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The God who neither is, nor is not:
A theological evaluation of Richard Kearney's "God who may be"

by

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Suppose a king...

הֵן לְצֶדֶק יִמְלָךְ־מֶלֶךְ

וּלְשָׂרִים לְמִשְׁפָּט יָשֹׂרוּ׃

וְהָיָה־אִישׁ כְּמַחֲבֵא־רוּחַ

וְסֵתֶר זָרֶם

כְּפַלְגֵי־מַיִם בְּצִיּוֹן

כְּצֵל סֶלַע־כָּבֵד

בְּאֶרֶץ עֲיֵפָה׃

Suppose a king should reign with righteousness

and likewise princes should rule with justice.

Then each would be like a refuge from wind

and a shelter from a storm,

like streams of water in a dry place,

like the shade of a massive rock

in a parched land.

Isaiah 32:1-2[1]

[1] This translation by John D.W. Watts results from his choice to read הֵן hypothetically, which changes the genre to wisdom instruction (Watts 1998:n.p.).

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DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENT WORK

Student full name: Yolande Steenkamp

Student number: 21191353

Subject of dissertation: The God who neither is, nor is not: A theological evaluation of Richard Kearney's "God who may be"

Declaration:

(i) I understand the concept plagiarism and am aware of the University's policy in this regard.

(ii) I declare that this dissertation is my own, original work. Where the work of others was used (whether from a printed source, the Internet or any other), such sources were duly recognised and referenced in accordance with departmental requirements.

(iii) No work previously created by any other student or person was used under the pretence that it is my own.

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SUMMARY

A recognised dialogue partner in the renewed philosophical quest for God, Richard Kearney subscribes to the move in contemporary philosophy of religion that places the God-after-God in a dialectical relationship with the metaphysical God of pure act and strives to overcome it. In *The God who may be*, Richard Kearney takes up the challenge of re-imagining God and traditional concepts of transcendence in a postmodern context, and in a way that takes issue with both idolatry and injustice. Between the two rival ways of interpreting the divine – the eschatological and the onto-theological – Kearney proposes the God-who-may-be as a third, "onto-eschatological" way that negotiates between these polar opposites.

The study examines Kearney's post-metaphysical reflection on God. More specifically, it probes into his utilisation of both eschatology and the imagination as a way of negotiating a third way, according to a "poetics of the possible," between the polar opposite understandings of God as either Being or Non-Being. It aims to understand The God who may be within the larger context of his trilogy and his other publications on the subjects of the imagination, ethics, hermeneutics, and "thinking God" post-metaphysically. It considers Kearney's God of posse from a theological perspective, with the guiding question of what may be gained and what will be lost along the way of the post-metaphysical wager. The hypothesis is that Kearney's notion of the God of posse promises new possibilities for leading theology and its discourse about God beyond metaphysical categories to allow for an eschatological understanding of the existence of God. The study finds that Kearney's God of posse does present some interpretational difficulties, but ultimately concludes that, if approached within the confines that Kearney lays out for himself – namely that of a poetic, phenomenologico-hermeneutical exploration of certain symbols of the Judeo-Christian tradition – that Kearney at least prepares the field for thorough and creative theological engagement with his proposals.

Keywords: Richard Kearney; postmodern theology; post-metaphysical theology; Exodus 3:14; possibility/impossibility; philosophy-theology debate; "Religious turn" in Continental Philosophy; imagination and theology; God-who-may-be.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Preliminary remarks

Between 2001 and 2003, Richard Kearney published a trilogy entitled *Philosophy at the Limit* that has received much scholarly attention from various disciplines, but especially from the fields of philosophy and theology. With the first volume of the trilogy (*On Stories*) traversing boundaries between philosophy and literary studies, the second (*The God who may be: a hermeneutics of religion*) and third (*Strangers, Gods and monsters: interpreting otherness*) volumes explored the margins between philosophy, sociology, and religion. It is especially in terms of *The God who may be* that one can ask the question of where philosophy proper ends, theology proper begins, and philosophy of religion emerges with its own distinct interests. It is precisely this sort of question which this study wishes to expound. Due to the notable possibilities and implications that *The God who may be* holds for both theology proper (as it faces the postmodern challenge of thinking traditional concepts anew), and the scholarly practice of interdisciplinary dialogue (through which different disciplines may find themselves opened to new possibilities for re-thinking their more traditionally delineated fields of inquiry), this study is motivated by the conviction that *The God who may be* deserves thorough theological engagement and response.

The present study follows upon and expounds a previous dissertation that explored Kearney's 2007 essay, "Re-imagining God,"[2] as an example of his characteristic hermeneutic exploration of the possible as a means of steering a middle way through philosophical extremes. Specifically, the essay was approached as a portal into Kearney's post-metaphysical proposal of re-imagining God eschatologically, that is to say as neither Being nor non-Being, but as the possibility-to-be (Steenkamp 2011:6). The current study is wider in its scope, in that it engages

[2] In this essay, Kearney utilises the vocabulary of possibility and impossibility to suggest that "the infinite is experienced as possibility, even 'when such possibility seems impossible to us' (51). He sets out three 'concentric circles' which he believes show how a God of the possible 'reveals itself poetically' (52). The first poetic mode is scriptural, the second is testimonial, and the third is literary. In each circle, he considers *dunamis* and argues for an understanding that discards the image of God as omnipotent ruler of a yet to come Kingdom, for and (*sic*) image of God as smaller, closer, and as making possible love and justice in this world. He imagines a god of small things who does not exclude, but rather continuously invites all to a feast" (Johnson 2010:63).

Kearney's God-who-may-be project in its entirety, particularly as worked out by Kearney in *The God who may be*, but also within the context of his other work.

1.2 Research problem

In *The God who may be*, Kearney outlines an approach to God as the ultimate other that makes an ethical appeal and escapes the phenomenological dilemma of a God who is either transcendent to the point of being wholly anonymous or one who is immanent to the point of being nothing more than a mere projection. Kearney distances himself from onto-theology and appeals rather to eschatology as a way of re-imagining God as an ethically enabling possibility – a possibility that possibilises acts of love and justice in us beyond our own intrinsic resources and so accomplishes the Kingdom of God. With the divine portrayed as enabling possibility and humanity as that which finds itself transfigured by the surprising grace of God, there results a co-relativity or co-dependency where God is as dependent on us for the coming of his kingdom as we are on God (Masterson 2008:247).

This study examines Kearney's post-metaphysical reflection on God. More specifically, it probes into his utilisation of both eschatology and the imagination as a way of negotiating a third way, according to a "poetics of the possible," between the polar opposite understandings of God as either Being or Non-Being. It aims to understand *The God who may be* within the larger context of his trilogy and his other publications on the subjects of the imagination, ethics, hermeneutics, and "thinking God" post-metaphysically. It also specifically considers Kearney's God of *posse* from a theological point of view, with the guiding question of what may be gained and what will be lost along the way of the post-metaphysical wager.

1.3 Hypothesis

Because this study explores Kearney's eschatological approach to the existence of God with a view to evaluate the extent to which it enables us to move, theologically, beyond traditional metaphysical categories, such as actuality and omnipotence, the hypothesis overlaps to a large extent with the research problem. The hypothesis is, namely, that Kearney's notion of the God of *posse* promises new possibilities for leading theology and its discourse about God beyond metaphysical categories to allow for an eschatological understanding of the existence of God. The post-

metaphysical avenues explored by Kearney's God-who-may-be project consists, specifically, of an eschatological approach that mediates between the polar opposites of thinking God as either Being or Non-Being. This approach is, however, not without its problems, and this will also receive its due attention in the study.

1.4 Research method

The research problem will be addressed by means of a literary study. Chapter two will provide an introduction to the life and work of Richard Kearney up to date, paying special attention to the works that relate to his God-who-may-be project. A significant part of the study is dedicated to an overview of Kearney's *The God who may be* (chapter three). The reason for this is that Kearney's wager regarding the God of possibility is the flowing together of several philosophical streams, worked out in different sections of this significant hermeneutics of religion. Considering his proposal without having a clear understanding of the explorations that led him to re-imagining God in this way, can only lead to misunderstanding. From this overview of *The God who may be*, we turn in chapter four to a somewhat systematic deliberation – from a theological point of view – of the problematic aspects or contributions of the God of *posse*. We will reflect on these issues both in light of Kearney's other publications and in light of discussions in critical scholarship following the publication of his trilogy.

1.5 Expected results

On the one hand, this study provides a rather thorough exposition of the philosophical colour-mixing that lies behind the picture that Kearney paints of the God-who-may-be. But on the other hand, it moves beyond this elucidatory function to consider the question of the contributions that Kearney's wager of possibility stands to make to theology proper. In this regard this study can be understood as an attempted response to Kearney's invitation to theologians to enter into dialogue with philosophy and contribute their particular perspective to what has become known as the "religious turn" in contemporary Continental philosophy. While the study will find that Kearney's God of *posse* does present some interpretational difficulties, it will ultimately conclude that, if approached within the confines that Kearney lays out for himself – namely that of a poetic, phenomenologico-hermeneutical exploration of

certain symbols of the Judeo-Christian tradition – that Kearney at least prepares the field for thorough and creative theological engagement with his proposals.

CHAPTER TWO

RICHARD KEARNEY: BETWEEN STRANGERS, POETICS, AND MIDDLE WAYS

The voice that wagers that God would be best rethought in the onto-eschatological terms of the possible has in the last several years established itself as a significant dialogue partner in the renewed philosophical quest for God.[3] This chapter aims to give a human face to the ideas that will both engage and be engaged in the pages that follow, enabling the reader to interpret his phenomenology and hermeneutics of religion in a wider context.

Speaking from across the North Atlantic, where he holds the Charles H. Seelig Chair of Philosophy at Boston College, this Irish philosopher (Kearney is visiting professor at University College Dublin) has become a most prolific writer whose work traverses many boundaries and interests ranging from philosophy,[4] theology, and religious studies,[5] to politics,[6] literary theory,[7] aesthetics,[8] and even

[3] At a time when the philosophical question of God was expected to be dead and buried under the onslaught of the Masters of Suspicion, this quest seems to have been resurrected to the extent that some now speak of the "Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy." Kearney has been an active participant in this dialogue on God, as is seen especially from his involvement in the Villanova conferences (cf. Caputo 1997; Caputo, Dooley & Scanlon 2001; Caputo & Scanlon 1999, 2007). His essay "Re-imagining God," published in the 2003 proceedings from this conference, *Transcendence and beyond: a postmodern inquiry* (Caputo & Scanlon 2007), comes closest in theme and scope to the case he makes for envisioning God as possibility in *The God who may be* (2001) (cf. Kearney 2007a:51-65). The title of this conference volume, which is dedicated to Jacques Derrida, sets the dynamics of the word "transcendence" "loose upon the word itself," with the word "beyond" being intentionally ambiguous: "Moving beyond transcendence may mean finding an ultimate transcendence or it may mean ceasing to speak of transcendence and focusing on immanence. The articles in the volume take both approaches" (Johnson 2010:61).

[4] Kearney specialises in philosophical theology, as well as both the French and German traditions of Continental philosophy (Marsoobian 2005:729). His work has been characterised by a commitment to understand and engage other philosophical thinkers. See, for example: *Dialogues with contemporary Continental thinkers: the phenomenological heritage* (1984a); "Kierkegaard's concept of God-man" (1984b); "Friel and the politics of language play" (1987a); *Modern movements in European philosophy* (1987b); "Paul Ricoeur and the hermeneutic imagination" (1988b); *Poetics of imagining: from Husserl to Lyotard* (1991a); *Heidegger's three gods* (1992a); "Between Kant and Heidegger: the modern question of being" (1992b); "Derrida and the ethics of dialogue" (1993a); *States of mind: dialogues with contemporary thinkers on the European mind* (1995a); *Modern movements in European philosophy* (1996); "Aliens and others: between Girard and Derrida" (1999); *On Paul Ricoeur: the Owl of Minerva* (2004a); *Debates in Continental Philosophy: conversations with contemporary thinkers* (2004b); "Time, evil, and narrative: Ricoeur on Augustine" (2005b); "Paul Ricoeur and the hermeneutics of translation" (2007b); "Returning to God after God: Levinas, Derrida, Ricoeur" (2009); "Eucharistic aesthetics in Merleau-Ponty and James Joyce" (2010a); "Ricoeur and Biblical hermeneutics: on post-religious faith" (2010b); "Paul Ricoeur" (2010c); "Paul Ricoeur: dying to live for others" (2011a); "Disabling evil and enabling God: the life of testimony in Paul Ricoeur" (2011b); and "Derrida's messianic atheism" (2011c).

[5] Cf., e.g.: "Ideology and religion: a hermeneutic conflict" (1990b); "Thinking after terror: an interreligious challenge" (2006b); "Introduction: a pilgrimage to the heart" (2008a); *Traversing the*

include works of poetry and fiction[9] (Gregor 2008:147; cf. Ward 2005:369).[10] Specific to the focus of this research project are his contributions to the renewed philosophical engagements with the topic of God – a topic that he approaches through his "characteristic hermeneutical exploration of 'the possible' as an 'imaginative' way of casting lights upon philosophical issues" (Masterson 2008:247).[11] For Kearney the perpetual return of the God question compels us to define exactly what we mean when we take the word "God" on our lips, and his growing body of work negotiates in many ways between extremes in the way that God has been perceived: Is God a "deity of omnipotent causality or of self-emptying service? A mighty monarch or a solicitous stranger? A God without religion or a religion without God? A bringer of war or peace?" (Kearney 2011e:xi).

In his most recent work, *Anatheism: returning to God after God*, Kearney sets his interest in the God debate in a context of politics, religious background and philosophy (2011e:xi-xvii). Having grown up in Ireland during the thirty-year period of

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heart: journeys of the inter-religious imagination (2010, ed. with Eileen Rizo-Patron); "Interreligious discourse" (2010f); "Translating across faith cultures" (2011d).

6 Kearney has published widely on Irish culture and politics, but also on politics in general. Cf., e.g.: *The crane bag book of Irish studies* (vol. 1, 1982, ed., and vol. 2, 1987c, ed.); *Myth and motherland* (1984c); *The Irish mind: exploring intellectual traditions* (1984d, ed.); *Transitions: narratives in modern Irish culture* (1987d); *Across the frontiers: Ireland in the 1990's* (1988c, ed.); *Migrations: the Irish at home and abroad* (1990a, ed.); "Postmodernity and nationalism: a European perspective" (1992c); *Visions of Europe: conversations on the legacy and future of Europe* (1993b); *Postnationalist Ireland: politics, culture, philosophy* (1997a); "Terror, philosophy and the sublime: some philosophical reflections on 11 September" (2003b); "Thinking after terror: an interreligious challenge" (2006b); *Navigations: collected Irish essays, 1976-2006* (2007d); "Memory in Irish culture: an exploration" (2010d); "Renarrating Irish politics in a European context" (2010e).

7 Cf., e.g.: "Utopian and ideological myths in Joyce" (1991c); "Poetry, language, and identity: a note on Seamus Heaney" (1998).

8 Cf., e.g.: *Continental aesthetics: romanticism to postmodernism – an anthology* (2001, ed. with David Rassmussen); Sacramental aesthetics: between word and flesh (2007c); "Aesthetics and theology" (2010g).

9 Apart from the significant role that narrative plays in his philosophical writings, Kearney has also published poetry volumes and written a number of his own novels. Cf., e.g.: *Angel of Patrick's hill* (1991b); *Sam's fall* (1995b) and *Walking at sea level* (1997b).

10 In the diverse nature of his professional interests, Kearney follows in the example of Paul Ricoeur, his supervisor for his doctoral studies, who published more than thirty major works during his lifetime that ranged from "existentialism and phenomenology to psychoanalysis, politics, religion, and the theory of language" (Kearney 2005:4).

11 Masterson describes this characteristic philosophical approach as follows: "His writings, from the 1960s to the present day, witness to this abiding interest in and commitment to the revelatory power of the imagination. Moreover, he has demonstrated a close study of its development from early mythological expressions through the long history of western philosophy. He has been particularly engaged with contributions to the discussion by the principal contemporary exponents of phenomenology, structuralism and postmodernism. Among these his mentor and friend Paul Ricoeur was the most influential inspiration in the development of his own characteristically hermeneutical exploration of 'the possible' as an 'imaginative' way of casting light upon a variety of philosophical topics" (2008:248).

religious violence, Kearney was witness to the most arrogant forms of religious triumphalism on the one hand, but also to religiously motivated ecumenical dialogues and peace efforts on the other. In this context, Glenstal Abbey, where he studied for five years, proved a lasting influence with their Benedictine commitment to uncompromising hospitality to the stranger. This radical interspiritual hospitality, which went so far as to consider even atheism as "indispensible to any wager of faith" (2011e:xii), was reinforced for Kearney by the sustained witness to Christian peace in Ireland, and made a lasting impression as to the potential of spiritual commitment to counter the perversion of religion (2011e:xiii). He explains,

> Thus while I certainly revolted at an early age against the ecclesiastical authorities of my land, and roundly rejected the God of Triumph, I never ceased to harbor a deep fascination for spiritual questions and an enduring admiration for religious peacemakers (2011e:xiii).

It was during his period of stay in the radically secular city of Paris that his interest in the God question crystallised into the question that would eventually develop into his hermeneutics of religion, and specifically into his *Anatheism* project: Could one return to God after leaving God? If so, what *kind* of God would this be? (Kearney 2011e:xiii). From his doctoral studies under Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Levinas in Paris, his earliest volumes in French,[12] to two of the three volumes[13] in his recent trilogy *Philosophy at the Limit*[14] and his most recent volume on a renewed quest for a God after God, this question has remained an abiding concern (2011e:xiii). In addressing this question, Kearney subscribes to the move in contemporary philosophy of religion that places this God-after-God in a dialectical relationship with the metaphysical God of pure act and strives to overcome it. Given the importance of his trilogy for the current study, we will quickly pause to provide the reader with an overview.

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[12] *Poétique du Possible: Vers une Herméneutique Phénoménologique de la figuration* (1984e) – his doctoral thesis under supervision of Paul Ricoeur, and *Heidegger et la question de Dieu* (1980, ed., 2nd ed. 2009).

[13] *The God who may be: a hermeneutics of religion* (2001) and *Strangers, gods and monsters: interpreting otherness* (2003a).

[14] Hederman makes the following important remark on the topic of Kearney's trilogy: "Since he has lived for many years with postmodernism, the energy and aim of this trilogy would seem to be both phenomenological and proselytizing. He wants not only to pass through and beyond postmodernism himself, but he wants to take with him those with whom he has labored at the coal face: Ricoeur, Husserl, Derrida, Freud, Heidegger, Kristeva, and Levinas" (2006:271).

On Stories (2002b). In this attempt at writing a public philosophy, Kearney illustrates his hermeneutical approach to the role of narrative in our lives. He addresses narrative imagination and illustrates its role in personal and socio-political identity formation (Gregor 2008:148; Kearney 2002b:4), showing how stories provide a "shareable world" that contribute to this end (Kearney 2002b:3). Through a number of actual stories, Kearney addresses the interweaving of fiction and history by first looking at the narratives of individual historical persons, and then also considering a few national narratives. He then outlines a philosophy of storytelling in the final section, concludes that narratives "matters," and joins his voice to Aristotle's in declaring the unnarrated life not worth living.

Strangers, gods and monsters: interpreting otherness (2003a). This work is an attempt to unravel the experience of alterity and otherness by interpreting three defining contours of the contemporary profile: strangers, gods, and monsters (Hederman 2006:270). Kearney attempts to make philosophical sense of the Self-Other relationship disclosed by this "estranging phenomenon" in art, religion and psychoanalysis, and illustrates the question of immanence and transcendence with regard to the Other in "theological, philosophical, anthropological, literary and psychoanalytical categories" (Masterson 2008:252). The work illustrates how we often project our unconscious fears, which in ourselves we recoil from, onto others and then make them into strangers, gods, and monsters – extreme others of whom we may live in terror and hatred. Kearney also investigates the scapegoating phenomenon found in various cultures and illustrates how transferring the responsibility for the troubles of a society or community onto a stranger and sacrificing him, her, or them accordingly, affirms cultural identity:

> The biblical scapegoat symbolically laden with all the guilt of the Israelites is re-enacted, usually in human form, right down to the present day. Jews, heretics, witches, infidels, Native Americans, Negroes, homosexuals, Catholics, Protestants, Muslims and atheists, have all been cast in the role (Masterson 2008:253).

Hederman judges the contribution of Kearney's book as a valuable 'practical' (complimenting Kant's 'theoretical') explanation of evil, providing a "much-needed third way between the somewhat masochistic metaphysics of Levinas and the almost autistic psychoanalysis of Freud" (2006:270-271). Kearney proposes a "hermeneutic

pluralism of otherness" and is convinced that no otherness is so exterior (Levinas) or so unconscious (Freud) that it cannot be at least minimally interpreted by a self (2003:81). He concludes that

> one of the best ways to *de-alienate* the other is to recognize (a) oneself as another and (b) the other as (in part) another self. For if ethics rightly requires me to respect the singularity of the other person, it equally requires me to recognize the other as another self bearing universal rights and responsibilities, that is, as someone capable of recognizing me in turn as a self capable of recognition and esteem (2003:80).

The God who may be: a hermeneutics of religion (2001). Due to the detailed discussion of this second book in the *Philosophy at the Limit* trilogy in chapter three, I will provide only a short overview here. Advocating an eschatological approach to interpreting the divine, Kearney attempts to retrieve the latent eschatological meaning of four biblical texts[15] in the light of contemporary phenomenological, hermeneutic and deconstructive debates (Kearney 2001:1). He proposes a God of the possible who transfigures and is transfigured in turn, enabling an eschatological kingdom that depends as much on our response to the divine invitation than it does to the God who possibilises it. Kearney imagines this God post-metaphysically, so that the God of the promised kingdom is emptied of the metaphysical deity's "purported power-presence – understood metaphysically as *ousia, esse, substantia, causa sui*…" (2001:2). His guiding question throughout remains

> how we may overcome the old notion of God as disembodied cause, devoid of dynamism and desire, in favor of a more eschatological notion of God as possibility to come: the *posse* which calls us beyond the present toward a promised future? (2001:3).

Kearney's trilogy saw the publication of two companion volumes comprised of essays by his dialogue partners. Originally intended as one volume, they include contributions by Ricoeur, Charles Taylor, Chomsky, Derrida, Nussbaum, Jack Caputo, Merold Westphal, Kevin Hart, John Manoussakis, Brian Treanor, etc. (Gregor 2008:148). *Traversing the imaginary: Richard Kearney and the postmodern challenge* (2007), edited by Gratton and Manoussakis, addresses Kearney's

[15] The accounts of the burning bush (Ex 3), the transfiguration on mount Tabor (Mt 17:1-13/Mk 9:2-13/Lk 9:28-36), the Shulamite's Song (from the Song of Songs), and the promise to make the impossible possible (Mt 19:26/Mk 10:27/Lk 18:27 – note: not Matthew 10 as Kearney mistakenly indicates in his introduction, 2001:1).

contribution to the fields of ethics, politics, culture, and aesthetics, focusing on the status of imagination in postmodernity, which has been a constant theme throughout his career, as well as on the role of narrative in his thoughts (Gregor 2008:148). *After God: Richard Kearney and the religious turn in Continental philosophy* (2006), also edited by Manoussakis, gathers contributions to Kearney's philosophy of religion, many of which take a critical angle on Kearney's God of the possible. Some of these points of criticism include exactly what "possibility" means with regard to God, Kearney's interpretations of other philosophers, and the methodological status of Kearney's hermeneutics of religion (Gregor 2008:149)

With *Anatheism: returning to God after God*, Kearney attempts to provide an "anatheist space" where both theists and atheists may engage in debate, and where the free decision to believe or not believe may be both tolerated and cherished (2011:xiii-xiv; cf. Soultouki 2010:446). The possibility of God after God exists only in relation to the alternative option of its impossibility, and for Kearney, it is the very transcendence of God that necessitates such openness:

> So much depends, of course, on what we mean by God. If transcendence is indeed a *surplus* of meaning, it requires a process of endless interpretation. The more strange God is to our familiar ways, the more multiple our readings of this strangeness. If divinity is unknowable, humanity must imagine it in many ways. The absolute requires pluralism to avoid absolutism (Kearney 2011:xiv).

While Kearney attempts in *Anatheism* to illustrate how certain proponent minds of the previous century responded to the conundrum of how to speak of the sacred after the disappearance of God, he does not propose anatheism as some necessary historical dialectic. The radicality of the traumas and disasters of the previous century demand that "God must die so that God might be reborn. Anatheistically. How this might happen is a matter of interpretation. A question of belief or disbelief – or some middle space between" (2011:xvi-xvii; cf. Soultouki 2010:445). Anatheism is not presented as a new religion, but rather as the

> re-encounter or recapturing of what we thought we already possessed or had relinquished. Anatheism is a movement back and beyond God, a concept that revisits the idea of God as a gift and suggests faith as a matter of reception and interpretation, rather than a teleological choice. What can be regained by the anatheistic movement, according to Kearney, is a new understanding of God in both secular and spiritual terms (Soultouki 2010:445-446).

Having explored the ontological and eschatological dimensions of transcendence in *Poétique du possible* and *The God who may be*, along with questions of metaphysical truth and being, Kearney has cast *Anatheism* in the form of a hermeneutic narrative that tries to tell a philosophical story of the God question (2011:xvii). Throughout this story are at work firstly a philosophical wager regarding the interpretation of diverse opinions about the sacred in our time, and secondly an existential wager central to everyday movements of belief and disbelief, uncertainty and wonder that pertains to that which we consider sacred and dear in our lives (2011:xvii). For this reason, Kearney describes *Anatheism* as "a narrative of narratives, that is, a philosophical story about the existential stories of our primal encounters with the Other, the Stranger, the Guest – encounters that in turn call for ever-recurring wagers and responses" (2011:xvii).

When it comes to Kearney's own spiritual heritage, he speaks of a "dual belonging" (2011:xiv). His upbringing in a devout but liberal Catholic Irish family, fostering a deep sense of sacramental spirituality, was supplemented by the more critical consciousness of his Protestant maternal family, thus teaching him that "religion should be a matter of individual choice and conscience as well as of consent and mystery" (2011:xiv). This same sense of double belonging was reinforced by Catholic and Protestant artists from Northern Ireland who reimagined their stories from the "other side": "Catholics and Protestants got into each others' minds, swapped stories, and began to feel what the 'enemy' felt" (2011:xiv). This sort of interreligious hospitality only expanded through Kearney's dialogues with Jewish thinkers (e.g. Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida), the Islamic tradition, and finally beyond the three Abrahamic faiths through his encounters with Buddhist and Hindu thinkers (e.g. Choqui Nyma and Swami Tyagananda) (2011:xiv-xv). Religiously, spiritually and artistically, then, Kearney has traversed many boundaries and extended many confessional circles.[16]

[16] Kearney himself puts it as follows in *The God who may be*: "Religiously, I would say that if I hail from a Catholic tradition, it is with this proviso: where Catholicism offends love and justice, I prefer to call myself a Judeo-Christian theist; and where this tradition so offends, I prefer to call myself religious in the sense of seeking God in a way that neither excludes other religions nor purports to possess the final truth. And where the religious so offends, I would call myself a seeker of love and justice *tout court* (2001:5-6). He points out that, if he doesn't refer to non-Western religious thought in *The God who may be*, it is due to his own limited competence rather than any Euro-centric presumption (2001:6).

Kearney makes a point of stating throughout his writings that, when writing on the God question, his approach is philosophical rather than theological (2011:xv; 2001:9). He acknowledges that he lacks not only scholarly expertise in theology, but also the motivation to legitimise his considerations with respect to any particular spiritual or religious tradition. Hermeneutically, then, he draws as freely from religious texts and their scholarly interpretation as he does from novelists and the writings of agnostic authors: “Imagination and narrative play as important a role in my inquiry as do faith and reason” (2011:xvi).

Philosophically, Kearney finds himself between the modern theories of phenomenology and existentialism on the one hand, and the postmodern ideas of poststructuralism and deconstruction on the other (2011:xv):

> From the former I acquired … an irrevocable respect for personal responsibility, choice, and agency; a belief in the possibility of thinking from concrete embodied experience; and a faith in the power of human imagination and action to transform our world. … From the latter, postmodern theories I learned that human selfhood and identity are always part of a larger linguistic-cultural process, a web of layered significations that constantly remind us of the unfathomable enigmas of alterity (Derrida, Levinas, Kristeva). Both of these stances – modern and postmodern – combined to inform my own narrative hermeneutic in dialogue with Ricoeur (Kearney 2011:xvi).

In *The God who may be*, Kearney again points to the philosophical influences of Levinas, Derrida, Ricoeur, but also refers to the participants of the 1980 conference “Heidegger et Dieu” (Jean-Lux Marion, Stanislas Breton, Jean Greisch, Jean Beaufret), as well as the Villanova conferences of 1997 and 1999, where he came into closer contact with John Caputo, along with a rich variety of Anglophone philosophers of religion (Westphal, Tracy, Taylor, Hart, Schwartz, Milbank, Dooley, Richardson) (2001:3). Kearney summarises the impact of these influences as follows:

> What these respective dialogues – French, American, and Irish – taught me is that God is not a dead letter but a vibrant concern for our time. In spite of the vagaries of fashion, and interminable apocalyptic pronouncements on the death of God, the task of questioning the divine has arguably become more urgent than ever (2001:3).

As the reader may have noticed from the overview of Kearney’s recent work provided above, he is a scholar who is committed to finding mediating, “middle” ways

between opposing schools of thought and between conceptual polar opposites. In this, he follows in the example of his mentor, Paul Ricoeur. Consider, for example, the respectful way that he speaks of Ricoeur as someone who performed the art of translation in his philosophical practice:

> Ricoeur was an inveterate mediator, someone who navigated and negotiated transits between rival positions. He was, it could be argued, unequaled as a diplomat of philosophical exchange, forever finding a point of commerce – if not always resolution – between ostensibly irreconcilable viewpoints. Consider his endless brokering and commuting between Continental and Anglo-Saxon thought at the most general level. Then, within the Continental tradition more specifically, between existentialism and structuralism; between hermeneutics and Critical Theory; between phenomenology and the human sciences; between Freudian psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics; between literary theory and the philosophy of religion; between historical understanding (*Verstehen*) and scientific explanation (*Erklären*); between psychology and neuro-science; between ethics and politics, and so on. And consider, finally, his many acts of mediating translation *within* hermeneutics itself between romantic hermeneutics (from Schleiermacher and Dilthey) and critical or radical hermeneutics (developed by Habermas and Derrida, respectively) (*sic*) What is remarkable in all these critical intercessions is that Ricoeur never ceased to respect both adversarial partners in the exchange. He deftly transmuted conflict into conversation without ever sacrificing depth of conviction or acuity of evaluation. In his philosophical role as translator, Ricoeur was, I believe, unrivaled in his time. Indeed, one could say that Ricoeur's thought represented both philosophy *as* translation and a philosophy *of* translation" (Kearney 2007:147-148).

As the reader unfamiliar with Kearney's work will undoubtedly discover in the next many pages, Kearney's entire God-who-may-be project could be presented, and Kearney himself hints to this fact more than once, as just such an attempt to navigate a middle way between opposing ways of talking about God that have arisen in contemporary postmodern philosophy of religion.

Let us then turn to this formidable contribution to discourse about God in a postmodern context.

CHAPTER THREE

THE GOD-WHO-MAY-BE:

RE-NEGOTIATING TRANSCENDENCE

> God neither is nor is not but may be. That is my thesis in this volume. What I mean by this is that God, who is traditionally thought of as act or actuality, might better be rethought as possibility. To this end I am proposing here a new hermeneutics of religion which explores and evaluates two rival ways of interpreting the divine – the *eschatological* and the *onto-theological*. The former, which I endorse, privileges a God who possibilizes our world from out of the future, from the hoped-for eschaton which several religious traditions have promised will one day come (Kearney 2001:1)

Pointing out the latent eschatological meaning of four biblical texts[17] in the light of contemporary phenomenological, hermeneutic and deconstructive debates, Kearney challenges the classic metaphysical view that possibility is something that needs to be eliminated from the divine, and indeed proposes that divinity's very "potentiality-to-be" is in fact the most divine thing about it (2001:2). The God-who-may-be is closely tied to Kearney's interpretation of the kingdom, which is – in the case of the God of *posse*[18] – never imposed or declared already accomplished from the beginning. Instead, it is by opening ourselves to the transfiguring power of transcendence that the God-who-may-be offers each person the possibility of realising a promised kingdom and thus also to transfigure God in turn: "by making divine possibility ever more incarnate and alive":

> This capacity in each of us to receive and respond to the divine invitation I call *persona*. In this sense, one might even say that it is, paradoxically, by first recognizing our own powerlessness – vulnerability, fragility, brokenness – that we find ourselves empowered to respond to God's own primordial powerlessness and to make the potential Word flesh. According to this reading, God can be God only if we enable this to happen (Kearney 2001:2).

The God of *posse* is in Kearney's view passionately involved in human affairs and history, and as such is more true to the biblical God who desires and promises

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[17] The accounts of the burning bush (Ex 3), the transfiguration on mount Tabor (Mt 17:1-13/Mk 9:2-13/Lk 9:28-36), the Shulamite's Song (from the Song of Songs), and the promise to make the impossible possible (Mt 19:26/Mk 10:27/Lk 18:27 – note: not Matthew 10 as Kearney mistakenly indicates in his introduction, 2001:1).

[18] Borrowing liberally from Nicholas of Cusa, Kearney calls the God of the possible the "God of *posse*" (2001:2).

than to the old deity of metaphysics (Kearney 2001:2). The God who reveals himself to Moses is not the purely ontological, abstract subsistent being that scholastic theologians assumed ("I-am-who-am"), but the eschatological one-who-will-be: "God will be God at the eschaton. That is what is promised" (2001:3-4). But because this is a promise rather than a *fait accompli*, the space of the possible calls at us from the free space that it leaves gaping at the very core of divinity. For the promise remains exactly that, and nothing more, until we respond to it: The transfiguration of the possible (the kingdom) into the actual is a partnership between us and the God-who-may-be.

> The divine possibility takes its leave of being having passed through it, not into the pure ether of non-being, but into the future which awaits us as the surplus of *posse* over *esse* – as that which is more than being, beyond being, desiring always to come into being again, and again, until the kingdom comes. Here at last we may come face to face with the God who may be, the deity yet to come (Kearney 2001:4)

Kearney calls this kind of philosophy of God by three preliminary "quasi-names" or methodological pseudonyms: dynamatology, metaxology, and metaphorology (2001:6-7). The first, a neologism from the Greek δύναμις (potentiality, potency), refers to the "logic of the dynamizing possible" and innermost potential. The second, *metaxology*, another neologism borrowed from Irish philosopher William Desmond (who has a slightly different use of the term), points to the commitment to choosing "a middle way (Greek, *metaxy*) between the extremes of absolutism and relativism" (2001:6). In the context of a philosophy of religion, Kearney chooses this middle space as an alternative to what he considers to be

> two polar opposites in contemporary thinking about God (which sometimes end up colluding with each other), namely: (a) the hyper-ascendant deity of mystical or negative theology; and (b) the consigning of the sacred to the domain of abyssal abjection. In the first instance, God can take the form of a divinity so far beyond-being (Levinas, Marion, and at times even Derrida) that no hermeneutics of interpreting, imagining, symbolizing, or narrativizing is really acceptable. Indeed God's alterity appears so utterly unnameable and apophatic that any attempt to throw hermeneutic drawbridges between it and our finite means of language is deemed a form of idolatry. In the second instance, the divine slips *beneath* the grid of symbolic and imaginary expression, back into some primordial zero-point of unnameability which is variously called "monstrous" (Campbell, Zizek), "sublime" (Lyotard), "abject" (Kristeva), or "an-khorite" (Caputo). While both positions push the notion of God to opposite extremes – to the highest of heights or lowest of depths – they share a common aversion to

> any mediating role for narrative imagination. For both, the divine remains utterly unthinkable, unnameable, unrepresentable – that is, unmediatable. The hermeneutic approach to religion I am espousing here, by contrast, seeks to engage just such a mediating function (Kearney 2001:6-7).

Kearney's third and final pseudonym, *metaphorology*, conveys his conviction that religious language always endeavours to say something about the unsayable, and that, as Ricoeur held, "inventive hermeneutic readings of religious texts can spark off a rich play of metaphoricity resulting in a radical semantic augmentation (or "surplus of meaning") (2001:7). Kearney's understanding of the importance of metaphor, specifically intersecting metaphors, in religious hermeneutics, will receive careful consideration in chapter four (4.1), where his eschatological waver will be theologically assessed by, among other criteria, the contribution that Kearney makes to the field of religious discourse.

