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God After God

An Anaheist Attempt to Reimagine God

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I hope it may be useful for the reader to preface this series of dialogues by offering a summary of what I mean by anaheism and the need to reimagine the sacred.

ANA: A QUESTION OF TIME

Ana- is a prefix defined in the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary as, “Up in space or time; back again, anew.” So understood, the term supports the deeper and broader sense of “after” contained in the expression “God after God.” The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins describes the moment of imaginative creation as “aftering, seconding, over and overing.” He speaks of poetic epiphany, accordingly, as a retrieval of past experience that moves forward, proffering new life to memory, giving a future to the past. What Hopkins means by this is that certain deep experiences can be followed by moments of disenchantment, after which we may return again to the primal experience in a new light, over and over. As a religious poet, Hopkins is speaking of a specifically sacred reimagining. But, though he was himself a Catholic, this notion of sacramental repetition is not confined to any particular religion. It refers to any poetic movement of returning to God after God—God again, atfe: the loss of God. As in child’s play, “gone, back again” (fort/des). We learn young that what disappears as literal comes back again as figural—that is, as sign and symbol, as a second presence in and through absence. And symbol here does not mean “untrue” or “unreal.” The return of the lost one—in the case of religion, the lost God—may well be the return of a more real presence. It may in fact be a much more powerful and moving presence precisely because of its return through absence.

Thus, in the prefix ana- we find the idea of retrieving, revisiting, reiterating, repeating. But repeating forward, not backward. It is not about regressing nostalgically to some prelapsarian past. It is a question, rather, of coming back afterwards in order to move forward again (reculer pour mieux sauter). So it is in this sense that I use the term anaheism as a “returning to God after God”; a critical hermeneutic retrieval of sacred things that have passed but still bear a radical remainder, an unrealized potentiality or promise to be more fully realized in the future. In this way, anaheism may be understood as “after-faith,” which is more than a simple “after-thought” or “after-affect.” After-faith is eschatological—something ultimate in the end that was in fact already there from the beginning. And that is why the after of ana- is also a before—a before that has been transposed into a second after.

Some people misread anaheism as a dialectical third term that surpasses theism and atheism. They construe it as a sort of Hegelian synthesis or final resolution. But I do not see it like that. It is important for me that anaheism contains a moment of atheism within itself—as it contains a moment of theism. Or should I say, anaheism precontains both, for it operates from a space and time before the dichotomy of atheism and theism, as well as after. The double a of anaheism holds out the promise but not the necessity of a second affirmation once the “death of God” has done its work. But it differs radically from Hegel’s “negation of the negation” that sees the return as a synthesis or sublation (Aufhebung). My argument is that the moment of ana- is actually a risk and a wager—an existential drama that can go either way. It can also go wrong. It is up to us. It is a matter of discernment and decision on our part. The event does not take place behind our backs, irrespective of our agency, like theology or Hegel’s dialectic of Absolute Spirit. There is no “ruse of reason.” Anaheism is not some ineluctable dialectic leading to a final totality. It
is not about uppercase Divinity, or Alpha God. *Au contraire!* Anathemism is about reimagining—and re-lying—the sacred in the least of these. It is lower-case from beginning to end.

Anathemism concentrates, therefore, on unrealized or suspended possibilities, which are more powerfully reanimated if one also experiences a moment of a-theism—the "-a-" here being a gesture of abdication, privation, withdrawal—a moment that is less a matter of epistemological theory, dogma, creed or proposition than a prereflective, lived experience of ordinary lostness and solitude, a mood of angst or abandon, an existential "dark night of the soul"—and who has never tasted such moments? This private moment—the first a—is indispensable to anathemism. But in *ana-* we have two a's. And if the first a is the "a-" of a-theism, the second a is the "not of the not." The "a-a-" of anathemism is a re-opening to something new, after all.

So the ana- is not a guarantee of ineluctable progress or blind optimism. It is not only something that arises in the wake of religious collapse but also something that brings us back to the beginning, to a foretime before the division between theism and atheism. And in this respect, I think of Kierkegaard's affirmative reading of "repetition" as a re-lying of the past, forward. This repetition of the former as latter, of the earlier as later, meant for Kierkegaard retrieving the event of faith not as a regression to some original position but as an originary disposition of openness toward the radical Other—what he calls a "leap of faith" in *Fear and Trembling.* Abraham has to lose his son as a given in order to receive him back as a gift; he has to abandon Isaac as possession in order to welcome him back as promise. Isaac is not Abraham's (as extension, acquisition, projection) but another's, another's, another (a return gift of what Kierkegaard calls the Absolute). In short, it is a matter of repeating forward rather than backward, a second retrieval of something after one has lost it. This goes beyond chronological time—that is, the notion of different moments succeeding each other in linear fashion from past to present to future—in favor of kairotological time, a time out of time focusing on an epiphanic moment (Augenblick) of Grace where eternity crosses the instant. Thus *ana-* is a prefix that seeks to capture this enigma of past-as-future, before-as-after.

