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MUST, OR MAY, GOD BE THE GOD WHO MAY BE?

A review of three books by Richard Kearney: *On Stories*, London: Routledge, 2001; *God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion ; Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Ideas of Otherness*, London: Routledge, 2002.

IT WAS A RAINY DAY at Mercyhurst College along the shore of Lake Erie and the scholars were sitting around the podium. The moderator suddenly said, "Tell us a story Thompson." So Thompson began. It was a rainy day at Mercyhurst College along the shore of Lake Erie....¹ I begin with that story because I am going to do no more in this story than to tell a story, a story about telling the story of God. Richard Kearney's trilogy on "Philosophy at the Limit" is worth investigating theologically. The trilogy's first book by this Professor of Philosophy at Boston College and University College Dublin, published in 2002 and entitled *On Stories*, tells the story of the essential role played by stories or narrative and storytelling in the lives of human beings. An indispensable ingredient of any meaningful society, stories give us a shareable world.² Every life is in search of a narrative, and as we recount our present situation in the light of past memories and future expectations we establish our identities. Kearney, whose work on stories has benefited from the narratives of Paul Ricoeur, sees story as sharing "the common function of *someone telling something to someone about something*". Stories have been told to provide symbolic solutions to contradictions of life which could not be solved empirically, and in the process reality itself is transformed. Stories serve a mythic function as they imaginatively give answers to the great unanswerable questions. Mythic narrative eventually assumed an historical and a fictional form; the former (historical narrative) modified traditional mythos by pledging allegiance to the reality of past events and the latter (fictional narrative) endeavored to redescribe events in terms of an ideal standard of beauty, goodness, or nobility. What both have in common, however, is a mimetic function, where Aristotelian *mimesis* is not merely a

¹ In Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (New York: Routledge, 2002), Kearney includes the following epigram from Ciaran Carson's *Fishing for Amber: A Long Story*, which I am playing off of: "It was a stormy night in the Bay of Biscay and his sailors were seated around the fire. Suddenly the captain said, "tell us a story, captain. And the captain began, "it was a stormy night in the Bay of Biscay."

² *On Stories*, 3.

mirroring of reality but “a creative redescription of the world such that hidden patterns and hitherto unexplored meanings can unfold”. Story, therefore, as mythos and mimesis, offers us “a newly imagined way of being in the world.” Story, in short, delivers to us possibilities, possibilities of being. Without story or narrative, Kearney contends, our lives are not worth living. In the closing chapter he provides a winsome philosophy of storytelling that centers on its five primary characteristics, namely, plot (or *mythos*), re-creation (or *mimesis*), release (or *catharsis*), wisdom (or *phronesis*), and ethics (or *ethos*).

The third book of Kearney’s trilogy was published in 2003 and is entitled *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Ideas of Otherness*. The three realities in the title—strangers, gods, and monsters—represent “expressions of extremity” and they usher us to the edge of conscious experience and call into question the comfortable, established categories of our consciousness and impel us to rethink things.³ He informs his readers that this third and last volume of ‘Philosophy at the Limit’ “tackles diverse experiences of human estrangement by means of a hermeneutic retrieval of selfhood through the odyssey of otherness” (19). He believes that by sounding out the borderlands separating “Us” from “Others” we “may become more ready to acknowledge strangers in ourselves and ourselves in strangers” (20). His method in this book is a “diacritical hermeneutics,” which he distinguishes from both a romantic and a radical hermeneutics. A romantic hermeneutics such as is found in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, and Gadamer, on the one hand, strives “to unite the consciousness of one subject with that of the other” by way of appropriation and a “congenial communion of fused horizons”. A radical hermeneutics such as developed by Caputo as inspired by Derrida, Blanchot and Lyotard, on the other hand, insists on “the ultimately sublime nature of alterity” or otherness and holds out for irreducible difference and separation by invoking a basic “dissymmetry of self and other” and heralding an “apocalyptic rupture of non-communion”. Kearney’s diacritical hermeneutics takes a middle road between these romantic and radical options, aiming to offer an interpretation of alterity or difference that will make us more hospitable to strangers, gods and monsters. This is important because we have too often demonized the other in Western culture out of fear. At the same time, our response to estrangement has frequently been paralyzing “horror”. While some in our culture have absolutized the ego, others have absolutized the Other. Just as “deconstruction of the cogito was a necessary correction for the idolatry of the ego,” so too does this need to be “supplemented by a critique of the postmodern obsession with absolutist ideas of extremity and otherness” The “suspicion of sameness” requires suspicion to be directed toward it in turn so that it not develop into a new idolatry of the “ineffable Other.” There are limits to ultimacy, argues Kearney. Genuine relating to others can be undercut by a “fetishizing of

³ Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Ideas of Otherness* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 3.

the Other” no less than by a “glorifying of the Ego.” Needed is a proper relation to ourselves-as-others. With no limit on the Other we lose ourselves, and with no limit on the ego we lose the other. Strangers, gods, and monsters are both *within* us and *beyond* us. In this third book, then, Kearney outlines “the hermeneutics of our contemporary cultural unconscious. He believes that as we open ourselves to these three foreign realities, we will learn more about the alien realities residing deep within us.

This brings us finally to the more focused concern of the paper, namely, the second volume of the trilogy, the 2001 book *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*.⁴ Here Kearney argues that it is not that God is nor that God is not but that God may be. Traditional theism has understood God in terms of act or actuality, e.g., Aquinas’ *purus actus*. Kearney wants instead to understand God in terms of possibility. This involves interpreting the divine eschatologically as opposed to onto-theologically. The eschatological interpretation of the divine “privileges a God who possibilizes our world from out of the future, from the hoped-for eschaton”. He wants to challenge the view that subordinates the possible to the actual and instead to set forth the view that God’s very potentiality-to-be is God’s most divine feature. Kearney walks the tightrope between onto-theology’s interpreting of divinity as pure being and negative theology’s view of God as pure non-being in favor of a construal of God as possibility to be. In this book he articulates a narrative eschatology.

The God-who-may-be does not impose a kingdom onto humans but rather offers humans the possibility of realizing the promised kingdom by opening themselves to God’s transfiguring power. Each person possesses the possibility to be transfigured and in the process to transfigure God. This eschatological God is the God who promises to bring new life and bring it abundantly. God promises a kingdom of justice and love. This God of promise empties the deity of power and presence so that God may be the promised kingdom. God is then the God of possibility to come, the God of *posse* who calls us beyond the present to a promised future. At the eschaton this God will be God. At this point, however, the eschaton has not arrived, so there is a free space, a space of the possible, a gap, within the core of God. God is not yet. The divine gap makes possible for us all that would otherwise be impossible. God as *posse* rather than *esse* means that the possibility of being prevails rather than the actuality of being as accomplished fact and that the promise is impotent unless and until we respond to it. God is doing something for us and we are doing something for God when possibility is transfigured into actuality and God’s coming is thus enabled to come into being. God depends on us to be. “We are free to make the

⁴ Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University, 2001).

world a more just and loving place, or not to". Foreknowledge in the traditional sense is given up, for the future can be known only in terms of possibilities. This God reminds us that what seems impossible to us is only apparently so. As transfigured by God all things are made possible. Hope is enlivened within us as we are confident that possibility will become more incarnate in life.

The God who may be finds voice in the desire of God. The desire of God can be understood as God's desire for us and our desire for God. Both play their role, for Kearney sees God's desire as embodied and human desire as hallowed. Desire, as Kearney puts it, responds to the double demand of eros and eschaton (79). The two main ways of desiring God are the onto-theological and the eschatological. The onto-theological view interprets desire as lack, i.e., "as a striving for fulfillment in a plenitude of presence," "a drive to be and to know absolutely". Eschatological desire, on the other hand, unlike the ontology of presence (*ousia*) that disrespects the *parousia* as yet to come, lives out its "yearning for an Other who beckons but has not yet fully arrived, who is present in absentia," who as *deus adventurus* (or the coming God) seeks the human but still promises to come unexpectedly in the future.

