RICHARD KEARNEY’S
ANATHEISTIC WAGER

Philosophy, Theology, Poetics

Edited by Chris Doude van Troostwijk and Matthew Clemente

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Theism, Atheism, Anatheism

James Wood and Richard Kearney

1

JW: I'd like to ask you about the personal nature of your relationship to God—your own religious path.

RK: Sure. I'll tell you a story about something I did on Irish radio. It's a program called Miriam Meets that's on every Sunday. Usually two members of a family are invited. So I did it with my brother, Tim, who works with the Communauté de l'Arche, founded by Jean Vanier. Vanier is a very committed Christian who works with disabled people—kind of a hero and a saint. I played the "bad guy" and my brother, Tim, was the "good guy." We get along extremely well, but we were teasing each other and so on. He was being pitched as the theist and me [sic] as the more wayward one—in other words, the anatheist. A week later, I was walking in the fields near our house in West Cork, and I came to the top of this hill. I was trespassing on a farmer's land, and he drove up with his tractor and hopped out, and I thought, "Oh dear, he's going to get me for trespassing and disturbing his cattle." But he just wanted to talk about God. "Are you the atheist?" he asks right away. So I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "I heard you on the radio. Your brother—he was very good, but you were very confused." In Ireland, an "anatheist" is an atheist—and atheists are very confused.

JW: Is there a tension between the openness, the emptiness of the name, "God"—God as the name for the "more," the "surplus," the "surprise," that humans seek—between that emptying out and the need to keep on talking of "God"? In his book Saving God: Religion after Idolatry, the Princeton philosopher Mark Johnston says, in effect, "Let's stop using the word 'God.' I will call him 'the Highest One' from now on"—which is good, proper anti-idolatry, but nevertheless he's managed to write an entire book about this indescribable Highest One. So if there are all sorts of words that we have to retire because language is too absolute to adequately represent this unfinished, unfinalizable, God, then from a nonbeliever's point of view, a question quickly emerges: "Well, why not just retire God himself? You've retired most of the language; why not retire the concept itself and just
stop talking about God, the Highest One, and all the rest of it?" Which is another way of asking, "Why does Kearney need God in order to achieve his ethics?"

RK: I'm sympathetic at one level—doing away with the word "God" and eventually doing away with the terms "theism" and "atheism." Anatheism is just a term for the critical revisiting of that language in order to try and upset it, challenging the old dogmatic antithesis between theism and atheism. Anatheism is no more than a strategic, terminological tool to carve open a middle space that is, as the prefix ana- suggests, both before and after the theism/atheism divide. In a way, its unfamiliarity as a neologism serves initially to confound readers' expectations—some people think it's theism, others atheism ("an-theism," as it sometimes mispronounced), and others again something altogether different. It depends how you read it. But at the outset, confronted with the term, no one is meant to be entirely sure—perhaps not even me. And the fact that it also means "back" and "forward" interests me. The "ana" is not readily locatable in either time or space. It is a special moment, a strange space that I do not hesitate to call sacred. So I'm using this odd prefix, ana-, to try to trouble the old dichotomy of God versus anti-God, and to do this in favor of a middle realm, a milieu, where some new kind of thinking about this ageless yet still urgent question might occur. Such a middle space is not some wishy-washy, lukewarm ambivalence—which one would be correct to "spit out" as Scripture suggests. It is not facile syncretism—a little bit of this and that without ever committing yourself to anything at all. The doubleness of "ana" is not duplicity, but rather a deeply productive tension. The idea of "ana" with its double a can be read in two ways: as in the colloquial a-dieu, it can mean both "hello" and "good-bye." One connotes a moving away from or a departure, the a of the deus absconditus—or, more radically, atheism (mystical or secular). While the other a is the adieu" of "hello"—ad deum. Excuse the Latin, but one finds echoes of this in the colloquial usage of French and English also. And for me this double a says something important about our contemporary relationship with the sacred.

JW: Why keep the word "sacred"?

RK: I use the word "sacred" because it is generous—or, at least, more capacious than the often-exclusivist understanding of terms like "theism," "religion," and "God." Many people who might have a real problem with the traditional notions of God have little trouble saying "This is sacred to me" when referring to a certain person, place, or time. So the initial a of ana signals a first movement of abstinence and absolution whereby one absolves oneself of the preconceptions of the old God of power and might, in a sort of apophatic (negative theology) or anti-idolatrous (iconoclasm) gesture. And this preliminary move, akin if not identical with a certain salutary atheist scruple, may then open the possibility—never the necessity—of a return to something more, other, transcendent: a surplus that was always there though we didn't see it. This is what I call ana-theos, or the God after God. Something "called" God—for God is a name that means different things to different people. The best response, at least for me, to the question "do you believe in God?" is, "It depends what you mean by God." In other words, "Tell me what you understand about God, and I'll tell you whether I believe it."

JW: So, tell me something about what God means to you. Tell me something about your own childhood in religious terms. Your father was a sort of observant Catholic, wasn't he?

RK: Yes, he was. Silently observant. He never came to mass with us.

JW: Oh, he didn't?

RK: No. He went often to his own mass. He was a silent observer and rarely took the Eucharist. He felt unworthy and would go on a penitential pilgrimage to Lough Derg in Northern Ireland once a year; only then would he take communion. Whereas my mother was very devotional and very partial to the sacraments. So to put it in terms he would never have used himself, my father was more "apophatic"—he rarely spoke about religion and never about theology. He was educated and intelligent—a professor of surgery—but never articulated his religious or spiritual beliefs. In fact, at his funeral, a medical nun from one of the Cork hospitals came up to me and said, "You know, every day we saw your father at the back of the chapel. He never went into surgery without saying a prayer." But it was like a revelation to us. We would never have imagined it.

JW: He went on his own?

RK: Yes.

JW: Interesting.

RK: By contrast, my mother was full of spiritual pathos and very involved with helping suffering and homeless people in the city. Both parents were incredibly tolerant—moral but never moralistic or moralising. My mother would say, "Just be good to people." To take a somewhat dramatic example, when contraception was outlawed in Ireland, she would encourage all six of her sons to bring condoms when we dated girls. She knew that boys would be boys and wanted us to be responsible and never cause our girlfriends any harm. My sister became pregnant when she was still in her teens and
suffered the consequences of a punishing Catholic community. But my father and mother stood by her and her baby, right through the terrible ordeal when she had to give up her studies and lost her first job as a trainee teacher in a girls’ school for “fear of scandal.” My parents were amazingly strong and protective. I respected that and learned early on that religious people could be the best as well as the worst.

JW: So your mother was a churchgoer and took you along?

RK: She took all seven of her children. My brothers and I were altar boys. We went through the whole thing, and it was very beautiful. Sacramental, richly liturgical, something magical, not at all censorious or punishing. It may have been somewhat atypical of most Irish Catholic culture of the time; I don’t know. But when I later heard and read about what so many of my contemporaries lived through as young Catholics—a punitive, fear-filled, guilt-ridden religion—I felt fortunate to have had the parents I did.

JW: The punitive element, that wasn’t there at all for you?

RK: For the most part, no. I was, of course, beaten by the Christian “brothers” in primary school—nobody escaped that—but fortunately, my parents sent me to secondary school in a Benedictine Abbey called Glenstal. The monks there had a deep culture of tolerance, an openness to interreligious dialogue inspired by pioneering Benedictine missionaries like Abhishikatananda and Bede Griffiths in India; and a real sense of critical questioning informed by Vatican II theologians like Yves Congar and Henri De Lubac. Glenstal Abbey was also a place of ecumenica, reconciliation in a sectarian Ireland, where the Northern troubles smouldered and raged in the late sixties and seventies.

JW: As a teenager, did you struggle with inherited belief or was the inherited belief not a large enough pressure that you had to struggle with it?

RK: It was a mixture of inheritance and struggle. Glenstal Abbey, where I went when I was twelve, provided a forum for this that was not, as I mentioned, very typical of Ireland in the late sixties. And then there was my equally atypical family situation—with a very apathetic father and a very catastrophic mother. And, of course, my mother’s devotion to the poor and needy—we’d pray for them and for my father’s critically ill patients every night before bed. It was basically my mother who shared my father’s work with us. He never said a word about it himself. And then three of my brothers started working with the disabled community as teenagers—they were much better than me in that regard. I was reading Nietzsche and Heidegger while they were pushing wheelchairs in Lourdes and Knock. They were very inspired by Jean Vanier’s movement L’arche, which was set up to care for the mentally disabled by taking them out of awful psychiatric hospitals, known as “looney bins” in Cork, and living with them in ordinary houses. Vanier, originally a philosophy professor in Canada and a good friend of the family, was extremely liberal, open, ecumenical, wise, and caring. So I saw all the good side of Catholic caritas and caring for the broken and wounded—along with the more oppressive side infamously epitomised by some perverted clergy in Ireland, as elsewhere, and in much of the Catholic-imposed social intolerance (regarding divorce, homosexuality, premartial sex, unmarried mothers, contraception, abortion, and so on). So, although I remained informed by a spiritually rich religious life on a personal level with my own family and educational experience, at a public level, I was extremely angry with the official Church. But my antieclesiastical indignation did not prevent me from struggling to retrieve what I considered to be certain valuable—perhaps invaluable—treasures of my spiritual heritage. I felt I could be furious with the bishops while continuing to worship something called “God.”

