

Sermon, LMF, April 28, 2024: *The God Who May Be*

Good morning. It feels good to be part of this sermon series.

I love the hymn we just sang! I once heard Harlem Black gang leader turned evangelist, Tom Skinner, thunder out:

*If Christ is the answer, what are the questions?!—*He later wrote a book by the same title.

I wonder, if ever we stop asking “complicated questions,” has our faith already begun to wilt and die?
...

Introduction

In spring 2012, it had been a difficult Monday at the office of the church-based Restorative Justice program I was Director of. The evening Board meeting had not made things better—a Board whose Chair became later notably anti-SOGI/LGBTQ—and was also *markedly* anti-Yours Truly. I climbed into my car, turned on the radio, just as David Cayley of CBC *Ideas* was beginning the first of a new “After Atheism” series: an interview with noted Irish Catholic philosopher Richard Kearney on the theme of “*anatheism*.” In 18th-century evangelist John Wesley’s phrase, ‘my heart felt strangely warmed’ by the end of the program, I listening to the last few minutes in our driveway. . .

It feels good to reflect on “*The God Who May Be*” in light of the theme of “*anatheism*,” a *neologism*—new word—created by Richard Kearney. Like the *ana* in *Anabaptist*, Kearney means quite literally “God again,” or “return to belief/trust in God once more”—just as the 16th-century Mennonite precursors baptized their converts again: hence *Ana*-baptist.

If *anatheism* signals the *possibility* of God after God, it is because it allows for the alternative option of its *impossibility*. So much depends, of course, on what we mean by God. . . it requires a process of endless interpretation. The more strange God is to our familiar ways, the more multiple our readings of this strangeness. . . *The absolute requires pluralism to avoid absolutism.* (Emphasis added)

That’s Richard Kearney, introducing his 2011 book: *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University Press.)

“*The absolute requires pluralism to avoid absolutism.*” Please let that register for a moment. . . At minimum for me it means there is no one Christian Tradition with *a corner on* “the truth;” nor one religion with *the* absolutely right spirituality.

I was raised in a “*quintessential fundamentalist*” tradition—Plymouth or Christian Brethren—so dubbed by church historian Ernest Sandeen in *The Roots of Fundamentalism*. My non-doctrinaire dad, an elder in my growing-up church years, had nonetheless a straightforward religious view of life, where all was black and white, with few interruptive hues or views. He was unquestioningly of the “God-said-it-I-believe-it-That settles-it” about the Bible, variety.

As to my more rigidly fundamentalist mom, Canadian journalist and author Charles Templeton, who had been an internationally-known evangelistic partner of Billy Graham, served as a kind of foil for her.

Religiously, once he had headed for the exit doors, he never looked back, as he moved on to agnosticism and eventually atheism.

Templeton's is a representative story of multiplied millions in our Western culture during the last several centuries—a civilization still in the throes of a ubiquitous dominant Enlightenment *anti-religion narrative*.

To this, Richard Kearney offers a kind of hearty *Amen!* For Kearney, that religion's "god" in many respects rightly needed to die. Especially when it is the "Omni-god" of metaphysical causality and consequently necessary *theodicy*—the fruitless attempts at "justifying" an Omnipotent God in a world full of evil. "Impossible," Kearney argues, as do two great 20th-century Christian philosophers: French mystic Simone Weil, and Canadian George Grant.

Kearney claims that:

. . . the atheist critique is a necessary moment in the development of genuine faith. . .
("Returning To God After God," *Research in Phenomenology* 39 (2011), Leiden: Brill, pp. 167-183)

Hmmm. The atheist critique *a welcome good* for true faith? Faith for Kearney is never a *fait — or a faith!* — *accompli*, never an absolute certainty, but a *wager*—ever a choice to make such a move of faith and trust—in this post-Enlightenment, post-Holocaust, post-Christian world of genocidal evil.

With over 40 written/edited books to Richard Kearney's credit, and hundreds of published papers, he is also a poet, novelist and playwright. Turning 70 this year, he has been foremost amongst "*the turn towards God*" movement in Continental Philosophy. Since his *Anatheism* was published in 2011, there have been, for instance, five international conferences held about it. *Spoiler alert:* In this talk, I barely touch down on Kearney's thought.

1. Consolation

My first religious "shock" growing up was a kind of *consolation* that set me on a renewed faith-positive trajectory. I was in Grade 12, and had begun to wonder if any intelligent people even believed in Christianity—and why should I? My growing doubts were persistent and troubling. But I *wanted* to believe!

In English classes that Grade 12 year, we studied a reader that was an eclectic anthology of writers, titled *Man and His World: Studies in Prose*. There I encountered C.S. Lewis, and G.K. Chesterton. They were educated, very smart—and *unashamedly Christian*. The spiritual breath I didn't know I had been holding was slowly exhaled. . .

