\(^ {17}\). These and other poets succeed imaginatively in getting into the imaginations of great holy figures. (A practice we also find in non-Abrahamic traditions such as the enchanting Jataka narratives of the life of the Buddha from Ajanta and Ellora). And to return to the Annunciation, we may say that the various poetic retellings of this scene invite us to ‘anatheistically’ retrieve Mary’s moment of oscillation: her pondering of disbelief and belief as she responds to the summons of the stranger. We do so after the event – two thousand years after – through imagination. In sum, revisiting these images we relive the primal dramas as if we were there, as if we were encountering these sacred figures for the first time.

And as though poets weren’t enough, we also have the painters. Countless of them – from Botticelli and da Messiah to Rembrandt, Rouault and Sheila Gallagher!\(^ {18}\) What the artistic imagination is doing here is inviting us

\(^{16}\) Cf. our discussion of these poets in R. KEECHEV, *Anatheism*, cit., pp. 23-25.


\(^{18}\) In Rembrandt’s painting, ‘Emmaus’, Christ is a dark silhouette illuminating the two disciples with light streaming from his invisible face. The returned messianic stranger remains unknowable no matter how familiar to them he has been during his previous lifetime. In the breaking of bread at Emmaus, Christ is there and not there, seen and not seen, recognized and unrecognizable, familiar and foreign. There is no glorious triumphant full stop. In this moment of what Ricoeur calls ‘eucharistic hospitality’ there is always something more, other, transcendent, exceeding, departing. It is always a matter of ongoing translation and discernment. Not a single saturating revelation. Not a final illumination. Not some total exposure or disclosure. That is why the anathemist moment constantly repeats itself within each religion and from religion to religion. Because it is always something strange: there is a God after God after God.... ‘Aftering’ never stops, and it does you get idolatry, triumphalism, dogmatism, fundamentalism: war between religions and within religions. That’s how close the wager gets. Hospital-
back to the inaugural moments of faith so that we may live them ‘again, anew’ — in time (language) and in space (painting). Without such ana-theist imaginings all we have is dry dogma and abstract doctrine: both lifeless. But in thus anatheistically re-figuring the moment of Mary’s wager we discover that it too was an anatheist moment. Mary herself was engaged in an act of anatheist retrieval (back) and promise (forth). She too was caught in a hermeneutic circle of past and future, before and after God. The fact that the maiden from Nazareth (who I like to call Nazarena for in the moment of wager she is no longer Mary and not yet Madonna) is almost always portrayed as reading at a lectern, indicates, I believe, that she is recalling the narratives of her Abrahamic faith and the various wagers which her ancestors made when solicited by a divine summons, by angels in disguise — from Abraham and Jacob to Tobias and Samuel.19 The Nazarena is reliving the past as she makes her leap of faith into the future — choosing, freely, to believe that the impossible is possible, that she will conceive a child. Like Sarah before her when visited by divine strangers. This moment of free choice, recalling the past and anticipating the future, is a primordial instance of the ana-time of anatheism: for at this oscillating instant where eternity hovers over the here and now, Mary is poised before the options of belief and disbelief. We are told in Luke that in this anatheist moment of freedom she «was troubled and pondered»20. It is a hard one. A lot is going on in her head. The Greek term for pondering is dialogizomai: she is dialoguing with the strange visitor, with herself, with all the voices in her head, saying «do it, don’t do it». And from out of this welter of perspectives and possibilities, she chooses. Moreover, I would claim that if she did not chose, or was not free to choose, from a space of negative capability, of imaginative...
empathy and openness to the stranger, the wager would have been fake. The incarnation would be an act of divine rape. Theism without anatheism is just that – a violation of human freedom and trust. But it is also important to recognize that this pondering, this aftering, this drama of wager, of responding to the call, is carnal. It is a thinking again in the flesh. It happens in an instant, it’s an incarnate hermeneutic radically informed by this wagering. Neither a reflex response to a stimulus nor a disembodied cogito with a clear and distinct idea! Mary is thinking through the body and embodying her text in action. That is why if – in almost all the portraits – she has a book in one hand, she has a lily (representing the senses) in the other. Mary’s response to Gabriel is one of savvy – a felt knowledge, a thinking that is also a touching and tasting, sapientia as sapere-savouer-savoir.