To say this is not, however, to deny that ana- also involves historical time. Infinite time is in-finite; it traverses finite temporality and cannot exist without it. Anathemism, in its temporal aspect, does indeed coincide today with a concrete historical situation that comes after the death of God, culturally, socially, and intellectually. It is marked by the modern announcements of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud; the atheist expositions of the Enlightenment; the French Revolution; the critique of religion as ideology; and so on. Anathemism expresses a typical modern anxiety in the face of what Max Weber terms the "disenchancement" of the world, the desacralization of society, the general malaise of the abandonment of God, loss of faith.

In this sense anathemism is, in part, a historical-cultural phenomenon that engages with our contemporary secular humanist culture, but not in any teleological manner—the facile idea that we were ignorant and have now seen the light, that all faith was delusion but we have finally reached the "end" of religion and are free at last. In sum, it is not complicit with the current anti-God squad of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris, nor with Francis Fukuyama's neoliberal *hobbes.* For me, to have lost the illusion of God (as sovereign superintendent of the universe) is to enjoy the possibility of opening oneself, once again, to the original and enduring promise of a sacred stranger, an absolute other who comes as gift, call, summons, as invitation to hospitality and justice. In short, anathemism is a radical opening to someone or something that was lost and forgotten by Western metaphysics—to cite Heidegger and Derrida—and needs to be recalled again. And here we can translate from the historical formulation of the anathemist question—What comes after the disappearance of God?—to the more existential one: How might any contemporary self experience this in one's concrete, lived existence—that is, in one's personal, as opposed to impersonal, being?

This is why I constantly come back to "examples" and "testimonies" of the anathemist moment, to descriptions—scriptural, literary, testimonial—of lived abandonment, disillusionment, disorientation, followed by moments of turning around again—what Socrates called *periage,* what Augustine called *conversio.* The first negative moment of letting go is indispensable. It is key to a proper appreciation of anathemism. Without that, we have cheap grace—God as comforting illusion, quick fix, opium of the people. I often think here of the mystic's "dark night of the soul," of Dostoyevsky's sense of radical alienation, of Hopkins's dark sonnets ("I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day"), or of Christ's own abandonment.
by the Father on the cross. These are all concrete moments of radical emptying that signal a return to the original move of atheism: the wager of yes or no to the stranger. This primal wager is first and foremost an existential wager—not a purely logical one à la Pascal, which is more a wager of knowledge than being, epistemological rather than ontological. And this atheist wager—to turn hostility into hospitality—is, I contend, the inaugural moment of all great wisdom traditions. Admittedly, in Anathemism 1 tend to focus mainly on the Abrahamic tradition in which I grew up, trying to reimagine certain “primal scenes” of hostility-hospitality by revisiting the inaugural wages of the scriptural narratives: Abraham and Sarah as they encounter the strangers in Mamre, Mary faced with the stranger called Gabriel, Muhammad faced with a voice in the cave. But this brings me already to my second question—regarding atheism as an act of reimagining.  

REIMAGINING GOD: A QUESTION OF FICTION

Atheism is not just a question of returning in time but also of returning in space. It involves a topos as well as a kairos. It needs images. When it comes to reimagining the sacred, I travel the third of the three paths—philosophical, religious, and poetic—that I sketched out in my book Anathemism.  

I am interested in reimagining the sacred as a space of “negative capability.” I take the term from the poet John Keats, who defined it as the ability to be in “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” I see the poetic refiguring of the sacred as somehow occupying that open, empty space. This refiguring is by no means confined to Keats and Romanticism; it goes right back to the beginning of culture, as Aristotle acknowledged in Poetics, when he defined drama as a cathartic movement back and forth between pity and fear.

