God, Particularity and Hermeneutics A Critical-Constructive Theological Dialogue with Richard Kearney on Continental Philosophy's Turn (in)to Religion

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In the discussion about the turn to religion in post-Heideggerian phenomenology and hermeneutics, by Anglo-Saxons labelled as “continental philosophy”, the Irish philosopher Richard Kearney has earned a particular place, amidst thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Kevin Hart, Jean-Yves Lacoste, Jean-Luc Marion, John Caputo, Merold Westphal, and their critics, such as John Milbank. Born in Cork in 1954, Kearney studied in Paris with Paul Ricœur, and was awarded a doctorate in 1980. He now holds the Charles Seelig Chair of Philosophy at Boston College and is a visiting Professor at the University of Dublin and the European University Institute at Florence. He is a well-received speaker at many conferences and colloquia, and a very prolific writer, having published on hermeneutics, narrativity and imagination¹. He also wrote two novels and a collection of poems. Moreover, Kearney is a well-known observer of Irish cultural and social life; he has hosted his own program on television and radio, and has been one of the ghost-writers of speeches for the Irish President Mary Robinson.

Lasting the past few years, Kearney released a trilogy in which he presents his philosophical position, first, in *The God Who May Be* (2001), on the God-question in contemporary continental philosophy, secondly, in *On Stories* (2002), on narrativity and hermeneutics and finally, in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, on how to interpret and to deal with otherness². It is in relation to the theme of this first volume that we start, from a fundamental-theological perspective, our inquiry of the contribution Kearney makes to the contemporary philosophical and theological discussion on thinking God. After some initial theological comments on Kearney's proposal of a poetics of a possible God, we will delve deeper into the intuitions, argumentation and framework of his thinking, and

1. For the bibliography of Kearney, see: <http://fmwww.bc.edu/Pl/fac/kearney.cv.html> (access 1.12.2004).

2. Cf. R. KEARNEY, *The God Who May Be. A Hermeneutic of Religion*, Indiana, IN, 2001; *On Stories*, London, 2002; and *Strangers, Gods and Monsters. Interpreting Otherness*, London, 2003.

present it in relation to other protagonists of the God-discussion in continental philosophy. This will lead us to a sharpening of the philosophical focus, and the suggestion to radicalise the hermeneutical turn Kearney introduces in this discussion. In line with this suggestion, we will finally offer some theological impulses for a contemporary philosophical discourse on God and religion³.

I. INTRODUCTION: BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY

In line with his *The God Who May Be*, Kearney recently⁴ suggested a “poetics of the possible God”, evoking the contours of a “God who may be”, as an alternative to the powerful omnipotent God “who is”, thought of in classical rationalist accounts as self-sufficient being, as self-causing cause. Through “three hermeneutical detours”, playfully and selectively interpreting texts and intuitions from Scripture, testimonial/confessional texts and literary sources, Kearney poetically makes a plea for the priority of the possible over the actual. Perhaps this approach is indeed the most adequate way of highlighting the “micro-theology” he intends – a poetics of the Kingdom of the last and the least, of “small things”, resisting “the standard macro-theology of the Kingdom as emblem of sovereignty, omnipotence and ecclesiastical triumph”⁵. Explicitly, Kearney waves all theological, exegetical, confessional-orthodox competencies and calls upon the “immunity of poetic licence”. Through his “threefold variation of imagination”, he hopes to identify some key traits of a post-onto-theological God, “a God-who-may-be that it reveals itself to us poetically”⁶. One could say that in this poetics Kearney strives at “possibilizing” this revelation of the God who “possibilizes” us to bring about the Kingdom of peace and justice, so actualising God’s *posse*. He features an eschatological God of promise and powerlessness – a God not of *potestas* or *potentia*, but (a Post-God!) of *posse* or *possest* – a God who persuades human beings to answer his call to realize the kingdom, “for if God’s lov-

3. I would like to express my gratitude to my colleague and friend Anthony Godzieba (Villanova University) and to my collaborators in the Research Group *Theology in a Postmodern Context* (esp. to Christophe Brabant, Frederiek Depoortere, Tom Jacobs, and Joeri Schrijvers) and in the GOA-Research Group *Orthodoxy: Process and Product* (Denis Robinson and Stijn Van den Bossche). For more information on these groups and their research projects (sponsored by the Flemish Fund for Scientific Research and the Research Fund of the K.U. Leuven), see resp. <http://www.theo.kuleuven.be/ogtpc/index-en.htm> and <http://www.theo.kuleuven.be/goa/>.

4. See R. KEARNEY, *Poetics of a Possible God. A Postmodern Alternative*, keynote paper given at the biennial conference of the European Society for the Philosophy of Religion, in Leuven (3-6 September 2004), to be published in the proceedings. A preliminary version is available at: <http://www.theo.kuleuven.be/espr/pw/Kearney.pdf> (access 1.12.2004).

5. KEARNEY, *Poetics of a Possible God* (n. 4), p. 5.

6. *Ibid.*

ing is indeed unconditional, the realization of that loving posse in this world is indeed conditional upon our response"⁷.

How thought provoking Kearney's philosophical-hermeneutical work may be, however, it is rather difficult to point out from a fundamental theological perspective⁸, where precisely he stands both philosophically and theologically. Specifically intriguing is the way in which he often introduces the term "wager" to account for his position in relation to other positions, both regarding its content and its methodological approach⁹. As I will further elaborate in the next section of this contribution, it would seem that "wager" – flirting with "le pari de Pascal" – sometimes has more the sense of a "creedal confession", a statement of belief, than a philosophical statement. Certainly when wagering on God and in profiling this God reading texts often from the Jewish-Christian tradition, his work appears to possess a thoroughly theological character – quasi confessional in its own right –, definitely when one perceives his position from his acknowledgement to belong to the Roman-Catholic Church (though sometimes – it would seem – with some anti-institutional sentiments¹⁰, and with a proviso¹¹). When theology is biography, as Johann Baptist Metz states, then Kearney's poetics of a possible God may well be his attempt, from an exercise of *fides quaerens intellectum*, to express and expose (his) the *intellectus fidei*, an exercise performed with a considerable freedom vis-à-vis the tradition and the Church to which he belongs.

And at first sight, there are quite a few immediate links in Kearney's thought to recent theological discourse. Does the appeal to a God who stirs us to the realisation of the Kingdom through a praxis of justice and peace not resemble the theological discourses of late modern political and liberation theologies? These theologies were eschatologically oriented, favouring a "this wordly" practical-historical praxis of emancipation and liberation, profiling the (God of the) Kingdom as critical criterion and actor in concrete histories. Christian faith, hope and love are conceived as

7. KEARNEY, *Poetics of a Possible God* (n. 4), p. 10.

8. My own perspective is a fundamental-theological one. My interest in philosophy, including philosophy of religion, is rather functional, in as much as I am looking in the field of philosophy, as many theologians before and with me, for systematic reflections, thinking patterns, intuitions, metaphors and concepts, which both challenge and assist me in my engagement in a contemporary project of *fides quaerens intellectum*. Indeed, I am challenged time and again to enter the philosophical field – often even by being just reminded that I always have already entered it –, and to choose position, precisely because I am already involved in the construction of a contextually adequate *intellectus fidei*, in other words in an interdisciplinary endeavour with an ultimately theological outcome.

9. See e.g. KEARNEY, *The God Who May Be* (n. 2), pp. 2, 34; *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (n. 2), pp. 19-20.

10. See e.g. his reference, when waving any confessional orthodoxy, to the fact that "many were burnt at stakes or put on the Index for far less in centuries past" (*Poetics of a Possible God* [n. 4], p. 3).

11. See footnote 17.

practical theological virtues. Orthopraxis, then, becomes the criterion of orthodoxy and not the other way around (E. Schillebeeckx). Truth is not so much a matter of “adaequatio” but of “promissio” (J. Moltmann); the Christian tradition is not a collection of eternal truths but a dangerous memory activating a resistance against all-too-easy reconciling “bourgeois” religion (J.-B. Metz), against patriarchy (D. Sölle, E. Schüssler-Fiorenza...), against the marginalisation of the poor through global capitalism (G. Gutiérrez, Cl. & L. Boff, J. Sobrino...), etc. Moreover, Metz’s broadening of the preferential option for the poor into a two-fold, intrinsically linked option for the poor and the other, would reinforce this resemblance. There are, of course, also differences. I will only name three of them. Political, and especially, liberation theologies have always had a major interest in the socio-political mediation of the realisation of the Kingdom, often invoking (neo-)Marxist schemes of analysis and action. The reference of these theologies, further, to a specific faith tradition and community – both retrieving and actively involved in reconfiguring this tradition and community – are of a confessional nature, and thus less pragmatic than Kearney seems to perceive them (he refers to them because he happens to be a Western Christian, and because of his limited competence of other religious traditions, as he admits¹²). And finally, political and liberation theologies would appear to balance more elaborately the “already” and the “not yet” of eschatological expectation, probably due to their taking into account the Christian doctrine of Incarnation. Kearney’s messianism would seem to be dismissive of the latter. These last – interrelated – two points are, most likely, the result of the philosophical license Kearney claims for his thinking, enabling him to selectively retrieve from the Jewish-Christian tradition as well as from others.

