

Givenness and God

Questions of Jean-Luc Marion

Edited by Ian Leask and Eoin Cassidy

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Hermeneutics of the Possible God

Richard Kearney

I come in the little things, saith the Lord.

—Evelyn Underhill

God, if God exists, exists not just for God but also for us. And the manner in which God comes to us, comes to mind, comes to be, and comes to dwell as flesh among us, is deeply informed by the manner in which we think about God—in short, how we interpret, narrate, symbolize, and imagine God. This, I suggest, calls for a philosophical hermeneutics instructed by the various and essential ways in which God “appears” to us in and through “phenomena,” and “signals” to us in and through “signs.” It is my wager in this chapter that one of the main ways in which the infinite comes to be experienced and imagined by finite minds is as *possibility*—that is, as *the ability to be*. Even, and especially, when such possibility seems impossible to us. I am not saying this is the only way, or even the most primordial way; just that it is a very telling way, and one that has been largely neglected in the history of Western metaphysics and theology in favor of categories such as substance, cause, actuality, absolute spirit, and sufficient reason.

In the first part of this chapter I propose briefly to explore ways in which phenomenology—as first developed by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger—helped to open up a new path for thinking about

God in terms of the possible. In the second part, I will chart a further itinerary through three hermeneutic circles of reading—*scriptural*, *testimonial*, and *literary*—that, I believe, disclose rich textual resources for reimagining God as *posse*.

The Way of Phenomenology

Husserl

Edmund Husserl inaugurated the phenomenological method. One of the primary purposes of this method was to open our minds to the realm of “pure possibility,” thereby liberating us from our habitual attachments to mere facts and opinions. Husserl identified five basic steps in the method: (1) the *epochē* (bracketing or suspension) of the presuppositions and prejudices of our so-called natural attitude; (2) the “reduction” of our attention back to “the things themselves,” as revealed in the intentional life of consciousness; (3) the “free variation in imagination” of any topic of inquiry across all its variants—actual and virtual, real or imaginary—until an invariant structure or essence (*eidō*) appears; (4) the “intuition” of this essential meaning in the pure immanence of consciousness; and (5) the “description” of essential meaning by transcendental subjectivities extending toward a *telos* of absolute reason.

Though most of Husserl’s mainstream work appeared to bracket out the theological or confessional question of God, there are a number of fascinating conjectures about a phenomenological approach to the divine in several of his later and posthumously published lectures, letters, and manuscripts. In some texts Husserl’s God approximates to a “transcendental ideal” in Kant’s sense, that is, an Idea situated at infinity that directs the various intentions of consciousness asymptotically. As such, it operates regulatively as a sort of teleological idea of Reason.¹ In other passages, such as paragraph 35 of *The Crisis*, Husserl compares the phenomenological method to a “religious conversion” that triggers an “existential metamorphosis of humanity.”² In short, the phenomenological *epochē* and reduction effect a change of attitude in the human subject that Husserl considers analogous to that brought about by a religious transformation of the “natural” self. He even goes so far as to speak of the *Idea Christi* as “the archetypal idea of the Man-God” that mobilizes human striving toward a universal humanity.³ Moreover, we have it on the testimony of Sister Adelgundis Jaegerschmidt, who nursed Husserl in his final

years, that Husserl confessed that “human life was nothing less than a journey towards God,” even though the philosophical vocation was, strictly speaking, a “path to God without God.”⁴

The basic postulate of a phenomenology of religion is this: religious consciousness is a distinct, *sui generis* mode of intentionality that aims at a transcendent meaning—called God—without being in a position (after the methodical bracketing of the question of transcendence) to verify or falsify its truth claims. While Husserl construes the religious mode of intentionality as one of “faith,” he is also wont to link this same intentionality with an inherent tendency of “phenomenological reason” itself directed toward an absolute goal of meaning.⁵ On occasion, these two seemingly incompatible claims—for faith and for reason—lead to some conflict, as when Husserl argues that “religious intuition presupposes the most universal intuition of absolute givens” and, as such, requires an approach transcending the normal limits of transcendental subjectivity.⁶ (Husserl might be said to anticipate here Jean-Luc Marion’s disclosure of the “saturated phenomenon” that, Marion argues, finds its apogee in the “saturated phenomenon par excellence”—Christ.⁷) To address this tension, Husserl sought to distinguish between two senses of the word “religion.” On the one hand, writes Husserl, we have “religion as a progressive myth, as an authentic and unilateral intuition of religious ideals, surrounded by an horizon of presentiments whose infinite dimensions remain impenetrable, compelling us to kneel before the unfathomable.” On the other hand, we have “religion as a metaphysics of religion, as the ultimate fulfillment of a science of universal understanding, in the sense of the norm of all intuitive myths and symbols, regulating all the figures and transformations of its imaginary.”⁸ The tension between these two approaches was, I believe, never fully resolved.

Husserl’s own instinct, it seems, was to move in the direction of a generous phenomenology of comparative religion. This would acknowledge the valuable resources of both monotheistic and nonmonotheistic religions (such as Buddhism) as respective approximations to the “teleological idea of reason,” guided by a universal entelechy and striving toward ever more perfect freedom. But even as Husserl appeared to subordinate faith to reason in this universalist gesture, he was still prepared to speak of this entelechy as a kind of unconditional “absolute obligation” (*absolutes Soll*) whose quality was not only moral but also “mystical.”⁹ Similarly, in a famous passage in *Ideas*, book 1, Husserl makes the telling concession that when he

speaks of the divine, he is referring to an “‘Absolute’ in a completely different sense than that of the absolute of consciousness” and to a “transcendent in a completely different sense than the transcendence of world.”¹⁰ It is not, Husserl insists, a human subject that “invents or produces this supreme transcendence.”¹¹ Little wonder, then, that Husserl could write in a letter to the young Roman Ingarden that there was no problem more important than that of God!¹²—adding that it was an essential task to rediscover “the meaning of divine being and of the divine creation of the world.”¹³