3.1 Toward a phenomenology of the *persona*

Before Kearney can "chart a hermeneutic path of thinking along the tracks and traces of the Possible God who comes and goes," i.e. develop his phenomenology of religion, he must first explore this "theme of transfiguration" in terms of a phenomenology of the *persona* (2001:9).[19]

3.1.1 Figure of the Other – Persona

> Each person embodies a *persona*. *Persona* is that eschatological aura of "possibility" which eludes but informs a person's actual presence here and now. I use it here as another word for the otherness of the other; just as I use "person" to refer to my fellow in so far as he/she is the same or similar to me (empirically, biologically, psychologically, etc.). At a purely phenomenological level, *persona* is all that in others exceeds my searching gaze, safeguarding their inimitable and unique singularity. It is what escapes me toward another past that I cannot recover and another future I cannot predict. It resides, if it resides anywhere, beyond my intentional horizons of re-tention and pro-tention. The *persona* of the other outstrips both the presenting consciousness of my *perception* here and now and the presentifying consciousness of my *imagination* (with its attempts to see, in the mode of *as-if*, that which resists perceptual intuition). The *persona* of the other even defies the names and categories of *signifying* consciousness. It is beyond consciousness *tout court*. Though this "beyondness" is, curiously, what

[19] Kearney here acknowledges his dependence on post-Heideggerean accounts of the self-other relation (Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, Kristeva, Ricoeur, and Derrida), as well as the Johannine promise: "A little while and you will no longer see me; and again a little while and you will see me" (Jn 16:16-20).

> spurs language to speak figuratively about it, deploying imagination and interpretation to overreach their normal limits in efforts to grasp it – especially in the guise of metaphor and narrative (Kearney 2001:10).

Kearney attempts to develop the notion of the *persona* in terms of a radical phenomenology of transfiguration:

> I never encounter others without at the same time configuring them in some way. To configure the other as a *persona* is to grasp him/her as present in absence, as both incarnate in flesh and transcendent in time. To accept this paradox of configuration is to allow the other to appear as his/her unique *persona*. To refuse this paradox, opting instead to regard someone as pure presence (thing), or pure absence (nothing), is to disfigure the other (Kearney 2001:10).

In this process, Kearney outlines two major pitfalls: *Firstly*, we may ignore the fact that the other only appears to us *as if* he or she were present, and appropriate them to our familiar paradigms of understanding and identification. Secondly, toward the other extreme, we may easily "mistake the other's *persona* for an idol than accept it as an icon of transcendence," effectively suspending the *as if* presence of the *persona* "in the interests of deification or apotheosis," as happens frequently in both religious idolatry and the cult of stardom (2001:11). While the first pitfall disregard others by ignoring their *transcendence*, the second does so by ignoring their *flesh-and-blood thereness* (Kearney 2001:11). We may succumb to either *literalism* (masking the figural in the literal) or *fetishism*,[20] in both cases conflating the orders of the possible and the actual, the fictional and the empirical.

3.1.2 Persona *as eschaton*

Kearney speaks of the eschatological notion of *persona* as that which guarantees the "irreducible finality of the other as eschaton," but stresses that this is as *eschaton* (in the sense of an "end without end" that escapes and surprises us) and not as *telos* (in the sense of a "fulfillable, predictable, foreseeable goal") (Kearney 2001:12). Realising that I have no power over the other *persona*, the other re-enables me, making me capable by entrusting power to me (2001:12). The eschaton consists

[20] Fetishism may involve human persons, but this is not necessarily so: "One finds it recurring, on the scale of persons, in the wild obsessions of fans and fanatics, ranging from stalker- and voyeur-fantasies to the mass-media apotheosis of certain figures of fame and charisma (a postmodern version of the modernist personality cult). But fetishism doesn't always involve a human person. Nations, states, and empires are also subject to idolatrous personifications. Think of the sacralizing cults of national sovereignty and territory" (Kearney 2001:11).

exactly of this: the future possibilities of the other that I find myself unable to grasp or realise. In a temporal sense, then, a person's *persona* can be said to be both younger and older that his/her person: "pre-existing and post-existing the seizure of myself as presence (qua sum of totalizable properties). The *persona* is always already there and always still to come" (Kearney 2001:12). It occupies the "u-topian no-place" of potential, so exceeding the dualism of internal subject and external object, being and non-being (Kearney 2001:12). It is the

> non-presence that allows presence to happen in the here and now *as* a human person appearing to me in flesh and blood. It is, in short, the quasi-condition of the other remaining other to me even as s/he stands before me in this moment. But however non-present it is, *persona* is not to be understood as some impersonal anonymous presence (i.e., a Monarchian *deus absconditus*), nor is it to be taken as a merely formal condition of possibility (Kant); nor indeed as some archaic and formless receptacle (Plato's and Derrida's *khora*). *Persona* is always inseparable from *this* person of flesh and blood, here and now (Kearney 2001:13).

Indeed, other than is often spoken about "spirit," the *persona* is no disembodied soul. It is precisely in and through the incarnate body that the *persona* gives itself or absolves itself: "There and not there, but never somewhere else" (Kearney 2001:14).

3.1.3 Beyond fusion

Through the act of projection, the unconscious continually subordinates singular others to some totalising sum of our ego-fantasies, thereby reducing the transcendent *persona* to a surrogate "object-other," the "unconscious illusion standing in for absence" (Kearney 2001:14). But because this fetishized Other does not exist, it does not care, unlike the *persona* who gives, calls, loves and solicits. For Kearney this is not unlike the so-called Platonic love: a woman is revered as exemplary of the Eternal Feminine, and is not loved for her unique singularity (*persona*). As such it is love of the Same-One. Augustine would later call this the Self-Loving-Love of the divine (*amor quo Deus se ipsum amatur*), and Plotinus spoke of Self-Desiring-Desire (*autou eros*), where God's is a self-sufficient love radiating in itself and for itself – indeed a return of Narcissus, where the One is simultaneously the *loved one* and *love*, and where what is lost is the alterity of the other person (2001:14-15).

What Kearney opposes to this "fusionary sameness of the One" is the "eschatological universality of the Other," conceived in terms of a possible co-existence of unique *personas* whose transcendence is in each case guaranteed. For this reason Kearney finds this eschatological notion of the universal more ethical, and, because it is still only a possibility to be attained, an "eschatological possible still-to-come creates a sense of urgency and exigency, inviting each person to strive for its instantiation, however partial and particular, in each given situation (Kearney 2001:15).

> To put this in terms of a more patristic metaphor, we might say that the eschatological universal holds out the promise of a perichoretic interplay of differing *personas*, meeting without fusing, communing without totalizing, discoursing without dissolving. A sort of divine *circumin(c/s)essio* of the Trinitarian kingdom: a no-place which may one day be and where each *persona* cedes its place to its other (*cedere*) even as they sit down together (*sedere*). The Latins knew what they were about when they played on the semantic ambidexterity of the *c/s* as alternative spellings of the phonetically identical root term *cessio/sessio*. They knew about the bi-valent promise of *persona* as both there and not there, transcendent and immanent, visible and invisible (Kearney 2001:15).

Always defying my power in the present, then, the eschatological *persona* "transfigures me before I configure it. And to the extent that I avow and accord this asymmetrical priority to the other, I am transfigured by that particular *persona* and empowered to transfigure in turn – that is, to figure the other in their otherness" (Kearney 2001:16). Having always *already come and gone*, or *is still to come*, it outstrips every figuration on my part, in that it never actually appears at all (2001:16).

3.1.4 Persona *as chiasm*

For this reason, the phenomenon of the persona calls for a phenomenology (Kearney calls it a "quasi-phenomenology") that is powered by ethics rather than an eidetics of intentional consciousness (in the Husserlian sense of "striving toward a rigorous science of transcendental immanence") (2001:16).

> … (A)lways avowing its own *as-if* conditionality, the *persona* of the other announces a difference which differentiates itself ad infinitum. *Persona* is infinitely premature and invariably overdue, always missed and already deferred. *Persona* comes to us as a chiasmus or crossover with person – as in Merleau-Ponty's crisscrossing lines or two-sided sleeve. Which is why we cannot think of

> the time of the *persona* except as an immemorial beginning (before the beginning) or an unimaginable end (after the end). That is precisely its eschatological stature – the messianic achronicity which breaks open the continuous moment-by moment time of everyday chronology (Kearney 2001:17).

Unable to be captured in some pure moment, the *persona* marks a time that is always surplus, but that nevertheless reveals itself in time, through the "incursion of the eternal in the moment" (2001:17). Indeed, to the extent that the *persona* is never adequately there at all, it is literally *personne*:[21] a *no*-one as opposed to a *some*-one who is phenomenally symmetrical to me. Always "other than the other-for-me here and now," the *persona* "transfigures by absenting itself as *personne* in the very moment that it hails and holds me," and "sounds through (*per-sonans*) the momentary person before me, sounding and seeking me out" (Kearney 2001:17). To acknowledge the other in all its eschatological uniqueness is

> to behold the other as an icon for the passage of the infinite – while refusing to construe the infinite as some other being *hiding behind* the other. This is not Platonism. Nor Kantianism. *Persona* is neither Idea nor Noumenon. Neither pure form nor *Ding-an-sich*. Nor any other kind of transcendental signified for that matter. No. *Persona* is the in-finite other in the finite person before me. In and through that person, And because there is no other to this infinite other, bound to but irreducible to the embodied person, we refer to this *persona* as the sign of God. Not the other person as divine, mind you – that would be idolatry – but the divine in and through that person. The divine as trace, icon, visage, passage (Kearney 2001:17-18).

3.1.5 Persona *as* prosopon

This idea of the *persona* shining and sounding through the person in front of me, for Kearney is akin to what the Greek poets and church fathers called *prosopon*.[22] To be a prosopon means to be-a-face-toward-a-face. As such it always presupposes the other, and it is significant that the term is almost always appears in the plural (*prosopa*), "signaling that the *prosopon-persona* can never really exist on its own (*atomon*), but emerges in ethical relation to others" (2001:18). For Kearney, such a

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[21] "(T)he french carries the dual sense of 'person' and 'no-one'" (Kearney 2001:17).

[22] Kearney briefly explains how his hermeneutic retrieval of *prosopon* (later translated by Tertullian and others into the Latin *persona*) finds support in the original Greek usage, with its etymology carrying the "dynamic sense of being-for-the-other": "The term is made up of the two parts: *pros* meaning 'in front of' or 'toward'; and *opos*, as in optics, meaning a face or more particularly an eye, countenance, or vision. More precisely, *prosopon* refers to the face of the person as it faces us, revealing itself from within itself. One 'is' a *prosopon* but never 'has' a *prosopon* as such; it lets us see the very soul of the person in a new light" (Kearney 2001:18).

hermeneutic retrieval of *persona-prosopon* from a post-Levinasian perspective may constitute a very appropriate translation of the Judeo-Christian primacy of ethics. The paradoxical phenomenon of the *prosopon* Kearney calls *transfiguration*, which is something that I allow the *persona-prosopon* to do to me (Kearney 2001:18). In short, Kearney proposes a version of the preference for icons over idols:

> If the tradition of onto-theology granted priority to being over the good, this counter-tradition of eschatology challenges that priority. Herewith the good of the *persona* takes precedence over my drive to be (*conatus essendi*) and holds it to account. And, where possible, cares for it (Kearney 2001:19).

Reading Matthew 25 as a reminder that openness to the *persona* of the other is the ultimate in eschatological awareness, Kearney finds himself, having laid the foundation with the analysis of the *persona*, at the "threshold of a phenomenology of religion" (Kearney 2001:19).

3.2 I am who may be

In the second chapter of *The God who may be*, in which the epiphany of the burning bush serves as a first example of religious transfiguration, Kearney aims to describe and discuss the

> extraordinary phenomenon of a deity which appears and disappears in a fire that burns without burning out, that ignites without consuming, that names itself, paradoxically, as that which cannot be named, and that presents itself in the moment as that which is still to come (2001:20).

Especially important for Kearney is the way in which, in Exodus 3:14, God "declares his own *incognito* and manifests himself in terms of a divine self-definition which cannot be defined" (2001:22). Indeed, the formula אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה has been a perpetual topic of fascination for a range of interpreters over the centuries.[23] Kearney

[23] The Hebrew has been translated into Greek as Εγώ εἰμι ὁ ὤν (*ego eimi ho on*), into Latin as *ego sum qui sum*, and into a variety of English forms, with "I am who am" and "I am he who is" being the most common (Kearney 2001:22). In the recent essay where he provides an overview of the philosophical reception history of Ex 3:14 from Platonism to postmodernity, Jaco Gericke illustrates the complexity of the Exodic formula by refraining from translating the verse, noting quite correctly that "(d)oing so would mean opting for a specific philosophical interpretation…" (2012:125). He lists several of the interpretations as reflected in the translations, pointing out the complete lack of consensus regarding the metaphysical assumptions of the verse "since the commencement of philosophical interpretations about 2300 years ago. It must suffice to take cognisance of the fact that familiar interpretations include: 'Being' ('I am that which is', following the LXX), 'active presence' ('I will be present', following the Talmud), 'creative activity' ('I will cause to be what I will cause to be', following Albright); 'emotional intensity' ('I am definitely here to act,' following emphasis via repetition

has divided the main traditions of interpretation into two broad approaches, which he calls the ontological on the one end, and the eschatological on the other.[24] As a middle way, he proposes an onto-eschatological interpretation:

> My ultimate suggestion is that we might do better to reinterpret the Transfiguring God of Exodus 3 neither as 'I am who am' nor as 'I who am not' but rather as 'I am who may be' – that is, as the possibility to be, which obviates the extremes of being and non-being. *'Ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* might thus be read as signature of the God of the possible, a God who refuses to impose on us or abandon us, traversing the present moment while opening onto an ever-coming future. That, in a word, is my wager (Kearney 2001:22).

3.2.1 The ontological reading

Inheriting the Hebrew אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה from the Greeks as Εγώ εἰμι ὁ ὤν, both Augustine,[25] Aquinas[26] and other early and medieval Christian theologians equated

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in Hebrew) and 'a refusal to commit' ('I shall be whatever I shall be', i.e., the deity answers by telling Moses 'whatever')" (Gericke 2012:125).

[24] Gericke puts the ends of this spectrum in different, somewhat more philosophical terms in the conclusion to his overview of philosophical interpretations of Ex 3:14: "The reception history of the verse can thus be compared to a metaphysical spectrum with realist Platonic or Aristotelian perspectives on the right, through semi-realist German Idealism and Jewish existentialism, to more contemporary non-realist post-structuralist and postmodernist readings. In all this the tendency seems to be a gradual move away from the metaphysical assumptions of onto-theology" (2012:135).

[25] "Already in the *Confessions* (13.31, 46), Augustine turns the verbal "is" of God into a substantive formula. And this move becomes more explicit when Augustine comments directly on Exodus 3:14 (which he renders as *Qui est, misit me ad vos*) – 'Because he is *Is*, that is to say God is Being itself, *ipsum esse*, in its most absolute and full sense. "*Esset tibi nomen ipsum esse*," he says to God (*Enarrrationes in Psalmos* 101.10).' Consolidating this quasi-Parmenidean reading, Augustine makes an important distinction between what God is for us (his *nomen misericordiae*) and what He is in Himself (his *nomen substantiae*). While the former more historico-anthropomorphic perspective is conveyed by the formula 'I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,' the latter – safeguarding the absolute, inaccessible, and transcendent character of God – is expressed by the *ego sum qui sum*. It is this latter sense that Augustine has in mind in the *De Trinitate* when he identifies the God of Exodus with the Greek-Platonic notion of substance (*ousia*) understood as an a-temporal, immutable essence: 'He is no doubt *substania* (*sic*), or if one prefers, he is the *essentia* which the Greeks called *ousia … essentia* comes from *esse*. And who "is" more than He who said to his servant Moses: "*ego sum qui sum*" … That is why there is only one substance or immutable essence which is God and to which being itself (*ipsum esse*) properly belongs' (*De Trinitate* 5.2, 3). Augustine concludes from this that anything that changes or is capable of 'becoming something which he was not already' cannot be said to possess being itself. We can say of God therefore that 'He is' precisely because he is that which does not change and cannot change" (Kearney 2001:23).

[26] Further developing the Augustinian view of the *qui est* of Exodus as the "principal name of God and the highest formulation of being," Aquinas held that the revelation of Exodus "designates 'true being, that is being that is eternal, immutable, simple self-sufficient, and the cause and principle of every creature.' For Aquinas, as for Augustine, the *esse* of God is nothing other than his *essentia*, and as such exists eternally in the present without past or future: that is, without movement, change, desire, or possibility – *Deus est actus purus non habens aliquid de potentialitate* (*Summa Theologiae* 1.3.4c). With Aquinas and the scholastics, the God of Exodus is thus enthroned as the most fully-fledged 'act of Being.' In both his *Commentary on the Sentences* and *De Substantiis Separatis*, the Exodus verse is invoked by Aquinas to corroborate speculative thought about the most ultimate mode of Being. For Being says more of God than either the Good or the One. The proper name of God is

this *ego sum qui sum* with the *esse* of metaphysics, with the result that the original Hebrew formula came to be seen as the "highest way of saying *vere esse, ipsum esse*, that is, Being-itself, timeless, immutable, incorporeal, understood as the subsisting act of all existing" (Kearney 2001:22). From this scholastic fusion of Greek metaphysics and the Semitic religious thought reflected in Exodus 3:14, resulted the idea that "Being," as the proper name of God, gave accurate expression also of the very essence of God, and as such in the fusion of Yahweh with the Hellenistic supreme Being:

> Thus did the God of Exodus secure ontological tenure in the God of metaphysics. And this tenure has come to be known, after Heidegger, as "onto-theology": a tendency to reify God by reducing Him to a being (*Seiende*) – albeit the highest, first, and most indeterminate of all beings. (Kearney 2001:24).

Although onto-theology equated God with a modality of being, it also attempted to defend the ultimate ineffability and transcendence of his nature. With its proofs and analogies, it attempted to strike a balance between the universality and indeterminacy of Being on the one hand, "and God's density as a quasi-subject or person (which holds God from infinite dispersion) on the other" (Kearney 2001:24). Another pole of the ontological reading of Exodus 3:14 comprised, however, what Kearney calls *mystical ontologism*, where human and divine consciousness is conflated (2001:24-25). We will return to this position later.

3.2.2 The eschatological reading

Kearney turns now to a counter-tradition of interpretation, which he calls eschatological,[27] and which focuses on the ethical and dynamic character of God as opposed to the essentialist interpretations that characterised medieval and post-medieval metaphysics (2001:25).

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revealed in Exodus 3:14 is none other than the absolute identity of divine being and essence. *Esse is the essentia of God*" (Kearney 2001:23).

[27] "The very framing of the Exodic self-revelation in terms of a response to Moses' question – who shall I say sent me? – opens the phrase toward the 'mark of becoming.' This reading points to the fact that Exodus 3:14 falls within the framework of a solicitation – that is, assumes the task of summoning us toward an eschatological horizon" (Kearney 2001:25).

The God who promises – the ethical mandate

Taking medieval Jewish commentator Rashi[28] as hermeneutic point of departure, who translates the phrase from Exodus 3:14 as "I shall be what I shall be," and interprets this name in terms of "mandate and mission," Kearney argues in this section for a more dynamic interpretation of God's self-disclosure: "The transfiguring God is not a once-off deity but one who remembers the promises of the past and remains faithful to them into the eschatological future" (Kearney 2001:25). Moses' response to Yahweh's calling – "here I am," signals for Kearney, in keeping with Rashi, that the 'name' should be read in the context of a dynamic mandate, pointing to the divine collaboration in the coming of justice on earth:

> Amplifying the meaning of *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh* in this manner allows for a plurality of interpretations of the verb "to be" used by God in his address to Moses. And this means reading the formula in terms of function rather than substance, in terms of narrative rather than syllogism, in terms of relation rather than abstraction. God's "I shall be" appears to need Moses' response "Here I am" in order to enter history and blaze the path toward the Kingdom (Kearney 2001:26).[29]

As opposed to the ontological reading of אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה (Εγώ εἰμι ὁ ὤν, "I am the one who is), Kearney therefore argues for an eschatological reading that reclaims much of the dynamism that was lost in the ontological reading: "The burning bush epiphany is to be understood less as an ontological substance in opposition to non-being than as a self-generating event" (Kearney 2001:28). With God revealing himself as the God of Moses' ancestors, while pledging also to be "with them" through the promise hinting in the name, it becomes apparent that the Exodic name is

> *both* an I that is identical with itself in its past *and* a Thou that goes forth into the future. It reveals God as he is, at the same time as it commits God, and his

[28] Kearney also refers to the commentators Buber and Rosenzweig, who "share the view that what the suffering Hebrews needed from Moses was not some metaphysical proof about the existence of God as *ipsum esse* but an assurance that He would remain close to them. The promise of the speaking God which begins with the word *'ehyeh*, 'I shall be,' means a pledge to his people that he will not abandon them. It is not, Buber observes, the self-exposure of some occult magical power but a clarification of the *kind* of God he is, an indication of the eschatological 'meaning and character of a name (YHVH)" (Kearney 2001:27).

[29] Kearney emphasises that the "eschatological promise is granted within an I-Thou relationship (of God with Moses), thereby indicating *two* sides to the promise, human *as well as* divine. … Here God commits Himself to a kingdom of justice if his faithful commit themselves to it too; the promise of Sinai calls forth a corresponding decision on behalf of the people" (Kearney 2001:28-29).

> emissary Moses, to an action of salvation. This is why the Name is both theophanic and performative. It serves as the pre-name and the sur-name of that which cannot be objectively nominated. And it is this excess or surplus that saves God from being reduced to a mere signified – transcendental or otherwise. The transfiguring God of the burning bush remains a trace which explodes the present toward the future, a *trait* which cannot be bordered or possessed. … Henceforth, Yahweh is to be experienced as a saving-enabling-promising God, a God whose performance will bear out his pledges (Kearney 2001:28).[30]

The main principle of Kearney's eschatological reading is that the epiphany in Exodus 3 is not a revelation of God as an "essence *in se* but as an I-Self for us," to which humans can most appropriately respond precisely by *committing* themselves to a response: "Exodus 3 is the proclamation that God has invested the whole of Himself in his emissary's history" (Kearney 2001:29).

The God who comes – historical mandate

The eschatological reading of the Exodic epiphany points, then, to a God who becomes with us, and who is equally dependent on humanity for the coming of his kingdom as humanity is on him: a fact that again underlines the importance of covenant and dynamic relationship over against conceptuality, and implies that "most philosophical reflections on God are in need of revision" (Kearney 2001:29-30). And indeed, Kearney argues that the

> eschatological wager reaches here its most dramatic stakes. Once the "unaccomplished form of the verb" – *'ehyeh* – is taken in its full implications, one realizes that God is what he *will* be when he becomes his Kingdom and his Kingdom comes on earth. At the eschaton, God promises to be God (cf. Isaiah 11:9; Psalms 110:1; Zechariah 14:9; 1 Corinthians 15:24-28). Meanwhile, God is in the process of establishing his lordship on earth and the *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh*

[30] While I believe Kearney is right in seeing more in Ex 3:14 than "a demystification of pagan tendencies to invoke divine names as mythical powers," (although this aspect surely contributes to the saturated nature of the text), I am less convinced by his argument that this God "also marks a step beyond the capricious deity inherited by the Hebrews themselves…" and that Ex 3:14 "may be read accordingly not only as a biblical critique of other mystery-rite religions but as a self-critique of such traces in biblical religion itself!" (Kearney 2001:27, cf. also p. 30). His use of texts from the Old Testament in his argument seems somewhat naive in light of biblical criticism, specifically tradition criticism and research on the socio-historical situatedness and development of Yahwism (See, e.g. Cook 2004, De Moor 1997, Gerstenberger 2002, Gnuse 1997). Of course, Kearney never claims to be an Old Testament scholar or theologian, but a philosopher who will draw from all literary traditions that may aid him in his re-imagination of the divine. This particular part of his argument does not convince, however. While it is certainly true that, at the epiphany of the burning bush, God looks both backwards and forwards (2001:28), it is not necessary to imply a development in Yahweh himself: "the One who has revealed himself as the God of his ancestors to proclaim a new plan of action by *becoming different* from what he has been until now" (2001:28).

> may be rendered accordingly as "I will be what I will be; I will become what I will become." In addition, therefore, to the unaccomplished for of the verb, we find an "uncannily taut drama" signaled by the relative pronoun *'asher* (what/who) "for its content essentially depends on the quality of history that Moses and his people will pour into it (Kearney 2001:30).

Taken together, the unaccomplished nature of the verb, the relative pronoun, and the first-person voice – "I-may-be" – renders the formula "performative rather than constative" – an appeal that invites action rather than a "super-determination from on high which leaves us too cold, or too hot, to act" (Kearney 2001:30). On an existential level, we witness here "a radical alteration of the metaphysical use of the copula" (2001:31). In contrast to the ontological (rather than moral) God of the Hellenists, where *being* was most crucial – timeless and permanent – of all, the Hebrews advanced *becoming* and *possibility* (to be able) as most important (2001:31).[31] Keeping in mind the confession of the "one who is, who was, and who is to come" (Rv 1:8), it follows that the early Church saw the incarnate Christ as the Exodic Name become flesh, so that the "recognition of the Name as eschatological vocation is charged with a goal which for Christianity finds its realization in the coming, or second coming, of Christ" (Kearney 2001:31).

3.2.3 Critical considerations

Under this section, Kearney turns to the problems that result when transcendence becomes "too transcendent": when God is entirely removed from historical being and as a result give rise to a "negative" or "apophatic" theology where "God can become

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[31] "Thus while the Hellenists translate Exodus 3:14 as 'I am the Being who is eternal,' a non-Hellenic Jew like Maimonides encourages us to conceive of Yhwh as an agent with an active purpose, a God who *does* rather than a *being who is* (*Guide of the Perplexed* 1.54-58)" (Kearney 2001:31). Jaco Gericke renders Maimonides' interpretation of Ex 3:14 very differently in his essay on philosophical interpretations of the Exodic formula: "On the Jewish side the Aristotelian philosopher Moses Maimonides (1135-1204 C.E.) deals with Exodus 3:14 in Chapter Sixty-Three of Part I of his *Guide for the perplexed*… The context here is his efforts to reconcile the numerous biblical divine names with the perfect unity of God. Briefly stated, Maimonides identified אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה as a divine name and expands on it only in terms of it being the 'explanation' of the name YHWH, and as the 'idea expressed by the name' YHWH. Maimonides contended that אֶהְיֶה derived from the verb root היה and connotes the idea of 'existence'. He interprets the question Moses asks God in Exodus 3:13 as Moses anticipating that the Israelites would not believe in the existence of God, and so he asks YHWH how he can demonstrate his existence to them. The closest he comes to an interpretation of אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה is: 'He is the existing Being which is the existing Being'. Maimonides develops his interpretation along the lines that God then taught Moses the 'intelligible proofs' by which His existence could be confirmed. Thus Moses was construed as having presented the Elders of Israel with an extensive treatise on Aristotelian thought and in so doing proved to them the existence of God" (Gericke 2012:130-131).

so unknowable and invisible as to escape all identification whatsoever" (Kearney 2001:31). As a case in point, Kearney discusses Jean-Luc Marion's concept of a God without being in some detail.[32] Kearney is critical of the fact that the transfiguring Word, mediated as pure gift for Marion in the context of an ecclesiastical hermeneutic, does not depend on a human response in any way. Instead, the referent of the religious sign is "encountered *as is* 'by mystical union,'" and humanity therefore has little part to play in the "transfiguring mission of the Word – e.g., the quest for historical justice" (Kearney 2001:32). But even at a deeper level, Kearney is concerned that the extent to which Marion understands the saturating phenomenon to be completely "bedazzling,"[33] negates our ability to differentiate between the divine and the monstrous: revelations that enable and transform and revelations that disable and destroy (2001:33).

A second concern for Kearney is another strand of "mystical postmodernism" – a "teratology of the sublime" – that focuses on the "monstrous" character of God. According to this view, the monstrosity of the divine springs from the fact that its very sublimity becomes "ultimately indistinguishable from abjection and evil. In the realm of the sublime, vertical excess and abyssal excess easily collapse into one another. Alterity becomes the flip side of the void" (Kearney 2001:33).[34] Kearney maintains,

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[32] Marion argues that "the whole metaphysics of *naming* God must give way to a new understanding of God as pure *giving*. To subordinate the God of love to speculative distinctions of being and non-being is to resort to principles of reason which God radically transcends. … The statement "God is One" may thus give way – for Marion … to the utterance "God loves" (Kearney 2001:31). In Gericke's words, Marion argues that "when the biblical God announces his name in Exodus 'I am who am' (Exodus 3:14) – what matters is not so much that he gives his name to Moses, but that he gives it. This is related to the Christian mystical tradition of God as love. Hence, in Marion's reading, God's most proper name is not being or the scholastic *Ipsum esse subsistens* but 'love' – which, for Marion, is the 'icon', as he calls it, which allows the incomprehensible to be seen while impeding any conceptualistic reduction of it" (2012:133-134).

[33] Kearney explains how Marion "points to a God beyond both the affirmation and negation of names, where words assume a purely pragmatic function … The 'hyper' of negative theology would thus point to a God radically devoid of being and safely beyond the reaches of onto-theology understood as metaphysics of presence. Marion distills negative theology … into an uncompromising 'theology of absence.' The 'saturated phenomenon' of mystical eucharistic encounter with the divine is informed by such a *hyper*-excess that it cannot be seen, known, or understood. Its very superabundance surpasses all predication and narration. Or to put it in Marion's own words: this mystical experience takes the form of a certain 'stupor' or 'terror' which its very 'incomprehensibility imposes on us'" (Kearney 2001:32).

[34] As examples, Kearney refers to "certain New Age invocations of a neo-Jungian or neo-Gnostic "dark god" – an ambivalent deity which transcends our conventional moral notions of good and evil and summons us to rediscover our innermost unconscious selves, to 'follow our bliss'" (2001:33). He also refers to Joseph Campbell's "monster God" and Slavoj Zizek's description of Judaism as "a cult of utterly unnameable, unimaginable, inaccessible transcendence … a religion of the sublime" (2001:33).

however, that a respect for the otherness of the God of Exodus need not result in the "extremes of mystical postmodernism" and its accompanying loss of ethical and historical judgment. Moses illustrated this point, in Kearney's view, by showing us

> how we can break open a new order of existence without dissolving into a void. He confronted the burning bush without succumbing to the monstrous. His encounter with the absolutely Other revealed a deity who, as noted, calls us to an ethico-political task – the eschatological quest for liberty and justice (2001:34).

He summarises,

> In sum, the danger of God without being is that of an alterity so "other" that it becomes impossible to distinguish it from monstrosity – mystical or sublime. To avoid this, it may, I suggest, be wiser to reinterpret the God of Exodus 3:14 as neither being nor non-being, but as something before, between, and beyond the two: an eschatological *may be*? Such a third way might help us eschew the excesses of both *ecclesiastical mysticism* on the one hand (Marion and certain negative theologians) and *apocalyptic postmodernism* on the other (Zizek and the prophets of the sublime) (2001:34).

3.2.4 The God who may be – a via tertia

Kearney turns now to a hermeneutic retrieval of the Exodic name, with which he aims to work out a third way beyond the polar opposites of onto-theology and negative theology:

> My wager here is that at the chiasmus where *'ehyeh* meets *einai* a seismic shift occurs – with God putting being into question just as being gives flesh to God. At this border-crossing, the transfiguring Word struggles for carnal embodiment even as it dissolves into the flaming bush of its own desire" (Kearney 2001:34).

Pointing to the extraordinary variety of interpretations of being that the translation of the Hebrew (אֶהְיֶה) into the Greek (ειναι) and into the Latin (*esse*) gave rise to, Kearney holds that such a plurality of interpretation "reinforces the enigmatic resonance" of the phrase, and as such guards against conceptual idolatry (Kearney 2001:35). Kearney revisits Meister Eckhart's contribution to the Exodus debate, and finds his ontological commentaries on the Exodic phrase – seen from an eschatological perspective – to take issue with much of the problematic aspects of the ontological reading, and to, instead, "carry a presentiment of God as pure *gift* and *passage*":

> Pure gift in the sense of self-giving beyond the economic condition of return. "Being," as Eckhart put it, "is so superior in rank and purity and so much God's own that no one can give it but he – as he gives himself." … Eckhart's own best defense against the charges of onto-theology or mystical ontologism is the reminder that he deemed the dialogue between God and being to be *provisional* rather than final (Kearney 2001:37).

Such a move beyond ontology and essentialist theology surpasses the focus on the essence of God and proceeds toward a focus on his ultimate promise – a revelation of the *transfiguring* God: "Transiting through and beyond metaphysics, God reveals himself, in keeping with his promissory note in Exodus, as a God that neither is nor is not but *may be*" (Kearney 2001:37). At this point, Kearney reads Nicholas of Cusa's notion that God is to be understood neither as *esse*, nor as *nihil*, but as *possest*, together with Eckhart's deconstructive reading:

> Transgressing the traditional scholastic capture of God as *esse*, Cusanus redefines God as *possest* (absolute possibility which includes all that is actual). "Existence (*esse*) presupposes possibility (*posse*)," writes Cusanus, "since it is not the case that anything exists unless there is possibility from which it exists." God alone, he concludes, "is what he is able to be." It is arguably this same hidden intellectual heritage which resurfaces, however obscurely, in Schelling's definition of the God of Exodus 3:14 as the "possibility to-be" (*sein wird*) or the "immediate can-be" (*unmittelbar Seyn-konnende*); or again in Heidegger's later understanding of the gift of being as a "loving-possibilizing" (*das Vermögen des Mögens*). Indeed we may even detect distant traces of it in Derrida's enigmatic description of the transfiguring power of the messianic Perhaps" (Kearney 2001:37).

Such counter-readings are what inspires Kearney's hermeneutic of God as May-Be: an onto-eschatological hermeneutics, a poetics of the possible. But he stresses that God remains unconditional giving and at no point becomes a conditional God. For even "if God's future being is indeed conditional on our actions in history, God's infinite love is not" (Kearney 2001:37).

3.3 Desiring God

In his third chapter, Kearney turns to what he calls "explicitly incarnational accounts of the *persona-prosopon*" in the Christian tradition, namely that of the transfiguration on Mount Tabor and the paschal apparitions (2001:39).

3.3.1 Messianic transfiguration

Building on his phenomenology of the *persona* in chapter one, Kearney describes the transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor as the person of Jesus being metamorphosed before the eyes of his disciples in the *persona* of Christ, and as Christ's "coming into his own," assuming his messianic calling (2001:39).[35] And significantly, instead of Jesus abandoning his person to become someone else, his divine *persona*, his "in-finity" shines through his "flesh-and-blood embodiedness" (2001:39-40). Kearney finds it significant that it was Jesus' face (προσοπον) that registered the transfiguring event, "marking an ethical openness to transcendence which refuses idolatry" (2001:40). And yet there are also several events in the text that signal toward distancing, in the sense of Christ resisting being made into an idol.[36]

3.3.2 The eschatological legacy

Referring to Saint John Damascene's insistence that the transfigured character of Christ's face did not imply a reduction of his divinity to his appearance, and that the transfigured Christ received glory "by investment" rather than "by fusion," Kearney surmises that the transfiguration "signals a surplus or incommensurability between *persona* and person even as it inscribes the one in and through the other" (Kearney 2001:41). And this signals for Kearney the phenomenological logic behind the Chalcedonian formula of the two natures of Christ in one: "A startling chiasm of infinity in the finite" (Kearney 2001:41).[37] For Kearney, the dazzling whiteness of Christ's face and clothes marks the

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[35] The narrative of the transfiguration on Mount Tabor is accounted for in the Synoptic Gospels in Mt 17:1-8, Mk 9:2-8, and Lk 9:28-36).

[36] Kearney mentions, for example, the fact that Jesus prepares his three disciples by leading them to a secluded mountain for prayer, covers himself in a cloud, and insists that no monuments be built and that the disciples keep what they have seen in confidence (2001:40).

[37] The Chalcedonian Creed was adopted at the Fourth Ecumenical Council, held at Chalcedon in 451 C.E. It responded to what was deemed by the Church to be heretical views concerning the nature of Christ, and established the orthodox view that the two natures of Christ (human and divine) are unified in his one person: "… our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable [rational] soul and body; consubstantial [co-essential] with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, … according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence, not

> Christic crossing of *persona* and person. A holy braille to be deciphered in blinding light. Which is why the transfiguring God calls at all times for hermeneutic vigilance and discernment, setting us at a critical distance – yet never so distant as to forfeit grace (Kearney 2001:41).

This "incident of radical alterity" sets Mount Tabor in relation to Mount Sinai as its Gospel replay, "with the transfigured Christ both re-figuring the burning bush and pre-figuring the coming of the messianic kingdom (when the resurrected Christ and the last prophet Elijah will return." As such, Christ functions as a "trans-figure *between* Moses and Elijah" (Kearney 2001:42).