Likewise, the presumption underlying this retrieving from many traditions has strong theological associations, especially with what in the heated debate in the theologies of religions about the relation of Christianity to other world religions has become known as the “pluralist” position, classically to be distinguished from “exclusivist” and “inclusivist” positions. Kearney presupposes that religious traditions, in one way or another, share the “same” caring for justice and peace, for human wholeness and fulfilment, and convey narrative wisdom to realise this. An exchange of readings of the different religious traditions, framed within a hermeneutics of religious toleration (i.e. a hermeneutic of tolerant and pluralist interpretations) may result in “suggestive intersections between the different wisdom traditions, given the insights of so many of the great spiritual mystics that God is ultimately one even as the ways to God are many”¹³. The God-who-may-be is revealed in and witnessed to in many

12. KEARNEY, *The God Who May Be* (n. 2), p. 6.

13. KEARNEY, *Interreligious Discourse – War or Peace?*, p. 3, lecture delivered at the Fifteenth Inter-American Congress of Philosophy and the Second Ibero-American Congress of Philosophy, on “Toleration”, 12-16 January, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Lima: http://www.pucp.edu.pe/eventos/congresos/filosofia/programa_general/miercoles/plenariamatutina/KearneyRichard.pdf (access 01.12.2004).

traditions, of which the insights may well be analogous or complementary¹⁴. Interreligious dialogue should lead beyond (although not without) differences in languages and histories to a communal understanding of the transcendent and a peaceful and tolerant living together. In the discussion of the theologies of religions, Kearney's position could be defined as a theo- and soterio-centric pluralist approach to deal with the plurality of religious traditions. Ultimately the transcendent (the "Real" – John Hick) and the striving for salvation is what religions have in common¹⁵, even when one has no religious Esperanto (unless a hermeneutically conscious philosophical account?) to universally determine and express these. It follows that the truth of religions is in what they have in common – even under different hermeneutical perspectives –, rather than what differentiates them. That is the reason Kearney opposes the too explicit, "confessionally partisan"¹⁶ truth claims of religions. It would seem that, for Kearney, the uniqueness and definitiveness of the fullness of God's revelation in the Incarnation in Jesus Christ would qualify to be such a claim. At least that is what most pluralist thinkers have problems with; they prefer representative Christologies (Christ as a representation of God, next to possible other ones) over constitutive ones (Christ as a irreducibly determining feature to speak of God) – and precisely on this point their critics are the most severe¹⁷.

These theological alliances are, of course, no indication of a lack of importance or false pretence, as if "theological" would mean ideological, un-reflexive or irrational, but at least it would seem that the underlying presumptions, and the theological discussions in which they are involved should be reflected upon in a philosophical understanding of (Christian) religion and its truth claims.

However, although for ages the discussion about the methodological specificities of philosophy and (Christian) theology has relentlessly popped up, it would seem that with Kearney the so-called philosophical turn to religion reaches a culmination point, transgressing disciplinary boundaries, making it very difficult to further distinguish between the two disciplines. Kearney is the first to acknowledge this, affirming "to be a little bit less scrupulous, less worried about the blurring", than Levinas

14. See, e.g., hints in this directions as regards Buddhism and Christianity (in reference to Bede Griffith) in KEARNEY, *Interreligious Discourse – War or Peace?* (n. 13), p. 2, (with reference to Charles Taylor) in *The God Who May Be* (n. 2), p. 6, and (in reference to Thomas Merton) in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (n. 2), p. 45; and in relation to Judaism, Christianity and Islam: *Interreligious Discourse – War or Peace?* (n. 13), p. 7, and to all religions, p. 8.

15. Cf. e.g., J. HICK, *An Interpretation of Religion. Human Responses to the Transcendent*, London, 1989, among others pp. 299-315, 380; P.F. KNITTER, *One Earth Many Religions. Multifaith Dialogue & Global Responsibility*, Maryknoll, NY, 1995, pp. 35-37.

16. KEARNEY, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (n. 2), p. 41.

17. Cf. e.g. J. HICK (ed.), *The Myth of God Incarnate*, London, 1978; J. HICK – P.F. KNITTER (eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness. Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Maryknoll, NY, 1987; G. D'COSTA (ed.), *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered. The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Maryknoll, NY, 1990.

and Ricœur¹⁸. His poetics of the possible God seem to mix up philosophy and theology, and therefore at least allow for a formally theological reading. Although, as has become clear, I do not completely refrain from this, I will primarily attempt to profile and evaluate Kearney's post-foundational effort to think God in relation to his philosophical discussion partners, and this with the leading questions of this session in mind: how to deal with religious truth claims after the criticism of the Enlightenment? How can we think God beyond onto-theology, without lapsing into negative theology or philosophy?

In doing so, I will suggest that where Kearney's account becomes theological some philosophical questions should be considered. Moreover, his philosophical wager on and hermeneutics of the God-who-may-be could profit from a more theological impulse. Put very briefly, his philosophy is not theological enough, his theology not philosophical enough. An attempt to better understand his position – in order to understand better mine – does not always lead to a communal understanding but sometimes to difference, and perhaps even conflict, irreconcilability. In what follows, I will first elaborate further, primarily on the basis of *The God Who May Be*, on Kearney's wagers to answer the question of God in contemporary continental philosophy. Through this presentation, some of the things mentioned above hopefully will appear in sharper profile. Afterwards I will situate, both in following Kearney and in my own right, these wagers in the broader philosophical field, especially regarding the so-called negative theologies or philosophies. So doing, I will continue my discussion of Kearney.

II. KEARNEY'S GOD-WHO-MAY-BE...

In a recent interview Richard Kearney states to “pass rightly for a theist”, and to think from his own intellectual and Christian tradition about God. So doing, he strives to elaborate a hermeneutics of religion betting on the possibility that the God he is talking about does exist “and is more than a figment of our imagination or a good story in itself”¹⁹. Answering the question “where do you speak from?”, posed in the introduction of *The God Who May Be*, he gives more details about his philosophical and religious position. First, he describes his philosophical position as phenomenological, attempting to describe phenomena as far as possible “before crossing over to hermeneutic reading”. As far as his religious position is concerned, Kearney acknowledges his allegiance to the Catholic tradition, but – as already mentioned – with a clear proviso: “Where Catholicism

18. L. KAVANAGH, *An Interview with Richard Kearney “Facing God”*, in *Journal of Philosophy & Scripture*, 1 (2004) n. 2, 1-10, p. 1: <http://www.philosophyandscripture.org/RichardKearney.pdf> (access: 01.12.2004).

19. KAVANAGH, *Interview with R. Kearney* (n. 18), p. 6.

offends love and justice, I prefer to call myself a Judeo-Christian; 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*²⁰. Kearney also cherishes the insight that religions and spiritual movements, at their core share a basic drive to detachment of an excessive ego, commitment to transcendence, and to love and justice. The basic question engaged in his enterprise is the following: how to “overcome the old notion of God as disembodied cause, devoid of dynamism and desire, in favour of a more eschatological notion of God as possibility to come: the *posse* which calls us beyond the present toward a promised future?”. How can we think God post-onto-theologically?

Two wagers are prominent in Kearney’s endeavour. The first, the theist one, is to wager that God exists and to conceive of this God in terms of a God “who may be”, “who is May-Be”, a “possible God”, a God “more than impossible”, with a first name, borrowed from Nicholas of Cusa: *Possest*. The God who may be is the God from the kingdom to come, an eschatological God, a God of promise and of powerlessness, of justice and peace, who enables human beings to answer the call to realize the kingdom to make God enter history. God’s *dunamis* is not to be understood as *omnipotentia* but as possibilizing powerlessness calling upon us to be possibilized to enter history, and make the impossible possible. The possible God is a conditional God, not in the sense that only when we want there to be a God, is there a God, but because the God who may be needs our answer to enter history, to make the impossible of God’s *posse* possible.

Kearney’s second wager has to do with the way in which such a God can be thought of today. A phenomenological description of such God does not suffice, because what such a God stands for, comes only to life when engaging in a hermeneutical retrieving of inspiring insights from some main texts of the western Judeo-Christian and philosophical, intellectual history (with a special eye for “the metaphorizing role of hermeneutic mediation”). So doing Kearney sketches, he says, “the outlines of a narrative [onto-]eschatology”²¹, which favours the possible over the actual, *posse* over *esse* – finally leading to a poetics of a possible God. Hereby, he holds to the priority of ethics over ontology. It is the very otherness of the other (coined by Kearney as the *persona* of the other), which “is the in-finite other in the finite person before me” (irreducible to the embodied person), the sign of God in the other, that “transfigures me before I configure it”²², and calls me to an “eschatological relation of one-for-the-other”, to the realization of the kingdom to come (which has

20. KEARNEY, *The God Who May Be* (n. 2), p. 6.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 18 & 16.

to do with the “promise of a perichoretic interplay of differing personas”²³). Giving the other a cup of cold water and sharing our bread is getting the Kingdom underway.

Kearney’s reading of the burning bush revelation of the name of God *’ehyeh’asher ’ehyeh* as “I am who may be”, pressing the ethical and historical aspect of the biblical God, may well be one of the most thought provoking ways to express this intuition: “I am who may be if you continue to keep my word and struggle for the coming of justice”²⁴. It is in this context, in profiling his proposal between onto-theology and postmodern negative theologies, that he writes 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”²⁵. The God who may be is not the almighty, all-knowing, omnipresent God of onto-theology, but remains a God engaged in history, unconditionally loving and giving, calling us to praxis of love and justice.