If pity (eleos) is the identification with the suffering characters on the stage, fear (phobos) is the withdrawal or withholding of participation. Belief becomes quasi-belief. Tragedy, as Nietzsche and others remind us, originally derived from Dionysiac sacrificial cults, but in the transposition from religious rite to dramatic representation a radical shift takes place. The work of mythos-mimesis (emplotment-redescription) intervenes to turn the literal into the figurative. The term tragedy originally meant “goat’s head,” because the main protagonists wore masks that impersonated the sacrificial animals, which themselves stood in for the pharmakoi, the sacrificial god-men (like Dionysus), who would have been celebrated in the ancient cults.

In other words, the move to dramatic imitation opened up the fictional space of “as if,” where we suspend our belief in the gods and our disbelief in fiction. Or, to quote Coleridge, we “willingly suspend our disbelief” in the imaginary in order to act as if we believe in the fictional characters. This suspension of belief requires a simultaneous, and equally willing, disbelief in the religious—insofar as the latter implies truth claims. So as we watch the great Greek tragedies unfold, there is already a realization that the religious-cultic-sacrificial acts taking place on stage—the sacrifice of Oedipus, Iphigenia, Antigone, and so on—are not making any claims to “reality” as such. We respond to the play as if the gods and heroes were present before us, but knowing full well they are not. The figural has replaced the literal.

Now it is this detour through the kingdom of as-if—where all kinds of possibilities can be explored in a “free variation of imagination”—that allows for an atheist disposition. We bracket our religious beliefs (provisionally at least) on entering the theater, in order to be able to believe in the theatrical make-believe. This, as I read it, is an Aristotelian foreshadowing of Keats’s negative capability (and, in a sense, of Husserl’s phenomenological epoché)—the agnostic liberty to explore all kinds of different views and attitudes without the constraints of orthodoxy, morality, or censorship.

But that is not the end of the affair for atheism. Once we exit from the theater, once we suspend this poetic detour in turn, we find ourselves back in the real, lived world, with the option to believe in the gods again or to not believe. But without such a negative capability—as a form of poetic license—it is difficult to freely choose which, if any, religious truth claim to embrace. Authentic faith commitments are, arguably, better fostered by the hiatus of aesthetic atheism, which contains the atheist option within itself and reanimates a real sense of existential drama in the relationship between the divine and the human. Some kind of letting go of one’s received beliefs—even provisionally, momentarily, hypothetically—is something that I consider central to the reimagining of the sacred, and to the possibility of genuine faith, which, as Dostoyevsky reminds us, comes forth from the “crucible of doubt.”
So how might this hypothesis of suspended belief relate to more contemporary literature? In *Anatheism* I look at Joyce, Woolf, and Proust as three modernist writers who reimagine the sacred. In *Ulysses* we have Stephen replying to the question, "What is God?" with the response, "A shout in the street" (a street noise: retrieved in Molly's cry at the end of the book). *Theo* is echoed as *Eros*. But what does Joyce mean when he describes God as a shout in the street? What is the sense of the sacramental, the eucharistic, the sacred that Joyce is teasing out in that phrase and in the constant revisiting and rewriting of a grammar of transubstantiation throughout the book? There is a whole series of Eucharists—black masses, parodic masses, failed Communions—and then, finally, we have Molly's own retrieval of a "shout in the street": her climactic "yes," along with the remembered exchange of seed cake with Bloom as they kiss on Howth Head. Is this not a powerful example of what Joyce calls "epiphany"? The sacred at the very heart of the profane? The infinite in the infinitesimal? The sacramental in the quotidian?

In *Anatheism* I also try to show poetic epiphanies at work in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. My question is: What does Lily Briscoe mean when she talks about the "little daily miracles, illuminations, the matches struck unexpectedly in the dark"? What's going on in the text? And what is Lily's relationship to Mrs. Ramsay, who prepares and performs a quasi-eucharistic feast in the first part of the book, which is then followed by the disenchanting interlude of death and war, before we return to Lily's final brushstroke, which completes her portrait of Mrs. Ramsay—"It is finished"—in the third part of the book? Is Lily Briscoe not somehow retrieving the lost experience of the opening banquet *anathetically*? Is it only when Lily has let go of the mystical Mrs. Ramsay—after her death and disappearance—that she can resurrect her in her portrait? What does "It is finished" signify? In what sense is it finished? What exactly does it mean for Lily to engage in that sacramental gesture of eucharistic memory?