The transfigured Christ therefore bursts through the limits of intentional consciousness through the mere excess of the transcendent *persona* over the immanent person (2001:42).[38] Adding to this excess, the transfiguration narrative is framed by scenes that once again refuse conclusions about Christ as some magical power that can be possessed, and that support the Mount Tabor's insistence that "when it comes to the *persona* of God – marking the unique thisness (*haecitas*) of each person – it is a question of the old enigma: now you have him, now you don't. One moment there, one moment gone" (Kearney 2001:42). And yet it is vital that both the flesh-and-blood thereness of the historical Jesus and the transcendence of Christ's *persona* be kept in mind, and yet not conflated: for while the Messiah is distinct from the Nazarene, they are in no way separable – from which it follows that the cult of the *historical* Jesus on the one hand, and a reduction of Christ to some a-historical fetish (such as in Gnosticism) on the other, can be forms of idolatry that are equally compromising of Christ's *persona* (Kearney 2001:42-43). When both the humanity and divinity of Christ is kept in relation to one another, it becomes clear, as in Saint Anastasius' homily, that the Mount Tabor transfiguration "is nothing less than a preview of the 'new creation,' and call to 'draw a recreated creation towards God'" (Kearney 2001:43). A bold aspect of this line of interpretation is found in the interpretation of God's voice telling the apostles that Christ is his "beloved son" (Mk 9:7), which is seen to imply that Christ is announced as the possibility that all of

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parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten …" (Chalcedonian Creed, 451 A.D., n.d.)

[38] "The very otherness and uniqueness of his *persona* exceed the horizontal reach of our three main modalities of noetic intentionality: It goes beyond *perception* (the dazzling whiteness and the cloud, recalling the veil protecting the holy of holies), beyond *imagination* (the refusal of Peter's cultic imaginings, and beyond *signification* (the observing of silence)" (Kearney 2001:42).

humanity may become “sons of God” by being transfigured into their own unique *personas* (Kearney 2001:43).

When the *persona* is used in relation to Christ, however, it loses its connotations of a mere theatrical mask or pretence, since this would compromise Christ’s uniqueness and authenticity. This suggests

> how the attribution of the *prosopon*/*persona* figure to Christ succeeds in *personalising* – without either *literalizing* or *volatilizing* – the notion of the Son. Now Christ can be seen as *both* finite and infinite, eternal and carnal, *hypostasis* and *ekstasis*. For the early Church Fathers, the point of identifying Christ with the *prosopon*/*persona* was to suggest that he was neither an hypostasis without ekstasis (idolatry of God as merely human), nor an ekstasis without hypostasis (mysticism of God as inhuman) (Kearney 2001:44).

3.3.3 The Pauline legacy

Paul’s understanding of the transfiguration on Mount Tabor as a call to all of humanity to become transfigured in the light of Christ played a determinative role in the eschatological reading of the transfiguration narratives (Kearney 2001:44). For Paul such transfiguration was certainly something that was done to us, that we received from the “grace-giving *persona*” of Christ. But then it was also something that we could and must do for one another in turn:

> That is why we are left with an ethical choice: *either* to transform our world according to the Christic icon of the end-to-come; *or* to fix Christ as a fetish whose only end is itself. The choice is between transformation or fixation (Kearney 2001:44).

Reading the transfiguration narrative as a re-figuration of Jewish messianic prophecy on the one hand, and a pre-figuration of the kingdom (involving the metamorphosis of each human being into the image of Christ, cf. 2 Cor 3:18), Paul understood this eschatological promise to require both grace and ethical action on our part:

> In short, for Paul the transfiguring Christ is not some *eidolon* to be embalmed and enshrined but the *eikon tou epouraniou*: the icon of the ultimate *persona* prefigured from the origins of time. This divine *persona*, finally, safeguards what is unique in each one us (*sic*) – what stitches each in its mother’s womb, what knows every hair of our head – while convoking us to a shared humanity (Kearney 2001:45).

3.3.4 Messianic time

This understanding of transfiguration as "epilogue of Adam" and "prologue of Christ-to-come-again" surpasses the common understanding of history. This is because *persona* is eternal and transcends causal temporality. And while it recognises that human persons exist in chronological time, its *eschaton* is not reducible to the "objective laws of cause-effect or potency-act," or to the world-historical mutations of Hegel or Hartshorne's teleological plan" (Kearney 2001:46).

> That is how we should understand the paradoxical language of anterior-posteriority which Christ, and later Paul, use to describe the eschatological kingdom. The kingdom is already "amongst us" even as it is still to come… Or as I might add, the eschatological *persona* is transfiguring always, in each moment, but always remains to be ultimately transfigured, at the end of time. Which is another way of saying, its temporality exceeds the limits of ordinary time (Kearney 2001:46).[39]

Kearney remains insistent that this call to transfiguration is for all humanity and does not exclude other messianic or non-messianic religions.[40] And even if, on Mouth Tabor, the Father calls him his "chosen one" (Lk 9:35) Jesus does not declare himself the one and only Christ and prevents the crowds and disciples from capitalising on his divinity, deferring them instead to the "Father in heaven." For

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[39] Kearney outlines this same idea in a later essay on the God-who-may-be, where he points to "temporal" figures of eschatology encountered in the Gospels, and that take the form of a certain achronicity: "I am thinking here of the numerous references to the fact that even though the Kingdom has *already come* – and is incarnate *here and now* in the loving gestures of Christ and all those who give, or receive, a cup of water – it still always remains a possibility *yet to come*. This is what Emanuel Levinas calls the 'paradox of posterior anteriority'; and it is cogently illustrated in an aphorism of Walter Benjamin which combines the spatial figure of the portal with the eschatological figure of futurity: 'This future does not correspond to homogenous empty time; because at the heart of every moment of the future is contained the little door through which the Messiah may enter.' As 'eternal,' the kingdom transcends all chronologies of time. Christ indicates this when he affirms that 'before Abraham was, I am' (John 8:58), and when he promises a Second Coming when he will return again. In short, the Kingdom is: (1) *already* there as historical possibility, and (2) *not yet* there as historically realized kingdom 'come on earth.' This is why we choose to translate the canonical theophany to Moses on Mt. Sinai (*esher ayeh esher - sic*), not as 'I am who am' (*ego sum qui sum*), but as 'I am who may be' (Exodus 3:14). God is saying something like this: I will show up as promised, but I cannot *be* in time and history, I cannot become fully embodied in the flesh of the world, unless you show up and answer my call 'Where are you?' with the response 'Here I am'" (Kearney 2007a:53-54).

[40] Indeed, he claims: On the contrary, what a Christian means by the *persona-visage* of Christ is very similar, one could argue, to what a Jew like Levinas believes when he says that one of his own preferred images of the 'face' is that of Jesus" (Kearney 2001:47).

Kearney, Christ's *persona* calls each of us to be chosen ones (Kearney 2001:46-47).[41]

3.3.5 The new age controversy

One implication of the fact that the transfigured Christ cannot be reduced to "his actual personal presence there and then" is that his *persona* must of necessity continue to be perpetually interpreted, resulting in a history of plural readings. Being aware of the multiple ways in which Christ's promise of metamorphosis could be read, Paul notes that an openness to both transfiguring (construing Christ as an icon of alterity) and disfiguring (misconstruing him as an idol of presence) interpretations will always flow from the fact that the transfigured Christ approaches us in words and "figures" (1 Cor 4:6) (Kearney 2001:47). In postmodern times, Kearney sees this controversy continuing in the difference between an eschatological reading of the transfiguration as the

> true "scandal" of Christ as herald of a messianic time of miracle and grace: a time which can undo the sins of the past (brushing history backward) while simultaneously invoking a universal kingdom that is both now and still to come (Kearney 2001:48),

and a New Age neo-Gnostic return to the historical or material Jesus – a Jesus "all too literal," yet "shrouded in fake mystique":

> This hypothesis ignores the rupturing of chronological history by the transfigured Christ in favor of a banalized Jesus, now little more than a guru-cum-escape-artist who teaches DIY self-improvement techniques: a sort of glorified maharishi-Houdini.

For Kearney, the main problem with this neo-Gnostic tendency to "literalize the historical line of Jesus" is that it "takes the eschatological harm (i.e., grace) out of

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[41] "Some early Christian commentators seem to suggest as much. The *persona* of the transfigured Christ is, as John Damascene suggests, 'both this and that, of the same essence as the Father (the universal kingdom) and of the same race and nature as us (the particular descendants) of Adam.' The transfiguration thus is as much about us as it is about God, for the transfigured Christ 'renews our nature in himself restoring it to the pristine beauty of the image charged with the common visage of humanity.' Such a transfiguring mission includes all who seek justice-to-come. Or as John Damascene's version promises: 'It is thus that the just will shine at the resurrection, transfigured, into [Christ's] condition … according to this image, this figure (*prosopon*), this light, as they sit with the son of God.' Perhaps it is also this universal invitation of the christic *persona* that Saint Anastasius has in mind when he urges us to waste no further time but hurry toward the kingdom: 'We should make speed towards it – I say this boldly – like Christ our precursor with whom we will all shine with spiritual eyes, renewed in the features of our souls, configured to his image and like him forever transfigured" (Kearney 2001:46-47).

the transfiguration," thus making it utterly immanent to the point that the very transcendence of Christ's *persona* is disavowed and the revolutionary challenge of transfiguration diffused (Kearney 2001:48).

And yet, keeping in mind the openness to a diversity of interpretations referred to above, Kearney does not intend to demonise such Gnostic interpretations, but instead to consider their validity in view of its faithfulness to the "ethico-eschatological import of the Christ-event" (Kearney 2001:48). Kearney maintains that, while not resisting the multiplicity of interpretations that results from the transcendence of Christ, we should always attempt to distinguish between "narrative testimonies that transform or deform lives. The rest is indeed silence" (Kearney 2001:48-49).

3.3.6 Paschal testimonies

Towards the end of the chapter, Kearney offers his readers a few more personal reflections on the enigma of transfiguration by reflecting on the paschal testimonies of the resurrected Christ. Specifically, he considers the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35), Mary Magdalene at the tomb (Jn 20:11-18), the disciples in the closed room (Lk 24:26-49), and, finally, the meeting with his disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee (Jn 21:1-14). From his discussion of these narratives, Kearney points out several things that reverberate the enigma of the Transfiguration. These include the tendency of human persons to overlook the divine that is right in front of us, often in the most mundane elements of our lives: "we overlook the *persona* in the person" (the resurrected Christ was repeatedly not recognised by those closest to him). Secondly, Kearney sees in the repeated motif of nourishment in the resurrection apparitions the reassurance that the embodied God cares for both our physical and material being (repeatedly, it is in the sharing of food that the divine becomes visible and the risen Christ is recognised). Thirdly, the resurrected Christ avoids triumphalism by repeatedly disappearing as soon as he is recognised, or warning Mary Magdalene to avoid clinging to him, thereby refusing to be "appropriated, enthroned, idolized." Fourthly, the resurrected Christ reveals a "God of small things" who appear to the outcast, the lowest and most despised of women, and makes her a herald of his resurrection message (2001:49). Repeatedly, the message of transfiguring comes to the disciples and Mary Magdalene as they

> see and hear his message of dying and rising again: a message of transfiguring that comes – paradoxically but tellingly – through the body, a broken body, bruised and hungry for something to eat. Not at all through hyper-power and glory, but through woundedness and want does the risen *persona* make itself known (Kearney 2001:50).

Indeed, when none of the disciples have the courage to ask Jesus who he is (Jn 21:12), and Jesus reveals himself to them in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the fish, Kearney claims that we witness here "the power of transfiguration as ultimate answer to blood-sacrifice – epitome of an ethics of *kenosis* and *gift*" (Kearney 2001:50). Kearney concludes:

> Indeed the most transfiguring thing about this God of little things is that he gives with a gratuity that defies the limits of space and time. Now he's gone, now he's here, now he's gone again. Now he's dead, now he's alive. Now he's buried, now risen. Now the net is empty, now it's full. And more surprising still, the fish is cooked for us even before we get ashore and unload our nets (Kearney 2001:51).

3.3.7 Conclusion

Kearney thus interprets the post-paschal narratives as stories of the transfiguring *persona* that remind us that the Kingdom is one that welcomes the wounded, weak and hungry, given to "little people 'poor in spirit'" (Kearney 2001:51). In this light, he points out the ironic failure of many monotheists to recognise that

> God speaks not through monuments of power and pomp but in stories and acts of love and justice, the giving to the least of creatures, the caring for orphans, widows, and strangers; stories and acts which bear testimony – as transfiguring gestures do – to that God of little things that comes and goes, like the thin small voice, like the burning bush, like the voice crying out in the wilderness, like the word made flesh, like the wind that blows where it wills (Kearney 2001:51).

3.4 Desiring God

Kearney sees the desire of God as another way of speaking of the transfiguration of God, for through this desire, the God-who-may-be finds voice in many different *personas*. He turns, therefore, in this chapter, to the "faces of eros" as ways in which the transfiguring God reveals himself more "secularly" and more "sensually": "Here *persona* becomes passion – the passion of burning love and of endless waiting" (Kearney 2001:53). Turning first to the chant of the Shulamite woman in the Song of

Songs, Kearney moves on to a phenomenology of largely non-scriptural experience when he considers phenomenological and deconstructive readings.

3.4.1 Biblical readings: the Song of Songs

Kearney finds an answer for his question of how to understand the desire of God – whether it is God's desire for us, or our desire for God, or both – in Song of Songs 3:1-4, "where the anxious, expectant seeking of the love-struck bride is reversed into a *being-found*, that is, a *being desired*" (Kearney 2001:53-54). For Kearney, this points to the fact that the "lover of God" "exists in the accusative as well as in the nominative": "God, it seems, is the other who seeks me out *before* I seek him, a desire beyond my desire" (2001:54). Significantly, however, this desire of God does not point to some divine deficiency, because the desire of God always overflows in excess, grace, and as pure gift (Kearney 2001:54).

For Kearney, what is witnessed in the lovers' discourse in Canticles is the traversing of sensuality by transcendence: "the amorous passion serves as a *persona-trace* testifying to the unnameable alterity of God," with even an allusion to the epiphany in Exodus 3, where the "transfiguring fire of the burning bush becomes the fire of a devouring desire (Can 8:6):

> (T)he ecstasy of the beloved crosses over with, without consuming or being consumed by, the incarnational love of God. And in this crisscrossing *persona* of lover and beloved, both are transfigured. Divine desire is embodied. Human desire is hallowed (Kearney 2001:55).

The connection with the divine in Canticles lies, for Kearney, in the fact that, where Exodus 3 imagined God speaking through a burning bush, Canticles "amplifies the range of divine speech" to include all that is alive, including lovers' bodies (Kearney 2001:54-55). In challenging the "cheerless" moralism of tribal law, the free nuptial love between the lovers recall the "innocence of eros" before the Fall, while simultaneously looking ahead to an "eschatological kingdom where such innocence may flourish again once and for all" (Kearney 2001:55). Pointing to Rabbi Hayyim de Volozhyn's similar reading of Canticles as an example,[42] Kearney notes

[42] Kearney finds a similar reading of Canticles – as both looking back and looking ahead – in the work of the influential nineteenth-century rabbi Hayyim de Volozhyn: "He takes the beloved's famous apostrophe – 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth' (Song 1, 2) – as a plea that the Exodic revelations on Mount Sinai may eventually be given *directly* through the mouth of the lover. No longer

the influence of the Cabbalistic Books of Creation, specifically its notion that the "cosmological orders of nature and the human body are themselves incarnational metaphors for the eschatological expression of a divine flame" (Kearney 2001:55). He then points out the link to his focus on transfiguration:

> We see thus how certain rabbinical traditions – which exerted considerable influence on contemporary thinkers like Levinas, Rosenzweig, and Schollem – came to read the texts of Genesis, Exodus, and the Song of Songs in the light of Cabbalist texts, …, premised on the idea that Creation is, in part at least, God's body and points toward the transfiguration of a new world. In this respect, the Song of Songs may be said to reveal how eschatology repeats cosmology, taking the form of a dramatic filling out of the incarnational voices of Genesis, Exodus, and Isaiah. The nuptial promise reads accordingly as a reprise of the promise of Sinai, while the lover longing for his "promised bride" anticipates the promised kingdom (Kearney 2001:56).

Kearney warns against seeing the lovers in Canticles as "cardboard characters of abstract allegory," and "mouthpieces for some spiritual message." And while they may personify spiritual wisdom or represent Yahweh's continuing love for an unfaithful Israel, they are also much more, coming across "as carnal embodiments of a desire which traverses and exceeds them, while remaining utterly themselves" (2001:56). While the erotic charge of much of Canticles has resulted in the frequent censoring of the book, or in its being explained away in terms of Platonising dualisms, Kearney identifies many subversive elements in the very candidness of carnal embodiment and its portrayal in the book. He admits to the metaphorical, intra-textual, and indirect nature of these references, but insist that they nevertheless

> show how a powerful religious poetics can sing the unsayable and intimate the unnameable by means of an innovative and insubordinate language, a language resistant to both allegorist abstraction and metaphysical dualism. By intimating a "perfect similarity of relations between two quite dissimilar things" (Kant's analogy of faith), this song of eros creates a surplus of meaning. It twists and turns accredited words and thoughts so as to bring about a sort of catachresis or mutation within language itself. And it is this very semantic innovation which transforms our understanding of both God and desire. So that engaging in the Song of Songs we can, in Paul Ricoeur's words, think *more* about desire and *more* about God. We can think each of them otherwise (Kearney 2001:57-58).

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obscurely – through a voice disguised as an angel or bush or the 'back of God's head' – but *mouth to mouth*" (Kearney 2001:55).

Kearney turns now to Julia Kristeva's incarnational reading of Canticles in *Tales of Love*, according to which the love song epitomises the transfiguring God's *persona* paradox, keeping God invisible while "simultaneously and paradoxically" enabling him to be experienced as erotic desire (Kearney 2001:58). Kristeva emphasises that "as soon as God is evoked in terms of amorous passion, we enter a poetic realm of uncontained figurative meaning" that names the transfiguring divine, but at the same time allows it to remain nameless, similar to the "double movement of epiphany and withdrawal" noted in the readings of the Exodic epiphany and the transfiguration on Mount Tabor: "This double move manifests itself in the Song as a desiring *persona* who is both overwhelmingly there and yet ultimately transcendent of our appropriating grasp" (Kearney 2001:58). Kristeva describes this erotics of incarnation from both a psychoanalytic and linguistic perspective, arguing that carnality in Canticles leads directly to the dialectic incarnation. This is due to its sexual idioms, linked inextricably to the by now characteristic "theme of absence and yearning to merge," and erupting in a "blossoming of metaphor (abstract for concrete, concrete for abstract) as well as incarnation (the spirit becoming flesh, the word-flesh)" (Kearney 2001:59)"

> The psychodrama of incarnation here is, of course, provisional and premonitory: the love metaphor is conjugal but also and inescapably marks a movement of deferral. And this surplus of eschatological sense in and through the five erotic senses of carnal contact is evidenced, at the linguistic and rhetorical level of the Song itself, as an almost inexhaustible proliferation of innovative figures of speech. In short, unlike Platonic love, this incarnational love of the Bible *does* involve all the senses – sound, odor, touch, sight, taste – but unlike the old pagan rites of sexual fusion and sacrifice, it resists the phallic illusion of totality, finality, or fullness (Kearney 2001:59).

The surplus of metaphoricity (Ricoeur's "phenomenon of indetermination") in Canticles, that entangles the eschatological symbolism of nuptial love with an erotics of the body while always remaining irreducible to it, guards the amorous song "as an open text of multiple readings and double entendres – divine and erotic, eschatological and carnal –" provoking "a hermeneutic play of constant 'demetaphorising and remetaphorizing' which never allows the song to end" (Kearney 2001:60). In this way, Canticles extends and enlarges "the range of religious expression" and opens religion to aesthetics and ethics – what Kearney

calls “an ethical poetics of religion,” and simultaneously confronts us with “a desire that desires beyond desire while remaining desire” (Kearney 2001:60).

3.4.2 Metaphysical readings

In an attempt to construct a hermeneutic guess for how the puzzling phenomenon of “desire beyond desire” may be understood, Kearney reviews, firstly, how divine desire was seen in the Western metaphysical tradition, and then, secondly, turns to some contemporary phenomenological accounts (Kearney 2001:60).

Kearney considers onto-theological ways of thinking about the desire of God, before turning to eschatological approaches. To the onto-theological paradigm belong all those approaches that consider desire as *lack* and as “striving for fulfillment in a plenitude of presence,” always endeavouring “to be and to know absolutely” (Kearney 2001:60-61). The suspicion towards such desire for ultimate knowledge eventually climaxed in Luther’s criticism against the “*fornicatio spiritus* which seeks to reduce God to a possession of metaphysical vision (*visio dei*)” (Kearney 2001:61). Such attempts to “objectify the *deus adventurus* into an onto-theological object” resulted in the compromising of the futural coming of the kingdom. Seen from a Pauline-eschatological perspective, which describes the desire for the kingdom as “hope for what we do not see” (Rm 8:25),

> The ontology of presence (*ousia*) is a travesty of the *parousia* still to come (*apousia*). Only in the light of *parousia* can we speak of realizing our desire to see God’s *persona*, “face to face.” Until then we live our eschatological desire as a yearning for an Other who beckons but has not yet fully arrived, who is present in absentia (Philippians 2:12), a *deus adventurus* who seeks me yet still promises to come, unpredictably and unexpectedly, in the twinkling of an eye (1 Corinthians 15:52), like a thief in the night (1 Thessalonians 5:2) (Kearney 2001:61).

Rather than a rejection of desire per se, such critique of onto-theological desire is better understood as a move towards eschatological desire: “a desire that eye has never seen nor ear heard” (Kearney 2001:61-62). Such desire is found not only in Canticles, but also in the longing of poets for their God in the Psalter, as well as in the “erotico-ecstatic” writings of mystics in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Referring to Augustine’s address to God as impassioned lover, Kearney remarks on the active-passive character of divine eros as follows:

> Augustine reveals the double genitive at work in the "desire of God." It is because the Creator has first … touched Augustine that Augustine is inflamed with such passion. Augustine's desire of God is a fervid *response* to God's desire of Augustine. An echo surely of the Song of Songs 3:1-4) (Kearney 2001:62).

3.4.3 Phenomenological readings – from Hegel to Levinas

In this section, Kearney enters into a somewhat technical discussion of Emmanuel Levinas' phenomenology of desire, showing how it stands in direct opposition to Hegel's phenomenology of consciousness. For Levinas, what relates eschatology[43] and desire is that fact that they have the same ethical structure, namely "a relationship with the other 'beyond the totality'"[44] (Kearney 2001:62). Levinas suggests that a phenomenology of desire unlocks eschatological infinity with its paradox that "the infinite is inscribed *within* our historical experience of totality precisely as a 'trace' which betrays that which is 'beyond' it" Kearney 2001:63). And it is *desire* (of the other) and *responsibility* (for the other), first and foremost, that evinces this trace, so that, in the end, eschatological desire is desire of the infinite. With this, Levinas already touches on a most perplexing aspect of the desire of God: "its yearning for an eschatological kingdom *beyond history* while welcoming the coming of what comes *in each instant*!" (Kearney 2001:63). With desire thus arising as an "inaugural movement toward an other-than-self," where this "other" remains ever irreducible to an object of need or consumption, Levinas at once confirms Hegel's distinction between desire and need, but then also moves beyond the dialectical account of desire with his description of *metaphysical* (sometimes *eschatological*) desire, which tends towards something entirely different (Kearney 2001:63-64). Following Plato, Levinas argues that

> metaphysical desire "desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness – the Desired does not fulfil it, but deepens it." The desired is like

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[43] "Levinas defines *eschatology* as a relationship of desire which breaches totality, opening up what he terms 'infinity.' It is a relationship, he explains, 'with a *surplus always exterior to the totality*, as though the objective totality did not fill out the true measure of being, as though another concept, the concept of *infinity*, were needed to express this transcendence with regard to totality, non-encompassable within a totality" (Kearney 2001:62-63).

[44] For Levinas, "totality" refers to "being as encompassed by history, reason, representation, horizon, and power, in brief – *ontology*. Totality, Levinas explains, is all that can be thought and said in terms of objectivity. This includes the object-presences of representation – as evinced in the *libido dominandi* of speculative epistemology. But it also extends to (a) the *archeological* obsession with First Causes (a retrospective account of desire running from Neoplatonic metaphysics right through to Freudian psychoanalysis) and (b) the *teleological* drive toward a Final End (a prospective account of desire proffered by the Hegelian model of history" (Kearney 2001:62).

> the good precisely because it cannot be possessed, because it is invisible, separate, distant, different, transcendent. This is not to say that desire is without relation; only that it is related to a desired that is never *given*, to an otherness that is absolute precisely because it absolves itself from the intentionality of adequation and appropriation. In other words, desire is a relation that is unequal to itself, asymmetrical (Kearney 2001:64).

Existing before memory and beyond anticipation, the desired of eschatological desire is "immemorial," "unimaginable," and exceeds the horizons of historical time. Levinas moves beyond Plato when he accepts the eschatological paradox that, while the desired good "gives itself from 'beyond' history, it is nonetheless inscribed, as vigilance and summons, in each instant of our existence. It is in-coming at all times" (Kearney 2001:64). Levinas moves away from both Hegel and Plato when he insists that

> it is not the accomplishment of knowledge but its very *inadequacy* which exposes the inordinateness of our desire for the absolutely other. This exteriority of the desired vis-à-vis the desirer cannot, however, be understood in terms of horizontal questing – as an endless restlessness that satiates itself in some dialectical infinity. Exhausting every "passion of the possible," it marks an ethical relation to the infinite as verticality – transcending all dialectical models of *Wesen* and *Gewesen*, of *anamnesis* and *mneme*, of *Möglichkeit* and *mögen*. Alluding, discreetly, to the language of the Torah, Levinas writes: "For desire this alterity, non-adequate to the idea, has a meaning. It is understood as the alterity of the Other and of the Most-High. The very dimension of height is opened up by metaphysical desire." But his elevation of desire towards the Most-High does not imply (as one might think) a Platonic elevation to a transcendental hinterworld. On the contrary, the experience of height arises, once again *in the midst of* my relation to the concrete living other. The good *beyond* finds itself inscribed *between* one and another. Desire here again reveals itself no as deficiency but as positivity. Not as *manque-à-être* but as grace and gratuity, gift and surplus. Less as insufficiency than as the bursting forth of the "more" in the "less" (Kearney 2001:64).

Acknowledging the rapport between intersubjective desire and language – desire simultaneously "is" language and exceeds it – Levinas describes the "erotic" in equivocational terms: "a simultaneity of need and desire, of concupiscence and transcendence, which reaches the interlocutor and goes beyond him. Eros – as word inscribed in flesh – discloses the 'ambiguity of an event situated at the limit of immanence and transcendence" (Kearney 2001:65). Through the face of the loved one, an obscure light filters that comes from beyond the face, "from what *is not yet*, from a future never future enough," which points to the messianic advent of

eschatological infinity (Kearney 2001:65). Levinas sees *desire beyond love*, which points us toward transcendence in its "absolute exteriority," to be of a higher ethical relation to the other than *desire with love*, where "love" of the other bears only ambiguous witness to eschatological infinity "on the plane of affective or sexual immanence" (Kearney 2001:56).

Levinas describes the feminine erotic as the epitome of *equivocation*, remaining ever "untouchable in the contact of voluptuosity" in the sense of the fragility that characterises the 'limit of non-being wherein is lodged not only what is extinguished and is *no longer*, but what is not yet'" (Kearney 2001:66). With the feminine thus bearing witness to the eschatological not-yet, he describes the *caress* as "an erotic surge into the invisible, a transcendence in and through the immediately sensible – what he calls future in the presence" (Kearney 2001:66). For this reason Levinas avoids understanding desire in terms of a subject-object duality, for he holds that the erotic cannot be reduced to the "*Bildungsprozess* of a subject seeking meaning." On the contrary, the erotic epiphany becomes the very portal to ethics itself, and the carnal trace of goodness, precisely because the erotic provides us a glimpse of the "epiphany of the face as eschaton of exteriority," so that "we begin to understand that being-for-the-other escapes the dialectic of antecedence and finality, in that in existing for another I exist otherwise than in existing for me" (Kearney 2001:66).[45] *Eros*, then, breaches Hegel's master-slave dialectic in that, in its voluptuosity, it resists both possession and totalisation. The Other is only ever possessed to the extent that the Other possesses me, so that I am both slave and master. At this point, through his notion of the engendered child, Levinas replays Hegel's desire of desire against itself:

> For while admitting that voluptuosity aims not at the Other but at the other's voluptuosity – voluptuosity of voluptuosity – he reads this not as a struggle for self-recognition but as *trans-substantiation* through the engendering of a child. Here erotic love seeks what is to be engendered – the "infinitely future" – where same and other are not fused or balanced but, "beyond every possible project,

[45] "Levinas is in fact taking issue here with a long tradition – running from the Stoics to Hegel and Sartre – which argued that desire and ethics are opposed. And in doing so he also appears to take his distance at this point from the phenomenological-hermeneutical approach to desire advanced by Ricoeur in *Freud and Philosophy*. For Levinas' phenomenology, the signification of the face is presupposed by and makes possible the symbolism of the sign. Ethics *precedes* hermeneutics" (Kearney 2001:66).

> beyond every meaningful and intelligent power – engender the child" (Kearney 2001:67).

Speaking in eschatological rather than merely biological terms, Levinas maintains that desire, which begins in voluptuosity, excels in paternity – that which "allows the lover who 'loves the love of the Beloved' to return to himself while at the same time moving beyond himself in the coveting of the child, both other and myself" (Kearney 2001:67). The paternal relation with the child therefore signals a new category: that of desire that will be neither "extinguished in its end nor appeased in its satisfaction":

> The transcendence of trans-substantiation – marked by paternity – is one where the I is, in the child, an other, itself as another, one-for-another. The child is the stranger, as Levinas reminds us (invoking Isaiah 49), who is me as a *stranger to myself*. But the future of the child could not come to pass from beyond the dialectical horizons of power and project were it not, to repeat, for the erotic encounter with the other as feminine – an encounter which breaks the relation with the future as a solipsistic project of the subject, as a power of mastery over possibilities, replacing it with a very different relation to the future which Levinas calls "fecundity" (Kearney 2001:67).

In fecundity, taking leave of its former "virile and heroic" self, the subject finds itself again as the self of an other. Lured by the alterity of the feminine, *eros* proceeds "toward a future that is *not yet*":

> Thus, in contrast to Heidegger's being-towards-death, Levinas (like Arendt) here promotes the idea of beginning-again-through-the-birth-of-another. Ethics as natality rather than as mortality. As the yes of woman rather than the *nom-du-père*. As ***autrement qu'être*** rather than *manque à être*. … In fecundity the obsessional neurosis of the self seeking to repeat itself or return to itself is breached. Indeed, the relationship with the alterity of the child inaugurates the time of the other as alteration of one's very substance, the time of a "third" exploding the lovers' *société à deux* (Kearney 2001:68).

Levinas' phenomenology of voluptuosity-paternity-fecundity therefore sees the self moving from *reiterating* itself as ego to "*initiation* into the enigma of oneself-as-another" (Kearney 2001:68). It is desire that "keeps love vigilant and asymmetrical," in that such desire for the other is never possession. Indeed, the other always remains separate and transcendent, so that desire exists as gift rather than as appropriation: "Desire thus engenders an ethics of asymmetrical fecundity finding its epitome in the desire of God" (Kearney 2001:68-69).

Apart from a suspicion that Levinas' account of eros to some extent interprets desire in light of certain biblical and Talmudic principles, and that it is therefore not as much of a phenomenological description as he would like to claim, Kearney also finds the "very hyperbolic excess" of Levinas' ethics the very "token of its impossibility. But apart from this, in a later reading of Canticles, Levinas sees the desire of the beloved for her transcendent lover turning from infinite yearning to "an almost pathological passivity and paralysis. The Shulamite that is "sick with love" (Can 5:8) speaks of a love that has become impossible and terrifying. "(N)ot embraced but suffered, not offered but inflicted," such love has become "(a) 'psychosis' bordering, at times, on theo-erotic masochism" (Kearney 2001:69).

3.4.4 Deconstructive readings – from Derrida to Caputo

Kearney starts of the section on deconstructive readings of eschatological desire by considering Derrida's comments on Levinas' above allusion to the Shulamite that is "sick with desire." Derrida notes, first of all, that the identity of the "self" who is "sick with love" remains unclear in Levinas' text. This sickness of love is a *response* to the other by the beloved "I," and specifically a response that

> pre-exists voluntary choice to the extent that the love-sick "I" comes to be in the accusative mode – that is, as someone who says "here I am" in visceral response to an erotic other whose language "interrupts," "deranges," "haunts," and "extradites" (Kearney 2001:70).

What interests Derrida in his linguistic and micro-logical analysis, Kearney claims, is Levinas' endeavours to "say the unsayable" – with regard to the love-sickness of the Shulamite – by "indirectly invoking *another* language behind the surface language of the text," and which manages to "disassimilate" and "interdict" the ways in which we normally speak and think (Kearney 2001:70).

Asking whether the "divine paramour" of Canticles is still considered to be God, or whether God has been replaced by an atheistic, anarchic, monstrous kind of other, Kearney notes that the most significant difference between Levinas and Derrida is that the latter links the desire of God with atheism. But by "atheism," Derrida does not intend to dismiss the God phenomenon as such, but instead indicates "a general openness to an alterity without name, beyond the historical givenness of a specifically revealed deity" (Kearney 2001:71). Derrida uses the word

"messianicity" to refer to this disposition toward an alterity that is still to come (as opposed to the "messianisms" of positive revelation. For Derrida, then, atheism is "less a refusal of God as such … than a renunciation of a specific God (or Gods) – a renunciation which could almost be said to serve as condition of possibility of a God still to come, still to be named" (Kearney 2001:71).

The desire of God is, in Derrida's view, very different from a desire operating "within a thematics of identity and possession" (Kearney 2001:71). It at once transcends the desire to have, know, and see, and moves beyond "the 'fratricidal desire' of rivalry and *ressentiment*" (Kearney 2001:71):

> Desiring God is, Derrida avows, not just an insatiable human questing but another voice of apophasis foreign to every "anthropotheomorphic form of desire" – a desire which carries with it "its own proper suspension, the death or the phantom of desire."

While this seems close to Levinas' eschatological desire (the "messianic disposition of attention and vigilance which … surpasses the onto-theological nostalgia for original causes and first foundations"), Derrida goes further in that, whereas Levinas exempted certain forms of metaphysical and theological desire from his critique of presence, Derrida leaves no metaphysical stone unturned (Kearney 2001:72).[46] In fact, even negative theology, sharing the same passion for the impossible as deconstruction does, is for Derrida too specific and closes down options of alterity, very often replacing the

> theistic essentialism of onto-theology with a higher and more rarefied form of hyper-essentialism. Whereas negative theologians … desire the *tout autre* in the name of a biblical-monotheistic God, deconstructionists construe this wholly other as *every* other, regardless of its theistic pedigree. An all-inclusiveness summed up in the claim – *tout autre est tout autre* (Kearney 2001:72).

The God that Derrida has in mind when he speak of the desire of God, then, is an impossible God "of such indeterminate and undefined alterity that it always remains to be invented," and it is this "*à-Dieu* of pure invention" that he calls the

[46] "All too often, Levinas' God of desire approximates to the 'ecstatic' desire of God, through which, Derrida notes, 'erotics leads or leads back to the Good.' And it is this kind of approximating to the old apophatic theologians which prompts Caputo to comment that 'Levinas is vulnerable to all of the criticisms that beset metaphysics, for this is metaphysics indeed, a metaphysics of the Good not the true, a metaphysical ethics, not a deontology, but metaphysics still.' So Caputo (like Derrida) deconstructs Levinas by taking the metaphysics out of him" (Kearney 2001:72).

"messianic": "a non-lieu of absolute passion and passivity, of incessant waiting and welcome, preceding and exceeding every historical revelation of a specific messiah" (Kearney 2001:73).

John Caputo likens Derrida's non-locatable "desire beyond desire" and his "messianic beyond messianism" to deconstruction itself. Since deconstruction is the desire for the impossible as impossible – for what transcends all intentional horizons of possibility – Caputo seems to imply that such messianic inventiveness is more respectful of radical alterity than any revealed eschatology:

> Desire beyond desire is, after all, precisely beyond the "desire of the proper," which, he argues, draws the Gift "back into the circle of a proper or identifiable Giver which gives us a proper or identifiable gift." That is why desire beyond desire remains desire for a Godless God – a God still to be invented (Kearney 2001:73).