JW: You weren’t struggling through theodicy questions?

RK: Of course, but not for long. Theodicy never made sense to me. I was incensed by the very idea from early on. I could never believe in a divinity that willed or allowed evil if it had the power to do otherwise. That seemed like sheer cruelty or casuistry. I never gave credence to a deity of omnipotence. My God was one of nonsovereignty, vulnerability, fragility, and unknowability. A God of service, who preferred washing feet, healing the sick, giving bread, dying for his friends and enemies alike. In fact, the washing of the disciples’ feet was always my favorite Easter liturgy. Jean Vanier used to do that. He’d go around and wash the feet of those—both abled and disabled—at his Easter table. That to me epitomised the divine as a servant—not servile, but in the service of others, strangers, outcasts. So, when you mention Mark Johnson defining the monotheistic God as the Highest One, I would rather say the “lowest one.” My God is an anti-God in that sense, God as outsider, guest, vagrant, the one who hungers and thirsts for justice—the least of these,” as he says in the gospels, the elachistos. Not the God above us but, as Paul Claudel put it, the God beneath us.3

JW: Now, what if an ethically, politically engaged atheist had turned up alongside you while you were doing those good, Vanier-inspired works? And this ethical chap was as ethical and motivated as you but turned out to have a Dawkins-like lack of belief. Where, then, do the distinctions fall? What would separate you, if anything, from him? What would be the difference?
RK: Well, the first thing for me would be what doesn’t separate us—the fact that we’re both in service to something radically other than ourselves. If you look at Matthew 25 …

JW: It is a foundational text for you, isn’t it?

RK: Yes. Matt 25:31–44 is radical. But its radicality is so often neglected in practical and theological terms. It’s crucial. Christ identifies here with the houpses, the stranger in the street, the last person in the world you think could be God. And that is where and how the kingdom comes—in that one who gives or receives a cup of water. I mean, that is the exclusion of exclusion par excellence. So if the worst of religion is its exclusiveness—“we have the revealed truth and the rest of you are damned”—the great thing about this passage (and I believe one finds certain equivalents in Judaism, Buddhism, and other religions) is that: no one need be excluded, except those who exclude themselves by choosing not to give or receive bread. Atheists are not at all excluded here—but I will come back to this. In fact, the asking—acknowledging one’s need for bread and water—is as important as giving the bread and water (or wine, as the case may be). So an atheist practice, as I understand it, would be the exclusion of exclusion, not the contrary. Or, to put it in more technical terms, when it comes to serving strangers, orthopraxis trumps orthodoxy.

JW: I see.

II

RK: But let’s get back to your example of the nonbelieving student who is doing the same thing as the believing student. What is the difference? When I’m washing people’s feet with this guy as we’re working together with the homeless in downtown Dublin or out in Somalia, the first and most important thing is that we’re doing the work (facere veritatem as Augustine says, “do the truth”); the second thing might be that, as we are working, we have a conversation. And the conversation begins with the questions, “What do you say that you’re doing? And why are you doing it? What is your narrative about this shared action?” In short, what is the story behind your being here? Or the history behind the story? The why, who, wherefrom, whereto? I recount my story and listen to the other’s story as well.

JW: You trade narratives.

RK: Yes. We trade narratives, and then we ask questions about those narratives: The atheist might say, “Why do you call that God?” And the anathete would say, “Well, actually, I call it the suffering servant.” And the reply might be, “But that’s not my view of God.” And then I could tell the story, as I understand it, of Abraham and Sarah feeding the hungry strangers under the Mamre tree and of Isaiah as the suffering servant and Christ’s washing of the feet at the Last Supper (perhaps using the more unusual term “the Nazarene” rather than “Jesus” or “Messiah”) and the feeding of the hungry with loaves and fishes and the healing of lepers (the one who came back to give thanks was an outsider, a Samaritan) and the later testimonies of Francis and Claire, and Teresa and John of the Cross, and Etty Hillesum and Vanier and so forth. I would explain that these are some key stories from my own Ahrahamic Christian tradition, but that one could find analogous (though not identical) stories in other spiritual or religious traditions—some of them occasionally called “atheist,” like Buddhism. I would express my belief in the radical ethos of hospitality to the outsider, the excluded, and the estranged as being central to my notion of the name or metaphor “God,” which, for me—as an anathete—radically includes atheists equally committed to love and justice for the stranger. And having said all that (or preferably a fraction of it), I would simply stop and listen to what the atheist had to say. I would be totally open to the fact that his or her story might be just as convincing and moving than mine, if not more so, or that our stories might overlap in some interesting and surprising ways, producing a more open atheism and atheism—that is, novel variations of the anathete option.

JW: So, for you, it comes back to narratives in the end?

RK: Yes. But in the case of religion—religious narratives are literary narratives but not just literary narratives—this does not have to mean illusion, fiction, untruth, or flight of fancy (as Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche said). It can also mean testimony—a witnessing to the truth: “you shall know them by the fruit” (Matthew 7:20), the fruit of their actions as recounted through stories and histories. And these fruits of faith might be called second actions that are inspired by the sacred stories initially inspired by first actions. It is a hermeneutic circle, as Paul Ricoeur puts it—prefiguring actions of sacred figures configured as oral and written narratives that can then be refigured by believers of those narratives. In other words, you begin with a sacred life or history that calls for a story that configures that holy act (hospitality, love, pardon, and revolution) and that, when read or heard by others, gives rise to another sacred act that reprises and re-entails the story. And so on, ad infinitum. I think that is what the infinite means—the call of the good constantly reinscribing itself in finite acts of history and stories without end. Christianity for me is that tradition of transmission through the lives of the saints, beginning with those who visit the empty tomb or share
bread in Emmaus and then down through the lives of ordinary Samaritans and saints in the lower case as well as the upper case—like St. Francis and Mother Teresa and Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King. And this is still going on every day where guests and strangers exchange actions and words of compassion. Hannah Arendt says that if someone asks you who you are, you tell your story. If someone asks me why I believe, I do just that. I tell my story.

JW: Yes, it seems tremendously important. I find that whenever I write about theological issues, I'm almost forced to admit some element of myself.

RK: As in your novel, The Book against God—that is quite autobiographical isn't it?

JW: Well, yes and no. I had a pretty strange upbringing religiously. My parents are Anglicans, and I grew up in the north of England, in Durham. But in the 1970s, when I was about twelve, the church we worshipped at underwent charismatic renewal. My parents felt quite hard for this Anglicised American evangelicalism (because that's what it was, really), despite the fact that my father was a scientist—he taught zoology at Durham University. I spent my late teenage years struggling pretty hard with my parents' evangelical Christianity, and in some ways my very concept of Christianity—even as I reject religious belief—is ultimately an evangelical one (which is a kind of tribute to my parents, I guess). In fact, when I wrote The Book against God, which is about an atheist who has religious parents, I tried hard to make those fictional parents very different from my own—I gave them a very easy-going, tolerant, undogmatic, centrist kind of Anglicanism, which is quite far from the evangelical form of belief. I did this because I wanted to get a true novelistic narrative going and not merely produce memoir. But if I didn't quite portray my parents in that novel, I certainly portrayed their world.

RK: The circle of narrative-testimony-praxis is the crux for me—the heart of the whole thing. Theory comes after (though it is not unimportant). So, to repeat, I would begin by saying where I am coming from and then listen to where the other is coming from. And what interests me is to learn of the journey that brings my interlocutor to say, "No, I cannot call that God," or "Gosh, I never thought of that before. I thought of God as the almighty one, not the three strangers coming out of the desert or the hungry, thirsting outcast on the wayside or the Shulammite woman lusty for her lover in the streets at night, asking to be kissed with the kisses of his mouth (as in the Song of Songs), or a voice crying in the wilderness." So we would listen to each other and hopefully learn from each other. I would hopefully learn more about atheism and so deepen my anatheism. In the final analysis, such dialogue comes down to the question, "What is God?" And I very much enjoy Joyce's answer to that in Ulysses: "A cry in the street." For me, Ulysses is a holy book, ending with a cry in the street and a cry in the bedroom—a woman crying out "yes," as Mary did in Nazareth. And several works by Gerard Manley Hopkins, William Blake, Fanny Howe, and other poets are sacred texts too. But that is another story.

JW: In that exchange, would you consider yourself engaged in some process of anatheistic conversion? I wouldn't like to use that word, but you know what I mean.