Re-imaging the sacred can thus revive faith – makes it live again (revivre). Religious imagination can, I believe, bring us back to the moment and lets us bring the moment back into our lives again. We become dramatic contemporaries of the wager. That’s ana-theism. If faith needs its prophets, it also needs its poets21.

3. The Sacred - A Question of Strangeness

The ‘sacred’ is somewhere between the ‘spiritual’ and the ‘religious’. We often hear the phrase «I’m spiritual but not religious». And we have all heard people say that a particular person, place, thing or moment is ‘sacred’ to them. The ‘spiritual’ can include the ‘sacred’ and the ‘religious’, but can also operate independently of them. ‘Spirit’ is a very capacious category that, at times, can mean anything and everything. But for the most part it means

21 If prophets and preachers give us theology, painting lets us into Mary’s body and poetry into her imagination. Without the slightest hint of blasphemy. There is a poem by Denise Levertov which speaks of Mary poised between her lectern (signifying thought) and lily (signifying the senses) facing an angelic visitor who stands and hovers and whom she acknowledges as guest, a hooper. The final stanza reads:

«We are told of meek obedience. No one mentions courage.
The engendering spirit 
did not enter her without consent.
God waited.
She was free

to accept or to refuse; choice
integral to humanness.» (Cited R. Kearney, Anatheism, cit., p. 24).

Such verses indicate that there is no blind dictat of divine Destiny. Mary’s yes is not a mere ‘effect’ of some omnipotent Cause or supernatural Will which ineluctably prevails, come what may. She is not the passive prey of some Alpha-God. The Nazarens could refuse or accept, she was free to say yes or no. She said yes. And if she had said no, there would have been no Christianity.
something and indeed something important. We know how in own secular age there are still many people still hankering after 'something' (they know what quite what, something 'however that may be defined'). This is often referred to as a 'spiritual quest' and can express itself in a great variety of ways, from an appreciation of the art of Botticelli, Bach or Bob Dylan through theosophical New Age movements, astrological readings or more recently forms of transcendental meditation and yoga – a mix of Rumi and Ramakrishna. All these forms of spiritual journeying and self-discovery can occur without any commitment to a denominational religious faith, with its inherited rites, creeds, practices and doctrines.

So, the 'spiritual' can involve a seeking that does not necessarily involve religion; if by religion we understand a specific set of creedal truth claims, shared ritual traditions and institutional behaviour codes. The 'sacred', on the other hand resides, I suggest, somewhere between the spiritual and the religious. It differs from the spiritual in that it is something you find rather than something you seek. It's 'out there' somewhere rather than in here, so to speak. It is there before you are aware that it is there. Before self-awareness. Before knowing. Before epistemology. I would say: we do not cognize the sacred, we re-cognize it.

Let me take some examples. We talk about things being sacred to us. Certain people, as mentioned, can be sacred to us. (Think of Levinas's 'epiphany of the face' where another before me becomes utterly unique and irreplaceable). Times can also be sacred to us, signaling a specific kairos (before-time and after-time) which, as noted, supersedes chronos (the linear secular time of one moment after another). While sacred time is one thing 'because' (dia) of another; ordinary time is thing succeeding (meta) another. The former is about being in time, the latter being on time. The liturgical calendar – Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, All Saints Day – offers traditional examples of sacred times in Christian culture. And, in addition to people and times, places can be sacred too, as khora – a special space traditionally separated out from profane one-dimensional space.²² So, in all three cases of person, time and place, the 'sacred' refers to something set apart. Something strange and ineffable. Walter Benjamin referred to this extra dimension as 'aura'. Sacer in Latin has the same root as secret or secret, which in turn is a translation from the Greek mysterion, meaning 'blind-fold'. So the sacred is something that surprises us; something that we haven't constructed or envisaged in advance, that blindsides us as it were. It is, in

