Epilogue: In Guise of a Response

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Thank you for these questions. Rather than respond to each individually, let me try grouping the main points under a few recurring headings: the challenge of the new hermeneutics, power and sovereignty, the key questions of perichoresis and kenosis.

I

I will start with a few words on hermeneutics—or what David Tracy calls the "new hermeneutics." I begin Anathesism with a question that Paul Ricoeur asked me when I first attended his seminar in Paris, in 1977. He went around the room and asked each new student, "D'où parlez-vous?" Where do you speak from? Where do you come from? This is, of course, the first hermeneutic question: What is your story? What is your situation? Or, more particularly, what are the particular perspectives that serve as filters for your way of sensing the world, understanding society, interpreting yourself and others? What in short, are your presuppositions, prejudices, preconceptions?

I was very persuaded by that inaugural lesson in hermeneutic exchange. We do filter things when we speak and read. The term hermeneutics, as you know, comes from the Greek hermeneuein, to interpret secret, hidden messages. These were originally messages from the Gods, as the eponymous Hermes (messenger of the Gods) reminds us. But hermeneutics is not just about theology or hierophany. In the late Middle Ages it became a method applied in law (adjudicating between competing versions of evidence) and philology (interpreting difference: genealogical layers of words); and later, with Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Heidegger, it was extended to philosophical and historical-cultural understanding generally. But even at the most basic, ordinary level, the way we try to read between lines is always according to a certain kind of selection, through a particular grid or filter. That doesn't mean à la carte relativism. And it certainly shouldn't mean imposing ideological agenda on persons, texts, or things (though such deformation and distortion can occur). At best, hermeneutics is just being responsible for "where we're speaking from" and, when it comes to religion (the topic of our discussion today), recognizing that we all have a particular cut on God, informed by our respective traditions and cultures.

So we find ourselves in a hermeneutic circle. Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur all agree on this. We are born into an historical conversation that precedes us, and we interpret our lives accordingly, being as responsible and free as we can by turning our heritage into a project. By giving a future to our past. The question of existence—Who am I? Who are you? Who are we?—invariably implies the question of interpretation, what Ricoeur calls the "grafting" of hermeneutics onto phenomenology. So, when it comes to the question of religion, I do not see God as a "thing" out there that we can describe phenomenologically in some essentialist way. I believe that God is a call, cry, summons that invites us to different interpretations by asking us—to cite the Christian version of the question—"Who do you say that I am?" That, to me, is an invitation to hermeneutics, and I'll come back to this in a moment. It's an invitation to constant questioning.

But, to begin from a more intimate perspective, where do I "speak from" personally? Well, at the most trivial, anecdotal level, I speak as a man from Cork, in his middle ages, who loves fishing, philosophy, dogs, and God—though not necessarily in that order. The reason I mention philosophy and God is because that's what Anathesism is about. The reason I mention fishing and dogs is because they are actually two of the things I love most in the world, after philosophy and God (and my wife!). These are primary filterings for me, since I spend three months of my time
fishing every summer—and I do most of my thinking there. As they say in Cork, if you are ever anguished, confused, or tormented, just "be philosophical about it and don't give it another thought." Well, when I'm out fishing, I'm not philosophizing in that sense. I'm just trying to give things another thought, as I am trying to do again, here, today.

This is anecdotal, but in a way, if hermeneutics goes all the way down, then if you spend a lot of time on the sea fishing, and if you spend a lot of time walking your dog, when you come to read sacred texts you're going to filter it in certain ways. You read it as a Catholic or a Protestant, as an Irishman or a Frenchman, or in terms of certain very simple identifications. When I was reading recently the paschal and postpaschal passages, I was struck that, when the risen Jesus appears to the disciples, he asks them not for declarations of faith or fidelity but for fish: "Have you got any fish here?" And then, when he appears to them on the shore at Galilee, he says, "Come and have breakfast." And guess what is for breakfast? Fish! Twice in a day. He's a Galilean fisherman, for God's sake!

Now, somebody brought up on a sheep farm might go for Jesus the shepherd, somebody who gardens a lot might go for Jesus the gardener (appearing to Mary Magdalene), while somebody from a medical background might emphasize Jesus the healer, and so on. All I am saying is that these little existential inflections, marked by our lived experience, inform our way of reading and seeing, from top to bottom, from head to toe. Hermeneutics goes all the way down! And it's not just about projections—it's not a matter of relativism—because, of course, Jesus was a shepherd and a gardener and a fisherman and a healer. Where we come from, no matter how humble our origins, affects the way we think.

Now, I never quite got to dogs, but let me simply add that Argos—Odysseus's hound—is my favorite character in the Odyssey because he's the one who has the hermeneutic flair to recognize Odysseus when he comes home. We need hermeneutic flair when we are interpreting texts, too, even sacred texts—perhaps especially sacred texts.

So the answer to the question "D'où parlez-vous?" involves extending circles of influence and importance, from past to present. In the preface to Anathem I try to acknowledge how my cultural and intellectual background affects my reading of God, as anybody's hermeneutic framework does. In addition to the biographical points mentioned, let me just mention one more historical factor that informed my thinking about the question of suffering: war.