These two wagers, both as regards content and methodological approach, are the point from which he engages the discussion with other contemporary thinkers on God and religion, and with whom he shares the guiding question “what comes after the onto-theological God of metaphysics?”.

III. ... AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO POSTMODERN NEGATIVE THEOLOGIES

Kearney profiles his exercise as an attempt at resisting both classical onto-theology and postmodern negative theologies, the latter of which conceive of God either as too transcendent, above all imagination and interpretation, or as “beneath the grid of symbolic or imaginary expression, unnameable, indeterminate”²⁶. Further, a considerable part of his philosophical discussion is devoted to a very sympathetic confrontation with deconstruction (Derrida and Caputo). In all three cases, Kearney argues that his wager of the God who may be, to be hermeneutically retrieved from both religious and intellectual traditions, is the better answer to today’s questioning about God. All other kinds of philosophical negative-theological approaches risk ending up being blind and empty, not able to distinguish between God and the monstrous.

In this paragraph, partly following Kearney’s classification and complementing or adapting it, we attempt to briefly outline the postmodern debate on God and religion, while at the same time continuing our discussion with him.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

1. *The Negative Theology of the Saturated Phenomenon*

In a stringent phenomenological outset, guided by the adagio *autant de réduction, autant de donation*, Marion argues that phenomena ultimately appear as given: Being is given, language is given; heuristics precedes hermeneutics²⁷. When thinking God in this regard, Marion claims that Christian negative theology, e.g. Pseudo-Denys' apophasis, is not a goal in itself, but rather leads to a third way, beyond affirmation and negation – de-nomination: “it concerns a form of speech which no longer says something about something (or a name of someone), but which denies all relevance to predication, rejects the nominative function of names, and suspends the rule of truth's two values”²⁸. God is pure giving, superabundant Love. God is rightly addressed only in praise, for in praise the order is inverted: it is “not a matter of saying, but of hearing”. The words of praise “expose me to what lets itself be said only for the sake of no longer permitting me to say it, but to acknowledge it as goodness, thus to love it”²⁹. In fact, the third way is answering to what Marion has coined a “saturated phenomenon”: an excess of intuition saturating the intention, “the measure of each and every concept”.

For Kearney, the God of Marion is too transcendent, so transcendent that we legitimately may ask how we still can know something of this God profiled as a “*hyper*-excess that cannot be seen, known, or understood”, a God encountered with “a certain ‘stupor’ or ‘terror’ which its very ‘incomprehensibility imposes on us’”³⁰. “If the saturated phenomenon is really as bedazzling as Marion suggests, how can we tell the difference between the divine and its opposites? How are we to distinguish between enabling and disabling revelations [...] how can we discriminate between excess and defect?”³¹. Moreover, such a God overwhelming us with love, and not depending on us in any way, is ultimately hardly different from the omnipotent God of onto-theology.

On both accounts, one would be eager to wholeheartedly agree with Kearney. When language ultimately does not matter at all – becomes merely pragmatic without any predicative character, as Marion claims –, and when the primacy of donation as pure giving principally installs a radically asymmetrical relation between God and human beings, condemning the latter to a merely receptively taking note of, one indeed may wonder how we came to know about it in the first place. It is indeed at

27. Cf. J.-L. MARION, “*Christian Philosophy*”. *Hermeneutic or Heuristic?*, in F.J. AMBROSIO (ed.), *The Question of Christian Philosophy Today*, New York, 1999, 247-264.

28. J.-L. MARION, *In the Name. How to Avoid Speaking of “Negative Theology”*?, in J.D. CAPUTO – M.J. SCANLON (eds.), *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, Indiana, IN, 1999, 21-53, p. 27.

29. MARION, *In the Name* (n. 28), p. 32.

30. KEARNEY, *The God Who May Be* (n. 2), p. 32 (with a reference to Marion's *In the Name*).

31. KEARNEY, *The God Who May Be* (n. 2), p. 33.

this point that only a more hermeneutical approach seems adequate to solve the problem. But one could wonder whether the structural asymmetry Marion points at, is relativised too much in Kearney's hermeneutics (and even inverted): getting to know the unconditionally loving God-who-may-be seems to have become conditioned by our hermeneutic choices: for why would one read this text (of Scripture, e.g.) instead of another? What guarantees Kearney's God-who-may-be not to be merely Kearney's God-who-may-be (of which he says to believe that its referent may be), a construct of a strong, albeit, hermeneutical, subject? Is God finally not what we make of God, and this not only on the level of knowing, but also as regards God's realisation?

2. *The Negative Theologies of the Sublime*

There would also seem to be some affinity with the traditions of negative theology in the postmodern philosophies of the sublime. Exemplary for this kind of philosophy is Jean-François Lyotard's aesthetic considerations on the postmodern sublime and the way he sees it function as the imrepresentable to be presented in postmodern art; indeed, contemporary aesthetics pays tribute to the unrepresentable, at the core of representation³². The modern avant-garde still presented the unrepresentable in the nostalgic longing for a vanished beginning or end, a foundational or anticipated presence no longer available. That which was recognizable in this longing, continued to offer some comfort and joy. The postmodern aesthetical sensibility, however, no longer knows this nostalgia and is only aware of the impossible (re)presentation of the non-(re)presentable. It is "ce qui se refuse à la consolation des bonnes formes, au consensus d'un goût qui permettrait d'éprouver en commun la nostalgie de l'impossible; ce qui s'enquiert de présentations nouvelles, non pas pour en jouir, mais pour mieux faire sentir qu'il y a de l'imprésentable"³³. Or: "La 'modernité' d'aujourd'hui n'attend pas de l'*aisthesis* qu'elle donne à l'âme la paix du beau, mais qu'elle l'arrache de justesse au néant"³⁴. The postmodern sublime indeed not only provokes a feeling of delight but also of terror.

32. Some references: J.-F. LYOTARD, *Réponse à la question: Qu'est-ce que c'est le postmoderne?*, *Post-scriptum à la terreur et au sublime*, and *Note sur les sens de "post"*, in ID., *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, Paris, 1986, resp. pp. 11-34, 105-115, and 117-126; *Réécrire la modernité, L'instant*, Newman, *Le sublime et l'avant-garde, Quelque chose comme: "communication... sans communication"*, *Représentation, présentation, imprésentable*, and *Après le sublime, état de l'esthétique*, in ID., *L'inhumain*, Paris, 1988, resp. pp. 33-55, 89-99, 101-117, 119-129, 131-139, and 147-155; J.-F. LYOTARD, *Pérégrinations. Loi, forme, événement*, Paris, 1990, pp. 61-66, 79-84; and also *Musique, mutique* and *Anima minima*, in J.-F. LYOTARD, *Moralités postmodernes*, Paris, 1993, 185-198, 199-210. A specific study of Kant is offered in J.-F. LYOTARD, *Leçons sur l'Analytique du sublime*, Paris, 1991.

33. LYOTARD, *Réponse* (n. 32), p. 32-33.

34. LYOTARD, *Anima minima* (n. 32), p. 207.

Lyotard, according to Kearney in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, makes a dangerous move when attributing the “same model of the sublime to the unspeakable horror of the Holocaust and the equally unspeakable alterity of the Hebrew Lord”: “any equivalence between the unspeakability of the Most High Lord (*makom*) and the unspeakability of abyssal evil (*privatio boni*) must [...] gives room for pause. If the divine becomes sublime to the point of becoming sadism it has, in my view, ceased to be divine”³⁵. Lyotard’s aesthetics obviously bears within it an ethical blind spot.

I would not agree with Kearney’s rather negative judgement of Lyotard’s aesthetics because of its ethical blind spot. One cannot read his aesthetics without seeing it in connection with his ethically framed language pragmatics³⁶ (an ethical impetus motivated by “the lessons of history”, of modern master narratives having lost their plausibility). Only then does one become sensitive to the critical intention of Lyotard’s interest in aesthetics, offering him the opportunity to interpret the postmodern aestheticisation in light of an aesthetics of the sublime with room for openness and receptivity. According to Lyotard, postmodern culture – the work of the painter, sculptor, author, musician, philosopher – develops a sensitivity for the *differend* to which one must bear witness; a sensitivity that at the same time criticises the hegemony of performativity and capital (including the capitalist recuperation of postmodern aesthetics of the sublime). It cultivates a sensitivity that resists the role of authority to be occupied by a particular instance, since this leads to terror; a sensitivity, however (or better: therefore), that remains without a demonstrable normative instance: where does the command to offer resistance get its legitimacy? The answer to this last question must remain open, Lyotard states, surely “s’il est vrais que ce ‘tu dois’ préserve et réserve la venue du futur selon son inattendu”³⁷. Filling it in risks entering again the patterns of the grand narratives. Perhaps, it is this openness that is of concern for Kearney. However, it is hardly a way out of ethics. On the contrary. Lyotard, having also learned the lessons of history, seems to have engaged in a wager. This raises the question: what motivates Kearney to make his wager? Where does it come from? Why does he engage in his particular God-who-may-be-narrative? And is his choice a filling in of what Lyotard wanted to keep open – or is it ultimately almost another name for it (given the highly “messianic” features it ultimately attains)?

