Modern Theology 18:1 January 2002
ISSN 0266-7177

GOD WHO MAY BE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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As a first step towards a phenomenology of religious transfiguration, we will focus on the epiphany of the Burning Bush in Exodus 3:14. Our aim is to identify and address the hidden crux of this enigma: the extraordinary phenomenon of a deity transfiguring itself as an angel 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.

In what follows, we discuss two main traditions of interpretation under the headings, *ontological* and *eschatological*, before offering a third or median option which we call *onto-eschatological*. Our ultimate suggestion is that we might do better to reinterpret the God of Exodus 3 neither as "I 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 'aser '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 our wager.

I. The Ontological Reading

a. Augustine

From the outset the Greeks rendered Exodus 3:14 in terms of the verb "to be", or *einai*. Inheriting the Hellenic formula *ego eimi ho on*—I am the one who is—Augustine and the Latins claimed there was no fundamental difference between this *ego sum qui sum* and the *esse* of metaphysics. The Exodic formula was considered by early and medieval Christian theologians to be

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the highest way of saying *vere esse, ipsum esse*, that is, Being-itself, timeless, immutable, incorporeal, understood as the subsisting act of all existing. While the human soul is split apart into memory (it was), attention (it is) and expectation (it will be), God suffers no such *distentio animi*. The God revealed in Exodus is what He is in Himself, one and the same: his own *essentia*—*Idipsum esse* existing beyond all time, all history, all movement.[1]

Already in the *Confessions* (XIII, 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 (Enarr. Ps. 101, 10)."[2] 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*) in the Exodic revelation. 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, a-historic, immutable essence: "He is no doubt *substania*, 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*, V, 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.

b. Aquinas

Aquinas developed the Augustinian view that the *qui est* of Exodus is the principal name of God and the highest formulation of being. The revelation of Exodus, he affirmed, designates "true being, that is being that is eternal, immutable, simple self-sufficient, and the cause and principle of every creature".[3] 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*, I, 3, a. 4, c). With Aquinas and the scholastics, the God of Exodus is thus unequivocally 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 Thomas 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 revealed in Exodus 3:14 is none other than the absolute identity of divine being and essence. *Esse is the essentia of God*. This obtains for Aquinas no matter how much the divine essence surpasses the limits of rational speculation, approaching God only in an analogical way in the proofs for his existence. Aquinas concedes, after all, that while we can prove *that* God exists we cannot know *what* he is. But these reservations notwithstanding, Aquinas has no hesitation in citing Exodus 3:14 as confirmation of his proofs in the *Summa* (Ad 3). This is how he justifies his conviction that the Exodic formula provides us with the ultimate name for God: "The reason for this name is that, in its reference, it exceeds every form, because it signifies being itself (*ipsum esse*). Moreover, the less determined the names the better they pertain to God, by virtue of their common and absolute character. Every other name in fact connotes a restrictive modality. Now 'He who is' does not define any particular modality of being; but it envelops all indeterminate modes. Nevertheless, the sacred Tetragrammaton preserves better still the incommunicability and singularity of God" (*Summa Theologiae*, q 13, a 11).

Without the encounter of Greek metaphysics with biblical religious thought, philosophers "would have never reached the idea that Being is the proper name of God and that this name designates God's very essence".[4] Or as Etienne Gilson remarked in *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, "Exodus lays down the principle from which Christian philosophy will be suspended … There is but one God and this God is Being, that is the corner-stone of all Christian philosophy."[5] With this scholastic verdict, the traditional notion of faith seeking understanding reaches its logical culmination. The conflation of Yahweh with the supreme Being of the philosophers is sealed. And this conjunction of God and Being was to survive for at least fifteen hundred years—from Bonaventure and Aquinas to Gilson and the neo-Scholastics. 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 "ontotheology": a tendency to reify God by reducing Him to a being (*Seiende*)—albeit the highest, first and most indeterminate of all beings.

Ontotheology, we might say, sought to have its cake and eat it: to equate God with a modality of being while safeguarding His ultimately ineffable and transcendent nature. Unlike the negative theology of Dionysius and the Christian neo-Platonists, however, most scholastics identified God with Being by means of proofs and analogies, seeking some sort of balance between Being's universality and indeterminacy on the one hand, and God's density as a quasi-subject or person (which holds God from descent into infinite dispersion) on the other.[6] It is, some argue, a short step from such ontotheological equilibrium to Hegel's notion of a "concrete universal"; or Schelling's famous equation of the divine "I am" with the self-identification of the transcendental Ego. Indeed, Schelling will go so far as to claim that the "I AM" is "one and the same thing with our immediate self-consciousness".[7] This unification of divine and human consciousness finds modern echoes

not only in German Idealism and romanticism (Schelling, Fichte, Hegel, Coleridge), but also in a contemporary strand of new age mysticism.

II. The Eschatological Reading

There is a powerful counter-tradition which resists ontological approaches to God. This second tradition of interpretation—which I call eschatological—is arguably more attuned to the original biblical context of meaning. Here the emphasis is on the ethical and dynamic character of God. 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".[8] 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 towards an eschatological horizon. Such an understanding of the Exodic Name contrasts sharply with the more essentialist conceptions of divine Being in medieval and post-medieval metaphysics.

a) The God Who Promises—The Ethical Mandate

It is important to recall here that Moses responds to the call of the burning bush—"Moses! Moses!"—with the reply "Here I am". The self-revelation of God that precedes and follows Moses' reply is less predicative than appellative. Above all else, it is a call and a promise: "This is the name I shall bear forever, by which future generations will call me" (Exodus 3:15). We should be chary, therefore, of hypostatizing the "name" and try to relocate it where it properly belongs, namely, within the orbit of a dynamic mandate.[9] Amplifying the meaning of *'ehyeh 'aser '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 towards the Kingdom.

One consequence of the infiltration of this transfiguring God into the history of Greek and Latin metaphysics, was to inject the latter with a specifically *ethical* charge. Smoke from the burning bush blurred the clear blue sky of Graeco-Roman assurance. Nobody slept quite so well at night anymore, or breathed quite so easily during the day. There was a whiff of anxiety and expectation in the air now. Dogmatic definitions of God began to fritter and come undone. And even those neo-Platonists who recognized the unknowable nature of God found it difficult to handle the urgency of this eschatological summons. God, it seemed, was undergoing an identity crisis. (Though not a gender one yet; He was still called He for a long while after.) And while it was all very well to agree with the likes of the Pseudo-Dionysius that the accompaniment of every affirmation with a negation points, apophatically, to a God beyond the proper names of Being, one was still left

facing the quandary: if God *is* devoid of *all* historical being is He not then also deprived of the power to act and call and love—a God so distant as to be defunct? So whether it was a question of the metaphysical God of essence or hyper-essence, it was hard to square either with a burning bush God resolved to retrieve the past and inaugurate a new beginning.

One exegetical commentator, André LaCocque, suggests that Moses' question to God may in part be an attempt to acquire this unknown name of divine power, particularly when we remember his competition with the Egyptian magicians. Moses' request, on this reading, is for just such a Name of Power; and God's response to his request may be read accordingly as a *refusal* of this request. The very circularity and indeterminacy of the nameless name—*'ehyeh 'aser 'ehyeh*—confounds the attempt to glean magical power from it. What God resists is not being addressed by Moses as such—He is invoked on countless occasions in the personal form of "Thou" throughout the *Psalms* (e.g., Psalm 99:6). No, what he resists is being reduced to the status of an idol. In short, God is repudiating any name that would seek to appropriate Him here and now as some thaumaturgical presence. Instead, God keeps Himself open for a future, allowing for a more radical translation of his nameless name as "I am as I shall show myself".[10] In this respect, the linguistic root *hyh* in *'ehyeh 'aser 'ehyeh* is to be understood, LaCocque argues, less as a mere copula than as a token of agency: more like "to be with, to become, to show oneself … to befall, to happen" (*cadere, evenire*).[11]

The God revealed in Exodus is more, however, than a demystification of pagan tendencies to invoke Divine Names as mythical powers. It also marks a step beyond the capricious deity inherited by the Hebrews themselves from certain ancestral narratives recorded in Genesis—in particular the "sacrificial" account of Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah in Genesis 22 or the burnt sacrifices performed by Abraham in Genesis 15. Exodus 3:14 may be read thus not only as a biblical critique of other mystery-rite religious but as a self-critique of such traces in biblical religion itself!

According to the eschatological view, the Greek rendition of Exodus as—*ego eimi ho on/I am the one who is*—misses too much of the original dynamism of the Hebrew expression, and concedes too much to Hellenistic ontology. And so doing it misses its mark. The burning bush epiphany is to be understood less as an ontological substance in opposition to non-being, than as a self-generating event. In this annunciation, an agent is designated whose "work is actualized in Israel's exodus from Egypt"—namely, the self-revealing agency of the "Thou in dialogue with the divine I".[12]

In such light, Moses' question in Exodus 3:14 may be reinterpreted as a radical challenge to the One who has revealed himself as the God of his ancestors to proclaim a new program of action by *becoming different* from what he used to be and has been until now. The fact that Moses returns to Egypt and delivers a message of emancipation to his people signals the

inauguration of an utterly novel mode of divine relation.[13] The One who was experienced by them as the God of their *Fathers*, now discloses himself as the God of their *sons and daughters*.

So the Exodic name, we may now surmise, 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 emissary Moses, to an action of salvation. This is why the Name is both theophanic and performative. It serves as the pre-name and 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 towards the future, a *trait* which cannot be bordered or possessed.

