



Review of Contemporary Philosophy 16, 2017
pp. 150–171, ISSN 1841-5261, eISSN 2471-089X

THINKING IN ACTION: AN INTERVIEW WITH RICHARD KEARNEY

ALINA N. FELD

alinanfeld@gmail.com

The General Theological Seminary
and Hofstra University

In the second half of the traumatic and explosive twentieth century, thinkers began considering the possibility of viewing our time as a new Axial Age affecting all areas of existence and thinking. In theological philosophy the interpretation of God and of the self in relation to God continues to change in the direction of a growing awareness of God's otherness while celebrating this very otherness. An effervescent debate on the meaning of God and of God's Other, and the future of a continental philosophy of religion after Nietzsche–Altizer's kerygma of the "death of God" has been enlivening ever wider circles in and outside American and European academe. Various debates have opened up in relation to this theme and inhabit presently the center of what has been identified as the "theological turn" in phenomenology and hermeneutics. The contemporary conversation has enlisted prominent thinkers – belonging to diverse generations, intellectual backgrounds, and academic spheres – such as Jean-Luc Marion, Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Gianni Vattimo, John Milbank, Julia Kristeva, John Caputo, Catherine Keller, and Slavoj Žižek, among others. Irish philosopher Richard Kearney is a major voice in this ongoing debate, rethinking God according to an eschatological hermeneutics, establishing platforms for extensive philosophical conversations as well as for interreligious dialogue centered on a hermeneutics of the heart. Moreover, Richard Kearney has also been a creative agent of reimagining the sacred and enacting a praxis of actualizing the good.

Richard Kearney holds the Charles B. Seelig Chair of Philosophy, Boston College (1999–present). He has served as a visiting professor at University of Paris, Sorbonne, University of Nice–Sophia Antipolis, University College Dublin, and The Catholic University of Australia. He is author of over twenty books on European philosophy and literature (including two novels and a volume of poetry), and has edited or coedited fourteen more. As a public intellectual in Ireland, he was involved in drafting proposals for a Northern Ireland peace agreement (1983, 1993, 1995). He has presented several series on culture and philosophy for Irish and British television and broadcast frequently on the European media. He is currently director of the

international *Guestbook Project: Hosting the Stranger – Between Hostility and Hospitality*.

This interview was conducted at the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy (SPEP) annual meeting in Salt Lake City on October 21, 2016.

AF: Good morning, Richard. It is a great pleasure and honor to have the opportunity to interview you today. Thank you for having graciously agreed to it.

In answer to the hermeneutic question of *d’ou parlez-vous*, what would you like to emphasize or add to your intellectual and spiritual genealogy introduced in *Anatheism*? In other words, what was the driving force or desire that spurred you onto this exceptionally complex and all-encompassing trajectory from *Poétique du Possible* (1984) and *The God May Be* (2001) to *Anatheism* (2009) and *Carnal Hermeneutics* (2015), and most recently to international peace and recovery projects like *Guestbook* and *Twinsome Minds* (2016), both important experiments in applied therapeutic imagination?

RK: One formative part of my intellectual journey was marked by growing up in Ireland where there was a war going on in the Seventies, waged in the name of religion. As a student of philosophy and interested from the beginning in philosophy of religion, I worked with Denys Turner and Patrick Masterson at University College Dublin discussing questions of belief and unbelief, at a time when sectarian battles were waging in Derry and Belfast. It was difficult not to address hard questions concerning the relationship between religion and politics, how people killed each other in the name of God, asking what idea of God we’re talking about if ideas can kill and ideas can heal?

I was educated by the Benedictines at Glenstal Abbey, Ireland, informed by the monastic motto *ora et labora*, pray and work. I was taught the importance there of both action and contemplation. In fact, the philosophy book series I codirected with Simon Critchley for Routledge for many years later was called “Thinking in Action,” and I am currently involved in a book on the theme of anatheism in art and action.

You raise the issue of applied hermeneutics. Working with Ricoeur in Paris in the late Seventies, I saw hermeneutics being applied to questions of everyday practice. One day I would attend Ricoeur’s academic seminar on some philosophical topic of Heidegger’s or Gadamer’s hermeneutics and the next day pick up *L’Esprit* journal or *Le Monde* newspaper and find Ricoeur discoursing on the burning issues of the day – the debacle of Cambodia, the Paris riots, refugee rights, economic or ecumenical crises. So I saw my teacher of philosophy operating as a man of peace and praxis, a very socially and politically committed mind. Whenever I traveled with Ricoeur to other countries he would always want to find out how people lived, how many prisons there were, what the unemployment rate was, how the schools and local

councils functioned. The typical Ricoeur move “from action to text to action” is what, in *Time and Narrative*, he calls more technically the narrative arc from Mimesis 1 (prefiguration) to Mimesis 2 (configuration) to Mimesis 3 (refiguration). This model has always impressed me, and especially as it informs the hermeneutic notion of translation in terms of linguistic and confessional hospitality. Then of course there were also the Canadian pioneers of “applied hermeneutics” in Calgary (inspired by Gadamer and Ricoeur), Caputo’s “radical hermeneutics” and Vattimo’s “weak hermeneutics”: all vitally and socially committed people. I said to myself, “these are people who *care*.” And I would not of course want to forget Levinas – who was on my doctoral dissertation board at the University of Paris – with his insistence on the primacy of ethical relations with the stranger as “first philosophy.” All these thinkers and movements influenced me greatly.

AF: It seems that you are taking it a little further. You started applying hermeneutics to the world of action when you set up the *Crane Bag* journal in 1977, bringing together artists, intellectuals and political figures from all over the world, including Marcuse, Eco, Chomsky, Jean Vanier, John Hume and Ireland’s current President Michael D. Higgins. This pioneering work as a public intellectual in Ireland issued ultimately in some important proposals for peace in Northern Ireland, published in your book, *Postnationalist Ireland* (1997) which found echoes in the Good Friday Agreement between Britain and Ireland in 1998 – in particular the idea that you could be Irish or British or both. And more recently with your international nonprofit *Guestbook* project (2009–present), and your *Twinsome Minds* multimedia project with artist Sheila Gallagher (2016), you have been applying your philosophy to conflict zones throughout the world, doing something very practical on the ground in terms of peace pedagogy and reconciliation around trauma, memory and forgiveness. Indeed, throughout your work, there emerges what I would call a “therapeutics of the heart,” a cathartic healing process rooted in a very deep concern for the other, the stranger, for humanity. Apparently that is sign under which your entire work has been unfolding.