Kearney speaks of "possibilizing God" in carrying out his eschatological reinterpretation of God as possibility. His method in this book is to do his reflecting in relation to biblical texts. Here the focus is on Mark 10:27, where Jesus says that what for humans is impossible, for God is possible. The eschatological possible suggests that when human power falls short, there is a divine power, an infinite *dynamis*, that is able to transfigure human power into a new kind of power. The New Testament refers to a possibilizing or potentiating power of the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. And this power Kearney understands as the divine possible that is the God who may be. The divine possible reveals possibilities to us that simply would have been impossible to us apart from grace. Disclosed are possibilities that are beyond both my impossibles and my possibles, considered from the perspective of projecting out from my inherent existence or what we might call teleological possibilities. The gift of the future creates me as one who may be and apart from that gift the possibles would be impossible.

One needs to distinguish between pure or ideal possibility and real possibility. Ernst Bloch's discussion of "The Category of the Possible" in *The Principle of Hope* is helpful in this regard. Relevant is Bloch's understanding of utopian possibility or the real possibility of Utopia "as what is not-yet-realized but realizable". Whereas Kant had seen possibility as an a priori condition of formal knowledge, Bloch sees it as a precondition of historical transformation. Utopian possibility is "the power-to-become-other than what is at present the case." This brings us

close to the Possible God, but Kearney is concerned that Bloch's Utopian Possible or Not-Yet is at times nothing more than "the dream projection of a universalist humanist". He seems to be raising in relation to Bloch's Utopia the very question that I want to raise in relation to his God who may be. And that is: "Must or may God be the God who may be?" Bloch falls short because he does not affirm enough otherness or we could may-be say enough necessity. There is no transcendent ground for God apart from history's dialectical striving toward Utopia.

That question comes up also in looking at another thinker. For his God of the possible Kearney acknowledges a "liberal borrowing" from Nicholas of Cusa, who equates the divine with the "possibility-to-be" (*posse esse* or *possest*). God is not *esse* (existence), God is not *nihil* (nothing), but God is *possest* (absolute possibility that includes all that is actual). *Possest* or the possibility-to-be means that possibility itself exists. As "actualized possibility" this *possest* is equivalent to God. Kearney quotes Cusanus as writing: "Existence (*esse*) presupposes possibility (*posse*), since it is not the case that anything exists unless there is possibility from which it exists."⁵ The *Triialogus* of Cusanus finds him contending that absolute possibility co-exists with actuality and that they are eternity and they are the Godhead. It is only in God that these two co-exist in this way. God combines these two in a miraculous identity, for God is everything which God is able to be. Therefore, Cusanus concludes that *posse esse* or *possest* is the best name that we can have for God. Like the name/no name dialectic of Exodus 3:14, *possest* or possibility-to-be or May-Be is a name but no name. Cusanus is claiming that "Actualized-Possibility" or possibilities that are really existing is all things or includes all things, since anything not included in the set of possibilities neither exists nor is able to be made.⁶ But this means that anything and everything, including all sorts of evil realities such as war, famine, disease and torture, is all part of the eternal Godhead. Nicholas states that in God "non-being is everything which is possible to be." Thus, he continues, God creates not from any other, but from Godself; for God is everything which is possible to be and in God all things and nothing are Godself.

Kearney criticizes Cusanus in this regard for not going far enough. Cusanus allows *posse* to collapse into an ontological system of necessity in which history is reduced to a slow unfolding of a pre-established plan. Cusanus' idea of *absoluta potentia* absolute possibility cannot be reduced to a totalizing necessity where from the beginning of time every possible is deterministically actualized according to script. Foreclosed then would be Kearney's notion of human

⁵ Cited in *The God Who May Be*, 37, from Nicolas of Cusa, *Triialogus de Posseset*, translated into English as *On Actualized-Possibility* by Jasper Hopkins, in *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa*, by Jasper Hopkins, 120, 69.

⁶ *The God Who May Be*, 104.

freedom and creativity as participating in the transfiguring play of creation. To the contrary, Kearney's eschatological reformulation reconceives divinity "as that *posse* or *possest* which calls and invites us to actualize its proffered possibles by our poetical and ethical actions, contributing to the transfiguration of the world to the extent that we respond to this invitation". If Bloch lacked necessity and a genuine ground for Utopia or the Not-Yet, Cusanus has too much necessity and not enough space for the freedom of the creation.