RK: I wouldn't use the term "conversion" either—I dislike the idea, as I do anything that smacks of evangelism or apologetics. I would hate to think I am trying to convert you now. God forbid. But I would say that in any meaningful exchange of narratives on religion, there might be some kind of mutual transformation. I distrust the current academic fashion of so-called neutrality. As if questions of God could be conducted without any concern for personal and existential issues of faith or truth. In the beginning is hermeneutics. We all have our presuppositions and wagers. If we were to put things in theist or atheist terms—I am actually becoming less and less satisfied with these tags—I would say that in the anatheist space of mutual exchange and question, the relation between service and faith, between the divine and human goodness, between God and the stranger, I would say that in the space of reciprocal opening to each other, one of us might describe himself as an anatheist theist (me, for instance) and another as an anatheist atheist (you, for instance). That is more or less how I would see my relationship with you in the anatheist discussion we are having right now. When I read Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx as a young student, for example, my understanding of theism was deeply transformed in good ways. Though for obvious reasons, the relationship with those atheist interlocutors was not mutual (alas, they were dead). In my dialogues with you—now and on previous occasions, and in reading your writings on literature and belief in The Broken Estate or in your novel—these intellectual encounters are challenging and opening up my thinking about religion, God, and spirituality. I would also add that it is largely in my recent exchanges with you—and also in my exchanges with Buddhist thinkers—that my dissatisfaction with the very terminology of theism/atheism has become more pronounced. But thenism and atheism are the terms we have to deal with, at least in the West where the theoneresa/pantheism/antitheism debates have raged—sometimes with very violent results. As Heidegger said, we have to use the language of metaphysics to get beyond metaphysics. I have to use the language of
Christian onto-theology to get beyond the limits of onto-theology. It is in this sense that ana is, for me, an alternative to the theist versus atheist polarities, the “us versus them” exclusivism. For me, Christ, genuinely understood, is the exclusion of exclusion. But there are many Christs before and after Christ. As he himself said in that wonderfully self-multiplying kenotic way of his, “before Abraham was I am” (John 8:58) and “I must go so that the Paraclete can come (John 16:7).”

III

JW: So, where would you place yourself on the Christian spectrum?

RK: I must confess that I even find the identifications of Christian and non-Christian very limiting at times, especially as one progresses in genuine interreligious dialogue with others. I would say that I am post-Christian in the sense of ana-Christian, by which I mean that I go beyond certain aspects of my Christian church and heritage while also going back to it after I have left it. Having abandoned my childhood faith, I keep revisiting, retrieving, and reviving what I find there as an inexhaustible remainder—the surplus, the gift, the “always more” that remains an endlessly rich resource for hermeneutics.

JW: I’m attracted to this because it makes human sense. It makes human sense and it makes a narrative sense as a way of honoring the mixture of one’s traditions, not least because even if you stop believing in God—and for better or worse, I would define myself in that language—you can’t really get beyond the God you inherit; you’re always—as you put it—“after,” you’ve been marked, and indeed you don’t want to get beyond God, in a way. However, let’s stick with that hypothetical atheist encounter. I’m going to lob a couple of questions. First, is there some element of command—divine command in the orthodox sense—to do good that separates you from the atheist? The second related question would be, suppose the atheist says, “Look, I like your narratives, and what you’ve told me is that you have an inherited tradition that is a collection of stories—it’s a literary tradition, a radical literary tradition about strangeness, hospitality, and kenosis. But I’ve got a literary tradition too.” Let’s say this atheist starts talking about George Eliot and Marx. And he continues: “I think there’s a lot of common ground here. I’ve got my philosophy and my fiction. You’ve got your Bible stories. But please, let’s just stop talking about this whole God thing, because we’re just fiddling about with varieties of metaphor.” I suppose this is another version of my earlier question: “Why not stop talking about God?” Suppose the atheist says, “Yes, your biblical stories are truly great stories, as great as the ones told by Eliot and Marx (or Hardy and Adorno, or what have you), but don’t make them into more than that, because I don’t believe that you believe they are more than that.”

RK: Well, first, I would respond that it’s not just the Bible that’s my story. I see my story as participating (very humbly) in the story that continues on well after the Bible—that includes St. Francis and St. Clare, Jean Vanier, Martin Luther King, John Hume, Mahatma Gandhi, and so on. Do you know what I mean? It’s a whole history of stories that are testimonies and testaments to people who, in the name of this particular God of kenosis, caritas, and gravitas, have done good things. So I start from Augustine—I don’t always like Augustine, but he said two things that resonate with me a lot. First, God is the name for what we hope for. It’s what we hope for and it is to use the language of the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) program, the impossible. Being cured of an addiction that nothing else—no medicine, therapy, or psychopharmacology—can seem to heal. Nobody knows why AA works. But somewhere along the line, you begin with the admission that you’re totally helpless before this addiction. Nobody goes to AA unless he or she is at rock bottom. And then out of that confession of emptiness, out of that total surrender—“costing not less than everything” as T. S. Eliot, in his last quartet _The Little Gidding_, would say—the addict hands over his or her powerlessness to what’s called a “higher power”—however that may be defined. It doesn’t have to be a transcendent God. It doesn’t have to be a metaphysical or biblical “God.” But there’s something else, something _other_, something _more_, _extra_, _strange_ in the sense of not-me, beyond me, more than me. And this is what I’m trying to get at.

JW: And that something other is _beyond language_, yes? I’m trying to press this distinction, because that is the point you would press against the atheist.

RK: That something other is _beyond language_ but is accessed through language. And what I share with the atheist is the second Augustine phrase mentioned earlier—“do the truth.” You don’t first think the truth, say the truth, profess the truth, defend the truth. You _do_ the truth.

JW: I like that.

RK: So you know them by their actions, by their fruits. Now, the atheist might say, “Well, what about my fruits? I can list as many people as you who were doing good things in the name of man, not God.” I would acknowledge that and would want to respond in several ways. First, one could cite Karl Rahner’s idea of the anonymous Christian. You do the Christian thing without knowing you are doing it. You give the cup of cold water, you just don’t see that you’re giving it to Christ every time you give it to the stranger. You call it something else. And that is fine. It doesn’t matter what
we say; it matters what we do. When you see something other in "the least of these" that commands you, solicits you, calls you to do something that you don't naturally do—something "impossible," like giving up your life in the service of others—you're a Christian whether you like it or not. It's a clever bit of ventriloquism, albeit generous in its inclusiveness to "nominal" non-Christians. And I do like the response of the Buddhist monks when Rahner visited them in Kyoto and called them anonymous Christians: "And you, Professor Rahner, are an anonymous Buddhist." Touché. And well meant. Leaving aside Rahner's term, I do believe that we can be summoned by children, friends, neighbors, and enemies, to do the impossible every day of our lives. For me, another word for "God" is the "impossible." What is impossible for us is possible for God. So if the only way of making the impossible possible—that is, healing me of my addiction—is invoking a "higher power," then why not? We do need to find other words—like "the impossible" or "the possibility of the impossible"—for God. "God" is such a controversial hold-all that can mean a thousand things and has been subject to so much misinterpretation and violence down through the ages—particularly the God of sovereignty and power. "Absolute love" or "impossible hope beyond hope" are other terms. We need poets who give us new ideas again and again (Joyce's "Cry in the Street," Hopkins's "Pied Beauty," Virginia Woolf's "It," and Proust's "Petit Miracle"). We perpetually need new words, images, names, stories to fill in the space of "God"—which Jews and apophatic mystics are right to want to leave empty in its transcendence and otherness—so that we can fill it in with hundreds and thousands of little names. Like the Hindu's five hundred names for God, that's a start and a good reminder to us of the modest limits of our naming powers. Who dares reduce God to one name or idea? The more names we have, the better. Derrida and I agree that "absolute hospitality" is a good name—as a term that names the solicitation to do what? to respond to this or that stranger, here and now, as an incarnate someone who calls me to do the impossible.

JW: Is there a command as such?

RK: Yes, there is. But the divine command comes in the form of a question: "Where are you?" In other words, "Now that I need you to feed me, clothe me, love me, heal me, hold me—where are you?" And I answer: "Here I am." It seems to me that Levinas gets this right when he brings together the key summons of Biblical ethics and the key principle of humanism in a wonderful philosophical insight. In the first and last instance, it is the surprising voice of the stranger, the transcendent call of the other, that says, "Where are you?" And what is belief or faith here? It's the belief in the other, in yourself, in life on this earth here and now—that the impossible can become possible. It is credo, the "I believe"—as in, I trust; I have confidence; I give credit to the other; I wager that the other is truly other and not just me talking to myself. That act of faith as trust and truth is also a creative act. The common French term créance bears witness to this. That command can mean do not kill, share your food, love the loveless, or simply peace, love, hospitality, hope, pardon, forgiveness—the emptiest words in the book. In any book, aren't they? But—faute de mieux—they are also the best words we have for God once we understand them in an unconditional, absolute, transcendent way—which doesn't take them out of the immanent world for one instant. In the work of the Guestbook Project, I have learned over the years that hospitality is holy, sacred, precisely because it means doing the impossible: faire impossible. And I have had the extraordinary sense—witnessing concrete instances of hospitality in divided communities like Mitrovica, Jerusalem, Derry, and elsewhere—of the impossible happening, of an event where something surprising and unpredicted emerges, some dimension of otherness in the other person, of strange grace in the until-then-hostile stranger. In those impossible moments, one witnesses a transcendence surging up in the immanence of the moment, a divine excess, surplus, extra in the human, of the human, through the human, beneath the human, beyond the human—and whose very divinity does not take anything away from the humanity. Au contraire. It deepens and rarefies it. The same experience of this "more" that makes the impossible possible can also happen in our relationship with nature. But that is another question.