35. KEARNEY, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (n. 2), p. 95.

36. Lyotard is of the opinion that the aesthetic and the historico-political – put differently: the problematic of language – are structured analogously. “L’une et l’autre font certainement accueil à une même manière de penser, celle que Kant appelle jugement réfléchissant. Le penser s’y montre capable de synthétiser des données, sensorielles ou socio-historiques, sans se servir de règles prédéterminées” (LYOTARD, *Pérégrinations* [n. 32], pp. 45-46).

37. LYOTARD, *Le temps, aujourd’hui* (n. 32), p. 88. See also, among others, his *Memoirandum sur la légitimité*, in *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, Paris, 1986, 65-94, p. 89ff.

Kearney's most exemplary author, however, for the "teratology of the sublime" seems to be Slavoj Žižek, whose position he characterises as apocalyptic postmodernism. In the sublime, diabolic Evil and the absolute Good coincide; differentiating between the two is a matter of perspective, not of content. In the sublime a dialectical conflation of the sacred and the monstrous becomes manifest, signalling "the eruption of the unpredictable into the economy of the modern self, expressing itself in a series of pathological phenomena which for Žižek are symptomatic of the peculiarly postmodern obsession with the Other as alien"³⁸. Focussing on the monstrous character of their God, Kearney reproaches such thinkers of the sublime, to dispense with ethical and historical judgement. The sublime God has become so indeterminate, alien, that God can be anything, monstrous, trauma, stranger, horrific. "In the realm of the sublime, vertical excess and abyssal excess easily collapse into one another. Alterity becomes the flip side of the void"³⁹.

At a broader religious and cultural level, Kearney sees the same dynamic operative in some neo-Jungian and neo-Gnostic forms of New Age in mind, calling upon a "dark God": "an ambivalent deity which transcends our conventional moral notions of good and evil and summons us to rediscover our innermost unconscious selves"⁴⁰. Also here only a critical hermeneutics of narrative imagination and judgement is a promising alternative. And also here, my question would be: of which narratives,

38. KEARNEY, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (n. 2), p. 95.

39. My collaborator, Frederiek Depoortere, signalled me that Žižek's thought is more complex than would seem from Kearney's presentation. First of all, the identity of diabolical Evil and the Good should be seen against the background of Žižek's Lacanian reading of Kant. Žižek makes use of Kant's notion of "diabolical Evil". This is evil that meets all the criteria of the ethical act and is, as such, indistinguishable from the absolute Good. Diabolical evil however is impossible. It is Real in the Lacanian sense of the term, as that what does not exist, but has to be presupposed to be able to account for the current symbolic order. Secondly, Žižek's view on the Law is not as negative as Kearney seems to suggest, although it is highly ambiguous. On the one hand, Žižek indeed searches to go behind the Law and to enter the domain of drive (as Kearney indicates), but on the other hand he also recognizes the necessity of the Law. Finally, one should be careful to speak about Žižek's God. He is and remains a staunch atheist and materialist. One should thus always take into account that what he says about God could be merely imagery. This does not mean that philosophers of religion and theologians should ignore his work, on the contrary, but it are not necessarily the passages in which Žižek talks explicitly about God, which are the most interesting for their undertaking, but those in which he offers his view on, for instance, universality. For Žižek's view on the moral Law, ethics, the Good and diabolical Evil, one can read his *The Unconscious Law. Towards an Ethics Beyond the Good*, in S. ŽIŽEK, *The Plague of Fantasies*, London – New York, 1997, 213–241. This is also the main source that is used by Kearney for his discussion of Žižek.

40. KEARNEY, *The God Who May Be* (n. 2), p. 33. And in conclusion about the two kinds of negative theology mentioned: "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*?" (p. 34).

and why? And what is the status of the product of this hermeneutical enterprise?

3. *Deconstruction and Negative Theology*

Marion's point on the merely pragmatic and not predicative function of praise is an immediate answer to Derrida, in the discussion both are engaged in on the relation between deconstruction and negative theology. Derrida argues that, although there are associations between his deconstructionism and the traditions of negative theology, prayer and praise stand between the two, because of the irreducible predicative element they contain⁴¹. Derrida points out that in the very act of negating God one actually negates one's negation of God. Derrida calls this a "dénégation": even the most negative discourse always contains a predicative moment, one which qualifies the trace of the other. From the perspective of deconstruction, negation here cannot hide or conceal – on the contrary it reveals – the fact that there is always an alterity which precedes speech and makes speech possible, but which at the same time can only appear in language as "named". Language is needed to speak about what can never be spoken about. In one of his own attempts to evoke the structure of language, and thus to speak about what is constitutive for speech but ungraspable therein Derrida re-introduces Plato's notion of *khora*⁴². At this juncture, Derrida differentiates *khora* sharply from negative theology, because of its radical a-human and a-theological character. "This has nothing to do with negative theology: there is reference neither to an event nor to a giving, neither to an order nor to a promise [...] but if, stirred by an obligation that does not come from it, we think and speak of it, then it is necessary to respect the singularity of this reference. Although it is nothing, this referent appears irreducible and irreducibly other: one cannot invent it. But since it remains alien to the order of presence and absence, it seems that one could only invent it in its very otherness, at the moment of the address". And Derrida continues: "But this unique address is not a prayer, a celebration, or an encomium. It does not speak to a You"⁴³.

41. Cf. J. DERRIDA, *Comment ne pas parler? Dénégations*, in *Psychè. Invention de l'autre*, Paris, 1987, 535-595; *Sauf le nom*, Paris, 1993; *Foi et savoir. Les deux sources de la « religion » aux limites de la simple raison*, in J. DERRIDA – G. VATTIMO (eds.), *La religion. Séminaire de Capri sous la direction de Jacques Derrida et Gianni Vattimo*, Paris, 1996, 9-86. The first reference to the similarity and difference between deconstruction and negative theology dates back to a text from 1968: *La différance*, published in *Marges de la philosophie*, Paris, 1972, p. 6. Further: H. COWARD – T. FOSHAY (eds.), *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Albany, NY, 1992; R.P. SCHARLEMAN (ed.), *Negation and Theology*, Charlottesville, VA – London, 1992.

42. DERRIDA, *Comment ne pas parler?* (n. 41), pp. 566ff.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 570; ET: *How to Avoid Speaking*, in S. BUDICK – W. ISER (eds.), *Languages of the Unsayable. The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Work*, New York, 1989, 3-70, p. 39.

Very sympathetically, Kearney tries to demarcate his own position in relation to deconstructionism, of which his primary discussion partners are Derrida and Caputo. In *The God Who May Be*, e.g., after having evaluated Levinas's views on "eschatological" desire of God (in which ethics radically precedes hermeneutics), as (a) being already a (biblical-Talmudic) interpretation of desire – a theological turn –, and (b) as impossible because of the hyperbolic excess of his ethics, causing almost pathological passivity and paralysis⁴⁴, Kearney deals with deconstructive readings of desire, which radicalise the otherness of which desire is in desire – an otherness which cannot be named, cannot be filled in. For Derrida, Kearney says, this desire for otherness is linked to atheism rather than to (a particular) theism; it 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"⁴⁵. Derrida calls here upon the general structure of "messianicity", to be distinguished from specific historically determined messianisms. Such desire of God (God being the other name of desire) is, according to Kearney, the desire for an impossible God, completely other and indeterminate; and the messianic stands for "a non-lieu of absolute passion and passivity, of incessant waiting and welcome, preceding and exceeding every historical revelation of a specific messiah"⁴⁶. In other words, it is the leap into radical atheism. And according to Caputo, this is what deconstruction is about: "the desire for the impossible as impossible", keeping the openness for otherness radically open. It is at this point that Kearney, again and in line with his criticisms of the two former positions, points to the "risk of indiscrimination" (teratology). "If every other is wholly other, does it still *matter* who or what exactly the other is?". How are we still able to discriminate then between what is God and not-God? "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 a specific point 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?"⁴⁷. Indeed, affirms Kearney, to know that it is God we desire (and not "some idol, simulacrum or false prophet"), the God of desire needs to be recognised in identifiable signs and stories. Is the absolute faith and trust Derrida asks for in another without face to come – a "monstrous other", absolutely surprising because one is always unprepared for it – not blind and empty? But how then to strive for justice? How to decide?

44. KEARNEY, *The God Who May Be* (n. 2), p. 69: "The sickness unto love sung in the Song of Songs [is] an impossible terrifying love, not embraced but suffered, not offered but inflicted. A 'psychosis' bordering, at times, on theo-erotic masochism".

45. *Ibid.*, p. 71.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

47. *Ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

Here, in the discussion with Derrida, Kearney's two wagers "make a difference". Only a hermeneutical retrieval of great texts, secular and religious, from our religious, cultural and philosophical traditions may shed some light in the dark – the wager on method. Such hermeneutical endeavour leads him to reaffirm his wager on content: God is desired because God desired first: "desire responds to the double demand of eschaton and eros. God's desire for us – our desire for God. The Shulamite loves as she is loved"⁴⁸. There is no messianicity without particular messianism.

I cannot help having the impression that Kearney's response to the question "how to decide" is not unambiguous. He indeed shows how Derrida's atheistic messianicity also implies a wager, a choice, a particular dealing with desire ("the messianic desire of God both is and is not outside the circle of messianism"). Desire beyond desire ultimately remains related to "the circle of desire". However, after having pointed to the difficulty of deconstruction to decide (its impossibility), how does he legitimate his own choice? Why would one decide his way? Why would one read the texts Kearney wants to read, and use his hermeneutical key (a God of love and justice)? Is this merely his own predilection, his own (private?) theological turn? Does it bind anyone else? And if so, how to deal with it? If God desires us and has shown this in a particular history witnessed to in signs and texts, how to decide upon which signs and texts these are? Who is the hermeneutical subject? And what is its hermeneutical community? And what is the relation they have to the tradition of signs and texts they read and interpret? If the philosopher turns into a theologian – with reference to a particular tradition –, why then not thoroughly so? And what is the philosophical license in this regard? We will come back to this.

