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I

CDVT: Let’s start with the fact that people sometimes misunderstand what you mean by anathesism. Anathesism, if I’m not wrong, is not so much a going back to “God” as it is the condition of possibility of a religious attitude, and thus the possibility of God. If so, could we characterize anathesism as some sort of “theory of religion” or a theory of the genesis of religion?

RK: I would say that anathesism is not just a theory but a wager. Or a faith before faith. There are many theories of religion, as you know—religion as an expression of ritual and social consensus (Durkheim); of periodic blood sacrifice (Girard); of wish-fulfilling projection onto a supernatural being (Feuerbach/Bloch/ Marx); of compulsory pathologies of fear, illusion, power, and consolation (Freud and Nietzsche); and so on. These are all very interesting theories, but anathesism begins with the experience of a wager shared by all human beings from the beginning of time: the wager of hostility or hospitality when confronted by the stranger. Faced with an unknown other—guest, foreigner, refugee, adversary, the other without or within—we are all capable of responding with violence and mistrust or with openness and empathy. Human history is a story of murder and war; it is also a story of impossible hospitality, of acts committed by great people from Abraham, Jesus, and the Buddha down to contemporary figures like Mahatma Gandhi, MLK, John Hume, Etty Hillesum, and Nelson Mandela. And also, let us not forget, by lots of little people every day of the week, who perform what Proust calls “les petits miracles” of sympathetic imagination. These anathesist acts inform and motivate theories. But existence precedes speculation. Anathesism is praxis and phronesis—to use Aristotle’s terms—before it is theoria.

CDVT: So there seem to be two ways of understanding the wager. One is anthropological—the human power to put another human being ahead of oneself. Another is more theological—involving a response to something more than human both in and through the human, a surplus of love that makes the impossible possible. You say that the encounter with the stranger is a universal human experience, but does it have to involve God per se? Could we not speak of it in purely humanist terms? That is James Wood’s question to you: “Why bring in religion?” In the history of philosophy, the Enlightenment enabled us to rid ourselves of God. Then, with Levinas, we were introduced to talk of the stranger as the trace of God—the so-called “theological turn in phenomenology.” Suddenly, God came back again.

RK: I agree. The anathesist wager can be interpreted anthropologically or theologically, humanistically or religiously, atheistically or theistically, or both. For some (like James Wood), it is an either-or (and he chooses the former). For me, it is a both-and. The wager is primarily about treating the stranger as friend or enemy (from the double term, hostis), not about believing or not believing in God. It is existential before it is propositional. In many wisdom traditions, “God” is the term used to describe the conversion of enemy to friend, of feared adversary to guest. “God” is a common name used by millions of people for millennia to denote the impossible move from hostility to hospitality. And there are, as we know, multiple names for God—and sometimes no names at all. Certain spiritual and mystical traditions share with humanism the option to refuse all names for God. As when Eckhart prays to God to rid him of God. They suggest abandoning all conceptual rights of the sacred so as to let the miracle happen. Eckhart calls it in a prayer Abgeschiedenheit: letting go to let be, letting mystery happen, letting come what promises to come. Anathesism is this radical alertness and attention to the call for transformation; and one could cite as a practical example here the twelve-step program that, in curing addiction, talks of a “higher power.” Proust talks of “little miracles”; Joyce of “a cry in the street”; Woolf of a “match struck in the dark.” The poets have great images when it comes to talking about the sacred (sacer has the same root as “secret,” alluding to what is intimate and ultimate, an unnamable dimension of strange otherness). And we too often forget that some of the most holy scribes and sages were poets. Theology is very often a theopoetics, which forgets this fact. So the important thing, ultimately, is not the name as such. That is why anathesism proposes an open space and time before and after the binary division of theism versus atheism, beyond religious-secular wars and ideologies, in favor of an existential experience of the impossible becoming possible, of hostility being transformed into hospitality, of violence becoming peace. “Ana” signals a moment of grace, trust, and change, a metamorphosis where something strange happens—something given, not made, a
of the stranger to change what is, by resisting the summons to run from nothing (our self-enclosure) to something, from ourselves alone to someone or something other than ourselves that solicits love and change. The call of the stranger may be experienced as epiphany or trauma—two ways of registering the other—and it is often a mix of both. But the bottom line is that it bids us "change our lives" (like the artwork in Rilke's famous poem). This is part of our existential experience, but it is also part of our hermeneutic heritage—our available traditions of stories and revelations. If one looks at the history and culture of religions, one finds a special language and liturgy that advocates for this welcoming of the stranger. You find it in Abraham receiving the strangers at Mamre, Mary welcoming Gabriel, and Jesus and the Buddha welcoming the sick and the seeking. That is why it is so helpful to be inspired and informed by our great wisdom traditions. But we are, potentially, equally informed and inspired by the call of the stranger each day of our lives. The wager is constantly called for. That is why anatheism refuses to oppose our existential experience and the hermeneutic inheritance of our spiritual traditions.

CDVT: If we take seriously the psychoanalytical approach to trauma as a nonretrievable wound, it is not an either-or. In epiphany, something like a traumatic undertone continues to sound. Abraham never will forget the horrible day he was ready to kill his son, ever if the story relates that God sent a ram as a substitute.

RK: You're right. And the story of Abraham and Isaac at Mount Moriah is a good example of how trauma (the temptation to murder his son) is but a whisker away from epiphany (the revelation that he must not murder his son, but rather replace the cult of blood sacrifice with the way of mercy and love). The call of God comes in the implied call of Isaac to his father: "do not kill me," and Abraham makes a genuine anatheist wager: he listens to the stranger/angel/other calling from the face of his son and abandons the old god of blood sacrifice. He runs from the old image of God to the new. Abraham opens himself to the God who comes, who runs toward him. God after God. Ana-theos. There is always someone or something that resists evil and bloodlust, that calls for something else—the sacred still to come.

CDVT: Is it a matter of choice and imagination, then?

KK: Both—a choice to be chosen by the call of love and justice, and imagination as a response to the call to create and recreate anew. Anatheism is not voluntarism or subjectivism. It is not just about "me"—but me (or us) faced with the stranger. Therefore it is radically interpersonal. I cannot respond to the call of the stranger without imagination and choice. The modalities
of this response differ from one spiritual tradition to the next. The Judaic
and Islamic religions, for example, tend to emphasize a transcendent God
where words and scriptures—the Torah, Talmud, Koran, Hadith—are
more important than plastic images, statues, paintings, liturgies (though
there are exceptions—Sufism for instance). Christianity, Buddhism, and
Hinduism are more on the side of the immanent, declaring certain persons
and places sacred—teachers, sains, gurus, mountains, rivers, planets,
and so on. But stories—works of narrative imagination—are central to
all the wisdom traditions, transcendent and immanent. Think of the
foundational role of sacred stories in the Abrahamic tradition: Genesis,
Abraham meeting the strangers at Mamre, Jacob struggling with the angel,
the healings and parables of Jesus, or in Buddhism, the Jakata stories and
images of the wanderings of the Buddha in search of wisdom. It is only later
that these sacred-spiritual narratives are institutionalized and codified into
what we now know as “religions.” And these religions often tend to close
down the role of sacred imagination and narration into exclusivist rituals,
credos, dogmas, and doctrines. In so doing, they provide a sense of religious
identity and belonging for a particular group—which is compelling and
important; but this is sometimes at the expense of interreligious curiosity
and generosity—namely, interreligiousity. The spirit blows where it wills.
It defies spiritual closure and self-certainty. Remember, the Greek for
“sacred” is mysterion, meaning literally a blinding experience of verticality
and strangeness bringing about a transformation of self, a questioning
of identity. And when thus blinded by the sacred, our imaginations go to
work. They turn the darkness into light.