JW: Is that responding to otherness—to the surplus, the "more"—is that where you'd locate the command? Because command is fraught in two ways. It's fraught in the sense that the atheist might say, "Well, you have told me about the command, but the fact is that you just happen to have read these so-called sacred stories as a teenager; they moved you immensely and inculcated the idea of ethical engagement and decency and so on. This is all very moving, but it's not quite a command, exactly." And command is vulnerable from another atheistic or antitheist position, which defiancesly asserts that one should do good because it is right, not because one is told—commanded—to love one's neighbor. I tend to agree with this defiance.

RK: I agree with Hitchens on those two points, but I don't see the stranger—the sacred stranger, the stranger as sacred—as browbeating me to do the good or as some imperial power ordering me from above, ex cathedra or ex machina. I see it as a "thin, small voice," like the one that spoke to
Elijah in the cave—a call, rather than a command. A solicitation from utter powerlessness: “Where are you?” Not: “Give me food or be damned in hell.” But rather, “Can you feed me so I can live?” The summons is not a diktat but a question. As when Jesus says—at the ontological level of food, offering his life and body as bread for his followers—“Who do you say that I am?” it’s the opposite of a command as injunction, while simultaneously being a voice or call that commands our attention and, by extension, commands our care. It provokes and persuades. It is, in the lingo of speech act theorists, “perlocutionary.” It desires our response in word and action, but we are entirely free to say no. The “commanding” voice (if one wants to retain some sense of “commandment”) is vulnerable, fragile, or, as St. Paul says, “weak,” which does not mean it is nothing. It is not “squishy” (to use one of your words). No, the very vulnerability of the naked call has its own special strength, its own authority—what Vaclav Havel calls the “power of the powerless.”¹¹ That power is stronger than the mightiest of armies, for thoughts that come on dove’s wings guide the world, as Nietzsche wrote in Thus Spoke Zarathustra. That’s what I would say to the angry or defiant atheist.

JW: You are quite close to Levinas here.

RK: I am. I learned a lot from Levinas’s writing and teaching when I was a student of his in Paris in the late seventies. Along with Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Merleau-Ponty, I would say that he had the biggest philosophical influence on my thinking about God. The idea of a divine summons coming through the “orphan, widow, and stranger” is a deeply Judaic idea, as I try to show in my own chapter of Anatheism, and it extends throughout the Abrahamic tradition—and I would argue, beyond. The call of the stranger for me is quasi-universal. It can occur in any culture, religion, time, or place, albeit differently in each case. Because its universality only comes through the singular: it is not some abstract, transcendental, metaphysical principle or idea, but rather a concrete, lived, carnal experience between persons—and doubtless also between persons and things, places, animals, plants, planets. To come back to the biblical narrative for a moment, I would say that the command of the stranger in the street—invoked by Jesus in Matthew 25—doesn’t have any power. There’s no army to back him up. No triumphal fleets of angels. No imperial powers. Just a cry in the street. The voice of an utterly exposed, naked body full of need and desire. And that body, I would hold, is in everybody. And if it has any “authority,” it is that of Jesus at the end of his exchange with the grand inquisitor in Dostoyevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov—which you write so wonderfully about in The Irresponsible Self—when he approaches

the cardinal of power and might and plants a kiss on his lips. That’s the call, and it is the very opposite of the temptation to trump weakness with might that Dostoyevsky identified, rightly, with the three temptations of the devil in the desert. These temptations have all been yielded to in history, as we know from the appalling consequences of triumphalist Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Hitchens, Dawkins, and the recent anti-God squad have a good point here, and I would not dismiss them, like some, as “undergraduate atheists.” That’s too easy. For me, anatheism is the complete overturning of triumphalist religion in all its forms. I don’t believe that this is impossible for God—God who works in and as humans, as word made flesh again and again, every time a cup of cold water is called for and given. And I don’t believe I’m making it all up. It’s there in the great stories of people who have changed the world—the sages and saints, the prophets and pilgrims, the endless heroic rebels and revolutionaries who transformed our earth into a better place. Time and again. I repeat my list of twentieth-century anatheists: Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Etty Hillesum, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dorothy Day, Nelson Mandela, John Hume, Jean Vanier, and many, many more. But these are just uppercase “Holy Ones” (who would be the first to refuse the capitalization). For every one of these names, there are millions who go unrecorded and unnoticed—lowercase “holy ones.” But they are there, and we all witness them at different times and places in our lives, don’t we? Anatheism is about the hallowing of such everyday acts of agents of goodness. Not sentimental niceness, but hard-core hospitality—possible beyond the impossible. The sacred, in and through the secular. Or, as Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it, “the poor potsherd matchwood immortal diamond is immortal diamond.”¹²If the devil is in the details, so is God.

JW: The thing you privilege is this miracle of the impossible—this event of strangeness or otherness that makes the impossible possible. But what if the atheist says, “Look, the thing that separates us is not theological difference but a linguistic one. Kearney has a greater faith in metaphor and symbol than I do. He revels in metaphor. He’s always using these words like ‘sacramental’ and ‘anatheism,’ and I can do without them. But it’s really language that he believes in.” I presume, and I don’t want to put words in your mouth, that you wouldn’t want to just rest there. You’d say, “Hang on. I’m not going to be defined simply as your standard issue postmodernist. What I do privilege is something extra-linguistic, some otherness beyond language.” Would that be fair?

RK: Absolutely. And that otherness has, in my view, gone by certain names in different biblical or religious narratives. In The God Who May Be
(GWMB), I try to look at how the other, who promises Moses liberation, refers to himself in Exodus 3:14. *Asher yahweh asher* in Hebrew. This it usually translated as “I am who I am”. But there are alternative translations offered by Rashi, and later by Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber and Erich Fromm: I am who may be, who can be, who will be. I am the one who will be with you and who will come to be in history, in the life of this earth, if you bring it about, if you show up, if you answer my call and you make it—make me—in the world. In *The God Who May Be*, I call that (in technical terms) onto-eschatological otherness. Ontological is the pledge, the commitment to being (Greek, *ontas on*). This means that the transcendence of the other, the stranger, the impossible, does not reside in some Platonic otherworld but in a coming-into-being, a being-toward-being, which in Christian theology is called *kenosis* (the emptying of God into being) and *ensarkosis* (word becoming flesh). We witness this most immediately in the transcending gesture of otherness, strangeness, moreness, surplus, in the other person. I would also add the “other thing” because like Hopkins, I think it can happen in nature as well as in human life. There is a “more” in nonhuman nature as well as in human nature. Western humanism (both Greek and biblical) has often been too anthropocentric, ignoring the alterity and mystery of animals, plants, fish, and planets. But ethics sometimes excludes that because you just think of the truly human person and not the rest. So the term onto- tries to capture this fidelity of the sacred to the being of all things.

**JW: And the term eschatological?**

**RK:** Eschatology refers to last or ultimate things, and I like the term because it is much broader a term than theology. You can have different kinds of eschatology. Paul Ricoeur uses it at the end of his Freud book to refer to the “sacred” in general philosophic terms. He doesn’t talk about the divine, the theism, God, revelation, or salvation here—he talks about the eschatological dimension of the sacred as that which comes before the beginning (archaeology) and after the end (teleology). It’s the ultra, the ultima, the not-yet, the still-to-come. And this overlaps with the kind of messianicity one finds in postheuristic thinkers like Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Jacques Derrida, and Giorgio Agamben. So the question is: Does this kind of language—of the sacred, of eschatology, of transcendence, of otherness, of moreness, of messianicity—actually help one do the impossible? Does faith in the more-than-possible, in the impossible becoming possible, give one more hope to keep going, to keep waiting for God—like Beckett waited for Godot—and preparing a space for God to appear potentially in each person or thing? I believe it does. We’re back to the question of the efficaciousness of faith, the power of the powerless handing over to a “higher power”—which actually reempowers us to do something we could not otherwise do.