This same discussion even more explicitly springs from Kearney's comments on Derrida as regards the impossible. In a series of post-meta-physical readings of the possible (Husserl, Bloch, Heidegger), Kearney finally discusses Derrida's deconstructive notion of the possible. For the latter, the "perhaps", the "peut-être" necessarily belongs to the structure of every experience, which is at the same time always an experience of the possible and the impossible (as that which is not predictable, expected or anticipated). An event, to be really an event, is always "the arrival of the impossible", the "making possible of the impossible" – and is thus involved in the aporia of the possible impossible: keeping the present open for the other (as "radically indeterminate possible") to come is the condition of everything which comes; but what comes lifts the perhaps. Kearney refers here to four examples of Derrida: decision, interpretation, invention, and pardon. All of them are only possible insofar as they involve the impossible as the unforeseen, something other to come, thus

48. *Ibid.*, p. 79.

impossible as regards what is by today's accounts possible. Therefore, "im-possibility is not the mere contrary of possibility but rather its mark of renewal and arrival as event"⁴⁹. It is to this aporia of the impossible as the condition of what is possible – the possible as "more-than-impossible" – that Derrida links the notion of the experience of faith (the faith of deconstruction): faith in (a filiality towards) the undecidability and unpredictability of what is to happen, what is to come. For Kearney, Derrida here refers to the general "structure of *all* human experience rather than to *any specially religious* experience of a loving God"⁵⁰. "For me", Kearney continues, "the impossible-made-possible signals the promise of new thinking about the 'possible God'"⁵¹. Here he sees no opposition but an irreducible difference with deconstruction's discourse. For Kearney the impossible-made-possible is not referring to the structure of experience in general (*différance*), but to "a specifically *religious* experience of God". It does not concern only a difference in language games but also in reference. Where Derrida points to the general "messianic" structure of experience, open upon the other to come⁵², leaving matters radically open, reserving judgement, Kearney does decide for an eschatological God of justice and peace, a particular messianism. A possible God who as May-Be is radically transcendent, at the same time possible and impossible, possibilizing the impossible to happen, calling upon us, engaging us in the realization of the kingdom, and finally not only a "can-be" but also a "should-be", urging for our openness to the gracious coming of possible divinity⁵³.

Again, Kearney points to Derrida's atheism when dealing with the fact that Derrida does not want to develop his own thinking in a theist way. Again, he brings in his own wager. The difference with Derrida has to do with another language game, with another referent, a parting of ways. We, however, are left with the question as to what the relationship is between the two discourses: if it is not opposition but difference, what difference? Are both just discourses standing next to each other? For if it is a matter of choice and decision, is Derrida's discourse then not presupposed – because to choose is to "lift the impossible". Or is it that Kearney implicitly acknowledges that he has been chosen before choosing – choosing then in fact being answering the call of God who already addressed him ("The Shulamite loves as she is loved")? And how does he know? Where does God speak, when and to whom? How does he dif-

49. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

52. "The closest Derrida's reflection comes to religion is in the guise of a 'messianicity without messianism', a form of vigilant openness to the incoming events of *all our experiences* – secular, sacred or profane; good or evil; loving or violent" (KEARNEY, *The God Who May Be* [n. 2], p. 98).

53. See Kearney's own summary in *The God Who May Be* (n. 2), p. 100.

ferentiate between the call of God and other calls? By reading texts... but what texts? Of his own tradition(s)... Which is (are)...? However, in the end, does it really matter – because all religions and great intellectual traditions would seem to speak of the same striving to decentring of the subject in view of what is other and a longing for justice and peace. And where does this presupposition come from? And, in view of his respect for deconstruction: is it not too facile to claim that it is a discourse which is “merely” different, and not opposite to his own discourse?

In summary, both Marion’s abundantly-giving-but-too-transcendent-God, the sublime invoking both terror and delight, and Derrida’s blind and empty undecidability seem to be inappropriate to answer the question as to what comes after the God of onto-theology. Kearney’s own response – his wager –, informed by a hermeneutics of several texts, religious and philosophical, leads us to a God-narrative evoking a messianic God always still to come who has left traces in signs and stories in history. But it remains a legitimate question why this God; and why rather a God who heals than a God who judges (which according to the tradition to which Kearney refers happens to be the same God). Where does this God come from? Whose God is this? Who is bound by this discourse? And what is its philosophical claim?

If after onto-theology discourse on God, and especially the rationality of this discourse, is a matter of wager, over against other wagers, privileging certain texts, why then not go John Milbank’s way, at least claiming not to be in difference with the philosophies of difference, but in persisting to oppose them.

4. *Beyond the Baptism of Nihilism in Postmodern Negative Theologies*

It is rather remarkable that Kearney, at least to my knowledge and in the works I consulted, is not referring to John Milbank’s postmodern neo-Augustinianism, using postmodern thinking to overcome it. He definitely knows Milbank, if not from other occasions, certainly from the second Villanova Conference on Postmodernism and Religion “Questioning God”, in October 1999⁵⁴. Although the end result of Milbank’s “Radical Orthodoxy” is “quite” different from Kearney’s, some structural similarities seem surprisingly striking: the wager on God and the coming of a kingdom of justice and peace, the acknowledgement of different language games (narratives) between which one must choose in dealing with the post-onto-theological situation, the critique of postmodern negative theologies, the turn to narrativity implying the reading of selected texts to know more about this God. Most probably, Kearney would see in

54. The proceedings have been published in: J.D. CAPUTO – M. DOOLEY – M.J. SCANLON (eds.), *Questioning God* (Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion), Bloomington, IN, 2001.

Milbank's discourse a postmodern re-installment of a quasi-ontotheology (because ultimately in Milbank's account "unfounded"), quite "confessionally partisan", when confronted with Milbank's claim that "only Christian theology offers now a discourse able to position and overcome nihilism itself. This is why it is so important to reassert theology as a master discourse; theology, alone remains the discourse of non-mastery"⁵⁵. For Milbank, postmodern criticism reveals the radical nihilism of modernity's secularism, and is therefore a supreme opportunity to launch a Christian meta-narrative to overcome it⁵⁶. For thinkers of difference are foremost expressions or variations of this modern nihilism, and not ways to go beyond it. In linking their historicist accounts (which Milbank welcomes) with an ontology of difference, these philosophers are too little aware of the fact that they construe a narrative (a *mythos*) in its own right which is not more "reasonable" than the Christian one, which in one way or another continues the modern ideas of freedom and emancipation⁵⁷, and leads to violence and exclusion – and in no way to a "kingdom of justice and peace". They spread a nihilism which can only be overcome through a theologically claimed realism – a truth claim based on a particular narrative, not on universal reason. The appeal to a particular narrative indeed does not refrain from making truth claims transgressing the boundaries of this narrative, because the Christian theological narrative from its own perspective – from within its narrative structure, engendering its own tradition-bound rationality – interprets the whole of reality, including the other accounts of it⁵⁸. Therefore, it is either nihilism or Christian theology. And the latter definitely stands in opposition to the postmodern "baptism of nihilism in the name of misconstrued 'negative theologies'", referring to the so-called turn to religion of continental philosophy. Briefly: postmodernist accounts of difference involve conflict, violence, exclusion, and dualism. The Christian account subsumes difference under a horizon of peace and harmony, the real Kingdom of God.

55. J. MILBANK, *Theology and Social Theory. Beyond Secular Reason*, Oxford, 1990, p. 6.

56. See also the introduction of J. MILBANK – C. PICKSTOCK – G. WARD (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy. A New Theology*, London – New York, 1999, p. 15: Radical Orthodoxy sees "the nihilistic drift of postmodernism (which nonetheless has roots in the outset of modernity) as a supreme opportunity ... to reclaim the world by situating its concerns and activities within a theological framework". "What emerges is a contemporary theological project made possible by the self-conscious superficiality of today's secularism".

57. See, e.g., Milbank's criticism of Lyotard in *Theology and Social Theory* (n. 55), pp. 314-319.

58. Hereto it proposes a return to Augustinianism, a Christian framework of conceptualization, in which the modern aporias brought to the fore by postmodern nihilism, are resolved. The central key in this regard is the category of "participation". The finite only preserves its own integrity – in fact even its worldliness – when it participates in its infinite eternal source, whereas in modern epistemology and postmodern nihilism the integrity of the finite ultimately dissolves.

This opposition goes obviously much too far for Kearney, who positions, as we mentioned already, his own discourse as different from deconstruction (as an example of a philosophy of difference), not opposed to it – which raises the question, however: in what way precisely different? It is, moreover, contrary to Kearney's philosophical (and theological) hermeneutical presumption that a lot of (religious) narratives may well be practising a kind of phronetic wisdom, "negotiating a medial position between the claims of universality and particularity, thereby conjoining the all-inclusive claims of timeless *sophia* with the more specific and singular claims of temporal faith traditions – Biblical, Buddhist, Hindu, etc.; and each of these wisdom traditions, in turn, possesses its own special historicity of production, transmission, translation and reception"⁵⁹. This would reflect a position severely at odds to Milbank's exclusive Christian claim.