I was born less than a decade after the Second World War and grew up in an Ireland divided by religious violence. My fathers and uncles were in World War II, and their stories affected me greatly. Obviously, a post-holocaust Europe was a Europe where the question of theodicy had to be taken seriously. Did God die in the hangman's rope at Auschwitz, as Elie Wiesel said? Why did God not intercede on behalf of his suffering people? Or was Etty Hillesum right to say that since "God could do nothing," it was up to humans to "help God be God"? I'll come back to this when I address the sovereignty of God. Suffice it to say, for now, that if God could intervene and didn't, if God held back and allowed innocents be slaughtered, then we are talking about a "sacrificial" God in the bad sense—not a sacrificial God in the good sense of loving self-giving.

We need to discriminate hermeneutically between two kinds of sacrifice. On the one hand, the God of sacrificial bloodletting, which sees the oblation of victims as part of a periodic expiatory ritual—something repeatedly written down through history in perverse "imitation of Christ," and which I witnessed in Northern Ireland, where the God of sacrificial purgation was invoked by both sides to fortify their cause and justify violence. This is an ideological misrepresentation of the true sacrifice of Christ, which involved a laying down of life for one's friends, in the service of others. Truly the Crucifixion is read through the hermeneutic filters of the washing of the feet at the Last Supper and the paschal scenes at Emmaus, and other moments of sharing food and drink, echoing the radical eschatological eucharistics of Matthew 15.

So, when Jens and Merold accuse me of jettisoning the notion of Christian sacrifice, this is not true at all. I simply wish to critically distinguish between two different interpretations/practices of sacrifice: one, periodic bloodletting and scapegoating as propitiatory ransom to a bloodthirsty God (which I believe, with René Girard and Ricoeur, is a betrayal of genuine Christianity); and two, sacrifice as a laying down of one's life for love of one's friends, which is what I believe Christ did.

But hermeneutic formation is intellectual as well as historical—as the references to Girard and Ricoeur suggest. So, in my own case, the formative experience of growing up in Ireland and Europe after the Second World War, and witnessing a thirty-year civil war going in the northern
part of my country, was accompanied by my philosophical training. This involved a very narrow form of scholastic philosophy in University College Dublin in the early seventies, before being liberated by teachers like Patrick Masterson and Denys Turner into new forms of philosophy (including transcendent Thomism and existentialism), and then going on to do graduate research with Charles Taylor in Montreal and to complete my doctoral studies in Paris, where I embraced the hermeneutical thinking of Ricoeur, the ethical thinking of Levinas, the deconstructive thinking of Derrida, and the mystical thinking of Stanišlas Breton. All of these became further intellectual and spiritual filterings for me, frameworks from which to read the great, inherited texts.

So, in a basic way, hermeneutics for me has always been an ana-hermeneutics—going back to read *again* (ana-). And in my anatheist readings I am influenced not just by contemporary philosophers but by key figures from the Christian mystical tradition—David Tracy has mentioned some of the great mystics: for example, Dionysius, Cusanus, Eckhart, Teresa of Avila, and John of the Cross. Those constant scholarly retrievals are an integral part of where I was coming from and where I am going. And this ongoing process of hermeneutic back-and-forth deeply informs my readings of the Scriptures themselves. A primary example here is my reading of God as the one who “may be,” in light of Cusanus’s notion of divine *posse*—God as possibility who calls to humans to be realized, embodied, made flesh. This is a typical example of a back-and-forth between philosophical and scriptural notions, to which I will return in a moment.

So these are some very basic hermeneutic legacies from which I speak, and which I readily profess, lest I give the erroneous impression that anatheism is something new or original. Anatheism, as I present it, is a hermeneutical interpretation issuing from a particular set of inherited narratives, life experiences, philosophies, whereby I attempt to make some sense of scriptures in the Abrahamic tradition from which I derive, and in other religions, to the extent that I believe that anatheism is an openness to interreligious dialogue, and that other religions have much to teach me.

But let me repeat, I am not a professional theologian. Many of the theological points cited in *Anatheism* are made by people who are much better versed than me in that whole discipline. I feel like a guest or visitor to theology. Desmond Connell, the cardinal of Ireland, when he read my first book, *Poltique du possible*, pulled me aside and said, “Richard, I want to say to you what Yahweh said to Adam after the Fall: ‘Where are you?’” That was thirty-five years ago and I still don’t know where I am. I am still searching, and anatheism is a way of continuing that search.

I suppose that “not knowing” for sure and going off the path, which is another definition of heresy, is a way of trying to find one’s way back. That’s what I’d like to think anatheism is doing. It takes an interdisciplinary approach, mixing philosophy with art, religion, literature. In its approach to God it has been described as a philosophical theology—a philosophical questioning of religious issues of faith issues, of theological issues, but from a philosophical perspective. I hope this is a fertile interanimation, as I hope the journeys through poetics and politics in the different chapters of the book are likewise.