In the light of all this evidence, Jean Greisch does not hesitate to affirm that we find in Husserl the “lineaments of a theological philosophy associated with the teleological idea of reason.”¹⁴ By all accounts, we are moving here from transcendental egology to transcendental theology. But that does not mean that we can ever fully disentangle the use of the terms *theology* and *teleology* in Husserl. From beginning to end, God appears as a term for “absolute entelechy”—the progressive actualizing of divine potential as “infinite life, infinite love, infinite will.”¹⁵ Moreover, I suspect that one of the reasons that Husserl’s God is not just an Idea of Reason but a gift of life is that this Absolute “entelechy of entelechies” constitutes itself for us in and through the “free variation of possibles” that imagination provides both in (a) the great texts of Scripture and literature and in (b) the third step of the phenomenological method—namely, “imaginative variation”—which seeks formally to revisit these texts in the eidetic realm of “pure possibility.” Indeed, it might be said that for Husserl it is this exploratory and intuitive use of imagination that seeks to bring together the otherwise opposed worlds of eidetic reason and experiential faith. As he confesses in *Ideas*: “If anyone loves a paradox, he can readily say, and say with strict truth if he will allow for ambiguity, that the element which makes up the life of phenomenology, as of all eidetical sciences, is ‘fiction,’ that fiction is the source whence the knowledge of eternal truths draws its sustenance.”¹⁶

The God of Husserl’s phenomenology is not just an abstraction of rationalist deism nor a glorified Monad of Sufficient Reason—it is also a God of an intuition so deep that it surpasses and overflows all our intentions. This latter is a God of testimony and empathy, of suffering and action, of passion and compassion. As Husserl himself concedes: “God experiences in himself [*lebt in sich nach*] every suffering . . . and it is only by suffering with in this manner that he can surmount his finitude, his not-having-to-be in infinite harmony in light of which he exists.”¹⁷ That is also why for Husserl the self of

spirit is one that not only “receives itself from another but capable of losing itself for another.”¹⁸ Here, arguably, we find the phenomenological roots of what Ricoeur calls the “sujet com-” and what Marion calls the “interloqué.” The phenomenological purified self discovers its originary existence as one that is ineluctably tied to others in a series of intersubjective transversals that ultimately to God. “In myself,” writes Husserl, “passing through other selves with whom I find myself tied, all the ways . . . lead to the same pole, God, who transcends both man and world.”¹⁹

It is this kind of thinking that enables Jean Greisch to conclude his highly illuminating investigation of Husserl’s phenomenology of religion by declaring that since, for Husserl, “every life only becomes conscious accompanied by love,”²⁰ the acute awareness that I have of the “absolute vocation of the subject, places him on the way to a God whose true name is Love.”²¹

Moreover, the fact that Husserl approaches the question of God after the reduction, in a manner that is radically open to every conceivable variation of meaning and manifestation means that this is the most nondogmatic divinity one could imagine. One might even say that for Husserl a certain methodical agnosticism or atheism is a necessary prelude to the disclosure of neglected aspects of divinity. This certainly keeps the doors open to dialogue between the different religious traditions of the world, resisting the temptation to impose the dogmatic presuppositions of any one faith. A phenomenology of religion in this sense is the contrary of apologetics. Its attentiveness to the realm of “pure possibility” marks a refusal of exclusivist dogmatism and throws down a challenge to the old metaphysical notion of God as impassive actuality or *ens causa sui*.

An insurmountable tension remains, however. Husserl’s commitment to promising adherence to a rigorous science of transcendent being— with God representing the ultimate universal pole—cannot be easily squared with the mystical or personal God of confession and devotion. The God of Reason and the God of Faith remain, in their own separate, if parallel, tracks in Husserl’s phenomenology. Both Gods hint, in their respective ways, toward a divinity fueled by the “passion of the possible”—a special passion accessible through the “free variation of imagination.”

Heidegger

Martin Heidegger took the phenomenological inquiry about Being and the Possible in new directions. His basic insight was that for ph

enology “possibility stands higher than actuality” (formulated in his introduction to *Being and Time*) was to prove of crucial significance. It offered a new ontological meaning to Husserl’s claim that it is the realm of possibility, opened up by the phenomenological method of reduction and free variation, that leads us to an essential intuition of truth. Heidegger gave Husserl’s argument a more existential articulation, however, when he showed how “*Dasein* is its possibilities,” from its everyday concerns and projects to its most ultimate and ownmost possibility of all—the possibility that is the impossibility of any further possibility: one’s being toward death (*Sein-zum-Tode*).

Heidegger was also borrowing here from Kierkegaard’s original suggestion in *Sickness unto Death* that divine existence should be conceived of in terms of the “possible.” “For prayer,” writes Kierkegaard, “there must be a God, a self—and possibility—or a self and possibility in a pregnant sense, because the being of God means that everything is possible [*mulig*], or that everything is possible means the being of God; only he whose being has been so shaken that he has become spirit by understanding that everything is possible, only he has anything to do with God. That God’s will is the possible makes me able to pray; if there is nothing but necessity, man is essentially as inarticulate as the animals.”²² What, exactly, Kierkegaard means by “possibility in a pregnant sense” is something that Heidegger sought to clarify when he identified the truth of Being with “the quiet power of the possible,” in his conclusion to *Being and Time*. The fact that Heidegger described Kierkegaard as neither a pure philosopher nor a pure theologian, but a law unto himself,²³ is also of interest as we seek to identify the exact status of Heidegger’s own contribution to a depth hermeneutics of the Possible.

Given Heidegger’s phenomenological analysis of *Dasein*’s different categories of possibility in *Being and Time*—as *Seinkönnen*, *Möglichkeit*, *ermöglichen*—one might be forgiven for supposing that the “power of the possible” refers to an essentially *human* property.²⁴ However, in the *Letter on Humanism* (1947), Heidegger claims that such a humanist supposition is mistaken. In a pivotal if much neglected passage in this postwar letter to Jean Beaufret, Heidegger revisits this exact reference to the “quiet power of the possible,” redefining it this time as an unambiguous gift of Being itself. Theological connotations abound, albeit elusively. And we are tempted to ask, What, if anything, does this “quiet power” of Being have to do with God?