Deconstructive faith, as a leap into radical atheism, therefore proceeds beyond negative theology, which despite its commitment to speak of God only in terms of what may not be said about perfect goodness, still retained the Judeo-Christian God as the object of their prayers (Kearney 2001:73). Kearney is concerned that, in its own commitment to not excluding any other-to-come, deconstruction may be opening itself to the risk of indiscrimination. Pointing to the "metamorphosis of the messianic other into 'every other … no matter what other,'" he poses his question thus: "If every other is wholly other, does it still *matter* who or what exactly the other is?" (Kearney 2001:73). While it is true that Caputo argues that the difficulty of identifying the other, so stressed by deconstruction, is not indifference (where every other becomes the same as every other), but in fact "a scrupulous attention to the singularity of each other before me in flesh and blood, here and now," Kearney would not settle the matter so easily:

> In rightly resisting the temptation to reduce the alterity of every other to the rubric of species and genus, to the identifiable features or fingerprints of a nameable being, is deconstruction (or Caputo's version of it) not, inspite of itself, removing the very criteria whereby we distinguish one kind of other from another – divine from human, good from the evil, true from false? Are we not in fact confounding the otherness of God with everything and everyone that is not-God, thereby compromising God's unique transcendence? In the name of a God of desire beyond desire, do we not perhaps lose something of the God of love who takes on very definite names, shapes, and actions at specific points in time, the God of

> *caritas* and *kenosis* who heals specific cripples and tells specific parables, who comes to bring life here and now and bring it more abundantly? (Kearney 2001:74).

Kearney maintains that, if we are to be able to say that it is in fact God that we desire (as opposed to some idol or false prophet), then God needs to be recognised. In short, human persons must have a means of discriminating "between good and evil specters, between those thieves that come in the night to violate and those who come to heal and redeem" (Kearney 2001:75). Kearney is concerned that deconstruction, in freeing God from onto-theology and biblical messianism, might be leaving us open and vulnerable to all others, all comers, thus denying us our need to identify divinity, at least to *some* extent, "before taking it in – or being taken in" (Kearney 2001:75). Derrida does concede that we have no way of discriminating between the demonic and the divine other, but then insists that any attempt to exert control over the other who comes, completely rules out the possibility of hospitality, for, just like the Messiah, the other "must arrive when he or she wants":

> Indeed, for Derrida it is precisely because we do not see or recognize who the other is that *faith* exists. "If we refer to faith, it is to the extent that we *don't see*. Faith is needed when perception is lacking. … I don't *see* the other, I don't *see* what he or she has in mind, or whether he or she wants to deceive me. So I have to trust the other, that is faith. Faith is blind." This God of absolute faith would be a God of absolute desire – but also a "*tout autre* without face." A God not just of discretion but of absolute "secrecy." A God not only reserved in terms of its coming but also an "impossible, unimaginable, un-foreseeable, unbelievable absolute surprise" (Kearney 2001:75-76).

But Kearney does not recant. "How," he asks, "could we ever recognize a God stripped of every specific horizon of memory and anticipation?" (2001:76). If the impossible God of deconstruction indeed leaves the human imagination mortified, "then must not our encounter with the coming of the other *find* itself not only blind but empty?" Indeed, for "how is alterity to be *experienced* as other if it surpasses all our phenomenal horizons of experience?" (Kearney 2001:76). Derrida attempts to address these difficulties of judgment by making clear that the "desire beyond desire is a desire for justice." Indeed, it seems that, to a degree, he attempts to redress the release of "the 'desire of God' from the ethical constraints of biblical affiliation … by introducing a certain complementarity of the messianic and messianism" (Kearney 2001:77). In his turn, Caputo re-inscribes Derrida with "a 'certain Jewish

Augustinianism'" that extends to the desert fathers, "who desired a God without being, beyond being, otherwise than being." Also, Caputo holds that the "'haze of indefiniteness'" provoked in us by deconstruction's "'faith without faith' … nourishes 'the urgency and passion of decision'" (Kearney 2001:77). But still Kearney is not convinced:

> (C)an we be so sure? Can we draw a line in the sand between deconstruction as desertification of God and desertion of God? Can we dance and sing before the God of deconstruction? Can we desire God without *some* recourse to narrative imagination? Without some appeal to tradition(s)? Without some guide for the perplexed? (Kearney 2001:77).[47]

3.4.5 Conclusion

Kearney finds these questions regarding the "discernment of spirits" especially relevant in our postmodern age of phantoms, false prophets and aliens in various forms – whether on the silver screen, the internet, or in politics. In a world constantly plagued and threatened by terrifying 'others,' it has become especially urgent to discern between mass-media fantasies and real-life others that lay an ethical claim on us (Kearney 2001:78). In the face of such uncertainty, the deconstructionists urge us to believe and read. Where our faith is blind, we may be helped by "the vigilant practice of meticulous reading" of the other – something that Derrida considers an ethical and political responsibility (Kearney 2001:78).

Despite the difficulties of discernment, Kearney appreciates Derrida and Caputo's efforts to sensitise us to the "the three calls of God: *donne*, *pardonne*, *abandonne*." But Kearney regrets that, for deconstruction, these calls always sound forth in darkness, where discernment is impossible. "(H)ow do we read in the dark?" he asks (2001:79). What Kearney himself proposes is that we engage in a multiple hermeneutic approach:

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[47] "In *Given Time*, Derrida returns to this abiding dilemma. He explains here that desire beyond desire is always bound to a double injunction – to respond to the gift *and* to the economy of exchange. In other words, desire beyond desire – as precisely that desire for the gift beyond the commerce of daily transactions – both *is* and *is not* outside the circle of exchange; just as the messianic desire of God both is and is not outside the circle of messianism. This confession of double allegiance allows Derrida to concede that the 'overrunning of the circle by the gift, if there is any, does not lead to a simple exteriority that would be transcendent and without relation.' On the contrary, it is this very exteriority that sets the circle going. Ultimately, the desire of God can never step completely outside of the circle of desire as *vouloir*, *amour*, *envie*, *attente*, *conatus*, *concupiscentia*; nor, if we keep Levinas in mind, beyond the carnal circle of *voluptuosity*, *paternity*, *fecundity*" (Kearney 2001:77-78).

> (W)e may approach the enigma of sacred eros by inviting various great texts on the subject – from the Song of Songs, and its legacy of religious and secular interpretations, to the contemporary philosophies of the "desire of God" in thinkers like Levinas, Derrida, and Caputo – to confront, cross over, and ignite each other so that the sparks that fly up from their friction may shed some light onto our dark (Kearney 2001:79).

3.5 Possibilising God

In his fifth chapter, Kearney investigates the spheres of possibility and impossibility in light of a few related scriptural and philosophical texts. He then moves on to analyse how the innovative notions of the possible in a number of contemporary thinkers can be compared with his findings. He suggests that an "eschatological reinterpretation of God as 'possibility' (*dunamis-posse*), guided by these readings, might help amplify (his) conjecture that God neither his nor is not but *may be*" (Kearney 2001:80).

3.5.1 The impossible made possible

While discussing the question of who can enter the kingdom with his disciples, Jesus responds to the question about how anyone can be saved with the following words: "For humans it is impossible, but not for God; because for God everything is possible" (Mk 10:27).[48] For Kearney, this eschatological "possible" suggests that, when we reach the end of our finite human powers, an infinite *dunamis* takes over that transfigures each of our incapacities into a new kind of capacity.[49] He likewise understands the prologue of John – that all who received the light was given the "possibility" to become children of God – to contain several decisive eschatological motifs (Kearney 2001:81).[50] Kearney understands the "messianic progeniture of the

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[48] The Greek is as follows: "ἐμβλέψας αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς λέγει, Παρὰ ἀνθρώποις **ἀδύνατον**, ἀλλ' οὐ παρὰ θεῷ· πάντα γὰρ **δυνατὰ** παρὰ τῷ θεῷ."

[49] Referring to the occurrence of *dunamis* in the example of Mk 10:27 and to Paul's references to the possibilising power of the Spirit and the Annunciation scene in Lk 1:35-37, Kearney remarks that "(i)n all these examples, divinity – as Father, Son, or Spirit – is described as a possibilizing of divine love and logos in the order of human history where it would otherwise have been impossible. In other words, the divine reveals itself here as the possibility of the Kingdom – or if you prefer to cite a *via negativa*, as the *impossibility* of *impossibility*" (Kearney 2007a:52).

[50] Jn 1:12: "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, *he gave **power** to become children of God*…" (ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς **ἐξουσίαν** τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι). Confusingly, the word δύναμις, which plays a rather important role in Kearney's argument, does not appear in the Greek, as he alleges. The word translated "power" here is, instead, ἐξουσία. However, the eschatological motifs that he points out revolving around this passage, remain valid: "First, we are told that these children are born not 'of blood' but 'of God.' A new category of natality and filiality thus emerges which sees progeny as eschatological rather than merely biological – that is, as pro-created from the future rather

possible" to be eternal in the sense that it brushes historical time against the grain, thereby "disclosing a past which unfolds achronically out of the future," but which is neither archaeological nor teleological:

> Resisting all modes of causal determinism – efficient, formal, material, or final – the messianic time of divine *dunamis* constantly surprises us. It operates according to a paradoxical tempo of *hysteron proteron*, or what Levinas calls "future anteriority." A tempo wherein the Messiah can be now and still to come at one and the same time. This time was before time began, is here and now, and will be after the end of time. It is, paradoxically, already here and not yet here in the eternal now (*Jetzzeit*). Eternal, that is, in the eschatological rather than Platonic-metaphysical sense (Kearney 2001:81-82).

Similar to Kearney's notion of the divine possible, this messianic temporality surprises us with possibilities which, without such grace, would have remained beyond both our impossibles and our possibles. In this way, the new possibilities of the eschatological I-am-who-may-be "promise a new natality in a new time: rebirth into an advent so infinite it is never final," and therefore calls us at one and the same time to struggle for justice (so that the kingdom may come) and to give thanks (that the kingdom has already come and continues to come). For from out of the future, and into every moment, "from beyond time, against time, into time," the kingdom comes, giving flesh to the Word, without end (Kearney 2001:82).

To the end of emphasising the dynamic sense of eschatological possibility inscribed in these biblical texts, over against a "mistaken impression of a metaphysical or chronological cause," Kearney makes a case for the translation of δύναμις as possibility rather than the traditional translation into English as "power." Such an "eschatological notion of the possible can," he believes, disclose new contemporary understandings of God.

3.5.2 Metaphysics of the possible

Metaphysics did not traditionally look kindly upon the notion of possibility, and conceived it a "dimension of being contained in reality," and thus as a latency in matter that was still to be realised into act (Kearney 2001:83). With the Aristotelian

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than causally engendered by the past. This marks the transition from tribal to cosmopolitan affiliation, so celebrated by Paul, the opening up of a kingdom which includes each human being as son or daughter of the returning God. No longer mere offspring of archaic gods and ancestors, we are now invited to become descendants of a future still to come, strangers reborn as neighbors in the Word, adopted children of the *deus adventurus* – the God of the Possible" (Kearney 2001:81).

and scholastic deity being perceived as “pure act,” and “without any potentiality whatsoever” (thus Aquinas), ancients and medievals alike agreed that there was nothing divine about possibility. Rationalists and idealists, in turn, conceptualised possibility as intellectual representation – a “logical category of represented possibility” which, whether understood from a metaphysical or a nominalist point of view, was customarily juxtaposed to various notions of “reality.” As such, possibility (conceived as a category of modal logic), was seen to fall short of a God perceived as “Supreme Reality” or “Sufficient Reason” (Kearney 2001:83). Evolutionist or “vitalist” thought, which understands God as “Process,” also exercised a notable influence on Western conceptions of the possible. According to these thinkers, the possible is the *retrospective* result of reality inventing and creating itself. This means that the possible does not pre-exist the real in an ontological sense, but rather “post-exists it as precisely that which can be recognized as a possibility *after the event*” (Kearney 2001:84). The metaphysical opposition between the “divinely real” and the “non-divinely possible” is exactly what Kearney contests in *The God who may be*. He attempts this by turning to four pioneering modern attempts to reconceptualise the notion of possibility (the approaches of Husserl, Bloch, Heidegger, and Derrida):

> My ultimate aim is to see how these preparatory soundings of post-metaphysical notions of the possible may serve as pointers on the path toward a new eschatological understanding which, in light of a hermeneutical retrieval of certain biblical passages, invites us to consider God in a very different fashion: namely, as *posse* rather than *esse* (Kearney 2001:84).

3.5.3 Post-metaphysical readings of the possible

Teleological notion of the possible (Edmund Husserl)

Edmund Husserl saw the ultimate aim of Western philosophy to be a teleological Idea of reason, where this telos “plays the role of a Kantian limit-Idea which surpasses the categorial intuition of essences toward a horizon of *pure possibility* (Kearney 2001:84). Approaching both the theoretical and ethical aspects of teleological possibility, he declared that having a teleological meaning, a duty-to-be, was conditional to being human (Kearney 2001:85).

> Both our theoretical and ethical consciousness, Husserl insists, are structured according to the teleological possibility of an Idea which is unconditioned and therefore surpasses any determined intuitive fullness (or presence) we may

> presume to have. Any attempt by our consciousness to grasp the telos as a fixed or complete object fails, for the goal of meaning is forever escaping us, *immer wieder*. The telos is always *beyond us* (Kearney 2001:85).

Husserl did not see this teleological Idea as subject to intuitive realisation (whether sensible or categorial), but understood it as an ever remaining possibility which manifested itself to us "only in the symbolic mode of the *as-if*." As such, it remained irreducible to finite objects or determinate essence, but could nevertheless function as both origin and end of all our intellectual-practical labours (Kearney 2001:86). Husserl's failure to offer a full phenomenological description of this teleological possibility serves to underline that the teleological possible "eludes every knowledge we can have of it," and operates as a "pure, prospective intention without intuition" (Kearney 2001:86).

> It is an "essential possibility" (*Wesenmöglichkeit*) which transcends the reality of essences (*Ueberwirklichkeit*) while constituting the final meaning (*Zwecksinn*) of all historical reality. For Husserl it is both "innate in humanity" *and* that goal toward which we are "called" – making all thinkers "functionaries of humanity" who must never "abandon faith in the Possibility of philosophy as a task, in the possibility of universal knowledge" (Kearney 2001:86).

In his late E Manuscripts, Husserl took the bold step of identifying teleological possibility as "God," and spoke of "this deity taking the form of an evolving telos-logos whose 'hidden meaning' goes beyond the world of actual being in itself (*Ueberwirklich/Ueber-an-sichlich*) toward a goal yet to be realized" (Kearney 2001:86). And while he left hints in his published works, Husserl never elaborated on his understanding of God, but confided to a student "that 'the life of man is nothing other than a path towards God'" (Kearney 2001:86).

Dialectical notion of the possible (Ernst Bloch)

Bloch's idea of a coming kingdom that reveals itself as an "objectively real possible" (*Das objektiv-real Mögliche*), proceeded from his singular brand of humanist utopianism (Kearney 2001:87-88). In all the great religious traditions, he found the pivotal "principle of hope" which, together with the "symbolism of hope" – the signs and images from a variety of cultures, myths, narratives, liturgies, etc. – testified to the "utopian quest for a future society of revolutionary justice and peace." As such they all precontained a universal project for the New (*Novum*): the "promise of a

'renewed nature' implicit in all progressive social expressions," and the "pre-figuration of a materially equal and emancipated society which is 'not yet'" (Kearney 2001:88). In this way, Bloch draws spiritual and religious aspiration into the revolutionary horizon of history, replacing at the same time the Hegelian definition of being (as that which has been – *das Wesen ist das Gewesene*), with the "neo-Marxist notion of utopia as a latent possibility of history, as that which has not yet actually been (*noch nie so gewesen*)" (Kearney 2001:88). The possibility of utopia does not, however, negate historical reality, but functions according to a "maieutics" which "brings the tacit imaginings of history to birth" (Kearney 2001:88).

Bloch's notion of "real possibility" stands over against a "purely ideal, formal, or transcendental" idea of possibility. As a "coming newness (*novum adventurum*)," it negates any metaphysical given (*fixum*):

> To interpret the world in the light of "real possibility" is to understand it as both "being-according to the possible" (*chata to dunaton*) and "being-in-the-possible" (*to dunamei on*). Bloch thereby intends to re-inject a dose of utopian historicity into the old Aristotelian metaphysics of "potency" (*dunamis*) (Kearney 2001:88).

While Bloch historicises Aristotle's concept of potency, he does not intend a reductive materialism that would class possibility as "sub-being." Instead, he takes his leave of the metaphysical understanding of potency as "inchoate matter awaiting the meaning-giving imprint of form (*morphe*) or act (*entelecheia*) and elevates it to the primary role of a mobilizing catalyst" (Kearney 2001:89). And through a hermeneutics of utopia, this enabling potential allows us to discriminate between possibilities that are authentically "real" (i.e., capable of historical realisation), and those that are mere fantasies. Indeed, recognising the correspondence between the goals of historical struggle on the one hand, and the inherent potencies of the material cosmos on the other, provides us with the "most effective critique of ideological paralysis" (Kearney 2001:89). The dialectical category thus serves a dual function. Firstly, signalling the "world according-to-possibility," it plays the critical role of indicating the limits of what is possible. Secondly, as sign of the "world-in-possibility," it "mobilizes an unlimited dynamism of meaning, forever extending into the 'utopian *novum* of all of history'" (Kearney 2001:89). Rather than some kind of ontological *entelecheia* (a form of forms, or self-thinking-thought), and rather than a

transcendent *actus purus* or a "Supreme Being already accomplished beyond time and awaiting the culmination of history to reveal itself," the *novum* is

> that promise of possibility inscribed in the not-yet-now of time and the not-yet-here of space. And as such, far from being an indifference that leaves us, human agents, indifferent in turn, the *novum* galvanizes our utopian drive toward the kingdom whose realization "here on earth human labour so powerfully helps to accelerate" (Kearney 2001:89).

In this schema, it is the aesthetic and religious dream that connects the distant goal that is the *novum* to our everyday earthly labours. And while art and religion throw history open to utopia, they are themselves grounded in the "real" by history. This entails a redefinition of utopian possibility as "what is not-yet-realized but realizable" (Kearney 2001:89-90). Utopian possibility is, then, "less a power-to-know" (as it was for Kant), than a "power-to-become-other than what is at present the case." And it is in Bloch's secularised understanding of salvation that this "transmutational capacity" reaches its summit: (Kearney 2001:90):

> "Interdependence is here such that without the potentiality of the power-to-become-otherwise, the power-to-make-otherwise of potency would not have the space in which to disclose itself; just as without the power-to-make-otherwise of potency, the power-to-become otherwise of the world would have no mediating meaning with humans. Consequently, the possible reveals itself as being what it is … thanks to the activating intervention of humans in the field of the transformable: the concept of salvation" (Kearney 2001:90).

The utopian possible is therefore no guarantee of redemption, but "presents itself as a free invitation from history to humanity" that may be either rejected or accepted. To summarise, then: Bloch distanced himself from *both* the "metaphysical reduction of the possible to the primacy of form/act/essence" *and* "its logical reduction to a formal modality of ratiocination," making a case instead for its radical utopian power to be retrieved by reinstating it "as the future-oriented determination of history itself" (Kearney 2001:90-91).

Ontological notion of the possible (Heidegger)

Heidegger's phenomenological analysis in *Sein und Zeit* of *Dasein*'s different categories of possibility (*Seinkönnen*, *Möglichkeit*, *ermöglichen*) creates the impression that the "power of the possible" refers in a humanist way to an essentially human property. In a post-war letter to Jean Beaufret, however, while speaking of

the “quiet power of the possible,” Heidegger specifies that he sees this to be “an unambiguous gift of Being itself” (Kearney 2001:91). He explains that, when speaking of the “quiet power of the possible,”

> he means neither (1) the “possible of a merely represented *possibilitas*” (a Leibnitzian-Kantian category of modal logic), nor (2) “the *potentia* as *essentia* of an *actus* of the *existentia*” (an Aristotelian-scholastic category of metaphysics). He means as he states here, “Being itself, which in its loving potency (*das Mögend*) possibilizes (*vermag*) thought and thus also the essence of man, which means in turn his relationship to Being.” Heidegger concludes this decisive passage thus: “To possibilize (*vermögen*) something is to sustain it in its essence, to retain it in its element” (Kearney 2001:91-92).

In the later Heidegger, then, where the “humanist-sounding” view of Being as “temporality and historicality” is replaced by a more “sacred-sounding liturgy of love and peace” (which agrees with his reconceptualization of Being as Gift), we are invited with him to also “rethink Being itself as the power that possibilizes the authentic being of things” (Kearney 2001:92). This he does by playing on the “latent etymological affinities between the German verbs for loving (*mögen*) and making possible (*vermögen*)”:

> “It is on the strength of this loving potency or possibilization of love” (*das Vermögen des Mögens*) that something is possibilized (*vermag*) in its authentic (*eigentlich*) being. This possibilization (*Vermögen*) is the authentic “possible” (*das eigentlich “mögliche”*), that whose essence rests on loving’ (Kearney 2001:92).

Because the only suitable human response to such “loving-possibilizing” is to “love-possibilize” Being in return (accomplished by “thinking things and selves in their authentic essence), the possibilising of Being can be said to have a double genitive, referring on the one hand to “Being’s loving-possibilizing of thought” and on the other to “thought’s loving-possibilizing of Being” (Kearney 2001:92).

While Heidegger does not identify possibility with God, he does equate the essence of Being with the “sacred” and the “divine,” and much of his language resonates with Christian eschatology (Kearney 2001:92-93). The God that Heidegger has in mind here is, however, more akin to the “god of the poets” than to the God of revelation, we can rightfully suspect some relation between ontological and theological readings of the “loving possible” (Kearney 2001:93). He did, after all, hint

to an analogy of proper proportionality in the ontology/theology relationship when he stated that “the believer is to God what *Dasein* is to Being” (Kearney 2001:93).

Deconstructive notion of the possible (Derrida)

In his turn, Derrida revisited the idea of possibility in terms of the “irreducible modality of ‘Perhaps’ (*peut-être*),” which he considered to be the “necessary condition of possibility of every experience. This is so because every experience is an “event that registers that which comes from the unpredictable otherness of the future.” When the “perhaps” is experienced in this way, the experience is simultaneously of the possible and of the impossible, or “the possible *as* impossible.” Soliciting a “yes” to that which is still to come, “beyond all plans, programs, and predictions,” the “perhaps” keeps the ontological question constantly in question (Kearney 2001:93-94). In *The politics of friendship* (1994), Derrida describes the circle of the “lucky aporia of the possible impossible.” He begins by distinguishing between the bad possible (that which can be predicted) and the good possible (that which is impossible), and affirms that

> (w)ithout the openness of a radically indeterminate “possible” – which like the phenomenological reduction brackets our prejudices about the future – there could be no genuine decision. But, equally, no decision could be made without somehow also lifting the “perhaps,” while retaining its “living” possibility in a kind of living memory. Consequently if no real decision – ethical, political, juridical – is possible without conjuring the “perhaps” that keeps the present open to the coming event, there could be no decision either – no committing of oneself to one possible rather than others – if there was not some limiting of this opening “perhaps” which serves as condition of the possibility of decision! (Kearney 2001:94).

A genuine decision, for Derrida, is one that does not derive only from the subject, but is one that – like genuine responsibility – derives just as much from *my* possibles and from *others’* possibles that intervene, and that may even represent the “impossibility of my own possible.” This preference of Derrida for a “paradoxically *receptive* decision” allows for the “irruption of the other in the self.” Moreover, we are enabled to “think” the possible “anew,” due to the fact that every responsibility, interpretation, invention, and finally also his “pardon,” must also “traverse this aporia of the impossible-possible” (Kearney 2001:95). Impossibility does not stand over against possibility as its mere counter position, but rather marks its renewal and

arrival as event. An event does not simply happen because it is possible ("qua ontological acting-out of some inherent *dunamis* or *potentia*), but specifically also because something impossible, unanticipated and unforeseen takes place (Kearney 2001:96).

> It is precisely the impossibility of formerly predictable possibilities which makes new ones announce themselves beyond this very impossibility. The impossible reminds us, therefore, that beyond our powers the impossible is still possible (Kearney 2001:96).

Admittedly, Derrida does not engage with the eschatological implications of his notion of the impossible possible. And yet there are hints in his work that Kearney considers to leave open the "option" of adding a "possible God." Kearney suspects that, by rethinking the im-possible in a non-negative and non-disabling way, Derrida attempts to conceptualise a post-metaphysical category of the possible:

> The impossible needs to be affirmed because, as I have noted above, it is precisely im-possibility which opens up possibility and makes it possible. Strangely, however, this can occur only when my power of possibility undergoes its own death as "my" possibility – acknowledging in mourning, passion, suffering, and anxiety that it is this very impossibility which allows a new possible, another possible, another's possible, an im-possible possible, to come, or to come back (Kearney 2001:96-97).

Derrida identifies the paradox of the impossible-possible with the experience of faith. But since faith always implies a possibility that is never adequately or fully present, and that is always "already anachronistic (remembered) or still to come (promised)," the way that Derrida relates virtuality to the origin of faith, may allude to a "general 'spectral' structure of *all* human experience rather than to any *specially religious* experience of a loving God." In fact, the whole aporia of the impossible-possible is for Derrida another name for deconstruction itself (Kearney 2001:97).

For Kearney, however, the impossible-made-possible holds the promise of enabling new thinking about the "possible God." Rather than seeing resurrection in opposition to deconstruction, he recognises the value of the two traversing each other, and interprets the difference between them to be one of both emphasis and substance. Whereas Derrida identifies in the play of impossible-possible a structure that pertains to experience in general, Kearney would claim that it marks a specifically religious experience of God, and that this difference moves beyond mere

language games to reference itself. "*Differance* and God, as Derrida is the first to remind us, are *not* the same thing" (Kearney 2001:98).

Derrida's reflections on the impossible-possible opens up new avenues of thought about faith and eschatology, But while he is willing to declare the "impossible-possible paradox of pardon/gift/justice/hospitality as a general 'messianic' structure of all experience," he has no interest to pursue this in a theological or theistic manner, and does not involve himself in any specific "messianism." His interest is more in vigilant openness to the "incoming events of *all our experiences*," whether secular, sacred, profane, violent or loving, than in the truth claims of a specific revealed faith (Kearney 2001:98). And yet his deconstructive reading of the impossible-possible certainly assists us

> to perform … a thoroughgoing purge of all "purist" or "dogmatic" notions of possibility as an immanently unfolding power blind to the invention of otherness which makes events happen. And this deconstructive critique of inherited onto-theological notions of both potentiality and presence marks, I think, and invaluable opening to a new eschatological understanding of God as *posse* (Kearney 2001:98).

3.5.4 Conclusion: toward an eschatological notion of the possible

While the post-metaphysical readings of Husserl, Bloch, Heidegger and Derrida all had their respective reservations on the religious front, Kearney judges them each to offer important "critical signposts for a new eschatology of God," or his God-who-may-be. Kearney understands all four thinkers to appreciate the force of the possible as something "higher rather than lower than the actual." And even if they do not pursue this, they seem to suggest that onto-theology's definition of God as the "absolute priority of actuality over possibility," may now be timely reversed. In sum, Kearney outlines the following crucial implications of such a "Possible God, understood as the eschatological May-be":

> (1) It is radically transcendent – guaranteed by the mark of its "impossible-possibility."
> (2) It is "possible" in so far as we have faith in the promise of the advent – the scandal of "impossible" incarnation and resurrection! – but also equally reveals itself as what "possibilizes" such messianic events in the first place.
> (3) It calls and solicits us – where are you? who are you? who do you say that I am? Why did you not give me to drink or eat? – in the form of an engaging

personal summons (unlike Husserl's Telos, Bloch's Utopia, Heidegger's *Vermögen*, or Derrida's Perhaps);

(4) And, finally, the eschatological May-be unfolds not just as can-be (*Kann-sein*) but as should-be (*Sollen-sein*) – in short, less as a power of immanent potency driving toward fulfillment than as a power of the powerless which bids us remain open to the possible divinity whose gratuitous coming – already, now, and not yet – is always a surprise and never without grace (Kearney 2001:100).

3.6 Poetics of the possible God

In his concluding chapter, Kearney attempts a hermeneutic retrieval of a few neglected readings of possibility in Western thought (namely those of Aristotle, Cusanus, and Schelling). He then attempts to reinterpret these in light of the paradigm of "God-play," aiming again "to break open new sites and sightings of the God-who-may-be" (Kearney 2001:101).

3.6.1 Hermeneutic retrievals

Aristotle's dunamis *and the* nous poetikos

As shown above, the Aristotelian reading of material *dunamis* has always judged possibility as subordinated to formal act (*morphe*, *energeia*, *entelecheia*). Kearney, however, explores here the possibility of re-reading Aristotle's doctrine of the *nous poetikos* in an eschatological light, asking whether this may cast the "making mind" as "a divine power which empowers, in the sense of enabling and transfiguring, the latent capacities within the human mind" (Kearney 2001:101-102). Kearney urges us to move beyond a narrow metaphysical dualism of potency versus act, so that we may imagine an eschatological God for whom "possibilizing is actualizing and actualizing is possibilizing," which is precisely what divine transfiguration means for Kearney. As a result, Kearney reads Aristotle's claim in "*De Anima* 3.5 that the material human intellect 'thinks nothing without the other' (*nous poetikos*)," as pointing to the fact that creatures and their Creator both need each other (2001:102). This "possibilising" by the *nous poetikos* does not mean, however, that our Creator determines the content of our own creative endeavours, or does the actual creating for us, but rather that the Creator "transfigures our being into a can-be – a being capable of creating and recreating new meanings in our world" (Kearney 2001:102).

Nicholas of Cusa's possest

With his claim that *possest* (his compound term for *posse esse*, the "possibility to be") is the most appropriate "approximate" name that we, according to our human concept of him, can come up with, Cusanus moves beyond any of his predecessors in the monotheistic tradition. This name, which is at once the very "name of names" revealed in Exodus 3:14, as well as "no name," surpasses human understanding and leads those who would speculate beyond all cognitive powers to a mystical vision where the revelation of the unknown God begins (Kearney 2001:103).

Arguing that absolute possibility is neither prior nor posterior to actuality, but that it in fact co-exists with actuality in a "co-eternal union," Cusanus claims that "(a)bsolute possibility and actuality are so eternally identical that 'they are Eternity itself'" (Kearney 2001:103). But it is only in God, the very Beginning of the world, that absolute possibility and absolute actuality co-exist in this way. With this claim that God himself combines the two in such a miraculous identity – "(f)or God is everything which he is able-to-be (*posse esse*)"[51] – Cusanus negates the conventional metaphysical view that places the possible in a secondary position in relation to the actual (Kearney 2001:103). Judging everything that exists to "already exist" in God, enfolded in him from the Beginning, and that the process of creation "in time and history" is a "universe unfolded into the created world," Cusanus sees the divine Creator as "everything that he is able to be (*est omne id quod esse potest*)" (Kearney 2001:104).

Kearney is concerned, however, that some form of theodicy is the inevitable result of such reasoning that everything that happens in the world, including both good and evil, is "precontained and predetermined in the mind of God from the beginning of time":

> '… Clearly, Actualized-Possibility (*possest*) is all things and includes all things; for nothing which is not included in it either exists or is able to be made. Therefore, in it all things exist and have their movement and are what they are (regardless of what they are) (*id sunt quod sunt quicquid sunt*).' This last qualifier (*quicquid sunt*) is particularly worrying. For it suggests, does it not, that anything

[51] Kearney quotes Cusanus: "'God exists before actuality that is distinct from possibility and before possibility that is distinct from actuality. But all things that exist after Him exist with their possibility and their actuality distinct. And hence God alone is what (He) is able to be (*solus deus id sit quod esse potest*); but no creature whatsoever (is what it is able to be), since possibility and actuality are identical only in the Beginning"' (Kearney 2001:103-104).

> and everything that occurs in the created world – including war, pestilence, famine, disease, torture – is all part of the eternal Godhead. Moreover, since there is nothing other than God, anything that appears to be different or distinct from him – such as non-being or otherness – is in fact really already contained within him. Even evil itself, it seems, is intrinsic to God (Kearney 2001:104).

While Kearney himself would at this point invoke the Augustinian argument of *privatio boni*, Cusanus embraces, he judges, a version of theodicy similar to that later promoted by Hegel and Leibniz, thus foreclosing the option of "human freedom and creativity as a way of participating in the transfiguring play of creation" so important to Kearney (2001:104-105). What is more, the original boldness of Cusanus' *possest* hypothesis is lost in that he allows "*posse* to ultimately collapse back into an ontological system of necessity," thus effectively conforming again to the scholastic idea of God as *necessitas* – "a being that cannot but exist as it exists qua uncaused self-existence" (Kearney 2001:105). Quite opposite to this, Kearney's concept of the God-who-may-be is an attempt to regain some of the eschatological radicality of the idea of a possibilising God. He insists that Cusanus' "God as absolute possibility (*absoluta potentia*)" should not be reduced, as Cusanus does, to a "totalizing necessity where every possible is ineluctably actualized from the beginning of time – history being reduced, by extension, to a slow release 'unfolding' of some pre-established plan" (Kearney 2001:105):

> On the contrary, from an eschatological perspective, divinity is reconceived 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, but refusing this transfiguring task every time we do evil or injustice or commit ourselves to non-being (Kearney 2001:105).

Schelling's Seyn-könnende

Commenting on Exodus 3:15, Schelling renders the formula אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה as "I will be what I will be," and argues that God reveals himself in the epiphany as "the general possibility of being" rather than as "being *in strictu sensu*" (Kearney 2001:105). With the "essence" of God thus revealed as "the capacity to-be or to-become his 'existence,'" he defines God as the "can-be" (*Seyn-könnende*). Following a trinitarian paradigm, Schelling considers this "potentiality of essence" to be inferior to the "free actualized existence of God": he does this, namely, by identifying the

"immediate can-be" with the Spirit ("the 'can-be of the divine ground as the beginning of its being'), and then subordinating this to both Christ (a "mediating cosmic potency"), and the Father ("as Being itself (*Seyn*) qua ultimate source (*fons et principium divinitatis*)" (Kearney 2001:105). As opposed to the "paternal primacy of being," Kearney suggests "an eschatological revisioning of the Father from the perspective of the eschatological Son and Spirit" (2001:105):

> The Father might thus be re-envisaged as the loving-possible which transfigures the Son and Spirit and is transfigured by them in turn. That, admittedly, is a long way from the standard German idealist reading, from Hegel to Heidegger, but it is, I suggest, one more attentive to the hidden eschatological potencies latent within Schelling's own texts if all too distorted by their onto-theological and Gnostic baggage (Kearney 2001:106).

3.6.2 Godplay

Kearney turns now to Heidegger's expression of the relation between Being and God in terms of proportional analogy, and proceeds to ask how this may be applied to the construal of the "power of the possible" in terms of *play*: the play of Being and the play of God" (Kearney 2001:106). The later Heidegger described the interrelationship between mortals and gods within the "fourfold of Being as a mirror-game (*Spiegel-Spiel*), and attempted to show that even the simplest of things may, once transfigured by poet or artist, participate in the ontological "play of the world": "Through art the 'thing things' and the 'world worlds' – a ludic tautology which discloses the 'loving power' (*das mögende des Vermögen*) of Being itself" (Kearney 2001:106).

But how might Heidegger's ontological model of play relate, analogously, to the eschatology of the possible? An important difference in such an analogy would certainly be that, while in ontological play the "power" of the Same returns to itself, eschatological play, in referring to the powerlessness of the other, summons us beyond the Same and invites us to freely realise the promises and prophesies of the eschatological possible (Kearney 2001:106). At this point, metaphors of the "possible God as a *deus ludens* who creates and dances before its own creation" abound. We read, for example, of Sophia playing before the face of the Creator (Pr 8:30), a scene which for Kearney signals "the pre-figuration of the world's genesis which itself serves as prelude (*praeludium*) to the eschatological kingdom still to come"

(2001:106-107). To the extent that God is a *deus ludens* who possibilises the world in the first place, every human person is thus a *homo ludens* transfiguring the world in turn. The fragile promise of the possibilising play of the world as a "may-be" that is dependent on humans for its coming to be, often symbolised in Judeo-Christian-Islamic mysticism by a naked, playful child, also find expression in many early church fathers and later mystics as an eschatological vision of a kingdom of play. It is here that we find the idea that the "Word becoming flesh in the history of creation constitutes a 'Trinitarian play' in which the 'spirit plays freely before the Father so that he becomes fecund and creative' through the coming into being of his Son" (Kearney 2001:107).

> 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. To be made in God's image is therefore, paradoxically, to be powerless; but with the possibility of receiving power from God to overcome our powerlessness, by responding to the call of creation with the words, "I am able." To God's "I may be" each one of us is invited to replay "I can." Just as to each "I can," God replies "I may be." In this eschatological play of power and powerlessness, the human self becomes the capable self (Kearney 2001:108).

It is, then, in the very "renunciation of my will to power" and in my "refusal to rest satisfied with my ownmost totality as a being-toward-death" that I become open to the "infinite empowering-possibilizing of God" (Kearney 2001:108). And to take this abandoning of ego even further, Kearney illustrates how the metaphor of eschatological play reveals the dispossessive nature of the kingdom:

> The kingdom is precisely that which can never be fully possessed in the here and now, but always directs us toward an advent still to come – an alternative site from which to rebegin afresh." (*sic*) Indeed we can only ever find the kingdom by losing it, by renouncing the illusion that we possess it here and now. If we think we have the kingdom, it can only be in the mode of the "as if," as imaginary, a play of images (Kearney 2001:108).