**JW:** But if one doesn’t want to call that “God”?

**RK:** Fine. And one might even construe such reticence as a certain apophatic scruple, a refusal to speak about what one cannot speak, what is beyond speech. Think of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s famous conclusion to *The Tractatus*: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.” Wittgenstein calls this unsayable, una nameable realm of silence *das Mystische* (though that is, I suppose, another kind of name, isn’t it?) “The mystical” is what cannot be said, what goes beyond what is the case, what we know, what we can represent in thought and language. “I’m going to do the truth, but I’m not going to speak about it.” I respect this. I even admire it. But the difficulty here, as I see it, is that it makes for a very solitary struggle—like Kierkegaard’s silent, single one on Mount Moriah with no one to talk to, no one to share his impossible summons. Derrida’s Abraham is alone on the mountain. It’s just too hard; it’s not liveable. One goes crazy in such absolute isolation and silence. So one of the reasons I propose a certain atheist retrieval of religion is its *shared* language. It’s about shared stories, commonly inherited narratives, translatable traditions and transmissible memories—albeit radically reinterpreted and retold (in accordance with poetic imagination and ethical sensitivity to each new historical situation). By contrast, one of the things I am a little wary of in our postmodern culture is its isolationism in the midst of a pseudo-collectivism (Facebook and the immediate availability of the social media). Where is the possibility of genuine community? Can one believe in the impossible on one’s own? I am not sure. Religion in its etymological sense of religare, a binding to the other, the one beyond and beneath us, the stranger as an impossible being rather than the enemy, is perhaps important here. The beginning of Abrahamic religion is the moment when Abraham welcomes the three strangers into his tent—turning hostility into hospitality—and the three turn out to be God. Genuine religion is the repetition of that gesture: war becoming peace. I fully endorse the idea of a “religionless Christianity,” expounded by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Paul Ricoeur, if we understand religion in the sense of dogmatic institutional imperium but retrieved as a genuine *auctoritas* that links us to a larger tradition and a historical community beyond our isolated, individual selves. I think something like that is still very valuable. Perhaps even indispensable.
IV

JW: I wanted to ask you about prayer—whether this other, this otherness who could be called God but you are happy not to call God, is a presence.

RK: One could call it by that name too.

JW: Exactly. Is it a presence one could or can pray to? That’s a general question. And a more personal one is the presence you pray to. For example, Terry Eagleton’s book, that I reviewed in the New Yorker a couple of years ago, Reason, Faith, and Revolution, trots out some perfectly acceptable Aquinas. I like Eagleton’s ethics, I like his anti-idolatry, and I like his Jesus of the gospels, who sounds a bit like Terry Eagleton, except doing better works than Terry Eagleton. But not once in the book does Eagleton mention prayer, and one is forced to conclude in the end that he has something like the philosopher’s concept of God—partly because he is philosophical in nature, but partly because he actually needs that “God” in order to bash on the one hand idolatrous evangelicals and on the other hand the idolatrous atheists who mirror the evangelicals.

RK: Are you saying his approach lacks prayer?

JW: I’m just observing that Eagleton never really mentions any personal relationship with this God that he’s always on about. And fine, I have no problem with the spadework necessary to get rid of the idolatrous God. But then, if someone writes a book about God and there’s no sense of presence and prayer, what kind of “God” is it? That’s my question. I think your answer would generally be, “Yes, absolutely, this otherness is a presence that one can pray to and meditate with.” And my more personal question is whether you are inclined to pray like this.

RK: Well, yes and yes. I do believe in such a presence, and it is what I call the power of the powerless. It is something “out there” (beyond imaginary projections or linguistic tropes)—it is something sacred, someone sacred that one can pray to and that I do pray to. So that is the short answer. And the longer answer is that I get weary of philosophies of religion that are just intellectual games. (I am not accusing Eagleton of this, but there is a certain postmodern play with divine-sounding signifiers that exhausts and frustrates me). I agree with Marcus Aurelius (and Wittgenstein) that philosophy is therapy—healing, caring, responding to pain and anxiety, seeking justice and goodness—and that if it is not, then it’s a waste of time. It’s just a game with ideas and bashing one argument against the other. So for me, it either does good—by doing the truth—or it doesn’t. And it is known by its witness, its fruits, and its stories that transfigure our lives. “Wisdom is vindicated by her children (Luke 7:35).” And might I add that this witness is not just a matter of ethics; it is also poetry. A poetics of presence that involves prayer. At least prayer understood in Simone Weil’s beautiful phrase about prayer being the absolute attention of the soul. So for me, the poetry of Dante, Herbert, Blake, and Hopkins is as real a form of prayer as the caring actions of St. Francis, or Teresa of Calcutta.

JW: You have some lovely stuff on “sacramental poetics” in Anatheism, where you write about Joyce and Woolf.

RK: In most of my writings on religion, I try to engage this crucial relationship between poetics and ethics. Poetics is very important because it embraces the splendour and pungency (to use one of your favorite words) of flesh. I believe this is a central aspect of the sacred often ignored in contemporary religion, which tends to observe a puritanical apartheid between sacred and profane, even in Christianity, which is supposed to be based on the radical incarnation of logos as sars. This poetics of sacred carnality is, I believe, indispensable—word made flesh. Kenosis descending from the highest to the lowest. So the miracle of the impossible can happen in the flesh—not just the spirit. The good that commands and calls does not come from some Platonic otherworld, some transcendent form, but from our lived ordinary universe. Beauty—or pungency—is the extraordinary in the ordinary, the more in the less, transcendence in immanence, otherness in everyday “thisness” (Hopkins’s riff on Duns Scotus’s haecceitas). Poetics responds to the sacred that shines and seduces through the flesh. It’s a form of sacred seduction, and thus poetics is essential for ethics. Otherwise, it becomes cheerless moralism. Miserabilism, or as Nietzsche said, cruelty. So the good is beautiful—Socrates was right about this—and it incites desire. Agathon ignites eros. It’s not a matter of saying: “I must do the good thing by going against my nature which is wicked and fallen.” And here I strongly disagree with Levinas, echoing Pascal, when he says that le moi est haissable—that ethics is unnatural. There is no room for an aesthetic of holy desire in Levinas—not to mention a divine pungency or sacred imagination. His ethics of the other does not allow for a poetics that mobilizes desire and imagination, that appeals to the good in our nature, the word in our flesh, the stranger within us as well as without. There are no icons in the Levinasian universe, no Bach or Blake, no Raphael or Rilke. Just the accusing and persecuting call of the other.

JW: So to come back to prayer, are you saying prayer is connected to a poetics of presence?

RK: I am saying that when I pray, I pray to something there. You cannot pray to Derrida’s or Levinas’s Other because it is not there. The Levinasian
face of the Other has no color in its eyes, no redness in its lips, no saliva in its mouth, no smell, no pungency. It is placeless, timeless, sexless. A quasi-transcendental placeholder. So disincarnate it only has a voice, a summons, but no fingers, hands, or feet. It does not touch us and is not touchable. The anatheist stranger, by contrast, is radically embodied and appears to us in concrete historical, spatio-temporal contexts, even if its holiness exceeds these multiple incarnations and epiphanies, as something supra-human breaks through its humanity. It is there. But where I do agree with Levinas (and Derrida after him) is that the other is not just my projection or alter-ego; it is someone who comes to me from beyond me even though it may also surprise me from within. But either way—whether it comes from without or within—it is more than me; it transcends me. That’s why it is more than humanism—why it is the more-than-humanism that keeps humanism human in a way by never allowing it to close up in itself.

JW: So, in terms of names, who do you pray to?

RK: My mother first taught me how to pray. I am sure I share that with many. So as a child, I prayed—like most Catholic children of in the 1950s in Ireland—to Mary, to Jesus as her son (more than as Messiah), and to the saints. There was a saint for everything: St. Anthony, for lost things; St. Christopher, for journeys; St. Francis, for compassion; St. Jude, for hopeless cases; St. Blaise, for sore throats and illness; St. Martin de Porres (the Peruvian slave), for fairness and justice (one of my younger brothers was named after him); St. Teresa the Little Flower, for little things. There was someone for everything—even tying your shoelaces. A sort of hallowing of the ordinary universe with someone always there to talk with. It was like I grew up with the communion of saints, and I still find myself praying to holy people rather than to gods, as such. I didn’t pray much to God the Father growing up, though that changed a bit when I heard Jean Vanier speak about the prodigal father and son as depicted in Rembrandt’s extraordinary painting. One more example of poetics bringing religion back to life. Shortly before my mother died of melanoma some years ago, she said she would like an interreligious funeral service. She herself was a Eucharistic minister toward the end of her life and very active in the local parish. Nothing like this had ever been seen in the village church in West Cork. And when the day came, my brother Philip, a priest who works with Vanier’s L’Arche communities, said a mass, and my different brothers and sisters and nephews and nieces said different prayers from the Buddhist or Vedentin traditions. It was really very moving and in keeping with my mother’s belief that, in her own words, while “Jesus and Mary were her people, there were other people for other people.” No hint of exclusivist superiority of her holy ones over other traditions and paths. No trace of supercessionism—other religions have little bits of truth but mine is the one with the “whole” truth. There was never any “My God is greater than your God” kind of talk. There are many mansions of faith and many rooms in each of those mansions and those rooms are populated with many names.

JW: Do you use any special names when you pray?