Nevertheless, Milbank's approach makes us wonder whether the priority of ethics over hermeneutics in Kearney should not be read the other way around: what is Kearney's narrative? Is it ultimately – even in its criticism of postmodern negative theologies and deconstruction – not a (quasi-modern?) attempt in its own right – by what I would call a strong hermeneutical subject – to come to the essence of Christianity, or broader the Jewish-Christian tradition (whatever this in fact may be...), or more, of religion, or even of humanity, guided by a (quasi-modern) hermeneutical presumption that a *phronetic* hermeneutics of toleration rather leads to a communal understanding beyond (of course, not without) difference, than to the acknowledgement of (sometimes irreducible) difference – a point also which would explain his appreciative references to Habermas' consensus-oriented theory of communicative action⁶⁰. Why "quasi"? For the same reason Kearney sometimes would refer to the "quasi"-universalist tendencies of his thinking⁶¹, because based on a wager.

There must be no misunderstanding: I share the criticism I assume Kearney would venture against Milbank's Radical Orthodoxy. But I think his own position remains as ambivalent – in Milbank's words: not historicist enough –, and seems to gamble both on the postmodern criticism of master narratives, on an ethical intuition sustained by a hermeneutical epistemology with modern reminiscences, and by a theism fuelled by elements from the religious tradition to which he belongs (in its prophetic-ethical version). But can his approach then, be promoted just as a different narrative as regards the narrative of deconstruction, or is it – philosophically speaking – not already one step too far, taking ultimately too little notice of the radicality infused in hermeneutics by deconstruction?

59. KEARNEY, *Interreligious Discourse – War or Peace?* (n. 13), p. 4.

60. See KEARNEY, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters* (n. 2), p. 104.

61. See *ibid.*, p. 19.

IV. SHARPENING THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOCUS: TOWARDS A MORE RADICAL HERMENEUTICS (OF RELIGION)

I doubt whether Kearney would object to a lot of what I have said thus far. I suggest that, from a philosophical viewpoint, he could further clarify his precise relationship to deconstruction, and the way he sees both his theist wager and his turn to narrativity and diacritical hermeneutics as an answer to it. For it seems that precisely these two interrelated points, combined with the appeal to wagers, are not free from some ambiguity. It may well be that this suggestion also tends to distinguish (not separate) the philosophical and theological moment of his discourse, rather than to conflate them. In this regard, it is a question of more philosophical clarity about his theological and hermeneutical wager.

“A basic problem with the approach of Levinas and Derrida, as I see it, is that they fail to distinguish adequately between different *kinds* of otherness [...] For Levinas or Derrida, to represent the alterity of the other is a betrayal – a reabsorbition [sic] of its unconditional difference into the Logos. Against this, we offer the wager that it may be possible to honour the ‘breach of totality’ that is, bear witness to the infinite other within the finite limits of certain reciprocal relations of love and justice”⁶².

I think Kearney is right when he opposes against those who would conceive of representing the alterity of the other as betrayal, contamination, as if this irreducible otherness would be accessible, thinkable without representation and language, and that the refusal to do so risks being blind and empty. There is no way beyond language to deal with otherness, even in its most subtle and thin forms. Moreover he would certainly agree, I suppose, that the role of narrativity and hermeneutics to deal with otherness he advances, are, in their own way, already at work in Levinas and Derrida themselves, Levinas in his quasi-untenable theist messianism, and Derrida’s atheist messianicity without messianism (which sometimes seems to become, in Caputo’s reception, a messianism in its own right). And next to such discourses then, by one’s own wager, one could construct or imagine another discourse: a philosophical-theological ethical theism of the God-who-may-be, a kind of a postmodern retrieval of a modern striving for justice and peace, venturing a (“quasi”-)universal ethical claim.

Nevertheless, and a discussion between John Caputo and Hent de Vries on prayer has made me aware of this, there is a “moment of truth” at work in deconstruction which both resists and acknowledges such an approach⁶³. Continuing the discussion between Marion and Derrida on

62. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

63. See my *The Rediscovery of Negative Theology Today. The Narrow Gulf between Theology and Philosophy*, in M. OLIVETTI (ed.), *Théologie négative* (Biblioteca dell’ “Archivio di Filosofia”, 59), Rome, 2002, 443-459.

deconstruction and negative theology, and relying on texts of the later Derrida, Caputo identifies “pure prayer”, prayer without the “contamination of predication”, with “an act directed at someone, at ‘you’, even and especially if one has no assurance that there is such a ‘you’”⁶⁴. So doing it would seem that, in Caputo’s account, deconstructionism is turned into what I would qualify as a “non-indifferent agnosticism”⁶⁵: the passion for non-knowing results in a passionate refusal to choose between theism – relation with God – and atheism – auto-constitution. The outcome is a paradoxical attempt to retrieve the relational attitude, which structures the subject in theism, but without the relationship itself – “religion without religion”⁶⁶. Hent de Vries distances himself from Caputo’s reading of prayer in Derrida, accentuating that one cannot turn Derrida just like that into a “man of prayer”, because Derrida’s prayer itself is in the last instance always suspended. For Derrida, prayer “is never pure properly speaking. Only as an *analytically unsurpassable* moment, only as a momentary gesture, as a breath, as it were, does it come to pass at all. From the very moment of its inception, it exposes itself to contamination”⁶⁷.

Perhaps the objection of de Vries to Caputo – thus, the double reading of the same Derridean texts – points us beyond their discussion to the specific and inescapable ambiguity from which Derrida’s position both lives and testifies to. One cannot hold out the “suspension” without already, while suspending, being positioned narratively. Both de Vries and Caputo then would accentuate one of the two sides of this ambiguity, leading de Vries to a more methodical reading of Derrida (deconstruction as a method) whereas Caputo would offer us a kind of spiritual reading (deconstruction as a way of living)⁶⁸. On other accounts, Caputo has

64. J.D. CAPUTO, *Shedding Tears Beyond Being. Derrida’s Experience of Prayer*, in M. OLIVETTI (ed.), *Théologie négative* (Biblioteca dell’ “Archivio di Filosofia”, 59), Rome, 2002, 861–880. Further, e.g., J.D. CAPUTO, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida. Religion without Religion*, Bloomington, IN, 1997; *More Radical Hermeneutics. On Not Knowing Who We Are*, Bloomington, IN, 2000; *On Religion* (Thinking in Action), London, 2001.

65. “Non-indifferent” because agnosticism in reality often results in practical atheism.

66. The differend between Derrida and Marion, however, is not affected by this move. The question remains whether prayer constitutes relation (even when not knowing whether it is a relation), or is constituted by it. Is prayer merely the decentering of the subject (eventually phrased as the “dream and desire for the coming of the other”), or the answering recognition of a being called by a You? The result of Caputo’s “religion without religion” is a radical negative theology, evacuating both “logos” and “theos”, reducing any link to particularity and historicity. Pure contemplation. I would side with Kearney when he evaluates these kinds of philosophy of “God without God” as empty and blind.

67. H. DE VRIES, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion*, Baltimore, MD, 1999, p. 139. See further p. 140: “[The passing moment of pure prayer] has no existence, no relevance or no effect, outside of the concrete prayers (or apophatic discourses) that it inaugurates, inspires, interrupts. It does not fall from heaven but remains, in a sense, parasitic upon or oriented toward the historical and positive determinations that it makes possible in the first place. More precisely still: it is made possible by what it makes possible. That is its aporia”.

68. An even more outspoken spiritual reading of Derrida is offered by Ilse Bulhof, see e.g. her contribution *Being Open as a Form of Negative Theology*, in I.N. BULHOF – L. TEN

pointed to this moment of truth in criticising Kearney for his confusion of undecidability and indecision in commenting on *khora*. The choice is not between God or *khora*, rather it is *khora* as the sphere of undecidability (condition for any condition to be made) which makes a decision, a wager, faith in God, possible. With *khora*, Caputo states, “I am describing the sphere, the desert sphere, in which any genuine decision or movement of faith is to be made, where God and *khora* bleed into each other and create an element of ambiguity and undecidability *within which the movement of faith is made*. Without *khora*, we would be programmed to God, divine automations hard wired to the divine being, devoid of freedom, responsibility, decision, judgement, and faith”⁶⁹. Therefore, it is not either the eschatological God of the Kingdom or the monstrous *khora*, the former beyond the latter, when one makes the wager.

However, to Kearney’s defence⁷⁰, and on the basis of what I previously said about Caputo, it would seem that in Caputo the decision to indecision, the decision to think religion from undecidability, has become the narrative “posited within” the *khora*, circling around it, making of *khora* “more than a name”. The discourse of Caputo’s radical hermeneutics of religion in the end seems indeed more of a philosophical piety, deconstruction turned into religion⁷¹, seemingly forgetful of the ambiguity deconstruction’s discourse lives from: undecidability is the condition of all decision, but it takes already a decision to philosophically posit it as that which makes decision possible. Speaking about *différance*, the other name for *khora*, installs already the passage to language, often referred to by deconstruction in terms of betrayal, contamination.