CDVt: I noticed that you often use the terms “God” and “sacred”
interchangeably. As a Protestant theologian, of course, this automatically
sets off alarm bells in my head. God and the sacred are two different
concepts.

RK: They are. I agree. But for me, the sacred is a more capacious and inclusive
term. Buddhists, for example, can readily speak of persons or things being
sacred, but they do not accept the idea of a transcendent God. You can say
this person, this place, this time is sacred to me, and it doesn’t necessarily
posit a belief in a theist God. Lots of nontheists, humanists, and agnostics
can say, “This is sacred to me” in the sense that it is irreplaceable or that
there is some special value or mystery about it. Can one explain why? Not
easily. There are reasons of the heart that reason does not understand.
Different wisdom traditions provide rich treasuries of witness, art, and
imagination concerning our experience of the sacred, and one can also
access the sacred without a theist theology. One can experience the sacred
without proceeding to an affirmation that God exists, without espousing a
church of particular confessional beliefs and doctrines. Anathesim is
a space that allows for both a theistic and an atheistic experience of the
sacred stranger—and of the hospitality or hostility wager that arises from
that. It acknowledges a sacred-spiritual moment before a leap of religious
faith as such. A sort of faith before faith, if you like. Or a faith after faith.
Derrida and Caputo refer, for example, to a messianic desire that precedes
all propositional doctrines and opens us to some sense of the impossible,
the gift, the perhaps, the event to come, the kingdom. One can choose to
call the impossible by an atheistic name like “chora” (as Derrida says, he
“rightly passes for an atheist”) or by a theistic name like “God”: defined, as
I say in The God Who May Be, as the “possibility of the impossible”—the
sacred possible beyond the impossible. Anathesim allows for both theist
and atheistic dispositions and fosters dialogue between them.

CDVt: So “God” comes after the experience of what is sacred for me or for you?

RK: Yes, if you chose to take the step from the sacred to God. The sacred is
always concrete and contextual, singular and experienced in some way.
We speak of something or someone sacred: a sacred time, a sacred place,
a sacred person or stranger in relation to you or your community. Mecca
is a sacred place for Muslims; Varanasi is a sacred place for Hindus. Even
though these are not sacred places for me as a Christian, I can respect them
as holy places for others. But this sense of multiple particular sacred places
and persons invites me to interreligious compassion and dialogue, so the
sacred doesn’t have to be just “for me.” I can recognize a sacred place for
others, too, and go there with reverence.

CDVt: Should we also distinguish between the sacred and the spiritual?

RK: Yes, I think it is important to acknowledge the difference between the
spiritual, the sacred, and the religious. The spiritual is everybody’s search
for something special, a surplus of meaning. And I am not sure I have
ever met anyone not open to that. One can easily say that one is spiritual
without implying a relationship to any particular sacred person or place
or to any particular religion. Literature, poetry, art, yoga, and meditation
are all spiritual practices. They can be individual spiritual choices without
involving commitment to any shared sacred experience, tradition or
religion. They are human experiences, acts, searchings. One can do yoga
without being a Hindu and walk the Camino de Santiago without being a
Christian. The sacred takes spiritual practices to a more incarnate, shared
level of special times, places, stories, persons, and invariably involves some
element of community, while religion, for its part, takes it all the way
to codified doctrines, dogmas, rites, ceremonies, and beliefs. The three
levels—spiritual, sacred, and religious—comprise a series of options one
can take or leave (at least in our secular western democratic culture) and I
am not setting up any claim to progression or regression from one level to
the next. Personally, I am happy to embrace all three, but I equally respect
others who chose one or another.

CDvT: You start with making choices and wagers.

RK: Yes, and in that sense, it is a human point of departure. But anatheism
is not limited to the human. It is a human response to something more than
human, in and through the human. Each sacred wager is centrifugal; it
runs beyond the self. The sacred is something you want to run toward
because it is other than you and solicits you in some way. And then the
religious is a further option, if you wish to take it—that is, to commit to a
particular shared set of doctrines, rites, and traditions. And finally, God,
one could say, is above all religions as the name for the divine X-factor: the
name for what cannot be named. And it is because God is an apophatic,
unnamed in essence, that—paradoxically—one finds multiple different
names for God in multiple different religions. Elohim, Yawheh, Abba,
Kyrios, Allah, and so forth, in the Abrahamic tradition and several
hundred names in the Hindu scriptures. “The non-nameability of the
divine is its omni-namability,” as Eckhart, according to Stanislas Breton,
rightly says. There are many names for God, and they all aim at something
more than the name—the more in the less, the infinite in the finite, the
radical grace of transformation, the possibility of impossible hospitality to
the stranger.

CDvT: Jean-Luc Nancy, in a discussion with Jean-Luc Marion, articulates the
question about God in terms of an exclamation, an address: “my God.” And
in that same text, he remarks that “God” is as much a nom propre as it is a
nom commun, a noun.

RK: Yes, the intimate, personal “my God” is one of many names, and as soon
as one says “my God” or “our God,” one has already made the apophatic
into the kataphatic—part of one’s own experience of the sacred. Not just
a name, but the experiential event of a name in one’s own being (personal
or communal).

CDvT: What then is “God”? A concept? An idea?

RK: God is a word, a name, an idea, but an empty one that we need to fill in
and flesh out with images, narratives, liturgies, actions, and embodiments.

I mean, if I pray to X, that prayer means nothing to me. But if I say a
prayer to Jesus, to Mary, to Saint Francis…I do not pray to some empty
abstraction—I pray to someone. So God is always a crossing of the name of
God into flesh, a running toward us as we run toward God. The name needs
to constantly fill and empty itself again and again, God after God after God
anathetically. I think again of Eckhart: “I pray to God to rid me of God.”

CDvT: But that is because you are a Catholic.

RK: But you Protestants pray to Jesus, don’t you? And to the Father in heaven?

CDvT: I remember in my church, there was a discussion about that. Some said
you can’t pray directly to God, but only to Jesus. Which is, dogmatically
speaking, nonsense. If you use the name of Jesus Christ, then you’re already
praying to a crossing of the name. In a sense: the godly Christ is the cross
over the human name of Jesus. But the point for us is, I think, that you
have to wager: theists may call to God or to one of his many other names;
atheists refer to some other concept. But the wager is inescapable.

RK: I agree.