RK: I do, in fact. When I am in West Cork in the summers, for example, I pray a lot to St. Brigid. Our house is located just opposite of Bridge’s Island, and there’s a holy well there which was a place of pilgrimage for centuries. She was called Maire na Gaeil (Mary of the Gaels), because local Irish people revered her as much as—if not more than—Mary, the Mother of Jesus. I pray to the local saints, Brigid and Finbar and Fachna. And I pray to Benedict when I return to Glenstal Abbey where I was educated—a Benedictine Monastery. And I pray to St. John when I am with Jean Vanier, as he has a special devotion and understanding of his special mission and grace. And I pray to Teresa of Lisieux when I am with my French wife and family in Normandy and St. James when I am doing my annual pilgrimage on le chemin de saint Jacques de Compostelle. There are not many saints in Boston, mind you; but my local churches are St. Ignatius and St. Bernard’s—so they do quite well. And I have to admit that I have a special devotion to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene, because my mother was a marvellous mix of both—in a totally unpretentious natural way. I loved her dearly. I should add that when I visit a Hindu temple like Aranachula in India or the Buddhist White Monastery in Kathmandu, I pray to their saints and holy ones too: to Ramana, to Choquy Nyma. Not in some “spiritual tourist” way, but seriously, deeply, respectfully. It’s not squishy or opportunist. It’s not New Age consumerism. I mean it. But while I believe in the equality of all holy names—as pointers and prayers to the sacred—I do not believe they are all the same. They are neither the same in themselves or in me. On the contrary: Buddha, Shiva, Islaah, Jesus—they are all radically distinct and unique. My own special choice of names is distinctive, accordingly. This is your question, right? It is deeply Christian, as the above list indicates. Why? For the simple reason that Christianity is the religion I grew up in, the holy narrative (with all its unholy betrayals and misreadings) that I learned to love and respect from my genuinely devout family (both parents and siblings), my wonderful Benedictine and Jesuit teachers and, later on in life, my incredibly impressive Christian friends (most recently here in Boston, people like Fanny Howe, Sheila Gallagher, Mary Anderson, Bill Richardson, and the
Theism, Atheism, Anatheism

V

JW: I'm interested in the Cambridge theologian, Denys Turner, who is a theist really, and is very interested in Meister Eckhart.

RK: As am I.

JW: In his book *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, Turner ultimately argues that although Eckhart is obviously a kind of mystical deconstructionist, there's actually a sort of orthodox set of beliefs underpinning that negative mysticism. I guess this is what makes Derrida a little suspicious of such mysticism.

RK: It's atheism in drag.

JW: Right. The last chapter of Turner's book circles around the "ultimate question": "why is there anything?" Turner imagines an exasperated atheist saying to him (I paraphrase): "It is all very well, you embarking on a project in which you re-educate me in what I'm supposed to deny. But if you, the theist, won't affirm anything comprehensible at all, then why would the atheist need to do any denying in the first place since you theologians have already done all the denying there is to be done? Does not your so-called negative theology amount to little more than a strategy of evasion, which kills God off with the death of a thousand qualifications?" Turner admits that this objection has some force and he tries to reply to such an atheist with a kind of bedrock definition of what he, Denys Turner, does believe. He writes, and here I am quoting from Turner:

As an atheist response to the theist, this line of attack though promising is not yet quite fair. There is something which the theist affirms—asking the question "Why anything?" just is its affirmation—but it is something affirmed about the world, namely that the world is created. That, as we have observed Thomas to think, is our starting point for talking about God, and so long as we remain resolutely anchored in the implication of that starting point—that in speaking thus about the world the theist is always speaking about the ultimately ungraspable, that we do not know what God is—the theist can feel justified in all manner of talk about God, and can safely and consistently allow that everything true of creation, everything about being human, is in some sort grounds for a truth about God. For in saying that what the theist affirms is something 'about the world' we are not denying that the theist is talking about God: saying that the world is created is, on the contrary, how to talk about God. The negative theologian still has plenty to say about God, more than enough for the atheists to get their denying teeth into. Negative theology does not mean we are short of things to say about God, it means just that everything we say about God falls short of him.

Now, in many ways, that is clearly different from your position because that seems to me to be a fairly orthodox negative theism. But it interests me because Turner offers a bedrock, and I suppose it's not necessarily your bedrock. Turner's bedrock is the creator: to talk about "God" is to affirm that the world was created. It's precisely this bedrock that I find difficult to affirm, and it's why I don't call myself a believer because I do think, with Turner, that if there is an extra-linguistic presence that means anything (a power worthy of worship, love, or fear), then such a force or power must be a creator. Yet unfortunately, such a concept takes me back to theodicy, and I can't stand the implications of theodicy (i.e., the cruel, indifferent, or weak creator-God). Is your extra-linguistic presence such a creator, and if so, can you see a way out of what I was just talking about—the theodicy problem?

RK: Wow. That is the best "last" question I've ever been asked. A lot to be thought and said. But let me just jump in and move around in no particular order. The bedrock, yes. I do believe there is a bedrock, but it is not a given bedrock. It is a giving bedrock. In other words, if creation is a story of theodicy, then I'm 100 percent with you: out, out with God. I'm an out-and-out atheist. Anatheism means reinterpreting the notion of creation—as a metaphor but also as something more than a metaphor. It is, of course, a metaphor for what I call "giving" (what Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, called "Es gibt": the giving of being and time); and this metaphoricity, of course, entails imagination and narrative (as I have tried to show in much of my early work on these subjects). But I would want to claim that is also more than just a figure of speech, an anthropomorphic projection of our human creative powers onto some higher Being (as Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud so brilliantly described). The reason we have
to speak of creation as metaphor, in my view of things, is that we can’t jump outside of language to get at that thing, whatever that thing is, whatever “it,” to use Virginia Woolf’s language, is. We use language, so we are constantly reinterpreting what language is trying to say and to depict its figural attempts at trying (always impossibly) to say what can only properly be “shown” (as Wittgenstein realised in the *Tractatus*), when he said that the mystical can be shown but not said. For me, these reinterpreations of “it” in metaphors and stories of creation are not to be taken literally, but figuratively. And yet not just “as fictionally (qua illusion) but anaesthetically—as making certain hermeneutic claims to something “real.” To say that life is creation is to speak metaphorically in that it is saying that life both is creation (the gift of a giver) and is not (literally) creation, as creationists or theodicy claim. For me, theodicy is a form of idolatry by refusing this second aspect of the “is not.” It takes—I would say mistakes—God’s power as that literally of a king, sovereign, emperor of the universe (and so Hitchens, Dawkins, Marx, etc., are perfectly correct in rejecting it). But the power of theodicy, that remains human freedom and creativity, is not, for me, the true power of divine creation—which is the power of the powerless, “possibilisation,” the god-who-may-be (which is how I translate Exodus 31: following Cusanus notion of *posse* and Rashi’s notion of the “one who will be”). No cards allowed. So I say an unequivocal no to the creator God of theodicy. And then we can ask, we are free to ask, if there is some sense in the stories of “creation” in the great wisdom traditions (it is not just the Abrahamic tradition—even Plato has a creation story in his *Timaeus*), which can be read in terms of hospitality—that is as an offer to enter the world and history as a calling to peace, justice, and flourishing. And to ask if this alternative (anatheist, posttheodic) reading can be shared with others who hail from the great wisdom traditions, and even many who don’t but still have a sense that there is something potentially “gracious”—and not just fortuitous—about life. Something holy in the habitual, something to be hallowed as sacred even in the very lowest and least of things—a shared or shareable story of life as a gifting. Even Nietzsche recognizes, after his timely declaration of the death of God, that if someone gives you something, you receive it; you do not ask who gives. There is a mystery that life surprises us with, beyond our planning and control and autonomy, beyond the mere calculative economy of give and take, credit and debit, mercantile trade and reciprocity—some meaning in and through things that is greater than what we merely put into things. A meaning is revealed to us in life in addition to the meaning we project or interpolate onto life. I read creation accordingly not as an imposed theodicy of necessary causality but as a *petit miracle* of hospitality—the marvel of the impossible becoming possible when the strangeness of the stranger surprises us. The strangeness of what Heidegger and Freud called—in different but fascinatingly complementary ways—"the uncanny" [*das Unheimliche*]. So for me, “the mystery of creation” is not something you believe—as if it was a proposition of logic, evidence, argument, causality going all the way back to some supreme superintelligent cause that would explain everything. It is not a matter of belief, but of faith—faith that there is some meaning in the impossible giving and receiving of a gift. Faith as trusting, *Fides as confidens.* And the con-implies another, a cocreator, a stranger who is not oneself. It is a wager based on incalculable, noncomputable odds. That’s why it is a risk. The risk of hospitality. That the impossible becomes possible with the creation of the new, the hitherto unthinkable and unimaginable. A matter of faith rather than belief or knowledge.

JW: So just to jump in for a second, because I don’t want to disturb your flow—would it be fair to use the phrase, not just of hospitality, “the miracle of hospitality,” but also of creation—“the miracle of creation”?

