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A review of Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. xxii + 247pp. 4 illus. \$29.50/£20.50 (cloth). ISBN: 978-0-231-14788-0.

A *natheism* is a fresh attempt to reconceive the possibility of the sacred for the 21st century, seeking a way, as the subtitle suggests, of “returning to God after God.” Deploying the resources of continental thought, especially the dialogical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur, Kearney draws masterfully on a dazzling range of texts, cultural phenomena, and ethical-political situations. Hardly a contemporary theorist of religion of import is neglected or a contemporary intellectual dilemma side stepped. Pity the librarian who has to classify this book for it will appeal to readers from diverse fields: philosophy, religious studies, biblical studies, comparative religion, art, literature, international studies, any one concerned with social justice as well as to anti-religionists. The book is so clearly written that general readers will be able to digest it, while in the endnotes there is a book beneath the book to slake the appetite of the more detail-hungry academic reader.

So what is *anatheism*? Kearney describes it variously as a movement, a paradigm, an invitation, a wager, a drama; a position between, before, and beyond the division of theism and atheism; “another word for another way of seeking and sounding the things we consider sacred but can never fully fathom or prove” (p.3). It is not a new religion. Yet it pivots out of a “repetition” (Kierkegaard) of a primal scene of religion(s). It is not a new secularism. Yet it bids *adieu* to the God of metaphysics and traditional religion whose surname has long been “Almighty” taking seriously the critical and iconoclastic force of atheism. *Anatheism* does not offer a dialectical synthesis of the theism-atheism opposition, yet it is committed to the necessity of mediation in a concrete, hermeneutical sense. *Anatheism* finds footing in the space between theism and atheism with a gesture of non-knowing, aligning itself with the venerable traditions of Socrates, Augustine, Nicholas of Cusa, Kierkegaard, Husserl or that moment of bewilderment which impels seeking and questioning in the first place. This gesture of non-knowing is crucial to the *anatheistic* paradigm. Its disarming honesty entreats from theist and atheist alike a tempering of the tendency toward dogmatic certainty of the former no less than the rational self-assuredness of the latter: “I know God” versus “I know God is not.” *Anatheism* is clear-eyed about the ravages to human flesh wrought in the name of religion

throughout the centuries, especially the 20th, is done with theodicy, yet respectfully declines the atheistic option that is done with any sense of transcendence or the sacred. Even clear eyes, however, do not see well in the night. Thus, anatheism works back from the experience of God-loss toward a genuine renewal of the sacred to recover forward a second, more mature faith. While insisting that anatheism is “nothing particularly new” (p.7), it seems to be of particular moment in this age where the gods have withdrawn. “Ana” – seeking ‘after’ (toward) God ‘after’ (subsequent to) the death of God. Anatheism--seeking a rebirth of faith after the loss of faith.

This book is not primarily a treatise on the ontology or idea of God as was Kearney’s *The God Who May Be*. It follows up on how the-god-who-may-be might be manifest, or rather how faith transpires in the first place. The thematic core of *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* is the encounter with the Stranger and the event of hospitality/hostility. In this basket Kearney’s places all his eggs. While official theologies and the popular religious imagination typically emphasize stories of creation, salvation, miracles, power, or final judgment as inaugural solicitations of faith, Kearney takes up the neglected figure of the Stranger. This wager is both the book’s strength and self-imposed limitation.

Paradigmatic examples, but by no means the only ones, are drawn from inaugural scenes of each of the Abrahamic faiths: Abraham’s visitation by three desert strangers, Mary at the moment of the Annunciation, Muhammad’s response to the address of Gabriel in the cave at Mount Hira. Kearney’s glosses on each scene are elegant, but here only the structural parallels can be sketched. In each case an uninvited Stranger appears; in each case there is a moment of disorientation, perplexity, fear, perhaps trauma is not too strong a word; in each case the addressee must decide for or against the Stranger; in each case the host’s welcoming of the Stranger opens from the Stranger a gesture for the promise of life, an epiphany of the divine: respectively, the birth of Isaac/Israel, the birth of Christ, the birth of the prophet and Qur’an; in each case a receiving host gives place to a guest who in turn transforms the gesture of affirmation such that the original host is now guest to renewed life, precisely in and through the encounter with the Stranger. That, clumsily expressed, is the central dynamic of Anatheism, which “begins and ends with the epiphany of the divine in the face of the stranger (p. 149).