CDvT: Do I understand you rightly, then, when I say that for you, anatheism
indicates the moment of hermeneutic decision: in what language are we
going to articulate the experience with the stranger? Either chora or God?
Either philosophy with Plato or theology with, let’s say, Augustine? Chora
is a notion of openness, purely formal, whereas “God” is loaded and has
strong spiritual and religious connotations. When pondered carefully, the
two concepts do not have equal weight.

RK: For theologians, yes, God is more loaded than chora. But theology comes
after religion which comes after the sacred.

CDvT: Could we say “eschatology,” in the sense that there is no original
experience that is not oriented to some final horizon of interpretation?

RK: Yes, I think so. I often use the term “eschatology,” which I have preferred
to theology in previous works like Poétique du Possible (1984) and The
God Who May Be (2001). Ricoeur uses eschatology in his conclusion to
Freud and Philosophy to denote an ontological sense of the sacred—sacred
understood as the surplus, the other, the strange: the beginning before
the beginning and the end after the end. In this sense, he distinguishes
an eschatology of the sacred from both an archeology of the unconscious
(Freud) and a teleology of absolute consciousness (Hegel). The eschaton
precedes and exceeds the Freudian das Ding and the Hegelian telos, while
admitting a proper role for each of them, and their resultant disciplines—
namely, psychoanalysis and dialectics.
So anatheism denotes that which exceeds comprehension, while remaining the condition of the possibility of it. But is your eschatology the same as Paul’s eschatological expectation? "For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (1 Cor. 13:12). It seems to me you are talking about something like an anaschatology, if you accept that neologism. A return to the moment of excess, both in the beginning and in the end?

I like the term anaschatology. I see it, with Ricoeur, as transconfessional and therefore conducive to interfaith dialogue. The question “what is the eschaton?” can be answered in different ways. I am thinking again of Ricoeur’s hermeneutic question: “D’este parlez-vous?” My own personal hermeneutic answer is: I come from an Irish Catholic, pagan, Christian tradition, and my wager—my interpretation of the wager—is deeply informed and inflected by this. This existential-cultural framework affects my reading of spiritual, sacred, and religious experience. My atheist friend James Wood might say: “I read the same phenomena from a secular-humanist hermeneutic.” And Derrida and Caputo chose to read it from a posthumanist messianic one. There are many ways of reading the eschaton.

And Heidegger tried to get rid of Christian theology altogether.

He tried to replace it with a new mythology inspired by Schelling, but I am not sure he ever fully succeeded. I think William Richardson is right about that. And here again I think we may find anatheism useful in challenging the old dogmatic distinction between theism and atheism. People were burned at the stake for such dogmatic disputes. Anatheism, by contrast, presents theism and atheism as variable and sometimes exchangeable options, as hermeneutic interpretations, but deeply heartfelt ones.

IV

Take James Wood again. He says something like, “Look, I believe in opening my arms to the stranger, but I do not need God to do that; I do it as a human being.”

I tried to address this question in the postscript to Anatheism: “why is the wager of hospitality not just glorified humanism?” And my answer is, because the anatheist moment remains open, disposed, vigilant toward something more than human, which can call to us through the human (or nature)—a sort of in-finite which shines through and exceeds human finitude [Dasein]. In that sense, there is something posthumanist in my reading. Nonetheless, the more-than-human in the human is a total vocation to become more human. As Chesterton says somewhere, when you die and go to heaven, God will not ask you why you were not more like him, but why you were not more like yourself. What I call the more-than-human in the human is the stranger in ourselves that goes beyond ourselves, the transcendent in the immanent, the possible-impossible in the actual. This posthumanism can either take the form of an anatheist theism (which, in recent debates in Reimagining the Sacred and elsewhere, I would identify with thinkers like Charles Taylor, Jean-Luc Marion, John Panteleimon Manoussakis, and Catherine Keller) or take the form of an anatheist atheism (Julia Kristeva, Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, and Jacques Derrida).

The traumatic moment of the encounter provokes the anatheistic wager in that it calls for inscription in already existing discourses. Levinas, like you, talked about the infinity of the other: at once articulated in finite discourses and resisting radically any reduction to finitude, therefore infinite (not finite).

It provokes discourses about events—epiphanies or traumas—which come before or after our language. But we can only access them through our language, right? Even if it is a proto-linguistic language of the senses—what I call “carnal hermeneutics.” I agree with Levinas that this primordial sensibilité involves some kind of “existential trauma”: a primal wound as it were, but one that does not have to mortify and injure but can also be experienced, as Gregory of Nyssa put it, as a “beautiful wound.” Or to play on the common root of wonder and wound—from the Germanic wunde—a wonderful wound. Such a wound, if the wisdom tradition narratives are to be believed, is first registered as fear and trembling since it is radically strange and unfamiliar. That is why the holy figures of scripture are “troubled” and even terrified by the encounter with the stranger—in whatever language you chose to name it: the ger, the hospes, the xenos, the gast. Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Mary of Nazareth, the shepherds at Bethlehem—“Every angel is terrible,” as Rilke says. And the first thing such angelic strangers say to their human recipients is, “Do not be afraid. Nothing is impossible to God.” It’s there from the time you are born—this traumatizing call and response. It’s there from the very beginning. Your first cry is a response to a trauma that Levinas calls le traumatism original, and your last cry before death. From the moment we’re born to the moment we die we’re being addressed by a call; we’re responding in one way or another—we are wagering, carnally or cognitively.

But we can’t suppose an active will power for an infant. Might we say that the wager is wagering in us?
RK: This is an interesting question. Can babies wager? Take some recent research in developmental psychology, indicating that since birth, we have two ways of responding to the world. One: you connect. Two: you disconnect. The "original trauma"—with a small t—of natal life is such that one either withdraws or makes a movement out of oneself, toward the other—who, of course, has also experienced trauma and has her own kind of call and response. We are always going back and forth between the movement toward and away from the other. This designates the precognitive carnal-natal options and vacillations of association or dissociation, which remain throughout one's lifetime. Laplanche and Klein offer a fascinating psychoanalytic reading of the infant's different ways of fantasizing the breast, interpreting it symbolically rather than biologically—though, of course, the breast is both a source of nourishment, warmth, and milk, as well as of primal eros and thanatos projections.

CDvT: But surely at birth there is no "there is no self, nothing like a subject. Yet there is still the call and the response. The wager is not, in this case, an active decision. Kristeva quotes Winnicott in your interview with her: "Consciousness is not just cerebral. Consciousness is somatic."

RK: Winnicott is right. For the newborn, the existential wager is never, of course, a case of a cerebral choosing subject—à la Descartes or Sartre. It is a play of active-passive interfusion between two beings: mother and child. Kristeva calls this primary natal relation reliance, declaring it to be one of the most underestimated of all human relationships, and she reckons we ignore this primordial bond at our own peril, for it is deeply humanizing and formative. It is curious, but I have come to believe that birth is already baptism, the baptism of desire. I discuss this with Emmanuel Falque in another conversation in this volume. From the moment you are born, you desire something that you cannot have; you're suddenly exposed in your nakedness, in terror and fear, to this strange world—at once potentially hostile or hospitable. You respond

CDvT: Richard Colledge wonders in his contribution whether the wager implies something like a Kierkegaardian leap, with the risk of voluntary and subject-bound fidelity. But it seems that, for you, the wager is primarily not an active, subjective choice, but rather a bodily and relational event.

RK: Subjectivity is anachronistic here. We retrospectively project that onto the child. Anatheism never happens with one person. It is always between persons, always in relation, transfusion. And from the moment the child is born, she is already in relation—sensing, fearing, but also desiring—searching for connection and direction (the primary sense of sens). Then, as the child develops, she reiterates and accentuates the moments of attraction or retraction. Those initial wagers happen between two people—mother and child as host and guest. The first person you encounter is your host, and you are the guest.

CDvT: That implies that your host, at that moment, is determining your wager. Après coup, I am thinking of Lyotard's concept of enchâinement. The sheer quod of a phrase does not yet have a determined meaning; it all depends on the phrase that follows. Yes, the baby is a guest to the mother, but only if the mother accepts the child in hospitality. But the newborn could equally appear to be a host if the mother rejects her, for instance, in postnatal depression.

RK: It is a both-and situation, wavering between connection and disconnection. I remember Levinas telling me once that he'd been watching TV the previous night and had seen a doctor put his finger on the foot of a newborn child. The foot moved backward and forward, and that very double-response of withdrawal and offering was, Levinas suggested, already a form of language, where the first wager begins. Contact or retract. Cry out or remain silent. Already we're sensing the world through our senses. That is where carnal hermeneutics originates. The first natal wager is carnal, not epistemological, which is why anatheism is not agnosticism. Agnosticism says, "I don't know" in epistemological terms. Anatheism is prior to questions of knowing and not knowing, but it is precognition before cognition, sentiment as presentiment. So that all cognition is, strictly speaking, always recognition, the working over and working through of sometimte that has already been sensed. Once again, the double sense of "ana" as pre- and re-, before and after.

CDvT: Would you frame this original anatheistic wager as more proper to hermeneutics or to phenomenology? The carnal side I associate with the latter; the epistemological and religious with the former.

RK: I would say that hermeneutics goes all the way down and is therefore already, from the start, also a phenomenological experience. What I call carnal hermeneutics is phenomenology as proto-hermeneutics. When we're sensing, we're already directing our senses, like the French question "dans quel sens?" Do you go toward the other or retreat from the other? Sense means not just sensing a sensation, but rather looking for sense as meaning, a sense of direction, an orientation in the world with others, or finding your way in a strange new world.

CDvT: So the wager is about sensibility—about closing or opening? In fact, some sort of deep hermeneutics?
RK: Yes, a sort of primal phenomenological hermeneutics where you are prefiguring your world. You may be born in the desert, like Ismael, and all you can do is cry out and there is no one to rescue you. Abraham, your father, has cast you out. He doesn’t hear you, won’t hear you. Will someone else come to rescue you? Will anyone answer your cry: “Where are you?” The cry of a child is a wager in the sense that when it cries out, it prays, hopes, trusts, and believes somebody will come.

CDVT: Again, this wager is happening to you more than you are consciously responsible for it…

RK: Yes, it is happening to you, but you are also participating in what happens. As a day-old infant, you are, of course, not responsible for what happens to you, but you are responding. You’re responding to trauma or love. Or both. And as soon as you’re responding, you’re already on a threshold, an in-between transitional space, an entre-deux between self and other, in however primitive and inchoative a sense.

CDVT: This recalls a proximity to William Desmond’s metalexology (metaxu—between) as Richard Colledge suggests in his essay.

RK: I am very partial to my friend William’s metalexology—the transitions and mediations between divine and human, the natural and metaphysical. That is also why I don’t want to draw an unbridgeable dualist gap between the animal and the human, because we are responding as human animals—or “humanimals” as my colleague, Kalpana Sheshandri puts it. Again, this is something I develop in my dialogue with Falque. So when it comes to the question of atheism, there is a metalexological moment when we respond to the call of the stranger, a reaction to the presence of the radically other. We don’t translate that experience into theories or doctrines about theism or atheism until we go to school or church and learn about religion. But the wager is operative at birth—a sort of carnal connaissance as co-naissance (cubiringth) between two beings. Religion and theology are methods and codes for thematizing and institutionalizing that experience après coup. One rearticulates the primary ontological first faith (fides) and trust (confidens) into scriptures, rites, religions, and doctrines. If one is a Christian, one rereads one’s primary sense of carnal orientation vis-à-vis strangers in terms of Mary and Gabriel, Jesus, and the Syro-Phoenician woman. If a Hindu, one speaks the life of Krishna; if a Buddhist, one speaks the life of Siddhartha. These are different and equally legitimate (which is not to say equivalent) ways of responding after the event, nachtraglich, to the trauma-epiphany of first fear and first faith—and the struggle, the wager, the journey between them, which I call the anatheist journey.

CDVT: Are there successive wagers, then?

RK: Yes. There is a primary wager between hostility and hospitality regarding the stranger and a secondary one between belief and nonbelief. Anatheism works back and forth between these two levels of wager, of call and response. Hence the double a of anatheism is “ad” (toward) and “ab” (away from). Advance and absence. Advent and abandon. The two senses of a-dieus as moving toward or away from the other, which many chose to call God, and many prefer to call by some other name or no name at all.

VI

CDVT: Let’s try to dig deeper into this journey and focus on prayer. Wasn’t it precisely Jesus who, calling himself the “son of God,” taught his disciples—and thus us—to pray to “our father?” Didn’t he want all of us to engage in a journey of transformation, to become sons of God?

RK: Yes, he did. One can read the entire life of Christ, right up to his death on the cross as a radical rejection of the Alpha-Patriarchal God, who demands substitutionary atonement of his son. By contrast, Jesus (and Isaiah before him) invites everyone to be a “son of God,” like him. “You can all follow me,” he announces. A theopoetic calling to everyone to become a son or daughter of the divine, to become a hospes as he revealed himself to be in Matthew 25. Anatheism reads Matthew 25 as an open call to everyone to become host or guest. An endless call to rebirth, as God after God after God, stranger after stranger after stranger…

CDVT: But when Jesus prays on the cross, his prayer seems to be much less confident. It is more like a complaint: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46).

RK: Christ’s cry from the cross brings me back once more to the double a of anatheism. The cry represents the a of abandonment, replicating the first natal moment when we abandon the womb and are abandoned to life. Thrown or ejected into life, as Heidegger might say: Geworfenheit. One’s first experience entering naked and exposed into the world is one of forsakenness, but it is immediately and simultaneously accompanied by a second or double experience of yearning to reach toward someone or something “other” than oneself, to survive, be salvaged, saved—the second a in ana, which signals advent: Christ’s “unto thee I commended my spirit.” The first cry of the child captures this double sense of a-n-a. Both moments—abandon and advent—are equiprimordial. We spend the rest of our lives going back and forth between them, reinterpreting our earliest beginning in light of our last end. In that sense, we are at once both natal
and mortal. Just as the kingdom reinterpretst creation, eschatology repeats genesis, and so on. Now, in any good anatheist debate regarding the second "religious" wager, the atheist might say to the theist, "I respect your need for religious faith, but I'm not going there. I'm staying loyal to the first a of absence—abstention, separation, natal beginning, eventually leading to autonomy and individuation (what Lacan calls 'symbolic castration')." Atheistic humanism doesn't have to be seen as deficient or defaulting. The atheist has every right to say, "We can handle things among ourselves; we don't need to appeal to God." Whereas the theist chooses to translate the moment of primary trust into a religious belief, a holy scripture, a theology, a set of ritual ceremonies, prayers and practices which identify the stranger as God.