If we ask our question "Must or may God be the God who may be?" of Kearney, it is not terribly clear how he would answer. "Must" points to divine necessity and "may" points to divine freedom. He calls his stance an onto-eschatological hermeneutics, or a poetics of the possible, and insists that this position is not settling for a conditional God. That sounds like a defense of God's freedom. Kearney admits it might well be that God's being is conditioned on the actions of humans in history. But God's infinite love, he declares, is not conditional. "As a gift, God is *unconditional* giving". God's unconditional giving is love and love presupposes freedom. The may-be God, then, is the free God who has decided to love. But then we can or may ask, does not this divine decision to love establish a necessary structure which allows for "must" language. God must be the God who may be once God has decided to love.

Kearney makes mention of Whitehead but seems to suggest in a footnote that he has not as yet seriously studied process philosophy.⁷ Whitehead's thought may be an able complement to Kearney's reflections. Especially Whitehead's notion of God as a non-temporal actual entity seems relevant to Kearney's God of *possest*. A non-temporal divine decision constitutes God in an act of conceptual valuation that en-realms all possibilities within God's primordial nature and enlists those possibilities in the service of life and love. This can be understood as a free decision to love. From this decision a certain necessity follows. God may be the God who must be or the God who may be, but in the non-temporal decision of self-constitution God is established as the God who may be. The God who may be creates and joins in the divine adventure of creation. According to Whitehead's vision, as primordial nature God is ever the God who may be in relation to the cosmos. But in the consequent nature God receives all actuality into the divine life with a spirit of loving embrace and preserves every ounce of vivid immediacy worthy of preserving. Here God is the fellow sufferer who understands. What a creature will become depends on how that creature will use its freedom. But whose a creature will be is clear. Via the consequent nature God claims the creature for eternity.

Schelling can also be invoked in relation to these reflections, and Kearney does

⁷ *The God Who May Be*, 151n7.

refer to him a few times in the trilogy. Schelling recognized the importance of an adequate theory of divine subjectivity.⁸ His view of the subject allowed him to distinguish internal or subjective necessity from external or empirical necessity. This enabled Schelling to construe the world's creation as a free act, as long as he could show that the absolute or the divine "is pervasively subject and is determined by its nature alone." Building on Spinoza, Schelling understood God pantheistically as including the world within God's self. But that is only the first pole of God. There is also the freely self-unfolding God who is involved in a process of becoming. This qualifies Schelling's pantheism and really makes for panentheism or the belief that all things are in God (and God is in all things). God grounds finite beings as the Godhead. But in the process of becoming the self-manifesting of the Godhead reveals the personal God.

In wanting to move beyond an onto-theological understanding of God, Kearney downplays divine presence, power, and actuality. The eschatological God of possibility cannot be fully present nor fully powerful; there would then be no room for freedom and becoming. But his eschatological God who may-be requires some sense of presence, power, and actuality. The visions of a dipolar God of both Whitehead and Schelling attribute a healthy measure of possibility and thus not-yet-ness and absence to the divine life. But they also affirm the other pole of God, namely, as they envision and conceptualize God as decisive and thus actual and in some sense powerful and present. When Kearney thematizes the divine decision he may-be envisioning precisely such a dipolar God. He writes: "By choosing to be a player rather than an emperor of creation, God chooses powerlessness. This choice expresses itself as self-emptying, *kenosis*, letting go. God thus empowers our human powerlessness by giving away his power, by possibilizing us and our good actions—so that we may supplement and co-accomplish creation."⁹ So Kearney too is affirming some sort of divine power and presence, but he makes the needed distinction between power or *potestas* as eschatological *possest* and *potentia/possibilitas*, and between *auctoritas* and *imperium*.

In the end we can say that the vision of the eschatological God that Richard Kearney narrates more directly in this volume and more indirectly in the other two volumes of his trilogy on "Philosophy at the Limit" is a winsome philosophical story from which theologians can learn to help them better tell their form of the story about the God who may be, who has created the world for us so that we may recreate it for God (110). I hope this little story of mine, which really has just been the retelling of Kearney's story, has delivered a few possibilities to you. If it has done that, then there is reason to thank the God who

⁸ Philip Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 474.

⁹ *The God Who May Be*, 108.

may be for making the impossible possible.

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