Kearney cautions, however, to the danger of players forgetting that they are engaged in *play*, and beginning to confuse their signs, symbols and images for the real, mistaking the "figural for the literal, the possible for the actual." It is in keeping this danger in mind that the "ludic possible" contains for both humans and God a

"double movement of engagement and detachment," reminding us that, while we are in the world, we are not fully of the world (Kearney 2001:109).

3.6.3 Perichoresis

Kearney turns, now, to the powerful image of the Trinity found in the doctrine of *perichoresis* – a sacred, circular dance-play between the three Persons of the Trinity, where each gives place to the other in a "gesture of reciprocal dispossession rather than fusing into a single substance" (Kearney 2001:109). To the extent that the Son entered history through the incarnation, humanity is invited to join in this continuous "moving *toward* each other in a gesture of immanence and *away from* each other in a gesture of transcendence":

> We thus find ourselves players in an eschatological game of which we are neither the initiators nor the culminators, a game which we cannot master since its possibles are always beyond our possibles, refiguring the play of genesis, prefiguring the play of eschaton, a game that knows no end-game, no stalemate, whose ultimate move is always still to come. But if we cannot master the divine play of the possible, we can partake of it as a gift given to us, a grace that heals and enables, a love that comes to us from the future summoning us toward the other beyond ourselves (Kearney 2001:110).

It is in this sense that Kearney's concept of "Godplay" moves beyond Heidegger's *Spiegel-Spiel*, where the Destiny of Being happens when it happens, irrespective of human action. The play of eschatological possibility, in contrast, is a promise of salvation, but is only fulfilled to the extent that humans choose to respond to it and bring the coming Kingdom closer through their actions, all the while acknowledging that the ultimate realisation of the Kingdom far exceeds our power and is impossible to us alone:

> To respond to the song of the Creator is to hear the Word which promises a possible world to come, a second creation or recreation of justice and peace, a world which the divine *posse* is always ready to offer but which can come about only when humanity says yes by joining the dance, entering the play of ongoing genesis, transfiguring the earth. God cannot become fully God, nor the Word fully flesh, until creation becomes a "new heaven and a new earth" (Kearney 2001:110).

3.6.4 Epilogue

For Kearney, imagining God as *possest* does not condemn us to another dualism where *posse* is opposed to *esse* in some binary division. It is, rather to say that the *possest* "contains the possibility (though not the necessity, as Cusanus held) of *esse* within itself," so that the eschatological *possest* promises something that is as radically new as it is adventurous (Kearney 2001:110):

> For *possest* may now be seen as advent rather than arche, as eschaton rather than *principium*. The realization of *possest*'s divine *esse*, if and when it occurs, if and when the kingdom comes, will no doubt be a new *esse*, refigured and transfigured in a mirror-play where it recognizes its other and not just the image of itself returning to itself. In this way, *posse* may bring being beyond being into new being, other-being. It promises a new heaven and a new earth (Kearney 2001:110-111).

Kearney concludes:

> Is such a thing possible? Not for us alone. But it is not impossible to God – if we help God to become God. How? By opening ourselves to the "loving possible," by acting each moment to make the impossible that bit more possible (2001:111).

CHAPTER FOUR

POST-METAPHYSICAL GOD-TALK:

GAINS AND RISKS OF THE GOD-WHO-MAY-BE

After the rather thorough overview of Kearney's God-who-may-be project in the previous chapter, we now proceed to understand and evaluate this proposal in the context of his other works, as well as against the rich traditions of theology on the one hand, and Western philosophy on the other.

The intellectual legacy that Kearney was exposed to during his doctoral studies in Paris with Ricoeur and Levinas has taught him that not only is the philosophical question of God far from dead, but also that the innovative methods of thinking proposed by phenomenology and hermeneutics may actually serve to revive it (Kearney 2001:2). But how does Kearney himself judge the contribution of these ways of thinking? How does he suppose talking about God as possibility makes a difference? He answers in three parts (2001:4-5):

Firstly, a future that is unprogrammable, places all our presuppositions and prejudices into question. The possibility of God's coming kingdom remains an ever-inviting imperative to say yes to the coming of the kingdom. It is because the divine "perhaps" hovers over every just action that we may be assured that history is never over. But this also means that our duty is never done: "God depends on us to be. Without us no Word can be made flesh" (Kearney 2001:4).

Secondly, the God of possibility underlies our freedom to choose. The future is not preordained, and therefore we may choose to make the world a more loving and just place, or not to. Evil in our world does not reflect on God, but on us, and the God of *posse* therefore speaks a final "no" to theodicy, which would create some form of link between evil and the pre-established will or destiny of God ("the error of metaphysical thinking about divinity as pure act and necessity") (Kearney 2001:5).

Thirdly, the God-who-may-be reminds us that, once transfigured by God, all things, including that which seemed impossible, are again made possible, so that the "eschatological potentials latently inscribed in the historically im-possible" is

disclosed (Kearney 2001:5). As such we remain open to hope against hope, that "in spite of injustice and despair the *posse* may become more and more incarnate in *esse*, transmuting being as it does so into a new heaven and a new earth…" (2001:5).

Let us turn now to a somewhat more systematic analysis and theological evaluation of the gains and risks of Kearney's post-metaphysical proposal.

4.1 It depends on what the meaning of "is" is: Kearney's hermeneutics

Kearney paints a picture of his own hermeneutic situation in the preface to *Anatheism* (cf. chapter one) and acknowledges the important lesson that he learned from hermeneutic philosophy: that interpretation "goes all the way down. Nothing is exempt" (Kearney 2011e:xv). No interpreter has any God's-eye view available to him or her, as the faults and failures of human history clearly shows. For Kearney, hermeneutics is a lesson in both humility, insofar as we all speak from finite situations, and imagination, insofar as we all fill the gaps between available and ulterior meanings (2011e:xv). There is no word without hermeneutics, and, as critical biblical scholarship has thankfully made us aware, all our holiest books are themselves works of interpretation.

> If Gods and prophets talk, the best we can do is listen – then speak and write in turn, always after the event, ana-logically and ana-gogically, returning to words already spoken and always needing to be spoken again. Hermeneutics was there from the beginning and will be there to the end (Kearney 2011e:xv).

But how does such interpretation work for Kearney, exactly? To answer this question, we must pause to consider Kearney's understanding of the workings of metaphor in religious texts. In this regard, he borrows, in his own words, "liberally" from Ricoeur's notion of the "semantic augmentation": the "surplus of meaning" that may result from inventive hermeneutic readings of religious texts, giving rise to a "rich play of metaphoricity" (2001:7).[52] To illustrate, Kearney refers to Ricoeur's

[52] Proceeding from the work of German hermeneutic thinkers such as Dilthey, Heidegger and Gadamer, Ricoeur "elaborated a complex set of enquiries into what he called the enigma of 'semantic innovation'. How does new meaning come to be, and, in doing so, reconfigure the meanings of the past? This fundamental hermeneutic question is based on the thesis that existence is itself a mode of interpretation (*hermeneia*), or, as the hermeneutic maxim goes: *Life interprets itself*. But where Heidegger concentrated directly on a fundamental ontology of interpretation, Ricoeur advances what he calls the 'long route' of multiple hermeneutic detours. This brought him into dialogue with the

discussion of hermeneutic interpretations of the Song of Songs. Here Ricoeur makes the point that, because no single writing or reading could ever capture the meaning of divine desire referred to in this textual tradition, it is by interanimating this text with other texts from both Scripture and the later traditions of interpretation "that we can begin to approximate to some notion of divine desire with live metaphors that conjoin heterogeneous semantic fields" (Kearney 2001:7). Contrary to the narrowly Platonising use of allegory, where meaning is transferred only vertically from the sensible to the intelligible, and from the human to the divine, Ricoeur's new model of religious hermeneutics regains some of the original etymological charge of metaphor as *meta-phora* (to transfer, transit, carry across), so that the production of metaphorical meaning becomes a two-way movement – "like Jacob's ladder with angels passing up and down" (Kearney 2001:7). Kearney quotes Ricoeur's example of the two lovers in the Song of Songs at length in order to illustrate:

> The idea of an intersecting metaphor invites us to consider the different and original regions of love, each with its symbolic play. On the one side, the divine love is invested in the Covenant with Israel and later in the Christic bond, along with its absolutely original nuptial metaphorics; on the other, there is human love invested in the erotic bond and its equally original metaphorics, which transforms the body into something like a landscape. The double 'seeing as' of intersecting metaphors then finds itself as the source of the "saying otherwise." (Ricoeur 1998:302-303 in Kearney 2001:7-8).

Ricoeur concludes from this that it is the mark of the

> power of love to be able to move in both senses along the ascending and descending spiral of metaphor, allowing in this way for every level of the emotional investment of love to signify, to intersignify every other level (Ricoeur 1998:302-303 in Kearney 2001:8).

The sheer diversity of ways for metaphorizing the desire of God points to the fact that none can claim superiority to the other, and that it is precisely from "the productive friction of the 'intersignification' that some transfer (*metaphora*) of meaning is eventually, if always tentatively, achieved" (Kearney 2001:8). Greater

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human sciences, where philosophy discovers its limits in what is outside of philosophy, in those border exchanges where meaning traverses the various signs and disciplines in which Being is interpreted by human understanding. Ricoeur thus challenged Heidegger's view that Being is accessible through the 'short route' of human existence (*Dasein*) which understands itself through its own possibilities; he argued instead that the meaning of Being is always mediated through an endless process of interpretations – cultural, religious, political, historical and scientific. Hence Ricoeur's basic definition as the 'art of deciphering *indirect* meaning'" (Kearney 2004a:1).

awareness of the fertile metaphorical interplay at work in religious texts enables the hermeneutic retrieval of certain lost meanings "within and between (*metaxy*) the texts themselves" (2001:8).

For Kearney the theological value of this "metaphorizing role of hermeneutic mediation" lies in the fact that it steers a middle way through the apophatic[53] and cataphatic[54] approaches to God. Traversing this frontier zone where the human imagination uses stories, parables and images to think the unthinkable and to say something about the unsayable, Kearney attempts to navigate a third way between the poles of negative and onto-theology.[55] Here God is not approached as being or as non-being, but as the possibility-to-be, and where the intersecting of metaphors disclose latent and new meaning: "It is here that we encounter the nuptial nexus where divine and human desires overlap. The still point of the turning world where the timeless crosses time" (Kearney 2001:8).

For Kearney it is important to navigate between *romantic*[56] and *radical*[57] hermeneutics – an approach which he terms "*diacritical hermeneutics*" (2003a:17).[58]

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[53] The apophatic tradition, with its negative theologians like Clement of Alexandria, Dionysius, Levinas, Derrida, and Marion, "stresses the impossibility of saying anything meaningful about God," so that God is placed too far beyond being (Kearney 2001:8).

[54] The cataphatic tradition risks embracing overly positive or foundationalist propositions when talking about God, so that God is sometimes reduced to being – "either as the most general or highest being: *ontos on* – *theion*" (Kearney 2001:8).

[55] Masterson notes that "Kearney's reflections on philosophy of religion are in the phenomenological and hermeneutical tradition of formulating perceptive and ethically liberating interpretations of sacred myths and narratives. In this approach he is influenced by thinkers such as Bachelard, Girard, Levinas and, of course Ricoeur. However, it is Heidegger who inspires him with his most distinctive insight into the large issue of how we should envisage the object of religious worship, namely, God" (2008:249).

[56] By "romantic hermeneutics," Kearney means "the view – endorsed by Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Gadamer – that the purpose of philosophical interpretation is to unite the consciousness of one subject with that of the other. This process is called 'appropriation' which in the German, *Aneignung*, means *becoming one with*." For all three of these proponents, "the purpose of hermeneutic understanding was to recover some lost original consciousness" – For Schleiermacher the original message of the Kerygma, for Dilthey some kind of objective knowledge about the past, for Gadamer a fusion of horizons between ourselves and strangers – "by way of rendering what is past contemporaneous with our present modes of comprehension" (Kearney 2003a:17).

[57] Kearney describes "radical hermeneutics" with reference to Caputo's rejection of the "model of appropriation, insisting on the unmediatable and ultimately 'sublime' nature of alterity" – an approach inspired by the deconstructive turn of Derrida, Blanchot and Lyotard. "To this end Caputo promotes the 'hyperbolic hypothesis' of Levinas and Derrida, defined as an 'unphenomenological model' in which 'an invisible infinity comes over me and demands everything of me, the food out of my mouth' – a new model 'for the friend and for politics, which have always been understood in *egalitarian* terms'. In this light, radical hermeneutics invokes an irreducible dissymmetry of self and other" (Kearney 2003a:17).

[58] In this approach, Kearney follows in the direction chartered by Ricoeur, whom Kearney compliments as having developed his own brand of philosophical hermeneutics through his much

Avoiding both the "abyss beyond the logocentric tradition" and the "nostalgic" search for "a new path beyond logocentrism by revitalizing and reconceptualizing the old logos and its potentiality for speculative, systematic thought" (Nichols 2006:115), Kearney opts for a middle way that is, in his view, actually "more radical and challenging" (Kearney 2003a:18). Nichols gives good expression to the hermeneutic mark that Kearney sets for himself:[59]

> This is an enormous task for thinking, and … this new dialectic has raised the bar for hermeneutic discourse one new level, both forbidding and demanding a resolution at the same time. When Kearney at times seems to fall to one side or the other in his attempt to define a radically new, yet comfortingly old, conception of God, we must with due charity recognize the virtual impossibility of his task, as well as that this is in fact the vanguard of thinking in the postmodern situation, and hence we are led down this new path with a sense of urgency and necessity, happy that a rough-hewn path has begun to emerge from the thickets and brambles (Nichols 2006:115).

But Bloechl criticises Kearney for *The God who may be*'s lack of thorough hermeneutical analysis in the sense of "close attention to distinct forms of expression and their various linguistic, conceptual, and historical horizons" (2006:131). He holds that, given the subtitle of the work, "*A hermeneutics of religion*," one would expect more detailed hermeneutic attention to the different fields of thought between which Kearney very adeptly navigates the passages under his attention, and the very different ways in which each field would interpret the events discussed. He understands this lack of hermeneutical analysis, however, in light of the importance of grace as a "surprising" event that enters the world of being and act always from

noted ability to negotiate between competing schools of thought: "Determined to find a path between a) the romantic hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Gadamer and b) the more radical hermeneutics of the deconstruction (Derrida, Caputo) and critical theory (Habermas), Ricoeur endeavored to chart a middle way that combined both the empathy and conviction of the former and the suspicion and detachment of the latter. He himself never gave a name to this third path (he was wary of founding a new ideology or –ism). But I think we would not be far wrong in naming it dialogical or diacritical hermeneutics. There were not many major figures in contemporary thought – Husserl, Freud, Rawls, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Foucault, Lévi-Strauss, Saussure, Austen, Arendt, Jaspers, Marcel, Habermas, Levinas, Derrida – with whom he did not engage in robust debate" (Kearney 2005:4).

[59] Nichols suggests, however, "to those who enter the orbit of Kearney's discourse that his diacritical hermeneutics, despite the attempt to remain 'in between' romantic and radical hermeneutics, must necessarily lean more closely to the romantic side if it is to retain the possibility of having a *real* God-who-may-be. One could even say that diacritical hermeneutics *is* a version of romantic hermeneutics, but one that strives with incessant vigilance to remember its own potential for violent domination" (Nichols 2006:125).

beyond, and as such lies beyond interpretation (Bloechl 2006:129-132; see 4.4, "Between ontology and eschatology").[60]

But Bloechl goes too far in this contention – both in expecting a hermeneutical analysis outside the parameters that Kearney sets for himself, and in explaining this hermeneutical "lack" in terms of the phenomena in question lying "beyond" interpretation. To address the second point first, it is doubtful whether Kearney would concede anything lying beyond hermeneutics. In fact his whole phenomenologico-hermeneutical exploration of the topic of the God-who-may-be is best understood as an attempt to poetically say the unsayable and thus engage the radical schools of thought that emphasise the otherness of alterity to the point where it becomes irredeemably strange. In terms of the first point, Kearney engages hermeneutically the textual treasure chest of the Judeo-Christian tradition, as well as works of literature, with the freedom that his philosophical point of departure lends him. His aim in this venture is not to suggest a final or even authoritative interpretation, but rather to engage poetically in an act of reinterpretation, or, more aptly, re-imagination – an act that can be described as applying Ricoeur's "semantic innovation" and "surplus of meaning" in the field of Philosophy of Religion. Consider, for example, the way Kearney reflects on his mentor's thinking of symbols and its ability to aid us in the interpretation of indirect or tacit meanings:

> Where Husserl located meaning in the subject's intuition of the 'things themselves', Ricoeur follows the hermeneutic dictum that intuition is always a matter of interpretation. This implies that things are always given to us *indirectly* through a detour of signs; but it does not entail an embracing of existentialist

[60] "To begin with, at the moment being is been aligned with act and actuality as opposed to possibility, it becomes essential that the grace by which the God who may be would enter human experience and history occurs from outside the domain of act and actuality. It is not easy to measure the depth of this reservation about being and act, but the sheer notion of 'surprise' seems to imply a previous closure into monotony. It is as if first there was experience closed from what breaks into it and deserves to be called grace, and then there is the event in which something new and other thus arrives. However, if such a surprise may be interpreted, it must first show up in its effects; and if it is thus to be understood as 'graced,' then those effects must be of the particular sort Kearney would have us associate with justice. Is this to say that grace deserves to be called grace only if those to whom it is offered actually recognize and act on it? *The God Who May Be* provides no answer to this question for the simple reason that it does not attempt an account of the disposition and the capacities of the person who may indeed do those things. A phenomenologist wants to know how it is – on what existential condition – that an event of grace goes beyond the surprise itself, into the possibility of that transformation. A good classically minded theologian thinking along the same line misses much talk of the grace that is infused. Whichever the case, the argument that passes over them moves toward the view that nature acts independently of any support from the divine, and the divine for its part intervenes in nature, if at all, to correct it – and not rather, as Augustine has preferred, to perfect it" (Bloechl 2006:132).

> irrationalism. The interpretation (*hermeneia*) of indirect or tacit meaning invites us to think *more*, not to abandon speculative thought altogether. And nowhere is this more evident than in the challenge posed by symbolic meaning. By symbols Ricoeur understands all expressions of double meaning wherein a primary meaning refers beyond itself to a second meaning which is never given immediately. This 'surplus meaning' provokes interpretation. 'The symbol gives rise to thought', as Ricoeur puts it in a much-quoted maxim (Kearney 2004a:2).

And whereas Ricoeur's earlier hermeneutic of symbols could have been said to be limited to expressions of double intentionality, Kearney notes how, in his later hermeneutic of texts Ricoeur extended interpretation to all phenomena of a textual order – a move which opened new avenues for dialogue with the human and social sciences that became expressed by Ricoeur's maxim: "'To explain more is to understand better" (*Expliquer plus c'est comprendre mieux*)" (Kearney 2004a:3):

> Moving from 'speech' (the immediate dialogue of speaker and listener) to 'text' (mediated discourse), Ricoeur acknowledges the alterity and distantiation of meaning as essential dimensions of the hermeneutic process – dimensions which had been largely distrusted by Romantic existentialism as symptoms of scientific objectivism. In so doing, Ricoeur endorses a positive hermeneutic conversation with the sciences … In the interpretation of texts, scientific 'explanation' and phenomenological 'understanding' converse and converge. Philosophy thus opens itself once again to a productive dialogue with its other (Kearney 2004a:3-4).

But this openness to addressing the semiological challenge via dialogue – as such restoring hermeneutics to the model of the text – does not imply that the text is enclosed in a prison house of language games. Ricoeur advances a hermeneutic dialectic that "passes through the detour of the text in the name of something beyond it – what he calls the 'matter of the text,'" and that brings us to the ontological potential of a text: "the ontological horizon of world-meaning opened up by the textual workings of language" (Kearney 2004a:4):

> This ultimate reference – to a world not merely represented by the text but disclosed by the text – brings us beyond epistemology to ontology. Thus the ultimate horizon of Ricoeur's work remains, from beginning to end, the horizon of being which signals to us obliquely and incompletely: a promised land but never an occupied one. We encounter here a truncated ontology – provisional, tentative, exploratory. And this limitation on the pretensions of speculative reason signals for Ricoeur a renunciation of Hegel and all other versions of systematic closure. The interpretation of being is always something begun, but never completed (Kearney 2004a:4).

This detour into the hermeneutic philosophy of Kearney's mentor helps us to gain a better understanding of what Kearney attempts – and does not attempt – through his hermeneutics of religion. Ricoeur has namely led us beyond both Husserl's understanding of meaning as some essence to be intuited and Kant's idea that it is a transcendental condition of possibility to be reflected upon, and has in effect freed the text from the circuit of internal reflection, opening it to "intersubjective horizons of language and history" that "involves a 'long' intersubjective detour through the sedimented horizons of history and tradition" (Kearney 2004a:4). Kearney's attention to the "second-order reference" that hermeneutics produces *in front of the text* – and he speaks about God to a postmodern world – precludes the idealist claim of occupying an absolute or total standpoint, and yet still involves *someone saying something to someone about something* (Kearney 2004a:4-5). Entering into his poetical exploration of biblical narratives, Kearney re-reads these ancient symbols in a way that produces new worlds of possibility.

4.2 Between ontology and eschatology

Since Kearney has repeatedly positioned himself as a philosopher of "middle ways" (cf., e.g. Gregor 2008:148), we should not be surprised that, in the postmodern attempt to conceptualise the divine, he also attempts to mediate between the extremes of, on the one hand, traditional onto-theological dogmatism (ontological objectivism), and, on the other hand, postmodern egalitarian dogmatism (relativistic subjectivism).[61]

Craig Nichols urges us to consider Kearney's eschatological view of transcendence – his onto-eschatological God-beyond-God – as itself possibilised by "the 'closing' of the Western metaphysical tradition (Hegel) and the consequential 'death' of the Judeo-Christian God as a result of this metaphysical closure (Nietzsche)". His essay explores the idea that, if it is the "life" and "death" of the God

[61] The phrasing of these polar opposites is borrowed from Nichol's extended review of *The God who may be* (2005:750-761), which is a modified version of a paper read at the 2002 meeting of the American Academy of Religion, Toronto, Canada, during a session dedicated to the discussion of Kearney's *The God who may be*. An extended version of the review was published in Manoussakis' edited volume, *After God: Richard Kearney and the religious turn in Continental philosophy* (Nichols 2006:111-126, 404-408).

of Western ontology,[62] and the "multivalent advent concepts, or in metaphysical parlance, *parousia* concepts of the Western tradition" that are the very *conditio sine qua non* of the present return to the God-who-may-be, then its "rebirth" must be retrieved through the God-who-was (Nichols 2006:112).[63] Indeed, the very fruits that, according to Kearney, would evidence a transformation toward "the good" has, Nichols insists,

> only recently been shaken from the tree of ontotheological symbolism *and* speculation – and we must not forget that the absolute of ontotheology and the symbolism that clothes this God are intimately intertwined and cannot be easily separated (and perhaps not at all) (2006:116).

But can the God-who-may-be really be considered an *onto*-eschatology, Nichols asks, without sufficiently problematizing the ontological nature of the claim that God should no longer be spoken of in ontological terms? For once again, the negation that God neither *is*, nor *is not*, itself by necessity "depends in its conceptual formulation upon the very ontology being negated" (Nichols 2006:116). And since Nichols judges Kearney's discourse to assume the Judeo-Christian God "in most of its facets *to be* not *dead*, but ready-to-hand for retrieval," he wonders whether the God of onto-theology is not, through this assumption, given "its due as the One, the *causa sui*, which itself *makes possible*, historically and hermeneutically, the God-who-may-be in advance, as it were" (2006:116). It is in response to these deliberations that Nichols offers his own

> hyperbolic metaphorical formulation of the God-who-may-be as a God whose possibility for meaningfulness arises as an *eschatological theogony* from out of the *chaos* (confusion *and* openness) "generated" by the deconstructive, or "forensic," analysis of the textual corpus, or "corpse," of the onto-theological God (Nichols 2006:116).

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[62] "The God of the philosophers has been crucified, if you will, because the promise of an eminent *parousia* (the promise of future revelation – the very essence of eschatology) was turned into an immanent appearance of the Godhead through the completion of an absolute system encompassing every last possibility of thought. Every possible meaning of 'the rational' – that is , every possibility for thought – was reduced to the actuality of a self-contained system – 'the real'" (Nichols 2006:121).

[63] "The fundamental clue, I suggest, for conceiving the future God-who-may-be must be sought, therefore, in a postmetaphysical conception of *parousia*, albeit one that gives due recognition to the necessary entanglement of such a concept with the ontological tradition that first gave birth to it. In other words, like the two conceptions of Christological presence identified in the New Testament – that is, the first and second advents of Christ – we must not lose sight of the fact that the dogmatic-mythopoetical God who died on the cross and the speculative-philosophical God who died in the absolute metaphysical system are inexorably, albeit opaquely, 'the Same.' And it is this *Same* God that is offered up for regeneration, for how could any finite god possibly outreach the absolute shadow cast by the 'last God'?" (Nichols 2006:122).

But his radical concept of "eschatological theogony" must in his assessment be both "tempered" and "given meaning" by a hermeneutical "reentering" and "reaffirming" of onto-theology itself.[64] His aim is thus to illustrate the severity of the abyss – the ontological void – that has opened beneath us with even greater clarity, and to amplify even more the tension between romantic and radical hermeneutics outlined by Kearney and mediated in his attempt at diacritical hermeneutics (see 4.1 above). In this context, Nichols points out three clarifications – which in my view constitute areas where Kearney's God-who-may-be project needs further refinement:

Firstly, he notes that Kearney's God-who-may-be should be understood less as a fixed standpoint between the "system-building venture of traditional metaphysics and the radical deconstructionism that has followed in its culmination and demise." It would be better to imagine his *via tertia* as an attempt to embrace both extremes hermeneutically, allowing the God-who-may-be to emerge "'in between' through its own revelatory capacity" (2006:117). Nichols fears that Kearney's close leaning to Levinas in defining the God-who-may-be (via the carving out of his phenomenology of the *persona*), may lead his readers away from the possibility of an ontological ground for thought and release them – contrary to Kearney's own intention – to an "aporetic play of fantasy" (2006:117).

Secondly, since *The God who may be* does not make a case for why the question of God should be revived in a postmodern world to begin with,[65] the God-who-may-be could very well be read as a mere "unifying Idea" providing a rallying point for ethical behaviour and poetic imaging. The embrace of such an idea would, Nichols insists, require finding a way to re-enter onto-theology. And while Kearney certainly does not simply want to leave it behind, he also does not specify just how we could re-enter the onto-theological tradition (2006:117):

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[64] Through his analysis of Hegel and Heidegger, Nichols maintains that there exists an identity, an "essential 'Sameness'" between the "ontotheological God-who-was (and who 'died')" and the "imminent God-who-may-be": "The two concepts are hermeneutically co-constitutive, whether conceived dogmatically as two advent concepts, or metaphysically/deconstructively as two ontological concepts" (Nichols 2005:125).

[65] This point is somewhat redundant when viewed against the fact that, against all expectation, religion seems to flourish in postmodernism. The question is therefore not whether the question of God should be revived, but rather which conception of God would challenge and confront the many dilemmas of our world.

> What ground, for example, other than a hermeneutically retrieved ontotheological one, can justify the idea that even though "God's future being is indeed conditional on our actions in history, God's infinite love is not. As a gift, God is *unconditional* giving." Such an ontological statement implying the *esse/essentia* of the God-who-is (cf. God as pure *esse* in Aquinas or as the *Unbedingt* in German idealism) can be guaranteed and justified only by first defining the relationship between the postmodern God-who-may-be and the traditional God-who-was. Furthermore, if the eschatological God of possibility is to obtain meaning as a *present* reality – a *real* hope – rather than an illusion receding endlessly into the future, the need for such a revelation must be established on the inability of human beings to take over God's job of establishing peace and justice in the world (Nichols 2006:117-118).[66]

Nichols' *third* invitation for greater clarity calls for a hermeneutical correlation between the "revelatory capacity of being/nothing and the symbolism of the divine." The hermeneutical relationship that Kearney attempts to build between *esse* and *posse*, or ontological objectivism and relativistic subjectivism, will ultimately be decided, Nichols believes, "within the horizon" of such a correlation (2006:118). He closes his essay on Kearney's God-who-may-be with the acknowledgement that the deconstructionists may be right in their insistence that we cannot *know* that God is good. "And yet," he cautions, "we must *believe* it or despair" – a necessity that returns us to "the orbit of traditional theological symbolism (mythopoeisis) and its necessary correlation with speculative doctrine (dogma)," and the resulting imperative of hermeneutic vigilance (Nichols 2006:126).

In his essay on Kearney's hermeneutics of otherness, Patrick Masterson also takes issue with Kearney's negative evaluation of onto-theology and argues that the phenomenological frame of reference within which Kearney affirms an "experiential affirmation of divine transcendence as eschatological possibility" must be both "qualified" and "complemented" by metaphysical considerations – be they of a theological or a philosophical nature (2008:247-265).[67] *The God who may be*

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[66] This is indeed a point that Kearney repeatedly implies, but does not work out philosophically.

[67] A similar argument is that of Asle Eikrem (2012:197-204), which we shall consider here only in passing. Eikrem questions whether Kearney's post-metaphysical conception of God by virtue of a hermeneutic procedure contributes any new insights to Systematic Theology. He seems to answer this question negatively, and criticises Kearney on three points: "First, is it shown that Kearney confuses the notions of being and reality as determinations of God. Secondly, Kearney is criticized for relying on a conceptual scheme that is unable to clarify the distinction between Creator and created being. It is argued that God is not a possibility and/or reality but the condition for anything is real/possible (*sic*). Thirdly, while Kearney's conception of God is fundamentally eschatological in character, he does not offer any reasons for construing Christian faith as faith in God as the fulfiller of true promises" (Eikrem 2012:204). To these points of criticism I would respond as follows: Eikrem's

presents itself as a post-metaphysical approach to philosophy of religion that distances itself from the "ontotheological corruption by Greek metaphysics of the dynamic biblical conception of God," and embraces instead a "distinctive conception of God as an eschatological, ethically inspiring possibility which, transcending our intrinsic resources, enables us to attain an otherwise unattainable kingdom of justice and love – and thereby make actual the unlimited divine possibility which is God" (Masterson 2008:258). But Masterson considers the (Heideggerean) judgement that Greek metaphysics has reduced the dynamic biblical God to the status of a highest being to be itself a reduction that fails to appreciate the extent to which the biblical conception of God as creator likewise impacted Greek metaphysics and its divine

reading of Kearney seems to be, at crucial points, rather one-sided. As such he leans heavily in his criticism on Kearney's reference to Cusanus and his notion of *possest*, while Kearney makes mention of Cusanus only within the context of a hermeneutic trajectory, or "counter-tradition of readings which he terms an onto-eschatological hermeneutics (2001:37, 103-105), and moreover states clearly that he borrows "liberally" from Cusanus in use of his term for denoting the God of the possible as the God of *posse* (2001:2). Kearney also reads Cusanus critically insofar as he lapses into mystical pantheism with its negative consequences for theodicy (2001:104-105). Furthermore, Eikrem's reading of God as the possibility of being and as being eschatological to the extent that God is primarily to be thought about as a deity that is still to come (2012:198) is also an unbalanced emphasis, for Kearney repeatedly qualifies Messianic time as that which crosses historical time, and clarifies that the Messiah has always already come and yet is still to arrive: "The *persona* is 'eternal' in its very unicity to the extent that it remains irreducible to the laws of a purely causal temporality. Its eschaton does not operate according to the objective laws of cause-effect or potency-act (though it does recognize that this is the chronological time in which human persons exists). Nor is it exhausted in the world-historical mutations of some teleological plan à la Hegel or Hartshorne. The reason that Paul says that the kingdom will come in a 'blink of an eye' is to signal the utterly unpredictable and unprogrammable character of its coming. That is how we should understand the paradoxical language of anterior-posteriority which Christ, and later Paul, use to describe the eschatological kingdom. The kingdom is already 'amongst us' even as it is still to come – like a lightning flash across the sky (Luke 17:20-25). Or as I might add, the eschatological *persona* is transfiguring always, in each moment, but always remains to be ultimately transfigured, at the end of time. Which is another way of saying, its temporality exceeds the limits of ordinary time" (Kearney 2001:45-46; cf. 2007a:53-54). But by far the most important shortcoming of Eikrem's discussion of Kearney's God-who-may-be is that he evaluates Kearney's phenomenological-hermeneutical approach according to the very metaphysical categories that Kearney seeks to avoid, at once determining the definitions of these categories (e.g. "possible," "real/reality," "being" [2012:200]) and then judging Kearney's hermeneutics of religion accordingly. He seems to forget what he himself points out: that, "for Kearney, the eschatological nature of God comes into view as that which God is *for finite beings* that live in historical time" (Eikrem 2012:199). Thus, the ideas that Eikrem judge very negatively, such as that "God cannot become fully God" (Kearney 2001:110) are always ideas that relate phenomenologically to God-for-humanity, and are not meant as ontological statements about God – an area into which Kearney does not venture. Finally, Eikrem's concern that the eschatological dimension presupposes that the promises of God be not empty, but that that which is hoped for must be "something more or less semantically and ontologically determined at present" (2012:203), seems unnecessary in light of Kearney's perpetual focus on hermeneutics. The kingdom that is promised at the eschaton is one whose contours are outlined by setting free of slaves (Exodus), the feeding of the hungry (Mt 25:31-46), the breaking of bread to the ignorant (Lk 24:13-35) and the granting of fish, in miraculous numbers, to the betrayer of love (Jn 21). Where Eikrem argues then, finally, that Kearney's "central concept of possibility can only clarified (*sic*) within the framework of a comprehensive theory of *reality*" (2012:204), I would propose that, instead of reading Kearney as opposed to metaphysics, one should rather interpret him as in dialogue with the inherited tradition, and as proposing indeed a new metaphysics between the dynamism of poetics and imagination.

unmoved mover. Since, under biblical influence, God came to be understood as the creator of "the very existence of all particular beings rather than their highest instance," it followed that God could not be simultaneously understood as

> an inhabitant of the order of contingent beings whose existence he originates and explains. As Aquinas remarked, he must rather "be understood as existing outside the order of beings, as a cause producing the whole of being and its differences". Viewed in this light, traditional theodicy can be seen, not as a forgetfulness of the ontological difference between Being and beings, but rather as the recovery, in its own terms, of this very distinction through a de-hellenization of Greek rationality (Masterson 2008:258).[68]

Laying out the two central claims of *The God who may be* as (1) God as possibility and (2) God is dependent on human cooperation in order to become God, Masterson contends that this way of speaking about God only has validity if Kearney's intention of a "phenomenological-hermeneutic retrieval" rather than "theological exegesis per se" is kept in mind and adhered to (2008:258-259; cf. Kearney 2001:39; 2007a:62).[69]

> This phenomenological perspective abstracts from theological claims and precludes traditional metaphysical ones. It is an account of the interaction between humankind and God described from the viewpoint of human religious attention. The God so described although undoubtedly portrayed as a "presence-

[68] Gericke elaborates as follows on Aquinas' interpretation of Ex 3:14: "Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 C.E.) was also influenced by Aristotle and interpreted the Vulgate's *sum qui sum* of this passage to mean that God is *ipsum esse subsistens* ('subsistent Being'). However, this reading of Exodus 3:14 is also Augustinian and Neo-Platonic. … Since YHWH does not receive existence from a different source than himself his existence is his essence, and it is he who gives existence (i.e., being) to all creation. Still, 'existence' is not understood to be univocal term, as though YHWH existed in the same way we do" (Gericke 2012:131).

[69] Cf. in this regard Kearney's emphasis of this point in his 2007 essay on the God-who-may-be: "God, if God exists, exists not just for God but for us. And the manner in which God comes to us, comes to mind, comes to be and to dwell as flesh amongst us, is deeply informed by the manner in which we think about God – in short, how we interpret, narrate and imagine God. This, I suggest, calls for a philosophical hermeneutics instructed by the various and essential ways in which God 'appears' to us in and through 'phenomena,' and 'signals' to us in and through 'signs.' It is my wager in this essay that one of the most telling ways in which the infinite comes to be experienced and imagined by finite minds is as *possibility* – that is, as *the ability to be*. Even, and especially, when such possibility seems impossible to us" (Kearney 2007a:51). Cf. also Asle Eikrem on this topic: "Let it be clear, from the beginning, that Kearney describes his contribution to the understanding of the notion of God as 'an attempt to chart a hermeneutic path of thinking' which seeks to provide conceptual resources for a rethinking of the notion of God. His style is literary and poetic rather than strictly theoretical, and it is not easy to say if he himself construes his hermeneutic as having a critical aspect. He labels his own way of doing philosophical theology as '[…] an onto-eschatological hermeneutics. Or more simply, a *poetics of the possible*" (2012:197; cf. Kearney 2001:1, 9, 7f.). Regardless of these parameters laid down by Kearney, Eikrem feels that "by virtue of his poetics of the possible being articulated in the indicative mode and producing several arguments against opposing positions, Kearney's book at least might be taken to be highly theory-laden (i.e. arguing for what is the case), and as such theoretically explorable" (2012:198).