Add to this your own personal experience of other religions. In your dialogue with Catherine Keller in *Reimagining the Sacred*, you mention your experience of a Native American sweat lodge, as an attempt at integrating the entire world down to its elements, as well as your experience with yoga with the Hatha Yogin Asish Das, described in your article on pranayama in *Religion and the Arts*, vol. 8 (2012). This is striking to somebody used to armchair philosophers, theoreticians, lost in the clouds like Aristophanes’s caricature of Socrates, or Swift’s caricature of philosophical idealism. You are engaging in experience, dialectically bringing together philosophy and experience, creating a bridge between theory and practice. This is *metaxic*, to

quote your philosophical compatriot William Desmond. You are, I think, actualizing what Pierre Hadot intended – philosophy as a total experience. Hadot was retrieving ancient and Renaissance models of the Platonic academy, and Marsilio Ficino’s Florentine academy where people lived out what they believed. That is unique and timely, we do need such an academy for our world.

RK: I am very honored by what you say. But while I do try to apply philosophical thinking to the world of action, I would not, in all honesty, consider myself either a real philosopher or a scholar. Let me explain. I think there are philosophers, scholars, and thinkers. By “*philosophers*” I mean the original great minds: Aristotle, Plato, Augustine, Descartes, Kant, Leibniz, Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein...people who devote their lives to really important questioning and usually have one single world-changing idea. Then there are the “*scholars*” – brilliant academic commentators who provide detailed analysis and exegesis on the work of the great philosophical minds. Think of Aquinas and the Scholastics or some of the best continental and analytic commentators of our own time. And finally there are what I would call “*thinkers*”: minds who try to apply philosophical ideas and scholarship to concrete practical matters of living and being-with-others in just communities – in other words the lived worlds of human existence, religion and society. I would count as “*thinkers*” people like Kierkegaard, Pascal, Nietzsche, Kristeva and most existentialists. When Heidegger says that Kierkegaard is not a philosopher but a “religious thinker,” this is what he has in mind. Kierkegaard was not a university academic but someone who took on society, the church, the market place, what he called “the present age.” He was a sort of modern Socrates. If I were to place myself anywhere, it would be as a humble clerk to this kind of lived thinking, or thinking for life, thinking as healing, thinking in action.

AF: Tell me something about how you came to write your first major work of philosophy, *Poétique du Possible*, published in 1994.

RK: My first book was actually a published version of my doctoral dissertation with Paul Ricoeur in Paris. To do that kind of work I basically hid out in my apartment in Paris for three years. And several of my subsequent books in English – from *The Wake of Imagination* (1988) to *The God Who May Be* (2001) were basically translations and elaborations on that. But from the beginning I did not feel that “pure philosophy” was my calling. I would never claim to be an original “philosopher.” And I don’t consider myself a real “scholar” either. I use lots of footnotes and bibliographies, of course, and always check my textual sources with my best scholar friends – I send my Greek to John Manoussakis, my Latin to Joseph O’Leary, my phenomenology

to Bill Richardson – but great and thorough scholars are not always original thinkers, although they do know the texts better than anyone and generously share their knowledge with others.

There are some great minds who combine all three categories of philosopher, scholar, and thinker. Augustine is a good case in point – think of how he could write such different works as *City of God*, scholarly commentaries on the Gospels and an existential testimony like *The Confessions*. My own personal preference is for the existential and therapeutic model of engaged thinking, though I am not claiming that it is superior to the other two. It is just the one which interests me most and which I try to apply in my teaching, writing and living.

AF: And this goes back to the ancient idea, doesn't it, of doing and living out philosophy? Thinking as wisdom, concrete life, a questioning about "how to be happy" and "how to live." Socrates is doing that. But you are doing more than that too, you are also the healer, the hermeneut par excellence (Hermes, patron of hermeneutics and communication), linking all these domains, gods and humans, on the model of the healer-soter, alchemist, who changes mud into gold. Without that any theory cum practice is pointless, ultimately false.

RK: My brother Michael, a doctor who is also a thinker, writes wonderfully about the role of the wounded healer. I resonate very much with that. And with modern thinkers like Wittgenstein or William James or Kristeva who espouse the idea of thinking as a mode of catharsis and healing. I personally believe that for thought to be really therapeutic and transformative it also needs to be supplemented by more hands-on carnal practices of conversion and integration, including meditation, yoga, spiritual journeying, centering prayer, social action and public art performance.

AF: Hence the importance of your work as director of an international nonprofit peace pedagogy project like *Guestbook*, and your role as a public intellectual and media practitioner in France and Ireland in the 1980s and 90s. And I should also mention here your recent multimedia work with artist Sheila Gallagher on memory and trauma, which toured seventeen international venues.

RK: I think both ways are important – the personal work of thinking and the public work of communicating, reflection and action. But the two are not the same. And it is also important at times, for one's health and that of others, just to go fishing and have a good time!

AF: One cannot separate woundedness and healing, or pathos and genius, coincidentia oppositorum, they are Janus-like.

RK: Like Leonard Cohen says, “there is a crack in everything, that’s where the light gets in.” Not to romanticize that, of course, because clinical depression and severe psychiatric illness – schizophrenia, psychosis – are terrible things; but even psychosis can go hand in hand with genius. Think of Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, Lowell was frequently hospitalized for impossible behavior but he also had an extraordinary poetic gift.

AF: As Aristotle knew, “All exceptional individuals are melancholics...”

The story exchange in *Guestbook* is part of the therapeutics, talk therapy, or confession, as Ricoeur argues in *Symbolism of Evil*, confession as the restoration of the ethical meaning of existence.