God does not reveal himself, therefore, as an essence *in se* but as an I-Self for us. And the most appropriate mode of human response to this exodic revelation is precisely that: *commitment to a response*. Such commitment shows Yhwh as God-the-agent, whose co-respondents, from Moses to the exilic prophets and Jesus, see themselves as implicated in the revelation as receivers of a gift—a Word given by someone who calls them to cooperate with Him in his actions. That is why Moses is called to be as "God for Aaron" and "for the Pharaoh" (Exodus 4:16 and 7:1). Moses and the prophets are *implicated* in the revelation showing us how Yhwh acts concretely through his human emissaries. With the revelation of his Name, "God tells of himself something like 'with you Moses—and with Israel throughout history—I stand or fall!'". Exodus 3 is the proclamation that God has invested the whole of Himself in his emissary's history.

b) The God Who Comes—Historical Mandate

We may say, consequently, that the Exodic act of divine self-disclosure signals an inextricable communion between God and humans, a radically new sense—as Levinas points out—of fraternity, responsibility and commitment to a shared history of "becoming", beginning with the emancipation from bondage in Egypt. God may henceforth be recognized as someone who *becomes with us*, someone as dependent on us as we are on Him. God's relation with mortals is, in other words, less one of conceptuality than of covenant. From which it follows that most philosophical reflections on God are in need of revision. And certainly, the orthodox ontotheological categories of omnipotence, omniscience and self-causality, originally forged *sub specie aeternitatis*, could do with a radical rethink *sub specie historiae*. Faced with the burning bush one doesn't merely speculate; one runs, or if one holds one's ground, one praises, dances, acts.

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; Psalm 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 'aser 'ehyeh* 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 form of the verb we find an "uncannily taut drama" signaled by the relative pronoun *aser* (what/who) "for its content essentially depends on the quality of history that Moses and his people will pour into it".[14]

Thus does the Exodic Name come to supplement *Elohim* as the name for the living God. For if *Elohim*—a name derived from a common noun—is the transcendent God who sat in heaven (Psalm 47), created earth and demanded sacrifice (e.g., of Isaac), Yhwh is more a name-of-invocation which makes the living God more accessible to human relation and history (i.e., more personal and more eschatological). With the revelation of Exodus, "God ceases to be the Unnameable, the inaccessible, the one *a se et per se*. He ceases to be impassible—if he ever was."[15] Yhwh is now revealed as affected and vulnerable, showing himself henceforth as one who wrestles with himself (Hosea), laments (Jeremiah), regrets (Samuel), seduces and forgives (Psalms). Here we witness a God who persuades rather than coerces, invites rather than imposes, asks rather than impels. This God of Mosaic manifestation cannot be God without relating to his other—humanity. And seldom has this wager been so dramatically expressed as in the following Midrash on Isaiah 43:12: "If you are not My witnesses, I am, as it were, not God."[16]

The existential implications of this inauguration of a personal God are revolutionary. For what we are witnessing here is a radical alteration of the metaphysical use of the copula. What is crucial for Greek thought is *to be*, since divine being is ultimately timeless and permanent, ontological rather than ethical. (Just think of Aristotle's God.) For the Hebrews, by contrast, what is most important is *to become, to be able*. Thus while the Hellenists will 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 to the Perplexed* 1.54–58).

The unnameable name is, in short, God's way of transfiguring—that is, of appearing-disappearing—in a bush that never burns away. The Exodic revelation is an ingenious wordplay which heralds an eschatological transcendence—a transcendence with the wherewithal to resist the lures of logocentric immanence.

III: The God Who May Be—A Via Tertia

In conclusion we will briefly trace a hermeneutic retrieval (*Wiederholung*) of the Exodic Name which seeks to chart an itinerary beyond the polar opposition between ontotheology and negative theology. My wager here is that at the chiasmus where *'ehyeh* meets *einai* a revolutionary exchange operates—with

God putting being into question just as being gives flesh to God. At this border-crossing, the transfiguring Word carries with it a certain *noli me tangere*, even as it struggles for carnal embodiment, transfiguring itself to the point of self-withdrawal even as it flares and announces itself in the burning bush.

From this onto-eschatological perspective, I will try, by way of a few final remarks—necessarily tentative and selective—to reread some highpoints in the historical interpretations of Exodus 3:14.

When Philo invoked the Greek translation of the Exodus passage—*ego eimi ho on*—he insisted that God here reveals not his content (whatness-essence) but only *that* he exists (the verb *einai*). Christian commentators would later render this passage in the light of the self-revelations in the Gospel of Jesus—e.g., "The one who is, and who was, and who is coming", or again, "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). This translation of the Hebrew into Greek (*einai*) and later into Latin (*esse*) was to radicalize the existing plurality and equivocity of the Hellenic terms for being (recognized since Aristotle). It provoked an extraordinary variety of interpretations throughout the history of Western thought. Indeed it is Paul Ricoeur's view that this very plurality of interpretations actually safeguards against the danger of "conceptual idolatry" (so rightly feared by Marion and other postmoderns) and reinforces the enigmatic resonance of the original phrase heard by Moses and his Hebrew followers.[17]

The prefatory command of God to Moses to remove the sandals from his feet may now be seen in its original innovative implications. As also the fact that it is far from his own people, captured in Egypt, that Moses receives his revelation from God. For it is only in the solitary estrangement from his native home that the Other shows itself (as self-consuming fire) and speaks itself (as tautological pun). In this manner, the "dangerous liaisons" between being and God are, as Stanislas Breton suggests, a way of showing God in his transcendence without abandoning all traces of existence: for if there was no burning bush to see or no voice, however riddling, to hear, there would be nothing to witness, and so nothing to remember or promise! There would only be regress to the chaos of pre-creation: the dark before the Word. *Tohu bohu*.

Revisiting Meister Eckhart's much neglected intervention in the Ex 3:14 debate, we might note how this subtle Dominican managed to twist inherited ontological categories in the direction of an eschatological intent. Under his gaze, the "I" of the Exodic tautology is seen to accentuate the sense of God's *difference*: the epithet *discretivum*, with which Eckhart qualifies the "I", connoting a measure of distance. By extension, Eckhart's use of the term *substantia* may be understood in the curious sense of a "being that stands on its own, by its own energy"—the quasi-being encountered at the heart of nothingness, which "carries all things according to the Word". This pure separateness of the divine "I" declines all additions of "this or that" and outstrips the familiar Aristotelian categories of substance utilized by conventional scholasticism.

Eckhart's commentary on the verb *sum* also reinterprets the traditional being of God. "Being-as-coupla" becomes being in "solitude and separation".[18] *Qua sum*, God here absolves himself from all predication, announcing both the ontological difference between Being and beings and the theological difference between divine and human. Here is a *sum* whose very burning-bush indeterminacy, in Breton's words, "expresses the purificatory fire of a certain iconoclasm".[19]

And what, finally, of the *who*? Here again, Eckhart may be seen as stressing the *dynamism* of the self-revealing God: "The repetition which says twice 'I am who I am' is the purity of affirmation which excludes all negation … it indicates a certain reflexive conversion in itself and on itself, a sanctuary or repose which holds in itself; what is more, it indicates a specific effervescence (or bubbling over) or birth of self: this being, in fact, conceals a fervor which expands within itself and onto itself in a sort of bubbling; light within light, it penetrates everything …."[20] By means of such hyperbole, Eckhart's rendering of the Exodic verse actually destabilizes and reworks traditional metaphysics. Behind their ostensible orthodoxy, the ontological proposition *esse est Deus* and the theological proposition *Deus est esse* mutually deconstruct each other. But this bilateral deconstruction does not ignore the fundamental co-implication of being and God in flesh. On the contrary, it shows that God's self-nomination cannot dispense with the detour through being, lest it become so unknowable as to pass us by unseen and unheard. There's more to God than being. Granted. But to pass *beyond* being you have to pass *through* it.

Thus the ontological commentaries on the *ego sum qui sum* found in Eckhart, may be seen—from an eschatological viewpoint—to carry a presentiment of God as pure *gift* and *passage*. Pure gift in the sense, noted by Derrida, of self-giving beyond the economic condition of return. "Being", as the Meister 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."[21]

But God is also pure passage in the sense that while he always stays faithful to his promise, He never stays put. Eckhart's own best defense against the charges of ontotheology or mystical ontologism is the reminder that he deemed the dialogue between God and being to be *provisional* rather than final. God passes through being just as we beings pass through God. But the primary verb is just that: *passage*, understood as transition and migration. Reinterpreted from an eschatological angle, God is the *imperative of transit*. "This is a God who disturbs, uproots, reiterates the call of Yahweh to Abraham to 'leave his house'; a God who shakes every edifice, even the venerable *esse subsistens.*"[22] Which is surely why Eckhart takes his leave of being only after he has rendered homage to its imprescribable necessity as passage. His famous formula—"I pray God to rid me of God"—may be read consequently as an echo of the imperative to transit. The move beyond ontology has as corollary the move beyond essentialist theology, surpassing the essence of God

towards God's ultimate promise. In this wise, the metaphysics of exodus (being-word-abyss) becomes an exodus of metaphysics. A self-emptying movement of metaphysics beyond itself. The revelation of God as traversal.