The passage in question opens as follows: “Being as the element is the ‘quiet power’ of the loving potency [*Vermögens*], i.e. of the possi-

ble [*des Möglichen*].” Already the interpolation of the new term *Vermögen*, to qualify the standard term for the possible in *Being and Time*—namely, *das Mögliche*—signals a shift from an existential-transcendental perspective (easily confused with humanism) to a more unequivocally Being-centered one. This new assignation for Being’s own power of possibilizing is more topological than anthropological. It marks a clear departure from the transcendental residues of “possibility” still evident in the existential analytic of *Dasein* in *Being and Time*. Determined now to avoid any further humanist misreadings, Heidegger is emphatic on this point. “Our words ‘possible’ and ‘possibility’ are,” he explains, “under the domination of ‘logic’ and ‘metaphysics,’ taken only in contrast to ‘actuality,’ i.e. they are conceived with reference to a determined—viz. the metaphysical—interpretation of Being as *actus* and *potentia*, the distinction of which is identified with that of *existentia* and *essentia*.” But Heidegger explains that when he speaks of the “quiet power of the possible,” he means neither (1) the “possible of a merely represented *possibilitas*” (a Leibnizian-Kantian category of modal logic) nor (2) “the *potentia* as *essentia* of an *actus* of the *existentia*” (an Aristotelian-scholastic category of metaphysics). He means, as he states here, “Being itself, which in its loving potency [*das Mögend*] possibilizes [*vermag*] thought and thus also the essence of man, which means in turn his relationship to Being.” Heidegger concludes this decisive passage thus: “To possibilise [*vermögen*] something is to sustain it in its essence, to retain it in its element.”²⁵

The significance of this pronouncement on the “possible” cannot be underestimated. It offers a unique insight into the famous “Turn” in Heidegger’s thought from “phenomenology” (with its residual transcendental, existential, *Dasein*-centered idioms) to “thought” (with its shift of emphasis to Being-as-Being, *Sein als Sein*).²⁶ Heidegger I’s humanist-sounding idioms of Being as temporality and historicity are now replaced with a more sacred-sounding language of love and grace, consistent with Heidegger II’s rethinking of Being as Gift (*Es gibt*). Playing on the latent etymological affinities between the German verbs for loving (*mögen*) and making possible (*vermögen*), Heidegger invites us to rethink Being itself as the power that possibilizes the authentic being of things:

It is on the strength of this loving potency or possibilization of love [*das Vermögen des Mögens*] that something is possibilized [*vermag*] in its authentic [*eigentlich*] being. This possibilization

[*Vermögen*] is the authentic “possible” [*das eigentlich “mögliche”*], that whose essence rests on loving.²⁷

The proper response of human beings to such loving-possibilizing is, Heidegger suggests, to love-possibilize Being in return. How? By thinking things and selves in their authentic essence. “Thought is . . . to concern oneself about the essence of a ‘thing’ or a ‘person,’ that means to like or to love them.”²⁸ The possibilizing of Being may thus be understood in terms of a double genitive referring both to Being’s loving-possibilizing of thought and thought’s loving-possibilizing of Being. Thus we might translate Heidegger’s phrase—“Aus diesem Mögen vermag das Sein das Denken”—as “Being possibilizes thought which possibilizes Being.” The sense of this translation is confirmed, it seems, in Heidegger’s subsequent sentences:

The one renders the other possible. Being as the loving-possibilizing is the “*posse-ible*” (*Jenes ermöglichte dieses. Das Sein als Vermögend-Mögende ist das “Mög-liche”*).²⁹

By choosing to translate the operative term *Mög-liche* as *posse-ible*, I am suggesting that the shared semantic sense of *mögen* (to love) and *vermögen* (to be able/to make possible) is perhaps best captured by the Latin term *posse*—a word that, according to Nicholas of Cusa, lies at the very heart of divine being, qua God’s power to love. Nicholas coined the word *Possest* to capture this double belonging of possibility and being that he identified with God. “God alone,” he wrote, “is all that he is able to be.”³⁰

Heidegger does not go so far. There is no mention of Nicholas of Cusa. Yet much of his language is deeply resonant with the religious language of Christian eschatology. Indeed, in a related passage in the 1947 letter to Beaufret, Heidegger actually equates the essence of Being with the “sacred” and the “divine.”³¹ This, in conjunction with his *Der Spiegel* claim that “only a god can save us now” and his *Beiträge* allusion to Schelling’s equation of the God of Exodus 3:14 with the “possibility of being” (*seyen wird/Seyn-könnende*) certainly solicits the surmise that *some* rapport might exist between the “possibilizing” power of Being and the *Possest* of God.³² Moreover, Heidegger’s liberal borrowings from Christian mystical theology—for example, Eckhart’s *Gelassenheit*, Angelus Silesius’s “rose-that-blooms-without-why,” and Paul’s eschatological *kairos*—all suggest a deep, residual affinity with the author’s early fascination with Catholic and Lutheran theology. And even if it is probably more the “god of the

poets" (than of revelation) that the later Heidegger has in mind when he invokes a "saving god," one cannot gainsay some kind of relation between ontological and theological readings of the "loving possible." Indeed, in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger had already hinted that the ontology/theology relationship might take the form of an *analogy of proper proportionality*: namely, the believer is to God what *Dasein* is to Being.³³