RK: Evidently, not only Catholic confession, confession in a broader sense, certainly Augustine’s...

AF: Would you see Aristotelian catharsis and Christian confession as coming together in healing?

RK: I never saw it in quite those terms, and I would be a little wary of becoming too denominational or confessional, in saying “Christian” confession. I am a Catholic, but a radical broken-hearted Catholic, and I sometimes hesitate to invoke the term in relation to “thinking” (whatever about believing) for fear it may sound proselytizing, and might exclude others. I try to be discrete when I am working on the hermeneutics of healing. If I could do it interreligiously, I would. I am Christian, but like Eliade and Ricoeur, my position is comparative and not exclusive. There is a wounded healer present in all traditions. In Hinduism Krishna, in Buddhism the Buddha, in Greek myth, Chiron the wounded healer who does similar work to Christ, but nobody feels excluded by a mythic holy man; there is no church of Chiron, no power of authority behind the story. And let’s remember that Jesus himself never set up an authoritarian church, his stories spoke for themselves, they were never meant to be hierarchical or exclusive. They became so only with ecclesiastic domination.

AF: Let’s remember the monastic movement, it emerged as a reaction to the power of Ecclesia.

RK: In every generation you have a Thomas Merton or a Dorothy Day.

AF: Is that what attracted you in the mystical tradition, the practice, the experience?

RK: Yes, it's the experience of the heart, the "eyes of the heart" as Paul put it. I find this very powerfully present in mystics like Theresa of Avila who combined brilliant theoretical works with the everyday practice of "pots and pans." Deep mysticism allows for both, fake mysticism withdraws into extremes.

AF: Martha not Mary...

RK: Eckhart famously defended Martha against Mary.

AF: Martha was in fact closer to God, she knew that you find God here in the world, "in pots and pans," and within you, you don't have to separate, remove yourself, from the world in contemplation. That would be missing the point, a misunderstanding, and idolatry.

RK: What was Mary doing wrong?

AF: She misunderstood the reality of God, the sacred is not circumscribed by location, one finds God in the castle of the soul, the little flame, thus contemplation is not superior to action in, with, for God. For Eckhart, God is looking at us through the eye of a cow.

RK: What does he mean the eye of the cow, why a cow?

AF: "Les nourritures terrestres," "our daily bread," and agapeic self-giving, also, contemplative nature, or perhaps Nietzsche's cow avant la lettre?!

Talking about holy food, or food made holy, sacralized: I was so inspired by your piece on recreating ritual, liturgy, your discussion of Henry Le Saux alias Abhishiktananda, and Sister Sarah Grant, their experiments in interfaith liturgy, Hindu and Christian, on the one hand, and Teilhard de Chardin's Mass of the world, on the other. Do you see this call to renewal, to resacralization, ushering in a possible future? An atheistic event?

RK: I do, especially through art. Religion and the arts should come together again. The Catholic religion I grew up in became too canonical. Vatican II tried to open the way for an aesthetic reenchantment of the world, for an appreciation of the sacred in art and nature, in ordinary secular existence; but it did not succeed alas. At least yet, though perhaps Francis will reopen the doors? The church needs to be exposed anew to the radicality of the arts, as the Benedictine theologian Mark Hederman argues. And it is not just Catholicism; most other Christian denominations are not more open to the aesthetic; with the possible exception of Greek Orthodoxy which has a very rich liturgical and iconographic imagination. I strongly believe Christianity in general has much to learn here from Hinduism and some other Eastern and

indigenous religions. Though it is good to see a new generation of Christian artists like Sheila Gallagher, Bill Viola, and others opening new paths to religious and interreligious imagination again.

AF: The arts enacting *Carnal Hermeneutics*, the title of your recent book. The abyss of the heart... Enlivening the heart, the chakra of the heart, the body and repressed senses, taste, and touch – the sense most related to the heart – everything is coming together, from different perspectives, all apparently random pieces making sense. Your current carnal hermeneutics is fascinating – trying to bring the forgotten, lost body back to a Western Christian tradition, centered on the incarnation; not only the body of flesh but the spiritual body as well.

RK: In two recent books on my work – *The Art of Anatheism* and *Richard Kearney's Anatheist Wager* – I am very happy to see examples of the reengagement of religion and the arts featuring a whole new generation of artists and scholars. And the specific use of media art and technology in relation to narratives of religious and interreligious difference is also part of the international youth peace project I codirect with Sheila Gallagher, “Exchanging Stories Changing Histories” – involving exchanges between pairs of young people in conflicted cities and cultures: Armenian and the Turk, Palestinian and Jew, Congolese and Rwandan, Irish nationalist and British loyalist etc. Out of the narrative exchange – where each storyteller listens to the other – a third imaginary narrative is created, something new emerges and various possibilities of healing reconciliation can occur. And the challenge is to take it into other problematic areas too – trying to overcome divisions between poor and wealthy, sick and healthy, gay and antigay, Democrat and Republican. We believe it is crucial to keep it young, so that the next generation have opportunities to overcome the transgenerational traumas and suppressions, the angers and fears which have plagued their lives up to now, often in a repetitive compulsive manner. It is about trying to turn melancholy into mourning, enmity into empathy, pain into peace.

AF: The stranger, or other, can also be, a dark mood, a forgotten sense, the repellent smell, the dreadful in all its forms. It's an alchemic process starting with what is growing in the dark, bringing it into light and language. I see this as alchemy, the principal way of healing. It worked with images and symbols provoking corresponding states of being, in a coordinated way to enable progressive sublimation, facilitating transfiguration.

RK: Yes, the alchemical imagination is a powerful form of healing. I like that idea. Jung and Bachelard have used it. Transfiguration of matter. Very relevant to finding the so-called philosopher's stone! The peace of wisdom.

AF: In *The Interreligious Imagination* you recount a pilgrimage across India in 2009 with representatives of different religious traditions in conversation. That made me think of the *Eranos Lectures* in Ascona, Switzerland, on the phenomenology of the spirit that brought together scholars from all fields, Eliade, Corbin, Sholem, Jung and others. They made genuine interreligious dialogue possible. I was wondering what you think is different today from the Eranos project?

