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Some fifty years ago in his short lyric "Days," Philip Larkin raised the question that troubles this book: "What are days for?" In the first verse a blasé voice responds:

> Days are where we live.
>
> They come, they wake us
>
> Time and time over.
>
> They are to be happy in.
>
> Where can we live but days?

—whereupon the poet jumps in:

> Ah, solving that question
>
> Brings the priest and the doctor
>
> In their long coats
>
> Running over the fields.

Reimaging the Sacred brings a dozen "priests and doctors" scurrying over the hills of contemporary hermeneutics to address the poem's question by weighing up whether and how to retrieve, reformulate, and reimagine the sacred (the holy, the divine, God, all *ex aequo*) after the so-called death of God. At the center of the discussion is Richard Kearney's hugely important and widely read *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (2009). Joining him in one-on-one dialogues in this collective symposium are literary critic and novelist James Wood, theologians Catherine Keller and David Tracy, and eight philosophers: Charles Taylor, Julia Kristeva, Gianni Vattimo, Simon Critchley, Jean-Luc Marion, John Caputo, Merold Westphal, and Jens Zimmerman (who is also co-editor of the collection). Kearney himself bookends the symposium with an introduction that lays out the project of anatheism and an epilogue that responds to some of the questions raised. Boston artist Sheila Gallagher, whose work graces the cover of the book,

concludes the volume with a reflection on *pneuma* and *hostis*: spirit and enemy/stranger/guest.

Kearney is the most prolific, and in my opinion the best, of the Anglophone philosophers in the French tradition who over the last thirty years have taken the "theological turn." But for Kearney it is a "theo-*poetic*" turn, and therein lie both the power and the paradoxes of "anatheism." Rather than summarize the wide-ranging conversations that make up this volume (a virtual impossibility), I will probe the question: What is Richard Kearney driving at? What is anatheism, and what would he have it do for us?

1. *The God who may be.* Richard Kearney—poet, novelist, philosopher, public intellectual—first read philosophy at University College Dublin, then took an M.A. at McGill under Charles Taylor, and in 1980 completed the Ph.D. under Paul Ricoeur. The title of his trilogy "Philosophy at the Limit" (2001-03) reveals the goal of his work: to take hermeneutical thinking to the edge of what can be said on this side of Christian faith, and then to make subtle raids on the inarticulate to tease out what *might* be said about an impossibility-that-*may*-be-possible, which he limns as "God again, after God." The "again" and the "after" are two of the meanings Kearney gives the ἀνά of ana-theism; another is a double reading of *adieu*: both *ab deo*—abandoning the God of metaphysics—and *ad deum*, theo-poetically refiguring the divine as a "God of perhaps, *peut être*."

The "after God" moment stands for Kearney's full-throated rejection of the God of metaphysics, the sovereign "Alpha-God" who has long been the whipping boy of the post-modern theological turn. In contrast to this "omni-God"—which I shall call God^{1}—the *deus* of *ad deum* (God^{2}) is a bit harder to define—and that's the point of anatheism: God^{2} is in fact undefinable and eludes every attempt, even Kearney's, to say what He/She/It might be. In Augustine's words, "Si comprehendis, non est deus": If you understand, it is not God. But Kearney would add an adverb: "*etsi* non est deus"—it is *not yet* God^{2}, not yet the "God anew," poetically refigured "otherwise" (*autrement*), who through and beyond the dark night of the soul might elicit a "positive affirmation," not as an entity and least of all a Supreme Being, but perhaps only as a call to "radical transformation," a summons to "a faith worth living."

Behind Kearney's anatheism stands the first principle of post-modernity, proclaimed by Nietzsche and elaborated by Heidegger, that possibility is higher than actuality. This principle marks the end of the onto-theological worldview stretching from Aristotle's self-thinking thought through Aquinas' *ipsum esse subsistens* down to Hegel's "development and realization of Spirit." For some 2500 years this metaphysical God^{1} was presented as either in fact (Aquinas) or in *fieri* (Hegel) a perfectly actualized self-coincidence that draws all of nature and human beings towards their

own teleological fulfillment. But Kearney's anatheism refigures God[2] not as Pure Act but as a God that *may be*, one who is self-emptying and "weak," that is, poured out into the needy of this world as in the *ekenosen* of Philippians 2:7. Kearney could well make his own Jean-Luc Marion's bold declaration that "the place of God *is*—and should be—empty."

2. *Ethics.* Since this kenotic God[2] has left no forwarding address other than those in need, all questions about God, faith, and religion in anatheism (as apparently also in Marion) are transformed into issues of ethics: justice, hospitality, mercy, forgiveness. In Kearney's words "the sacred is the stranger at the door." Or in Vattimo's *bon mot*: "Now that God is dead we can love one another."