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*. And here we might add the intellectual dexterity of Cusanus to the deconstructive daring of Eckhart. God, as Nicholas of Cusa puts it, is best considered neither as *esse*, nor as *nihil*, but as *possest*. 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".[23] 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" (*seyn 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*). This counter-tradition of readings calls, I believe, for a new hermeneutic of God as May-Be. What I term an onto-eschatological hermeneutics. Or more simply, a *poetics of the possible*.[24]

Let me conclude the above explorations with the following surmises: In the circular words, I-AM-WHO-MAY-BE, God transfigures and exceeds being. His *esse* reveals itself, surprisingly and dramatically, as *posse*. The Exodus 3:14 exchange between God and Moses might, I have been suggesting, be usefully reread not as the manifestation of some secret name or essence but as a pledge to remain constant to a promise. God, transfiguring himself in the guise of an angel, speaks through (*per-sona*) a burning bush and seems to say something like this: *I am who may be if you continue to keep my word and struggle for the coming of justice*? The God who reveals himself on Mt. Horeb is and is not, neither is nor is not. It is a God who puns and tautologizes, flares up and withdraws, promising always to return, to become again, to come to be what he is *not yet* for us. This God is the coming God who may-be. The one who resists quietism as much as zealotry, who renounces both the ontotheology of essence and the voluntarist impatience to appropriate promised lands. This Exodic God obviates the extremes of atheistic and theistic dogmatism in the name of a still small voice that whispers and cries in the wilderness: *perhaps*. Yes, perhaps if we remain faithful to the promise, one day, some day, we know not when, I-am-who-may-be may at last be. Be what? we ask. Be how? Be what is promised as it is promised. And what is that? we ask. A kingdom of justice and love. There and then, to the human "Here I am", God may in turn respond, "Here I am". But not yet.

NOTES

1 Emilie Zumbrunn, "L'exégèse augustinienne de 'Ego Sum Qui Sum' et la Métaphysique de l'Exode", in *Dieu et l'être* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1978), pp. 246–272.
2 See Dominique Dubarle's chapter, "La Nomination ontologique de Dieu", in *L'Ontologie de Thomas D'Aquin* (Paris: Ed. de Cerf, 1996).
3 See Paul Ricoeur, "From Interpretation to Translation", in *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. D. Pellauer (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 350.
4 Ibid., p. 353.
5 Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* (Paris: Vrin), p. 51.
6 See Stanislos Breton in "Je suis (celui) qui suis (Ontologie et Métaphysique)", in *Libres Commentaires* (Paris: Ed. de Cerf, 1990), p. 64.
7 For further comments see Gabriel Marcel, *Coleridge et Schelling* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1951).
8 Paul Ricoeur, *op.cit*., p. 334.
9 Ibid., pp. 337f. and also Joseph O'Leary, "God Deconstructs", in *Religious Pluralism and Christian Truth* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), pp. 159–204.
10 Gese in "Der Name Gottes" translates Exodus 3:14 as *ich erweise mich, als ich erweisen werde* and *ich bin, als der ich mich erwisen werde* (quoted by André LaCocque, "The Revelation of Revelations", in *Thinking Biblically*, p. 312).
11 A. LaCocque, *op.cit*., pp. 312f.
12 Ibid., p. 314.
13 A similar shift of emphasis onto the futural potentiality of God is found in Moltmann and the theology of liberation as well as in Whitehead and process theology. See in particular Whitehead's notion of God's "consequent nature", comprising a reservoir of possibilities to be creatively realized as world in *Process and Reality* (New York, NY: Free Press, 1978); see also John B. Cobb, "A Whiteheadian Doctrine of God", in *Process Philosophy and Christian Thought*, D. Brown, R. James and G. Reeves (eds) (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), pp. 215–243; William Dean, "Deconstruction and Process Theology", *The Journal of Religion*, vol. 64, 1984, pp 1–19; and David. R. Griffin, "Postmodern Theology and A/Theology", in *Varieties of Postmodern Theology*, D. Griffin, W. Beardslee and J. Holland (eds) (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), pp. 29–61.
14 A. LaCocque, *op.cit*., p. 324.
15 Ibid., p. 325.
16 *Sifre Deuteronomy* 346 (ed Fin Kelstein), cited by LaCocque, *op.cit*., p. 325.
17 Paul Ricoeur, *op.cit*., p. 341.
18 Stanislas Breton, *op.cit*., p. 64.
19 Meister Eckhart, "In Exodum 3:14", *Lateinische Werke*, II, 21 (cited by Breton, *op.cit*., pp. 61–62).
20 Eckhart, *Meister Eckhart*, ed R. B. Blanhey, pp. 208–209.
21 Stanislas Breton, *op.cit*., p. 66.
22 Ibid., p. 67.
23 Nicholas of Cusa, "Dialogus de Possest", in *A Concise Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicholas of Cusa* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), pp. 120–169. See also, Richard Kearney, *The Wake of Imagination* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 75–78.
24 Richard Kearney, *Poétique du Possible* (Paris: Ed de Beauchesne, 1984)—in particular part 4.

Modern Theology 18:1 January 2002
ISSN 0266-7177

RICHARD KEARNEY'S ENTHUSIASM: A PHILOSOPHICAL EXPLORATION ON *THE GOD WHO MAY BE*

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Richard Kearney is a genuine "enthusiast"—in the best sense of the word. His writings are contagiously enthusiastic, so charged and exciting, so moving and inciting, so full of prayers and tears that it is he, not I, who should have written a book with a title like that. His beautiful and powerful prose is a perfect testimony to what his friend Seamus Heaney meant when Heaney said that the Irish are a people who took over their invader's tongue and improved it for them. His words leap from the page. His thoughts dance, his erudition dazzles us. His imagination—no wonder this is his favorite theme—races far ahead of the rest of us who are left in his dust, running as fast as we can lest we lose sight of him altogether, occasionally leaning against a post to catch our breath. Richard, one of the truly great readers of Levinas, has a glorious and productive case of insomnia, which keeps him up at night reading everything and writing about it until the cock crows.

But Richard is an enthusiast in the ancient and literal sense of *en-theos*, a man filled with God, driven by a passion for God, and that is the Richard Kearney who will interest me here. His is not simply a passion for the God who is, or for the God who is and was and will be—that would never be enough for Richard. His passion is for the God who *may be*, who may be more than we imagine, more than our imagination can contain, the God who may be more than God, who is yet to be what God can be, the God who, as we might say in American English, has not shown us anything yet. Such a God is a self-surpassing, self-transcending possibility whose *posse* exceeds his *esse*, who has passed right through and gone beyond being, who leaves being in the dust. If Thomas Aquinas said that God is the act of all acts, the

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actus omnium actuum, Richard will go the Angelic Doctor one better and up the ante. In keeping with a line from Heidegger that he should certainly cite (I have not found him citing it yet), that "possibility is higher than actuality" (one of the many lines that Heidegger lifted from Kierkegaard without citation), Richard—lion-hearted to the end—has pursued this thought down to its most radical conclusion. For him, God is the possibility of all possibilities, the possibility *beyond* all possibilities and, as Richard says in a recent writing that gives me great joy, in which he joins hands with the eminent quasi-Augustinian quasi-Jewish slightly atheistic quasi-theologian, Jacques Derrida, God is even the possibility of the impossible. I greatly cherish this exquisite point where Richard and Jacques touch fingers and I plan to have it painted on the ceiling of my study. For Richard, who chiefly draws upon the resources of Levinas and Ricoeur, has been known to give Jacques Derrida a hard time in the past. To this new alliance, I myself, off in the distance, completely out of breath, trying to observe this ring dance of Richard Kearney and Jacques Derrida and Immanuel Levinas and Paul Ricoeur through my clouded binoculars, can only say, *oui, oui*, Amen, yes, yes, I said, yes, I will, yes.

So in what follows I propose to do two things. First, I want to sketch the possibility of Richard's God of possibility, of God as the *posse* beyond *esse*. Then I will add a second word about Richard's enthusiasm aimed not exactly at tempering or moderating it, because enthusiasm properly understood is the love of God and the only measure of love is love without measure. A moderate, temperate love is the love of a mediocre fellow. No, I will add a word aimed at *complicating* Richard Kearney's enthusiasm, *bedeviling* it, making it all the more ambiguous and aporetic. I have always stood for giving the devil his due, in particular the devil of undecidability. I have always thought we get the best results by facing up to all the difficulties that beset us in the wake of what I like to call a "devilish" hermeneutics. Aporias and undecidability are not all bad news for me, for such devilish aporetics only serve to intensify the passion of faith and so to heighten the intensity and to raise the pitch of genuine enthusiasm—Richard's, mine, Jacques's—the enthusiasm of all those who, like St. Augustine, keep disturbing their tranquility with the question, *quid ergo amo cum deum meum amo*?

The God Who May Be More Than God

Richard Kearney's philosophical theology turns on a distinction between what he calls the "eschatological" and the "ontotheological" concept of possibility. In its most classical metaphysical terms possibility is subordinated to actuality as the imperfect to the perfect, for possibility is taken to mean potency, latency, unactualized or unrealized potential, every trace of which must be removed from an all-perfect God conceived as pure act, as the perfection of *ousia, hyperousia, substantia, esse subsistens*. In its modern form,

possibility refers to the ideal limit state of the Idea in the Kantian sense, God as a regulative ideal. This is at bottom a profoundly Greek way to think about God, Athenian and ontotheological, a God spun out by an *Aufklärer*, or by leisured aristocrats speculating on the nature of a being they called *theos*, endlessly cutting lazy circles in the heavens utterly unmindful of us suffering mortals here below. Despite the enormous prestige it has accumulated in the official theologies of the several churches, it is very questionable what this *theos* has to do with the biblical God, with the passionately involved God of the prophets or with the intimate one whom Jesus dared call *abba*.