> absence", as an "eschatological Otherness" transcending the limits of intentional consciousness, is nevertheless always envisaged in terms of God as he is for us. "God does not reveal himself, therefore, as an essence *in se* but as an I-Self for us. … This God of Mosaic manifestation cannot be God without relating to his other – humanity." (Masterson 2008:259; cf. Kearney 2001:29-30).

Kearney's phenomenological-hermeneutic approach means, firstly, that metaphysical considerations regarding God's independent existence is put in parenthesis, and, secondly, that it is only his religious significance for humankind that is considered. Once this is conceded, Masterson continues, the sense of speaking of God in terms of *posse*, possibilising eschaton, and finality of human aspiration (affirmed as "the not yet accomplished fulfilment of ethico-religious desire") becomes more apparent: "He is encountered as the 'impossible-possible', transcending yet transfiguring human capacity by enabling it to achieve a kingdom of justice and love beyond its own resources" (Masterson 2008:259). Unfolding as an ethical adventure of appeal and response (rather than a process of causality), and mediated when we respond to the eschatological appeal that the *persona* of the other person makes on us, we finally learn of our powerlessness over him or her and find our desire for his or her good initiated (Masterson 2008:259). Masterson comments:

> In all of this one has the impression of a demanding attempt to speak about divine transcendence in a way which, without betraying this transcendence, affirms that it impinges upon experience in a way which permits the legitimation of it by experience. One notes the tension of this requirement in the appeal to a "possible God" an "eschatological May-Be" experienced not as an actual object of intentional consciousness but as an enabling ethical invocation (Masterson 2008:260).

Bloechl, in his essay on *The God who may be*, helps the discussion with his careful description of Kearney's expression "may be" as neither a logical maybe, pointing to the fact that something may possibly exist, but also possibly may not, nor a Bergsonian "maybe" where a "past moment and condition in which an event that is now present was once only possible (Bloechl 2006: 129). Rather, he holds that it

> invokes a God who is not contained in being but is also not opposed to being, as if the other of being is simply non-being. The God who may be is a God who does exist and does enter human experience, but without submitting to

> comprehension in and through the concept of being, understood in its fully verbal or active sense (Bloechl 2006:129).[70]

In opposition to what Heidegger described as the God of "onto-theology," Kearney envisions an eschatological God of possibility who "overflows being and acting from beyond their reach, from a moment always yet to come" (Bloechl 2006:130). When it comes to this most distinctive of his insights regarding how God should be envisaged, Kearney has been most strikingly influenced by Heidegger. This Heideggerean inspiration lies in an analogy that Kearney draws between the priority Heidegger gives to the enabling possibility of "being as such" (*Sein als Sein*) and his own approach to God as the enabling possibility of human ethical behaviour rather than as "Pure Act" and "ultimate Cause" of everything (Masterson 2008:249). Kearney asks (in correspondence to Heidegger's "being as such" that "is the quiet power which enables [possibilizes] *Dasein*'s [human consciousness'] relationship to being – its essential openness to truth about beings and being as such") whether God might not also be envisaged as the "possibility which enables humans to exercise a religious and ethical response to an eschatolgical (*sic*) call to accomplish an historical purpose" (Masterson 2008:249). This analogy does not identify God with Heidegger's concept of Being, however, but rather recognises a "relationship of proportionality" between Being and philosophical concern on the one hand, and God and religious faith on the other (Masterson 2008:249-250, see 3.5.3 above).[71]

In keeping with Kearney's ethical concerns, this eschatological God must provide the possibility for intuition to "yield determined meaning" that results in ordered thought. For if we were to encounter the God who is truly God "directly and without possibility of confusion," such an encounter must always prepare the way for "sensitivity and care" towards the other (Bloechl 2006:130). And what is more: where

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[70] For Bloechl, this source of "an inevitable polemic against ontotheology" is remarkably close to Jean-Luc Marion's *God without Being* (1991), "where it is also said that 'God is, exists, and that is the least of things.' With this in mind, we ought to not mistake Marion's English title for unqualified allergy to being (as Kearney does at *GMB*, 31), but attend closely to the other possible translation of Marion's French title, *Dieu sans l'Être*, God without being It – that is, without being "God," or, more precisely, God without *having to be "God."* At this point, it is no longer clear just how much separates the God who *may* be from the God who *does not have* to be" (Bloechl 2006:129-130).

[71] Masterson (2008:250) quotes Kearney's explanation in his translation of Heidegger's *Letter on humanism*: "The analogy of proper proportionality recommended by Heidegger reads as follows: Dasein is to *Sein* what the religious questioner is to God. So that what we are exploring here is not – if we take Heidegger seriously – an identification of God and Being as *Vermogen/Posse* but rather a properly proportionate analogy between two post-metaphysical concepts of the possible, one applied to Being, the other applied to God. Such an analogy inevitably carries differences as well as similarities" (1995:61).

being is associated with act or actuality, and God with possibility, the "God who arrives from beyond and ahead of any act of comprehension must certainly strike us in surprise" (Bloechl 2006:130). A God who suddenly disturbs the relatively stable world of a subject who comprehends the things that present themselves to him/her as beings, and opens this world to that which comes from "beyond incorporation into the world of things," is truly eschatological. And since such a God "would thus absolve itself of any and every manifestation called divine – from any and every actualization, in other words – it would also be what Kearney means by possible, or *posse*" (Bloechl 2006:130). And through this surprise that becomes an occasion of revelation for both God (as eschatological and possible) and the human being (who may come to a deeper understanding of his or her own condition), the human person is turned towards the world, but – also and firstly – toward God (Bloechl 2006:131).

> This is where eschatology flows back into ethics, for the surprise that Kearney describes has now become a potentially transformative event. To know oneself as being-toward-God while, or perhaps even before, one is being-in-the-world is to be awakened from any thought of relating to oneself as the locus of what offers itself to comprehension; it is to be opened out into the world and to others met in the world, without immediately gathering them around oneself. It is to be liberated from a heavier materiality, though not from material concerns altogether. The surprise is grace, and grace comes as a surprise, Kearney sometimes says. This grace renders us sensitive to the other person beyond what may be contained in a material understanding. By grace, we are sensitive to the soul of the other person, to his or her *prosopon* (or *persona*). It is by this grace, therefore that love and justice become possible (Bloechl 2006:131).

Bloechl continues to explain how Kearney's reservations about being and act lead to a judgment about being (understood primarily as act) as being "invested with a fault that can only be amended or at least supplemented only from elsewhere or beyond," specifically by the mercy of God that enters into our world as a surprise (2006:132). Aligning being with act and actuality as opposed to possibility necessitates that the "grace by which the God who may be would enter human experience and history occurs from outside the domain of act and actuality," he argues. The surprise that is this grace can, moreover, only be interpreted once it has shown up in its effects – the nature of which Kearney would require must conform to love and justice (Bloechl 2006:132). Since *The God who may be* is not an attempt to illustrate the disposition and the capacities of the subject, it does not state whether

this implies that grace deserves only to be called grace "if those to whom it is offered actually recognize and act on it" (Bloechl 2006:132).

> A phenomenologist wants to know how it is – on what existential condition – that an event of grace goes beyond the surprise itself, into the possibility of that transformation. A good classically minded theologian thinking along the same line misses much talk of the grace that is infused. Whichever the case, the argument that passes over them moves toward the view that nature acts independently of any support from the divine, and the divine for its part intervenes in nature, if at all, to correct it – and not rather, as Augustine has preferred, to perfect it (Bloechl 2006:132).

This would imply, Bloechl asserts, that even the best-intentioned acts of love and justice stand – as acts – in need of "immediate correction by further events of grace which give rise to new acts of love and justice, and so on *ad aeternum* (2006:132). Furthermore, it would mean that being, understood primarily as act, is "invested with a fault that can be amended or at least supplemented only from elsewhere or beyond" (Bloechl 2006:132):

> Kearney thus stops short of saying that being is simply evil, but it is not clear that he can avoid concluding that it alone contains the *potential* for evil. This, too, will have been virtually assured the moment he aligned being with act and actuality, and indicted it with closure from the God who is possibility. If being is the source of any eventual idolatry, as forgetfulness of God, then being is also the more distant source of the dark things that may transpire in that forgetfulness. Left to itself, without surprises, being seems without any inclination to goodness (Bloechl 2006:132-133).

This brings us to the issue of theodicy, which is unfortunately never fully addressed by Kearney. That the God of onto-theology is a God drawn into being results in a God contaminated by the very source of the potential for evil. Appealing to eschatology, Kearney resorts to withdraw the God-who-may-be from the horizon of being as act, and likewise also withdraws this God from the potential for evil rooted – it appears – in our very existence (Bloechl 2006:133). In Kearney's view, then, the only access we have to justice is to open ourselves to the grace of the God of *posse* who enters our experience as a surprise. Contrary to the self-sufficient God of onto-theology, who is withdrawn, distant, and a God who does not partake of human suffering or joy, the God-who-may-be enters our experience "directly, touching us as we already are, here and now (Bloechl 2006:134). The self-

sufficiency – Aquinas' *actus purus* and Augustine's *ipsum esse* – of the onto-theological God also marks the failure of theodicy, Kearney asserts:

> (T)he God who is self-sufficient is easily a God who is therefore free of any lack and, in that sense, omnipotent. We are all familiar with the sort of question that this always raises: Is it still possible to attribute omnipotence and supreme goodness to one and the same God? Doubt about this is also doubt about the theodicy that is woven into the ontotheology that promotes a God who is pure act, and now at least we may recognize the precise site of their inner relation. When the concept of divine omnipotence is introduced, the God who is principle of all things becomes a God who is their origin. Under this second determination, *though not necessarily the first*, an understanding of God's being and action grounds an explanation of the being and action of all that is not God. Under this second determination, in other words, God is submitted to the principle of sufficient reason, and thus appears accountable for suffering and evil (Bloechl 2006:134).

It is certainly important for Kearney to rid God of the snares of theodicy – but in claiming that Kearney understands all being as evil, Bloechl probably stretches him too far. Let us turn briefly to Kearney's own treatment, albeit brief, of the problem of evil.

When it comes too Kearney's engagement with Nicholas of Cusa regarding the problem of evil, he takes two approaches. In *The God who may be*, he distances himself from the idea that all things are enfolded in the *possest*, or "Actualized-Possibility," for the inevitable lapse into theodicy that this would imply (cf. 3.6.1). For Cusanus, Actualized-Possibility (*possest*) "is all things and includes all things; for nothing which is not included in it either exists or is able to be made. Therefore, in it all things exist and have their movement and are what they are (regardless of what they are) (*id sunt quod sunt quicquid sunt*)" (Kearney 2001:104). Kearney does not go along with this statement, and especially the last qualifier "regardless of what they are," since this would imply that "anything and everything" that occurs in the created world – including suffering and evil – is constituted as part of the eternal Godhead. Instead of this "ostensible lapse into mystical pantheism," Kearney suggests the Augustinian argument of *privatio boni* – that evil is a lack or absence of God. For him, Cusanus allows *posse* to "collapse back into an ontological system of necessity," viewing God scholastically as "a being that cannot but exist as it exists qua uncaused self-existence." In this way, he holds, Cusanus forecloses the

possibility of "human freedom and creativity as a way of participating in the transfiguring play of creation (2001:104-105):

> The notion of the God-who-may-be I am endeavoring to adumbrate is an effort to re-inject an eschatological radicality into the idea of a possibilizing God. Hermeneutically retrieving Cusanus's idea of God as absolute possibility (*absoluta potentia*), I hold firm to the view that such potentia cannot be reduced to a totalizing necessity where every possible is ineluctably actualized from the beginning of time – history being reduced, by extention, to a slow-release "unfolding" of some pre-established plan. On the contrary, from an eschatological perspective, divinity is reconceived 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, but refusing this transfiguring task every time we do evil or injustice or commit ourselves to non-being (Kearney 2001:105).

From this argument, it follows not only that Kearney safeguards God from theodicy by claiming that evil is a *privatio boni* – a lack or absence of God, but also that he seems to conclude as much for being as such, including human being, in that he described acts of injustice and evil as a committal "non-being" (not that this implies that Kearney equates Being with God). In a shorter treatment of the theodicy problem in his 2007 essay "Re-imagining God," and also with reference to Cusanus, Kearney expounds Cusanus' diction that "God alone is all he is able to be" to be a final "no" to theodicy. This is so, because,

> (u)nlike the God of metaphysical omnipotence, underlying the perverse logic of theodicy which seeks to justify evil as part of the divine will, this notion of God as an "abling to be" (*posse* or *possest*) points in a radically different direction. Let us pause for a moment to unpack the phrase, "God is all he is able to be." Since God is all Good, God is not able to be non-good – that is, non-God – defective or evil. In other words, Gods is *not* omnipotent in the traditional metaphysical sense understood by Leibniz and Hegel. The Divine is not some being able to be all good *and* evil things. That is why God could not help Etty Hillesum and other victims of the Holocaust: God is not responsible for evil. And Hillesum understood this all too well when she turned the old hierarchies on their head and declared that it is *we* who must help God to be God (Kearney 2007a:55).

In this later essay, then, Kearney seems to bring together his choice to believe in a God that is good with his choice for Augustine's *privatio boni* to hermeneutically engage and reinterpret Cusanus' dictum to point to a God that is not responsible for evil. But nowhere in these brief considerations of theodicy do we find

Kearney attributing evil to being either, and Bloechl's argument from silence seems an unfair stretch.[72]

Towards the end of this section, we might return to Bloechl's careful distinction of what Kearney means to say when speaking of the eschatological "may be," and also what he does not mean (Bloechl 2006:129; cf. above). Kearney himself spells this out in his 2007 essay on the God-who-may-be, stating how important it is to be clear on what we mean when we speak of the possible. Rather than suggesting the possible as a "category of modal logic or metaphysical calculus" – according to which God would be more impossible than possible – Kearney reinterprets the possible

> as eschatological *posse*, from a postmetaphysical poetical perspective… (N)ow we are talking of a *second* possible (analogous to Ricoeur's "second naïveté") *beyond* the impossible, *otherwise* than impossible, *more* than impossible, at the *other side* of the old modal opposition between the possible and the impossible (Kearney 2007a:59).

Perhaps, now, to bring this section to a close, we might consider Kearney's own answer to the question of what would happen to the God of *posse* if humankind were to refuse the offer of his transfiguring grace and destroy the earth: "How can God's promise of a kingdom on earth be fulfilled if there is no earth to come back to? What might be said of the existence of God in such a scenario?" (Kearney 2007a:59).

Kearney notes, *firstly*, that even if we were to fail or frustrate the covenant "by denying its potential for historical fulfillment *on earth*, God would still, as eternally

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[72] This does not mean, however, that no questions remain regarding Kearney's choice to sketch God in terms that are so different from the metaphysical categories that explain all being and matter as having their dependence on God. An important matter to be addressed regarding Kearney's God-who-may-be, is whether a God of possibility is rendered a *contingent* God in relation to the world, over against the bulk of Christian interpretation imagining God as "absolute and necessary reality that creates contingent being" (Eikrem 2012:202). Is this distinctively Judeo-Christian perspective of God in the danger of being lost in a post-metaphysical re-imagination of God as related to finite being as infinite possibility through desire? In his generally negative appraisal of the God-who-may-be, Eikrem cautions that "God is not necessarily unrelated to the contingencies of human history by being construed as absolute or necessary being. On the contrary, it is precisely because God is so determined that God is related to human history in all of its contingent aspects as Creator (not itself created). God does not become less transcendent when conceived in terms of the created (immanence), but moves beyond Being by passing through it and in so doing becomes possibility, as Kearney argues. On the contrary, by virtue of being Creator God is ontologically related to everything possible and real … God is the absolute and necessary dimension of *Being* in and through which all being are fulfilled" (Eikrem 2012:202).

perduring, constant, faithful and attentive to us in each moment (present), live on an "an endless *promise* of love and justice. But the divine advent would nevertheless remain, in each moment, as an enduring "yes" in the face of our "no," even if it would be deprived of an historical, human future (2007a:59). *Secondly*, Kearney supposes that the divine *posse* will, as eternal memory (past), preserve any and all eschatological moments when the divine was incarnated in the world in acts of justice and love: "In kairological as opposed to merely chronological time, these instants would be eternally 'repeated' in divine remembrance" (2007a:60).[73] *Finally*, Kearney states that, "qua eternal *advent* (future), we might say that even though world annihilation would have deprived the divine *posse* of its future realization as a kingdom *come on earth*, we could not, by such an act of self-destruction, deprive God of the possibility of starting over again" (2007a:60).

The way that Kearney addresses these questions of human failure in some way brings together the questions we have been considering above. It points, namely, to a God who continues to exist as promise even in the face of human failure to respond, even in the face of such existence being denied its embodiment in being. This is perhaps exactly why Kearney names his way of thinking about God "onto-eschatology," for it is truly a mediation between ontology and eschatology as both terms are more traditionally understood. The *via tertia* that Kearney proposes here results in a transfiguration of both extremes: a new ontology and a new eschatology that are both re-imagined in terms of the other.

4.3 Between *persona*'s (transcendence) and persons (immanence): Kearney's phenomenology of otherness

Kearney's philosophy of religion is characterised by a hermeneutical understanding of phenomenology on the one hand, and the conviction that the possible occupies a place of primacy in relation to the actual on the other (Masterson 2008:251). In the idiom of postmodern philosophy, Kearney gives phenomenological expression to the

[73] For Kearney this idea indicated "a deeply eschatological character to the biblical injunction to 'remember' (*zakhor*). And this character is what translates God's mindfulness of creatures into a form of 'anticipatory memory' (the term is Herbert Marcuse's) which preserves a future for the past. As Psalm 105 tells us, 'He remembers forever his covenant / which he made binding for a thousand generations / which he entered into with Abraham' (vv. 8-9). In other words, the promise made at the beginning of time is kept by the divine *posse* as an "eternal" remembrance of both the historical past and present right up to the parousia" (Kearney 2007a:60).

relationship with the other as alien (*Strangers, Gods, and monsters*), and sketches God as the ultimate other (Hederman 2006:272). Ward aptly notes, with regard to one of Kearney's essays that advances the same basic arguments as *The God who may be*, that Kearney's association of eschatology with transfigurative possibility forms the crux of his explicitly theological reflections (2005:370). In fact, the way that Kearney himself expresses his intention in this essay, namely to explore the theme of transfiguration first in terms of a phenomenology of the *persona* (corresponding to chapter one of *The God who may be*), and second with reference to the transfiguration of Christ on Mt. Tabor (corresponding to chapter three), brings his intention with these different parts of his argument regarding the God of *posse* into sharper focus (cf. Kearney 2005c:370). He puts the way he understands the phenomenology of the *persona* as linked to transfiguration as follows:

> It is to behold the other as an icon for the passage of the infinite – while refusing to construe the infinite as some other being *hiding behind* the other. This is not Platonism. Nor Kantianism. *Persona* is neither Idea nor Noumenon. Neither pure form nor *Ding-an-sich*. Nor any other kind of transcendental signified for that matter. No. It is the in-finite other in the finite other person before me. In and through that person. And because there is no other to this in-finite other, bound to but irreducible to the empirical person, we refer to this *persona* as the sign of God. Not the other person as divine, mind you – that would be idolatry – but the divine in and through that person. The divine as trace, as icon, as visage, passage, voice – the otherness of the other in and through that flesh-and-blood person over there. Trans-cendence in and through, but not reducible to, immanence. We call it *trans-figuration*. Something we allow the *persona* to do to us. Something we suffer to be done unto us. Like the will of God. Or the eyes of the icon that look through us from beyond us (Kearney 2005c:377).

This leads Kearney to call for a "personalism of the icon against the cultism of the idol (2005c:377). It is via symbols – among other those of traditional religious narratives – that the "ineffible silence" surrounding the *persona* finds a voice in the form of myths, legends, epics, poems, histories, and doctrines (Nichols 2006:113). What Kearney calls the "counter-tradition" of eschatology reverses, he claims, onto-theology's preference for being over the good, for the "good of the *persona*" has priority over the being of the person and holds it to account (2005c:377). Kearney's innovative, eschatologically focused definition of the *persona* reverses ontology's history of "subordinating *otherness, plurality, difference*, and so on to *sameness, unity, identity*" (Nichols 2006:112). It is namely that irreducible part of human existence that "lies beyond all being and knowing as the final arbiter of the good, in

contrast to the sameness which unifies and identifies all ‘persons’ with one another” (Nichols 2006:112).

But Kearney’s description of *persona* and person is only one side of the coin, and an analysis of his phenomenology of otherness would be incomplete without considering his hermeneutical and phenomenological consideration of ‘Otherness’ in *Strangers, Gods, and monsters*. Here, Kearney reflects on various modalities of “otherness” that influence our viewpoint of both the world and ourselves (Masterson 2008:252). He considers those experiences of alterity that so transgress the familiar and so expose our existential insecurity and lack of self-sufficient autonomy that they manifest themselves as strangers, gods, and monsters – representing those experiences of extremity that drive us to the edge. Perceiving them as the threatening unfamiliar, we often ostracise them in fear and trembling, sometimes even envisaging them as “*both* monster *and* god, fascinating yet terrifying” (Masterson 2008:252).

> Beyond the reach of the omnidirectional human spotlight, whatever lurks in exterior darkness is the irrevocably other. This is unidentifiable alterity that remains uncategorizable and therefore is as likely to be an alien as an ally, a monster as a messenger, a stranger as a neighbor. Kearney is still confident that within the orbit of human interpretation and narrative imagination we can detect and discern the benevolence of such presence when it emanates from the divine (Hederman 2006:275).

Seeking to come to terms – philosophically – with the Self-Other relationship in the experience of radical alterity, Kearney argues that the challenge of the Other appearing as the Alien calls for a critical hermeneutical engagement of self-and-other, which in turns calls for a form of narrative interpretation capable of tracing interconnections between the poles of sameness and strangeness. This requires an account of the Other that steers clear of the extremes of radical transcendence and radical immanence – the first extreme rendering the Other “utterly unthinkable, anonymous and terrifying,” and the second extreme rendering the Other as “indistinguishable from a self-projection” (Masterson 2008:252). The complex figures of alterity encountered in the book sometimes blur the line between monster figures and images of deity, and are understood as expressions of the darker depths of the human psyche that, in their sublime manifestations, can be experienced as both horrifically unnatural and horrifically supernatural. For Rudolph Otto, the strange

sense of the monstrous pointed to the dark counterparts of the wholly transcendent Other, but for Freud they were only traces of repressed unconscious trauma (Masterson 2008:253). For Kearney these two perspectives represented by Otto and Freud – absolute transcendence or absolute immanence – must both be surpassed and hermeneutically negotiated. For Masterson, however, "this multi-dimensional intimation of otherness via unfamiliar, frightening images of strangers, gods and monsters," begs the question of whether the 'Other' is ultimately accessible to human consciousness after all:

> There is a dilemma which must be addressed. If the 'Other', whether envisaged as stranger, god, monster or alter ego, is co-relatively accessible to human consciousness, then its alleged radical otherness becomes compromised in favour of some version of the 'Same' variously understood as Logos, Substance, Reason, or Ego. If it is not so accessible, it escapes our ego-logical schemas and our attempts to contain it cognitively as humanly projected scapegoat, monster, deity or alter ego (Masterson 2008:253-254).

It is Kearney's position that we can mediate between absolute transcendence and absolute immanence by means of narrative imagination "which envisages the other as an ethical appeal which, precisely as other, is constitutive of my conscious self and not merely derived from or projected by it" (Masterson 2008:254). Kearney implies, in other words, that such a practical ethical approach to the other overcomes, at least to some extent, the antimonies that a purely cognitive perspective presents. This is because

> (a)ddressing the other from the perspective of the requirements of justice allows us to distinguish between enabling and illusory forms of alterity – between genuine threat and innocent scapegoat, between the self as ethically discerning agent and as phobic egoistical fantasist (Masterson 2008:254).[74]

Postmodern and deconstructionist philosophers are not so easily convinced, however, by Kearney's approach to the 'Other' via a hermeneutics of ethical discernment, and does not find this "practico-ethical resolution of the tension between immanence and transcendence, between the same and the other," satisfactory (Masterson 2008:254). Conceding that this approach to the other may be helpful in addressing the difficulty of the "same" and the "other" in interpersonal

[74] "Kearney develops various aspects of this hermeneutics of ethical discernment which enables him to judge between different kinds of selves and different kinds of others and to imaginatively narrate a 'hospitable' understanding of others which does them justice" (Masterson 2008:254).

human encounters, deconstructionists argue that, through its anodyne view of the other (which makes it ultimately agreeable to human ethical categories), it finds itself still in the traditional perspective of according "priority and ultimacy to a unified context of goodness, reason and sameness" (Masterson 2008:254):

> The postmodern approach refuses this attempt to disarm the disconcerting contemporary rediscovery of the radical character of otherness. It disputes the attempt to contain all discourse about the other within the confines of ethical discernment. The 'other' which resists our efforts to contain it – even ethically – is a more absolute otherness than that accommodated within our interpersonal relationships. "The absolute other is without name or face. It is, as Jack Caputo insists, 'an impossible, unimaginable, unforeseeable, un-believable, ab-solute surprise'."[75] The depth and independence of this otherness are more profound than those that are manifested in interpersonal relationships. It is an otherness of which we are, at best, a tributary rather than a comprehending counterpart. To be faithful to the import of this radical otherness is to acknowledge its incomprehensibility, to recognize that it absolves itself from and recedes behind every attempt to know it (Masterson 2008:254-255).

It is here that the deconstructionists bring us the question of God or *khora*. An emphasis on the uncontainable character of radical otherness brings us, beyond the limits of all particular experience, to the matter of primordial origin or foundation – that which "we encounter in fear and trembling when faced with the bottomless void of our existence" (Masterson 2008:255). And it is here, at the "foundational otherness" that underlie our existence and that can be imagined as either/or-both/and sublime deity or/and monstrous evil, that deconstructionists such as Derrida and Caputo pose their question of God and *khora* and indeed appear to "*opt* for the *khora* alternative of meaningless indeterminate chaos as the more likely face of radical otherness.[76]

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[75] Masterson here quotes Kearney (2003a:3).

[76] Masterson explains: "This issue of God or *khora*, of an otherness beyond being or before being, can be raised but cannot be answered – it exceeds the limits of our understanding and our discourse. However, while emphasizing the terrifying unknowability of this ultimate other, both Derrida and Caputo, perhaps appalled by the fearful experience of surpassing evil evidenced by abominations such as the Holocaust, tend to *opt* for the *khora* alternative of meaningless indeterminate chaos as the more likely face of radical otherness or at least as the more realistic option" (2008:255). He proceeds to quote from *Strangers, Gods and monsters*: "As one reads Caputo one cannot help surmising that for him *khora* is – at bottom and when all metaphysical illusions are stripped away – the way things are. It is a better, deeper way of viewing things than its theological or ontological rivals – God or *Es gibt*. For its advocates, *khora* seems, in the heel of the hunt, closer to the 'reality' of things than all non-*khora* alternatives. In this sense, yes, deconstruction does appear to take sides even when it is doing its most non-committal four step of neither/nor/both/and. Deconstruction makes a preferential option for *khora*" (Kearney 2003a:203).

Kearney's philosophy of religion, while it engages in the contemporary "pre-occupation" with otherness, profoundly disagrees with the deconstructionist interpretation that, ultimately, the face of otherness is entirely inaccessible to human consciousness – a claim which, in his view, leads to both intellectual and ethical paralysis (Masterson 2008:256). He would supplement the deconstructionist approach with a hermeneutics of practical wisdom that would enable us to discriminate between justice and injustice, monster and loving God:

> Prompted by a sensitive phenomenology of the self-other dyad, this hermeneutics involving narrative imagination and judgement suggests that the other is never absolutely transcendent nor absolutely immanent but somehow between the two. Others are intimately bound up with selves in various ways which constitute real ethical relationships between them. In this perspective there is no otherness so absolute as to be utterly inaccessible to consciousness (Masterson 2008:256).

This would mean – if applied to the biblical God – that the divine is "*in some way* present or quasi-present in its absence, and hence able to disclose itself" (Masterson 2008:256).[77] But what does this "*in some way*" mean, exactly? How precisely is a transcendent deity accessible to human consciousness? Kearney works out his unique answer to this question from a hermeneutical/phenomenological perspective in *The God who may be*, characteristically according the possible priority over speculative reason[78] through his re-imagination of a "vertically" transcendent actual supreme being as "a 'horizontally' beckoning possibility of ethical achievement (Masterson 2008:256). But the relationship that the God of *posse* has with the world is not that of teleology or latent purpose, but rather of eschatology and ethical invocation, for as a transfiguring possibility, God enables acts of justice and love beyond the intrinsic possibilities of the historically evolving world (Masterson 2008:257). Furthermore, just as the God of

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[77] As Kearney remarks in *Strangers, Gods and monsters*: "I believe such indistinction between God and horror poses a real problem for ethical judgement. For how can we tell the difference between (1) a God of justice, memory and promise and (2) the sheer indifference of the *il y a*, unless the divine is *in some way* present or quasi-present in its absence, and so able to disclose itself *as* a God of justice, memory and promise? In short, can a deity be narratively recorded and remembered in scriptures, parables and psalms if it is not *somehow* capable of being *seen* (e.g. as a burning bush), *heard* (e.g. as a call to freedom) and *believed* (e.g. as a promise of the kingdom)?" (2003a:107).

[78] Masterson notes the motivation behind this re-imagination of God as possibility: "This commitment to considering God in terms of possibility rather than actuality is motivated in part by a rejection of a metaphysical conception of God – a rejection of what has been called, after Heidegger, 'onto-theology', namely the tendency 'to reify God by reducing Him to a being (*Seinde*) – albeit the highest, first and most indeterminate of all beings" (2008:257).

posse has a bearing on human history, Kearney controversially claims that human history has a comparable bearing upon God as well and must "help" God to become God by remaining open to loving possible and making the impossible more and more possible through our actions in each concrete moment (Masterson 2008:257). Kearney gives content to the "*in some way*" in which the "Other" and the "Same," God and humankind, and transcendence and immanence can be related by integrating them by means of his ethical concerns which also lie at the heart of his resistance against the deconstructionist emphasis on radical alterity (Masterson 2008:258).

But Masterson is critical of Kearney's enthusiasm, and doubts whether it is satisfactory to provide a legitimation for an experiential affirmation of divine transcendence within a phenomenological frame of reference. He is not convinced that divine transcendence can be at once unbounded by, but yet situated within, experience – a doubt which brings him to his argument that, however compatible with religious sentiment, Kearney's type of thinking should be "philosophically repositioned by more metaphysical considerations" (Masterson 2008:260). Masterson approves of the phenomenological approach, but claims that one can go further than talking about God "as though what is meant by 'God' involves necessarily and irreducibly his relationship to us as the 'possible' or not yet achieved goal of our ethical and religious desire." For such a God "appears inextricably, in however privileged transcendent or eschatological terms, as God for humanity – a co-relative component with human subjectivity, of human experience" (Masterson 2008:260). Should Kearney's discourse not be qualified by metaphysical considerations, Masterson sees a dilemma resulting that will involve either idolatry or atheism:

> For a God inextricably inscribed in human experience is inextricably a human god, and a God no so inscribed must ultimately not even be a possibility from a strictly phenomenological viewpoint. On the one hand, the relative dependence of God, described in phenomenological terms as a possibility co-relative to human desire (rather than in terms of his independently possessed actual existence – his *esse*) appears to compromise his alleged radical transcendence. On the other hand, insistence on the radical alterity of his transcendence calls in question the claim that he is most appropriately spoken of as "possibility" or "the God Who May Be", which refers inextricably to his reality for mankind (Masterson 2008:260).

Masterson's proposal for avoiding this impasse involves appreciating the fact that "the transcendence which is apprehended or given in experience cannot be phenomenologically legitimated as an experience, however indistinct or eschatological, of divine transcendence" (2006:260-261). For this reason, admitting that phenomenology represents a necessary and appropriate approach to the "pre-philosophical lived experience of divine transcendence," Masterson argues that it cannot be sufficient because transcendence that is phenomenologically given is by its very nature a transcendence that is accessible to "my disclosing capacity for experience," and as such is a transcendence that is relativized as "transcendence-for-humans" (2006:261).[79] It is because of this claim that an experientially inscribed transcendence, "however numinous, 'other', absent, or eschatological," can never be phenomenologically legitimated as an experience of divine transcendence that Masterson argues for a different approach to such experienced transcendence which will consider the experience as significant, even if it cannot be phenomenologically legitimated:

> It will ask questions not just of meaning, but of existence and truth. It will ask for the conditions of the possibility of this experience of transcendence – an experience which appears to orientate our thought beyond the limits of experience. It will ask whether beyond the intrinsic conditions of the experience anything exists independently which somehow corresponds to what is intimated, however inadequately, by the phenomenologically describable experience. It will address the question "Might God be the source of our experience of transcendence?" – a question which, we have argued, cannot itself be answered phenomenologically. For God, as such, is not a phenomenological "given" – neither psychologically, socially, culturally or otherwise (Masterson 2008:261).

The question whether God is the source of our experiences of transcendence can for Masterson be addressed either theologically or philosophically. A *theological* approach would be "based upon faith in a divine revelation accepted as such," for while faith in the Judeo-Christian God of salvation history does not affirm divine transcendence phenomenologically, it legitimises the experienced salvation history for the believer as "a genuinely revealing trace of what exceeds this-worldly human

[79] Masterson explains: "For in order to claim that the affirmed transcendence is phenomenologically justified because given experientially, rather than simply postulated, one must affirm a pole of conscious subjectivity which allows or enables the phenomenon to appear as bearing the meaning which is has. … An autonomously transcendent God 'whom no man hath seen at any time' cannot be so accessible – cannot be coordinated with the bi-polar (noesis-noema or subject-object) conditions of phenomenologically given experience" (2008:261).

experience (2008:261). On the other hand, a *philosophical* approach should, in Masterson's view, "proceed by way of indirect metaphysical analysis of the implications of this experience to arrive finally at a non-experiential affirmation of God as its ultimate real foundation" (2008:262). This means that the phenomenological intimation of transcendence must be illustrated as "existentially disquieting," "theoretically unintelligible" and/or "contradictory unless it is understood to be a created trace or likeness of God himself" (Masterson 2008:262). Also, such a metaphysical argument claims that there is no experience of God himself – not even if this experience of God be described as "indistinct" (such as in Kearney's approach that claims that transcendence is *somehow* inscribed in experience). "Rather, his existence is only *implicit* in any experience and must be made non-experientially explicit by way of indirect metaphysical argument"[80] – the possibility or impossibility of which "cannot be determined a priori but only in the light of its success or otherwise" (Masterson 2008:262). While Masterson is positive about Kearney's attempt to "rescue discourse about ultimate transcendence or 'Otherness' from the nihilistic implications of deconstructionist insistence on its terrifying and radical unknowability," he cautions that Kearney

> seeks to hermeneutically navigate a conscious reconciliation of transcendence and immanence, of God and man, by way of a phenomenological account of ethical openness in interpersonal relationships to a divine transfiguring possibility. However, these ciphers of divine transcendence, disclosed in ethical endeavour, are not an indistinct awareness or "presence through absence" of divine transcendence. Here it seems to me, the deconstructionists are right. Radical "Otherness", or the utterly transcendent God, is not accessible phenomenologically and if this is the only access to divine transcendence then it is indeed unknowable. My suggestion is that the ethical ciphers of transcendence so engagingly delineated by Kearney can be deciphered by metaphysical argument which enables a non-experiential but informative affirmation of a radically transcendent God (Masterson 2008:263).

But Masterson's view of phenomenology is a narrow one that seems hurdled by commitments to epistemology and ontology. Yet the question that preoccupies

[80] Masterson explains: "Thus one would be misled if one discerned a vague indistinct experience of God as Infinite Truth and Goodness in our seemingly limitless desire for knowledge and happiness. At most one might say that in such experience God is known and desired *implicitly*. But what is implicit is known to be implicit only by being made explicit and this cannot be accomplished by any direct insight or immediate inference from the given of experience but only, if at all, indirectly by causal metaphysical argument. The development of such argument involves a progressive transition from what is prior according to our human experience to what is prior in an absolute sense, i.e. a transition from the *prius quoad nos* to the *prius quoad se*" (2008:262).

phenomenology today is less "the question of the *that* or the *what* than the *how*" (Hart 2009:714):

> Being never merely is; there are always modes in which it is being intended. By performing reductions from diverse angles, we pass from being to the phenomenon, the self-showing of something, and, having been enabled to reflect on the movements of our consciousness, we can pay heed to the precise manner in which the phenomenon is actually given to us: its phenomenality. How the phenomenon is disclosed will depend on the intentional horizons in which it is concretely embedded, and that will turn on the sort of phenomenon it is (Hart 2009:714).