Thus, when Heidegger speaks of poetic dwelling as an invitation to abide in "that which has a loving for man and therefore needs his presence" (*was selber den Menschen mag und darum sein Wesen braucht*), one has reason to suspect that some kind of deity is hovering in the vicinity.³⁴ And this surmise is substantiated when one observes how several of Heidegger's last writings recast the Husserlian notion of teleological possibility in terms of a quasi-eschatological drama. A typical example is *The End of Philosophy*, where Heidegger claims that the "end of philosophy is the place in which the whole of philosophy's history is gathered in its most ultimate possibility"—a final possibility that is also the "first possibility" from which all genuine thought originates.³⁵ Such a possibility is clearly beyond all human powers of determination, for "its contours remain obscure and its coming uncertain."³⁶ So we are back once again, it seems, with that possibilizing-appropriating of human thinking by Being itself: a form of happening (*Ereignis*) and giving (*Es gibt*) that remains beyond our ken and control. Being is thus rendered as "that which is capable of being," the *esti gar einai* of Parmenides now rethought by Heidegger as the "possibility of Being." From a human point of view this means, quite simply, letting things be what they *can be*.³⁷

But whatever this "possibility of Being" may be, it is certainly *not* the mere *potentia* of some metaphysical substance, nor the *possibilitas* of some representational logic (alongside reality and necessity).³⁸ The loving-possible is for Heidegger something that surpasses the understanding of both metaphysics and logic. It is nothing less than the giving of Being itself.

The Eschatological Way

In this second part, I will proceed by means of three concentric hermeneutic circles—scriptural, testimonial, and literary. By traversing this threefold "variation of imagination," I hope to identify some key characteristics of the God of the Possible. In what follows, I would like to address two main questions: (1) How might a hermeneutics

of God as *posse* benefit from a mode of thinking that takes its cue from “poetical” rather than “metaphysical” thinking? (2) How might such a hermeneutics of *posse* enable us to avoid theodicy—the claim that if *all* things are possible to God, this must also include *evil* things (a position I will vigorously contest)?

The Scriptural Circle

My efforts to rethink God as *posse* rather than *esse* draw primarily from the biblical message that what is impossible for man is possible for God. This latter notion of messianic possibility is evident in many scriptural passages. In Mark 10, for example, we are told that while entry to the Kingdom seems impossible for humans, all things are made possible by God. The exact text reads: “For humans it is impossible but not for God; because for God everything is possible” (*panta gar dunata para to theo*) (Mark 10:27). In similar vein, we are told in St. John’s prologue that our ability to become sons of God in the Kingdom is something made possible by God: “Light shone in darkness and to all who received it was given the possibility [*dunamis*] to become sons of God” (John 1:5; my translation). The word *dunamis* is crucial and can be translated as either “power” or “possibility”—a semantic ambivalence to which we shall return below. Further evocations of the possibilizing power (*dunamis pneumatos*) of the Spirit are evidenced in Paul’s letters to the Corinthians and Romans; but perhaps most dramatically of all in the Annunciation scene, where Mary is told by the angel that the *dunamis* of God will overshadow her and that she will bear the son of God—“for nothing is impossible [*a-dunaton*] with God” (Luke 1:37).

In all these examples, divinity—as Father, Son, or Spirit—is described as a possibilizing of divine love and logos in the order of human history where it would otherwise have been impossible. In other words, the divine reveals itself here as the possibility of the Kingdom—or, if you prefer to cite a *via negativa*, as the *impossibility of impossibility*.

A hermeutical poetics of the Kingdom looks to some of the recurring *figures*—metaphors, parables, images, symbols—deployed in the Gospels to communicate the eschatological promise. The first thing one notes is that these figures almost invariably refer to a God of “small things”—to borrow from the wonderful title of Arundhati Roy’s novel. Not only do we have the association of the Kingdom with the vulnerable openness and trust of “little children,” as in Mat-

thew, but we also have the images of the yeast in the flour (Luke 13), the tiny pearl of great price (Matthew 13), and, perhaps most suggestive and telling of all, the mustard seed (Mark 4)—a minuscule grain that blooms and flourishes into a spreading tree. The kingdom of God, this last text tells us, is

. . . like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade.

One might be tempted to call this recurring motif of the Kingdom as the last or least or littlest of things a *micro-eschatology* to the extent that it resists the standard macro-eschatology of the Kingdom as emblem of sovereignty, omnipotence, and ecclesiastical triumph. The frequent reference in the Gospels to the judgment of the Kingdom being related to how we respond in history, here and now, to the “least of these” (*elachistos*) (e.g., Matthew 25:40) is crucial. The loving renunciation of absolute power by Christ’s emptying (*kenosis*) of the Godhead, so as to assume the most humble form of humanity (the last and least of beings), is echoed by the eschatological reminder that it is easier for the defenseless and powerless to enter the Kingdom than it is for the rich and mighty. And I think it is telling—as Dostoyevsky reminds us in the Grand Inquisitor episode of the *Brothers Karamazov*—that the greatest temptation that Christ must overcome, after His forty days in the desert, is the will to become master and possessor of the universe. This is a temptation He faces again and again, right up to His transfiguration on Mount Tabor, when his disciples want to apotheosize and crown Him by building a cult temple there on the mountain (Luke 9). Instead, Christ proceeds to a second kenotic act of giving, refusing the short route to immediate triumph and embracing the *via crucis*, which demonstrates what it means for the seed to die before it is reborn as a flowering tree that hosts all living creatures. As “King” he enters Jerusalem, not with conquering armies but “seated upon an ass’s colt” (John 12). He upturns the inherited hierarchies of power, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah that he would bring justice to the world, not by “shouting aloud in the street” but as a “bruised reed that shall not break, a smouldering wick that shall not quench” (Isaiah 42:2–3).