In questioning the God of pure act, Kearney thus joins hands with what I would call the fundamental theological project of contemporary continental philosophy, which lies in overcoming the God of metaphysics and asking the question "what—or who—comes after the God of metaphysics?". From the time of his doctoral dissertation, written under Paul Ricoeur and Stanislas Breton, entitled *Poetique du possible*, Richard Kearney has focused this question on the notion of possibility. Thus to the detached pure act of Greco-onto-theo-logic, devoid of all potency, Kearney opposes the biblical God, the "eschatological" God, where possibility is taken not ontotheologically but eschatologically, not as potency or latency, but as the *dynamis* up ahead, the possibility to come, *à venir*, the futural event that draws us, the present beyond itself. This yields the God who is to come, who is here but still coming, who must thought in terms of the future and of promise, which the theologians call the "Lord of History". The famous text of Exodus, 3:14 is not to be understood, according to Kearney, onto-theo-logically, as "I am who am", I am pure and subsistent being, as it was read in the middle ages, but eschatologically: I am the one who will always be faithful, and by my faithfulness all future generations will know me and call me; I am the promise to remain with my people, and they can all count on me in the future. I am the God not only of their memories and of their fathers and mothers, but of their hopes and aspirations, of their sons and daughters. God will be God, Kearney says, at the eschaton.

Kearney argues that it is wiser to interpret the God of Exodus neither as pure being, in the manner of onto-theology, nor as pure non-being, in the manner of negative theology, which is his criticism of Marion, but as an eschatological "may-be", *peut-être*. Kearney postulates a chiasmus in which Yahweh, the Lord of history, meets *einai*, in which, as he says, God puts being into question and being gives flesh to God, albeit a flesh that remains untouchable, in a narrative with no end in sight. He cites Meister Eckhart, for whom the *ego sum qui sum* meant *ebullutio*, overflowing being, light within light, penetrating everything, the way light fills the air. God penetrates and passes through being. God takes his leave of being but only after a transit through it, not into the pure ether of non-being, but into the future, so that God is the excess of *posse* beyond *esse*, the God that may be, the God that may be God, the God yet to come.

At this point, Kearney says, eschatological theology can join hands with Derrida and speak of God as the possibility or becoming possible of "*the* impossible", as the still small voice that cries "perhaps", as the prophetic promise of a justice or a democracy to come. Kearney's argument reaches a point that is most interesting to me when, following a recent piece of Derrida's entitled "*Comme si c'était possible*", Kearney posits a point of contact between his own conception of "a poetics of the possible", which turns on a post-metaphysical eschatological concept of possibility, and Derrida's notion of "*the* impossible". Derrida has always stressed that by "*the* impossible" he does not mean the simple logical opposite of the possible, and that he does not mean a simple logical or ontological impossibility, like *p* and *not-p*. On the contrary, he has in mind a non-metaphysical idea of the impossible, a quasi-phenomenological one, as that which is unforeseeable, unprogrammable, as the *tout autre* that shatters the horizon of possibility. Of this Derridean idea of *the* impossible, Kearney says that it marks "an invaluable opening to a new eschatological understanding of God as *posse*". What Kearney and I are agreed about, and we both have recourse to Jacques Derrida's work at this point, is that the category of "*the* impossible" is a central religious category. We are told throughout the Scriptures that with God nothing is impossible, that the impossible is God's business, part of his job description, as it were. The impossible, Kearney argues, delimits the autonomy or autarchy, the *Seinskönnen* of the subject vis-à-vis the power of something that eclipses subjectivity. We find ourselves pushed to our limits, driven to a point described by Derrida as *sans voir, sans avoir, sans savoir*, where faith must make up for our lack of *voir*, hope must compensate for our lack of *avoir*, and charity supplement our lack of *savoir*. In "As if it were possible", Derrida argues that the "perhaps" is the necessary condition of possibility of every experience which is truly an "experience", that something arising from the unpredictable otherness of the future, which is what he means by the possibility of the impossible. This "perhaps" hovers over every decision in order to give it "responsibility", since there would be no decision or responsibility without the undecidable perhaps. Beyond our own possibilities, the impossible is still possible, and indeed it is, as Kearney says, using a phrase from his early *Poetique du possible* which Derrida cites in "*Comme si c'était possible*", "more than impossible" (*plus qu'impossible*). For the im- of "impossible", Derrida says, does not mean a denial or negation of possibility but something that propels us into the most radical of all possibilities, the possibility of *the* impossible, which is a matter of *faith*. Thus if for Derrida, the "perhaps" of the impossible is a condition of experience in general, Richard Kearney would say, and I would fully agree with him, it is also a condition of religious experience in particular, which also implies that experience in general, experience in its sharpest sense, has a certain religious quality.

Complicating Enthusiasm

Throughout his work, Richard voices a constant and legitimate concern about nihilism, about falling into what some might call the "abyss", or being overwhelmed by what Levinas calls the *il y a*, or being left stranded in what Derrida calls the desert of *khora*. Richard does not want to be consumed by these monsters. He wants to oppose these anonymous forces with all the force of the personal, and he invokes the name of God, or the name of what Levinas calls the *illéité* beyond *il y a*, to keep us safe. Now for all the kind things he has lately said about Derrida, he still thinks that Derrida, and I along with Derrida, have failed to provide such safety, that we leave everything dangling in undecidability, and that we lack the steel to make a decision that would steer us out of this chaos.

The abyss, *il y a*, and *khora* are all various and not necessarily synonymous descriptions of limit-states which delimit the sphere of meaning, sense, direction, on the one hand, and hope, joy, aspiration, on the other hand. They point to an underlying stratum of anonymity that inhabits and disturbs our world from within. They cover a wide and disparate range of phenomena that, I think, neither Richard nor I have been careful enough to discriminate in sufficient detail. If time permitted we would have to sort them out. Richard tends to single out the most extreme states of madness, misery, terror, torture, depression and desolation, the nightmare of a prisoner trapped in the ground or a child crushed by rubble. Such phenomena must be distinguished from the mystical abyss which for Meister Eckhart is a font not of terror but of love. Both of these extreme states in turn would need to be differentiated from *différance*, in virtue of which we make any distinctions or differentiations at all. *Différance*, while maddening enough at times, does not constitute a state of literal madness, of insanity and terror, let alone of torture or imprisonment, but rather of the inescapable "spacing", the play of traces, within which we constitute or "forge" our beliefs and practices. *Différance* is that condition in virtue of which whatever meaning we constitute is made possible and also impossible, that is, the quasi-transcendental which sees to it that a meaning is a temporary unity that is forged from the flux of signifiers or traces and that lasts just as long as the purpose it serves and the contexts in which it can function endure. It is in virtue of *différance* that whatever we can do with words can also come undone. That is useful enough, and it is at times also annoying enough, but it is not exactly the terror of the abyss, madness, torture, or desolation. Whatever it is, it is not God unless one has an exceedingly odd idea of God, which is always possible.

Khora, Derrida says, is a surname for *différance*, that is, it is a figure found in the history of philosophy, in Plato's *Timaeus*, where the brute "out of which" quality that simulates *différance*, that inhabits all our beliefs and structures, shows through the seams of metaphysics, and here, of that most classical of classical metaphysicians, Plato himself. The *khora* thus constitutes a kind of

counter-part to the *agathon*, a counter-image not beyond *ousia* but below it, a structure that falls below the level of sense and sensibility, of meaning and being, rather than exceeding them. Thus it is used by Derrida to show how *différance* insinuates itself into everything. Whatever we say or pray, think or believe, dream or desire, is inscribed in the shifting sands of *différance*, that is, inscribed in *khora*.

Derrida is interested in the mirror-image effect of the Platonic *agathon* and *khora*, in the way that the beyond being and below being mirror each other—neither is a "thing" that yields to a simple intelligible or sensible presence, that has a simple being or truth. Now put that beside Levinas's observation that *illéité* (which is his way of appropriating the *agathon*) is so far beyond the other one (*autrui*), so other than the other one (*autre qu'autrui*), that it begins to fall into a "possible confusion" with *il y a*. If we put these two mirror effects side by side, we see that there is a certain ambiguity or undecidability between the two. While we can for all practical purposes keep them apart, upon closer consideration we find that they do share common characteristics, that is, neither belongs to the medium sized phenomena of daily life, neither has the determinacy, the form, the structure of a definite thing or being. That is why in the middle ages David of Dinant made the argument that God is prime matter, because God does not have and cannot be restricted by "form". Thomas Aquinas thought that was a particularly foolish thing to say and that David should have distinguished the way *ipsum esse subsistens* is beyond form from the way prime matter is below form. While Thomas was right to say that we can keep these concepts apart, I would say that David had hit upon a phenomenological point, that our *experiences* of the two are not necessarily so widely divided, for in both cases we experience a certain confusion (Levinas), a kind of bedazzlement (Marion), or what Derrida and I with him would call an "undecidability", which I think can only be resolved by *faith*, and on this point Marion has become rather more forthright lately.

But Richard—and this is my main complaint with his work—has muddied the waters of this debate. To begin with, I do not think he has carefully discriminated the chiefly semiotic and quasi-transcendental function of *différance* as "spacing" from terror, torture and desolation. Then, trading on that ambiguity, he says that Derrida and I have consigned us all to live in an unlivable desert space called *khora*, without hope or faith, wallowing without decision in the waters of undecidability. Kearney argues that Caputo and Derrida, still infected with a residual nihilism as they are, think that *khora*—conceived especially as terror—is what is really real, what is really there, that everything else, every sense or meaning, is a forgery, a fake, a simulacrum, an impostor, and that all there is the anonymous rustling of the there is that is eventually going to gobble us up or turn us to ash. *Il y a là cendre*. He thinks that Caputo and Derrida have not been able to reassure us that *khora* is "temporary" and that we can "get beyond it", and that they

have not shown us how we can be saved or redeemed. They would rather be one of those hearty chevaliers, those knights, not of faith, but of nocturnal *khora* who go chin to chin with the abyss and try to stare it down. For the true anchorites (an-khora-ites), on the other hand, the desert was a medium through which they must pass on the way to redemption. You must first lose your self if you would save yourself according to the ancient economy. Caputo and Derrida are knights of infinite resignation, whereas it is only the knight of faith that gets Isaac back.

But, I would say, Richard's argument falls wide of the mark on two counts. (1) He has confused undecidability with indecision, instead of recognizing that undecidability is not indecision but the condition of possibility of a decision. The opposite of undecidability is not a decision or decisiveness but rather "programmability". That is, if a situation were not inhabited by undecidability then the decision could be made by a decision procedure, by a program or an algorithm that would process the components of the problem and render the decision in a strictly rule-governed formalizable process. That would be a programmed result, not truly a "decision" in the genuine sense of any exercise of "judgment" and "responsibility". Undecidability means that human decision making is required, which means entering into an idiosyncratic situation that is not covered by the rules; undecidability was first recognized by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where *phronesis* was precisely the acquired skill of figuring out what to do in situations that are unique enough to fall below the radar of rules and universals. The emphasis on singularity in Kierkegaard and Heidegger, and in Derrida and Levinas, is it seems to me a radicalization of Aristotle's point, which is why I am willing to describe deconstruction as a form of "radical hermeneutics".

Hence when I say that as we approach the God who comes after metaphysics, we enter a region where we do not know whether it is "God or *khora*", I am not leaving us twisting slowly in the winds of a (misconceived) undecidability. Rather, 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 automatons hard wired to the divine being, devoid of freedom, responsibility, decision, judgment, and faith.

(2) Because Richard has misconstrued undecidability as indecision, he thinks that the movement of decision, here faith in God, would somehow or another extinguish *khora*, get us past it, put it behind us. That view goes along with a "linear" interpretation of Levinas that I reject, that we can so decisively surpass *il y a* that it goes away, that we can get on top of it or beyond it, dominate it and drive it off and then, resting from a hard day's work, get a good night's sleep safe from its insomnia. I, on the other hand, think the ghost of *il y a* is inextinguishable and irrepressible, that it disturbs our days and haunts our nights, that it is never driven out, and that as such

it is precisely the condition of possibility of the ethical decision. In other words, in rigorously Derridean fashion, *il y a* is the very thing that makes ethical transcendence possible and impossible. That is, it makes ethics possible—by confronting it with something to be overcome—and impossible, by delimiting ethics as the ever haunting possibility of the anonymous that never goes away, that refused to be banished, that returns night after night. That is why ethics is ethics, why ethics is *a beau risque*.

Without *il y a* there is no *risque*, just the *beau*.

Without *khora* there is no *faith*, because then God would have plainly and unambiguously revealed Godself, without any possible confusion.

Without *khora* there is triumphalism, dogmatism, the illusion that we have been granted a secret access to the Secret. That is the illusion that makes religion so consummately dangerous and that fires the fundamental religious hallucination. That is why religious people think that they have been hard-wired to the Almighty, that they know in some privileged way the Secret that has been communicated to *them*—because God prefers *them* to *others*, Jews to Egyptians, or Christians to Jews, or Protestants to Catholics, or Unionists to Republicans, or xenophobic, homophobic gun-toting red-necked southern Baptists to effete, northeastern liberals. Or whatever! It goes on and on.

Without *khora*, there is no "impossible", no poetics of the possible, no poetics of the possibility of the impossible, because there would be nothing to drive us to the impossible. Without *khora* we would know what we need to know, and we would not be pushed to the point of keeping *faith* alive just when faith seems incredible and impossible. After all, believing only what is highly credible is the mark of a mediocre fellow; rather than a *beau risque*, it always bets on the favorite. Without *khora*, we would have every reason to think that we will succeed and we would not forced into the impossible situation of hoping against hope, hoping when hope is impossible. Without *khora*, we would see the sense of playing ball with others, of trading tick for tack, and we would not face the madness of an expenditure without return, of loving those who do not deserve it, of loving our enemies, which is impossible.

Without *khora*, the situation which evokes the impossible, which demands the impossible of us, which elicits faith, hope and charity would not obtain. *Khora* is the *felix culpa* of a phenomenology of the impossible, the happy fault of a poetics of the possible, the heartless heart of an ethical and religious eschatology. *Khora* is the devil that justice demands we give his due.

Modern Theology 18:1 January 2002
ISSN 0266-7177

FROM EXODUS TO ESCHATON: ON THE GOD WHO MAY BE

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I. Ontological Necessity. Freedom toward Death and toward Love

Richard Kearney's vision of "the God who may be" finds its birthplace in Heidegger's critique of onto-theology. At the same time, however, it opens up an alternative to both the "mystical authoritarianism" of negative theologies and the "apocalyptic anarchism" of radical postmodernism (*GMB* 34).* Following Heidegger's attestation of Being as the *Vermögen das mögens*,[1] Kearney is the first to catch sight of God's loving and grace-giving potency that liberates, first of all, God Himself from the "Idolatry of the New and the Tyranny of the Same" (*PI* 224) that both Being (medieval scholasticism) and Non-Being (postmodernism) impose on Him. Suddenly we find ourselves attentive to a whole variety of forgotten thoughts about God as one 'who may be' or as one 'who is beyond being and non-being'. The retrieval of the forgetfulness of being discovers a parallel in the reversal of the forgetfulness of God as *posse*. This reversal finally inverts the old Aristotelian scheme, adopted by onto-theology, which defined God as the absolute priority of actuality over possibility, while the "possible God neither is nor is not but *may be*", (*GMB* 37) or better yet, it is an eschatological promise that may-be.

Aristotle, in distinguishing between actuality (ἐνέργεια) and potency (δύναμις), undertook two crucial steps that haunt the entire history of Western metaphysics ever since: he gave a qualitative priority to actuality over potency and then, he identified the former with pure essence. Possibility, for Aristotle, is a mode that denotes transition and corruption and thus imperfection. However, the risk that he acknowledges and fears most is that potency is ambiguous and undecidable. In his own words, "the possible

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could be both a being and a non-being … it could equally be both things and neither" (1050b10, 1051a1). It is this *coincidentia oppositorum* that prevails in the potency that forced Aristotle to exclude it from the categories that properly define God. For Aristotle, a "possible God" might not be a God at all since "a possible being may not be" (1071b15). The risk that the God of the possible runs is that He might choose *not* to exist and, in this case, "there would be nothing" (1071b25). That is why he argued for the concept of a God that subsists as pure activity (ἐνέργεια), eternally (ἀΐδιος) and continuously (συνεχῶς); a *noesis* totally identified with its *noema* (1072b25–30).

As such, the Aristotelian God enthrones Himself in the summit of onto-theological assertions: bound to the most absolute necessity, that of ontology, He not only cannot be but His own being but also, He cannot cease to be. His very essence condemns Him to unavoidable as well as tautological existence. Enclosed in the monism of his ipseity, He autistically thinks Himself. Being is the prison of God. Of course, in front of such a God one "can neither pray nor sacrifice … Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god".[2] Thus the fact of His existence, proven or not, remains our most indifferent reality.

Aristotelian philosophy was inherited, via the exegesis of Averroes, by Scholastic theology and the identification of God's essence with pure actuality was carried on in Aquinas' system: "*Deus est actus purus non habens aliquid de potentialitate*." As R. Kearney has shown in the exemplary case of Exodus 3:14, a great dose of Greek metaphysics had been injected into Christian theology long before the Thomistic tradition and already with the translation of the Bible by the LXX. By translating the epiphanic name of God (*'ehyeh 'aser 'ehyeh*) as ἐγώ εἰμί ὁ ὤν, and thus crystallizing God's identity as His own being, they "missed too much of the original dynamism of the Hebraic expression, and conceded too much to Hellenistic ontology" (*GMB* 28). Since then, the highest understanding that we can reach of God is that of a motionless and apathetic presencing of His being. In this way, however, "the God of Exodus secure[s] ontological tenure in the God of metaphysics … a tendency to reify God by reducing Him to a being—albeit the highest, first and most indeterminate of all beings" (*GMB* 24).

Although metaphysicians have desperately tried to avoid the introduction of any kind of necessity into the concept of God, what they did accomplish was exactly that: the subjection of God to the absolute necessity of existence. "Ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἄρα ἐστίν ὄν", writes Aristotle of the "unmoved mover" in the Book 12 of his *Metaphysics*, condemning God's existence to necessity. He exists, therefore, of necessity! The price that God is called to pay for His existence is something much more important than His being, namely, His freedom.

The necessity of existence (God's or man's) as such was rarely questioned in the history of western metaphysics. Jean-Paul Sartre was a thinker who, following Heidegger, challenged this assumption by questioning the compulsory character of existence and the identification of its principle with

freedom.[3] The God of metaphysics would have been for Sartre another case of an *être-en-soi* since He is only what He is and He is never what He is not.[4] In this way He attains "la synthèse de soi avec soi" (33) exhausting His being in being Himself. He absolutely coincides with His self, being unable to raise any question about His being and excluding any kind of otherness from His existence.[5] The only way out of this situation that Sartre can see as a solution is that of the *néant*. That means that God (as *être-pour-soi* this time) would be what He is *not* and He would choose *not* to be what He is, in this way He would be, finally, *free* to annihilate His *nihilo*. Freedom is thus defined as the choice to negate being in (and by) being. At this point, we realize the importance of the turn toward which Sartre forces the entire tradition of metaphysics by understanding freedom as the force that possibilizes existence, even prior to essence: "Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible: the essence of the human being is suspended in his freedom (…) man does not exist *first* in order to be free *subsequently*; there is no difference between the being of man and his *being-free*" (60, Sartre's emphasis).

It is disappointing, however, to see how Sartre is posing perhaps the most crucial hypothesis in the history of metaphysics (that of ontological freedom) only in order to discard it as absurd. For the promise of an existence free from any condition, as it was stated in the beginning of the momentous *Being and Nothingness*, is easily turned, after six hundred pages, into a nightmare. Sartre's freedom is itself conditioned by its very own choice. How can we imagine, Sartre asks—and that is the tremendous thing that he *asks*—a freedom that not only chooses this or that, but a freedom that chooses over its very being, its very freedom? His answer regresses to Aristotelianism, for a free freedom would "need another prior freedom" and thus we would be "referred to infinity" (623). Therefore, freedom has to be a *causa sui*, in the same way and on the basis of the same reasoning that the scholastics, in order to avoid the absurdity of another being that creates the Creator, made God prisoner to His self-sufficiency. That is why, if we follow the route that Sartre proposes to us, we would save God from the necessity of His existence but also, at the same stroke, we would condemn Him to the necessity of His freedom. For God would not have chosen freedom but, on the contrary, he would have been "free" because He could not cease to choose; even the choice not to choose, Sartre reminds us, is still a choice! "In fact we are a freedom which chooses, but we do not choose to be free. We are condemned to freedom" (623). This in-escapable freedom constitutes freedom's facticity that leads Sartre to the tragic conclusion "my freedom eats away my freedom!" (618).

II. Freedom Prior to Existence. The God-Who-May-Be

It seems now that we have reached a dead-end in our arguments; between the necessity of existence on the one hand and the necessity of freedom

on the other, we are caught in this trap of aporias. The real problem appears to be located in our inability to imagine freedom prior to existence. Even Sartre's scheme remains Aristotelian to the extent that actuality (existence) precedes potency (freedom); the choice (not to be) is always a product of existence and it can be actualized *only* once existence has taken place. And reasonably so. How are we ever to imagine a choice *prior* to its agent? How can we possibly stretch freedom that far back, even *before* the moment when for the first time existence emerges? For us, humans, it is impossible. For our freedom is limited and conditioned by our existence which is given. It is precisely this "giveness" of our existence—beyond our will—that constitutes our facticity. I exist, it is true, but it was not my decision; I exist, but no one asked me to. Our only possibility for freedom lies on the other edge of the existential phenomenon, namely, death. As Kirilov says in Dostoevsky's *Demons*: "whoever wants the main freedom must dare to kill himself. There is no further freedom; here is everything and there is nothing further. He who dares to kill himself is God" (115–116). And later he adds: "If there is God, then the will is all his, and I cannot get out of his will. If not, the will is all mine, and it is my duty to proclaim self-will … It is my duty to shoot myself because the fullest point of my self-will is for me to kill myself … I kill myself to show my insubordination and my new fearsome freedom" (617–619). This is a kind of freedom that confirms Sartre's nothingness; it is a freedom for nihilism. Even through this handicapped freedom, however, we can discern our thirst to become God by imitating God's freedom, "he who dares to kill himself is God". With the only difference that we have to imagine (no matter how unthinkable it is) a God who not only is free in his existence but also a God who is free *from* and *before* His existence![6] God, in other words, *chooses to exist* and it is this choice prior even to His own existence that is self-generating, like the Burning Bush from which it announces itself. This God choosing-to-be-before-He-is is *not*! If we wish to render His freedom back to Him, we have to imagine, following Kearney's proposition, a God who is *not* but who may-be!

God, therefore, instead of being the absolute being and the *causa sui* of His being is rather *in need* of being, as Heidegger would argue in the hermetic language of his *Beiträge zur Philosophie:*

> Once, beingness became the most "being" (ὄντως ὄν); and, following this notion, being [Seyn] became the essence of god itself, whereby god was grasped as the manufacturing cause of all beings (the source of "being" and therefore necessarily *itself* the highest "being", the most-being). (…) Being [Seyn] is not and can never "be" more-being than a being, but also not less-being than gods, because gods "are" not at all. Being "is" the between [Zwischen] in the midst of beings and gods—completely and in every respect incomparable, "needed" by the gods and withdrawn from a being.[7]

Therefore, God is not. God is not—not only the Being but also God is not even His own being. God should be able to transcend this necessity by affirming His existence not as the acceptance of a fact or a reality but as a product of freedom. It is the freedom of the *posse* of God that brings God into *esse*. If Heidegger's critique of onto-theology has caused theological thought to abandon the question "what is God" for the question "who is God", the poetics of the possible take us a step further: neither the what nor the who of God but rather *how* and *when* God comes-to-be: "the *possest* contains the possibility of *esse* within itself … the realization of *possest*'s divine *esse* if and when it occurs, if and when the kingdom comes, will 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* brings being beyond being into new being, other-being!" (*GMB* 111). This other way of being beyond being answers the *how* and *when* of God's being as being-for-the-other and being-with-the-other.

Certainly, this is a much-promising and far-reaching proposition; but how can we be attentive to it if it does not find support or sufficient grounds? Is the God who may-be a novelty of faith? Or is He merely a rabbit pulled out of theology's hat? Is He another yet, fancy neologism of the postmodern milieu?

III. God as Trinity. A Personal God

If God were a *single* God we would have to accept His ontological necessity and thus, any attempt to imagine a God who may-be would have found the door of theology long sealed. However, the Christian God, contrary to the God of the philosophers, is a Triune God who exists as loving relation among the three Persons of the Trinity.[8] The Trinitarian God has revealed Himself as the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, that is a personal God who is Himself a person. What does it mean to say that He is a *personal* God instead of an *essential* one? Or, even simpler, that God is a person and not an essence? At the end of his study on the Exodic epiphany of God, Kearney proposes a new interpretation of God as neither being (onto-theology) nor non-being (negative theology, hysterical postmodernism), but as something between the two: an eschatological promise that *may-be*. According to the "eschatological reading" of the passage the "eschatological promise"—that is, God—"is granted within an I-Thou relationship", and furthermore it is "granted unconditionally, as pure gift". A gift that, à la Derrida, "neither is nor is not; it gives" (*GMB* 29). To be requires no other; to give as well as to promise presupposes the existence of another. No one promises or gives gifts to oneself (unless in a solipsistic fantasy). A God who gives and promises is a God who relates and is thus a personal God. By these characterizations we do not intend just to describe an attribute of God, but to point directly to the core of the mode of divine existence.[9]

Kearney writes, "Mount Thabor unfolds accordingly as a Gospel replay of Mount Sinai, with the transfigured Christ both re-figuring the Burning Bush and pre-figuring the coming of the messianic kingdom"[10] (*GMB* 42). If so, can we, then, look at the narration of Christ's metamorphosis for another revelation of God's identity similar to that made by God to Moses in Exodus? I believe yes. Reading the passage, as it is recorded by all of the three evangelists, we notice that God appears not as "He who is", neither as a single entity, nor as an eternal essence, but as Trinity. All of the three Persons become manifest at once in the moment of transfiguration: the Father in the voice that identifies Christ as His beloved Son; the Son in the shining face of Christ; and the Holy Spirit as the cloud that overshadows Christ and brings together both Moses and Elijah while occasions the event of transfiguration. A small and yet important detail does not go unnoticed by Kearney who says, "Note that it is the *face* that registers the transfiguring event" (*GMB* 40). Is it accidental that it is the face (*prosopon* all the accounts say) that becomes the register of the trinitarian theophany?

The personhood (prosopon) *of God is the very mode of God's self-generation into being*. The person of God is that instant where we can touch with the tips of our fingers, so to speak, the very mystery of the *passage* from *posse* to *esse*! Only in the event of personhood is God's "possible" hypostasized as an ecstasy towards the other. He exists because he ek-sists. From as early as the third century, the Fathers had conceived a synthesis of tremendous importance, that of *hypostasis* with *person*.[11] God as prosopon is neither an ekstasis without hypostasis (mysticism) nor a hypostasis without ekstasis (idolatry) but rather the chiasmic crossroad of the two.[12] The term that Kearney uses to express the grasping of the other as present in absence, as both incarnate in flesh (hypostasis) and transcendent in time (ekstasis)" is that of *persona*. Although, his understanding and analysis of *persona* is in perfect harmony with the Patristic *prosopon*, however, the term *persona* has the disadvantage of alluding to the superficiality of a mask, that is, to the realm of theater and, transferred into theological language, it brings the risk of Sabellianism, of interpreting, in other words, the Trinity as different roles that the *one* and the *same* God has performed throughout history.[13] There is yet another reason for which we prefer the term *prosopon* over *persona*; the etymology of prosopon is eloquently illustrating and recapitulating, as if in a capsule, all the dynamics of being as being-for and with-the-other.

IV. The Phenomenology of Prosopon

We usually translate it as "face" and hence as "person". Indeed, prosopon is the face and the person, but it means much more than that. Let's say that the term is used exclusively with the verb "to be" and never with the verb "to have". It makes sense only if one states that someone *is* a prosopon. To say that someone *has* a prosopon deteriorates the term into something that

someone possesses, i.e., a mask. What does it mean to be a prosopon? "Pros" means *towards*, *in front of* and "opon" (the genitive of "opsis", as in the word "optics") means a face and especially an eye. So, to be a *pros-opon* means nothing more than to be-towards-a-face; to stand in front of someone's face; to be present in her/his presence and in her/his vision. Being-towards-a-face always presupposes the other, in front of whom, we stand. This other, in turn, by standing in front of me, has to be a prosopon as well.

Both components of the term show some interesting characteristics. First, let's examine the preposition "pros". To be a pros-opon means to be on your way towards the other being. This also situates the being into a perpetual ek-sistence, a stepping-out-of-yourself and a being-towards-the-other. Being-towards-the-other means also to present yourself, to make yourself present in the other's presence. Prosopon strongly implies reciprocity of gaze through which the self is interpellated by the other and, ultimately, "othered". The antonym of a prosopon is again described in the Greek language by the term *atomon*. Prosopon and atomon are the only two existential possibilities open to a human being. However, to be an atomon means to be in fragmentation (a- and *temno*, to cut; therefore, the a-tomic is that which cannot be cut any further). As in the English language, the in-dividual is he who has been "divided" so many times that he has reached this point where no further split is possible. The individual stands in sharp opposition to the prosopon. Where the latter gathers and unites, there the former cuts off, separates, alienates. Where, then, does the individual belong? One would say to Hades. Hades, for the Greeks is the place of non-being, the underworld, the place where there is no *seeing*. A-ΐδης means the place where there is neither gaze nor face, where the possibility to see the other, face-to-face, has disappeared and along with it the dynamics of being a prosopon and of being as such. Hades is surrounded by the river *Lethe*, a-letheia, therefore, has no place there; this is the reign of existential Death. As Kearney, reversing Sartre, would say the only hell in this scenario is that of self condemned to self. The empty choosing will. The idolatry of each-for-itself.

V. Icon and Perichoresis

Two very important concepts, introduced by Kearney, reflect his understanding of the divine and human person, that of the *icon* and of *perichoresis.*[14] In *Transfiguring God* (as well as in its earlier version "La Transfiguration de la Personne" from the *Poétique Du Possible*) he articulates the scheme of a never-fully-exhausted icon as the alternative to a totalizing idol. Thus, the icon becomes the terminological double of the *persona*. "[I]t is easier to mistake the other's *persona* for an idol than accept it as an icon of transcendence … There is a thin line, of course, between seeking to capture the other as divine (qua idol) and receiving the divine through the other (qua icon)" (*GMB* 11). His linkage of the *persona* to the *icon* finds theological and

historical confirmation in the thought of the early Christian centuries and it is voiced in the axiomatic sentence "πρόσωπον γάρ ἐστι καὶ εἰκών ὁ Υἱός τοῦ Πατρός",[15] where the Son is said to be the *persona* and the *icon* (not of Himself but) of the Father, coining the two terms as synonymous. The resistance of the icon to be solely confined within the territory of the Same but always transcending towards the Other "the eyes of the icon that look through us from beyond us" and "the other as an icon for the passage of the infinite" (*GMB*) find its theological expression in the image of *perichoresis*. Perichoresis in Greek or *circumincessio* in Latin, "referred to a circular movement where Father, Son and Spirit gave place to each other in a gesture of reciprocal dispossession rather than fusing into a single substance" (*GMB* 109). Neither substance nor presence count as ways according to which the *how* and *when* of God's come-to-be happens. Instead, God's existence is revealed in "the sacred dance-play" of perichoresis where the principle of Divine existence is conceived as "an image of three distinct persons moving *towards* each other in a gesture of immanence and *away from* each other in a gesture of transcendence … An interplay of loving and letting go" (*GMB* 109).

John Damascene (c. 749) speaks of the trinitarian perichoresis using a language loaded with dance metaphors: the three persons "hold each other" as in a cyclical dance "the Son with the Father and Spirit, the Spirit with the Father and Son, the Father with the Son and Spirit in one and the same movement, in one leap, in one movement of the three hypostases" (*De Fide Orthodoxa*, 1000B). An earlier source, a fragment by Amphilochios of Iconium (c. 394), affirms and reinforces that all we can speak and know about God is not His *whatness* but rather His *howness*, and this is as "Father, Son and Spirit" which reveals the way that God exists (τρόπον ὑπάρξεως) but not what He is (οὐκ οὐσίας). In another ancient text we read that God exists only by virtue of this loving interplay with the other Persons (the Father begetting the Son and processing the Spirit). That is why, His existence is not subject to any causality but it is, finally, "of any necessity free".[16]

VI. Synergy. Eschatology and the Kingdom.

To a next level, "this trinitarian play includes humanity … to the extent that the second person becomes incarnate and enters history" (*GMB* 109). How could we possibly imagine the momentous implications of this "entering" where the a-chronic came to be measured in time and the u-topian to be confided in space? Incarnation is the event where transcendence intersects history without being swallowed up by historicity. It grafts radical otherness onto the body of self-sameness in a way that is precisely described in the Chalcedonian formula: "without division and without confusion." It produces a surplus. To argue in Levinasian terminology, "a *surplus always*

exterior to the totality" that is infinity, and yet to be "reflected *within* the totality and history, *within* experience" (*Totality and Infinity*, pp. 22–23). It is from this surplus that eschatology arises as the rapture of totality (eschatology as the beyond of history). The eschatological paradox of "always here and yet still to come" can only and always be understood as "transcendence in the face of the Other—*le visage d'autrui*" (*Totality and Infinity*, p. 24), in this case, the face of the incarnate Son, the face of Christ. This surplus is produced each time the Divine crosses paths with humanity: in the Exodic revelation of God to Moses where the "surplus saves God from being reduced to a mere signified transcendental or otherwise" (*GMB* 28) and in the episode of Christ's transfiguration which "signals a surplus or incommensurability between *persona* and person even as it inscribes the one in and through the other", and it "invites a history of plural readings" (*GMB* 28).

With these remarks, we reach now the most crucial and perhaps the most revolutionary moment in the thought of Kearney: *synergy*. A double-edged synergy. Where God gives but He also waits to be given, "as the one who persuades rather than coerces; invites rather than imposes; asks rather than impels. This God … cannot be God without relating to his other—humanity" (*GMB* 30). God's alleged omnipotence is then dramatically limited, if not totally given up, by his loving potency to relate, by being a personal God. "By choosing to be a player rather an emperor of the creation, God chooses powerlessness" (*GMB* 108). It is the Kingdom of this God that unfolds less as a power of immanent potency laboring towards fulfillment than as a power of the powerless, a vision that also invokes Christ's antinomy when, speaking to Paul, he said: "my power reaches perfection in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). God's power of powerlessness implies, however, neither an ontological nor a metaphysical, but rather an ethical imperative for humanity: to help God *be* God. Here lies the radicality of such a double-edged synergy. For it is not only God who helps us by His grace, to become "gods", it is also we who help Him, by our actions, to become fully God.[17] "God may henceforth be recognized as someone who *becomes with* us, someone as dependent on us as we are on Him" (*GMB* 29–30). God's *pleroma* will be attained with the coming of His Kingdom, he *will* be when he becomes his kingdom and his kingdom comes on earth. During the vigilant advent of His Kingdom it is crucial to remember that the kingdom always comes through the face of the most vulnerable, the cry of "the smallest of these", the widow, the orphaned, the hungry who asks "where are you?" the defenseless ones who forbid murder. Therefore, if we desire to see God "face-to-face" eschatologically, we need first to recognize His face in the face of the powerless historically, and, in doing so, we are called to assume both a synergetic *and* an energetic awareness. If we respond to this call, we will have transformed the World without deforming it. "If God has created the world for us, we recreated the world for God" (*GMB* 110). And

in this way, by returning to God the gift of love *with* love (the double genitive in Derrida's "the desire of God"), we become forerunners of His becoming for "God cannot become fully God, nor the Word fully flesh, until creation becomes a 'new heaven and a new earth' " (*GMB* 110). Neither God by Himself nor humanity alone can achieve the eschatological vision, to the extent that the kingdom will signal the end of all the monisms; what is in need here is "a mutual answerability and co-creation" (*GMB* 30). "The eschatological dance cannot be danced without two partners" (*GMB* 110).

But we may choose *not* to dance at all. To God's invitation we may choose *not* to respond. And the fact that we have this choice confirms God's dependency on us, regardless of how offensive such a thought may be to some. The Kingdom in absolutely no way should repeat the Garden of Eden. The *eschaton* cannot simply repeat the *arche*—this would be catastrophic—but it should constitute the way out, the *hyperbaton* of our facticity. This was the *felix culpa* that took place in the Fall from the Edenesque state, when man chose *not* to accept God's invitation to an existence of blind obedience and servile subordination by choosing his choice, that is, by choosing his freedom even at the price of death. Since then we are paying for our freedom with a freedom towards death. By means of this freedom, however, man became like god: "then the Lord God said: 'See! The man has become like one of us, knowing what is good and what is bad!' " (Genesis 3:21). When the moment for God to become a man came, there again human freedom was at stake. For could the incarnation have ever taken place if the Virgin Mary had *not* accepted God's invitation? In the moment of the annunciation we can see again how crucial this double synergy can be. God offers the plan of the salvation as *possible* (it is the possibility that the angel announces to her; note how many times the term δύναμις is repeated in the passage) but it is up to humans to say the final "yes": "Let it be done to me as you say" (Luke 1:38). It is also up to us to choose if we will lose or regain God's paradise. In this way, we should also imagine the angel returning to God and bringing to Him too the Good News of (His) salvation. And still, man could not eradicate his death until God assumed it as well. The Garden of Eden is only undone in the Garden of Gethsemane. There the agonizing Christ, although he asks "if it is *possible* (δυνατόν) let this cup pass me by", yet He had to say "yes" to His awaiting passion: "let it be as you would have it, not as I"[18] (Matthew 26:39).