RK: I am not too familiar with the Eranos project, but I can say, in all modesty, that with the small examples of *Guestbook* and the Indian pilgrimage, there is an attempt to move from theory to practice, from text to action: a movement involving a process of spiritual and intellectual pedagogy – which stops short of political activism while remaining politically active.

AF: Socrates was already aware of the loss of freedom in political involvement.

RK: You are free to intervene in your own way, not just with a party political or official church voice. When we were making that journey in Kerala, traveling together as pilgrims, discovering new spiritually wise people along the way, something new and important glimmered. In the “Introduction” to *Interreligious Imagination*, I try to describe the different stages of that journey as a developing interactive group.

AF: What about evil and the question theodicy – the enigma of evil, the dark nature of God, chora...?

RK: I am skeptical of theodicy and somewhat wary of the Jungian God. There is so much in Jung, Schelling and Leibniz I love, but I reject the idea of a God that could justify evil or see it (earthquakes, holocausts) as still the best of all possible worlds. I agree with Voltaire in *Candide*. I think of God as the possibility of good; if there is evil it’s our own doing. I am Augustinian here, evil is the absence of good, *privatio boni*. Socrates was wise to say that nobody does evil knowingly; and Aquinas was right when he argued that one often chooses evil thinking one is choosing good. Radical evil does exist alas – the torture of innocent children, as Dostoevsky knew. But it’s a *human* responsibility. The problem of theodicy comes from our projecting it onto God. My mentor, Paul Ricoeur, correctly affirms the ontological primacy of yes over no, the primordially of good over evil. In *Anatheism* I argue for the return to the good after the evils of the holocaust and the horrific world wars of the twentieth century. Our task is to resacralize the world, make it hale, whole and healthy again. It’s a choice – to reactualize the possibility of God as love in the world. Through healing and wisdom. Catharsis and Sophia.

AF: You write about God as a play of love, a fascinating vision but one that is not common, especially today. I was thinking of Boehme's Godplay, Gadamer's hermeneutic circle, the hermeneutical God of "who do you think I am?" What do you make of the *deus ludens*?

RK: It's an old mystic idea I first came across in a book by Hugo Rahner, Karl Rahner's brother, also a Jesuit, where he appeals to the concept of *deus ludens* echoing Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*. He goes through various texts of the Judeo-Christian and mystical traditions concerning the idea of God as play. Eckhart picks up on the notion of the God that laughs, as does John of the Cross in his Canticles, his long poem on the Song of Songs, with its images of lovers in play, Solomon and the Shulamite woman. The Sufi poetic mystical tradition was also rich in such ideas, especially Hafiz, Rumi, and Halluj. But gradually, alas, the Jewish, Christian and Islamic mystical movements were marginalized and neglected. Indeed today Sufis find themselves fiercely persecuted by the Wahabi and Salafi movements of Islam. And Christian and Jewish fundamentalists are not much better. There is a battle in all Abrahamic religions to recover the God of play. I am personally hopeful about a new mysticism and new monasticism – often interreligious – where this notion of the playful God is resurfacing. In our work on theo-poetics in the *Art of Anatheism*, we feature work by artists like Sheila Gallagher and Alexandra Breukink who explore this notion of divine play in nature and art along with contemplative mystics like Cynthia Bourgeault and Richard Rohr – close to Thomas Merton and Thomas Keating. Rohr is particularly inspiring in his recent book *The Divine Dance* which is a contemplative rereading of Andrei Rublev's icon of the Trinity in terms of *perichoresis*. This is all part of a new return to the God of play, the lord of the dance, the shepherd king of the song of songs. Parts of popular culture often remained close to the playful God – think of good liturgical ceremonies and Carnival, Corpus Christi processions, Christmas and Easter pageants, la Nuit de la St. Jean, Mardi Gras, All Hallows and other holy times and places of liturgical imagination. There is a huge crisis in modernity, because both Jansenist Catholicism and the Reformation forgot to laugh and play. That's why there is an urgent need for religion today to rediscover the arts – and not only the high arts but also the popular arts. That's where I would like our own intervention in theo-poetics to be – in creative dialogue with new young scholars, artists and writers who are currently contributing to the ongoing work of anatheist retrieval.

AF: Would God's play be an innocent play or would it always contain Dionysian elements?

RK: Mardi gras, la Nuit de la St. Jean, All Souls are often quite Dionysian. Carnival is both holy and profane, in a good way. The Word became Flesh

after all. In Italy, Christ might be portrayed as a donkey, for example, the highest would become the lowest and the lowest the highest, in a sacrocomic reversal. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor writes very insightfully about carnival and the carnivalesque as a time that the church has lost and needs to regain. Bringing it back again can involve quite simple things. A beekeeper Benedictine monk friend of mine in Ireland, Simon Sleeman, for example, did a “symphony of the bees” in his monastery church. That kind of daring imaginative fun experimentation augurs well.

AF: And this God would be a *coincidentia oppositorum*, a profane divine comedy, a performance of holy tricks...

RK: Yes, the mystical-comic Christ is the holy fool, the sacred trickster running from Jesus playing with the Samaritan woman at the well down to Shakespeare’s punning wise fools (think of Lear’s fool or Hamlet’s Yorick) and Dostoevsky’s idiot. Contemporary art and literature is full of such marvelous creatures. That’s why religion needs to recover its imagination if it is to recover a genuine sense of the sacred. It needs art to become holy and healing again.

AF: With postmodernity, there is no longer God but a divine milieu, where the carnivalesque is taking place, and where nothing stays itself, but always changes identity. What kind of need do you think this reversal satisfies in our time?

RK: I have some problems with the term postmodernity but I would agree that the contemporary need you describe calls for the wisdom that says the first will be last and the last first. One of the central moments of the atheist wager is “humor,” the basic idea of comic transformation and reversal – that to go up you have to go down. And that, as you say, involves *coincidentia oppositorum*, sacred contradiction, mystical paradox. Bergson knew this when he wrote that laughter is a response to contradiction. He describes this brilliantly in his little book *On Humor*.