CD: We make that second religious wager when we are praying, don't we? To whom do we address ourselves when praying, if not to God?

RK: The anatheist theist says that there is something out there in which she confides, has confidence, to whom she expresses fidelity and faith qua divine other, which she calls God. To which anatheist atheist like Derrida or Nancy might reply, "Well I too am prepared to say that there is something more—but it is something more in human life itself, a sur-vivant of life in life. An alterity and excess here and now. Within the finite. We can find that in art, in literature and culture, in everyday life. We don't need to go to some transcendent deity. I can see the need for trusting in some ultimate goodness that is inexplicable, but I do not want to put the name 'God' on that."

CD: I would agree that, yes, we need to admit the excess or the surplus. But to me, it's not enough to merely indicate that there is something or, if you want, some sort of spiritual energy 'out there.' The need for "gods" is felt at all times in all places. It has some sort of necessity in it. Why? Maybe because of an inescapable need which I feel in myself.

RK: What Kristeva calls "le besoin incroyable de croire."

CD: Exactly. But why this unbelievable need? Because of a split. Because human beings are only able to experience trauma at a distance—not when the trauma actually happens but only in the awareness that a trauma has happened. Thus I'm conscious of my inability to experience that which I have experienced in trauma. In a sense, I find myself in two places: in the presence of a trauma that I do not realize and, at the same moment, in the realization that I do not realize it. This double position reveals that, in some ways, I'm already heading for something like a vision sub specie aeternitatis—something like a bird's-eye view of the world, of my world. It is as if my own experience of my inability to experience trauma is already a going-out, a going-above the world—an experience of transcendence. But the one who is looking down at himself "from above" is stuck in the presence of trauma without knowing it. There is in human subjectivity this striving for transcendence, this moving force to go beyond, and the concomitant desire to address.

RK: Again, this sounds to me like Kristeva's "incredible need to believe."

CD: It prompts us to propose something like a divine individual, a god—I mean something with anthropomorphic features. God becomes the name for the more-than-human experience of the unexperienciable. In myself, in being conscious of myself, I'm always already heading for some sort of subjectivity that is larger than I am, larger than this Augustinian intimate untouchability of myself that so interested Lyotard at the end of his life. And this "more-than-me" captures the features of otherness and irreducibility that were revealed to me in the traumatic experience with myself in relation to the other, the stranger, both hostile and welcoming.

RK: I see what you are saying, and perhaps that is why anatheist wagering is a wondering and wandering, a fluid crisscrossing between atheism and theism. I think atheism without theism is unhealthy, and vice versa. The anatheist wager has nothing of the all-or-nothing of Pascal's or Kierkegaard's fideist wager. Healthy atheism grounds and complicates eschatology: that is what Jesus came to do. He was an atheist, defying the existing religious authorities, before he redirected his anatheist faith toward God. He reinterpreted the divine (against theocidy). That is what he meant in his cry: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" "Do you know why you have forsaken me? Because you—the God who has forsaken me—are the alpha-God of totalizing omnipotence, and I'm here to prove that we have to get rid of you. You are an idol. I have a fully carnate you to show that the true God is your 'face in ten thousand faces,' as G. M. Hopkins has it. My calling is to manifest you in and as every singular son and daughter of God who gives or receives bread or water in your name—that is: in the name of love." The anatheist Christ says: "This is my vocation—to announce the death of an excarnate God and the birth of an incarnate one. A God of flesh." "Unto Thee, I commend my spirit" is the opening of consent to a Thou that is beyond, because beneath, the omni-God of theocidy. As Merleau-Ponty put it so well, citing Claudel: "If there is a God, it is a God beneath us, not beyond us." Christian incarnation means that the more is in the less, the infinite in the infinitesimal.

CD: Have we identified here a second argument behind the anatheist hypothesis? First, we said: I have had an experience that exceeded my
ability to experience; but, paradoxically, I am aware of my own inability to experience that experience. So we’re staying on the level of ego. But this ego is a stranger to himself, as Kristeva would have it.

RK: Or a “wounded cogito,” as Ricoeur puts it—a self that’s haunted and obsessed by the stranger.

CDvT: Yes, and the second argument has to do with the phenomenon of “addressing”—the miraculous experience of prayer. The original wager provokes us to respond in a very carnal and incarnate way. But responding is addressing. Therefore, the original wager calls for a “name,” an “address.” Again, something like a “God” been out of the impossible experience of excess. Addressing myself to God implies that the other to whom I am addressing myself also has subjectivity. So, if the phenomenon of looking to this traumatic moment “from above” or sub specie aeternitatis, it implies the idea of a super-consciousness, the address “reinvents”—and here I think of Derrida’s reflections on invention—this super-subject as the other. That is why I believe that we’ll never entirely be rid of the anthropomorphic or, better, the personal God. At the most minimal level, we’ll stick to some sort of divine name: we interpret our own cry in relation to trauma as an address. Psychology might call it projection. But I refuse to admit that it is a simple mirroring process. It is more like an expulsion of strangeness and thereby a reiteration of it on another level. Trauma begets trauma by “projecting” the impossible experience onto some sort of exteriority that bears the name God.

VII

RK: I think I see what you mean. I suppose anathesism occurs when we make the wager to ensure that we dwell in what Keats called “negative capability”—a remaining in radical mystery and uncertainty, refusing to reduce the wonder of the other to myself, resisting the temptation to limit the irreducible stranger who calls to a merely subjective projection.

CDvT: Yes, and thus also respecting the “split” in ourselves—our subjective incompatibility, the other in ourselves. Soi-même comme un autre (Ricoeur).

RK: Indeed, anathaemism is there to ensure that I don’t say, “This mysterious other is me.” The stranger is precisely not the same as me. The other in me is not reducible to me. It is more than an alter-ego. In terms of eschatology, that implies that we need the father: to rescue us from the anthropology of the son by reminding us that there’s always something different, always a kingdom still to come.

CDvT: You mean that the Father stands for the traumatic moment, the real otherness? Not the projection of my self in a super-subject, but the projection of my trauma onto that subject, my experience of not coinciding with myself?