But Kearney resists any reduction of anatheism to some variant of Left Hegelianism. There is an irrepressible "plus," an "etsi non," adjoined to his ethics. But this "more" is not the mere *surcroît du sens* within a secular humanism limited to a *horizontal* transcendence (more justice, more charity, more gift). Nor does he have much patience with the faceless transcendence, the "endless displacements," and the ethics of "the other as any other" that he finds in the undecidability of Caputerridian deconstruction. Rather: "I personally believe there *is* an extra dimension in seeing this [the gift] as not just coming from ourselves but also from something 'more' than us, other than us," what he calls, in the words of Alcoholics Anonymous, "a higher power," an "'It,' however you define that It."

3. *Sacramentality.* At this point Kearney's "philosophy at the limit" edges over that limit. Unlike Derrida's "religion *without* religion," Kearney argues for a religion[2] *after* religion[1], one stripped of the dogmatism and exclusionism of traditional Christianity, one that is ever open to serious doubt and the "Dark, dark, dark" of "East Coker" III. Religion[2] surrenders the truth-ism of traditional Christianity in the spirit of that emblematic anatheist, Pope Francis who recently declared, "If someone has answers to all the questions, that's proof God isn't with him." On the positive side, religion, like life, is a *social* and *cultural* phenomenon (Aquinas: *religio* is a natural, not a theological, virtue) and therefore is "sacramental," inseparable from *narratives* that are forever being revised and rewritten, *rituals* that are enacted differently in differently cultures, *sacred times and places* (birth, death, passion) that contain epiphantic or "saturated" meanings that no theology can parse and rationalize. In this regard, I suspect that Kearney's case is not much different from my own: I could no more stop being Catholic than I could stop being Irish. (The point, however, is to wear the baptismal garment loosely.)

Religion[2] rejects the Alpha-God[1] of metaphysics in favor of the Omega-God[2] of eschatology, not as the Judge who breaks in at the end of time, but as the ever absent X who, having awarded himself an endless sabbatical on Day 7 of creation, has decided never to appear again. This is the God that

Karl Rahner called "die abweisende Ferne": Seek him if you wish, but all you'll feel is a torrential wind blowing you back into this world, towards this needy stranger, into the arms of that friend or enemy. As St. Paul intimated in Galations 3:24 and as Jean-Luc Nancy has recently written, religion[2], especially if it's connected with Christianity, is made to put itself out of business in the name of what it is about.

4. *Whither anatheism?* The disaffected Christians and "cultured despisers" who are the likely audience for this wonderful symposium will find in its pages, as in Kearney's earlier *The God Who May Be* and *Anatheism*, one of the most appealing, and certainly the most literate, cases for rethinking the question of God—but for doing so within the scope of the poetic imagination rather than the calculative rationality of philosophy or theology. Besides being a consummate philosopher in the French continental tradition, Kearney is also an accomplished poet and novelist, and so it's no surprise that these dialogues often favor the poetic paradox over the analytic argument, and the apophatic over the apophantic. The effect is both pleasant and sometimes puzzling—in any case, a healthy stimulus to further thought. In the words of a certain nineteenth-century prophet: "We have art lest we perish from the truth."

As a theo-*poetics* aimed at refiguring a narrative about God[2], anatheism will not be troubled by possible conflicts with current scriptural scholarship. Professional exegetes, for example, may carp about the misreading of *kenosis* in Philippians 2—but to no good end. That post-modern horse, spurred on by Jack Caputo, escaped the barn years ago and ain't coming back. Others may wonder whether the anatheistic project (not unlike Garry Wills' reading of Jesus) should be as closely tied to Johannine Incarnation theology as this collection and the previous books would have it (this apart from the fact that the Lukan annunciation scene is not about the Incarnation). John's gospel, of course, represents the most *echt* of orthodoxies, and it would seem to sit uncomfortably among the more inclusionist sympathies of anatheism. Johannine theology represents a momentous shift away from, and ultimately a dogmatic narrowing down of, the earlier adoptionist or electionist christologies of Paul and the Synoptics, as well as the Q-communities' pre-scriptural interpretations of the Galilean prophet—not to mention what Yeshua himself thought about who he was and what he was doing. Paradoxically John's Incarnation theology, which crops up throughout Kearney's work, could well be read as the driving force behind religion[1].

Sheila Gallagher closes the book with a lovely reflection on her artwork "Pneuma hostis" that appears on the cover. She asks how God and religion are tied in with violence and sacrifice, especially in today's warrior world, and she wistfully cites Seamus Heaney's observation that no work of art has ever stopped a tank.

Maybe not the tank, but what about the driver? In his philosophy, his art, and his tireless work for peace in Ireland, Richard Kearney has spent over thirty years of a brilliant career laboring to make the driver of that gruesome weapon stop and think about what he is doing. We may all hope that philosophy in general and anatheism in particular will someday penetrate the mind and heart of that soldier.

But meanwhile the question remains: What to do about the damn tanks?

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