RK: Yes, the miracle of creation, if that means the miracle of the gift, that there is a giving that is not a given—something taken for granted. Do you know what I mean? Creation can never be a given. As soon as it is considered so, it becomes an idol: a fact, a piece of evidence, *quod erat demonstrandum.* And we are back to theodicy: creation happened and everything is predetermined and preordained. That idea is as abhorrent to me as it is to you. But that is not how I would read the idea of creation. I prefer the radical (quasi-heretical) idea of mystics like Meister Eckhart, who says that creation is an endless gifting and birthing in every moment of existence as it surges and bumbles (sbulutio) up from nothing into something. So when he says, “I pray to God to rid me of God,” what he means is that there’s a letting go of the God of theodicy in order that the God of nativity can be born: a moment of conscience, of cocreation where the human and divine, the secular and sacred, give birth to and through each other. It’s startling and beautiful. For an anatheist appreciation of sacred beginning, in each moment, there must be an evacuation of the old God—the knowable, familiar alpha-God of causal creation, omnipotence, and theodicy. Adieu, bye-bye to that God. So then, out of that evacuated space, out of what Eckhart calls the empty bowl, the vacant (a-theist) womb, a new divinity can give birth to itself through us, can begin again out of nothing, its nothing, our nothing. The God after God gives birth to itself through the void. But apophasis and negative theology are not the last word, though they are indispensable. There is also, for me at least, the
affirmative possibility of a God who-may-be, being reborn through us. And here I would want to interpret the notion of the empty womb, the void, the nothing as the khora, which is what Plato calls (in the Timaeus) the origin before the origin, and that Christianity reinterprets as the womb of Sarah and of Mary. Let’s go back to the beginning, at least in the Abrahamic story. We have the image of the bowl that Abraham offers to the three strangers who appear out of the desert in Mamre. He gives them a bowl of food and water, and in so doing, a scene of potential hostility (they are hostes as ostensible enemies) becomes one of hospitality (they become hostes as divine guests). But it is Abraham and Sarah’s faith that makes this miracle possible, that the bowl might become full with food just as Sarah’s own womb (until then, barren, empty) can become full with child. The impossible becomes possible. Sarah laughs (which is what you do when faced with the impossible if you don’t despair or shoot yourself). And a child, a new beginning, an impossible birth, happens. Isaac (meaning laughter) is born. In the annunciation, in the Abraham story, there is this openness. So it’s a second creation, if you will. The Christian annunciation repeats this scene of Abrahamic creation/birthing/gifting/hospitality/faith (they are all one). A womb that cannot have a child has a child. The impossible becomes possible (adunaton becomes dunaton as the angel-stranger says to Mary in Nazareth in Luke), but these impossible births from nothing are going on all the time. For creation is not understood as not about one big omnipotent bang at the beginning of time, which fixes things once and for all for the rest of time, but rather a series of endless multiple re-birthings. I’m very Eckhartian in that sense. It’s happening all the time. In every moment. If we allow it to happen, whether we call it “God” or not. And what we chose to call it is obviously a matter of language—a matter of what special images and stories we have to describe it. Because we don’t have facts. We don’t have evidence or proofs. It is not verifiable or falsifiable. It is not about knowledge, but faith. Faith in a story, but a story you can choose to believe is true, in the sense of troth, something you trust, espouse as your spouse, betroth as your betrothed, love as your lover. It’s all in the Song of Songs. The only God worth its salt is the God of the Shulammite woman.

JW: But is there something beyond the language, a reality beyond the stories?

RK: For me for anatheism as I understand it—is, there is. And that is why it is not just fiction, though it relies on and presupposes fiction. One cannot bypass narrative and metaphor on the way to the sacred. But the sacred is something more than the stories we tell about it. As in the old Buddhist example, they are fingers pointing to something beyond the hand itself. I have faith that sacred narratives—the scriptures, the lives of saints, the testimonies of holy people (and they are everywhere to be found)—refer us to something other than ourselves, bigger than ourselves, more loving than ourselves. This could be read as purely pragmatic at one level: let people believe this if it makes them do good. But I happen to think it is more than pragmatism. I believe it and am prepared to pray to that other in others.

JM: Could you say more about the notion of khora?

RK: Yes. Let me return to the Christian narrative here, since it is the one I know best. (Derrida and Caputo will explore the mystical potentials of the Greek Platonic khora for example—and I have had critical exchanges with them both on this in Strangers, Gods and Monsters). Mary, in the annunciation scene and afterward, is described in Greek Orthodox liturgy as the khora of the akhoraton. She is the figure of the womb, the bowl, the empty space through which the divine, the littlest of things, the lowest of the low can be born. And the visitation of the three kings from afar echoes the three Abrahamic strangers in the Biblical imagination. It’s all part of what Northrop Frye and Paul Ricoeur call a “great code” of figureations—prefigurative, configurative, refigurative. A yes that goes from the first chapter of Genesis through the stories of Sarah and Mary to the reveries of Molly Bloom. (Think of Bloom recalling Molly’s “yes” at the end of Ulysses). Coiled up in bed beside Molly, he is described as “man-child weary, child-man in the womb,” signalling the possibility of rebirth through Molly’s “yes” of desire, of affirmation through new life. And in addition to literature (sacred and secular), there is also visual art; and I think particularly here of the Greek Orthodox images of the perichoressis. Take Andrei Rublev’s icon of the three persons, the canonical image of the Trinity in Eastern Christianity. Perichoressis is the image of three strangers moving in an endlessly open circle. This is not some static, omnipotent, fully accomplished God at the end of history. It is the image of the eschaton—the last of things—as three people moving around an empty bowl: Mary’s womb as the khora akhoraton (which means the “container of the uncontainable”). So Mary’s khora—at the heart of the peri-khara—is imagined as the core of an uncontainable divinity, newness, strangeness, moresens. This womb is the empty, ever-renewable open (to cite Rilke) at the heart of the Godhead, the a-theist space that makes anatheism possible. So when Levinas says atheism is Judaism’s best gift to humanity, he means the carving open of this space. And in the eschatalogical imagination, it is this space, this u-topos, which keeps the three topoi moving in a circle, a circle in which each of the figures plays host and guest in turn, saying to the other “After you, after you,
after you." And in this dance (khora also has the sense of khorein as in a Greek chorus) we rediscover the double ana-theist movement of adieu, as each person leaves its place for the other and takes the place left to it by its other. We find this twofold movement of departing (ad) and approaching (ad), of leaving and arriving, of transcending and incarnating, beautifully captured in the Latin translation of perichoresis as circumin-cesso—which can be spelled with a c meaning cedo, to cede one's space or with an s meaning sedo, to occupy or receives one's space. That, for me, is why I believe in the poetics of the sacred—narrative, imagination, metaphor, icon. I think if you stop creatively rethinking and reimagining the words and the concepts of the divine it dies. The perichoresis goes on and on.

JW: It sounds as if your response to Denys Turner might be, "Yes, I do believe in a creator God, but the creator God I believe in is rather different than your creator God. You seem to believe, Professor Turner"—forgive me if I am putting words in your mouth—"in a creator God who is pretty much the founder of the world, the spark of the world, who providentially in some way manages the world, even though you can't speak about it. Whereas my God, my creator God, is, as I see it, an endless gifting." Would that be fair?

RK: That would be fair. Since the sacred story I personally hold by—the Abrahamic narrative—does speak of a God of genesis in its opening chapter, it would be a stretch for me to shed that right off; but how I reinterpret it is an endless gifting (beyond the merely given), I would want to speak of the radical importance of the seventh day of this on-going genesis of word into flesh. The Sabbath is crucial because it is the day when nothing happens. When God stops and we start. When the divine withdraws (zimzum) and we take on the promissory work of cocreation. The seventh day, though it seems to come at the end, is actually there from the beginning as the gap in God. It is the time of kairos and the space of khora. And here I return to the empty bowl at the heart of the trinity, the free zone at the centre of the Godhead. The call to make the impossible possible and the possible actual. If you get rid of this space of loving cocreation you have theodicy. You lose God as the one who may be, who can be, if and only if one responds to the call of the stranger. One no longer hears the cry in the street. "What is God? A cry in the street" (Ulysses).

JW: That's beautiful.

RK: Because that's the cry of powerlessness. But it is also—I would add—Molly's cry of "yes." So it's a cry that solicits the food of life—"Give me bread"—and it's also the cry of love.

VI

JW: When, if ever, you think about this inconceivable beginning of time, the big bang—something that physicists themselves don't know that much about—do you, can you, envisage, imagine, your creator God, your "extra-linguistic presence" present at this big bang? Can you imagine your extra-linguistic force there? Right there at the beginning, right there—not just beyond language, but before language?