Virginia Woolf’s words, the «thing given not made»\textsuperscript{23}. In other words, the sacred, at its most basic, involves a deep sense that there is something ‘more’, something radically Other, uncanny, transcendent. Impossible for us to imagine until we re-imagine it anew, until we make the impossible possible though a leap of faith. The sacred is the realisation that there is something there that is more than ‘me’. Or more than ‘us’, understood as an immanent consensus of ‘we’. Of course I could say much here about the notion of the \textit{sacer} as something or someone numinous and ambivalent in-spiring «fear and trembling» (Kierkegaard), «fascination and recoil» (Otto), «totem and taboo» (Freud), «blessing and curse» (Caillois). In short, the \textit{persona sacra} is the Stranger who surpasses the normal notions of law and logic, shattering our conventional horizons, perspectives and presuppositions. It is the ‘other’ in the other person who precedes and exceeds us. And as my mentor, Paul Ricoeur, used to say, \textit{donne à penser}: gives rise to thought, provokes and amplifies our reason and understanding. (I am no advocate of blind irrationalism and fideism).

Now what I’m trying to suggest with the notion of anathem is that the sacred can also be experienced in and through the secular. For me, the hyphen between sacred and secular is absolutely crucial. So in this respect, anathem is an attempt to sacralize the secular and secularize the sacred. Re-imaging the sacred after the secular and through the secular. Bonhoeffer talks about being \textit{with} God yet living \textit{without} God. I call this double sense of ‘with and without’, the movement of \textit{adieu}. This twofold movement involves both an atheist and theist moment and exceeds both. In its atheist guise, \textit{a-dieu} is a departure, a leaving, a farewell, to the old God of metaphysical power, to the God we thought we knew and possessed, the Omni-God of sovereignty and theodicy. \textit{Adieu}, therefore, to the God that Nietzsche, Freud and Marx declared dead. But in saying \textit{adieu} to the Omni-God, anathem opens the option of a God still to come. Or a God still to come back again. If you will forgive the etymological play of prefixes – \textit{ana} has two ‘a’s: the double ‘a’ of \textit{ab} and \textit{ad}. More precisely, the \textit{ab-deo} of departure from God opens the option of the \textit{ad-deum} of a return to God after God, a supplementary move of \textit{aftering} and \textit{overing}. But as soon as the before-and-after God becomes fixed or fixated we need to deconstruct this latest fetish and go ‘after God’ again. And so on without end.

In sum, the ana-theist God is one of perpetual departing and arriving, conjoining negative capability with constant rebirthing of the divine in the ordinary. This double sense of leaving and returning is, for me, at the heart

\textsuperscript{23} V. \textit{Woolf}, \textit{To the Lighthouse}, cit., p. 118 ff.
of the sacred. And it may express itself either 'spiritually' (as a general gracious openness to 'something more') or 'religiously' (involving creedal commitments and devotions). Anatheism has many mansions. One can be an anatheistic theist or an anatheistic atheist. I suspect many of us are often one and the other by turns. But whatever form it takes, anatheism is an existential wager to leap or not to leap, to believe or not to believe. In fear and trembling. In uncertainty and mystery. Let me end with this description from Anatheism of the relationship between the secular and the sacred:

«Anatheism is not an atheism that wishes to rid the world of God, rejecting the sacred in favor of the secular. Nor is it a theism that seeks to rid God of the world, rejecting the secular in favor of the sacred. Nor, finally, is it a pantheism, ancient or new age, that collapses the secular and the sacred into one, denying any distinction between the transcendent and the immanent. Anatheism does not say the sacred is the secular; it says it is in the secular, through the secular, towards the secular. I would even go so far as to say that the sacred is inseparable from the secular while remaining distinct. Anatheism speaks of inter-animation between the sacred and the secular but not of fusion or confusion. They are inextricably interconnected but never the same thing.»

The ana- of anatheism makes sure that the God who has already come is always still to come.

Richard Kearney

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24 R. Kearney, Anatheism, cit., p. 166.