But in addition to these *spatial* metaphors of the Kingdom exemplified by little things—yeast, a mustard seed, a pearl, a reed, an infant,

the “least of these”—a hermeneutic poetics of the Kingdom might also look to the *temporal* figures of eschatology. These invariably take the form of a certain *achronicity*. I am thinking here of the numerous references to the fact that even though the Kingdom has *already come*—and is incarnate *here and now* in the loving gestures of Christ and all those who give, or receive, a cup of water; it still always remains a possibility *yet to come*. This is what Emmanuel Lévinas calls the “paradox of posterior anteriority”; and it is cogently illustrated in an aphorism of Walter Benjamin that combines the spatial figure of the portal with the eschatological figure of futurity: “This future does not correspond to homogenous empty time; because at the heart of every moment of the future is contained the little door through which the Messiah may enter.”³⁹

As “eternal,” the Kingdom transcends all chronologies of time. Christ indicates this when He affirms that “before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58) and when He promises a Second Coming when he will return again. In short, the Kingdom is both (a) *already* there as historical possibility and (b) *not yet* there as a historically realized kingdom “come on earth.” This is why we choose to translate the canonical theophany of God to Moses on Mount Sinai (*esher ayeh esher*) not as “I am who am” (*ego sum qui sum*) but as “I am who may be.” God is saying something like this: “I will show up as promised, but I cannot *be* in time and history, I cannot become fully embodied in the flesh of the world, unless you show up and answer my call ‘Where are you?’ with the response ‘Here I am.’” (I explore this eschatological enigma of time in further detail in the conclusion, below).

The Testimonial Circle

Our second hermeneutic circle explores a poetics of the Kingdom in light of a number of testimonies recorded by religious writers down through the ages. This we might call the *testimonial or confessional* genre. Unlike “metaphysical” thinkers, who presuppose an ontological priority of actuality over possibility, these more “poetical” minds reverse the traditional priority and point to a new category of possibility—divine possibility—*beyond* the traditional opposition between the possible and the impossible.

Let me begin with the pregnant maxim of Angelus Silesius: “God is possible as the more than impossible.” Here Angelus—a German mystical thinker often cited by Heidegger and Derrida—points

toward an eschatological notion of possibility that might be said to transcend the three conventional concepts of the possible: (1) as an epistemological category of modal logic, along with necessity and actuality (Kant); (2) as a substantialist category of *potentia* lacking its fulfillment as *actus* (Aristotle and the scholastics); and (3) as a rationalist category of *possibilitas* conceived as a representation of the mind (Leibniz and the idealists). All such categories fall within the old metaphysical dualism of possibility versus impossibility. But Angelus intimates a new role for the possible as a ludic and liberal outpouring of divine play: "God is possible as the more than impossible . . . God plays with Creation/All that is play that the deity gives itself/It has imagined the creature for its pleasure." Creation here is depicted as an endless giving of possibility that calls us toward the Kingdom.

I think the early medieval Jewish commentator Rashi also had something like this in mind when interpreting Isaiah's God calling to his creatures—"I cannot be God unless you are my witnesses." He takes this to mean "I am the God who will be whenever you bear witness to love and justice in the world."⁴⁰ And I believe that the Holocaust victim Etty Hillesum was gesturing toward a similar notion when, just weeks before her death in a concentration camp, she wrote: "You, God, cannot help us but we must help you and defend your dwelling place inside us to the last."⁴¹ Both Rashi and Hillesum were witnessing to the *dunamis* of God as *the power of the powerless*. This, clearly, is not the imperial power of a sovereign; it is a dynamic call to love that possibilizes and enables humans to transform their world—by giving themselves to the "least of these," by empathizing with the disinherited and the dispossessed, by refusing the path of might and violence, by transfiguring the mustard seed into the Kingdom, each moment at a time, one act after another, each step of the way. This is the path heralded by the Pauline God of "nothings and nobodies" (*ta me onta*) excluded from the triumphal preeminence of totality (*ta onta*)—a kenotic, self-emptying, crucified God whose "weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Corinthians 1:25). It signals the option for the poor, for nonviolent resistance and revolution taken by peacemakers and dissenting "holy fools" from ancient to modern times. It is the message of suffering rather than doing evil, of loving one's adversaries, of "no enemies," of "soul force" (*satyagraha*). One thinks of a long heritage ranging from Isaiah, Jesus, Siddhartha, and Socrates to such contemporary figures as Gandhi, Havel, Dorothy Day, Jean Vanier, Ernesto Cardinal, Thich Nhat Hanh,

and Martin Luther King, among others. The God witnessed here goes beyond the will-to-power.

Nicholas of Cusa, as already mentioned, offers some interesting insights into this eschatological God when he declares that “God alone is all he is able to be” (*Dialogus de Possest*).⁴² Unlike the God of metaphysical omnipotence, underlying the perverse logic of theodicy that seeks to justify evil as part of the divine Will, this notion of God as an “abling to be” (*posse* or *possest*) points in a radically different direction.

Let us pause for a moment to unpack the phrase “God is all he is able to be.” Since God is all good, God is not able to be nongood (that is, non-God)—defect or evil. In other words, God is *not* omnipotent in the traditional metaphysical sense understood by Leibniz and Hegel. He is not a being able to be all good *and* evil things. That is why God could not help Etty Hillesum and other victims of evil. God is not responsible for evil. And Hillesum understood this all too well when she turned the old hierarchies on their head and declared that it is *we* who must help God to be God. Was she not in fact subscribing here to a long—if often neglected—biblical heritage? After all, if Elijah had not heard the “still, small voice” of God in his cave, we would never have received the wisdom of his prophecy. If a young woman from Nazareth had said “no” to the angel of the Annunciation, the Word would not have become flesh. If certain fishermen, tax collectors, and prostitutes had not heard the call to follow the Son of Man, there would have been no Son of God—and no Gospel witness. So, too, if Hillesum and others like her had not let God be God by defending his dwelling place of *caritas* within them, even in those hellish moments of Holocaust horror, there would have been no measure of love—albeit as tiny as the mustard seed—to defy the hate of the Gestapo. For if God’s loving is indeed unconditional, the realization of that loving *posse* in this world is conditional upon our response. If we are waiting for God, God is waiting for us. Waiting for us to say “yes,” to hear the call and to act, to bear witness, to answer the *posse* with *esse*, to make the Word flesh—even in the darkest moments.