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

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

Let me give one last example of reimagining the sacred. In the second chapter of *Anatheism* I revisit the primal scene of the Christian event—the annunciation. I do so not just theologically but poetically, because I believe that the annunciation, as we have received it over time and history, is in great part a scene of religious imagination, in the deepest sense of that term—a primal anathetic scenario that can be revisited in poetic imaginings, which may lead to a new faith. To be more precise, I am struck that the most effective ways of returning to this founding event of Christianity are through poets and painters rather than through preachers and theologians. The text of Luke is just a few lines, but we have countless poems about the announcement throughout the centuries—and, more recently, extraordinary verses by the likes of Denise Levertov, Andrew Hudgins, Kascha Semonovitch, and others—which explore the original moment when Mary encounters the stranger in Nazareth and wonders whether she will say yes or no. Just as Kierkegaard gets into the mind of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* (a work of theoepoetics, if ever there was one), and Kazantzakis gets into the mind of Christ in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, these poets succeed in getting into the imaginations of great holy figures.
(Note that we also find such poetics in non-Abrahamic traditions such as the enchanting Jataka narratives of the life of the Buddha in Ajanta and Ellora.) And to return to the annunciation, we may say that the various poetic retellings of this scene invite us to "anathetically" retrieve Mary's moment of oscillation: her pondering of disbelief and belief as she responds to the summons of the stranger. Two thousand years after the event, we can still do so through imagination. In sum, in revisiting these images we relive the primal dramas as if we were there, as if we were encountering these sacred figures for the first time.

And as though poets weren't enough, we also have countless painters, from Botticelli and da Messina to Rembrandt, Rouault, and Sheila Gallagher. What the artistic imagination is doing here is inviting us back to the inaugural moments of faith so that we may live them "again, anew"—in time (language) and in space (painting). Without such anatheist imaginings, all we have are dry dogma and abstract doctrine. But in thus anathetically refiguring the moment of Mary's wager we discover that it, too, was an anatheist moment. Mary herself was engaged in an act of anatheist retrieval (back) and promise (forth). She, too, was caught in a hermeneutic circle of past and future, before and after God. Indeed, the fact that the maiden from Nazareth (whom I like to call "the Nazarena," for in the moment of wager she is no longer Mary and not yet Madonna) is almost always portrayed as reading at a lectern, indicates that she is recalling the narratives of her Abrahamic: faith and the various wagers that her ancestors made when solicited by a divine summons—that is, by angels in disguise—from Abraham and Jacob to Tobias and Samuel. The Nazarena is reliving the past as she makes her leap of faith into the future—freely choosing to believe that the impossible can be possible, that she can conceive a child, like Sarah before her, when visited by divine strangers.

This moment of free choice, recalling the past and anticipating the future, is a primordial instance of the ana-time of anatheism, for at this oscillating instant, when eternity hovers over the here and now, Mary is poised before the options of belief and disbelief. We are told in Luke that in this anatheist moment of freedom she "was troubled and pondered." It is a hard one. A lot is going on in her head. The Greek verb for pondering is dialogizoma; she is dialoguing with the strange visitor, with herself, with all the voices in her mind saying, "Do it," "Don't do it." And from out of this welter of perspectives and possibilities, she chooses. Moreover, if she did not choose, or was not free to choose, from a space of negative capability, of imaginative empathy and openness to the stranger, the wager would have been false. The Incarnation would be an act of divine rape. Theism without anatheism is just that—a violation of human freedom and trust. But it is also important to recognize that this pondering, this aftering, this drama of responding to the call, is carnal. It is a thinking again in the flesh—a hermeneutic act of wagering. Neither a reflex response to a stimulus nor a disembodied cogito with a clear and distinct idea, Mary is thinking through the body and embodying her text in action. That is why, in almost all the portraits, she has a book in one hand and a lily (representing the senses) in the other. Mary's response to Gabriel is one of savvy—a felt knowledge, a thinking that is also a touching and tasting, sapere—savoir—savour.

Reimagining the sacred can thus revive faith, make it live again. Religious imagination can bring us back to the moment, and it brings the moment back into our lives again. We become dramatic contemporaries of the wager. That's anatheism. If faith needs its prophets, it also needs its poets.