RK: I must confess, it is not the kind of question I ever ask. Physics and metaphysics are two languages of causality that I do not apply to the question of the sacred. To think of divine creation as causality—the first, supreme, final cause, or the ens causae—is already theodicy in my view. I utterly respect the thinking of science and physics but am not comfortable, personally, with trying to explain "God" in those terms. I think it is perhaps a case of what certain analytic philosophers, following Gilbert Ryle, would call a category mistake. I'm not competent to go there, and I don't. So let me come at it from another angle, from the claim that in the beginning was the word. There are two things about this: in the beginning was the word, and the word was the promise and desire of flesh. History—human history, cosmic history—can then be viewed as a beginning that never ends, as a constant rebeginning, an endless remaking and rebirth of word as flesh. But for atheism, the word is first and foremost a cry. So we could reformulate Scripture as saying—in the beginning was the cry. The double cry of "yes" and "Where are you?" The first is a cry of love and desire, the second is a cry in the dark, a cry in the street, a cry in absence and pain and in separation and loss that says, "Where are you?" Both are repeated as the cry of the child at birth. So one is summoned into existence by a call that asks us "to be." To be there for the other. To show up as the other shows up. We're called "to be" by a cry for existence. So God is not, God may be if we respond to the cry and make God (call, promise, hope, and desire) incarnate by bringing it into the flesh. Now, I know I am going back in language when I speak of the cry and the word made flesh, but I also intend this as testimony to what happens in the street. Everyday voices, gestures, and solicitations, as when someone phones up and says they need help with a paper or problem, the cry is ordinary. The word and the flesh are flesh that is quotidian (which is why I am very reluctant to capitalize them). Quite a number of contemporary philosophers are returning to the realist and causalist metaphysics of Aquinas—McIntyre, Eagleton, and, it seems, Turner too, from what you are saying. But while I have huge respect for the brilliant synthesizing author of the Summa Theologiae—that is not my path, and his proofs for
the existence of God are not my proofs. I don't have any; I don't believe in a God that can be proved, in a God of whom one says, "I believe that God exists." Faith is not believing that but believing in, as I said previously. In contrast to the metaphysical notion of God as first cause of the universe, as pure act without possibility (\textit{actus purus non habens aliquid de potentialitate}), anathemitism wagers on an alternative notion of God as what may be—as posse rather than esse ipsum subsistens. My first book, \textit{Poetique du Possible}, ends with the statement "Dieu n'est pas mais peut être." And this God of May-be, this sacred Perhaps, is not an invention of mine. It goes right back to a radical messianic reading of Exodus 3:15 through Nicolaus Cusanus's notion of \textit{possese} right up to contemporary notions of sacred possibility (Etty Hillesum, Franz Rosenzweig, and Ernst Bloch). It is a counter tradition, if you will, often linked with a certain mystical anarchist current sometimes dismissed as atheist, as Leibniz and Derrida rightly acknowledged, or a subtradition, the God beneath rather than beyond. The more in the less. When Cusanus (the brilliant fifteenth-century Christian thinker) tried to describe this mysterious \textit{possese} he compared it to the fragile voice of a child in the street. We are back to Joyce.

JW: And back to the first cry of creation.

RK: Yes. And that is the perichoresis—which is, of course, itself a poetic image expressed in an icon. I would say that the cry of creation—the cry of the beginning and the end—comes from the middle of the \textit{khora}, what I call the “fourth dimension” of the sacred. In the metaphor of the trinity, there are three persons, and then the fourth dimension is the khora. That's also the neglected and repressed feminine dimension. It is the dimension of history, desire, birth, time, space, and finitude, which most orthodox causalist metaphysics expel from the patriarchal plenitude and purity of the deity. It's what Derrida calls “phallogocentrism.” The cry of khora is a fourth forgotten dimension which challenges the perfectly self-contained, self-sufficient, omnipotence of the supreme being. So, to return to the relationship of all this to physics, I should mention that I recently had occasion to ask a great astrophysicist at Harvard, Leon Golub, about the fourth dimension. And he went away and thought about it—he's very careful, he doesn't spin into metaphors and narratives like me. He's a very thoughtful atheist fascinated by these questions—which to me is far better than a theist who isn't fascinated. He sent me some wonderful notes on the ways of thinking about a fourth dimension in physics and mathematics. I was delighted. I realized I'm not just alone with my metaphors; there may be something out there physically. A dialogue might be possible at some level between metaphor and matter.

VII

JW: That's a very nice line. I'm going to have to quote you on that. I have a question of the gossip kind. I would assume, given all that we've discussed and what I know of your belief, your faith, and your work, that it doesn't bother you at all that our mutual friend, the artist Sheila Gallagher, who is a committed Catholic believer, probably thinks you're more of a believer in her terms than you actually are. And that I might say to Sheila at a dinner party, "Well, I think Richard is actually much more of an atheist than he would like to admit." This contradiction doesn't bother you?

RK: No. On the contrary. It means I may be getting something right. I'd be worried if that conversation didn't happen. I do like differences; the fact that when we have our exchanges about God—at BC, at Harvard, here—it is a real dialogue in the original meaning of \textit{dia-legein}, welcoming the difference, a respectful, creative difference. I have that in a special way with Sheila too. If you are my favorite atheist anathemist, she is my favorite theist anathemist. Anathemism can handle both. As long as these dialogues continue—at the level of personal and intellectual friendship and witness—I realize, once more, I am not totally on my own with figures and tropes. I am bound again, re-connected, \textit{re-ligare}, to a community of minds, bodies and souls. And that brings me back to the communion of saints. Which for me is not about saints in heaven but concrete people on earth.

JW: How would a Derridean thinker like Caputo react to all this? I presume he would pounce on your mention of a presence that is something more, something extra-linguistic.

RK: Yes, I suspect he would. And even within my use of language, he might take issue with my frequent recourse to narratives. For a deconstructionist, that would be too hermeneutic. Too much deferring and referring to traditions, memories, communities, to a whole legacy of previous interpretations. He'd be suspicious of that because he's deeply committed—and I totally respect this. His Derridean position that you're alone in the desert (like the anchorites) and on top of the mountain (like Kierkegaard's and Derrida's Abraham). It's not just narrative imagination and tradition; even metaphors are suspect because, as the etymology indicates, they are transferring meaning, transiting and transferring from one meaning to another. In contrast to such hermeneutic mooring, bridging, translating, deconstruction claims (as I read it) that you should be alone, insovable, and disconsolate before the radical absence of meaning. You should stay with the dark sonnets, with the dark night of the soul, and not move beyond them. I fully acknowledge the mystical annihilation of self, the total
abyss of loss, but with John of the Cross and Hopkins, I also want to take the second step, though I fully respect those who don't. It's a brave choice. Uncompromisingly lucid and honest.

JW: And if you're a solitary in the desert is there, for you, still someone else there?

RK: There's an other, an otherness—yes.

JW: I am thinking of what Caputo said to you in your Harvard dialogue in 2011. He said something like: "I go to colleges all around America and people come to me and say, 'My life really changed because I took Jesus Christ as my Savior and I really believe in God as creator and redeemer,' and what do you have to say to them?" For me, that question is always the pressing one. And I am always coming back to that. We've just explored this whole question, but for Derrida and the deconstructionists, is there something else?

RK: There's an alterity out there that is coming at you. But it's utterly anonymous, it's utterly uncaring. As Derrida says, it does not care, it's not love, it's not grace; it's something fortuitous that confounds and interrupts. It's not humanism, it's not messianism. It is a structural messianicity: of pure event, without messianism—that is, without face, flesh, content. It's khora without the persons.

JW: Is it this antihumanism which differentiates Derrida from Levinas?

RK: The difference between Derrida and Levinas is complex. I am close to Levinas in holding that the face of the stranger is the trace of transcendence, but I part company with his exclusively Abrahamic-Judaic reading of transcendence. He is radically anti-incarnational and has no real dialogue with Islam, not to mention with what he refers to as "paganism"—Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism and other non-Abrahamic spiritualities. Religions outside Judaism are basically forms of idolatry. There is only one true form of transcendence: the Tout Autre of divine creation understood as radical separation from nature, immanence, history, imagination. This total other is contaminated and betrayed in incarnation. There is no possibility of gracious translation or transition from sacred word to profane flesh. That's where he stops short of atheism, though his adherence to an anti-idolatrous atheism as crucial to Judaic ethics comes close at times.

JW: So if someone says to you, "My Lord and Savior has changed my life"?

RK: When I hear people speak like that, I try to listen and understand where they are coming from. My basic line would be—and this leads us back into hermeneutics—if your faith in what you call your "Lord" leads you
to follow Martin Luther King or Etty Hillelum or Dorothy Day, I am with you. And if it leads on the opposite path of Rush Limbaugh or Rick Santorum, then I'm against you. These same words can be deeply enabling or profoundly disabling. They are neither black nor white. Atheism reads between the lines and makes its wager. You shall know them by their fruits. It is ultimately a matter of tasting, eating, living. God is what we eat, or God is nothing at all.

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Notes

1. Merleau-Ponty quotes Claudel in The Prose of the World, 83–84: "God is not above but beneath us—meaning that we find him not as a supersensible model, which we must follow, but as another self in ourselves which dwells in and authenticates our darkness."
2. Arendt, Men in Dark Times, 97.
3. Cf. Kearney, "Eucharistic Imagination in Merleau-Ponty and James Joyce."
4. Rahner, "The One Christ."
6. In his sonnet from 1889 "That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection."