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JOHN THE POSSIBILIZER: THE PROMISE OF A KEARNIAN  
BAPTISMAL HERMENEUTIC

The wild hair, the scratchy clothing, the grit and body odor, and the exotic diet. All of these images typically come to mind when one mentions John the Baptist. He is a cartoonishly fiery, angry (and a wee bit insane) prophet railing against the system like an ancient hippy. He is the wild and crazy opening act to the more staid main event of Jesus. The canonical Gospels are quite consistent in their understanding of John's character and role. He is not the messiah, but rather the one who urges that the way be prepared for the advent of the messiah.

John's call from the wilderness is a two-step process. His cry for a baptism of repentance is a call to deconstruction. It is a plea to turn back from that which is not of the kingdom of God. According to the Gospel of Luke, John urges his listeners to "bear fruits worthy of repentance."

He tells the gathered crowd to share their food and coats, tax collectors to collect only the amount prescribed to them, and soldiers not to extort money. He is clearing the ground of those obstacles which impede just relationships. He is pruning away those things that limit the possibility of the coming Basilea of God. It is dipping the static structures of oppression into the tehomic waters of the Jordan in order to shake loose new possibilities.

John's baptism is, further, an opening into the eschatological possibilities of the Kingdom, an "othering" transfiguration, and an appearance of Irish Catholic phenomenologist Richard Kearney's "God who may be." It is an advent that opens the baptized up to the unique messianic possibilities which engulf them. Just as John's unique *persona* attracted followers and created a community moved by the possibilities of the God of promise, a community that included Jesus, so too through this baptism we today can be moved towards openness to the potentialities of the divine.

Might this baptism, then, lead the way toward a Kearnian hermeneutic of opening possibility? A watery vision of the God who may be? To explore this question, I suggest that it is worth taking a Kearnian look at the portrayal of John in the Gospel of Luke.

## PROSOPON AND POSSIBILITY

Preliminarily, though, I should point out that while Kearney does not write about John the Baptist,<sup>1</sup> I would argue that some inferences can be made about the way that he might describe John's *persona* by examining Kearney's description of Jesus as *persona*. Using what he terms "a phenomenological-hermeneutic retrieval rather than ... theological exegesis per se,"<sup>2</sup> he highlights the Transfiguration texts in examining the figure of Christ. Specifically, he argues that at Mount Thabor "the person of Jesus is metamorphosed before the eyes of his disciples into the *persona* of Christ."<sup>3</sup>

Kearney argues that his notion of *persona* (or the Greek version, *prosopon*, which Kearney uses virtually interchangeably with *persona*) is eschatological, not teleological. That is, there is no foreseeable or predictable goal or outcome to which the *persona* of the "other" who is encountered is aimed. Rather, the other is moving towards open and surprising potentialities which we have no power to control or define. The *persona* is always just beyond our grasp. The *persona* or *prosopon*, usually translated as "face," is the "eschatological aura of 'possibility'" exuded by a person.<sup>4</sup>

It is the overflowing or exceeding of a person that makes them an Other, in Levinasian terminology. It is this exceeding, transcendent aspect of the person that is the space of the possible. The *persona* is the "capacity in each of us to receive and respond to the divine invitation."<sup>5</sup> It is our human openness to the divine opening of the possible.

In a response to Kearney's work, philosopher John Panteleimon Manoussakis points out that while *prosopon* is generally translated as "face" or "person," such translations can skew one's understanding of its ancient meaning. He notes 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*."<sup>6</sup> *Prosopon* is not possessed, but is more like a stance taken.

Manoussakis goes on to elaborate that since *pros* means "toward" or "in front of," *prosopon* is best understood as "to be-toward a face" or "in front of someone's face."<sup>7</sup> *Prosopon* or *persona* is, then, an event that necessarily involves relationality. Being a *prosopon* requires an encounter with an Other who is also (or becomes also) a *prosopon*.

<sup>1</sup> He does make brief reference to the presence of the messiah to John the Baptist in an interview, which will be noted later.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 39. Hereafter noted as *GMB*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>6</sup> John Panteleimon Manoussakis, "Prosopon and Icon: Two Premodern Ways of Thinking" *After God*, John Panteleimon Manoussakis, ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 283.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

The encounter of *personas* is a dynamic event ripe with ethical implications, rife with echoes of Levinas. In being part of the interplay of face-to-face gazes and mutual othering, an ethical personhood is developed. Manoussakis writes, “*Prosopon* strongly implies the reciprocity of gaze through which the self is interpellated by the Other and, ultimately, ‘othered.’ The passage toward the Other leaves my existence vulnerable to the fear and trembling of the infinite possibilities that await me.”

Thus, the infinity of the other compels an ethical relationship to the other, à la Levinas, but also with hints of William James’ eschatological ethics.<sup>8</sup> The infinity of the *persona* is an opening to the vulnerability of possibility. Manoussakis continues,

the dynamic (i.e., full of potential) character of the person makes “the possible” a personal (*prosopic*) category par excellence. Personhood ... is never to be understood as a fait accompli or a once-and-for-all given that somehow we possess. Rather, to be a person suggests a process continuously occasioned by the unreserved exposure to the Other.<sup>9</sup>

Kearney terms the encounter of a *persona* with another *persona* a “*prosopon transfiguration*.<sup>10</sup> Such a transfiguration is a call of the other to the self that completes the self and opens it to heightened eschatological awareness of the ethical possibilities. The transfiguration of the *persona* is an opening to divine possibility. As Paul Symington, another commentator on Kearney’s work, notes, *persona* is always both already present and still to come.<sup>11</sup>

This messianism of the possibilities of the *persona* serves as a gateway to the “Kingdom of the Possible.” The Kingdom of the Possible is, for Kearney, the messianic potentiality for justice being actualized in the world. It is an invitation to humans to participate in the realization of that justice.

When and insofar as humans partake in the Kingdom of the Possible (that is, participate in ongoing *prosopon transfiguration*), the divine is manifested in the world. Kearney writes, “in every moment there is the possibility of good and the possibility of non-good. There’s the possibility of love; there’s the possibility of hate, violence, aggression.” God *is* when we choose love, and *is not* when we do not.

Kearney goes on to say, “every moment we are actualizing the Kingdom or not-actualizing the Kingdom.”<sup>12</sup> His sense of the divine, then, is that it unfolds in the possibilities of the ordinary activities of daily life, and through the hope in the possibilities of the future. There is no guarantee of the existence of God’s being, however, because of the human capacity to reject the messianic possibilities. The existence of God’s being in the world is a promise

<sup>8</sup> For more on the connection between the ethics of Kearney and James, see Paul Symington, “Beyond Continents: Eschatological Dimensions in the Philosophy of William James and Richard Kearney,” *Philosophy Today*, 50:3, Fall 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Manoussakis, 284-285.

<sup>10</sup> GMB, 18.

<sup>11</sup> Symington, 268.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Kearney Interview with Mark Manolopoulos, in *After God*, 373.

that may become actualized, depending on the human participation in that promise.

Thus, Kearney argues that the Kingdom of God – and in fact, God’s very being – is an eternal promise. In this sense it is imbued with a transcendent quality. The transcendent aspect of divinity, then, “is described [by a variety of biblical texts] as a possibilizing of divine love and logos in the order of human history where it would otherwise have been impossible. In other words, the divine reveals itself here as the possibility of the Kingdom.”<sup>13</sup>

As eternal, the Kingdom defies containment in chronology. It both is and is yet to come. He describes God as saying, “I will show up as promised, but I cannot *be* in time and history. I cannot become fully embodied in the flesh of the world, unless you show up and answer my call ‘Where are you?’ with the response ‘Here I am.’”<sup>14</sup>

God is the eternal promise made manifest in human response and the possibility of continued human response. French philosopher Stanislas Breton terms this move of Kearney’s a “micro-eschatology,” because it is forged in the minutia of daily choices rather than a grand cosmic scheme.<sup>15</sup> It is an eschatology of potentiality, not of teleology.

Such a focus on God as promise has a resonance with Martin Luther’s insistence on focusing on God’s promises (and the human response of faith in those promises), rather than a preoccupation with the existence of the divine. Church historian James Samuel Preus, for instance, holds that in Luther’s first Psalms course, he comes to see *testimonia*, or promise, as the normative meaning of the entire Bible.

Preus argues, “With Luther, something different has now appeared: promise, or testimony, as Scripture’s normative, theological-literal meaning, together with faith as the goal of interpretation.”<sup>16</sup> The wider theological implication of this biblical understanding of promise, according to Preus, is a break with medieval understandings of grace and faith. Preus writes, “Grace-as-*intellectus* is being thoroughly undermined … Therefore, faith is not the grace of *intellectus*, but the trust of future things that are promised.”<sup>17</sup>

Thus Preus’ argument demonstrates that, for Luther, God speaks to humanity through words of promise, which through grace inspire a faithful trust in the divine activity in the world.

Yet Luther goes even further in tying the promise of God’s action in the world to the faithful human response. In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, for instance, Luther writes,

<sup>13</sup> Richard Kearney, “Enabling God,” *After God*, 41.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 43, author’s italics

<sup>15</sup> Stanislas Breton, “On the God of the Possible” *After God*, 180.

<sup>16</sup> James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther*, (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1969), 189.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

For God does not deal, nor has he ever dealt, with man otherwise than through a Word of promise. ... We in turn cannot deal with God otherwise than through faith in the Word of his promise. He does not desire works, nor has he need of them; ... But God has need of this: that we consider him faithful in his promises [Heb. 10:23], and patiently persist in this belief ... [P]romise and faith must necessarily go together. For without the promise there is nothing to be believed; while without faith the promise is useless, since it is established and fulfilled through faith.<sup>18</sup>

Faith here is more than simply intellectual assent, but is rather a participation in the promises of God. Faith, for Luther, is the basis of hope and love; it is thus the basis for the possibility of participation in the divine promise. The category of promise and faithful response in a sense overcomes the dichotomy of signifier and referent, and permits an active participation in the gap between them.

There is a notable resonance here with Kearney's sense of God's enfleshment in the world through human response to the promise. Of course, Luther's eschatology is much more teleological than Kearney's is. Nevertheless, the two share a sense of the relationship between God's promise and the active human response of faith that concretizes that promise.

#### *JESUS' TRANSFIGURATION AND PERSONA*

Because the Messiah is always still to come, while already having come as well, there can, for Kearney, be no once-and-for-all messianic moment. There are, however, moments where the divine possibilities are so intensely embodied that they can be looked back upon as paradigmatic moments of divine incarnation. He uses examples like Moses and the burning bush, but finds the clearest moment to be Jesus' Transfiguration on Mount Thabor.

Kearney argues that, in the Transfiguration, Jesus is "othered" as Christ. The infinite transcendent overflow of his *persona* is manifested in the particularity of the person Jesus, in such a way that he was clearly still recognizable in his particularity and yet also clearly other than his everyday visage.

Kearney points to the importance of the face in the Transfiguration scene, writing,

Saint Luke's Gospel tells us that as Jesus was praying, 'the aspect of his face (*prosopon*) was changed and his clothing became sparkling white' (Luke 9:29-30). Note that it is the face that registers the transfiguring event, marking an ethical openness to transcendence which refuses idolatry.<sup>19</sup>

In this opening of his face to the possibilities of the God of promise, Kearney calls Jesus as Christ the *prosopon par excellence*.<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Bloechl, another philosopher of religion, explains that for Kearney, "It is in and through

<sup>18</sup> Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, in *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, Ed. Timothy F. Lull, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 298.

<sup>19</sup> GMB, 40.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Jesus...that we may catch sight of the spiritual dimension of a humanity...irreducible to physical and material concerns – the dimension that opens each of us to his or her own future beyond the limits of this world."<sup>21</sup>

Christ in this sense is a paradigmatically deep opening of the person to the *persona* and the potentialities lying therein. Again, Kearney argues, "Christ [is] the possibility of all humans becoming 'sons of God' – that is, by being transfigured into their own unique *personas*." Christ is related to the historical figure of Jesus, but exceeds that particularity as a promise of potential, as "a way not a terminus, an *eikon* not a fundamentalist fact, a *figure* of the end but not the end itself."<sup>22</sup>

Thus, for Kearney, Christ seems to be what empowers humans to be open to the uniqueness of their own *persona*, while Jesus' unique *persona* is encompassed in Christ. Yet Kearney seems to reserve the title of Christ for Jesus' openness to his own *persona*.

