

Theism, Atheism, Anatheism

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Anatheism means *ana-theos*—in Greek, after God. It is a way of thinking about God after the death of God. It means retracing the remnants, revenants, and returns of the divine after the disappearance of the old familiar divinities we thought we possessed like idols of gold. Or to be more precise, after the deconstruction of the Omni-God of dominion and delusion—philosophically formulated by Freud, Marx and Nietzsche, but already anticipated by Jesus and the prophets—whatever survives is what we could call ana-theism. Anatheism is a spirituality of the remaindered God to come: a God who may be if we let it be, a sacred promise made from the beginning of time and always still to be realized, again and again. If we remain.

I. Something lost that is found again

“Ana” is a prefix defined in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* as: “Up in space or time; back again, anew.” As in anamnesis, analogy, anagogy, anachronism. So understood, the term supports the deeper and broader sense of “after” contained in the expression “God after God.” *Ana* opens a semantic field involving notions of retrieving, revisiting and repeating. But if it repeats, it does so *forwards* not *backwards*. It is not a matter of regressing to some prelapsarian past, but of coming back “afterwards”—returning in order to go forward again. *Reculer pour mieux sauter!*

It is in this sense that we use the term ana-theism as a “returning to God after God”: a critical retrieval of sacred things that have passed but still bear radical potentialities that may be reanimated in the future. As such, anatheism proposes a future for the forgotten or still unfulfilled calls of divine history: it is an “after-faith,” which is more than any “after-thought” or “after-affect.” After-faith is eschatological—something ultimate in the end that was already there from the beginning. And that is why the “after” of *ana* is also a “before.” A before that has been transposed, so to speak, into a second after. As Wisdom (*Sophia*) says when she plays before the face of the Lord: “Before He made the world I was there . . . constantly at his side . . . filled with delight, rejoicing always in his presence” (Prov. 8:26–9). This Hebraic sense of ana-chrony is aptly echoed in Jesus’ startling claim: “Before Abraham was I am.”

But let us be clear: anatheism is not a dialectical third term which supersedes theism and atheism in some Hegelian synthesis or final resolution. True, anatheism contains a moment of atheism within itself as it does a moment of theism. Or, to be more precise: anatheism pre-contains both—for it operates from a space and time *before* the dichotomy of atheism and theism. (As well as *after*.) The double “a” of anatheism holds out the possibility, but not the necessity, of a second affirmation once the “death of God” has done its work. But it differs from Hegel’s “negation of the negation” which sees the return as an ineluctable synthesis or sublation (*Aufhebung*). Resisting the logic of theodicy, anatheism is always a wager—a risk that can go either way. It depends on us. It is a matter of discernment and decision on our part, responding to the Call of the instant. A replay of faith without cease. The return does not take place behind our backs, irrespective of our agency, like Hegel’s dialectic of Absolute Spirit. There is no “Ruse of Reason” unfolding through the pretext of particulars into a Final Totality. Anatheism is not about Upper Case Divinity dictating a predetermined dialectic. *Au contraire*, anatheism has nothing to do with Alpha-Gods or Omni-Gods. It is about re-imagining—and re-living—the sacred in the “least of these.” It is lower case from beginning to end.

As such, anatheism reactivates suspended or unsuspected possibilities often experienced in the a-theism of non-knowing; the “a-” marking an act of abstention and withdrawal rather than passive privation. Such a-theism is less a matter of epistemological argument *against God* than a pre-reflective lived experience of lostness and separation—a mood of *Angst* or abandon, an existential “dark night of the soul” which most people experience at some point in their lives. Even Christ on the Cross declared: “My god my god why have you forsaken me?” This “a” of atheism is indispensable to anatheism. But it is only a part, a step, a move in a larger choreography. For in “a-n-a” we have two “a”s. And the second “a” is the death of death. The death of the death of God. The yes after the no which repeats the first yes of genesis. This double A-A of anatheism signals a reopening to something always still new, strange, and ineffable. A dance of twelve steps which the AA movement calls “yielding to a higher power.” A surrender which only happens when one owns one’s existential “helplessness.”

So, I repeat, the ana- is no guarantee of ineluctable dialectical progress. It operates by promise not predictability, by call not certainty. If anything, one could say that the end of religion brings us back to its beginning—to a fore-time preceding the division between belief and non-belief. And in this respect, we might think of the poet John Keats’ famous definition of poetic faith as a “willing suspension of disbelief,” a returning again to Adam’s experience on the first day of Creation when everything was fresh and up for grabs, when anything could happen, for better or for worse. Keats called this ordinary moment of radical openness “negative capability”—“the ability to experience mystery, uncertainty and doubt, without the irritable reaching after fact and reason.” And this has parallels, I believe, with Kierkegaard’s famous “leap of faith” in *Fear and Trembling*. A sacred repetition—not to be understood as a regression to some original position but as a disposition of openness to the radical incoming Other.¹ In Kierkegaard’s reading, Abraham had to lose his son as “given” (someone taken for granted) in order

¹ Cf. Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. A. Hannay (Penguin, New York, 1985).

to receive him back as “gift”; he had to abandon Isaac as possession in order to welcome him back as promise. Isaac does not belong to Abraham (as filial property or projection). Isaac is *other* than his father. He is himself-as-another, a gift of the Other, of God (the return gift of what Kierkegaard calls the “Absolute”).