Like Husserl, Masterson would put divine transcendence beyond the reach of phenomenological investigation. Hart questions this sort of prioritising of phenomenology as the preferred method for doing philosophy of religion, while denying that there is any theology involved. He suggests that it may be helpful to think of phenomenology as a means of exploring "revelation as well as manifestation, the style of attention we call prayer, especially contemplative prayer, as well as the attention we call the converted gaze" (2009:715). In his opinion, when properly understood, phenomenology is strictly neutral to all academic disciplines, so that it would be

> of as much help in thinking theologically as it is in thinking philosophically. If we must bracket God as Creator and Judge, so too we must bracket the existence of many other things about which philosophy talks. We are in need of a critical examination of what "theology" means for those philosophers who endorse phenomenology as working within the limits of philosophy alone and whether it is at all justified. My suspicion is that it will usually be a caricature at best (Hart 2009:715).

Following in the footpaths of Heidegger, Levinas, Scheler, and Bergson, phenomenology today has broadened its playfield to include affective and axiological concerns along with epistemological ones, and to address counter-intentionality just as carefully as intentionality (Hart 2009:716).[81] Phenomenology has also come to acknowledge

[81] Hart illustrates: "Feeling – fatigue or shame, for example – does not blur our being in the world but rather indicates our *Befindlichkeit*, the manner in which we are in the world at a particular time. This realization has implications for the prizing of epistemology in Husserl's philosophy. In devoting myself to the intentionality of feeling, I may be able to show that intentionality is not always a matter of knowing. Yet meaning may arise not only in emotion (let alone acts of cognition), but also in the

> the priority of intuition with respect to intentionality in a wide range of phenomena, and to asterisk the truth that phenomenality has no formal conditions to satisfy. Horizons of intentionality are breached more often than we have thought, and we need to acknowledge that phenomenality has the power to surprise us, and indeed that surprise is a not uncommon response to phenomenality (Hart 2009:716).

Most importantly, with respect to Masterson's criticism of Kearney's phenomenology of religion, Hart points out that phenomenology, by detailing the diverse ways in which phenomena become present to us – ways "that exceed the familiar triad of epistemic, ontic, and ontological presence – has moved beyond the epistemological prejudice that the "phenomenon must give itself to us by way of representation" (2009:717). And since divine transcendence means that God is not constrained by any mode of self-revelation or structure of intentionality, it follows that God can reveal himself in anticipation and imagination as much as in perception (Hart 2009:722). Phenomenology has now become wider in its scope and application, so that the spiritual life need no longer to be restricted to the same protocols and requirements of evidence required of physical and intellectual objects (Hart 2009:724).

4.4 "*Prosopon par excellence*": the Christology of *The God who may be*

The rise of the God-who-may-be is occasioned, as we have seen, by the "death of the God who is *actus purus* and *ipsum esse* at the hands of a philosophical critique of ontotheology and an existential revolt against theodicy" (Bloechl 2006:134). In Kearney's view, this eschatological approach to transcendence is not only a better way to conceive of God, but also leads to greater intimacy with God. Significantly, also, while it may be true that the "surprise of grace" (by which the God of *posse* enters into being without having to submit to being, and possibilises acts of love and justice in which the other is respected and served as *persona*) for reasons essential to its very definition, defies typical hermeneutical investigations, Kearney still goes so far as to locate its privileged revelation in Jesus Christ, the "*prosopon par excellence*" (Kearney 2001:40; Bloechl 2006:135):

> It is in and through Jesus, he says, that we may catch sight of the spiritual dimension of a humanity thus irreducible to physical and material concerns – the

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breakdown of representation as such and that happens, Lévinas argues, in the very constitution of intersubjectivity…" (Hart 2009:716).

> dimension that opens each of us to his or her own future beyond the limits of this world. In this Jesus, we are opened "*to the father through the features of man's face*" (Bloechl 2006:135, citing Kearney 2001:40).

But, if the texts chosen for investigation in *The God who may be* can be taken as indication, this is the Jesus not necessarily of the passion and resurrection, but of the transfiguration – leading Bloechl to conclude that "Kearney's Christology … does not need Jesus to have actually died in order to fulfill its role within his eschatology" (2006:135). Even if the possibility of justice has been opened by the surprising approach of the grace of God, justice itself still depends completely on us. And while this fact brings Kearney especially close to Levinas, for whom "ethical commitment constitutes the labor of redeeming creation," we might be stretching the point too far if we labelled Kearney's Christology as "fundamentally ethical," Bloechl feels (2006:135). But, he goes on, Kearney's deliberations on the transfiguration do suggest that he considers the unique revelation of Jesus to open us, first and foremost, "directly to sensitivity to the properly human nature of each and all of us as *prosopon*" – a focus that is decisively different from much of the Christian tradition, emphasising that the compassionate movement towards the other is occasioned by the cultivation of humility – the desire for which simultaneously exhibits the work of grace in us, as well as the significance of the kenotic humility of Christ as providing the means for such humility to be cultivated in us (Bloechl 2006:136).

The difference in Christologies is significant, with the more classical position reserving a unique messianic role for Jesus, and Kearny, on the other hand, envisioning him, in Bloechl's view, as a unique example "who invites, or at least makes possible, a role for each of us that might instead, in his philosophy, be called messianic" (2006:136). This stops short of Levinas' argument that those of us who have learned what it means to be truly human may bring this good news to others – something that goes against the natural tendency of our being which is not inclined to goodness. But Bloechl asks whether the proposition that a human may respond to the "surprise of grace" with acts of justice and love, does not cast doubt on the claim that being is completely without goodness and turned from God (2006:136; cf. this point addressed under 4.2). His point is an important one:

> Even if being does *incline to* this condition, the sheer notion that it might reform itself, albeit with important help, supposes that a certain help has already come

> to it. And this would mean, as a matter specifically for metaphysics, reconsidering the idea that being, as act and actuality, is necessarily without a positive relation to God and goodness. As a matter for Christian theology, it suggests the thought, anything but new, of a first and unique messiah who has already saved being from death and darkness. What the classical theologian therefore misses most is an account of the Christ of sacrament, where all of this is anchored at the heart of Christian thought (Bloechl 2006:136).

Bloechl claims that only a Christianity unfamiliar with the sacramental Christ that has already come to us in our fallenness "could ever find itself calling on a God who needs our help to enter being and transform it (2006:137). But Bloechl reads far too much into Kearney when it comes to his Christology. Considering the important role that the transfiguration and the post-paschal resurrection narratives play in *The God who may be*, and the function of the transfiguration in the gospel narratives as foreshadowing the resurrection (Myburgh, 2012), one would encounter significant hermeneutical hurdles when trying to read the transfigured "*prosopon par excellence*" separately from the crucified Jesus and the risen Christ. Secondly, the type of Christology – or one should say soteriology – Bloechl seems to advance represents a rather narrow interpretation of the paschal events. In its place, one could outline a Christology in which the crucifixion of Jesus, read dialectically with the resurrection, has a constitutive function (Bloechl accuses Kearney's Christology of being illustrative). And while it is admittedly true that Kearney does not include such arguments in *The God who may be*, there also seems to be nothing in his work that would hinder one hermeneutically from working out such a Christology within the playfield of the God of *posse* – one that describes the passion of Christ as a transfiguring event *par excellence*.

Bloechl's contentions regarding Kearney's Christology also seems far-stretched in view of Kearney's repetitive reference to the breaking of the bread and sharing of the wine. The first context in which Kearney turns to this topic is in his discussion of the post-paschal resurrection narratives (2001:49-52), where again and again Jesus is only recognised upon providing a meal for and/or sharing it with his followers (Lk 24:13-35; 24:35-48; Jn 21:1-14). The reference of these stories back to the last meal Jesus shared with his disciples before his passion is unmistakable, and again sketches the crucifixion and resurrection as standing in an unmistakably dialectic relationship. The fact that Kearney chooses (as some of the narratives of

the Judeo-Christian tradition that he will hermeneutically revisit to re-imagine the God-who-may-be) both the transfiguration (pre-figuring the resurrection), as well as the resurrection narratives, calling to mind the last paschal meal before Jesus' suffering, makes it hermeneutically untenable to suppose that the crucifixion and resurrection is of no consequence for Kearney's Christology, as Bloechl does. Moreover, Kearney further expounds the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the wine in his 2007 essay, "Re-imagining God." Here, within the context of the "Palestinian formula" of eschatological memory (*eis anamnēsin*),[82] Kearney interprets the Eucharist as a petition for repetition that "remembers the Messiah":

> The notion of eschatological memory is, as noted, also frequently witnessed in New Testament literature where it takes the form of a double "repetition" – looking to past and future simultaneously. In the Eucharistic formula – "do this in remembrance of me, *eis tēn emēn anamnēsin*" (Luke 22:19 = 1 Corinthians 11:24) – the proper translation of the repetition-injunction, in keeping with the Palestinian memorial formula, is this: "Do this so that God may remember me." The appeal to divine memory during the Eucharistic sharing of bread and wine may be seen accordingly as an echo of the third benediction of the grace after Passover meal, which asks *God to remember the Messiah* – a benediction which is followed in turn with a petition for "the remembrance of all thy people": The remembrance of past suffering is thus tied to the hope for the advent of the parousia – for Jews the entry of the Messiah to Jerusalem; for Christians the return of Christ on the last day. The petition for repetition – in the *kairological* rather than *chronological* sense – may be translated as: "God remembers the Messiah in that he causes the kingdom to break in by the parousia" (Kearney 2007a:61).

Paul's version of the Eucharistic remembrance formula[83] further alludes to such a "bilateral temporality whereby divine memory recalls the *past as future*"

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[82] Kearney describes the Palestinian memorial formula as prevalent in late Jewish and early Christian literature, and as finding some of its earliest expressions in Ps 112 (v. 6, "For the righteous will never be moved; they will be remembered forever") and Pss 37 and 69, "where the memory of God refers not just to creatures remembering their Creator in rituals and liturgies, but also to the Creator recalling creatures, making the past present before God in a sort of eternal re-presentation which endures into the future and beyond. Likewise in Ecclesiasticus we find the repeated prayer that God might mercifully remember his children. As the biblical commentator, Joachim Jeremias, observes, such remembrance is an 'effecting and creating event which is constantly fulfilling the eschatological covenant promise… When the sinner "is not to be remembered" at the resurrection, this means that he will have no part in it (Ps. Sol. 3.11). And when God no longer remembers sin, he forgets it (Jer. 31.34; Heb. 8.12; 10.17), this means that he forgives it. God's remembrance is always an action in mercy or judgment'" (Kearney 2007a:61).

[83] 1 Cor 11:23-26: "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." **For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you**

(Kearney 2007a:61). In light of the fact that the subjunctive use of ἄχρις in the New Testament often points to the arrival of the eschaton (cf. Rom 11:25; 1 Cor 15:26, Lk 21:24), the crucial phrase "until he comes" may thus be read, Kearney asserts, "in light of the liturgical *maranatha* (Come, Lord!) invoked by the faithful in their prayers for the coming of God" (Kearney 2007a:61-62). Rather than understanding and remembering the death of God as a mere historical event of the past, the remembrance formula celebrates it as an eschatological advent that inaugurates a new covenant (Kearney 2007a:61-62). Here, Kearney references Joachim Jeremias' work on the eucharistic formula, and notes that within this light, one can begin to understand why Luke wrote of the mealtimes of the earliest Christian communities as characterised by an "eschatological jubilation and 'gladness' (*agalliasis*)" (2007a:62):

> This proclamation expresses the vicarious death of Jesus as the beginning of the salvation time and prays for the coming of the consummation. As often as the death of the Lord is proclaimed at the Lord's supper, and the *maranatha* rises upwards, God is reminded of the unfulfilled climax of the work of salvation until [the goal is reached, that] he comes. Paul has therefore understood the *anamnēsis* as the eschatological remembrance of God that is to be realized in the *parousia* (Jeremias 1977:253).

Kearney concludes:

> In sum, the close rapport between the Eucharistic request for repetition and the Passover ritual, suggest that for both Judaism and Christianity the Kingdom advent is construed as a *retrieval-forward of the past as future*. The remembrance formula might be interpreted accordingly as something like this: "Keep gathering together in remembrance of me so that I will remember you by keeping my promise to bring about the consummation of love, justice and joy in the parousia. Help me to be God!" Or as the Coptic version of the formula goes: "May the Lord come… If any man is holy, let him come. *Maranatha*. Amen" (2007s:62).

It may be true that Kearney doesn't work out a Christology that explicates the suffering of Christ as constitutive to the salvation history of God. But based on the

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proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (Ἐγὼ γὰρ παρέλαβον ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου, ὃ καὶ παρέδωκα ὑμῖν, ὅτι ὁ κύριος Ἰησοῦς ἐν τῇ νυκτὶ ᾗ παρεδίδετο ἔλαβεν ἄρτον καὶ εὐχαριστήσας ἔκλασεν καὶ εἶπεν, Τοῦτό μού ἐστιν τὸ σῶμα τὸ ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν· τοῦτο ποιεῖτε εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν. ὡσαύτως καὶ τὸ ποτήριον μετὰ τὸ δειπνῆσαι λέγων, Τοῦτο τὸ ποτήριον ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ ἐμῷ αἵματι· τοῦτο ποιεῖτε, ὁσάκις ἐὰν πίνητε, εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν. **ὁσάκις γὰρ ἐὰν ἐσθίητε τὸν ἄρτον τοῦτον καὶ τὸ ποτήριον πίνητε, τὸν θάνατον τοῦ κυρίου καταγγέλλετε ἄχρις οὗ ἔλθῃ**).

above references that Kearney does make, as well as the hermeneutic implications of his readings of the transfiguration and resurrection narratives, I would contend that he has provided theologians with much to make such a contribution to his God of *posse*. This is, after all, what he invites theologians to do on numerous occasions: to contribute their expertise to the dialogue.

4.5 A God beyond every idol – but still a God at all? Kearney and religious discourse

Nichols is right in pointing out the positive contribution that Kearney's God-who-may-be project makes to the conversation regarding the need for a "postmodern revitalisation" of religious symbolism (2005:750). The controversial question here always remains whether we must only rid our religion of its persistent idols, or whether it must be religion itself, as a practice of idolatry, that we dispose of: "Do the fires of suspicion only purify, or do they consume everything that touches them?" (Bloechl 2006:127). With some claiming that the refusal of totality in our God-talk simultaneously affirms infinity, and indeed that "faith in the true God would be the source of ceaseless revolution," much of contemporary philosophy of religion gathers in one of either two camps: those who affirm the "glory of a God beyond every idol," or those who demand "a demonstration of the mercy and justice of a God opposed to every totality" (Bloechl 2006:128). In *The God who may be*, Kearney approaches this debate – traditionally waged unsatisfactorily with "fragmented" and "incomplete" arguments – from the perspective of hermeneutics (Bloechl 2006:128). And indeed his founding principle appears to be ethical, as Bloechl deduces from his commitment to love and justice above any specific religious metaphor and/or tradition – should he have to choose:

> Religiously, I would say that if I hail from a Catholic tradition, it is with this proviso: where Catholicism offends love and justice, I prefer to call myself a Judeo-Christian theist; and where this tradition so offends, I prefer to call myself religious in the sense of seeking God in a way that neither excludes other religions nor purports to possess the final truth. And where the religious so offends, I would call myself a seeker of love and justice *tout court*" (Kearney 2001:5-6).

This leads Bloechl to the conclusion that the core of Kearney's thought regarding the God-who-may-be – "the thought of a God who is possibility exceeding

actuality, and of a soul defined by its own futurity" – could exist not only separately from Judeo-Christian theism, but could even be "at best indifferent, and perhaps even alien, to the mainstream commitment to worship" (2006:128). Bloechl is not wrong in identifying this possibility, and his pointing out of this hermeneutical shortcoming in *The God who may be* is indeed valuable. But his concern over the matter seems a little overstated. In the section of the introduction where the quote is taken from, which Bloechl interprets as a "ready criticism of the traditions" (2006:128), Kearney is responding to the standard hermeneutical question: *D'où parlez vous?* ("Where do you speak from?") (Kearney 2001:5-6). Hermeneutically, the God-who-may-be is far too dependent on the Judeo-Christian tradition – and even, as Nichols shows, on the onto-theological God (2006:111-126) – to easily become so removed from mainstream doctrine and worship to be called "indifferent" or "alien" to it. Kearney merely aims here at putting the cards of his own religious commitment on the table, and not to lay an ethical foundation at the cost of religious commitment for his God-who-may-be project. The same goes for Bloechl's concern, based on the same quote by Kearney, that "whatever religion still animates the choice for love and justice against all else has no need to express itself in prayer and worship." While Kearney's God-who-may-be project certainly rests on an ethical principle, its deeper ground rests in eschatology (as Bloechl rightly observes), a fact that prevents his reflections from resulting in a mere ethical monotheism. Kearney's God is significantly more that someone like Herman Cohen's "guarantor of an eternal world":

> The God who is surplus of possibility over actuality – or, as Kearney prefers, of *posse* over *esse* – is a God who constantly pours into actuality from beyond, disturbing the tendency of acts to seek conclusion and thus, at least by design, stability. This is a God who both transcends all the names and images by which we humans reach toward God from within this world, and transforms consciousness otherwise inclined to accept closure in its own world; it is a God who refuses every idol and a God who defies every totality precisely by coming to us from outside and, in that sense, ahead of them. … In *The God Who May Be*, eschatology supplants ontology just as surely as ethics supplants politics. The God who is *posse* calls each of us out of immersion in this world, to awareness of a futurity that the time of being and act can never contain (Bloechl 2006:129).

The question that Bloechl addresses can therefore not be addressed without a thorough consideration of Kearney's hermeneutics (see. 4.1). We saw in chapter

three that Kearney distanced himself from deconstruction's view of the play of the impossible-possible as a structure that pertains to experience in general, and claimed instead that it marks a specifically religious experience of God, and that this difference moves beyond mere language games to reference itself. While the God-who-may-be certainly escapes all totalisation, and can never be contained in presence but rather moves in and out of historical time from beyond time, and in and through being from beyond being, Kearney certainly does not envision a God that is so far beyond our experience that he becomes of no consequence at all, or that he remains out of our reach hermeneutically. For such a God could be as much a tyrant as he could be love, but Kearney clearly and repeatedly states that he takes the goodness of God as a basic point of departure.

4.6 Between poetics and ethics: imagining possible worlds

With dialogue, dialectic and hermeneutical reappropriation being some of Kearney's dominant philosophical concerns, they have provided landmarks for his thinking regarding imagination and its relation to ethics and poetics (Ward 2005:369). Having illustrated the intellectual bankruptcy of certain postmodern conceptualisations of the imagination, Kearney's work on the topic between 1988 and 1995 has emphasised "the creative potential of imagining other possible worlds," and argued that the "possibility of reconciling ethics and poetics lies within the faculty of the imagination," and that it is "at this point that theological investigations begin" (Ward 2005:369-370). Masterson goes so far as to identify the primary intuition of Kearney's thought as "his commitment to the primacy of the possible over the actual, of imagination over speculative reason" (2008:248):

> From his earliest philosophical reflections his attention was drawn to a study of the imaginable rather than the scientifically knowable. Which is not to say that he is more interested in flights of fancy than reality. For he is convinced that it is the imagination, properly exercised, which can provide us with the most profound insight into reality. The imagination is more concerned with what is 'possible' than with the given 'actual' and, unlike Aristotle, he believes that possibility is a more fundamental dimension of being than what is simply actual (Masterson 2008:148).

Having explored the theological imagination, especially in its Semitic manifestations, in the beginning of *The wake of the imagination* (1988), Kearney advances his account of imagination as a corrective to the more traditional view of

the imagination "as producing inner sensations which mirror or combine *in* consciousness faded copies of perceptions of a pre-given order of being" (Masterson 2008:250). He proposes, instead, a view of imagination as "a power to fashion truth – an intentional act *of* consciousness which intuits and constitutes meaning":

> Adopting this new creative 'intentional' understanding of imagination, pioneered and developed by early phenomenologists such as Husserl, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, Kearney, following Ricoeur, advocates a hermeneutical turn in the phenomenological enterprise[84] – one that moves the emphasis from description to interpretation. It is one which considers the imagination less in terms of 'vision' than in terms of 'language' (Masterson 2008:250).

Kearney's interest lies in what Ricoeur calls "semantic innovation": the role that the imagine plays in the creation of meaning through language, for the productive power of imagination – over against the representative power – is primarily verbal. It is by means of the linguistic imagination that the capacity of language to "open up new worlds of thought, action and self-understanding by means of illuminating interpretations of symbols, myths, narratives and ideologies" can create new possibilities in ethics (Masterson 2008:251).[85] This is why Kearney frames the theological reconciliation between ethics and poetics in terms of the imagination: "Surely an eschatology of divine justice (if it exists) demands that ethics and poetics be reconciled? Such a demand is the proper task of hermeneutic imagination" (Kearney 1988a:370). Attempting to explore the "utopian potential" and "transcendental possibilities" of imagination, as well as its capacity for inventing new worlds and eschatological kingdoms, Kearney has persistently argued for the transformative capacity of imagination through its ability to transfigure (Ward 2005:370).

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[84] Masterson explains how Husserl, founding father of phenomenology, "insisted that imagination intuits things, not perceptually in their actual presence, but in their absence or possibility. … Husserl and Sartre described the innovative act of imagination as a 'neutralized' or 'unrealized' mode of quasi-seeing the world. It is a way of discussing the imagination in its relation to and distinction from perception – as a mode of consciousness which presents an object to itself not in the direct manner of encounter but in the indirect manner of invention" (2008:250).

[85] For Kearney, the linguistic imagination entails the "creative capacity to decipher new possibilities of meaning beyond literal descriptions. This deciphering activity can involve a hermeneutics of '*suspicion*' which discloses the potentially distorting and alienating character of accepted narratives and ideologies (for example, the interpretative disclosures of Nietzsche, Marx and Freud). But it can also involve a hermeneutics of '*affirmation*' which discloses new possibilities of human liberation and fulfilment. In the context of sacred texts and narratives this activity of creative interpretation can point back to an 'archaeological' foundation and/or forward to a teleological or eschatological realm of human possibility" (Masterson 2008:251).

Kearney's ethical focus also remains present throughout *The God who may be*. Here, by means of his eschatological programme, he advocates a new vision of transcendence in quotidian experience. This is a form of transcendence, however, that is concerned about the finite forms that it assumes, making an "ethical claim through the face (*prosopon*) of the other revealed in every encounter with finite being(s)" (Nichols 2006:111). Through his description of the *persona*, Kearney manages to bring the cosmological *nothing*, lying entirely beyond being, into the practical sphere of individual moral existence – a significant contribution to postmodern moral philosophy (Nichols 2006:112):

> Kearney reminds us that the no-place, or nothing … is instantiated in each individual, each *person*, as an ethical frame, or guideline, and provides more (although, it should be noted, *not less*) than the conceptual parameters for understanding the fateful rise and fall of cultures and societies. The appearance of persona through the face of the other, or the mandate from beyond being *to be* in certain ways as one projects oneself into the future, is, for Kearney, a transfiguring event experienced through the present encounter with other persons as well as through the encounter with otherness encoded through language, furthermore, which allows us to conceptualize and communicate the ethical value of persona radiating from the face of the other (Nichols 2006:112-113).

In this context – and keeping in mind the achronistic nature of messianic time (cf. 3.3.4 above) which imagines the Kingdom as simultaneously *already there* as historical possibility, yet *not yet there* as a historically realised kingdom "come on earth," Kearney specifies his choice to translate the Exodic formula as "I am who may be" to indicate God saying something like the following: "I will show up as promised, but I cannot *be* in time and history, I cannot become fully embodied in the flesh of the world, unless you show up and answer my call 'Where are you?' with the response 'Here I am' (2007a:53-54).

For Kearney the ethical mandate is ever that which refuses the relativism of certain postmodern philosophies, and demands that we choose between different interpretations of religious symbolism based on which readings are more faithful to the ethico-eschatological significance of the Christ-event – to the transfiguring power of the *persona* (Kearney 2001:48). But a problem lingers here – one which Kearney never addresses: How are we to judge which interpretations are more faithful to

these standards, and which acts most conform to the standards of "love" and "justice" that echo throughout Kearney's work? Nichols verbalises this question well:

> (I)s there any *law* governing what is contained in the conceptual content of the persona, even though it may only be heard as an echo emanating from around the language of the narrated symbol? Why, for instance, is the nothing lying beyond being an *ethical* no-place rather than a monstrous, violent, all-consuming blackness, held off only by the *reasonable* behavior of persons obedient to the moral law of pure reason, as Kant would have it, or even preserved in the "authentic existence" purported by the early Heidegger? Why again, is persona inclusive and not exclusive in its messianic quality? It seems, in fact, to be held up as the one concept, above all others, capable of *redeeming* the various symbols, narratives, doctrines of its conceptual "others." How can the appearance of persona – here understood as messianic-eschatological in origin and transforming in character – be *universally* indicative of the value of symbolic interpretation without appealing in some measure to a hierarchical structure of concepts and a systematic construct of being to house those concepts? (Nichols 2006:114).

What gives foundation to such terms as "love," "justice," and "gift," if not their historical reference in the tradition of onto-theology? (Nichols 2006:114). While Kearney repeatedly makes clear that he has no interest in a monstrous God such as the one the results, at least potentially, from Nietzsche's proposal to completely re-evaluate all traditional values, the matter may be not as easily settled as Kearney attempts to do by his attempted mediation, through "diacritical hermeneutics," between the polar extremes of radical and romantic hermeneutics (Nichols 2006:114-115).

4.7 Ecumenical possibilities

Kearney's explorations in philosophical theology is characterised by his conviction that, while it is true that religions have caused much hostility in human history, they can (and should) also be a source of hospitality and healing. This is the case no less within certain religious traditions (Kearney's focus is on the Christian faith) than across religious divides – divides that have in their own turn spurred violence, misunderstanding and war (Kearney 2008a:3).[86] During an international meeting in

[86] Kearney lists a few occasions where modern history has witnessed the momentous impact of inter-religious exchanges (e.g. the 1986 inter-religious exchanges at the Assisi gathering and the pilgrimages of Pope John Paul II to both India and the Wailing Wall in the 1990's) (2008a:8), as well as examples of "symbolic gestures, words, or acts taking on a spiritual importance whose fallout extended way beyond the initial event" (e.g. John Hume and Gerry Adams shaking hands in Northern

Bangalore in June 2008,[87] focused on inter-religious imagination, the Sanskrit term *Guha* – referring to the hidden spaces in earth and heart where the human and the divine host each other as guests – came to exemplify the crossing of thresholds "back and forth, in space and time," that characterised this meeting, embodying "a mutual traversal of wisdom traditions" (Kearney 2008a:4). Reminded of the mystical imagination's dramatic capability to provide us with "a language and liturgy which translates across confessional divides," the group in Bangalore rediscovered how the very alterity of the perspective and approach of the other – experienced often as imaginary insights and experiences – may result in a fresh experience of certain aspects of one's own religious tradition, contributing in this way to the process of religious self-understanding and growth. The experience of the other thus has the potential to not only deepen one's own religious imagination, revealing unexpected dimensions never anticipated, but also to serve a genuine dialogue between religions (Kearney 2008a:7):[88]

> An initial hypothesis arising from such symbolic crossovers is that semantic inter-animation is at the heart of religious dialogue. Something new arises from bilateral translations between the ancient imaginaries of the great wisdom traditions. Out of the silent dark of the heart-cave – from which many religions originate – emerges a chorus of sounds, images, symbols, and gestures inviting endless translation into different religious liturgies. This very "translatability" fosters the transversality of religions. It makes inter-spiritual conversation into a fertile crossroads where diverse paths converge, traverse, and intersect – a nexus of inter-confessional hospitality, in Paul Ricoeur's phrase (Kearney 2008a:9).

In *Anatheism*, Kearney stresses the importance of respecting the limitations of oppositional beliefs and avoiding the risk of "homogenising," "deducing," or "inferring" all religions as one (Soultouki 2010:446). This respect for religious difference is made apparent by Kearney's choice to begin the monograph with an exploration of the divine Stranger – an idea that forms the core of the anatheistic movement – and

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Ireland, Karol Wojtyla seeking pardon of Jews in Jerusalem, and the historic meeting between the historical adversaries Mandela and De Klerk) (2008a:8, note 1). "These were historical moments," he comments, "when the 'impossible became possible' – spiritual breakthroughs translating into political miracles and confirming the maxim that 'thoughts which come on doves' wings guide the world'" (Kearney 2008a:8, note 1).

[87] A special issue of Religion and the Arts (12 [2008]) is dedicated to the proceedings of this meeting.

[88] Indeed, Kearney states that "(l)earning to let go of our inherited fears, attachments, and securities in order to meet the stranger, the guest, the visitor, the alien, the other who knocks at our gate from another culture, country, or faith is, I wager, the most sure and subtle key to opening the door to inter-religious imagination" (Kearney 2008b:1-2).

identifies imagination, humour, commitment, discernment and hospitality as five components that determine our response to the divine Stranger and enables interreligious dialogue (Soultouki 2010:446).

> In the anatheistic movement, the recognition of what is alien in another's faith enables communication. By looking closely to the examples of Dorothy Day, Jean Vanier and Mahatma Gandhi, Kearney refigures faith as the means for encountering the sacred in a secular world. What permeates this analysis is the understanding that the Other, the Stranger, is not to be found only in others but also in ourselves. … *Anatheism* may then be approached as the beginning of an Odyssean journey, a journey that teaches us that the embracing difference opens us up to grace (Soultouki 2010:227).

Kearney wagers that the "aboriginal signs of the heart-cave," or *guha*, are "sounded and received" at the level of imagination – before and after they are expressed as theory, doctrine, ideology and dogma (2008a:9). This space where the divine becomes visible and audible in image, sound, and liturgy (the Sanskrit *darshan*, or "sacred manifestation") extends the invitation for us to

> attend to the primal scenes and stages of embodying the ultimate, so finely celebrated by Mahayana Buddhism, Hindu puja, or the great religious imaginings of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic art. In other words, we are wagering here on the possibility of a spiritual acoustics capable of reinterpreting the oldest cries of the religious heart (Kearney 2008a:9).

The traversing across historic religious divides is not an end in itself, however, but must result in common action in everyday life that gives life, addresses conflict and cares for the oppressed in all its various manifestations. With this end in mind, Kearney's ever present ethical focus again becomes apparent. In light of religion's historical record of perversion, oppression, and violence, often rehearsed by the proponents of New Atheism, it remains all the more imperative that real acts of compassion be practised by different faiths. Doctrine and high-sounding theories will always fall short to living testimonies of compassion, for the *vita contemplativa* must always be incarnated in the *vita activa* (2008a:13-14).

Kearney's focus on the imagination as a portal to inter-religious dialogue that culminates in social awareness and action is an important contribution to the theology of religions in an age where, in Kearney's words, "religions will be inter-religious or they will not be at peace" (2008a:32). But how exactly does Kearney envision the theological basis for such dialogue? Since he is certainly not exclusivist

in his thinking, does that mean that he is inclusive to the point of succumbing to an uncritical New Age-type relativism that out of principle puts all religious claims on equal footing? If we consider his reference to Fred Dallmayr's essay (2008:420-433) in the same issue of *Religion and the Arts*, this would not appear to be the case:

> This kind of inter-religious overture is not, as Dallmayr writes in his essay below on Cusanus (the fifteenth-century ecumenical thinker), an invitation to relativism but to "relationism," namely, "the conviction that truth or true knowledge cannot be seized or monopolized by a dogmatic authority but is best promoted through the interrelation between distinct perspectives (with each sincerely searching for the truth). The upshot of this conviction is an unorthodox and innovative conception of the relation between the 'one' and the 'many,' where the 'one' serves only as a common loadstar but not as the domineering master of the 'many.'" Here, inter-religious relationality is not a finite means towards an end but an infinite good in itself – the gift and kenosis of divinity in and through the flesh of humanity (Kearney 2008a:24, note 6).

At this point Kearney refers his readers to the dialectic between faith as "infinite relational openness to others" and religion as "institutional limit and consolidation" in the thoughts of thinkers like Bonhoeffer, Ricoeur, Derrida, and Caputo and reflected in his (at the time still forthcoming) *Anatheism* (2011).[89] Nichols argues that, while Kearney's ana-theism and ana-religion necessitates a plurality of interpretations of transcendence (so asserting the pervasiveness of hermeneutics in any and every attempt at knowledge), it also affirms the incarnate reality of lived history, where judgment concerning the truth of meaningfulness of phenomena is no longer a luxury but a necessity. In the complex pluralism that results, (an open space of "compassionate dialogue" where competing traditions may converse without seeking to convert one another), Nichols nevertheless claims that

> the alternate historical contexts of such competing paradigms of transcendent compassion do in fact force the interpreter to choose between different, perhaps even irreconcilable, finite paths, since the finite forms of traditional experience must be reaffirmed and reappropriated – for that is precisely where we are brought by the fourth reduction[90] (2006:111-112).[91]

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[89] Cf. also the published proceedings of the three Villanova Conferences on "Religion and Postmodernism," on this matter (Caputo, Dooley & Scanlon 2001; Caputo & Scanlon 1997, 1999), representing the thoughts of leading contemporary theorists of the religion-faith debate (e.g. Derrida, Millbank, Marion, Vattimo, Keller, Hart and Tracy) (Kearney 2008a:24, note 6).

[90] Richard Kearney and John Manoussakis has described a "fourth reduction" that Hederman interprets in his reflection on Kearney's God-who-may-be through four "descents in the *kenosis* of God": "The first, 'transcendental,' reduction is situating God as above and beyond anything which we experience subjectively as 'us,' God as beyond and above our epistemological radar screens. The

This requires that we ask whether all epiphanies of the *eschaton* in everyday experience and in the various religious traditions have the same transcendent source (i.e. an absolute identity), and also that this question be asked from the very tradition that has allowed for the possibility of asking the question in the first place (Nichols 2006:112).[92] Indeed, Kearney does not recommend that the multiplicity of interpretations of religious symbolism be renounced, but urges us to enter the conflict and "take sides," based on which interpretations best resound the ethico-eschatological import of the Christ-event (2001:48-49; see 3.5.5 above; cf. Nichols 2006:113). Seen from this perspective, it seems that the relationality between religions that Kearney advocates assumes a "generosity of imagination" (2008a:26) that allows the sort of traversing across religious boundaries that enables true religious dialogue. This not only leads to a greater understanding of the religious other and a fresh experience of one's own religious tradition, but of necessity always

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second, 'ontological,' reduction could be interpreted as creation of the world: 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God,' in Hopkins's phrase. This involves more specifically the first person of the Trinity as Father, originator, and creator. The third, 'dosological,' reduction is the *kenosis* of the Son, the second person of the Trinity, who emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave. Incarnation is more properly viewed in terms of this third level of gift or 'givenness' in terms of 'hypostatic union between phenomenon and phenomenality,' as Manoussakis puts it: Christ as gift and sacrifice of himself. The fourth, or 'prosopic,' reduction becomes most fittingly, then, the further *kenosis* of the Trinitarian God in and through the 'impersonatisation' of the Holy Spirit. 'The eschatological reduction retrieves and repeats the *possibilizing* of essence, being and gift which seemed impossible before the return to the gracious deep underlying and sustaining them' (Kearney). This is not incarnation as such, but the deeper impregnation of the personhood principle constitutive of an ecclesial world. 'Prosopon, therefore, is not the face of the Other (a "where") but rather the way (the "how") of the relationship through which the Other gives himself or herself to me' (Manoussakis). Through the Spirit, with the Spirit, in the Spirit, the mystical body of the communion of saints is 'prosoponised,' allowing Christ to play 'in ten thousand places,/lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his/To the father through the features of men's faces' (Hopkins). The fourth reduction of God is the fourth person of the Trinity: ourselves as recapitulated into the body of Christ, through the pleromatic personhood of the Holy Spirit" (2006:277-278).

[91] Further on in his essay (2006:111-126), Nichols seems to suggest that the fact that Kearney maintains that his Christocentric reading (in this specific case of messianic time) does not exclude either other messianic or entirely nonmessianic religions in some form of Christocentric triumph, results in a pluralistic approach to religious symbolism that does not afford priority to any single set of cultural symbolism (2006:113). "But how," he asks, "can a particular reading of messianic time, that is, qua eschatological transfiguration, not place itself *above* its conceptual peers (i.e., other messianic conceptions) and those conceptions it seeks to instruct, or explain in *higher* terms of clarity (i.e., specifically nonmessianic conceptions), insofar as it seeks to schematize all other schemata?" (2006:113).

[92] It is in this light that we should understand Nichols' argument that Kearney's "radical reenvisioning of God must be tempered and given meaning through reentering and reaffirming onto-theology in a qualified (hermeneutical) sense," for this is the tradition that enables the re-imagining of the metaphysical God in the first place. Nichols proceeds to "sketch a possible renewal of meaning for the traditional Christian *parousia*-concept as a hermeneutical circle between Hegel's systematic closure of Western metaphysics and Heidegger's deconstructive appropriation of the hidden possibilities of presence within the onto-theological tradition" (Nichols 2005:750).

requires a *choice*, and must culminate, he insists, in the practical care of the downtrodden and oppressed.