Thinking irreducible otherness, transcendence or “God” after onto-theology, indeed often has lead to a negative theological account evacuating the particularity of religious and other traditions in order to protect this otherness, transcendence, “God”. Language too rapidly becomes qualified as betrayal or contamination, even when it is simultaneously recognised as inescapable – how not to speak? It would seem that this kind of procedure leads too easily away from the narrative structure by which people live, brackets too easily the fact that only through the particular and in constant reference to it, truth claims, meaning, references to otherness and transcendence are made. Here I side with Kearney, against

KATE (eds.), *Flight of the Gods. Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology* (Perspectives in Continental Philosophy, 11), New York, 2000, 195-222.

69. J.D. CAPUTO, *Richard Kearney’s Enthusiasm. A Philosophical Exploration on The God Who May Be*, in *Modern Theology* 12 (2002) 87-94, p. 93.

70. See also J. KEARNEY, *Khora or God?*, in M. DOOLEY (ed.), *A Passion for the Impossible. John D. Caputo in Focus* (SUNY Series in Theology and Continental Thought), Albany, NY, 2003, 107-127.

71. As I will hint at in my conclusion, it would seem that Caputo’s “religion without” religion is rather the result of the transformation of religion in the West, becoming apparent at the end of the 20th century than an adequate phenomenological description of the structure of religious conscience.

philosophical negative theologies, when he acknowledges the importance of hermeneutics of texts and traditions. However, where he would seem to conceive of this move in terms of “wager”, I would radicalise this move claiming that *the radical turn to hermeneutics of particularity is the other side of deconstruction*. Radical hermeneutics should not lead away from particularity, trying not to speak to point at irreducible otherness (transcendence, “God”), which would seem to be similar to Caputo’s account of it. Instead, radical hermeneutics *leads irreducibly to particularity*, to texts and traditions and the way these function in religion and elsewhere. The “moment of truth” of deconstruction then points us to the impossibility of a discourse which, beyond particularity, deals with irreducible otherness, transcendence or “God”. On the contrary, it refers us radically back to the very unsurpassable particularity of our narratives, including their truth claims. A “more” radical hermeneutics thus (than Caputo’s). There is indeed always a “wager”, a positioning, or a being positioned, involved. Thinking is always already taking a distance from within an irreducible being involved, never getting really beyond it⁷². The “wager” is already there; Kearney’s phenomenological approach “crossing over in hermeneutics”, is *already crossed* from the very beginning by hermeneutics. Because, indeed, for some among us, this being positioned is of a theological nature, referring to specific (Jewish and Christian) traditions to deal with irreducible otherness, transcendence, God. And this leads to a different kind of discourse, theology⁷³. This is what I would see as the most important insight of contemporary philosophy for religion and those who reflect from religion on religion (in line with *fides quaerens intellectum*). This radical hermeneutical turn implies that the “reduction” which Kearney executed in his own hermeneutical stance, his answer to the question “where do you speak from?” should be read backwards: he longs for justice and peace, because he acknowledges to be religious; he is religious because he is inserted in the Judeo-Christian tradition; he belongs to this tradition, because he is immersed in a Christian, even a particularly Roman-Catholic, narrative (this is a narrative belonging to the family of narratives making up the internally pluralised and diversified Roman-Catholic tradition). And from the very start he is involved in its continuing hermeneutics, in dialogue, confrontation, or conflict with the other religious and intellectual discourses which one happens to encounter, thus involved in a dynamic interplay of a plurality of narratives, challenging each other to acknowledge, develop, re-describe one’s own position (one’s own truth claim), arguing for it in relation, discussion or conflict to others – thereby respectful or not of the challenge of particular

72. That is the reason why theology is not only a reflection on tradition but at the same time its very continuation.

73. And it is for this reason that Kearney’s account of the God who may be invites for a theological discussion, on the plural field of interpretations of the texts of the religious tradition he starts from.

truth claims of other narratives (challenging one over and again to reconfigure one's truth claim). I am tempted to suggest that Kearney's appeal to the philosophical license, not to be engaged in "confessional theology" and not to be concerned about the "confessional orthodoxy", is as much a taking a position in its own right both within and against this theological tradition, maybe even trying to enlarge the distance from the initial involvement, attempting to relativise their irreducible link, in the same vain attempting to get beyond it (motivated by, in Kearney's account, an ethical intuition or "structure of religious experience"⁷⁴, and, *mutatis mutandis*, in Caputo's a striving for "religious purity"). This is, of course, in a world of an irreducible plurality of narratives, a legitimate move, but in fact as particular as any other one, and as much so entering the dynamic interplay within and between narrative traditions and positions. It allowed Kearney at least to be very selective in his sources and to profile a (quasi-)post-traditional religious position with strong messianic tendencies, in terms of the "Judeo-Christian tradition" rather "Jewish" than "Christian".

The acceptance of the radical particularity of our narratives and reflections, and thus their radical plurality, does not necessarily lead to relativism (which is in the end only one way, and thus a narrative in its own right, to deal with particularity and plurality). Nor does it lead to particularism or fundamentalism, the closing off of narratives from the challenging encounters and confrontations with others, withdrawing within one's narrative, constituting it as a meta-narrative, absolutising one's own truth claim against all others (Milbank). Both are forgetting, one could say, the "moment of truth" of deconstruction. Narratives, including the religious ones, in all plurality and ambiguity, venture indeed a truth claim which is bound *to the very lived particularity* in which this truth claim is made, a truth claim which, therefore, is not to be relativised in view of a quasi-transcendental hermeneutical or ethical position, nor in reference to the plurality of truth claims. As a matter of fact, what distinguishes my truth claim as one among others, is that it is the truth claim of the narrative from which I live. As I have developed elsewhere, I indeed think that narratives, mindful of "this moment of truth", of the very particularity of their truth claim, and of the irreducible plurality of narratives can develop a self-understanding, a critical consciousness within their own narrativity which enables both to live according to one's own truth claim and to be respectful of the truth claims of others⁷⁵. This would be a narrative stance

74. Moreover: what does "a hermeneutics of religion", the subtitle of *The God Who May Be*, in fact mean? All four words, and definitely the last one, are definitely not unambiguous. For what is religion, apart from concrete religious positions, practices, narratives? Which, whose religion?

75. I have developed this further, among others, in *Critical Consciousness in the Postmodern Condition. A New Opportunity for Theology?*, in *Philosophy and Theology* 10 (1997) 449-468; *The Particularity of Religious Truth Claims. How to Deal with it in a So-called Postmodern Context*, in K. DE TROYER – C. HELMER (eds.), *Truth. Interdisciplinary*

which, consciously from its own narrativity, engages in a critical constructive conversation with other narratives and truth claims, without a priori presupposing a common religious structure, challenging each other to take position, and to (re)consider this position because of this challenge⁷⁶. At least this is to what the “moment of truth” of deconstruction and the radical hermeneutics of particularity lead me in engaging Christian theology (from a Roman-Catholic background) in a so-called post-modern context.

And from this, from the outset interdisciplinary but ultimately theological, hermeneutical enterprise – a hermeneutics from, and of, Christian tradition in relation to the many other discourses –, I run into problems with the selectivity with which Kearney deals with the Christian tradition. However inspiring his hermeneutical retrieval may be, I think that the truth claim of Christianity, at stake in its texts and traditions, practices and communities, in Christian faith as a praxis of hermeneutics in light of the Kingdom of God, cannot be thought of without an acceptance of the radical incarnation, inscription, of God in a particular history, with as culmination the history of Jesus of Nazareth, confessed by Christians as the Christ, God’s Son, the Logos incarnate, both God and human being, whose Spirit is at work in the world and in the hermeneutical efforts of the communities living in His name to recognise this activity. God’s revelation is irreducible historical, bound to the very particularity of a people, of a human being, of communities, and it is only from that particularity on that it is meaningful, e.g., to make a distinction between revelation in general and revelation in particular.

Accepting the radicality of incarnation, the constitutive character of the incarnation in Jesus Christ, however, is not the end of hermeneutics, absolutising the historical, but the very start of a theological radical hermeneutics. And maybe from such hermeneutics I could do some suggestions to Richard Kearney engaging his poetics of the God-who-may-be, leading to another hermeneutics of “religion”.

Dialogues for a Pluralist Age (Studies in Philosophical Theology, 22), Leuven, 2003, 181-195; and *The End of Conversation in Theology. Considerations from a Postmodern Discussion*, in J. HAERS – P. DE MEY (eds.), *Theology and Conversation. Towards a Relational Theology* (BETL, 172), Leuven, 2004, 189-209.

76. Interreligious dialogue then is primarily about how to live together in difference. Moreover, it is often precisely in interreligious contacts and communication that the particularity of someone’s position becomes manifest. What one seems to have in common then often reveals itself as what differentiates the most. It would appear, e.g., that precisely what binds the three so-called prophetic religions (also called the religions of the book or religions of revelation), at the same time fundamentally distinguishes them (a) in the way that they perceive their “prophet”, Muhammad, Jesus or Moses respectively, (b) the role that their holy scriptures have within the religion (Koran, Bible or Torah), and (c) the way in which the revelation of God in history is understood. Indeed, Christian fasting is not simply a variant of Ramadan; the Buddhist mystical contemplation of nothingness is not the same as the Christian mysticism of love. The Old Testament to Christians is not the Bible of the Jews even though they share that tradition.