THE SACRED: A QUESTION OF STRANGENESS

The sacred is somewhere between the spiritual and the religious. We often hear the phrase "spiritual but not religious." And we have all heard people say that a particular person, place, thing, or moment is "sacred" to them. The spiritual can include the sacred and the religious, but it can also operate independently of them. "Spirit" is a very capacious category that, at times, can mean anything and everything. But for the most part it means something, and indeed something important. We meet many in our secular age who are still hankering after "something"—they know not quite what—but now that may be defined. This is often referred to as a "spiritual quest," and it can express itself in a great variety of ways, from an appreciation of the art of Botticelli, Bach, or Bob Dylan through theological, New Age movements, astrological readings or, more recently, forms of transcendental meditation and yoga—a mix of Rumi and Ramakrishna. All these forms of spiritual journeying and self-discovery can occur without any commitment to a denominational religious faith, with its inherited rites, creeds, practices, and doctrines.
So, the spiritual can involve a seeking that does not necessarily involve religion, if by “religion” we understand a specific set of creedal truth claims, shared ritual traditions, and institutional behavior codes. The sacred, on the other hand, resides somewhere between the spiritual and the religious. It differs from the spiritual in that it is something you find rather than something you seek. It is “out there” somewhere, rather than “in here,” so to speak. It is there before you are aware that it is there—before self-awareness, before consciousness, before epistemology. We do not cognize the sacred, we re-cognize it.

Let me offer some examples. We talk about things being sacred to us. Certain people, as mentioned, can be deemed sacred. (Think of Levinas’s “epiphany of the face,” in which another before me becomes utterly unique and irrereplaceable). Times can also be sacred to us, signaling a specific kairós (before-time and after-time) that supersedes chronos (the linear, secular time of one moment after another). Whereas sacred time is one thing because (dia) of another, ordinary time is one thing succeeding (meta) another. Sacred time is about being in time; ordinary time is about being on time. The liturgical calendar—Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter—offers traditional examples of holy times in Christian culture. And, in addition to people and times, places can be sacred too, as khora—a special space traditionally separated out from profane, one-dimensional space.10

In all three cases—person, time, and place—the sacred refers to something set apart, something strange and ineffable. Walter Benjamin referred to this extra dimension as “aura.” In Latin, sacer has the same root as secretus, or “secret,” which in turn is a translation from the Greek mysterion, meaning “blindfolded.” So the sacred is something that surprises us, something that we haven’t constructed or envisaged in advance, that blindsides us, as it were. It is, in Virginia Woolf’s words, the “thing given not made.”11 In other words, the sacred, at its most basic, involves a deep sense that there is something “more,” something radically Other, uncanny, transcendent, impossible for us to imagine until we imagine it anew, until we make the impossible possible through a leap of faith. The sacred is the realization that there is something there that is more than “me”—or more than “us,” understood as an inmanent consensus of “we.”

One could say much here about the notion of the sacer as something or someone numinous and ambivalent, inspiring “fear and trembling” (Kierkegaard), “fascination and recoil” (Otto), “totem and taboo” (Freud), “blessing and curse” (Caillois). In short, the persona sacra is the stranger who surpasses the normal notions of law and logic, shattering our conventional horizons, perspectives, and presuppositions. It is the “other” in the other person who precedes and exceeds us—and thus, as Ricoeur says, donne à penser, gives rise to thought, provokes more reasoning, and amplifies our understanding. (I am no advocate of blind irrationalism and fideism.)

What I am trying to suggest with the notion of anatheism is that the sacred can be experienced in and through the secular. The hyphen between sacred and secular is crucial. So we might say that anatheism is an attempt to sacralize the secular and secularize the sacred. It is reimagining the sacred after the secular and through the secular. Bonhoeffer talks about being with God yet living without God. I call this double sense of “with and without” the movement of adieu. This twofold movement involves both an atheist and a theist moment, and exceeds both. In its atheist guise, adieu is a departure, a leaving, a farewell to the old God of metaphysical power, the God we thought we knew and possessed, the omni-God of sovereignty and theodicy. Adieu, therefore, to the God that Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx declared dead. But in saying adieu to the omni-God, anatheism opens the option of a God still to come—or a God still to come back again. Ana- has two a’s: the double a of “ab” and “ad.” The ab deo of departure from God opens the option of the ad deum of a return to God after God, a supplementary move of aftering and overing. But as soon as the before-and-after God becomes fixed or fixated, we need to deconstruct this latest fetish and “go after” God again. And so on without end.

In sum, the anatheist God is one of perpetual departing and arriving, conjuring negative capability with constant rebirthing of the divine in the ordinary. For me, this double sense of leaving and returning is at the heart of the sacred. And it may express itself either spiritually (as a general gracious openness to “something more”) or religiously (involving creedal commitments and devotions). Anatheism has many mansions. One can be either an anatheist atheist or an anatheist atheist, but whichever one chooses—belief or nonbelief—anatheism remains a wager.