This “new hermeneutics,” as David Tracy calls it—which is also an old hermeneutics, an ana-hermeneutics, because there’s nothing new under the sun in anatheism—this anatheist hermeneutics is a retrieval of stories, narratives, revelations that are already there, albeit in a “re-newed” way. And if there is anything re-newing about it, it is certainly not in the sense of some teleological synthesis or supersession. It is about opening a space—an anatheistic space—which is *before* theism and atheism, and *after* them. That is the double sense of ana—back and forward at the same time. It’s an “opening” (to borrow a term from Rilke and Nancy) where we do not “know” for certain any longer what is divine and what is not, where we have no absolute answers about the absolute.

This is not the first time this has been said. It has been said by many philosophers, and indeed many negative theologians, in the past. It was what Socrates meant when he said that, before you ask philosophical questions, you need to confess that you don’t know any answers. It was what Cusanus said about the *docta ignorantia*, the mystical way of not knowing. It was the apophasis of the mystics that David Tracy just spoke about—namely, that we do not know what God is, and only by not knowing what God is can we return to another, deeper kind of questioning. It is the “negative capability” of John Keats, which I invoke when I’m trying to read certain texts, the condition of being in the midst of mystery, uncertainty, and doubt without the “irritable reaching after fact and
reason.” This negative capability—which, for Keats, is the origin of all poetic sensibilities, attentions, and attentions to the world—is another form of anathetic not knowing, a radical opening to what is infinitely strange, what is utterly beyond or beneath us.

Anathemitism is a dis-position vis à-vis different positions. Theism is a position. Atheism is a position. And they are both legitimate. Anathemitism is a dis-position, which invites new re-positionings by trying philosophically to retrieve certain key inaugural moments—moments which all of us face sometime in life, when we no longer know for sure what it all means, when we open ourselves again to radical questioning, to extreme attention towards being—what is being done, said, called—towards what is and what might be. At those instants, we’re back with Socrates, we’re back with Cusanus, we are even back with Descartes’ moment of doubt, Hume’s tabula rasa, Husserl’s epoché, where suddenly we let go of all fixed certainties in order to occupy a space where we are disposed to listen and attend. Anathemitism is, above all, a listening—a listening followed by a “speaking again.” And this prior listening is not just to your own tradition, which you can anathematically and ana-hermeneutically retrieve, but to other traditions.

So, to return to David’s and Jen’s question, I would say anathemitism is not the only way. On the contrary, it’s a way open to many ways; it’s a disposition that invites you to reposition yourself again and again by engaging with others’ positions. It is the very opposite of ideology. It is not a new religion but a way of living religion in new ways.

In this regard, let me say another word about the hermeneutic approach of Paul Ricoeur. I see it as a sort of mediating between Gadamer’s hermeneutics of dialogue with tradition (you go back) and Habermas’s critical hermeneutics of the “ideal speech situation” (you go forward). What I am trying to develop in Anathemitism and other writings is a third position, closer to Ricoeur, which I call diacritical hermeneutics, that brings these two positions together. The term diacritical means a careful, vigilant reading between the lines, between positions and oppositions. In the technical, linguistic sense, a diacritical sign is an accented mark—diacesis, circumflex, acute accent—which can give different meanings to otherwise identical spelled words. The tiniest inflection of a letter can make for a very different sense—for example, ou or øh in French, meaning “or” or “where.” But you have to be hyperattentive, you have to see and hear acutely, you have to really attend to the letters and what lies between them.

Likewise, at the broader level of reading whole texts, or human dialogues, or even human faces, we have, I argue, real need of a diacritical acoustic and diagnosis. The medical term is important here. Diakrínè to diakrínè was originally a Greek term for how we discriminate and discern between signs of the body, how we read skin and flesh and fever diacritically, in a kind of carnal hermeneutics. It was a matter of attending carefully to somatic signs, changes in temperature, tactility, or complexion which were symptomatic of underlying disease or healing. And, so doing, you diagnosed what is going on within the body.

So I like to think of ana-hermeneutics as this kind of diacritical, vigilant, attentive reading of texts as well as bodies. And that doesn’t mean just new texts; it also means, very importantly, old texts, the oldest stories in the book. In the case of Anathemitism, for example, I try to read Joyce and Proust diacritically alongside Homer and the Gospels. And, in this kind of ana-hermeneutic gesture, I take my cue from thinkers like Ricoeur, Gadamer, and Heidegger—the great modern hermeneutic thinkers—who agreed you cannot think anew without thinking back. Which means going back to go forward, or what Kierkegaard famously called “repeating forwards.” Ana- means hermeneutic repetition in this sense—anamnesis (remembering forward), which is also anagoge (reading ultimate spiritual meanings in given literal ones). In all cases, it is about reading diacritically between, beneath, and beyond the lines.

But let me leave hermeneutics aside for a moment and move onto the question of power and sovereignty, raised by all three of my interlocutors today, David, Meroid, and Jen. The God of power and might. There is power and there is power. There is the power of the powerful, imperium, and there is the power of the powerless, the power of the possible—which I call posse (after Cusanus). Sometimes the former goes by the Latin term potestas and the latter by potestas—two different ways of translating the Greek δυνάμεις.