While taking his point of departure from inaugural scenes of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Kearney is prepared to show that the anatheistic dynamic, wager, or movement cuts across all familiar borders: theistic-atheistic, western-nonwestern, sacred-secular, indeed every self-other, same-different division. Mediation of these oppositions proceeds by way of five aspects of the anatheistic wager. One might call them interpretive attitudes or hermeneutical predispositions –imagination, humor, commitment, discernment, and hospitality–each crisply defined. These are not stages but five equiprimordial points on the hermeneutical circle of understanding informing the communicative praxis of anatheism.

Anatheism does, however, admit of stages or moments which Kearney names the iconoclastic, the prophetic, and the sacramental. The first accepts the "NO" to the God of ontotheology delivered theoretically by enlightened atheism as well as the school of suspicion (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud) and delivered existentially by Auschwitz. The second moment gathers prophetic voices writing either directly out of prison camp experience of the Holocaust (Hillemann, Bonhoeffer, Ricoeur) or in that shadow (Arendt, Rabbi Greenberg, Levinas, Derrida). Such voices, profoundly attuned to the absence of God in the midst of unspeakable suffering and pain, are unable to deny the weakness, powerlessness, indeed, suffering of God. In each case, however, a reversal occurs (that I do not well understand and describe with trepidation) pivotal for the anatheistic paradigm. In the utter absence of a powerful and saving God a realization can occur that for God to be 'we' have to host 'Him', save 'Him; if God is estranged and a stranger to this world 'His' coming depends our welcome. This is perhaps possible through a certain affectivity. Kearney writes, "The felt absence of the old God (the death of God) ushers in a sense of emptiness that may provoke a new desire, a seasoned desire for the return of the Other God -the divine guest who brings life." (p.63). Or possible, perhaps, through hearkening of "the word of existence." Glossing on Ricoeur, Kearney writes, "The word of existence -which affirms the goodness of being in spite of its multiple estrangements....must be regrasped and reinstated." The ambition of anatheism is "to disclose a site where the freedom of our will is rooted in a listening to a 'word' of which one is neither source nor master" (p.75). Out of the depths of the abyss a return and recovery of the sacred is possible, a re-birth -not of the God of omnipotence but a God of service and a sacramental "yes" to life. Maybe. God-may-be, again, anew. That is the eschatological wager of anatheism.

The exposition of protest and prophecy closes the first half of the book (*Prelude*) and by now, in my view, the better part of the philo-theological heavy lifting has been achieved. The second half of the book (*Interlude* and *Postlude*) details the third moment of Anatheism: sacramental transformations in the everyday, mostly in secular scenes, specifically, at the levels of lived experience (Merleau-Ponty, Kristiva), literary imagination (Joyce, Proust, Woolf), and ethical-political praxis (Day, Vanier, Gandhi). Kearney puts on display a tapestry of anatheistic or proto-anatheistic instances of mediation, acts of transformation, epiphanies where the secular and sacred mutually beckon and inform each other. Readers will find their own favorite and more illuminating examples. Part of the astounding richness of the book is its multiple points of access welcoming diverse readers to engage the anatheistic option. Two structural points about this extended exemplification of the antheistic option stand out. First, by sacramental Kearney means and continually appeals to the figure of the Eucharist and thus enjoins a certain logic of transubstantiation. For example, he hones in on Merleau-Ponty's description of sensation as a form of communion or reversible rapport between seer and seen, and finds the same figure operative in Kristiva's aesthetics. Second, the anatheistic search for the divine, the sacred, or God (these terms tend to slip into each other) transpires "in" the world of human experience. Kearney's philosophical and theological position is insistently

incarnate (each of the seven chapters of the book begins with the preposition “In...”). That means leaving behind that strong sense of transcendence traditionally associated with God the Sovereign without eliminating transcendence entirely or reducing it to the world (pantheism) or some aspect of the world (humanism). The sacred for Kearney is “*in* the world but not *of* the world” (p.152). Hence the preference for the figure of the Stranger over a disembodied, otherworldly traditional Omni-God, and over the rather abstract and well worn master concept of postmodernism –‘the Other’. The Stranger is sacred in the sense that “she embodies something *else*, something *more*, something *other* than what the self can contain or grasp (p.152). The anatheistic wager concerns how we respond to this surplus, this transcendence within immanence, this glimmer of the infinite in the finite.