Let me end this preliminary sketch of the anatheistic retrieval of the sacred with this description from Anatheism of the relationship between the secular and the sacred:
Anatheism is not an atheism that wishes to rid the world of God, rejecting the sacred in favor of the secular. Nor is it a theism that seeks to rid God of the world, rejecting the secular in favor of the sacred. Nor, finally, is it a pantheism (ancient or New Age) that collapses the secular and the sacred into one, denying any distinction between the transcendent and the immanent. Anatheism does not say the sacred is the secular; it says it is in the secular, through the secular, toward the secular. I would even go so far as to say the sacred is inseparable from the secular, while remaining distinct. Anatheism speaks of "interanimation" between the sacred and the secular but not of fusion or confusion. They are inextricably interconnected but never the same thing. 22

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

James Wood is a well-known English literary critic, essayist, and novelist. His career as an increasingly influential writer includes positions as the Guardian’s chief literary critic (1991–1994), senior editor of the New Republic, staff writer at the New Yorker, and professor at Harvard University. After publishing several volumes of essays, Wood has also written a theological novel, The Book Against God (2004). Not unlike his novel’s main character, who struggles with his religious background, Wood, an atheist convert from evangelicalism, finds in literature a middle ground between belief and unbelief. Good literature, he argues in The Broken Estate, not only depicts the great complexity of belief but also provides a space where one can examine faith without total commitment. Great modern novels by Melville, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Woolf, and Camus, for example, raise the crucial questions about faith and allow us to enter into the authors’ beliefs without a total commitment. Wood calls this believing “not quite,” or “as if,” the ”true secularism of fiction,” and he prefers this hospitable space of freedom to the secular and religious fundamentalists, who want to clarify and simplify both religion and atheism through dogmatic claims.

This middle ground makes Wood, in Kearney’s eyes, an “atheist anatheist,” someone who seeks dialogue beyond dogmatism, but from the
And where so many still search and work for healing and peace? No work of art ever stopped a tank, as Seamus Heaney said. But he added; "The end of art is peace." Might that this little image of alchemical play be an intimation of such peace.
it is always open—for no atheism or theism can presume to be certain of itself without falling back into another dogmatism (of belief or antireligion).

So, whether it is a matter of what I call “atheist atheism” or “atheist theism”—a second theism or a second atheism—it is for us to choose: it is a wager, a hermeneutic task. The atheistic moment is to be understood, according to the moment before a choice between theism and atheism insofar as it liberates into wager, action, and commitment. And in this sense it comes “after” we have abandoned the dogmatic unfreedoms of first theism or first atheism. In moving from religion through atheism to faith, a hermeneutic moment of “suspension” is indispensable. Or, to put it in terms of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic arc, unless one allows the “masters of suspicion”—Freud, Marx, Nietzsche (and I would add de Beauvoir and the feminist critique)—to unmask the inherited theological corpus, one is less likely to reach a faith worth living, intellectually speaking. Such iconoclastic atheists may be deemed allies in the process of hermeneutic suspicion, which can lead, in turn (for those who so choose), to a hermeneutic reaffirmation of the sacred. See Paul Ricoeur, The Symbolism of Evil, trans. E. Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 347–357; and “Religion, Atheism, Faith,” in The Conflict of Interpretations, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 440–467.


4. In this sense, Christ can say, “Before Abraham was, I am” and “Remember me until I come.”

5. I think that several thinkers after Kierkegaard—such as Benjamin, Derrida, and Agamben—are saying something similar when they talk of “messianic time,” though I personally prefer the notion of kairosological or eschatological time. This ana-time translates the sacred enigma that the Kingdom already was, is now, and is yet to come. It is always already and is always still to come.

6. There is a certain deconstructive moment here of which Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, among others, have much to teach us. Levinas talks about atheism in Totality and Infinity as the greatest gift that Judaism has given humanity. What I think he means is that Judaism is a prophetic prohibition against idols and illusions; its promissory messianism signals an atheist moment of “separation” from fusion with being, including fusion with God (sacrificial paganism), and that separation gives the “I,” the self, and a freedom and a responsibility to respond to the other, the stranger. If there is no such “atheistic” separation, there can be no ethical encounter with the stranger, who, Levinas argues, bears the face of the wounded, the destitute, the naked—“the widow, the orphan, the stranger”—which is itself, for Levinas, the “trace of God.” Derrida, for his part, talks about a “religion without religion.” And if there is a difference between Derrida and myself here, it is a difference between “without” (Derrida’s sans) and “after” (ana). I talk about religion after religion, where he talks about religion without religion. But as he himself said in his discussion of my “God of perhaps” (peut-être), there is but the “thinnest of differences” at times between his atheism and my anatheism. See my dialogue with Derrida, which took place at New York University in October 2001, “Terror, Religion, and the New Politics,” in Richard Kearney, Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 3–31. See also my related essay, “Derrida’s Messianic Atheism,” in Edward Baring and Peter Gordon, eds., The Trace of God: Derrida and Religion (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