Power as potestas is sovereignty understood as “one and indivisible,” from Plato to Rousseau and Hobbes. The Platonic form is one and indivisible. It is outside of time, it is outside of movement, it is outside of desire. When applied to the divine, it excludes the human, and this God
of Platonism, of Western metaphysics, of ontotheology, as it is called after Heidegger, becomes a God of sovereign plenitude and totality, a unity without division, difference, change, possibility—or humanity. This becomes God as pure act, or causa sui, in the more reductive forms of Scholasticism: *Deus est purus actus non habens aliquid de potentialitate*.

That is, of course, just one interpretation of scholastic metaphysics; there are others (especially Scotus, Eckhart, and Breton) that are much more liberating, in my view. But that notion of an unmoved and unmoving God, of an indivisible God, of a God who, when taken as model for worldly power becomes the one and indivisible emperor, the one and indivisible sovereign king, and then the one and indivisible sovereign state or nation-state—that imperial paradigm of sovereignty is a recipe for war. It’s bad politics, and I think it’s bad theology. And I’m not putting this all on the head of Plato; it wasn’t Plato (certainly not Socrates) but bad Platonism.

What I am saying is that if you apply that model of sovereign Form to the biblical God or the gods of other religions, you are doing something Socrates himself would have never dreamed of doing. You are imposing a certain metaphysical category of pure actuality onto something divine, which also and crucially contains possibility—the divine ability to become (the posse or posse esse of Cusanus), which expresses itself as an invitation to love and to justice in time and space. And that, as the analytic philosophers say, is a category mistake. With important consequences.

So, when Jens objects that I am embracing a metaphysical dualism or antinomy between omnipotence and impotence, between the God of power and the God of the powerless, this is not so at all. And the same applies to related distinctions—cited by Jens—between immanence and transcendence, being and becoming, sacrifice and service. Let me be quite clear: contrary to what Jens claims, I am not at all affirming such binary oppositions but destabilizing and deconstructing them, for the sake of something deeper and higher, which these binaries betray. In *Anathemism*, for example, I speak again and again of transcendence in immanence. And elsewhere I call for subtle distinctions between different kinds of love (love rather than slavery) and different kinds of sacrifice (life affirming rather than death dealing). And, I might add, between different kinds of being and different kinds of becoming. Indeed, one of the main efforts of my philosophizing, from *Poétique du possible* (1984) to *The God Who May Be* (2001), has been to rethink the divine in terms of both ontological being and eschatological becoming. Hence my embrace of *onto-eschatology*, in contrast to the “God without Being” of Levinas, Derrida, and Marion.

In all these cases, it is question of *overcoming*—not endorsing—the old binary oppositions in favor of more authentic hemeneutic discernments, crossings, and retrievals. On the vexed matter of divine omnipotence, to come back to this central discussion, I am trying to distinguish between two kinds of power, one divine and one nondivine. The divine is precisely the power of the powerless—which is not no power but a power greater than any nondivine power.

My quarrel with the supporters of a sovereign omni-God is that they often confuse the two forms of divine and nondivine power; that is, one, the loving/power/posse of the powerless, and two, the fully actualized all-power of an emperor God. If “omnipotence” is interpreted to mean the divine power of the powerless, I have absolutely no problem with it. But I regret to say that the triumphalist aspects of the history of Christendom and ontotheology do not convince me that this was always so. Likewise, if “sovereign” implies genuine respect for the Lord of love and justice, I obviously have no objection to that either; on the contrary! But it has not always meant that, in our Western metaphysical constructions of sovereignty.

Again, it all depends what exactly we mean when we use these terms—omnipotence, sovereignty, sacrifice. These influential concepts are part of an ongoing hemeneutic play of interpretations—a robust “conflict of interpretations,” as Ricoeur says—and I am simply recognizing my part in that hemeneutic conversation; and acknowledging that atheism encourages a plurality of readings. So one needs to be humble and discerning in declaring, for example, what a “true Christian” means. Who decides? Who knows in any absolutely dogmatic, infallible way? No one. Hence the salutary detour through a hemeneutic “negative capability” of faith and trust (faith as fides/fidelity; trust as troth/trust). One makes a wager based on witness and experience, as much as on theology and doctrine. For my part, as an atheist, I support those from Jesus, Saint Francis, and Teresa of Avila up to modern reformers, liberation theologians, and new monastics, who are struggling against an imperial Church in favor of an *ecclesia* of the poor and powerless. I place my wager on the church of the widow, orphan, and stranger—and not just “out there,” beyond the border of us and them, but here also, inside ourselves, where we are always, irredicucibly, strangers to ourselves in important ways.
My views are, I readily admit, informed by my own Christian story. I am not alone, and what I am identifying is, it seems to me, an important wager that has been made down through the centuries—and dramatically staged by Dostoyevsky in his vivid depiction of Christ refusing the imperial temptations of the Grand Inquisitor. It is a perennial struggle. There really are two types of power in Dostoyevsky’s account—the one epitomized by Christ, the other by the Inquisitor—and I fear that many historical invocations of “omnipotence” have been, all too often, on the side of the latter.