Who is the Stranger? Who makes possible the manifestation of the divine? For a full reply one must turn to Kearney’s *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* (especially chapter 3). The current book is not so much focused on the theory of the other-stranger-alien-guest-monster-god as with showing that in both secular and religious contexts (western and non-western) there live figures of thought and figures of action that embody the anatheistic gesture of welcoming the Stranger, enacting the choice of hospitality over hostility . These figures of thought and deed are held up as holy alternatives to the god-images of power, sovereignty, might, fear, tyranny, absolutism, oppression, and sacrifice that all too frequently govern political discourse in European democracies no less than Islamic theocracies or quasi-theocracies. I found Kearney especially effective at drawing out the anatheistic paradigm in classical and contemporary Islamic thinkers. The book wants to make a statement about the religious-other as well as the political-other. Kearney’s suggestion is, I believe, that getting our religious imagination in order is a precondition for getting our political house in order.¹

If peace is ever achieved on our planet, it will not, I submit, be brokered by global politicians and constitutional lawyers. It will be a peace brought by what Karl Jaspers called a “loving combat” (*liebender Kampf*) between different faiths and non-faiths. (p.181)

“Translation” rather than “combat” is Kearney’s metaphor of choice for exhibiting the anatheistic response to the religious or political stranger. He draws liberally on Ricoeur’s model of translation or “linguistic hospitality” defined as “the act of inhabiting the word of the Other paralleled by the act of receiving of the Other into one’s own home, one’s own dwelling.”² Translation admits of no reduction of one language to another or to a third master language, but preserves the strangeness of the other while opening the host language to unthought possibilities. Translation neither captures or domesticates the Other nor allows us to become perfectly transparent to the Other. Translation always leaves a

¹Our, ‘of course, is ambiguous since ‘we’ are the other for someone else –a phenomenon that continually eludes everyday political and religious discourse. And it is this self-other, host-guest ambiguity anatheism fruitfully exploits

²Quoted by Kearney in “Paul Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of Translation” *Research in Phenomenology* 37 (2007): 151.

surplus of meaning available for different or plural expression. It transforms both the one who is translated and the one who is translating. Who is 'same' and who is 'strange' becomes a slippery yet productive dynamic, revealing not only the otherness of the other but myself as another. Translation seems to have a dynamic similar to Kearney's ethic of hospitality and resembles as well the logic of the Eucharist. Translation, hospitality, Eucharist, oneself-as-another – a play of metaphors converging on the structure pervading atheistic movement. The translation metaphor seems to work more effectively in political and cross-cultural contexts than, say, the Eucharistic.

The readiness to translate back and forth between ourselves and strangers -without collapsing the distinction between host and guests languages -is, I submit, one of the best recipes to promote nonviolence and prevent war. (p. 151)

Inter-religious translation is a paramount concern for atheism. Kearney is appreciative of interfaith efforts that converse toward convergent principles. But common denominator ecumenicalism needs to be complemented by a second move that plumbs the specificities and differences of each spiritual tradition. The point is not to settle for what is alike but to generously attend to what is profoundly different not in order to translate back into my tradition or language, but in order to dwell and be hosted in the house of another. This enactment of hospitality as guest opens two possibilities: a deeper understanding of what is at the root of a different spiritual tradition, and second, an opportunity for self-critique of one's own tradition, of what is undiscovered or underdeveloped in one's own tradition (p.175).

However, at a culminating moment Kearney's atheism puts a universal back in play. For in plumbing religious difference what one finds is a commonality at the root of each religion: "a silent, speechless openness to a Word that surpasses us" (p. 176), "a surplus of meaning that exceeds all our different beliefs" (p. 178), "a mystical ground (*un fond mystique*) of what is most fundamental in each religion and which is not easily translated into language but rather borders on a common profound silence" (citing Ricoeur p.179), an "ineffable genesis point" (p. 179). It is this deep ground that atheism returns to, and why it can claim to be before (older than) and after (newer than) theism and atheism, holding out the promise of faith, again, *ana*. The mystical or apophatic thus appears in atheism as the commonest of grounds, struggling for expression not only in religions but in secular sites such as agnostic literature, art, and "the pots and pans" of everyday life –epiphanies of the everyday. What manifests itself Woolf called 'it' and Kearney is willing to refer to as the divine stranger. One must take utmost care, however, not to translate this up into a super-transcendent *hyperousia* but to translate down as "an infinite Other incarnate in finite others" (p.183). The divine stranger is always an incarnate stranger. In the Other, especially the *ta me onta*, something more, something unassimilable calls us beyond ourselves toward previously unenvisioned, virtually impossible acts of grace, hope, charity, and wonder. This is not a call to humanism or improved civil behavior. This is making ready for hosting something worthy of the name divine, receiving

a 'word' that we are neither source nor master (v.s.). The wager on the stranger is fundamentally, to use Kearney's entirely apt phrase, "a phenomenological testimony of goodness" (p. 183).