AF: Subversive.

RK: Yes, it can be subversive in very creative ways. Bakhtin wrote about the revolutionary power of carnival in Rabelais and Dostoevsky, the grotesque body, the Mardi Gras commotion.

AF: And related to this you invite us to think of chora and the Trinity, which for you seem to be in continuity.

RK: The Christian image of the Trinity as *perichoresis* is a playful dance around the chora, circling about the core space of hospitality, the generative womb of Sarah and Mary, the Eucharistic chalice of bread and wine. Revelation of the divine is in the carnival of hospitality between the three persons opening onto the fourth – humanity. The fourth dimension involves the invitation to join the perichoretic dance – as signaled by the little mirror first inserted at the base of Andrei Rublev’s Icon of the Trinity, where we see ourselves reflected in the divine play between persons: Father, son, and spirit inviting us all to the Eucharistic banquet. As the old liturgical song went: “Dance dance wherever you may be, I am the Lord of the Dance said he.”

AF: An anamorphosis. This is surely threatening to the old dogmatic theology, especially the introduction of the fourth, the feminine, chora.

RK: It is very radical in its challenge to traditional masculinist Christianity, but true I think to the original inclusive hospitality of Christ, Mary and Mary Magdalene. Excluding chora is excluding earth, the feminine, humor, humanity, Sophia. The Spirit in Hebrew is *ruah*, feminine, and the semitic word for mercy is *reham*, meaning womb. The biblical God is, at root, both feminine and masculine, both Sophia and Logos.

AF: It is interesting that in Rublev’s icon, the three figures are very feminine, or perhaps beyond gender.

RK: Yes. It’s a dance of opposites and differences, of coming and going, a *circumincessio* where male and female are equally welcome. As are the divine and the human.

AF: That’s beautiful. So the human is called forth to actualize the possible God. But I wonder if the human on its own is able to that. Isn’t that too Pelagian? The Pelagian side of the Pelagian-Augustinean controversy of freedom and grace?

RK: There is both grace and freedom. In that sense this is not Sartrean Pelagianism, not pure human agency, not just Feuerbach, Freud and Bloch saying God is an imaginary projection. Atheism does of course acknowledge that theopoiesis is a making – but that making is a double making, both God making and man making, a mutual mak of each other by each other. God is a loving possible that needs to be remade by us – in a play of recreation. As I say in *The God Who May Be*, divinity possibilizes, humanity actualizes. We are always radically free in our response to the call of the possible. God is unable to do evil, God is only able to do good. But the realization of this good – this *posse* as Cusanus calls it – is conditional upon us answering the call. God is unconditionally there as promise, as *posse*, but

for the *posse* to become *esse*, we must respond to the summons, “the cry in the street,” as James Joyce calls it in *Ulysses*. We humans are not working from nothing. It’s not *creatio ex nihilo*, nor Sartrean imagination, nor transcendentalist idealism.

AF: Pelagius’s theology appeals to our ethical logic, we already have been given grace, and we are responsible, that is attractive, it satisfies our ethical requirements. We are very Pelagian today, whether we are aware of it or not.

RK: We are all Pelagians now! In a sense anyway. We receive grace and we are all responsible for what we do with it. In this regard I remain very much an existentialist at heart. I learned my first philosophical lessons from Camus, Sartre, and de Beauvoir, but I never embraced their militant atheism. What I embraced is their affirmation of human liberty and responsibility –which I see as totally compatible with the idea of divine *posse*. Human imagination is free to respond and correspond to what the Sufi mystics called the “imaginal” life of God. As the Bible says, there is a good and evil imagination. It is already there with Cain and Abel. Having killed his brother, Cain defends himself and blames God: “it’s not my fault,” he protests to Yahweh, “you created me with the evil imagination [*yetzer hara*].” And it is true: God created the *yetzer hara*; but God also gave us the freedom to say yes and no, otherwise we would be puppets and marionettes. We have to avoid the temptation of theodicy – that evil is as much part of divinity as good. We need to replace the idea of a divine plan with that of divine play. Theodicy with perichoresis.

AF: Schelling was desperate to find a ground for evil that exculpates both the human and God. He thought he found it in the dark ground of God, which is and is not God, “a negation and support of revelation.” In that way evil would not be “in” God as such. The problem of evil remains. According to your notion of theopoiesis, are we called to become *like* God or to become God?

RK: That’s a very interesting question and I would say the former. Catherine Keller’s work on *theopoiesis* addresses the divinizing of the human in Christianity. For a dance to happen, you need a host and a guest, the infinite and the finite. Otherwise there is no dance, only a Hegelian totality.... I resist any form of totality or fusion with the divine because you can’t dance unless you remain somehow different from your dance partner – human and finite as opposed to divine and infinite. We are in-the-finite but we are not infinite. God alone is infinite.

Becoming like God, realizing the divine potential in us, yes, but not eliminating the difference between creator and created. We are created by God

and recreate God in turn: God becomes our creation, the coresponsibility of cocreation. Divinity is a promise of goodness and justice, a call to endless caritas and hospitality – but, as the history of humanity shows again and again, we can misinterpret the call, mistake it, misdirect it.

AF: What can we do today about *excarnation*? On the one hand we bring back the body – as you suggest in *Carnal Hermeneutics* – and on the other, we lose it again, in digital virtuality. *Hoc est corpus meus* becomes late modern hocus pocus. Where are we heading?

RK: Charles Taylor calls our digital age an age of excarnation. The original message of the incarnation – the invitation to relate to each other humanly in flesh and blood – is increasingly challenged by our digital culture – the internet, social media, simulation, pornography, ecommerce, elearning, ebanking, eliving. There is the constant lure to live by proxy, vicariously, through media and mediation. The digital revolution marks both a danger of “losing our senses” and also of course a huge opportunity to experience with new modes of empathy, invention and imagination. And we mustn’t forget that if the perichoresis includes the body of the son it also includes the pneuma of the spirit – air, wind, play, the virtual, the possible, the imaginary. The worldwide web can also be an interplay of spirit. We must assume responsibility for how we use it. We’re back with the good and evil yetzer!

AF: Is this related to what you are trying to do with *Guestbook*?

RK: It is true that *Guestbook* involves both a digital aspect – websites, videos, virtual exchanges – and working with people concretely on the ground. For me it is crucial that the live person-to-person, corps-a-corps interaction never be lost for if there is only simulation – behind which there can be anything or nothing – then you cannot have a credible exchange of stories with other living beings. Exchange of stories is both in the air and on the ground. An exchange of spirit *and* flesh.

AF: Is dealing with the excarnation your new project? It seems to me very necessary, since there is so much confusion today about the power and value of the digital, even terror about the digital. The challenge of carnal hermeneutics for the phenomenon of excarnation is timely.

RK: I am currently working on a small book about the whole incarnation-excarnation drama. It is called simply *Touch*. This is a continuation and development of the *New York Times* article I wrote in 2015 entitled “Losing our Senses.” I got a huge response to that and this next book will be a further response to that response. A sort of distillation of the key arguments from *Carnal Hermeneutics*, but speaking in a more personal voice. I would like it

to be more accessible than my normal academic university-press books. A middle voice, perhaps, between my scholarly work and novel writing. And I have also been involved with others recently in multimedia live performance work such as *Twinsome Minds* – a mixed-media exploration of trauma and remembrance, which toured fifteen cities in 2016.

AF: That is what is needed today in order to reach people, the authenticity of personal experience and pathos. Experiments in synesthesia, perhaps using images you can touch, or that awaken other senses?

RK: I believe that's right, and it's important in religion as much as in art and philosophy. In the Greek Orthodox tradition, you can touch and kiss the icon. That is so different from the western tradition. In the Catholic tradition, you kiss the Cross on Good Friday and wash feet, but for the most part you don't touch the Eucharist, nor statues of the Virgin. And the Reformation often put an end to touch and taste entirely. In its justifiable desire for reform, its purifying zeal sometimes veered into a puritanical fervor which threw the carnal baby out with the ecclesiastical bathwater.

AF: In the Hindu practice of *darshan*, in the exchange of gazes, a *communicatio idiomato* occurs, an ontological transformation of the reader/viewer/pilgrim into the object of the gaze.

RK: Yes, Diana Eck's book *Darshan* is very strong on that. I think the challenge for contemporary art and religion is to find an analogous invitation to enter the dance through touch and taste.

AF: A truly tempting invitation to an exciting new horizon! Thank you so much, Richard, for granting the interview. I look forward to experiencing all these new exciting projects, and entering the dance.

* * *

A Supplemental Note on Richard Kearney's path to Anatheism

Alina N. Feld

As a sequel to *Poétique du possible*, his first major work of philosophy (1984), Richard Kearney launched into a rethinking of our traditional concept of God with *The God Who May Be* (2001). His central thesis read as follows: "God neither is nor is not but may be."

Kearney's hermeneutics of religion explores two rival interpretations of the divine, the ontotheological and the eschatological. By privileging the

latter, he proposes “a God who possibilizes our world from out of the future, from the hoped-for eschaton.”¹ In order to retrieve the eschatological and challenge the classical metaphysical subordination of the possible to the actual, Kearney adduces four biblical texts, the burning bush, the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, the Shulamite’s song, and the Annunciation. He invites us to rethink God not as actuality, but rather as possibility. Inscribing his thesis in the contemporary philosophical debates – phenomenological, hermeneutic, deconstructive – he proffers the view that God’s potentiality-to-be is not a lack but *more* divine than traditional divine actuality.²

The God who may be is neither the God as *actus purus*, the “disembodied cause devoid of dynamism and desire” of traditional metaphysics, nor the God of dark nature of German Idealism, but a “God of desire and promise who calls out of burning bushes, makes pledges and covenants, burns with longing in the song of songs, cries in the wilderness, whispers in caves, comforts those oppressed in darkness, and prefers orphans, widows and strangers to the mighty and the proud” (2). The possible God who does not overwhelm us by sheer power represents a denial or reversal of the association of the divine with the triumphal God of theodicy, and reveals an otherness of a different order.

This otherness of God brings him closer to us since we are called to acknowledge and respond to God’s powerlessness, from our own “powerlessness.” It is precisely in this “vulnerability, fragility, brokenness that we find ourselves empowered to respond to God’s own primordial powerlessness, to make the potential Word flesh” (4). Both our brokenness and empowering correspond and mirror God’s own, since “God can be God only if *we* enable this to happen,” by receiving and responding to his call and promise. The nature of God matters to us because “God depends on us,” his promise remains powerless unless we respond to it, thus if we say no to the kingdom, the kingdom will never come. Theodicy is dissolved one more time since the evil in the world is our responsibility, it is the “consequence of our refusal to remain open to the transfiguring call of the other persona – the summons of the orphan, widow, or stranger, the cry of the defenseless one” (5). The possible God as the eschatological may-be who reaches us in our weakness and calls us forward toward the future into actualizing the promise is (1) “radically transcendent”; (2) “calls and solicits us in a personal summons”; (3) is possible only in so far as we have “faith in the promise of the advent”; (4) a “power of the powerless” (100). As the “power of the powerless,” he invites us to remain open to the possible divinity whose gratuitous coming is always surprising and graceful.

Kearney names and defines his philosophy of God: dynamatology, metaxology, metaphorology (6–7). Dynamatology since God is movement (from the future, toward us); metaxology refers to a theory of God situated

in-between theories of God as being itself (ontotheologies); theories of God as other than being, such as beyond being (contemporary forms of mystical and apophatic discourse Marion, Levinas, Derrida) and beneath being, teratology (monstrous, Zizek; Sublime, Lyotard; abject, Kristeva; an-khorite, Caputo); metaphorology, in that the God the possible always traverses being and requires semantic intersecting and augmentation (5–6).

To prepare the grounds for a theology of the loving possible and a poetics of *deo posse et ludens*, Kearney reads selectively Husserl, Bloch, Heidegger, Derrida; and retrieves hermeneutically Aristotle, Nicholas of Cusa, and Schelling. It is Heidegger's "loving possible" (a play on *mogen*, love and *vermogen*, to make possible) that defines Being after "the turn" that is the closest approximation to Kearney's intention and he adopts it while transferring it from a discourse on Being to one on God. Heidegger's Being as loving possible is the power that possibilizes the authentic being of things to which human beings may respond by love-possibilizing Being and thinking things and selves in their authentic essence (91–93).

What does the kingdom mean for us in the third millennium? Kearney maintains that God the loving possibility invites us to actualize the promised possibilities by our "poetical and ethical actions contributing to the transfiguration of the world." We refuse the call to this transfiguring task every time we do "evil or injustice or commit ourselves to nonbeing" (105). According to the theology of the possible, together and individually we are called to participate actively, lucidly, and lovingly, in the creation of our own world and future. Moreover, the eschatological vision of the kingdom is articulated with the help of an ontological model of play which Kearney finds analogous to the eschatology of the possible. In the image and likeness of possible God as *deus ludens*, each individual is a *homo ludens* transfiguring the world. Kearney retrieves the notion of perichoresis (*peri*, around; *choros*, dance) circumcession in Latin, to refer to the Trinitarian play that includes humanity by the second person's entering history (106–9). God the loving possible appears as advent (rather than *arche*), eschaton (rather than *principium*), promising fecundity, natality, fragility, powerlessness, making the impossible possible.

Kearney's eschatological hermeneutics envisages humanity as always on the way, attending or refusing to attend to a radically transcendent call. The individual is a fully responsible creator of his or her world and together responsible for the destiny of the shared world. There is thus a will or intention at work in his elaborate thinking: one of retrieval of a deeper meaning of existence, sacred texts, texts tout court, and a gesture toward comprehending more or the more (in both physical and intellectual senses), that reaches a vision of this our world in the third millennium made sacred. For Kearney

the skies have opened, humans and God are again as always conversing with one another, working together for the transfiguration of all.

While in *God Who May Be*, Kearney's metaphysical revision of the nature of God, he explores "ontological and eschatological dimensions of Transcendence addressing issues of metaphysical truth and being," *Anatheism: Return to God after God* is a hermeneutic narrative that investigates the possibility and nature of religion after the death of the God theologies (xvii). The paradigm of his investigation into the question of God is circumscribed to Abrahamic traditions and informed by his personal journey thorough Biblical theism, interreligious dialogue, modernist literature, adventures in European thought and politics in the twentieth century, and especially the challenge of a return to the sacred at the birth of the third millennium. Kearney questions the meaning of the sacred in a godless world, the possibility and relevance of faith after scientific enlightenment that changed the vision of both our selves and the universe, and two world wars that rendered absurd the idea of history as a divine drama. He proposes anatheism (*ana-theos*) as a wager of faith beyond faith for Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic believers and nonbelievers alike.

What is anatheism? A third way between militant atheism and dogmatic theism, a return to God after God, second time around free choice of faith after the purging (kathartic) experience of "radical dispossession" that takes many diverse forms – such as existential loss of belief, doubt, and confusion, dramatic *katharsis*, mystical night of the soul, philosophical Socratic knowing that one does not know or *docta ignorantia*, phenomenological epoche. Apophatic theology as well as atheism are modes of radical dispossession and as such sine qua non moments for anatheism. The paradigm of anatheism is the suspense provoked by our encounter with the Stranger or Divine Other residing in the human other. Thus, anatheism is an "invitation to revisit a primary scene of religion: the encounter with a radical Stranger whom we choose or not to call God": the "event of the Stranger" is at the core of the atheist wager (7).

To this encounter we have the option to respond with hostility, giving in to a natural impulse, or hospitality, by appeal to a faith beyond faith, that involves five moments, imagination, humor, commitment, discernment, hospitality (chapter 2: "In the Wager"). Kearney finds abundant evidence for the significance of the encounter with the stranger.

In the Moment adduces biblical atheist moments: Abraham under the Mamre Tree, Mary at the instant of Annunciation, Muhammad in the cave on Mount Hira make visible religious responses to the advent of alterity in the midst of the human by waging war or peace, by caring or hating. Inaugural moments of faith begin with our response to an uninvited visitor. They constitute liminal events, "moments of anagnosis," "agnostic abandonment,

crucial transition to deeper faith” (8). Here “anatheist suspensions of theistic certainties allow for a return (*ana*) to a second kind of faith, a faith beyond faith in a God beyond God” (9).

In the Name initiates a theological discussion answering the questions of what we mean when we speak of God: master or servant, sovereign or stranger, emperor or guest. *In the Flesh* provides a philosophical perspective for the sacramental experience of everyday adumbrated by contemporary philosophers like Merleau-Ponty or Kristeva. A poetic musing, *In the text*, engages Greek drama; Keats’s *negative capability*, the art of living in uncertainty and doubt; Hopkins’s *aftering, seconding, over and overring*, thus retrieving the divine in a world ostensibly estranged from God, recovering the sacred in a time of disenchantment. Here the nadir of descent or katabasis becomes a moment of ascent, or anabasis, a second yes to the no of dereliction. Holderlin’s double movement of estrangement and epiphany introjects the strange into the homely, where a poetics of the uncanny argues that the shortest route from wonder to wonder is loss, and homelessness must precede the journey of homecoming. Kearney aptly and imaginatively brings forth radical experiments in modernity, those of Joyce, Proust, Woolf, as exemplary retrievals of sacred epiphanies in ordinary existence.

Kearney’s quest for evidence of the reality and therapeutic potency of anatheist metanoia does not stop at the border of life in the world. A hermeneutics of political action, *In the World* covers recent controversies on the role of theism and atheism in matters of war and peace, religion and democracy, democracy and violence, compassion and intolerance. Kearney is critical of Habermas’s apparent endorsement of a secular faith, and dismantles the pretensions of antitheism, the “antitheistic squad,” as he calls it, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens, which reduces religion to its perversions, judges it accordingly, and dismisses it, thus denying critical dialogue. Antitheism is as biased and absolutist as dogmatic theism, its archenemy. Both fall into unsophisticated literalism and make the category mistake of confusing the domains of science and religion. *In the Act* identifies anatheist moments in the world of social and political action and evokes exemplary figures who have refigured our understanding of faith by bringing the sacred in the secular world of action and suffering: Dorothy Day, Jean Vanier, Mahatma Gandhi.