So let me try to be clear about this essential point. Anatheism proposes a notion of divine power, not as sovereign imperial potestas but as loving posse. As interpreted by Nicolas of Cusa (Cusanus), divine posse is the power to be able to be, the power to be all that one is capable of becoming—namely love. Posse is an invitation, whereas potestas is an imposition—imperium. Cusanus compares posse to a child’s call in the street. It is a cry in the wilderness, as the Gospel says, that invites us to respond, to give esse to posse so that God can become more historically divine as possest, to give flesh to the Word. And if we don’t say yes, if we don’t make the cry incarnate, it doesn’t happen. God is up to us, in the end. There is no question of sovereign power here, no imperium imposing itself, no force enforcing itself. The call, the cry, the claim, the plea invites us to say yes or no—to the God of desire. A sovereign being without possibility is a being without Eros or becoming. The desiring lovers in the Song of Songs (going back to David Tracy’s point) signal a God who seeks out human beings, who is hungry for us, who cannot be given flesh without us.

And yet, the wondrous paradox nothing can change the world like this power of the powerless. “Thoughts that come on dove’s wings guide the world,” Nietzsche said, having declared the death of the sovereign God. And, in my view, he was right. He was being a good Christian when he said that. Because that is what Christ himself said when he compared divine power to a mustard seed or a child or a voice crying in the wilderness or a hungry stranger in the street. What is God? asks Joyce. “A shout in the street.” That is right. Matthew 25.

So, when I look at the politics of Northern Ireland or, far worse, of the Second World War, I see a bellicose clash of sovereignties where one sovereign nation-state infringes upon another, because if you’re one and indivisible you cannot share power. If there is absolute sovereignty, there is one people—not several and many peoples. “Una duce una voce,” as Mussolini said. “Ein Reich über alles,” said Hitler. Even the French Revolution fell into this: “la souveraineté est une et indivisible.” The great national social contract. Anybody who didn’t conform—foreigners, étrangers—were exiled or executed so that the body politic could become whole and one again. Gallows and guillotines purified the many into the one.

So, what triumphal politics is saying is basically that one nation-state cannot share sovereignty with another because it’s one and indivisible. So it goes all the way down from theology to politics, from Plato’s Republic to modern republics. I think the sovereign God—and the sovereign nation-state, which simply secularized this God—has been a source of huge misinterpretation and of huge violence. Certainly, the politics of Northern Ireland, which I grew up with, was about two sovereign nations claiming the same territory. You couldn’t have a United Kingdom and a United Ireland at the same time, so people were at war for almost three hundred years, until eventually somebody said, Let’s go beyond sovereignty. Let’s have a post-nationalist and a post-unionist Ireland. Don’t mention the S-word! And suddenly, the impossible became possible. We now have what is de facto a form of “shared sovereignty,” even though de jure it is a contradiction in terms. It means that, since the Good Friday Agreement (1998), citizens of Northern Ireland can be, as the simple formula says, Irish or British or both. That has meant surpassing the idea of sovereignty as one and indivisible.

In short, what I am suggesting is that the notion of a sovereign God, no less than that of a sovereign nation, is ruinous, but fortunately destructible, in favor of postsovereign deities and communities.

IV

When it comes to God, a one and indivisible God … if you stop there, you have a betrayal of the God of little things, a reversal of the God of multiplicities and pluralities, the God who appears as three angels—not one, but three—to Abraham. The God who divides into three and then multiplications thereof is repeated, of course, in the epiphany of Christianity, in the three kings, and, again, in the three persons of the Trinity. In Andrei Rublev’s wonderful portrait in the Russian Orthodox religion, the three angels of Abraham are retrieved—anathetically, ana-hermeneutically—
in order to portray the perichoresis of Father, Son, and Spirit. So, one can come back to the beginning—the three strangers appearing to Abraham at Mamre—in order to repeat forward the perichoretic scene in an ongoing hermeneutic reinterpretation.

This, at least, is my hermeneutic wager—and faith. Rublev's Trinity is, of course, a painting. This is poetics, not dogma. It is an imaginative interpretation of dogma, according to a divine threesome and the creative space (choros) between them as they move towards and away from each other in love. So the one and indivisible sovereign that knows no movement is here hermeneutically reconfigured as an endlessly mobile, loving, interstitial deity where each person is ceding place to the other as they succeed each other. This is a poetics of kenosis full of passion and compassion, of Eros and love. I will come back to this crucial question of kenosis.

But, first, my response to Jens Zimmerman on the perichoresis. He objects that I have reduced the chalice-chora at the heart of perichoresis to an "impersonal, empty space" rather than recognizing it as the presence of "God's humanity in Christ." Far from being empty, Jens protests, the chalice is full with a sacrificial offering, epitomized in tradition by a calf's head representing Christ's sacrifice. Rublev's icon, he concludes, follows this tradition.

So let me protest to Jens's protestation. I will take each point in turn. First, the chora-chalice at the heart of the Trinitarian dance is, for me, anything but impersonal. On the contrary, it is the interpersonal space par excellence. It is the place where Mary's womb—called the chora theoria in tradition—serves as the hub around which the three persons move in the moment of divine-human incarnation. Its emptiness is not opposed to fullness but, in keeping with the Christian mystery of genuine sacrificial kenotic emptying, becomes the ultimate form of eschatological presence. Jens confuses Derrida's notion of impersonal chora—drawn from Plato's Timaeus—with mine (a confusion based on a misreading of my essay on "God or Khora?" in Strangers, Gods and Monsters).

In short, I am not denying for one moment that the chalice is brimming with food and wine—as symbol of Abrahamic hospitality towards the stranger, which I explicitly celebrate in the opening chapter of Anathesm. On the contrary, the chalice of nourishment is central to my entire reading of anatheist hospitality. And I also affirm that, in the Christian narrative, the chalice-chora represents "God's humanity in Christ," but understood as a gap of passus; that is, as no-place, which allows for the annunciation, reception, conception, and incarnation of the incoming divine stranger, the impossible guest—first Isaac, then Jesus, both made possible by the respective responses of Sarah and Mary. Chora is the u-topos where the topos of the Messiah may constantly arrive, promise, call, take place. This notion of emptiness that is fullness is echoed in the kabbalistic notion of divine creation as "withdrawing/leaving space" (eintsem) as well as in Meister Eckhart's beautiful image of the empty bowl (linked with the beghards and beguines), which fills the more it empties and empties the more it fills—a sacred paradox also echoed, interreligiously, in the ancient Buddhist Heart Sutra, "emptiness is form."

The mystery of chora as both emptiness and fullness, absence and presence, divinity and humanity, sacrifice and service, food and natality is absolutely central to the Christian symbol of perichoresis. My reading of Rublev's icon is, therefore, as I see it, entirely in keeping with a whole sacred tradition of Abrahamic hospitality—from Genesis to Dorothy Day—and offers possibilities of extending this hospitality to other, non-Abrahamic faiths as well. Far from refusing Christian guests to "retain their true character," I believe it deeply respects the truth of Christianity.

But I, unlike perhaps Jens, believe that Christian truth, like all truth, is subject to a hermeneutic polysemy of expression and interpretation, once it is embodied in the spatiotemporal world of human finitude and language. And this means, for me, that an exemplary sacred icon like Rublev's perichoretic Trinity invites a rich plurality of readings—chora as cup, womb, food, sacrifice, natality—an endless hermeneutic plurality which allows, among other things, for the reinsertion of a radically feminine and spatiotemporal humanity into the eschatological image of the eternal (and, often, all-too-exclusively male) kingdom. So, once again, we find that anathesm follows a logic of both/and rather than either/or. Chiasm rather than dualism. Chora as the crossing of eternity and time, of transcendence and image, of the eschatological not-yet with the carnal here and now.

Anathesm is all about interpretation. It is, I repeat, a hermeneutic wager, a rereading, reimagining, retrieving, in flesh and blood as well as mind
and spirit. It is carnal hermeneutics and conceptual hermeneutics and ultimately denies the separation of the two. I begin Anathemism with the three strangers coming to Abraham, followed by Abraham's hermeneutic wager—namely, to interpret the strangers as enemies or friends, or both (remember, hóités can mean "enemy" or "friend"). From the start, anathemism is a matter of life or death, hospitality or hostility, Eros or Thanatos.

And we find a similar scene when Gabriel comes to Mary in Nazareth, and we are told, in Luke 1:30, that she is "troubled" and "ponders." Those two words are crucial. Mary is deeply troubled (dieteráchtē) until the angel says, "Do not be afraid." And at the same time she ponders (dialo-gizoma) whether to say yes or no. This existential pondering is hermeneutic—reading in and through the flesh. That is why, in the Western Christian tradition, Mary is almost always portrayed in poems and paintings as accompanied by both a lily and a book. She is both scented and reading the stranger. She hails from the tradition of the Book, a hermeneutical, rabbinical tradition, and also of the body, where Jacob famously struggled with his night stranger, hip to hip, before receiving the name of God. Mary the Nazarene has heard, one imagines, about many angelic strangers who have appeared to others before her—to Abraham and Sarah, to Jacob, to Samson's parents—angels who have answered human fear, each time, with the words "Do not be afraid." Mary's response to the stranger in Nazareth refigures hermeneutically this recurring inaugural scene—she moves forward and backward in time and space, as in the wonderful Botticelli painting of the Cestello Annunciation, where we see Mary's body recoiling in fear as she simultaneously goes forward in love.

This is the hermeneutical wager: in action, in body and soul. And remember: if Mary had said no, there would be no incarnation, no Christ, no Christianity. If Mary does not accept the freedom, integral to choice, as Denise Levertov says in her poem "Annunciation"—if we see in her only "meek obedience" to a Word that's going to happen anyway, if we read Mary as submitting to a Logos of imperial divinity which imposes itself upon her—then I think we have misunderstood a fundamental message of Judeo-Christianity: namely, that God is a call, a solicitation, a desire, a posse—a God of little things desperately trying to be heard and heeded, to become incarnate, to make a difference.

You ask, "How small is your God?" I would say it is the smallest, most infinitesimal God you could possibly imagine. Why? Because God names the power of the powerless. The mustard seed. The cry of the widow, orphan, and stranger. The call of the child in the street. The thin, small voice. It is the power of nonviolent and nonviolating solicitation to which we are totally free to say yes or no.

A last example I would like to cite is "the quiet power of the possible" is that of healing. I am thinking particularly here of the invocation of a "higher power" in twelve-step meetings. Thomas Merton described AA as one of the most important spiritual movements of the twentieth century. And I read AA here not just as Alcoholics Anonymous but as Addicts Anonymous, generally, understanding addiction in the sense of Buddhist "attachment" or the Christian sense of sinful clinging and enclosure (Kierkegaard's "incorvurance of self"). We are all addicted or attached in some form or another. I think what Merton realized is that it is the person who has reached rock bottom, the very lowest rung of the ladder, and acknowledged that he or she is "powerless" before his or her addiction, who is often in fact capable of being most open and disposed towards what AA calls a higher power, "however that is to be defined."

The qualifier is important here, and deeply hermeneutic. This is very interesting to me, because the whole process of moving from being utterly powerless to a higher power (I always prefer the lowercase)—that is, to an ineffable power beyond oneself—basically signals a moment, a space, a turn, a return, where the impossible becomes possible. That is what the messenger (αγέλος) says to Mary. And before Mary, to Jacob and Sarah. Likewise, in the case of the addict, the impossible—"it is impossible to find a cure for my attachment/addiction/abandon"—can suddenly become possible, if we let go, if we allow something "more," "other," "higher" to enter our lives and bring healing.

This is a possibility beyond the impossible, as the mystic Angelus Silesius wrote. It is "without why." As such, it works all the way down. People who suffer from addictions find there can be a healing through an invocation of this power/potential/oisiss beyond the limits of their own ego/me/self. Something or someone strange and transcendent says to me, "You can change. You are capable of recovery." It doesn't have to be a traditional, supersensible God; it can be heard quite simply through the voice of the AA sponsor sitting beside you, the witnesses and fellow sufferers in recovery in the room. One only has to be disposed to receive a message from beyond oneself, ready to listen to the call of healing. And this,
it seems, is far easier to do when the illusion of sovereignty—the image of the imperial “fortress ego”—has been debunked and one is radically opened up to the call of the transcendent. I think the idea of being able to be “in recovery” is very telling here. One is always “in recovery.” One is never fully recovered. It is a journey, not an end. A wager, not a guarantee. An apprenticeship, not a fair accomplishment. In this sense, AA is very ana-hermeneutic.

VI

Let me end with a few words on kenosis, since this came up in all three speakers. Kenosis—as I interpret it with Kristeva, Vattimo, and others—means emptiness, cut, annihilation, nothingness. After this cut, this entry into emptiness, what kind of God comes—or comes back? What kind of God comes again after the death of the Alpha God? What returns—or what can we return to—after the kenotic emptying of God (upper case) into God (lower case)? If we want to interpret the notion of “sacrifice” not as expiatory bloodletting but as self-giving, we may read kenosis as an atheist letting-go of God in order to open ourselves to God (understood as God after God). I am merely echoing Meister Eckhart of course—praying to God to rid us of God. And Stanislas Breton, too, when, after Eckhart, he invokes the apophatic mystical call of nothing, which invites us to respond by making divine nothing into something—something out of nothing, ongoing recreation ex nihilo, endless rebirth and re-embodiment, ensarkosis without end. Each time we move—pericoretically and kenotically—from God to God, we witness natality trumping and succeeding mortality, a living God replacing a dying God. We are talking here of a radically fragile, vulnerable, humble, appealing, loving divinity.

I conclude with some final examples. The Abrahamic revelation of kenosis is not the only revelation, but it is the one that calls and claims me personally, hermeneutically, and to which I try to respond here.

The first story of kenosis, in the biblical tradition, is creation. It begins with a narrative of divine descent into time, history, humanity. This is the movement from monologue to dialogue, because God, as Levinas put it in a nice image, got bored with himself and wanted somebody to talk to. And having somebody to talk to meant that two was better than one. But to “empty” into that dialogue of two meant opening up to the possibility of becoming, the risk of history, the wager that divine creation may or may not be fulfilled by humanity.

So what is this creation that remains open to co-creation? The Genesis narrative tells us it is the seventh day, the day that the divine did not fill in. And by leaving that sabbatical space empty, the divine creator entered a relation with humans where the divine stranger could be radically rejected or welcomed, hated or loved. This is to interpret creation as a form of descent, a form of carnal kenosis that is a perpetual invitation for us to co-create and to co-respond with the divine call—“co-naisance.”

Secondly, we have the revelation of kenosis as incarnation. Here we have the classic example of Christ’s kenosis, invoked by Paul in Philippians 2:7, the emptying away from the illusion of sovereign self-sufficiency (“equality with the Father”) into the flesh, the sarx of the world, the chora of open space. Here we find the image of the matrix of natality, the womb of Mary, which was described by some of the patristic authors (as I learned from John Manoussakis) as the chora achoroton, container of the uncontainable—Mary as carrier of the Messiah child. Mary as Theotokos.

So, in this Christian narrative we have a descent into empty, free space, echoing the first creatio ex nihilo that, in turn, brings about the possibility of new life, but only if and when Mary says yes. Then, after the annunciation and conception, we have the story of Christ’s second kenosis, a second going down, this time into water, the descent into the Jordan. And, finally, we have Christ’s third moment of kenosis as he descends into the abyss of the cross. Here, Christ experiences complete abandonment as the illusory omni-God bleeds away (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” [Matthew 27:46]) to let the after-God of messianic promise be reborn with the risen Christ—a Christ who, having commended his life to the one who is to come (“Unto thee I commend my Spirit”), is reborn as a healer and nurturer of his disciples at Emmaus, of Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb, and of other apostles at the shores of Galilee, where he bids them to “come and have breakfast.” Once again, the fisherman, the fisher of men, the feeder of bodies and souls. And with each of Christ’s kenotic rebirths—incarnation in the womb, baptism in water, descent/ascent from three days in Hades—there is the returning promise of the Spirit. “I must go so that the Paraclete can come,” says Jesus. “Do not touch me, for I have still to go to the Father,” he says to Mary Magdalene.
Or again, in Matthew 25 Jesus reveals himself to be each stranger who asks to be fed and healed. In other words, Jesus is saying, "I am the one who is always coming back and is always still to come." The ana-God who is forever a stranger (hospes) opening up the self, home, people, earth to ever-new natality.

I have always been struck that Christ, when risen, does not appear as sovereign king but as a foreigner, again and again—as a gardener, a fisherman, a beggar man, a cox, a wanderer at the inn. Emmaus is not a house; it is not a cathedral; it is not a temple. It is a station along the way. Deus viator—homo viator. This is a hungry God who keeps coming and saying, "Do you have anything to eat? I was a stranger and you did not give me to eat. I was thirsty and you did not give me to drink. I was the least of these (elachistos) and will always be the least and last of these." That is eschatology at its most radical, not with capital letters but in the lowercase—a micro-eschatology of the god of little things.

So let me end where I began. Back in Ireland, as a schoolboy at Glenstal Abbey, one of the first things I learned about Benedictine spirituality was hospitality to the stranger. Chapter 24 of The Rule of Saint Benedict spells out how every stranger who comes to the monastery, regardless of who they are, where they hail from, or what faith they believe in, should be treated as Christ. This was my first lesson about the kenotic god—the very opposite of the God of theodicy.

I won't go into Auschwitz here; I won't go into the arguments of whether God could or could not intervene to save the Jews. You know the debates. I agree with Etty Hillesum, who talks about us humans being the only ones who can "enable God to be God" through acts of radical hospitality, love, and justice. I agree with Rabbi Irving Greenberg and Elie Wiesel, who declared that the idea of a sovereign God of absolute power (who could have intervened and didn't) is a cruel God who died in the hangman's rope at Dachau. After the evils of World War II and other horrors and genocides that preceded and followed it, the God of expiatory bloodletting and sacrificial scapegoating is well and truly dead. At last. How different this is from the kentic giving of the "suffering servant" who calls out for justice to be done and injustice avoided, for love over hate, life over death. I am with the god of service over the God of Sovereignty. I have made my wager.

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**Artist's Note on Cover Art**

SHEILA GALLAGHER

*Pneuma Hostis* is a flaming halo created out of gold-leafed cigarette butts. It is a maze-mandala in the form of a commercial Lasco fan, modeled on the one installed in my studio window in Boston to clear the smoke and toxic fumes from my work space. The butts and the fan blades come together in the shape of a gold host, where inhalation and exhalation, life and death, health and illness, the addict and the saint share the same space.

The cover image points to a crossing of the sacred and the profane. This is a central insight of Richard Kearney's notion of ana-theism, which informs and inflects the conversations in this volume—the idea of returning to God "after" (ana) God, of rediscovering the holy in happenstance, the iconic in the ordinary, the highest in the lowest. Here the sacramental mingles with the banal, and transcendence can be found in the most base or everyday things. In short, to cite Scripture, ana-theism is a way of retrieving the sacred in the "least of these"—even in discarded smoked-out butts.

The titular *pneuma*—air, breath, spirit in Greek—converses with the substitutal *hostis*—whose Latin ambiguity gives us both host and guest, friend and enemy. We hear the age-old ambivalence of religion as both sacrificial violence and salvific healing. What are we to make of this double legacy today, when wars are still waged in the name of One True God?