When he writes of "Christ," he means specifically the *persona* of Jesus. His own system would, I contend, call for a wider conception of Christ. His assertion that Christ is the possibility of possibility – that is, of each person opening to their unique *persona* – would seem to argue for a notion of Christ as the enabling of the opening, something like the catalyst for the *prosopon transfiguration*.

Certainly, Kearney would not want to argue that Jesus is the sole example of incarnation or the only coming of the Messiah. His entire understanding of messianism is that it is always to come as much as it has already happened. Indeed, he shares in an interview his belief that the Messiah has shown up in history regularly, saying,

With Elijah in the cave the Messiah came. But that wasn't the end of it. The Messiah came to John the Baptist, too, the voice crying in the wilderness. God always comes and goes. And that's the nature of the Messiah: it's already here – the Kingdom is already here – but it is also not yet fully here.<sup>23</sup>

His terminology of "Christ" as Jesus' *persona*, then, is at best perplexing. I would suggest that Christ is better understood as the full meeting of the person with the possibilities of the Kingdom, a meeting that occurred for Jesus in a way that made him intimately linked with "the Christ," but not in such a way as to grant him exclusive use of the title.

#### A KEARNIAN READING OF THE LUKAN JOHN

In Kearnian terms, then, the John portrayed by Luke is one who has a special, though not as paradigmatically unique as Jesus', openness of *persona* to the God of possibility. Might we even say that it is Christ at work in John? Distinctive to Luke is John's biological relationship to Jesus. Only in Luke is

<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey Bloechl, "Christianity and Possibility," *After God*, 135.

<sup>22</sup> GMB, 43, author's italics.

<sup>23</sup> Interview, 373.

the promise of John's birth recorded (Luke 1:8-25), Mary's visit to Elizabeth recounted (Luke 1:39-56), and John's birth included (Luke 1:57-80). In the third chapter of Luke, John is living in the wilderness when the word of the Lord comes to him and causes him to begin preaching a baptism of repentance (Luke 3:2-3).

Yet it is important to note that by this third chapter, John is already out in the wilderness. At the end of chapter 1 (1:80), John goes to the wilderness and grows spiritually strong. His move to the wilderness and his emergent spiritual strength are not the result of receiving the word of the Lord, although they could possibly be the condition for perceiving it.

Moving to the wilderness is, after all, a renunciation of the power structures of his world. It is, perhaps, for him the first stage of a *prosopon transfiguration* – the clearing away of obstacles preventing the possibilities of the kingdom from being actualized.<sup>24</sup> Such an ascetic move functioned for John as a personal clearing that allowed him to receive the word of the Lord.

What is this encounter that John has with the word of the Lord? Could we understand receiving the word of the Lord as an experience of opening to the possibilities of the Basilea; as an experience of the God who may be?

In Luke's setting, John was identified from before birth as having a special role; yet leaving the solitude of the wilderness behind to engage others and receiving the word of the Lord coincided for John. At the least, receiving a word from the Lord is what brought John *in from* the wilderness, not what sent him *out into* it. It moved him to engage people, to move around and begin to preach and attract disciples. It called him into a public ministry, proclaiming the coming of the kingdom.

I would suggest that an opening of his particularity to the infinity of his *persona* occurred in John's receiving the word of the Lord and facing others, and that through this encounter, he was transfigured. He was brought into a connection with the realm of possibility, a realm laced with ethical implications. He peered into the kingdom of the possible, and in so doing experienced a *prosopon transfiguration*. His message of repentance, then, was a call to others towards a similar transfiguration and entry into the Basilea.

In his encounter with the possible, John knew that the kingdom could be, but also saw that there were roadblocks to its occurrence. Structures of sin, individual and corporate, barred the way. The things that needed clearing away for him personally through his wilderness experience needed to be

<sup>24</sup> Within the Lukan framework, the prophecy to Zechariah certainly serves to identify John's special calling to the reader. The prophecy notes that John is to be prohibited from any strong drink and that he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. Yet, while this prophecy sets up John's ministry, it is worth noting that there is a difference for Luke between John's being filled with the Holy Spirit and his receiving the word of the Lord. Being filled with the Spirit is the preparatory phase that, though started at birth, culminated in his deconstructive action of going out to the wilderness, while receiving the word is what brought him back in to the region around the Jordan.

cleared away for others, not just on an individual level but also on the larger social scales.

Thus, he adopted the baptism of repentance for his deconstructive purposes, to be the one preparing the way for the messianic coming. He was working to break the dam clogging the flow of possibility, stirring up potentiality in those that came to him. In his baptizing, he was possibilizing.

Yet he was also acutely aware that the work he was doing was not a fulfillment of the messianic thirst for justice. His baptism of clearing away, of deconstructing the constructions that prevented the coming of the Basilea, was only the first part; a reenactment of the spiritual strength he gained in his wilderness wanderings. His work was opening up space for the possible, the possible that he expected because of the opening of his *persona* to the word of the Lord that came to him.

Opening space for the possible is, however, a form of allowing the actualization of the possible. Such opening makes what was impossible possible. There is a Kearnian sense to this work of opening up the possible. Kearney is critical of Jacques Derrida's focus on the impossible, for instance. He argues, "But for me, God is the possibilizing of the impossible. ... We actualize what God possibilizes and God possibilizes what remains impossible for us."<sup>25</sup> I would suggest, then, that John's word from the Lord was one of the possibility of making possible what had been impossible.

Yet John clearly sees a difference between *preparing the space for the kingdom* and *being the Messiah*. In Luke 3:16 he says, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals."

It is, perhaps, this belief that he was not the Messiah that distinguished John from Jesus. Jesus accepted the fullness of the messianicity of his *persona* in a way that John did not. If John did not understand himself as the Messiah, then, what was the purpose of his baptism?

Certainly, there is a great deal of scholarly literature on this topic from historical and exegetical perspectives. From a more theological level, however, I suggest that John's baptism was a step into possibility. The step into the water was a step into the deep, into the tehom, into the chaos of open possibilities. It is what theologian Catherine Keller might call a "tehomic" movement.

*Tehom* is the Hebrew word for the deep of Genesis 1:2. It is the primordial chaos out of which God created. Keller brings this chaotic deep into play as a theological hermeneutic, as a "tehomic theology" of a world in flux and constant becoming. She employs poststructuralist theory to "clear a space for the tehomic hermeneutic" of uncertainty that deconstructs the notion of *creation ex nihilo* in favor of a *creation ex profundus*.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, it is a

<sup>25</sup> Interview, 374.

<sup>26</sup> Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, London, New York: Routledge, 2003.

process theology of creativity. In the depth of the tehom, there is a chaotic abundance. She argues,

For a tehomic theology, ... the deconstruction of the absolute Logos of the *ex nihilo* yields an otherness of cosmos bottomlessly preceding and exceeding human language. ... The excess and deficiency of significance marks itself as a chaos *vis-à-vis* any totality; it gathers its dimensions here under the sign of the tehom.<sup>27</sup>

The inexpressible Deep of the tehom is, for Keller, the matrix of possibility. John's baptism was a step away from the constrictions of the forces of the world and a step towards the potentialities of the kingdom of God; an unleashing of the tehomic chaos of kingdom possibilities. The person baptized, however, still needed to participate in actualizing the Kingdom of the Possible through their myriad day-to-day choices.

They still needed to take part in making the potentialities of the kingdom into realities. Yet those possibilities were impossible for the person until the *prosopon transfiguration* brought on by the encounter with John's baptism, and its accompanying opening to the vibrant potencies of the divine. The step into the messianic forcefield unleashed a torrent of possibility.

The one who was baptized encountered not just the wild and crazy man John, but the messianic potentialities of the *persona* John the Baptizer. In encountering this *persona*, one was "othered" by it and opened to their own depth, their own infinity of possibility, and moved to face the other. In this sense, then, the baptism of John was a moment of possibilization. It was a ritual of transfiguration, on a smaller scale than Jesus' on Mount Thabor, but a *prosopon transfiguration* nonetheless.

To be sure, the Gospel writer of Luke is clear that John's baptism is superseded by baptism into Christ. In Acts 19:3-4, for instance, it reads,

Then [Paul] said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' [The disciples in Corinth] answered, 'Into John's baptism.' Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.'

Yet this move makes sense in the Kearnian scheme of encounter with *persona*. Put simply, if an encounter with the *persona* of John the Baptizer through the tehomic waters opened a person up to the possibilities of the kingdom of God, how much more open would they become through an encounter with the *prosopon par excellence* of Christ? It is a *qal va-homer* argument: if John's baptism leads to transfiguration and an opening to the divine possibilities, even more so does baptism in Christ, the one most fully open to divine possibility.

Does this argument, however, leave John back where we found him, the opening act before Jesus' main event? In a sense, yes. Yet it is perhaps better to think of John more in terms of a preliminary act rather than an opening act.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 165. Author's italics.

The opening act is extraneous, while the preliminary act sets the stage for what is to come. Though John is awaiting the Messiah to come,<sup>28</sup> I suggest that he plays an essential role in opening Jesus up to the possibilities of the Basilea and thus the *persona* of Christ.

It is Jesus' encounter with John's unique *persona*, I would argue, that opens Jesus up to the potentialities and promises of the God who may be. Again, to be a *prosopon* requires an encounter with another *prosopon*. In baptizing Jesus, John initiates Jesus' first *prosopon* encounter, his first *prosopon transfiguration*, which acts as the word of the Lord did for John, setting Jesus in motion towards his public ministry and his increasing connection with the *persona* of Christ, the connection that Kearney sees reaching its apex in The Transfiguration.

It is worth noting that according to Luke, Jesus' next act after being baptized by John is to go into the wilderness, reversing John's process. While there, Jesus is tempted by the devil. From a Kearnian standpoint, Jesus is making his choice of how to respond to the divine that John has possibilized for him.

While a reading of the specific temptations is beyond the scope of this paper, I would suggest that in reversing John's movement Jesus went to the wilderness to gain the spiritual strength to clear himself of the obstacles within himself which prevented the actualizing of the divine possibilities now opened to him.

Thus, clearing and opening should be seen as two different – reversible and interrelated, but still distinct – phases of this messianic transfiguration represented by John and Jesus. Both a dissolving of impossibility and an opening to new possibilities is required. The desert and the water go hand in hand.

One might wonder whether such a reading of Jesus' baptism ends up as a form of adoptionism, where through his baptism Jesus becomes divine. There is, however, a distinction between adoptionism and this more Kearnian reading of Jesus' baptism. The claim being made here is not that in Jesus' baptism Christ descended upon him and Jesus became the Christ. Rather, my argument is that Jesus was opened up to the infinite unfolding of his *persona* in Christ through his baptism. As Kearney holds, "The infinite *persona* of Christ is not exhausted in the finite figure of Jesus of Nazareth. The Messiah is distinct, if by no means separable, from the Nazarene."<sup>29</sup>

My reading offers a concrete theological test or application of that inexhaustibility. In Jesus' baptism, he was opened up to the Messiah who was *already present* in his *persona*, just as the Messiah is present in each person's *persona*. Each person can embrace the possibilities of the Kingdom so as to actualize them in the world. In his baptism, Jesus began this process of

<sup>28</sup> It is interesting to note that in the Lukan set-up it would seem likely that John would understand the coming Messiah to be Jesus, but the text of Luke, like Mark, does not actually make this move explicitly, the way Matthew and John do.

<sup>29</sup> GMB, 43.

opening that eventually reached such proportions that he became inseparably identified and uniquely linked with the messianic arrival.

#### SACRAMENTAL HERMENEUTICS

In order to appreciate the force of Kearney's hermeneutical contribution, it will prove helpful to compare it briefly with analogous moves made by another Roman Catholic phenomenologist, Jean-Luc Marion. While Marion develops a Eucharistic hermeneutic in *God Without Being*, drawing on the Emmaus passage in Luke 24, I would like to suggest that Kearney's religious hermeneutic actually fits better with the beginning of Luke's Gospel and with a different sacramental strand of thought. Kearney's hermeneutic of religion can be read as a baptismal one, which draws on Luke 3 and the figure of John the Baptizer, and its open possibilities, in contrast to the coming of the referent that Marion finds in the Eucharistic text.

To sketch briefly Marion's Eucharistic hermeneutic, he understands Christ as the "Living Referent" who stands outside the text and animates the text. For the disciples in the Emmaus story, the Paschal event has already occurred; it is trapped in the past and so locked out of reach. He writes,

For the disciples, as for us, it no longer belongs to the present. Once things have happened, there remain only words: for us, there remains the text of the New Testament, just as for the disciples there remained only the rumor...of the putting to death...In both cases, the event referred to is lacking.<sup>30</sup>

For Marion, an event is a fleeting encounter with the dynamic divine; words are the leftover "relic" or "trace." The words do not contain the event, but only memorialize it. Even correctly interpreted, the texts can only lead the disciples to an elapsed event.

A new event, the advent of the Living Referent, is necessary for entering into the fullness of the text. As Marion commentator Scott David Foutz notes, "Marion concedes that all fall short of the ability to arrive at a full understanding of the text apart from the aid of the Living Word himself."<sup>31</sup> In terms of the Emmaus passage, this advent of the Living Referent comes in the form of Christ's self-disclosure that culminates in breaking bread with the disciples so that their eyes were opened to Christ's appearance to them.

Marion thus sees the Eucharist as continuing to function as a place of encounter with the Living Referent, so that in the Eucharist the text of a past event bursts with fullness. He argues, "The Eucharist alone completes the hermeneutic; the hermeneutic culminates in the Eucharist; the one assures the other its condition of possibility: the intervention in person of the referent of the text as center of its meaning..."<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. by Thomas A. Carlson, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 147.

<sup>31</sup> Scott David Foutz, "Postmetaphysic Theology: A case study: Jean-Luc Marion" *Quodlibet Online Journal*, Vol. 1, Number 3, June 1999.

<sup>32</sup> Marion, 150.

In the Eucharist, the possibilities of the Kingdom are manifest in the Living Referent. It is Christ, the Word, the Living Referent, who is the summation of the potencies and possibilities of the Basilea that is to come. The Living Referent is the bearer and collector of possibility, showing up from time to time in history, and giving us a peek at the fullness of possibility through the self-disclosure of the Eucharist.

Thus, while Christ for Kearney is a certain opening and unfolding of possibility, for Marion Christ is more the originator and container of possibility. Marion's system is one of fulfilling while Kearney's is one of opening.

Kearney, meanwhile, is not so much interested in the advent of the referent as he is in the advent of possibility. He places this advent in the realm of transfiguration, as an ever-unfolding phenomenon where Christ's *persona* calls each of us to be transfigured as "chosen ones."<sup>33</sup> Yet it seems that an appropriate parallel can be drawn between this transfiguration hermeneutic and a baptismal one.

In fact, Kearney's sense of on-going messianism is conducive to a multiplicity of incarnational encounters that may serve as hermeneutical lenses. Breton, for instance, understands his sense of the possibilities emanating from the absence of the Cross to have strong resonances with Kearney's God of possibility.<sup>34</sup>

In a Kearnian scheme, baptism is shaken from any solid mooring it may have as a moment of ontological change. It is moved beyond a free ticket into heaven, and towards an opening into the Basilea. Even rhetoric of dying and rising with Christ can be understood in terms of opening beyond the confines of the person into the possibilities of the *prosopon*.

Like the baptism of John's followers, baptism today is a plunge into the deep potentialities of the kingdom. The waters of baptism become an active symbol of manifestation of possibility. Through baptism, then, there is an immersion in the tehom that unleashes a torrent of the possible.

It is a chaotic concrescence opening the person to the reaches of their *persona*, othering them and facing them with ethical responsibility. It is a ritual of *prosopon transfiguration*.

Baptism thus understood acts an entrance into the bubbling burst of divine dance. Kearney talks of the perichoretic dance within the trinity of God, humanity, and the Kingdom. "The *perichoresis*," he notes, "is the dance around the *khora*. *Peri-chora*."<sup>35</sup> The throbbing of the *khora* is the beat that propels the dance, and baptism is the opening into its rhythms.

From a hermeneutical standpoint, the God of promise emerges by looking through the waters of possibility. From the outside, it is nearly impossible to

<sup>33</sup> GMB, 46.

<sup>34</sup> See Breton, "On the God of the Possible."

<sup>35</sup> Interview, 370.

get a clear picture of what is going on beneath the shimmering surface of moving, chaotic water. Reflection, refraction, ripples, and waves all work to create a kaleidoscopic play of images.

There is much greater clarity, though, when you are under the water. Some distortions remain, but many do not. We cannot stay under the water for long, however, before we must return to the surface, where vision is once again impeded. This is the baptismal hermeneutic. The chaotic infinity of divine possibility can at best be seen kaleidoscopically, as an interplay of light and texture.

An immersion in the tehom, an opening to the *persona*, a whirl in the perichoretic dance, grants greater clarity to the possibilities of the kingdom; yet, the moment of relative clarity is fleeting. The openness of possibility is best seen from within, through the baptismal waters. Rather than a hermeneutic of the advent of the Living Referent, it is a hermeneutic of being engulfed by the possibility.

Though the vision of the possibility is one step, the dance does not stop there. The wilderness step, the clearing of obstacles and building of spiritual strength, remains. It is the step of building up lung capacity, clearing the way for longer dips in the pool. It is the step of repentance, deconstruction, and challenging structures that perpetuate the non-advent of the kingdom. This step too is essential for a baptismal hermeneutic. It is a step of action and participation.

As a Christian practice, baptism seen in this light can be understood rather conventionally as the beginning of a life of discipleship. It is joining an apostolic succession; not a succession of properly consecrated bishops, but – not so conventionally – a history of mutually transfiguring *personas*.

The ideal of the Christian community here would be that the gathered assembly is a collection of *prosopons* who move one another, and in particular the one who is being baptized, to a *prosopon transfiguration*. Christ can then be said to be truly present in the assembly and in that baptism. The *prosopon transfiguration* through baptism opens the way to seeing the possibilities of the divine, and daily remembrance of baptism is a daily remembrance of the promise of the God of possibility.

Of course, baptism alone does not give entry into the kingdom. Here again, the step of building spiritual strength is also required. Such discipline and clearing of pathways is part of the life of the community of the church. Through this second step, the baptism of possibility is brought into fullness.

Care must be taken here to avoid turning the rite of baptism into an idol for controlling a *persona*, just as Kearney is careful to show that Jesus does with his disciples' desire to hold on to the clarity of his *persona* in the Transfiguration moment. On this drive to hold on to the elusiveness of the *prosopon*, Kearney notes "the disciples' effort to fix Christ as a fetish of

presence" and "the idolatrous impulse of Peter, James, and John to fuse with his person or possess him as a cult object."<sup>36</sup>

The *persona* is always beyond reach, ungraspable. It cannot be pinned down into a ritual, dogma, or doctrine. God may be in the waters of a baptismal service, insofar as the service participates in the Kingdom, or may not be, insofar as it does not participate in the Kingdom. The God of possibility is beyond any static predictability.

#### CONCLUSION

The baptism into the possibilities of the Basilea is not without risk. A *prosopon transfiguration* is not for the faint of heart. For John the Baptist, as for Jesus, his transfiguring experience of opening to his *persona* quickly made him a *persona non grata*. The authorities only put up with a little bit of challenge from such a *persona* before John was imprisoned (Luke 3:20) and later killed. The cracks in the impossible that allow it to become possible are small and have sharp teeth.

Yet the echoes of a *prosopon transfiguration* continue to resound. As Kearney holds, "If and when the Kingdom comes, I believe it will be a great kind of 'recollection,' 'retrieval,' or 'recapitulation' (*anakephalaiosis* is the term used by Paul) of all those special moments of love."<sup>37</sup>

Those moments and events continue to be meaningful. Even beyond Kearney's eschatological recollection, the resounding is felt in the continuing community, the apostolic succession – a succession by no means limited to the Church. It is the history of continued moments, of *prosopons* provoking the transfiguration of other *prosopons*. The line is not unbroken, and yet the promise of God continues to be energized by the communities formed around the *personas* it has created, and these communities continue to create more fleeting moments of transfiguration.

From the currents of baptismal possibilities, the cry from the wild man in the wilderness rings out, declaring the messianic coming of divine promise. "Prepare the way of the Lord," he calls, "make his paths straight." Repent, deconstruct, clear the ground. Make space for divine possibility, and grow in spiritual strength to engage those possibilities. John's public ministry was a preliminary act for the ongoing arrival of the messiah to come, a key link in the chain of *prosopon* succession. His was the work of a possibilizer.

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<sup>36</sup> GMB, 42.

<sup>37</sup> Interview, 374.