Why is a return to God beneficial to or relevant for us at the beginning of the third millennium? It reintroduces the sacralization of the secular, of existence in the flesh and in the world by letting the Transcendent or the sacred manifest in and through the immanent or the secular. The divine Other, he maintains, comes to us as human others. In the face of these others we may see God if we choose hospitality, namely love and trust over fear and violence, as our response to the Stranger. Kearney insists that anatheism is

indifferent to both archeology (origins) and teleology (ends), is not a Hegelian dialectical third moment, a grand finale. It is a Kierkegaardian movement of faith, the option of choosing God again or not. The anatheist God to which one returns, no longer the God theodicy, the God we assumed and possessed, is not all-powerful but rather powerless, servant rather than master, a God who suffers and dies (on the Cross) and returns to life, anatheistically.

What is the Transcendent? Is anatheism a form of global religion? The transcendent is the *more*, as William James termed it, the untranslatable remainder, which makes the humanly impossible possible, and has been called God. Kearney adduces Habermas's program of translating faith and religion into rational discourse and global democracy and argues that such a program is both impossible and disquieting. Genuine religions grow around an untranslatable core, the mystic *fonds sans fonds*, which must be attended to and preserved as the root of love and justice in this world. To reduce traditions of faith to a universal moral code means to exile the sacred from the world, or hostility toward the stranger. To the question of humanism, "why does the stranger have to be a divine other, why can't it be just human?" Kearney responds:

Recognizing something more in the stranger than the human is a way of acknowledging a dimension of transcendence in the other that [...] exceeds the finite presence of the person before me a transcendence in and through immanence which far from diminishing humanity, amplifies it. (182)

Certainly, transcending the human may go both ways, can be good or evil. A simple test is enough: listening to the call of the stranger and submitting it to an interrogation:

Does the Other in the other bring more abundant life or not? Does it invite us to have more hope, charity – and wonder – than we might have if we did not respond to something higher and deeper in the other person than what meets the eye? Something that summons us to greater heights and depths than are available at a purely humanist or naturalist level? This is what I refer to as the call of the stranger in the other, and it is a dimension of alterity that invites belief in the *impossible made possible*. (183)

The call of the stranger is one of hope, charity, and wonder, a summons to greater heights and depths than those available at the humanist or naturalist level. To illustrate what he means, Kearney does not invoke the mystics but social activists. Dorothy Day, Jean Vanier, and Gandhi responded to the call of the stranger by their "fidelity to something sacred – something graciously greater than themselves – [which] gave them the audacity to transform

injustice into justice and the passion to serve others in need.” Or recovering addicts and alcoholics who could give up their addictions by acknowledging and “surrendering to a higher power.” A theology of goodness emerges. Kearney explains his wager on the “stranger as an infinite Other incarnate in finite others” as based on a “phenomenological testimony of goodness.” Thus: “The wager on the stranger – as infinite Other incarnate in finite others – is a wager based not on a logic of calculation or probability (Pascal) but on a phenomenological testimony of goodness” (183).

NOTES

1. Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*, Indiana University Press (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 1; all further quotations of Kearney that follow are from this book.

2. “Refusing to impose a kingdom and declare it already accomplished from the beginning, the God who may be offers us the possibility of realizing a promised kingdom by opening ourselves to the transfiguring power of transcendence” (2).

* * *

A Selection of Works by Richard Kearney

- *Poétique du Possible* (1984)
- *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers: The Phenomenological Heritage* (1984)
- *Modern Movements in European Philosophy* (1987; 1994)
- *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture* (1987)
- *The Wake of Imagination* (1988)
- *Poetics of Imagination: from Husserl to Lyotard* (1991; 1998)
- *Visions of Europe: Conversations on the Legacy and Future of Europe* (1993)
- *Poetics of Modernity: Toward a Hermeneutic Imagination* (1995)
- *States of Mind: Dialogues with Contemporary Thinkers* (1995)
- *Sam’s Fall* (1995)
- *Walking at Sea Level* (1997)
- *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy* (1997)
- *The God Who May Be* (2001)
- *On Stories* (2002)
- *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* (2003)
- *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers* (2004)
- *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (2005)
- *Navigations: Collected Irish Essays, 1976–2006* (2007)
- *Traversing the Heart: Journeys of the Inter-Religious Imagination*, ed. with Eileen Rizo-Patron (2008; 2010)

- *The International Guestbook Project: Welcoming the Stranger From Hostility to Hospitality; Exchanging Stories, Changing Histories* (2010–present, ongoing): Mitrovica (Kosovo), Derry/Londonderry (Northern Ireland), Jerusalem (Israel/Palestine), Bangalore (India), Dokdo (Japan/Korea), the Mexican-American border (El Centro)
- *Hosting the Stranger: Between Religions*, ed. with James Taylor (2011)
- *Phenomenologies of the Stranger: Between Hostility and Hospitality*, ed. with Kasha Semonovich (2011)
- *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (2011)
- *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God*, ed. with Jens Zimmermann (2015)
- *Carnal Hermeneutics*, ed. with Brian Treanor (2015)
- *Mystical Eucharistics: Abhishiktananda and Teilhard de Chardin* (in *Mysticism in the French Tradition*, Contemporary Theological Explorations in Christian Mysticism, 2015)
- *Twinsome Minds: Recovering 1916*: Commemoration of 1916 events in Dublin and the WWI battlefields of Flanders and interpreting the Rising for a new generation
- *Wounded Healers* (*Japan Mission Journal*, Spring 2016)
- *The Well* (a novel, forthcoming)
- *Art of Anatheism* (forthcoming)
- *Flesh: Recovering the Body in an Age of Excarnation* (forthcoming)

Not listed here are numerous essays and articles, recorded talks and interviews, radio and television series, CDs, print media publications, films, and documentaries.