To conclude: in terms of the radical hermeneutics I am putting forward, one is always already irreducibly narratively posited, even when one intends to point at its limits, the limits of narrativity. Claims going beyond this narrativity should at least take this into account. Therefore, hermeneutics radically precedes ethics, thus also the ethics of hermeneutics. And, at this point, one could read Kearney's approach to appear on certain accounts neither fish nor fowl: not deconstructive enough to question his priority of ethics over hermeneutics, not modern enough to oppose from this ethical a priori the undecidability of deconstruction (and not "merely" to differ from it), not radically hermeneutic enough to question the ultimately modern presumption of universality of his hermeneutics. Finally, he is not theologian enough to hermeneutically engage the Christian tradition from within, in its complexity as well as in its integrity, operating within it, in relation to its hermeneutical communities, to retrieve and reconfigure it – without "seeking the immunity of philosophical license".

V. THEOLOGICAL IMPULSES FOR A PHILOSOPHICAL DISCOURSE ON GOD AND RELIGION

From a Christian fundamental-theological perspective, I briefly would like to offer some suggestions to those, like Kearney, engaging a hermeneutics of (Christian) religion. They all in one way or another evoke incarnation as a hermeneutical principle. I start with a reference to the doctrine of incarnation, afterwards very briefly to eschatology, and finally I deal with negative theology.

The *incarnation*, as anchor point of a constitutive Christology, is not the end, but the motor of radical hermeneutics. The all too particular is not an obstacle for the revelation of God, but its very condition. For it is not in spite of his humanity that Jesus reveals God and the Kingdom, but precisely in it. This is what a hermeneutical retrieval of the Christological dogma of Chalcedon points to: to affirm that Jesus Christ is both God and human (unmixed, unchanged, undivided, unseparated), means proclaiming that in person, life, speech, and deeds, he was the definitive hermeneutics of God, but that he – himself being God – only can be approached in a radical-hermeneutical way. He is the definitive revelation of God, and this precisely in the paradoxical relation of God and humanity established in his person because, as a person, he gives expression to the tension between the word and the Word (Logos). In as far as Jesus Christ is a signification of the divine reality, the same religious hermeneutical-critical proviso applies to him as to all other religious discourse. The *homousious* of the Son indeed implies then that precisely in his person, life and words Jesus Christ is considered by believers to be the definitive signification (revelation) of God – "Whoever sees me, sees the Father" (cf. John 14,9) –, but implies at the same time that his person, life and

words, being signification of God, can only be known as the word about the Logos, while standing in a relationship to the Logos. In other words: God's superfluous love has been revealed in a particular life story that does not exhaust this love, but nevertheless signifies it in a definitive way. As a particular life story, Jesus' narrative bears, entangled in particularity, witness to the universality of grace, which as such can never be articulated.

A taking into account of the incarnation of course also modifies the eschatological messianism Kearney comes to, probably more influenced by Derrida and Levinas than by Christian theology. The scandal of Christianity is that the impossible has become possible already, that the Kingdom of Love is already there, urging us to the praxis of the Kingdom in the *imitatio Christi*, standing out to its eschatological fulfilment: only thus the eschatological dynamics of the "already" and the "not yet", the eschatological proviso, really starts to work, invoking a radical hermeneutics of whoever makes a claim upon the Kingdom, both ad intra and ad extra of the faith communities. Moreover, a particular apocalyptic intensification may well sharpen the eschatological drive, reinstalling instead of a "stetserwartung" again a "naherwartung": time is short, the judgement at hand – God interrupts history. Against recent cultural, political, ecological, ... apocalypticisms, Christian apocalypticism calls for a shift from catastrophe thinking to crisis thinking. It is not simply a matter of devastation, catastrophe and chaos, it is also one of perspective, revelation and disclosure (which immediately reminds us of the original significance of the Greek *apokalypsis*). As a theological conceptual strategy it perceives the boundaries of time as determined and restricted by God. Within this limited time crisis (persecution, destruction, loss, suffering and pain) is the precise location in which God reveals Godself as the boundary, as the one who interrupts time, the one who judges it. At the same time, revelation as interruption implies its own demands and calls for engagement. A neutral attitude at this juncture is no longer appropriate. Interruption, as the revelation of God, provokes us to assume a position: we can no longer maintain an indifferent stance to what is going on. What is called for is a critical praxis of hope. Etymologically speaking, the word "crisis" also implies "judgement". A Christian perspective on time requires submission to God's judgement and God's promise for the world and for humanity as revealed in Jesus Christ. Apocalypticism calls for the radical temporalisation of the world, with a radical awareness of the irreducible seriousness of what occurs in the here and now.

Finally, in reaction to the postmodern negative theologies that Kearney also opposes, I briefly refer to the specificity of *Christian apophysis*. For some, indeed, it would seem that precisely in negative theology, a close connection could be made between philosophy and theology. Some would argue that in negative theology Christianity results in its "moment of truth". The philosophical apophaticisms indeed challenges Christian

theology, but may lead instead to a rediscovery of the specificity of its own position, including its apophatic-theological dimension. In a Christian radical hermeneutical consciousness *apophasis* is not doing away with *cataphasis*, but is intrinsically at work in it. The negative-theological critical consciousness, then, does not distract from history, separating God from the historical and particular, but rather qualifies the way in which history is theologically interpreted. The God active in history cannot be comprised by history; every pointing to God's activity in history, every witness to it in narratives and praxis, is therefore subject to an uninterrupted hermeneutics. God's ineffability has nothing to do with vagueness or being undetermined, nor with a movement that leads away from the concrete. To the contrary, it leads immediately back to history itself. God as the Other of history is involved in it as determinate Love, as a prophetic challenge to make visible God's invisible presence and activity⁷⁷.

To conclude, looking upon the postmodern philosophical negative theologies from a cultural-theological point of view, I have been wondering whether these are not the reflective expressions of the culturally widespread vague (post-)Christian religiosity. Detraditionalisation and pluralisation of religion did not extinguish religion in Europe, but seems to result in its transformation in "a cultural diffuse pattern"⁷⁸. It would seem that from it speaks an embarrassment with Christian particularity, i.e. faith in God revealing Godself in the contingencies and particularities of history. One of the questions for theology and philosophy of religion, is whether such "cultural apophaticism" evacuating the very particularity of

77. In this contribution, I could only very briefly refer to these theological impulses. For an elaboration of a radical hermeneutical reading of the dogma of Chalcedon, see my *Christus Postmodernus. An Attempt at Apophatic Christology*, in T. MERRIGAN – J. HAERS (eds.), *The Myriad Christ. Plurality and the Quest for Unity in Contemporary Christology* (BETL, 152), Leuven, 2000, 577-593. I further developed the apocalyptic tuning of eschatology, inspired by J.B. Metz, in *God Interrupts History. Apocalypticism as an Indispensable Theological Conceptual Strategy*, in *Louvain Studies* 26 (2001) 195-216. On Christian negative theology in relation to philosophical negative theologies and to the phenomenon of "cultural apophaticism", see resp. my *The Rediscovery of Negative Theology Today and Cultural Apophaticism. A Challenge for Contemporary Theology*, in F.L. BAKKER (ed.), *Rethinking Ecumenism. Strategies for the 21st Century*. FS A. Houtepen, Zoetermeer, 2004, 79-92.

78. Cf. H. COX, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century. The Rise and Fall of "Secularisation"*, in G. BAUM (ed.), *The Twentieth Century. A Theological Overview*, Maryknoll, NY, 1999, 135-143, p. 139. On the transformation of religion in Europe, see also P. BERGER, *The Desecularisation of the World. A Global Overview*, in ID. (ed.), *The Desecularisation of the World. Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, Grand Rapids, MI, 1999, 1-18, and more recently, on the basis of the data of the European Values Study, Y. LAMBERT, *A Turning Point in Religious Evolution in Europe*, in *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 19 (2004) n. 1, 29-45. Some have termed this phenomenon "something-ism", referring to its rather indeterminable acceptance that "there is something more" to life than facts and figures (cf. S.W. COUWENBERG, *Onttovering van het geloof en het "ietsisme" als eigen-tijdse uiting van religieus verlangen*, in *Streven*, [jan. 2004] pp. 10-20).

Christianity, is an alternative to Christian faith or its newest form. It is probably a question quite analogous to the one posed regarding the modern transformation of religion in ethics.

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ABSTRACT. — In a critical-constructive dialogue with Richard Kearney's philosophical hermeneutics of religion, Lieven Boeve sketches the panorama of continental philosophy's turn to religion, and comments on it from a theological-epistemological perspective. After some initial theological comments on Kearney's poetics of a possible God, Boeve analyzes the intuitions, argumentation and framework of his thinking. Furthermore, he situates Kearney's approach in relation to the proposals of other protagonists of the God-discussion, such as Marion's phenomenology of the saturated phenomena, the negative theologies of the sublime (Lyotard and Žižek), deconstructionism's religion without religion (Derrida and Caputo), and Milbank's radical-orthodox overcoming of postmodern negative theologies. Afterwards Boeve evaluates Kearney's philosophical hermeneutics (and as much so Caputo's radical hermeneutics) as not radical enough. For a "more" radical hermeneutics of religion does not relativise the very particularity of religion to determine its truth claims but irreducibly leads to it, stressing the impossibility of a discourse dealing, beyond linguistic particularity, with otherness, transcendence, "God". It is at this point that the Christian doctrine of incarnation, taken as a (theological-)epistemological maxim, may inspire a philosophical hermeneutics of (Christian) religion.