RK: Well, it’s a way of responding to it in a certain language, a very psychoanalytical language, about the relation between father and son. The one thing that precedes and eludes us at birth is the father. We know the mother, but we don’t know the father. It’s about a beginning before I begin, a genesis of becoming before I am. I began before I begin. I was begotten before I was born. And that experience of unknowable paternity—whether you call it the Creator or the first day of creation or Joyce’s “epical forged check,” the “blind rut in the dark”—we all share that in common. There’s something else that precedes and supersedes us—that comes before and after us. We don’t have any control over it, and that is expressed in Christ’s words, “I must go so that the Paraclete can come.” In other words: the son becomes the father to the next “son,” who is the Paraclete as endlessly reproducible sonship—filiality replicating itself as endless hosting and guesting (Matthew 25). Perichoresis once again. Father birthing son birthing spirit ad infinitum. We have to be careful of gendered language here, of course, but I am merely citing the terms of scripture, which are hopelessly masculinist. We could say something like this: by eschatologizing the language of creation, we rescue it from narrow naturalism; we take it out of the chronological determinism of natus and genus, toward a spiritual sonship and daughterhood.

CDvT: So anathesism is, for you, also a way of rethinking theology in modernity or, if you like, postmodernity? If so, would you agree that in classical theodicy, a spatial paradigm of thinking was presupposed, spatial in the sense of a simultaneous, metaphysical, hierarchial, unfolding relation between the one and plurality; whereas in anathesism, a different scheme, a paradigm of temporal succession without final comprehension, is presupposed? I noticed that you refer repeatedly to notions of achronic seriality, successivity, and historicity. And this time beyond and before time seems to relate to a traumatic moment that escapes temporality. I see some resonance here with Levinas’s analysis of the birth of time, from the relation to the face of the other, and maybe also with Lyotard’s analysis of Newman’s “The Sublime is Now,” Trauma is the enigma of beginning. So the only way of speaking about it is by coming back to it, retrospectively: the trauma will be noticed only after the event has passed. And this moment is constantly passing, which would make the grammatical mode of anathesism the future antérieur?
RK: You are right: anathemis is ana-chronistic. But I would modify your suggestion. Theism and atheism follow chronological time, whereas anathemis upsets that model in a basic sense. According to Freud and Marx—and the Dawkins anti-God squad—religious people are delusional and infantile; they should accept the scientific enlightenment and become secularized, rational, responsible grown-ups (albeit, for Freud, at the price of neurosis—the "discontent" of mature civilization). That is a model chronological "progression" which anathemis challenges. Anathemis accepts certain aspects of the atheist critique of religion but it introduces the vertical into this horizontal notion of time. Modernity is not some inevitable march of Progress.

CDVT: I would relate that discussion to the paradigm of simultaneity. Time, chronos, as expressed in the attitude: "Once we had theism; now we have atheism." But when you propose anathemis, you propose to come back time and again to that unpredictable "thing" that will always only become articulated afterward, in the future anterior tense. Hence: sheer successivity.

RK: Let me try to clarify. Kaiological time breaks open chronological time. It is a temporality of the strange (traumatic or epiphanic, sublime or sacred), which is always already there and always yet to come. Derrida and Agamben got this right—following Benjamin—in their analysis of messianic temporality. Bergson also had great insights into this deep temporality, as developed by Deleuze in his magisterial work on cinema and time. The time of cinematic montage is, curiously, isomorph with that of eschatology.

CDVT: So ana-time as the future anterior once again: what is will only be articulated when it has already passed away.

RK: Yes, but that does not take us away from the moment. The moment is always potentially traumatic and epiphanic because it escapes us. And chronological time and history are attempts to put that back into some sequential casual order. That is, if I understand you correctly, what you entitle the simultaneity paradigm. Such order can be a particular temptation for theism and atheism alike. Both risk conceiving time in terms of causal regress and progress.

CDVT: You mean, institutional theism puts the experience of time under the dictum of logos. Would then anathemis be the inscription of logos into the impossible experience of time?

RK: It depends, again, what kind of time. I insist on this distinction between chronology and ana-chronology (kaiological-eschatological-traumatic time). In Greek mythology, Chronos devoured his sons. He wanted everything to come back in line with the cause, to return to the paternal origin. He couldn't let the other—his children—go. By contrast, ana indicates that time is uncontrollable, untotable, and that we are always too late for the moment, but also that it is always still to come because it is an excess. The excess is interpreted apophatically by mystical theism; there are no words, names, narratives, images for it. It is interpreted kataphatically by theism, through teachings, theologies, liturgical calendars. Anathemis says that the apophatic and kataphatic need each other.

VIII

CDVT: When you say "need," you mean that kataphasis and apophasis are mutually corrective? I remember Derrida's reflection on the mystical question "How to avoid speaking?" The silence pierces through the words. The mystical moment prevents any discourse from closing in on itself, from totalizing or adequate repetition.

RK: In that sense, one could say, provocatively, that Derrida needs the church and the church needs Derrida. Why? Because the church without deconstruction risks reducing messianism to triumphalism. And Derrida on his own is a lonely voice crying in the desert with no one to talk to. I asked Derrida once, "How do you pray?" And he answered, "I pray in Hebrew because I have no other language." Even the apopistic needs a bit of kataphatic help when it comes to the crunch.

CDVT: As a Jew—but what is it to be a Jew?—Derrida has his linguistic, Hebrew community.

RK: Yes, and Derrida is very helpful on the relationship between concrete historical "messianisms" like Judaism and Christianity and what he calls "messianicity"—the more formal condition of possibility of all messianisms. In this deconstructionist sense, one might say that anathemis is not a belief or disbelief but, to come back to your opening question, the condition of possibility of both. When you disbelieve anathemistically or believe anathemistically it is always a wager that expresses the fact that you don't know: the fact that it is, at bottom, always a matter of faith and trust in the stranger, however that is defined (as they say of the "higher power" in the AA movement).

CDVT: You have been doing some interesting recent work on Duns Scotus. Is anathemis a version of Scotism—I mean a radical acceptance of contingency?

RK: In a sense, yes. The contingency of human existence makes every wager free. And there I remain a Scotist existentialist, a believer in freedom, but
not arbitrary freedom. I would say, rather, a responsive, interrelational, summoned freedom.

CDVT: The risk of skepticism is there too.

RK: Of course, and that's why anatheism always harbors an element of skepticism and doubt. Call it what you will: docta ignorantia, the dark night of the soul, not-knowing, anguish, questioning. It also informs the first step of the twelve-step program of AA: the admission that I am radically abandoned—forsaken. The realization that you are not in control but are radically helpless regarding your attachments and illusions, your addictions, and repetition compulsions. You are now ready to appeal to the other—the higher power beyond your ego, which is the second step of AA. In short, you realize you cannot do this on your own; healing is impossible without recourse to a community. You need the other— your sponsor, your group. You need to tell your story, to hear the story of the other. Nobody can do it alone. Kierkegaard couldn't. He was miserable. Derrida couldn't. They were both spiritually and intellectually miserable.

CDVT: But maybe one is only miserable if one refuses to accept that one's always already in community?

RK: I agree, and it is complex. Because even to the extent that Kierkegaard was miserable, he still had a church to fight with, a language to speak to and to speak against. The Lilies and the Birds and all those sermons. He had a common discourse, however controversial. He belonged to a messianic-Abrahamic tradition, much more explicitly than Derrida, but he lived it contentiously, as the "single individual" devoid of congenial partnership or community. Even the "single one" is in relation to some community it resists or rejects.