I think Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite could be said to add to our understanding of this great enigma when he speaks, in book 7 of the *Divine Names*, of a “possibility beyond being” (*hyperousias dunameos*) that engenders our desire to live more abundantly and seek the good. “Being itself,” he writes, “only has the possibility to be from the possibility beyond being.” And he adds that it is “from the

infinitely good *posse* [*dunamis*] of what it sends to them [that] they have received their power *dunamis*.”⁴³ I am tempted to relate this notion of an infinitely good possibilizing of God to another extraordinary passage in the *Divine Names*—this time book 9, section 3—where Dionysius writes of the God of little things:

God is said to be small as leaving every mass and distance behind and proceeding unhindered through all. Indeed, the small is the cause of all the elements, for you will find none of these that have not participated in the form of smallness. Thus, smallness is to be interpreted with respect to God as its wandering and operating in all and through all without hindrance, “penetrating down to the division of the soul, spirit, joint and marrow,” and discerning thoughts and “intentions of the heart,” and indeed of all beings. “For there is no creation which is invisible to its face” (Hebrews 4:12). This smallness is without quantity, without quality, without restraint; unlimited, undefined, and all-embracing, although it is unembraced.⁴⁴

Is this extraordinary passage by Dionysius not a passionate invitation to embrace a micro-eschatology of the Kingdom? Is it not a solicitation to embrace an eschatology of little things—mustard seeds, grains of yeast, tiny pearls, cups of water, infinitesimal, everyday acts of love and witness? It appears so.

Moreover, I think it is just this kind of microeschatology that Gerard Manley Hopkins had in mind when he recorded God’s grace in small and scattered epiphanies of the quotidian—when he speaks, for example, of God’s “pied beauty” being manifest in various “dappled things,” from “finches wings” and “rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim” to “all things counter, original, spare, strange;/ Whatever is fickle, freckled—who knows how?” (“Pied Beauty”). For Hopkins, it is not the mighty and triumphant Monarch that epitomizes the pearl of the Kingdom (“immortal diamond”) but, contrariwise, the court fool, the joker in the pack, the least and last of these. Here is Hopkins’s take on the eschatological kingdom:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am,
And
This Jack, Joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood,
Immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.

Hopkins's deity is one of transfiguration rather than coercion, of *posse* rather than power, of little rather than large things.⁴⁶ An echo, perhaps, of Dante's deity in the "Paradiso," who is described as a tiny, indivisible point of light in contrast to the towering figure of Lucifer in the final canto of the "Inferno." But in our shift of registers from theology to poetry, we are already embarking on our next circle of readings.

The Literary Circle

In our third and final hermeneutic circle—the literary—I include a number of passages that offer more explicitly poetic epiphanies of the possible. This amplification of our investigation to embrace a literary poetics extends the range of reference to take in soundings of *posse* that transcend the confessional limits of theism or atheism, enjoying as they do a special liberty of imagination—a "poetic license" to entertain an unlimited variation of experience. As Emily Dickinson rightly observed, "possibility is a fuse lit by imagination," a belief that informs her imaging of the eschatological possible:

I dwell in possibility—
A fairer house than prose—
More numerous of windows—
Superior—for doors . . .
Of visitors—the fairest—
For Occupation—This—
The spreading wide my narrow Hands
To gather Paradise—

The French author Rabelais had his eye on a similar paradise when he affirmed the possibility of life through death, yea-saying to his last moments as he jubilantly declared: "J'avance vers le grand possible!" In his remarkable novel *The Man Without Qualities*, the Austrian writer Robert Musil offers a further perspective on the eschatological *posse* when he claims that "possibility is the dormant design of God in man"—a design waiting to be awakened by our poetic dwelling in the world. Our true vocation in history, for Musil, is one of utopian invention. It involves an audacious surpassing of given reality toward imagined possibility. Here is the passage in full:

One might define the meaning of the possible as the faculty of thinking all that *might be* just as much as what is. . . . The implications of such a creative disposition are huge. . . . The possible

consists of much more than the dreams of neurasthenics; it also involves the still dormant plans of God. A possible event or truth is not just the real event or truth minus the "reality"; rather it signals something very divine, a flame, a burning, a will to construct a utopia which, far from fearing reality, treats it simply as a perpetual task and invention. The earth is not so spent, after all, and never has it seemed so fascinating.⁴⁶

The metaphor of fire—with its allusions to both the burning bush (Exodus 3:14) and the Pentecostal flame of speaking tongues—is explored by Wallace Stevens in a poem addressed to the philosopher George Santayana titled "To an Old Philosopher in Rome." Here again the correspondence between the simple (indigent, small, inconsequential) and the eschatological (the Kingdom) is conveyed by the figure of a candle flame that illumines the real in the light of the "celestial possible." The pneumatological call to speak in tongues commits itself here to a poetics of the poor and unremembered. Stevens writes:

A light on the candle tearing against the wick
To join a hovering excellence, to escape
From fire and be part of that of which
Fire is the symbol: the celestial possible . . .
Be orator but with an accurate tongue
And without eloquence, O, half-asleep,
Of the pity that is the memorial of this room,
So that we feel, in this illumined large,
The veritable small . . .
Impatient for the grandeur that you need
In so much misery, and yet finding it
Only in misery, the afflatus of ruin,
Profound poetry of the poor . . .
It is poverty's speech that seeks us out the most.

But it is doubtless the Prague poet Rainer Maria Rilke who has composed one of the most inspiring invocations of the gracious power of *posse* in the conclusion to his *Letters to a Young Poet*. Here the eschatological promise of a coming God is combined with the erotic expectancy of a waiting lover. "Why don't you think of Him [God] as the one who is coming?" he asks his youthful correspondent—as

one who has been approaching from all eternity, the one who will someday arrive, the ultimate fruit of a tree whose leaves we are? What keeps you from projecting his birth into the ages that

are coming into existence, and living your life as a painful and lovely day in the history of a great pregnancy? Don't you see how everything that happens is again and again a beginning, and couldn't it be *His* [God's] beginning, since, in itself, starting is always so beautiful?

Then Rilke poses this crucial question:

If he is the most perfect one, must not what is less perfect *precede* him, so that he can choose himself out of fullness and superabundance? — Must not *he* be the last one, so that he can include everything in himself, and what meaning would we have if he whom we are longing for has already existed? As bees gather honey, so we collect what is sweetest out of all things and build Him.⁴⁷

Rilke ends this remarkable passage with a call to vigilant attention and expectancy. Messianism at its best. The metaphor of the flowering, flourishing mustard seed is brought to a new poetic intensity. “Be patient,” Rilke counsels the young poet, “and realize that the least we can do is to make coming into existence no more difficult for Him [God] than the earth does for spring when it wants to come.”⁴⁸

Here we return, as it were, to the “pregnant sense of the possible” noted in the quotation from Kierkegaard above—the interweaving of the divine and the human in patient prayer and longing. And this eschatological desire, as Rilke vividly reminds us, is not confined to human existence but involves, by extension, the entire expanse of the terrestrial universe as it awaits, yearns, and prepares itself for the coming *prima vera*.

My daughter, who brought this passage to my attention, told me this was a God she could believe in. Could I disagree?

Conclusion

So much depends, then, on what we mean by the *possible*. If one defines possibility according to established convention, as a category of modal logic or metaphysical calculus, then God is closer to the impossible than to the possible. But if one seeks, as I do, to reinterpret the possible as the eschatological *posse*, from a postmetaphysical poetical perspective, the stakes are very different. For now we are talking of a *second* possible (analogous to Ricoeur's “second naïveté”) *beyond* the impossible, *otherwise* than impossible, *more* than impossible, at the

other side of the old modal opposition between the possible and the impossible. And so we find ourselves close to Kierkegaard's "passion for the possible" as portal to faith.

I think it is crucial to recall here the telling distinction between two competing translations of the Greek term *dunamis*. On the one hand, we have the metaphysical rendering of the term as *potestas/potentia*, that is, as a potency understood in terms of an economy of power, causality, substance—what Lévinas calls the economy of the Same (or Totality). On the other hand, we have an eschatological rendering of *dunamis* as *posse/possest*, that is, as a gracious and gratuitous giving that possibilizes love and justice in this world. It is this latter interpretation of *dunamis* that I have been seeking to promote in my three hermeneutic detours through the poetics of the possible (and, in more depth and detail, in *The God Who May Be*).

In triumphalist accounts of the Kingdom, the advent of the Messiah on the last day is often described in militaristic terms—as sublimely apocalyptic rather than lovingly vulnerable, as "almighty" rather than solicitous, as coercive rather than caring. By contrast, the divine *posse* I am sponsoring here is more healing than judgmental, more disposed to accept the "least of these" than to mete out punishment and pomp. If God can prevent evil from happening by re-creating the historical past, as the theologian Peter Damian once suggested, He is by implication a God of theodicy: namely, a God who has the power to decide whether history unfolds as good or evil. To me, this sounds like *potestas* rather than *posse*. A far cry from the divine power of the powerless that Etty Hillesum invokes when she summons us to help God to be God in the face of violence and war. A world away from the God of little things.

Sometimes I have been asked what would happen to the God of the Possible if we were to destroy the earth. How can God's promise of a kingdom on earth be fulfilled if there is no earth to come back to? What might be said of the existence of God in such a scenario? There are a few observations I would like to make here by way of conclusion, surmises that claim the poetic license of a "free imaginative variation."

First, I would say that as eternally perduring and constant (that is, as faithful and attentive to us in each *present moment*), God would live on as an endless *promise* of love and justice. This would be so even if we fail or frustrate this covenant by denying its potential for historical fulfillment *on earth*. In this case, God would be like a spouse

abandoned by a spouse—to take up the bride/bridegroom analogy from the Song of Songs. A lover forsaken. Or, to borrow a metaphor from Hildegard of Bingen, the *posse* would be like a tree deprived of its greening (*viriditas*).⁴⁹ If denied its ultimate incarnation in the last days, the possible God would be like a flowering seed arrested before it could come to its full flourishing and fruition on the earth. It would still be *adventurus*, but no longer *futurus*. In other words, the divine advent would be deprived of a historical, human future but would remain, in each moment, enduringly faithful in spite of all. It would still be a “yes” in the face of our “no.”

Second, as eternal *memory* (past), the divine *posse* would preserve all those eschatological “moments” from the past where the divine was incarnated in the flesh of the world every time (as Christ and Isaiah taught) someone gave a cup of cold water to someone else. In kairological as opposed to merely chronological time, these instants would be eternally “repeated” in divine remembrance. This would mark a rewriting of the old adage to read “The good that men do lives after them, the evil is interred with their bones” (to juggle with a line from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*). It would be in keeping with the repeated assurances of the biblical deity to remember the faithful who lived and died in history (e.g., Isaiah 49:15):

Can a mother forget her infant, be without tenderness for the child of her womb? Even should she forget, I will never forget you.

And it would also be consonant with the contrary commitment to erase the memory of evil: “The Lord is close to the broken hearted/ The Lord confronts the evildoers/ To destroy remembrance of them from the earth” (Psalm 34). There is, then, a deeply eschatological character to the biblical injunction to “remember” (*zakhor*). And this character is what translates God’s mindfulness of creatures into a form of “anticipatory memory” (the term is Herbert Marcuse’s)—a memory that preserves a future for the past. As Psalm 105 tells us, “He remembers forever his covenant which he made binding for a thousand generations—which he entered into with Abraham. . . .” In other words, the promise made at the beginning of time is kept by the divine *posse* as an “eternal” remembrance of both the historical past and the present right up to *parousia*.

Third and finally, then, qua eternal *advent* (future), we might say that even though we would have deprived the divine *posse* of its future realization as a kingdom *come on earth*, we could not, by such an

act of self-destruction, deprive God of the possibility of starting over again. Nothing *good* is impossible to God. And rebirth in the face of death is good. As in any nuptial promise or pledge, each partner can speak for himself or herself only: God can promise only for God, not for us. We are entirely free to break *our* part of the promise at any time. And if we do, if we engage in collective self-destruction (God forbid!), why should God not have a “second chance”? Is not *posse*, after all, the possibility of endless beginning?