This double-edged synergy then, thus understood, not only will put God's omnipotence under question but, far more dramatically, it will doubt God's claim to any omniscience as well. In Book XI of the *Confessions*, Augustine, discussing the concept of time in general, understands God as standing outside of time. If God knows no time then God, by necessity, knows everything. Whatever constitutes for us a tripartite structure of future-present-past, (or expectation, sight and memory as Augustine argues) for God is only "a today which does not yield place to any tomorrow or follow upon

any yesterday" (219); this motionless, unchangeable moment is precisely God's eternity. By virtue of His eternity God knows everything since the triptych of our history—past, present, future—lies in front of Him as an open book. Augustine employs the example of a well known canticle that one is reciting: "for to such a mind nothing would be hidden of ages past or ages still to come, any more than when I am singing my canticle anything is unknown to me of what I have sung from the beginning, of what remains to me to sing to the end" (231). So, God already knows the "end of the story" and always knew it. It is as if God is watching over and over again the same movie, a movie that he himself wrote and directed and now, *ex officio*, is condemned to be its only and eternal viewer. Such knowledge will sentence him to an equally eternal boredom. This boredom is the essential meaning of the theological predestination. If God knows everything with a necessary knowledge then, every single effort of us to change both ourselves and the world will be always already in vain no less than every effort of God to do things otherwise will be prescribed as impossible. Neither a miracle nor any prayer can appeal to a bored, albeit omniscient, God.

The God who may be, but is not yet, not already, the insufficient and inadequate God who always lacks and depends on His other, *this* God cannot be accused of theodicy. Such a God, neither omnipotent nor omniscient, fails every time that one of us falls short in her or his life, in her or his dreams. He fails, in each moment of my despair, in my distress and in my solitude. He fails, as my witness of suffering and misery takes away from Him the chance to be. He fails with me; my failure doesn't miss Him and He can't escape my agony. There and in each of these moments, God fails to be God. My betrayed hopes and my abandoned dreams, my tears and my fears send God down to the Hades of my incapacity. Broken lives and wounded bodies put together the pieces of the cross on which God is "lifted up". The same cross, nonetheless, that constitutes God's only glory (John 3:14, 8:28, 12:32). For it is only in His ultimate humiliation and suffering that God, contrary to all human understanding and beyond human comprehension, reveals His unfathomable glory. That is why those depictions of the crucifixion that did not sacrifice theological signification to historical accuracy, present Christ on the cross under the inscription not of *Rex Judaeorum* but rather of *Rex Gloriae*. The antinomy between image and text being an evident one: on the one hand, the image of a body naked, harassed, wounded, dirty with blood and dust, lifeless and, on the other hand, the solemn inscription that proclaims this very miserable spectacle nothing less but "the King of Glory". It is this "folly of the cross" that ultimately reveals another meaning in my failure: failure's very opposite one. God's wounds transform my solitude and my suffering to a triumphant song of doxology. Handicapped and outcast, sick and wounded, lost and distressed, we are all becoming voices in God's *magnificat*. "To God's 'I may be' each one of us is invited to reply 'I can'. Just as to each 'I can', God replies 'I may be' " (*GMB* 108). "Jesus Christ" says Paul

"whom I preached to you as Son of God, was not alternately 'yes' and 'no', *he was never anything but 'yes'*" (2 Corinthians 1:19). It is through this endless exchange of "yeses" that little by little, "by acting each moment" we bring the *posse* of God to the *esse* of history, we "make the impossible that bit more possible" (*GMB* 11).

NOTES

*(*GMB*) refers to Richard Kearney's volume, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), which was not yet published at the time of this essay.

1 "Being is the enabling-favoring, the 'may-be' [*das Mögliche*] … being is the 'quite power' of the favoring enabling, that is, of the possible … When I speak of the 'quiet power of the possible' … I mean being itself …" Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism", in *Pathmarks*, W. McNeill (ed) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 242.
2 Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1969), p. 72.
3 Although it sounds paradoxical, Sartre's views on the ontological problem constitute the highest point of the western *theological* thought albeit the fact that his resolutions lie in the antipodes of patristic thought.
4 Interestingly enough, Sartre, in his analysis of the *être-en-soi*, concludes that "being is what it is" (*Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, H. Barnes, trans. (New York, NY: Washington Square Press, 1956), p. 28), a formula that dangerously resembles the name of God in Exodus 3:14 as it was translated and interpreted by the tradition ("I am that I am"). Also the absolute identification of the being with its being excludes *a priori* any possibility: "Being-in-itself is never either possible or impossible. It is" (p. 29).
5 The être-*en-soi* "knows no otherness" (Ibid., p. 29).
6 Such a provocative claim was first formulated in the thought of the Greek Church Fathers and it was again unearthed and brought to its full rigor in the pivotal work of John of Pergamos (Zizioulas).
7 Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)*, P. Emad and K. Maly (trans.) (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 172.
8 It is worthy to re-think, at this point the phronetic character of ecclesial practice. We have neither been baptized in the name of the Being and the Essence and the Substance nor we pray to the Divinity or Godhead. Instead, the Church baptizes us in the name of three *persons* (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) and we call God "our Father" when we pray. "Father" and "Son" are terms that par excellence denote a personal and a relational association. A father can not possibly be what he is without a son and the son is never a son without a father. Both John of Pergamos and Karl Rahner have called attention to the fact that in modern handbooks of dogmatics the chapters are so arranged that "On the One God" precedes "On the Trinity", an arrangement that expresses the misunderstanding that the principle of God's existence lies on His single substance rather than on His trinitarian-personal way of existence. (*Being as Communion* (New York, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), pp. 40 and 58.)
9 I am greatly indebted here and for the analysis to follow to a series of articles by the Metropolitan of Pergamos, John Zizioulas, most notably his "Human Capacity and Human Incapacity" (*Scottish Journal of Theology*, v. 28, 1975), "Communion and Otherness" (*St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, v. 38, n. 4, 1994) and "On Being a Person: Towards an Ontology of Personhood", in *Persons, Divine and Human*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991).
10 Maximus the Confessor (c. 662) would agree with this interpretation. In a comment on Pseudo-Dionysius' *Ecclesiastica Hierarchia* he writes that "shadow refers to the Old Testament, icon to the New and Truth to the future condition" (Migne, v. 4, 137 D); following this tripartite hermeneutic principle, the event of Christ's Transfiguration is the *icon* that was foreshadowed in Exodus and will become fully true eschatologically in the Kingdom.

11 For a complete historical as well as theological account of the importance of this synthesis one should consult Metropolitan of Pergamos John Zizioulas's excellent treatment in *Being as Communion* (New York, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

12 One should remain attentive to the various nuances that the terms *ekstasis* and *hypostasis* carry especially after their use (almost as hallmarks of their respective philosophical systems) by Heidegger and Levinas. Kearney's work on the *possible* seeks to reconcile this phenomenal contradiction into an eschatological understanding of the person.

13 "In this sense we might best describe ourselves as actors (figurants) in a play authored by *personne* … To interpret a role is, therefore, to respond to the script of the *persona* who speaks through (*per-sona*) the other, to figure and play out this role as a one-for-the-other, as one through (*trans*) the other" (*GMB* 17). These lines could serve as pretext to whomever wishes to misread Kearney's intentions. Basil the Great in a letter (214) makes clear the crucial distinction between *prosopon* (face) and *prosopeion* (mask), the latter degenerates the plurality and the otherness of the person into the monism and the sameness of the mask.

14 It is quite evident in almost all the texts by Kearney a *return* to the thought of the early Christian Church. This return signals by no means a naïve retreat to the security of fundamentalism, but the fruitful and enriching conversation with the, in many aspects original and progressive, Patristic tradition. Kearney opens often in his discussions a dialogue with figures like Gregory the Nyssa, John Damascene and Maximus the Confessor. His analyses achieve thus what was considered as the impossible: a bridging between Christian theology and Modern (or even Postmodern) philosophy.

15 By Procopios of Gaza (c. 538) in his *Commentary on Genesis*, (Migne v.87, 361 A).

16 Traditionally attributed to Justin the Philosopher and Martyr, but recent scholarship placed it under the name of Theodoretos of Cyrene (c. 458): "Η μὲν ἄκτιστος [φύσις] δεσποτικὴ καὶ **πάσας ἀνάγκης ἐλευθέρα** …"Ωστε τὸ Ἀγέννητον καὶ Γεννητόν καὶ Ἐκπορευτόν, οὐκ οὐσίας δηλωτικὰ, σημαντικά δε τῶν **ὑποστάσεων** ἐστι ἱκανάς γάρ ἡμῖν διακρίνειν τά **Πρόσωπα** καὶ τοῦ Πατρός καί τοῦ Υἱοῦ καί τοῦ Ἁγίου Πνεῦματος ἰδιαζόντως δεικνύει ὑπόστασιν … καί τόν **τρόπον τῆς ὑπάρξεως**." *Exposition Rectae Confessionis*, (Migne, v.6, 1212 A).

17 Humanity as the other of God, on which God is dependent, makes sense *only* if understood in terms of the *Economical* Trinity—that is, the Trinity in its (historic) relation to humanity and to creation in general, especially through the Incarnation and Ascension of the second Person. In the *Immanent* or *Ontological* Trinity (i.e., the relationship of the three Persons with each other) the other of God is always God as the Other (Person). The human Other and the divine Other constitute two distinct moments of otherness viewed under the two different angles of speaking about the Trinity, the Economical and the Ontological respectively. I am thankful here to the Metropolitan of Pergamos, John Zizioulas, who, in a private conversation, brought this potentially self-contradictive point to my attention and suggested the maintaining of the distinction between economical and ontological Trinity as its solution. I also thank him for reading my text so carefully.

18 Kazantzakis would say that Christ's option to say "no" constitutes His Last and perhaps the most important of all Temptations that He has to fight and overcome.