CDVT: Then, does Derrida too need to come to religion? To a faith community?

RK: Not necessarily. An example: I have a friend who went to AA meetings and said to me, "Oh dear, I'm going to have to come to the God-moment, I can't stand it." And I replied, "You don't have to. You can interpret the 'higher power' agnostically, in human terms, if you wish." But then, of course, you get a definition of the human that enlarges the human. I would say then: "In the human, there is something more than human."

CDVT: Before addressing this theme of the inhuman or the more-than-human, tell me: do you think there is an intrinsic link between faith and community?

RK: If you ask people, "Why do you go to church?" many say because of community. Now, humanist atheists may say, "I don't need to find my community in a church. I find it in the human race. I find it in my neighborhood peace group, my local protest march for liberty, justice, housing, the right to choose, gay marriage, LGBT rights, or whatever. I find it having dinner with my friends." And that is all very true. The difference with communities based on something that is more than human—usually called God or spirit or the sacred—is that they acknowledge that we're not the only active agents involved: there is something bigger than us at work. There is something "higher" or "deeper" beyond or beneath us.

CDVT: Someone might pose this challenge: the Greek vision of the gods was that the gods suffer like human beings. They're kind of superhuman beings, but they have comparable problems. And that creates a solidarity, a community in suffering between the gods and men. Whereas in monotheism, this projection of the vulnerability of humanity into the sphere of the divine is lost.

RK: I'm not sure that the God of Abraham and Judaism is always such an indifferent God. I think that there is a lot of passion and compassion in the wisdom books, in the Song of Songs, in Hosea, and Isaiah. And Jesus is a suffering servant par excellence. In Sufi Islam too—think of the poems of Hafiz and Rumi where God is the guest, the drunk, the lover, the dancer, not some abstract impersonal force. Which is why Salafism—at the root of Al Qaeda—persecutes Sufis. The Sufis have no time for abstract ideologies.

IX

CDVT: Can you say more about what you call the "more-than-human." If we take Nietzsche's Übermensch as this "more-than-human," for example, we can't even say it is human.

RK: It may also include what Lyotard called the "inhuman," and then the line between atheism and theism becomes very porous and fertile. Each of us has a theist and an atheist inside. From the beginning, since the moment of birth, we experience both the sense of "I belong" and "I do not belong," and we can emphasize one moment or the other: either our desire to connect with the other, to communicate with the other, or our desire to be on our own, independent, sovereign. Both are important. And each involves taking a stand, saying, "Here I stand." You find these alternating positions even in the monastic tradition: ora et labor. Labor is going out and working with your community. Ora is prayer, contemplative life as monos, alone, abandoned to the spirit. And then comes, once again, the call of the other: I need confidence and faith in the other, who will rescue me from my loneliness, and who, in turn, needs my care and attention. I take my stand.
Hinenee. Me voici. Here I am. Anatheism is not wishy-washy indifferenzism; it is not lukewarm oscillation and procrastination. It is about making bold and committed wagers while always remaining open and attentive and refusing the tyranny of certainty—the lure of absolutism.

CDvT: That is on the side of the encounter with the other, but we spoke already about self-transcendence, about an immanent dépassement of the human subject who is always there where he can’t be, as Lacan said. Otherwise and more-than-human.

RK: And God is, I admit, one traditional name for this more-than-human in the human. Just as God is the more-than-animal in the animal. And the more-than-natural in nature.

CDvT: I’m not quite sure about the last two. Your thesis is similar to that of Pierre Gisel, who talks about the exces as the differential trait of the sacred and of God. But yes, God is the more-than-human in the human that I discover in myself as the thing I cannot put into words.

RK: You discover it in yourself, and you discover it in the other.

CDvT: Yes. Perhaps first in the other, before it reveals itself in me. But how do we discover the "more" philosophically speaking?

RK: In philosophy, we have only phenomenology, existential hermeneutic phenomenology of the other, of the face, what John Manoussakis calls the prósopon. That is the most a convincing philosophical way, it seems to me. Unless one leaves philosophy and turns to a theology of revelation; but even revelation is conveyed and communicated through narrative witness, with different confessional interruptions. The Talmud tells us there are ten ways to read each line of the Torah, and Christianity was transmitted by four gospel narratives. Again, we are faced with differing versions of carnal or scriptural hermeneutics—from top to bottom, there is no escape. You wager every time you read—the face of the stranger, the text of tradition—and respond.

CDvT: In this sense, you could say that the idea of excess, of the over-man projected onto some sort of "being" that still keeps some anthropomorphic elements, can also be found in political ideologies. In that sense, Marxism might be a replacement for religion.

RK: That is the claim of atheistic secular humanism—a humanism that also includes Nietzsche, Feuerbach, and Bloch. It says that the more-than-human comes only from the human. I would say that the more-than-human also comes to the human. It manifests through the human, but it is not something we own or limit or predetermine. It arrives out of the desert. It is immanent in the human world, but it is not of the human world. That is what we mean by the term "sacred" (in Greek mysterion, meaning blindfolded); something mystical and mysterious in our most mundane experience. We cannot see it with our ordinary eyes, but we can, nonetheless, feel and taste and touch it as coming to us from without—from the holy stranger and the strange. And that experience of the sacred is available to everyone, atheist and theist alike.

CDvT: You mentioned it already, but I find the tension between theism and atheism that can exist in one person a fascinating thing. Take the words of Jesus on the cross. I see a chiasm in the juxtaposition of his two exclamations. "My God, why have you abandoned me" implies that in the address, in the performative, Jesus paradoxically affirms what he denies on the level of signification: God is there, even if Jesus says he has been abandoned by him. As if he is crying for God to help him, to do something—which is impossible, because God has abandoned him. So he is asking for the impossible. In the question, as such, there is something like the possibility of the impossible. And then in the second move, in a kind of symmetrical way, there is also a paradox: "It is your hands I command my spirit." How could I command my spirit? Isn’t it the other way around? I need the other—life and death—to take my spirit from me. How could I do it myself? Which spirit, which subject could command himself to stop living? So there is the chiasm: when Jesus cries out the first time, he is crying for the other, whom he needs but who is absent; in the second cry, he is pretending to be able to do it himself, but can’t: death comes from without. And therefore, he is presupposing the presence of the other.

RK: Again we find the paradox of "a na": I am abandoned by the other who goes as I consent to the other who comes. God gone, God back again. Fort/Da. I think, in death, we reach a moment of "I am alone." Everybody dies alone. Nobody can die for you. It is the most singular [eigenst] experience, as Heidegger rightly says. But Heidegger failed to acknowledge the accompanying gesture. The call to the other: where are you? And the response: here I am. This is the second σ of a-na—the ultimate letting go, the radical openness to the stranger and the strange.

CDvT: In an ultimate sense, I can’t let go of my life because that would presuppose my subject and thus my life. Finally there is something that takes my life. "Take my life, Lord...".

RK: But you can consent to that.