Of course, the *posse* of the kingdom is not just a promise for humanity as a universal community (to be reassembled as the mystical body of Christ on the last day, according to the patristic notion of *anakephalaiosis*/recapitulation). *Posse* is also and equally a promise for each unique self whose singular good—but not evil—will be preserved eternally in the recollection of the *deus adventurus*: like each glistening speck of dust drawn in a comet’s tail or each glint of plankton in the nocturnal wake of a ship. But if we destroy the earth, we also refuse the possibility of each of these virtually recollected and resurrected selves returning to a “new heaven as new earth” on the last day. They would return with *posse*—as eternal promise—but without the *esse* of the Second Coming. Unless, that is, God decided to start over again.

Several of the above remarks and conjectures find textual support, I believe, in the “Palestinian formula” of eschatological memory (*eis anamnesin*) prevalent in late Jewish and early Christian literature. The formula finds one of its earliest inscriptions in Psalm 111, “the righteous will be for eternal remembrance”; and again in Psalms 37 and 69, where the memory of God refers not just to creatures remembering their Creator in rituals and liturgies but also to the Creator recalling creatures, making the past present before God in a sort of eternal re-presentation that endures into the future and beyond. Likewise, in Ecclesiastes we find the repeated prayer that God might mercifully remember His children. As the biblical commentator Joachim Jeremias observes, such remembrance is an

effecting and creating event which is constantly fulfilling the eschatological covenant promise. . . . When the sinner “is not to be remembered” at the resurrection, this means that he will have no part in it (*Ps. Sol.*, 3.11). And when God no longer remembers sin, he forgets it (Jeremiah 31:34; Hebrews 8:12, 10:17); this means that he forgives it. God’s remembrance is always an action in mercy or judgment.⁵⁰

The notion of eschatological memory is, as noted, also frequently witnessed in New Testament literature, where it takes the form of a double “repetition”—looking to past and future simultaneously. In the eucharistic formula “do this in remembrance of me” (*eis ten emen anamneisin*) (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24), the proper translation of the repetition injunction, in keeping with the Palestinian memorial formula, is this: “Do this so that God may remember me.”⁵¹ The appeal to divine memory during the eucharistic sharing of bread and wine may be seen, accordingly, as an echo of the third benediction of the grace after the Passover meal, which asks *God to remember the Messiah*—a benediction that is followed by a petition for “the remembrance of all thy people”: “may their remembrance come before thee, for rescue, goodness. . . .”⁵² The remembrance of past suffering is thus tied to the hope for the advent of the *parousia*—for Jews, the entry of the Messiah into Jerusalem; for Christians, the return of Christ on the last day. The petition for repetition—in the *kairological* rather than *chronological* sense—may be translated as “God remembers the Messiah in that he causes the kingdom to break in by the *parousia*.”⁵³

This allusion to a bilateral temporality whereby divine memory recalls the *past as future* is further evidenced in Paul’s gloss on the eucharistic remembrance formula: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death *until he comes*” (*achri ou elthei*; see 1 Corinthians 11:23–25). Indeed, the use of the subjunctive form *achri* often refers in the New Testament to the arrival of the *eschaton* (Romans 11:25; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Luke 21:24). The crucial phrase here—“until he comes”—may thus be read in light of the liturgical *maranatha* (“come, Lord!”) invoked by the faithful in their prayers for the coming of God. So, rather than remembering the death of God as no more than a historical event of the past, the remembrance formula can be said to celebrate it as an eschatological advent—that is, as the inauguration of a New Covenant:

This proclamation expresses the vicarious death of Jesus as the beginning of the salvation time and prays for the coming of the consummation. As often as the death of the Lord is proclaimed at the Lord’s supper, and the *maranatha* rises upwards, God is reminded of the unfulfilled climax of the work of salvation “until [the goal is reached, that] he comes.” Paul has therefore understood the *anamnesis* as the eschatological remembrance of God that is to be realized in the *parousia*.⁵⁴

It is with this in mind that Luke speaks of the eschatological jubilation and “gladness” (*agalliasis*) that characterize the mealtimes of the earliest Christian communities (Acts 2:46).

In sum, the close rapport between the eucharistic request for repetition and the Passover ritual suggests that for both Judaism and Christianity the Kingdom’s advent is construed as a *retrieval-forward of the past as future*. The remembrance formula might be interpreted, accordingly, as something like this: “Keep gathering together in remembrance of me so that I will remember you by keeping my promise to bring about the consummation of love, justice, and joy in the *parousia*. Help me to be God!” Or, as the Coptic version of the formula goes: “May the Lord come. . . . If any man is holy, let him come. *Marathana*. Amen.”

The above conjectures operate, for the most part, in the realm of a hermeneutical poetics that enjoys a certain imaginative liberty vis-à-vis the strictures of theological dogmatics, speculative metaphysics, or empirical physics. However, I hasten to add, a fruitful dialogue remains open with all three disciplines.

Let me end with a final eschatological image from the poetics of the Kingdom—the invitation to the feast:

I stand at the door and knock, says the Lord. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and sit down to supper with him, and he with me.

The great thing about this promise of an eschatological banquet is that no one is excluded. The Post-God of *posse* knocks not just twice but a thousand times—nay, infinitely, ceaselessly, until there is no door unopened, no creature, however small or inconsequential, left out in the cold, hungry, thirsty, uncared for, unloved, unredeemed. The Post-God keeps knocking and calling and delivering the word until we open ourselves to the message and the letter becomes spirit; the Word, flesh. And what is this message? It is an invitation to the Kingdom. And what is the Kingdom? The Kingdom is a cup of cold water given to the least of these, it is bread and fish and wine given to the famished and unhoused, a good meal and (we are promised) one hell of a good time lasting into the early hours of the morning. A morning that never ends.