In short, atheist faith is about something lost that is found again. It involves reiterating the before as after, the earlier as later—a replay which reconfigures the seriality of linear chronological time, where one moment succeeds another, in favor of a time out of time. A sudden lightness, if you will. An epiphanic moment (*Augenblick* or *Jetztzeit*) where Grace traverses the instant. It is this mystery of past-as-future that the verbal prefix “ana” seeks to capture.² This time out of time in time is what the Gospel calls the “time that remains.”

II. Anatheism, atheism, and theism

To say all this is not to say that *ana* eschews historical time. Far from it. Infinite time is in-the-finite; it traverses history and cannot appear without it. As such, ana-theism consorts today with a concrete temporal situation that comes after the modern declaration of the death of God. It is indelibly marked by the secular exposés of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the modern critiques of Ideology as false consciousness, unconscious delusion and patriarchal hegemony. Anatheism expresses a current concern with what Max Weber terms the “disenchantment” of the world, the desacralizing of society, the general malaise of the “disappearance of God” and forfeiture of faith. In this sense, anatheism is also evidently a socio-historical phenomenon of the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries, which engages our contemporary humanist and post-humanist culture. Though not in any teleological sense which would imply we were ignorant for millennia and have now seen the light—that all faith was delusion and we are finally free at last. For anatheism, losing the illusion of God (as sovereign superintendent of the universe) offers the possibility of re-engaging with the original promise of the Stranger, the absolute Other who comes as gift, call, summons, as invitation to hospitality, love, and justice in every moment. In sum, anatheism signals an audacious embrace of the mystery that was sidelined and erased by the logic of “Western metaphysics”—a mystery that needs to be relived again and again (*ana*).

In terms of contemporary continental philosophy, several thinkers offer guiding thoughts. Paul Ricœur has acknowledged the indispensable passage through atheism on the way to what he called a “post-religious faith.” But the journey from primary

² I think that several thinkers after Kierkegaard—such as Levinas (*Totality and Infinity*), Benjamin (*Theses on the Philosophy of History*), Derrida (*Specters of Marx*) or Agamben (*The Time that Remains*)—are trying to say something similar when they talk of “messianic time.” Though I generally use the somewhat broader terms “kairological” or “eschatological” to express the idea that the kingdom already was, is now, and is yet to come. It is always already and still to come. Catherine Keller provides a very timely eco-eschatological reading of the Pauline “time that remains” in her *Political Theology of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018) 2–5, where she translates the Greek *sunestalemnos* as “gathered” or “contracted” temporality, a *kairos* moment of urgency, alertness and abiding, understood as the “right time, the time in which something can be done” (p. 3).

religious faith through atheism to a second religious faith should not, he insists, be seen as some final triumphalist summation. A-theism is, indeed, a move beyond the naïveté of first faith—one's childish certainties, facile assumptions, acquired dogmas—into an open space of possibilities; but it is for us to realize those possibilities or not. The free space may lead either to a commitment to responsible atheism or post-theism. The ana-space is always open—for no atheism or theism can presume to be certain of itself without falling back into another dogmatism (of belief or anti-belief). So, whether it is a matter of what one might call "anatheist atheism" or "anatheist theism"—a second theism or a second atheism—it is for us to choose. A hermeneutic wager. With nothing inevitable or predetermined about it. We are free to consent or dissent. In short, the anatheist moment proposes a choice between faith and non-faith "after" we have abandoned the dogmatisms of first theism or first atheism. In moving from religion through atheism to faith—if we chose to do so—a hermeneutic moment of "suspension" is indispensable. Or to put it in Ricoeur's terms, unless one allows the "masters of suspicion"—Freud, Marx, Nietzsche (and one might add the mistresses of suspicion, De Beauvoir, Irigaray, Kristeva)—to unmask the religious idols, one is less likely to achieve a life-giving faith. Intellectually speaking, at least, Ricoeur deems iconoclastic atheism to be a potential ally of "hermeneutic suspicion" which may lead in turn (for those so moved) to a "hermeneutic reaffirmation" of the sacred.³