CDvT: You can try to be prepared, maybe—by opening yourself to the ultimate moment. But this impossible death experience resonates with
my thoughts on what I would call para-theism: we can’t get rid of God. We cannot be abandoned completely. When we are still crying out, when we are still addressing ourselves to that which is beyond our capacity of comprehension and interpretation, we are not alone—not entirely.

RK: All right. Maybe you can never get rid of God, but you can get rid of the idols that get in God’s way. God goes by many names, as we’ve said, and some of these can be read as pseudonyms, not just the five hundred Hindu names for deities, but even more secular, ontological, and colloquial terms such as mystery, depth, being, ultimate meaning, and chora. Very few people would refuse to admit that there is some deeper dimension to their lives, and further that that dimension—in nature, in particular human beings, in special times, places, spiritual experiences—is “sacred” to them—even if they don’t use the word “God.” Stanislas Breton once wrote that the truth of monotheism—the belief in an unnamable God—is actually polytheism—the belief in multiple names for God. Anatheism is polynymy.

CDVT: Derrida speaks of something like this in his Spectres de Marx. … A ghost is present-in-absence. Or even Lyotard had his philosophy of religion, in which God was the name for the unnamable event, only graspable après coup, nachträglich?

RK: Yes, spectres are something extra, excessive, uncanny, indeed nachträglich. We should go back to Derrida’s reading of Marx to see how eschatological he is. There is something there where humanism mixes with mysticism. I think if you dig down into a great atheist thinker, you’ll find some gap opening to the sacred. The sacred in the broadest sense. It’s like you excavate, and suddenly someone is knocking from the other side. That’s the sacred as secret, because you don’t know who is there. It is a stranger in the dark.

X

CDVT: Shifting gears now from death to birth, we said that anatheism inscribes itself in time—it is immanent. And trauma is irreversible. So what would you make of Christian ideas of rebirth and reconciliation which seem to imply that a blocked situation opens up again?

RK: Well, I think rebirth—perhaps we could call it “ana-naisance”—is what we are doing all the time. I am all for serial sacramentality. For me, the Eucharist is not some special thing. It is an exemplary liturgy, a paradigm for something that is happening all the time: the sharing of hosts with guests, of bread with neighbors, in a way that makes the simplest morsel of matter into the flesh of the world—the on-going incarnation of word as flesh. Just like what I was saying about birth being a universal baptism of desire. Nobody is excluded from the rite of passage into the holiness of human community. Baptism is just a Christian sacramental way of saying something very simple and applicable to all Christians and non-Christians alike—you go under water to rise again; you die to be reborn. Everyone dies to be reborn. The infant is traumatized by birth—the terror, the cold, the naked air—at the same time as she rises into an epiphany of postnatal life. Death and resurrection are not confined to Christ—they are parts of everyone’s experience, which is why nearly all wisdom traditions have their equivalent version of Christ-figures undergoing transformation through loss and abandonment, finding light through darkness, dying unto self in order to be reborn anew. Think of Siddhartha, Isaiah, Shiva, Chiron, and more.

CDVT: You mean that religion is a staging, an affirmative and reaffirmative mise en scène of original and universal human experiences of natality and mortality? A creative and affirmative hermeneutics of existence? But surely religion does more. It promises reconciliation, forgiveness, peace.

RK: To respond more personally, I see the work of Guestbook as relevant here—as an art of pardon and forgiveness: it implies an impossible moment, a wager of hospitality. Pardon is always a wager of trying to break the obstacle of passivity in order for the impossible to come. Now, that may sound very utopian, but it is actually very practical. I believe that if you venture an anatheistic wager, the impossible can become possible in one’s work with others in community. Exchanging stories, changing histories. You cannot do it alone. The AA healing of addiction and trauma is a powerful case in point. The “little miracle of forgiveness” (Ricoeur) can only come through others, through witness, shared testimonies, exchanged narratives, wise elders, sponsors and peers who are prepared to walk part of the way with you. There can be “big miracles” of forgiveness too, of course—think of Esau and Jacob, think of Christ with his thieves and crucifiers, think of Mandela and his jailors, or Hume with the IRA. It can happen, and such healing witness is contagious, whether it be by direct experience or narrative transmission. It can go viral, change the world.

CDVT: Could you say then that “God happens” when the miracle of forgiveness takes place? And maybe also the other way around—from the experience of forgiveness when it is needed, but there is no way to bring it about. Miracle is a condition of possibility of the God call, and vice versa.

RK: The reason why religion should remain anatheistic in its roots is because it should remain true to a faith in real community, not in commodity
fetishes, fads, and fanaticism. By always allowing a moment of a-theist doubt at the heart of atheistic faith one remains immune—or at least resistant—to the lure of fundamentalist idolatries. Being hospitable to the stranger keeps one safe from the totalizing and scapegoating ideologies of collective religious egos.

CDV: I'm a bit hesitant here. It is not black and white. We need a comfort zone—social habits, rules, and maybe even ideologies. Maybe even some inospitality. Why? Because otherwise, every single moment and place would be loaded with ethics and sacredness. Then we would lose the sacred, because the sacred—and I believe the same counts for ethical engagement—has its specific places and times. It would be a terrible, undifferentiated life if everything was sacred! If every encounter was ethically charged and we were always entirely responsible, we would be submerged.

RX: Yes, there are limits, boundaries, finitude. From the point of view of God, if we put it like that, every moment is indeed potentially sacred. But that is not possible for us finite human beings. Walter Benjamin said we should treat each instant as a portal through which the Messiah might enter. Every moment the Messiah is knocking, but most of the time we are just not capable of hearing, seeing, or handling it. Our finitude is such that too much infinity would blow our minds, blind us, traumatize us into speechlessness, strike us dumb. So we can only let in a little at a time. "Through a chink too wide comes in no wonder." Although I do believe that saints and holy people—and that can include a neighbor down the road—are those who manage to keep the door ajar more than most of us, or at least on the latch! Through prayer, through practice, through service, through giving, through constantly hosting guests and strangers in their lives, they are actually pretty close to holiness, but never totally. I think of people like Jean Vanier, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross—even they confess to dark nights of the soul. Their own terrible darkness. Theresa of Calcutta went dark too. Every moment cannot be holy even for the holiest of beings. Christ, too, had his Gethsemane. The holy is something constantly ventured, adventured, wagered, and we can't do it all the time. We can't be "on" from dawn to dusk. We'd be hypersaturated. We'd burn up. The world is full of wonders and wounds. Epiphanies and traumas. It's all too much. At times it can be very cruel and hostile. But it has within its cracks and fractures a constant call for hospitality. Epiphany shines through trauma. The thin small voice, the name of "perhaps," the little God of the possible. Ana-God. The Stranger who comes and goes and comes again.

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Notes

1. Erigena, Periphyseon, I, 452 D as quoted in Fauche, God, the Flesh, and the Other: From Irenaeus to Duns Scotus, 66.
2. Hopkins, "No Worst, There is None. Pitched Past Pitch of Grief."
7. See Doude van Troostwijk, "Phrasing God: Lyotard's Hidden Philosophy of Religion."