7. Read anathetically, the cross is not some expiatory sacrifice by a bloodthirsty, patriarchal God bent on ransoming his son for our sins. It is a moment of surmounting such an injurious, “theistic” temptation in a moment of “atheistic” letting go so as to open up an “anatheistic” disposition toward the new, the surprising, the gracious, the gift—resurrected life. Yet one more radical discovery of God after God (conceived as the Alpha God of theodicy). And I say “one more” for, as Christ himself revealed, it has been going on from the beginning and will never end: “Before Abraham was, I am” and “Now I must go so that the Paraclete can come.” Christ here and now is always Christ before and after: anachronic, ana-Christ. On the cross and in all his human woundedness, Christ abandons the omnipotent Father God who has abandoned him. His final, ultimate lesson is one of radical kenosis and letting go of lost illusions and attachments so as to open himself to the new, the other, the strange. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is the atheist moment of negation and negative capability, which opens the space for a release and liberation into new life beyond old life—“Unto thee I commend my spirit.” In this anatheist return, Christ is entrusting himself to the “thee” of each God after God, every stranger who seeks or receives food and love, as announced in Matthew 25—his hungry disciples at Galilee (“Come and have breakfast”), Mary Magdalene at the garden tomb (“Miriam!”), his fellow travelers on the road to Emmaus. Christ keeps coming back (ana) to his followers after (ana) he has left them, as a hosper they do not recognize—until he hosts them with food and touch. Only as guests again (ana) do they recognize the divine host.

8. Anatheistically considered, the Bible is a battleground of interpretations, a site of endless conflicts of interpretation between hostility and hospitality. One does not need to recite the long litany of hostilities that have been waged, and suffered, by the three Abrahamic religions over the centuries—something
true, I suspect, of all religions. No faith is exempt, purer than pure. There is no hospitality that is not ghosted by the dark demon of hostility. That is why anathemitism is always a recurring call for renewals and retrievals of the inaugural moment of grace and good, in every potential moment. There is no hospitality once and for all. Hostility is a continuing betrayal of the first promise of hospitality—the inaugural creative moment repeated in the stories of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Christ, and so on, and in every instant of our own everyday lives. Hostility—violence, intolerance, fear, aggression, egoism—is a constant temptation for theists and atheists alike that needs to be overcome again and again in acts of “afering,” of returning and retrieving the inaugural moment of hospitality that we witness in the great stories of breakthrough and new beginning. Civilization begins with the handshake—choosing to extend an open palm rather than reach for the sword. As Emmanuel Levinas says, the face of the stranger in its nakedness presents the trace of God: the poor one, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. See Emmanuel Levinas, Totality and Infinity, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 244.