Anatheism...asks how we respond to the radical surprise of the Stranger as an invitation to faith, to make the impossible possible, to bring justice where there is hate, wisdom where there is ignorance. If anatheism has nothing positive or persuasive to say to this, it is not worth a grain of salt, and this book has been in vain. (p. 231, n.4)

The book has not been in vain and is worth mountain of salt, opening a most generous site for hosting dialogue among the conflicted families of humankind religious, nonreligious, or even irreligious. The book performs the hospitality of which it speaks.

Where is this mountain located in the landscape of contemporary continental theory? Roughly, abutting Levinas to the north and Derrida to the south (and east of the "new atheists" -Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens- who are engaged briefly, courteously, and poignantly). Kearney takes seriously Levinas' commitment to the face of the Other -the widow, the orphan, *the stranger* (my emphasis)- as the trace of God. However, by shifting from the figure of the "Other" to the figure of the Stranger, Kearney seems to want to concretize the flicker of transcendence that on some readings of Levinas seems to evaporate from the world. Among the things he draws from Derrida is a wise reticence in determining the content of the name of God, or the difference between historical messianisms and the pure, universal structure of messianicity. Kearney allows for the openness of messianicity, the intractable structure of the 'to come,' the formal structure of the promise that conditions belief in general and faith as such. There is an eschatological openness to anatheism that resists being ossified into a final or particular position. However, he refuses to regard every translation or every reading of the divine name as a Fall from the purity of messianicity. Otherwise, the faith of "religion without religion" becomes endlessly deferred, arid, incarnate hopelessness and the hopelessness of incarnation. The salutary reticence toward translating the divine name should not issue in existential paralysis à la Godot, but in multiple ventures of cross- and re-translation, if I understand Kearney properly.

From both Levinas and Derrida, Kearney obviously accepts the call of the Other and the imperative of responsibility as a primary structure of experience and even the condition of selfhood. However, he cannot follow all the way to an *absolute* imperative of the Other, if that means overwhelming the capacity for respond-ability, for choice before the Other -else the face of the Other becomes a figure of invasion rather than encounter. I think Kearney is correct, phenomenologically speaking, to preserve this moment of choice. It is the option at the heart of the anatheistic wager -hospitality or hostility to the divine stranger. However, it exposes a raw spot in the anatheistic project, namely, the problem of criteria or discernment. How is it possible to discriminate between strangers bringing life and strangers bringing death? Derrida and Caputo have

taken Kearney to task on this issue, arguing that any such criteria close or pre-calculate genuine openness to the Other, compromising hospitality itself. On his side, Kearney has the hermeneutical point that a pure openness to the Other is impossible since the fore-structure of understanding can never be robbed of the "fore," the passive or pre-conscious arcs of anticipation. Insofar as the problem of discernment tends to get posed as an epistemological problem, I think Derrida and Caputo are correct. Belief in general and faith as such are what they are in virtue of an element of not-knowing. Fully aware of this, I think Kearney could help his case by avoiding as much as possible the trappings of epistemological language and commit to quasi-religious language. Instead of asking for criteria or grounds *for* the act of faith that might assist the choice to open or close the door to the stranger, might Kearney risk the description that the choice *is* the act of faith? This would separate discernment from criteria and unlink the problem of choice from the problem of cognitive judgment. Discernment would not precede the act of freedom but issue from it as a kind of testimony or witnessing. 'I do not know if you bring life or death, but by welcoming you I testify to your possibility for life.' Discernment thus becomes pro-active, projective, creative rather than responsive or reactive. This is not Kierkegaard's irrational leap of faith, yet it is born of a certain innocence, not particularly prudent from the point of view of the world. But perhaps not too much of a wager for atheism.

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Burkey, John. "A Review of Richard Kearney's *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 10 no. 3 (Summer 2010): 160-166.