Such talk of purgative atheism consorts with a certain deconstructive gesture in the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. Levinas talks about atheism in *Totality and Finitude* as the greatest gift which Judaism grants humanity. The first step of monotheism is atheism. What I think he means by this is that Judaism serves as a prophetic prohibition against false idols—an atheistic moment of "separation" from humanity's fusion with sacral "totality" (sacrificial paganism). This separation gives the "I," the human self, a freedom and responsibility to answer the ethical summons of the Other, the Infinite, the Stranger. If there were no such atheistic separation, there would no ethical encounter with the Stranger. A Stranger who, Levinas argues, bears the face of the vulnerable and naked—"the widow, the orphan, the stranger"—in short, the "trace of God." Derrida, for his part, talks about a "religion *without* religion." And if I have a difference with Derrida here, it is the difference between the words "without" (*sans*) and "after" (*ana*). Where I talk about religion after religion he talks about religion void of religion. In a 2001 dialogue we conducted on the question of the "God of perhaps" (*le dieu du peut-être*), Derrida surmised that there was but the "thinnest of differences" between his atheistic and my anatheistic understanding of things.⁴ But a difference there is.

³ See Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. E. Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968) and "Religion, Atheism, Faith" in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. D. Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 440–67.

⁴ See our dialogue, "Terror, Religion and the new Politics," which took place in New York in October, 2001, and was published in Richard Kearney, *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004) 3–15. Derrida was referring to my recently published work, *The God Who May Be* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), and my earlier book on the subject, *Poétique du Possible* (Paris: Éditions du Beauchesne, 1984). See also my related essay, which continues the dialogue, "Derrida's Messianic Atheism," in *The Trace of God: Derrida and Religion*, ed. E. Baring and P. Gordon (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

III. Living anatheism

Yet anatheism is more than the philosophical formulation—what comes after the disappearance of God? It is also and more fundamentally an *existential* question: how do we experience the appearing and disappearing of God in our lives? Prior to any speculative theory, anatheism bears witness to the loss and recovery of the divine. It involves attending to sacred strangers in our existence. This is why anatheism is theopraxis before it is theology. It occurs first as an act of felt abandonment followed by a turn toward something "more" (what Socrates called *periagoge*, what Augustine called *conversio*). The negative moment of letting go is, I repeat, indispensable to any genuine appreciation of anatheism, for without it we have cheap grace: God as confidence man, a supernatural peddler of comforting illusions, quick fixes, opiates for the people. Which is why we need to honor the deep experience of abandon powerfully evinced in the mystics' "dark night of the soul," or Dostoyevsky's talk of faith arising from the "crucible of doubt," or Christ's penultimate sense of dereliction on the Cross—"My god my god why have you forsaken me"—issuing ultimately in a leap of faith: "Unto thee I commend my spirit."

Read anatheistically, the Cross is not some expiatory sacrifice exacted by a patriarchal God, bent on ransoming his son for our sins. On the contrary, it harbors an "atheist" resistance to such transactional theism in favor of an "anatheistic" embrace of new life, of the gift of resurrection. The Cross is one more revelation of God after God. And I say "one more," for as Christ taught, his own death and resurrection are part of a continuous revelation from the beginning to the end of time: "Before Abraham was I am . . . Now I must go so that the Paraclete can come." Christ-here-and-now is always Christ-before-and-after: ana-chronic, ana-Christ. In other words, the crucified one abandons the Omnipotent Father who has abandoned him. His final lesson is one of radical *kenosis*, letting go of lost illusions and attachments so as to affirm lovingly the future, the other, the strange. Christ's cry of forsakenness is the atheist moment of negative capability which prepares his releasement into more life, to which he boldly commends his spirit. In this anatheist return, Christ is entrusting himself to the "thee" of each God after God, each stranger who seeks and receives the bread of life—his hungry disciples at Galilee ("come and have breakfast"), Mary Magdalene at the garden tomb ("Myriam!"), his fellow travelers on the road to Emmaus ("stay and eat"). Christ keeps coming back (*ana*) to his followers after (*ana*) he has left them. He returns each time a *hospes* hosts each one of us as guest. For only as guest can we recognize the host. (The Latin term *hospes* means both host and guest.)⁵

The act of kenotic emptying triggers the wager of hospitality. This primal anatheist wager is ontological rather than merely logical (unlike Pascal's wager which was one of knowledge rather than of flesh, epistemological rather than existential). The inaugural wager to turn hostility into hospitality, death into new life, marks a moment of decisive

⁵ See our more detailed discussion of the terms *hospes*, *hostis*, hostility and hospitality in "Double Hospitality," in the *Journal of the Continental Philosophy of Religion*, 1, no 1; Richard Kearney and James Taylor, eds., *Hosting the Stranger: Between Religions* (London: Continuum, 2012); and Richard Kearney and Melissa Fitzpatrick, eds., *Radical Hospitality: From Thought to Action* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

conversion in most wisdom traditions. And with respect to the Abrahamic tradition, we might recall certain “primal scenes” of hospitality: Abraham and Sarah encountering the three strangers at Mamre; Jacob wrestling with his dark stranger in the night; Mary engaging with a stranger called Gabriel in Nazareth; Christ returning as a stranger (*hospes*) seeking bread and water (Matthew 25)—a sacred host to the least of these (*elachistos*). Because anatheism is a call and response it invites an endless waging of hosting and guesting, giving and receiving. The stranger depends on humans to dwell amongst us, for word to be made flesh, for incarnation to recur as ana-carnation, again and again. The invitation is constantly, unconditionally there: it is for us to respond.

IV. Theopoetics as anapoetics

The poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, captures the anatheist wager well in his poetry. Theology becomes theopoetics. He describes the moment of literary epiphany as an act of “aftering and seconding”—an “over and overing” of experience which replays the secular as sacred. Hopkins speaks of a retrieval of lost experience that repeats forward, proffering new life to memory, giving a future to the past. This poetic moment of “epiphany” requires a detour of distance and disenchantment *after* which we may return to our first experience in a new light, over and over. *Ana*. Or, as Freud would say, *nachträglich*; and though Freud is speaking of “trauma,” the same structure of temporal repetition applies to poetic “wonder”: both terms come from “wound” referring to a fright or surprise which interrupts our normal sense of time and space. Hopkins sees poetry as a sacramental re-imagining of things in three movements: (1) our initial experience of an event in first naivety; (2) the loss of innocence in the dark night of the soul, vividly depicted by Hopkins in his “dark sonnets”—“I wake and Feel the fell of dark not day” or “the mind has mountains/sheer frightful non-man-fathomed/hold them cheap may/those who ne’er hung there”; and (3) the return movement of poetic epiphany, where one sees the world as “charged with the grandeur of God . . . like shining from shook foil.” Hopkins, a Jesuit mystic, developed a quintessential theopoetics whereby one surrenders all presuppositions and illusions before celebrating the inherent divinity of all beings, “counter, original, spare, strange” (“Pied Beauty”). He identifies the cosmic Christ with a divine potency within all mortal things, not only human eyes and limbs, but wells, stones, dragonflies, and birds:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell’s
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came.*
Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is –
Christ—for Christ plays in ten thousand places,

Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men’s faces.⁶

But this experience of holy repetition as epiphany is not confined to Christianity or any other particular religion. It extends, I believe, to any poetic movement of returning to “God *after* God.” God after the loss of God. As in the replay of child’s play, “gone, back again.” “*Fort/Da*.” We learn young that what disappears as literal comes back again as figural—that is, as sign and symbol, as a second presence in and through absence. And by symbol here we do not mean *untrue* or *unreal*. The return of the lost one—in the case of the lost God—may well be a realer presence, theopoetically speaking. A genuine second naiveté after the loss of one’s first naiveté. The return may indeed be a more powerful and moving presence precisely because of the detour through separation and letting go. This involves a new notion of time—*kairological* rather than chronological—which traverses and reverses history, as in the Eucharistic formula: “we do this in memory of him until he comes again.” Anatheism is about coming again, creating again, aftering again, time after time. In a word: *ana-poiesis*. Theopoetics is anapoetics.

If the examples of anatheist hospitality and epiphany I have cited here derive from the Western Abrahamic tradition, this is because it happens to be my own hermeneutic heritage, my particular spiritual tradition dependent upon the cultural time and place in which I was born and bred. But anatheist spirituality is in no way confined to the Western Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition. It applies, in principle, to all great Wisdom Traditions and spiritualities—from Buddhism and Hinduism to Taoism and Confucianism and the many indigenous cultures of Africa, Austral-Asia and the Americas. A recent volume I co-edited, *Hosting the Stranger: Between Religions*, recounts the wagers and wonders of anatheist hospitality in five major spiritualities of the world.⁷ And let me conclude by suggesting that such interreligious hospitality is not a luxury but an imperative. To open oneself to another God after the death of the last God is an endless opportunity to rediscover not only the lost possibilities of one’s own spirituality but also of other spiritualities.⁸ Hosting the stranger in one’s own faith—and strange faiths other than one’s own.

⁶ See our development of Hopkins’ theopoetic notion of epiphany in “Epiphanies” in *Cyphers of Transcendence*, ed Fran O’Rourke (Dublin: Dublin University Press, 2019). For other examples of the intimate liaison between anatheism and theopoetics in works of art and literature, see Richard Kearney and Matthew Clemente, *The Art of Anatheism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018) (in particular our “God Making: Theopoetics and Anatheism,” pp. 3–28).

⁷ For more on this theme of interconfessional hospitality, see *Hosting the Stranger: Between Religions*.

⁸ See Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010) 175.