14. Ibid., 207.
15. See the more detailed discussion of these poets in Kearney, Anatheism, 23–25.
16. In Rembrandt’s painting Emmaus, Christ is a dark silhouette illuminating the two disciples with light streaming from his invisible face. The returned messianic stranger remains unknowable, no matter how familiar to them he has been during his previous lifetime. In the breaking of bread at Emmaus, Christ is there and not there, seen and not recognized, familiar and strange. There is no glorious, triumphal full stop. In this moment of what Ricoeur calls “eucharistic hospitality” there is always something more, either, transcendent, exceeding, departing. It is always a matter of ongoing translation and discernment. Not a single, saturating revelation. Not a final illumination. Not some total exposure or disclosure. The anathemitist moment constantly repeats itself, within each religion and from religion to religion, because it is always something strange: there is a God after God after God after God. . . . “Afering” never stops, and if it does, you get idolatry, triumphalism, dogmatism, fundamentalism—war between religions and within religions. That’s how close the wager gets. Hospitality and hostility are etymological twins of the term hosia, meaning both “enemy” and “guest”: a Janus face that can look either way. Ana- signals a place and time of thresholds, limits, borders, crossings, which is why Janus is the guardian of boundaries, the patron saint of translations and transitions—along with Hermes and the Paraclete. This deep doubleness, which Émile Benveniste identifies in the Indo-European roots of both hosia and hosus, goes all the way back and all the way down. See Benveniste, Indo-European Language and Society (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), 71–78.
17. The anathemitist moment of pondering, weighing, and wagering is also indicated in the fact that, in almost all annunciation scenes, Mary is usually reading from a lectern. This suggests that she is inscribed in a narrative tradition of the Book; she’s revisiting and retrieving stories and memories of those who came before her. Maybe Abraham and the strangers at Mamre? Or Jacob meeting Rachel at the well? Or Solomon and the Shechemite woman? Who knows. But whatever texts she is immersed in are surely preparing her hermeneutically—through language, narrative, memory—for this encounter with the stranger. I say “preparing” in the sense of predisposing, not predetermined, because Mary is completely free to break from those narratives or to return to them by turning them toward a new opening.
18. Luke 1:29. Dieteräó”bethe (troubled) is the term used in the Bible for responding to impossible messengers with impossible messages. It was also used to describe Sarah, Samson’s mother, the shepherds of Bethlehem, and Mary.
19. If prophets and preachers give us theology, painting lets us into Mary’s body and poetry into her imagination, without the slightest hint of blasphemy. Denise Levertov’s poem “Annunciation” (Selected Poems [New York: New Directions, 2005], 162) speaks of Mary poised between her lectern (signifying thought) and lily (signifying the senses), facing an angelic visitor who stands and hovers and whom she acknowledges as guest, a hosus. The relevant stanza reads:

But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions courage.
The engendering Spirit did not enter her without consent.
God waited.

She was free to accept or to refuse, choice integral to humanness.
Such verses indicate that there is no blind dictate of divine destiny. Mary's
yes is not a mere "effect" of some omnipotent cause or supernatural will that
ineluctably prevails, come what may. She is not the passive prey of some Alpha
God. The Nazarene could refuse or accept; she was free to say yes or no. She
said yes. And if she had said no, there would have been no Christianity.

20. On this, see Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane, trans. Willard R. Trask
(Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1959).
21. Woolf, To the Lighthouse, 118.
22. Kearney, Anatheism, 166.

4. TRANSCENDENT HUMANISM IN A SECULAR AGE:
DIALOGUE WITH CHARLES TAYLOR

2. Ibid., 36–37.
3. The term Enzauberung means, literally, "de-magicalization," usually translated as "disenchantment."
4. On Sara Grant and Abhishek Pandit, see Richard Kearney and Eileen Rizo-
Patron, eds., Traversing the Heart: Journeys of the Inter-Religious Imagination

5. NEW HUMANISM AND THE NEED TO BELIEVE:
DIALOGUE WITH JULIA KRISTEVA

2. Ibid., 3.
5. Mohammed Merah (1988–2012) was a Franco-Algerian Islamist terrorist who
murdered seven people, including three Jewish children, in March 2012, at
Toulouse and Montauban.
6. La Défense is a business district in the Paris metropolitan area.
7. Although he knew Armenian and Hebrew, Paul of Tarsus cites the Hebraic
Bible in the Septuagint translation.
8. Julia Kristeva, This Incredible Need to Believe, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (New
York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 75–76.

6. ANATHEISM, NIHILISM, AND WEAK THOUGHT:
DIALOGUE WITH GIANNI VATTIMO

1. Richard Kearney, Anatheism: Returning to God After God (New York: Colum-
bia University Press, 2010), 8.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison (New York: Touchstone,
1997), 360–361.
3. Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, Hermeneutic Communism: From Hei-
5. Andenken, usually deployed as a noun, is a German word often used when
remembering deceased loved ones or commemorating important occasions.
6. Santiago Zabala, The Remains of Being: Hermeneutic Ontology After Meta-

7. WHAT'S GOD? "A SHOUT IN THE STREET":
DIALOGUE WITH SIMON CRITCHELEY

Anthology of English Literature, 5th ed., vol. 2 (New York: W. W. Norton &
Co., 1986), 863.

9. ANATHEISM AND RADICAL HERMENEUTICS:
DIALOGUE WITH JOHN CAPUTO

1. John Caputo, More Radical Hermeneutics (Bloomington: Indiana University
2. This dialogue was transcribed by William Chaddock.

10. THEISM, ATHEISM, ANATHEISM: A PANEL DISCUSSION WITH
DAVID TRACY, MEROld WESTPHAL, AND JENS ZIMMERMANN

2. See Hannah Arendt, "What Is Authority?" in Between Past and Future (New