4.8 A God of small things

Approaching the post-paschal narratives hermeneutically from the perspective of his phenomenology of the *persona* convinces Kearney that the message of the transfiguring *persona* of Christ is that the kingdom as a gift is freely given to "fishermen and fallen women, to those lost and wandering on the road from Jerusalem to nowhere, to the wounded and weak and hungry, to those who lack and do not despair of their lack, to little people, to the 'poor in spirit'" (2005:388). But this message of transfiguration is easily disfigured, and what would be better appreciated as an icon for transcendence soon becomes an idol that attempts to grasp the transfiguring *persona* and draw it into the present and into one's power – a fact that Kearney sees reflected in the towering cathedrals and religious skirmishing that now preside over these landscapes where Christ once cautioned "do not hold on to me" (2005c:388). Over against these monuments of triumph, stand the "silent, scattered ruins" – the now deserted and overlooked caves and towns that once hid banned Messiahs and followers – which still bear testimony to things that

> come and go, like the thin small voice, like the burning bush, like the voice crying out in the wilderness, like the word made flesh, like the wind that blows where it wills. … For these are places which resist the triumphalism of ecclesiastical empire. Hide-outs, off the beaten track, without foundation. Cut against the grain. Self-effacing, modest, vulnerable, welcoming. Sanctuaries for migrants. Shelters for the exiled. Footholds for the forgotten. Arks. Perfect places for rejected *personas* to come and lay their heads. Cyphers, perhaps, of a new millenium? (Kearney 2005c:389).

Likewise, when Kearney's "hermeneutical poetics of the kingdom" searches for recurring metaphors, parables, images, and symbols that communicate the eschatological promise in the gospels, he borrows from Arundhati Roy's novel to express that these figures "almost invariably" refer to "a God of small things":

> Not only do we have the association of the Kingdom with the vulnerable openness and trust of "little children," as in the Mark 10 passage cited above (vv. 13-16); but we also have the images of the yeast in the flour (Luke 13:20-21), the tiny pearl of invaluable price (Matthew 13:45-46), and perhaps most suggestive and telling of all, that of the mustard seed (Mark 4:30-32) – a miniscule grain that blooms and flourishes into a capacious tree. The kingdom of God, this last text

> tells us, is "like a mustard seed that, when it is sown in the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on the earth. But once it is sown, it springs up and becomes the largest of plants and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the sky can dwell in its shade" (Kearney 2007a:52-53).

This "*microtheology*" – the recurring motif of the kingdom as the last, least, or littlest of things – resists what Kearney calls the more "standard" macrotheology of the Kingdom "as emblem of sovereignty, omnipotence and ecclesiastical triumph" (Kearney 2007a:53). Over against this macrotheology, Kearney draws our attention to how frequently the gospels relate our actions towards the "least of these" to the judgment of the kingdom (cf. Mt 25:40), to Christ's emptying himself of absolute power and assuming the most humble form of humanity (Phlp 2:6-8), and the eschatological reminder that the powerless and defenceless will enter the kingdom more easily than the rich and powerful (Mk 10:25). Likewise, avoiding his disciples' would-be apotheosis and idolisation on Mt. Tabor, Christ "proceeds to a second kenotic act of giving" by "refusing the short route to immediate triumph" and instead embracing the way of the cross, demonstrating in his own body

> what it means for the seed to die before it is reborn as a flowering tree which hosts all living creatures. As "King," he enters Jerusalem not with conquering armies but "seated upon an ass's colt" (John 12). He upturns the inherited hierarchies of power, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah that he would bring justice to the world, not by "shouting aloud in the street," but as a "bruised reed" that will not break, and "a smoldering wick" that will not quench (Isaiah 42:1-4) (Kearney 2007a:53).

We might refer in this context to a quote by Hopkins, cited by Kearney in his 2007 essay on the God-who-may-be (2007:56). With the advantage of artistic licence, Hopkins describes the eschatological kingdom as follows:

> In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
> I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and
> This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
> Is immortal diamond

For Hopkins, the Kingdom is not epitomised by some mighty and triumphant monarch, but quite to the contrary by the "court fool" and the "joker in the pack" – the "least and last of these." This literary witness also testifies to a God who transfigures rather than coerces – a God of *posse* rather than of might, and of little rather than large things (Kearney 2007a:56-57). Another way to give expression to the idea of

the God-who-may-be as a "God of small things" is by pausing to consider Kearney's choice to translate the Greek *dunamis* as *posse/possest* rather than following the metaphysical translation of *dunamis* as *potestas/potentia*. While the latter signifies potency "in terms of an economy of power, causality, substance – what Levinas calls the economy of the Same (or Totality)," Kearney's choice of *posse/possest* points, as he would have it, to a "gracious and gratuitous giving which possibilizes love and justice in this world" (Kearney 2007a:59). With this choice of translation, then, Kearney also distances himself from triumphalist accounts of the Kingdom that picture the second advent of the Messiah in militaristic terms that border on the "sublimely apocalyptic" – a far, almighty and coercive cry from the lovingly vulnerable, solicitive and caring hermeneutic trajectory that we have seen Kearney point to in his discussion of the "metaphors of the kingdom" found in the gospels. He continues:

> (T)he divine *posse* I am sponsoring here is more healing than judgmental, more disposed to accept "the least of these" than to meet out punishment and glory. If God can prevent evil from happening by recreating the historical past, as a theologian like Peter Damian once suggested, He is by implication a God of theodicy – namely, a God who has the power to decide whether history unfolds as good or evil. To me, this sounds like *potestas* rather than *posse*. A far cry from the divine power of the powerless Etty Hillesum invokes, when she summons us to help God to be God in the face of violence and war. A world away from the God of little things (Kearney 2007a:59).

This pervading emphasis of Kearney seems imperative in a contemporary context where the traditionally Christian strongholds of the world stand convicted by history for the many ways in which they abused their power and erected structures that still perpetuate the inequalities that characterise the world today. The Christian Church no longer finds itself in the privileged political position that it once held, and often we see church leaders compromise for this fact by creating tower houses built on a competition for numbers and income that often victimises the most vulnerable of society. The message of a God of small things seem as relevant and vital in such a context as ever.

4.9 Opening spaces for dialogue: philosophy and theology

Kearney often reminds his readers that he operates, as philosopher, within the realm of hermeneutical poetics and phenomenology. And while he thus enjoys a certain

liberty in relation to theological dogma, speculative metaphysics and empirical physics, he always makes clear that, in his view, a fruitful dialogue remains open with all these disciplines (2007a:62). But Gregor suspects that one of the reasons why Kearney's hermeneutics of religion has received the large amount of attention that it has is because Kearney is in some way "beholden" not only to the philosophical community, but also to the world of theological scholarship. *After God: Richard Kearney and the religious turn in Continental philosophy*, is after all divided into the two section headings "Philosophy facing theology" and "Theology facing philosophy." Gregor claims that such contemporary thinkers as Badiou, Agamben, and Žižek, who "employ Christian ideas to their own ends," present less difficulties theologically, similar to when biblical scholars or theologians employ philosophical ideas without interacting directly with philosophy. But Kearney's work, he holds,

> has commitments in both worlds, and while he proceeds as a philosopher with humility vis-à-vis theology, a project like his cannot help but make theological moves. (Nor would he deny this by trying to feign theological neutrality). Consequently, Kearney's critics question not only his philosophical commitments, but also the theological implications of his proposal (Gregor 2008:149).

But just because there are critical questions regarding Kearney's project, and in particular as pertains to his methodology, does not mean that the boundaries between the disciplines of theology and philosophy should be more sharply emphasised. To the contrary, the traversing of these boundaries, that often suppress and hinder the creative exploration of many of our intellectual pursuits, are one of the most stimulating and rewarding features of the religious turn in philosophy (Gregor 2008:150). And Gregor feels that philosophy stands to benefit much from allowing itself to be yet more deeply and explicitly influenced by its relation with theology. Whereas the return of the question of God to the philosophical arena is often thought to benefit theology, it also presents an opportunity for philosophy to take a more sympathetic interest in religion – and find that it may well be its most significant and enduring conversation partner (Hart 2009:730). Yet neither Analytic nor Continental philosophy can boast a nuanced knowledge of the history of theology or of theological thinking, and one often finds claims of "theological innocence or philosophical purity" at the outset of works that attempt some sort of dialogue with theology from the position of philosophy – as though these might be assumed to be

the same thing (Hart 2009:730).[93] Yet “a sound philosophy of religion requires an engagement with theology,” as Hart states in *After God*: “that may well include a philosophy of theology and a theology of philosophy, but it should always avoid making a religion of philosophy” (2006:221).

This last point is important. The starting point of Christian theology can never be the creation or the eschaton, but it must be revelation of the Kingdom of God as it climaxed in the events surrounding the life of Jesus of Nazareth (Hart 2009:730). And while philosophy will always be a valued partner in Christian theology, and may aid it in many ways, it should always return to its parables, metaphors and narratives as main resource for its elaboration (Hart 2009:731).

[93] In the less formal Continental philosophy of religion, where one more often finds constructive reflection on religious texts and phenomena, what one is often left with is closer to a form of philosophical religion than to a philosophy of religion. While this no doubt contributes to the greater existential significance of Continental philosophy, it does not fill the void left by a closer dialogue with theology (Gregor 2008:150).

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

While Kearney at times in *The God who may be* may come across as categorically set against all things metaphysical (and we have seen him being interpreted as such), this is not really the case. Kearney presents his God-who-may-be-project as a *post*-metaphysical exploration of transcendence, and as such it necessitates the metaphysical tradition as its dialogue partner. It is also true that one can hardly do away with all sorts of metaphysics as such, and thus one may more correctly construe that, in dialogue with a more traditional metaphysics, which had its centre in ontology, Kearney proposes a new metaphysics that propels towards the eschaton. In later publications, Kearney also makes clear that his aim is not to claim that possibility is the only way – or even the most primordial way – in which infinity is experienced and imagined by finite minds. He argues merely

> that it is a very telling way, and one which has been largely neglected in the history of western metaphysics and theology in favor of categories like substance, cause, actuality, omnipotence, absolute spirit, or sufficient reason. So I am not proposing *posse* as some newly discovered (or recovered) Master Word – some extraordinary Meta-Code which might unlock the ancient Secret of divine nature or naming. God forbid! Our proposal is far more modest than that – namely, a tentative exercise in poetic conjecture about a certain overlooked aspect of divinity, seeking guidance on the way from phenomenological description and hermeneutic interpretation (Kearney 2007a:51-52).

Following, thus, in the footsteps of his mentor Ricoeur, whom Kearney himself calls a "brilliant intellectual negotiator between competing schools of thought" (2005:4), Kearney has attempted to negotiate a re-imagination of God that mediates between opposing ways of thought about God (namely mystical or negative theology's hyper-ascendant deity on the one hand, and the consigning of the divine to some domain of abyssal abjection) (Kearney 2001:6-7). The previous chapter has shown that Kearney's proposals are not without its problems, however. What, for example, does "possibility" mean when we use it in relation to God, and what are the implications of humanity "enabling" God to be God? Does Kearney neglect the passion of Christ in his Christology and eschatology? What of the methodological status of *The God who may be*? We have seen questions raised regarding Kearney's use of phenomenology, as well as claims that Kearney cannot sidestep at

least some metaphysical moves, and maybe also not a deeper encounter with theology proper (Gregor 2008:149).

* * *

Chapter two introduced the reader to Richard Kearney – the man and his work – and painted a picture of a scholar who has integrated a commitment to negotiating between extremes and binary opposites in both his professional writings as a philosopher, as well as his involvement in political, religious, and cultural dialogue. Kearney is a recognised dialogue partner in the renewed philosophical quest for God – a question that he approaches, philosophically, through his "characteristic hermeneutical exploration of 'the possible' as an 'imaginative' way of casting lights upon philosophical issues" (Masterson 2008:247). It is especially in his trilogy, *Philosophy at the Limit*, that Kearney addresses questions of a specifically religious nature, attempting to imagine an answer to the question of what sort of God would come "after God." Kearney subscribes to the move in contemporary philosophy of religion that places this God-after-God in a dialectical relationship with the metaphysical God of pure act and strives to overcome it.

In **chapter three**, a rather thorough overview of Kearney's *The God who may be* served the purpose of providing the reader with a sensitivity for the intricate way in which Kearney engages several schools of Continental philosophy in his hermeneutics of religion. Between the two rival ways of interpreting the divine – the eschatological and the onto-theological – Kearney proposes the God-who-may-be as a third, "onto-eschatological" way that negotiates between these polar opposites. He points out the latent eschatological meaning of four biblical texts in the light of contemporary phenomenological, hermeneutic and deconstructive debates, and proposes, contrary to the classic metaphysical view, that divinity's very "potentiality-to-be" is in fact the most divine thing about it (2001:2).

Toward a phenomenology of the persona. Before Kearney develops his phenomenology of religion by charting a "hermeneutic path of thinking along the tracks and traces of the Possible God who comes and goes" (2001:9), he first explores this "theme of transfiguration" in terms of a phenomenology of the *persona*. Developing his notion of the *persona* in terms of a radical phenomenology of

transfiguration, and then defining the eschatological notion of the *persona* as that which guarantees the irreducibility of the other as eschaton, Kearney stresses that the transcendent *persona* cannot be reduced to a surrogate "object-other" or fetishized Other that does not exist (2001:14). What Kearney opposes to this "fusionary sameness of the One" is the "eschatological universality of the Other," conceived in terms of a possible co-existence of unique *personas* whose transcendence is in each case guaranteed (2001:15). For this reason, the phenomenon of the persona calls for a phenomenology (Kearney calls it a "quasi-phenomenology") that is powered by ethics rather than an eidetics of intentional consciousness (2001:16). Unable to be captured in some pure moment, the *persona* marks a time that is always surplus, but that nevertheless reveals itself in time, through the "incursion of the eternal in the moment" (2001:17). Always "other than the other-for-me here and now," the *persona* "transfigures by absenting itself as *personne* in the very moment that it hails and holds me," and "sounds through (*per-sonans*) the momentary person before me, sounding and seeking me out" (Kearney 2001:17). Kearney expresses this transfiguration in terms of a hermeneutic retrieval of *persona-prosopon* from a post-Levinasian perspective and argues that it may constitute a very appropriate translation of the Judeo-Christian primacy of ethics. The paradoxical phenomenon of the *prosopon* Kearney calls *transfiguration*, which is something that I allow the *persona-prosopon* to do to me (Kearney 2001:18). Having thus laid the foundation with the analysis of the *persona*, Kearney finds himself at the "threshold of a phenomenology of religion" (Kearney 2001:19).

I am who may be. The formula of the Exodic self-disclosure of God, אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, has been a perpetual topic of fascination for a range of interpreters over the centuries. Kearney has divided the main traditions of interpretation into two broad approaches, which he calls the ontological on the one end, and the eschatological on the other. As a middle way, he proposes an onto-eschatological interpretation. Turning first to the ontological tradition, he illustrates how Augustine and Aquinas, along with other early and medieval Christian theologians equated God with a modality of being, while also defending to the ultimate ineffability and transcendence of his nature. Turning to the eschatological counter-tradition of interpretation, Kearney focuses on the ethical and dynamic character of God as opposed to the essentialist interpretations that characterised medieval and post-medieval

metaphysics (2001:25). This tradition understands the burning bush epiphany as a self-generating event where God reveals Godself as an "I-Self for us," to which humans can most appropriately respond precisely by *committing* themselves to a response (2001:29). This means that God becomes with us, and is equally dependent on humanity for the coming of his kingdom as humanity is on him: a fact that again underlines the importance of covenant and dynamic relationship over against conceptuality. In contrast to the ontological (rather than moral) God of the Hellenists, where *being* was most crucial – timeless and permanent – of all, the Hebrews advanced *becoming* and *possibility* (to be able) as most important (2001:31). For Kearney, problems result when God becomes too transcendent by being entirely removed from historical being. This gives rise to a "negative" or "apophatic" theology where "God can become so unknowable and invisible as to escape all identification whatsoever" (Kearney 2001:31). Kearney turns then to a hermeneutic retrieval of the Exodic name, with which he aims to work out a third way beyond the polar opposites of onto-theology and negative theology. Such a move beyond ontology and essentialist theology surpasses the focus on the essence of God and proceeds toward a focus on his ultimate promise – a revelation of the *transfiguring* God. Such counter-readings are what inspires Kearney's hermeneutic of God as May-Be: an onto-eschatological hermeneutics, a poetics of the possible.

Desiring God. In his third chapter, Kearney turns to what he calls "explicitly incarnational accounts of the *persona-prosopon*" in the Christian tradition, namely that of the transfiguration on Mount Tabor and the paschal apparitions (2001:39). Building on his phenomenology of the *persona* in chapter one, Kearney describes the transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor as the person of Jesus being metamorphosed before the eyes of his disciples in the *persona* of Christ, and as Christ's "coming into his own," assuming his messianic calling (2001:39). Kearney surmises that the transfiguration "signals a surplus or incommensurability between *persona* and person even as it inscribes the one in and through the other," so that the transfigured Christ therefore bursts through the limits of intentional consciousness through the mere excess of the transcendent *persona* over the immanent person (2001:41, 42). Paul's understanding of the transfiguration on Mount Tabor as a call to all of humanity to become transfigured in the light of Christ played a determinative role in the eschatological reading of the transfiguration

narratives (2001:44). Reading the transfiguration narrative as a re-figuration of Jewish messianic prophecy on the one hand, and a pre-figuration of the kingdom (involving the metamorphosis of each human being into the image of Christ, cf. 2 Cor 3:18), Paul understood this eschatological promise to require both grace and ethical action on our part (2001:45). This reading of transfiguration surpasses the common understanding of history. This is because *persona* is eternal and transcends causal temporality. And while it recognises that human persons exist in chronological time, its *eschaton* is not reducible to the "objective laws of cause-effect or potency-act," or to the world-historical mutations of Hegel or Hartshorne's teleological plan" (2001:46). From his discussion of the paschal testimonies of the resurrected Christ, Kearney sees the enigma of the transfiguration reverberated in (1) the tendency of human persons to overlook the divine that is right in front of us, often in the most mundane elements of our lives; (2) the reassurance that the embodied God cares for both our physical and material being; (3) the fact that the resurrected Christ avoids triumphalism and refuses to be "appropriated, enthroned, idolized;" and (4) the fact that the resurrected Christ reveals a "God of small things" who appear to the outcast, the lowest and most despised of women, and makes her a herald of his resurrection message (2001:49).

Desiring God. Kearney sees the desire of God as another way of speaking of the transfiguration of God, for through this desire, the God-who-may-be finds voice in many different *personas*. In his fourth chapter, then, he moves on to a phenomenology of largely non-scriptural experience when he considers phenomenological and deconstructive readings of Canticles. In light of his reading of Canticles, the "desire of God" denotes both God's desire for us and our desire for God. But this desire of God does not point to some divine deficiency, because the desire of God always overflows in excess, grace, and as pure gift (2001:54). For Kearney, the lovers' discourse in Canticles bears witness to the traversing of sensuality by transcendence, with the amorous passion serving as "a *persona-trace* testifying to the unnameable alterity of God" (2001:55). Kearney turns to Julia Kristeva's incarnational reading of Canticles in *Tales of Love* in order to show that Canticles epitomises the transfiguring God's *persona* paradox, keeping God invisible while "simultaneously and paradoxically" enabling him to be experienced as erotic desire (2001:58). Ultimately, the surplus of metaphoricity in Canticles that entangles

the eschatological symbolism of nuptial love with an erotics of the body while always remaining irreducible to it, guards the amorous song "as an open text of multiple readings and double entendres – divine and erotic, eschatological and carnal –" provoking "a hermeneutic play of constant 'demetaphorising and remetaphorizing' which never allows the song to end" (2001:60). In an attempt to construct a hermeneutic guess for how the puzzling phenomenon of "desire beyond desire" may be understood, Kearney reviews, firstly, how divine desire was seen in the Western metaphysical tradition, and then, secondly, turns to some contemporary phenomenological accounts. He considers onto-theological ways of thinking about the desire of God before turning to eschatological approaches. To the onto-theological paradigm belong all those approaches that consider desire as *lack* and as "striving for fulfillment in a plenitude of presence," always endeavouring "to be and to know absolutely" (Kearney 2001:60-61) Such attempts to "objectify the *deus adventurus* into an onto-theological object" resulted in the compromising of the futural coming of the kingdom. A different approach, itself very much a critique of onto-theological desire, is better understood as a move towards eschatological desire: "a desire that eye has never seen nor ear heard" (Kearney 2001:61-62). Such desire is found not only in Canticles, but also in the longing of poets for their God in the Psalter, as well as in the "erotico-ecstatic" writings of mystics in the Judeo-Christian tradition. From here, Kearney proceeds to a somewhat technical discussion of Emmanuel Levinas' phenomenology of desire, showing how it stands in direct opposition to Hegel's phenomenology of consciousness, and then moves on to deconstructive readings of eschatological desire. For Kearney, the most significant difference between Levinas and Derrida is that the latter links the desire of God with atheism. Kearney is critical of deconstruction's tendency to strip God of every specific horizon of memory and anticipation, arguing that alterity cannot be experienced as such if it surpasses all our phenomenal horizons of experience. Kearney maintains that taking the otherness of the other to this extreme, makes it difficult to draw a line between in the sand between deconstruction as desertification of God and desertion of God (2001:77). Moreover, in a world constantly plagued and threatened by terrifying "others," Kearney holds that it has become especially urgent to discern between mass-media fantasies and real-life others that lay an ethical claim on us (2001:78).

Possibilising God. In his fifth chapter, Kearney investigates the spheres of possibility and impossibility in light of a few related scriptural and philosophical texts. He then moves on to analyse how the innovative notions of the possible in a number of contemporary thinkers can be compared with his findings. He suggests that an "eschatological reinterpretation of God as 'possibility' (*dunamis-posse*), guided by these readings, might help amplify (his) conjecture that God neither his nor is not but *may be*" (Kearney 2001:80). Beginning with his reading of Mark 10:27, Kearney holds that the eschatological "possible" referred to here suggests that, when we reach the end of our finite human powers, an infinite *dunamis* takes over that transfigures each of our incapacities into a new kind of capacity (2001:81). Similar to Kearney's notion of the divine possible, this messianic temporality surprises us with possibilities which, without such grace, would have remained beyond both our impossibles and our possibles. In contrast, metaphysics did not traditionally look kindly upon the notion of possibility, but rather conceived it a "dimension of being contained in reality," and thus as a latency in matter that was still to be realised into act (Kearney 2001:83). Rationalists and idealists, in turn, conceptualised possibility as intellectual representation. As such, possibility (conceived as a category of modal logic), was seen to fall short of a God perceived as "Supreme Reality" or "Sufficient Reason" (Kearney 2001:83). Evolutionist or "vitalist" thought, which understands God as "Process," on the other hand, sees the possible is the *retrospective* result of reality inventing and creating itself. But this metaphysical opposition between the "divinely real" and the "non-divinely possible" is exactly what Kearney contests in *The God who may be*. For this criticism he turns to four pioneering modern attempts to reconceptualise the notion of possibility – Husserl's teleological notion of the possible, Bloch's dialectical notion of the possible, Heidegger's ontological notion of the possible, and Derrida's deconstructive notion of the possible. This detour enables him, in conclusion, to construct an eschatological notion of the possible that contains the following crucial implications of a "Possible God, understood as the eschatological May-be":

(5) It is radically transcendent – guaranteed by the mark of its "impossible-possibility."
(6) It is "possible" in so far as we have faith in the promise of the advent – the scandal of "impossible" incarnation and resurrection! – but also equally reveals itself as what "possibilizes" such messianic events in the first place.

(7) It calls and solicits us – where are you? who are you? who do you say that I am? Why did you not give me to drink or eat? – in the form of an engaging personal summons (unlike Husserl's Telos, Bloch's Utopia, Heidegger's *Vermögen*, or Derrida's Perhaps);
(8) And, finally, the eschatological May-be unfolds not just as can-be (*Kann-sein*) but as should-be (*Sollen-sein*) – in short, less as a power of immanent potency driving toward fulfillment than as a power of the powerless which bids us remain open to the possible divinity whose gratuitous coming – already, now, and not yet – is always a surprise and never without grace (Kearney 2001:100).

Poetics of the possible God. In his concluding chapter, Kearney attempts a hermeneutic retrieval of a few neglected readings of possibility in Western thought. He then attempts to reinterpret these in light of the paradigm of "God-play," aiming again "to break open new sites and sightings of the God-who-may-be" (2001:101). Under his hermeneutic retrievals, he considers Aristotle's *dunamis* and the *nous poetikos*, Nicholas of Cusa's *possest*, and Schelling's *Seyn-könnende*. He then turns to Heidegger's expression of the relation between Being and God in terms of proportional analogy, and proceeds to ask how this may be applied to the construal of the "power of the possible" in terms of *play*: the play of Being and the play of God" (2001:106). To the extent that God is a *deus ludens* who possibilises the world in the first place, every human person is thus a *homo ludens* transfiguring the world in turn. It is in the very "renunciation of my will to power" and in my "refusal to rest satisfied with my ownmost totality as a being-toward-death" that I become open to the "infinite empowering-possibilizing of God" (2001:108). Kearney turns, now, to the powerful image of the Trinity found in the doctrine of *perichoresis* – a sacred, circular dance-play between the three Persons of the Trinity, where each gives place to the other in a "gesture of reciprocal dispossession rather than fusing into a single substance" (2001:109). To the extent that the Son entered history through the incarnation, humanity is invited to join in this continuous "moving *toward* each other in a gesture of immanence and *away from* each other in a gesture of transcendence" (2001:109). To this extent, the play of eschatological possibility is a promise of salvation, but is only fulfilled to the extent that humans choose to respond to it and bring the coming Kingdom closer through their actions, all the while acknowledging that the ultimate realisation of the Kingdom far exceeds our power and is impossible to us alone.

After the thorough overview of Kearney's *The God who may be* in chapter three, **chapter four** turned to consider the contributions of Kearney's hermeneutics and phenomenology of religion, while also pointing out some areas that are in need of greater clarification, or that, from the perspective of theology proper, could be considered risks or deficiencies that should be supplemented by such an exploration of post-metaphysical God-talk. To this end, the chapter attempted to understand and evaluate Kearney's proposal in the context of his other works, as well as against the rich traditions of theology on the one hand, and Western philosophy on the other.

It depends on what the meaning of "is" is: Kearney's hermeneutics. For Kearney, the question of interpretation "goes all the way down," so that "(n)othing is exempt" (2011e:xv). He leans heavily in this on the hermeneutic philosophy of his mentor, Paul Ricoeur, and especially on his notion of "semantic augmentation" and the "surplus of meaning" as the creative process that results from the workings of metaphor in religious texts. Kearney also stresses the importance of navigating between *romantic* and *radical* hermeneutics by steering a middle road which he refers to as *diacritical hermeneutics*. While Ernst Bloechl criticises Kearney for *The God who may be*'s lack of thorough hermeneutical analysis in the sense of "close attention to distinct forms of expression and their various linguistic, conceptual, and historical horizons" (2006:131), it is argued that Bloechl goes too far in this contention – both in expecting a hermeneutical analysis outside the parameters that Kearney sets for himself, and in explaining this hermeneutical "lack" in terms of the phenomena in question lying "beyond" interpretation.

Between ontology and eschatology. This section takes issue with Kearney's attempt to mediate between the extremes of, on the one hand, traditional onto-theological dogmatism (ontological objectivism), and, on the other hand, postmodern egalitarian dogmatism (relativistic subjectivism).[94] With this in mind, it pays particular attention to the contributions of Nichols, Masterson, and Bloechl. Nichols explores the idea that, if it is the "life" and "death" of the God of Western ontology, and the "multivalent advent concepts, or in metaphysical parlance, *parousia* concepts of the Western tradition" that are the very *conditio sine qua non* of the present return to the God-who-may-be, then its "rebirth" must be retrieved through the God-who-was

[94] The phrasing of these polar opposites is borrowed from Nichol's extended review of The God who may be (2005:750-761).

(2006:112). In this process, he points out three clarifications which are judged to constitute areas where Kearney's God-who-may-be project needs further refinement. In his essay on Kearney's hermeneutics of otherness, Patrick Masterson also takes issue with Kearney's negative evaluation of onto-theology and argues that the phenomenological frame of reference within which Kearney affirms an "experiential affirmation of divine transcendence as eschatological possibility" must be both "qualified" and "complemented" by metaphysical considerations – be they of a theological or a philosophical nature (2008:247-265). While Masterson's essay is extremely helpful in its excellent portrayal of how Kearney's phenomenology of otherness lies at the basis of the God-who-may-be, it is argued that his view of phenomenology is, ultimately, narrow and limiting. Bloechl, in his essay on *The God who may be*, helps the discussion with his careful description of Kearney's expression "may be" as neither a logical maybe, pointing to the fact that something may possibly exist, but also possibly may not, nor a Bergsonian "maybe" where a "past moment and condition in which an event that is now present was once only possible. Rather, he holds that it denotes a God who is neither contained in, nor opposed to being (as if the other of being is simply non-being): "The God who may be is a God who does exist and does enter human experience, but without submitting to comprehension in and through the concept of being, understood in its fully verbal or active sense" (Bloechl 2006: 129). Bloechl's essay is helpful in pointing out the extent to which Kearney attempts to rid God of the snares of theodicy. I argue, however, that in claiming that Kearney understands all being as evil, Bloechl probably stretches Kearney too far.

Between persona's (transcendence) and persons (immanence): Kearney's phenomenology of otherness. This section illustrates Masterson's contention that Kearney's philosophy of religion is characterised by a hermeneutical understanding of phenomenology on the one hand, and the conviction that the possible occupies a place of primacy in relation to the actual on the other (2008:251), as well as to Ward's claim that Kearney's association of eschatology with transfigurative possibility forms the crux of his explicitly theological reflections (2005:370). It clarifies the way that Kearney understands the phenomenology of the *persona* as linked to transfiguration, and also considers how he reflects on various modalities of "otherness" in *Strangers, Gods, and monsters*. Seeking to come to terms –

philosophically – with the Self-Other relationship in the experience of radical alterity, Kearney argues that the challenge of the Other appearing as the Alien calls for a critical hermeneutical engagement of self-and-other, which in turn calls for a form of narrative interpretation capable of tracing interconnections between the poles of sameness and strangeness. Kearney's philosophy of religion, while it engages in the contemporary "pre-occupation" with otherness, profoundly disagrees with the deconstructionist interpretation that, ultimately, the face of otherness is entirely inaccessible to human consciousness – a claim which, in his view, leads to both intellectual and ethical paralysis. He would supplement the deconstructionist approach with a hermeneutics of practical wisdom that would enable us to discriminate between justice and injustice, monster and loving God. Applied to the biblical God, this means that the divine is "*in some way* present or quasi-present in its absence, and hence able to disclose itself." But what does this "*in some way*" mean, exactly, Masterson asks. How precisely is a transcendent deity accessible to human consciousness? Kearney works out his unique answer to this question from a hermeneutical/phenomenological perspective in *The God who may be*, characteristically according the possible priority over speculative reason through his re-imagination of a "vertically" transcendent actual supreme being as "a 'horizontally' beckoning possibility of ethical achievement (Masterson 2008:256). Masterson remains critical of Kearney's phenomenology of religion, but we argue instead that Masterson's view of phenomenology is a narrow one that seems hurdled by commitments to epistemology and ontology.

*"*Prosopon par excellence*": the Christology of* The God who may be. This section engages Bloechl's claim that, if the texts chosen for investigation in *The God who may be* can be taken as indication, "Kearney's Christology … does not need Jesus to have actually died in order to fulfill its role within his eschatology" (2006:135). It is argued, however, that Bloechl reads far too much into Kearney when it comes to his Christology. Considering the important role that the transfiguration and the post-paschal resurrection narratives play in *The God who may be*, and the function of the transfiguration in the gospel narratives as foreshadowing the resurrection (Myburgh, 2012), it is hermeneutically unviable to read the transfigured "*prosopon par excellence*" separately from the crucified Jesus and the risen Christ. Secondly, Bloechl's Christology/soteriology represents a rather

narrow interpretation of the paschal events. In its place, one could outline a Christology in which the crucifixion of Jesus, read dialectically with the resurrection, has a constitutive function (Bloechl accuses Kearney's Christology of being illustrative). And while it is admittedly true that Kearney does not include such arguments in *The God who may be*, there also seems to be nothing in his work that would hinder one hermeneutically from working out such a Christology within the playfield of the God of *posse* – one that describes the passion of Christ as a transfiguring event *par excellence*.

A God beyond every idol – but still a God at all? Kearney and religious discourse. Kearney approaches the controversial question of whether we must only rid our religion of its persistent idols, or whether it must be religion itself, as a practice of idolatry, that we dispose of (Bloechl 2006:127), from the perspective of hermeneutics (Bloechl 2006:128). And indeed his founding principle appears to be ethical, as Bloechl deduces from his apparent commitment to love and justice above any specific religious metaphor and/or tradition. In response to Bloechl's claim that the core of Kearney's thought regarding the God-who-may-be could exist not only separately from Judeo-Christian theism, but could even be "at best indifferent, and perhaps even alien, to the mainstream commitment to worship" (2006:128), it is argued that, hermeneutically, the God-who-may-be is far too dependent on the Judeo-Christian tradition – and even, as Nichols shows, on the onto-theological God (2006:111-126) – to easily become so removed from mainstream doctrine and worship to be called "indifferent" or "alien" to it.

Between poetics and ethics: imagining possible worlds. Kearney's interest lies in what Ricoeur calls "semantic innovation": the role that the imagine plays in the creation of meaning through language, for the productive power of imagination – over against the representative power – is primarily verbal. It is by means of the linguistic imagination that the capacity of language to "open up new worlds of thought, action and self-understanding by means of illuminating interpretations of symbols, myths, narratives and ideologies" can create new possibilities in ethics (Masterson 2008:251). It is for this reason that Kearney frames the theological reconciliation between ethics and poetics in terms of the imagination. For Kearney the ethical mandate is ever that which refuses the relativism of certain postmodern

philosophies, and demands that we choose between different interpretations of religious symbolism based on which readings are more faithful to the ethico-eschatological significance of the Christ-event – to the transfiguring power of the *persona* (Kearney 2001:48). We conclude, however, by pointing out the conundrum of how we are to judge which interpretations are more faithful to these standards, and which acts most conform to the standards of "love" and "justice" that echo throughout Kearney's work. This matter may be not as easily settled as Kearney attempts to do by his attempted mediation, through "diacritical hermeneutics," between the polar extremes of radical and romantic hermeneutics.

Ecumenical possibilities. Kearney's focus on the imagination as a portal to inter-religious dialogue that culminates in social awareness and action is an important contribution to the theology of religions in an age where, in Kearney's words, "religions will be inter-religious or they will not be at peace" (2008a:32). The relationality between religions that Kearney advocates assumes a "generosity of imagination" (2008a:26) that allows the sort of traversing across religious boundaries that enables true religious dialogue. This not only leads to a greater understanding of the religious other and a fresh experience of one's own religious tradition, but of necessity always requires a *choice*, and must culminate, he insists, in the practical care of the downtrodden and oppressed.

A God of small things. When Kearney's "hermeneutical poetics of the kingdom" searches for recurring metaphors, parables, images, and symbols that communicate the eschatological promise in the gospels, he borrows from Arundhati Roy's novel to express that these figures "almost invariably" refer to "a God of small things" (2007a:52-53). This "*microtheology*" – the recurring motif of the kingdom as the last, least, or littlest of things – resists what Kearney calls the more "standard" macrotheology of the Kingdom "as emblem of sovereignty, omnipotence and ecclesiastical triumph" (2007a:53). This is a very valuable contribution in a contemporary context where the traditionally Christian strongholds of the world stand convicted by history for the many ways in which they abused their power and erected structures that still perpetuate the inequalities that characterise the world today.

Opening spaces for dialogue: philosophy and theology. Gregor suspects that one of the reasons why Kearney's hermeneutics of religion has received the large

amount of attention that it has is because Kearney is in some way “beholden” not only to the philosophical community, but also to the world of theological scholarship (2008:149). The traversal of these traditional boundaries in scholarship benefits both theology and philosophy proper.

* * *

This study has explored Kearney’s post-metaphysical reflection on God. More specifically, it has probed into his utilisation of both eschatology and the imagination as a way of negotiating a third way, according to a “poetics of the possible,” between the polar opposite understandings of God as either Being or Non-Being. It has aimed to understand *The God who may be* within the larger context of Kearney’s trilogy (*Philosophy at the Limit*), as well as his other publications on the subjects of the imagination, ethics, hermeneutics, and “thinking God” post-metaphysically. It also specifically considered Kearney’s God of *posse* from a theological point of view, with the guiding question of what may be gained and what will be lost along the way of the post-metaphysical wager. While this approach is not without its problems, the study has found that his notion of the God of *posse* promises new possibilities for leading theology and its discourse about God beyond metaphysical categories to allow for an eschatological understanding of the existence of God.

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For GFR

… I have a confession