Still, Kearney writes:

No human can be absolutely sure about absolutes. Fortunately. Sages and saints repeatedly testify to encountering the divine in clouds of unknowing or caves of darkness. Believers typically pray to God "to help their disbelief" (Mark 9:24). And even Christ found himself questioning his Father on the cross—"Why have you forsaken me?"—before he could return to renewed belief in life: "Into thy hands I commend my spirit." *No one is exempt from the moment of not-*

knowing. (Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*, Columbia University Press, p. 5; emphasis added.)

Then the kicker comes:

Anatheism presupposes this *a-theistic moment* as *antidote to dogmatic theism*. True faith, as [brilliant Russian novelist Fyodor] Dostoyevsky put it, “bursts forth from the crucible of doubt.” (*Anatheism*, pp. 5-6; emphasis added.)

Excursus: *The Burning Bush and The Mount of Transfiguration*

Both texts for today tell of scenes of God’s *transfiguration*, or if you like of God’s *epiphany*, or *theophany*.

a. The Burning Bush: Exodus 3: 1 - 14

The first is Exodus 3 about Moses and the unquenched burning bush. In Chapter Two of Kearney’s book, *The God Who May Be*, we read:

So how does God respond to Moses? How does he reassure His bewildered shepherd, racked with doubt and insecurity? He reassures by repeating Himself, by not really replying at all . . . (*The God Who May Be*, p. 22)

Kearney continues:

My ultimate suggestion is that we might do better to reinterpret the Transfiguring God of Exodus neither as “I who am” nor as “I who am not” but rather as “*I am who may be*”. . . that might thus be read as signature of the God of the possible. . . *That, in a word, is my wager.* (*The God Who May Be*, p. 22; emphasis added)

Hence the sermon’s title: *The God Who May Be*—and also title of an earlier three-part *Ideas* series with Kearney, by David Cayley.

Kearney *bets* on Jesus’ claim: *Everything is possible with God.* (Mark 10:27)

God, in other words, is profoundly relational presence at once needed, and to be embraced. But like the smile of the Cheshire Cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, *now you feel/see God, now you don’t*—God is the Ultimate Master of the Disappearing and Reappearing Act.

b. The Mount Tabor Transfiguration: Matthew 17: 1 - 9

The second scripture reading is Matthew’s Transfiguration scene on what tradition says was Mount Tabor, with similar stories in Mark and Luke.

Kearney underscores that, of the essence in this scene is Christ’s refusal to be made into an idol—transfigured on the mountaintop from the human Jesus to the cosmic Christ, indeed, yet retaining his full humanity.

Kearney also points to . . .

[t]he thin white line between atheism and theism [that] marks the seemingly undecidable frontier of faith. (*The God Who May Be*, p. 41)

Further, he writes:

And it is this very solitude of Christ, together with the consequent silence of the disciples as they follow him down the mountain that marks off this incident as an *epiphany of radical alterity [otherness]*. Mount Tabor unfolds accordingly as a Gospel replay of Mount Sinai, with the transfigured Christ both re-figuring the burning bush [of Exodus 3] and pre-figuring the coming of the messianic kingdom. . . (*The God Who May Be*, p. 42; emphasis added)

2. The Missionary

In spring 1972, a 23-year-old man joined a two-year evangelistic team in then West Berlin.

On one of his door-to-door evangelistic forays, he encountered an early-thirties philosophy professor who taught at one of the two universities in the city. His name was Jörg Salaquarda. The professor listened politely to the young man's canned evangelistic *spiel*, smiled slightly at the offer of a free booklet titled *Die Bibel Sagt (The Bible Says)*, and invited the young man into his study. The evangelist suddenly felt wary, but stepped in.

"I studied under a man who also wrote about what 'the Bible says'," Dr. Salaquarda began, "His name is Karl Barth. Ever heard of him?" he asked courteously, if not mischievously. He then directed the young man's gaze to his bookshelf, that contained Barth's never-completed *Kirchliche Dogmatik (Church Dogmatics)*, the four-volume theological *summa* and *magnum opus* of Swiss Protestant theologian Karl Barth; published in thirteen thick books between 1932 and 1967—and occupying two of the bookshelves.

Dr. Salaquarda added: "I think I'll stick with Karl Barth on what the Bible says."

Of course I was that arrogant young evangelist of the fresh comeuppance, who thankfully had at least *heard* of Karl Barth (that saved me from total embarrassment meltdown!) I learned later in a Barth course that Dr. Barth was *the* theological Mount Everest of 20th-century theologians! I left the apartment soon thereafter with tail between my legs. . .

I now have on my bookshelves that complete set, albeit in English translation. But "The Bible Says" booklet is nowhere to be found. . .

When I later wrote a fictional coming-of-age novel, *Chrysalis Crucible*—with many Tom Skinner kinds of questions—inspired by that most-watershed-ever life experience, I included the above story.

In retrospect, ironically, he was a brief bright beacon in an otherwise dark and bleak personal *de-evangelistic* experience, that my novel-writing was undertaken to help me recover from.

Conclusion

- The God Who May Be.
- Anatheism—returning to God after God.
- A perhaps necessary “death of ‘god’ ” to rediscover God in Christ for the very first time.
- Pluralism to avoid absolutism.
- An atheist critique to abet one’s way to faith in God.
- The God of endless interpretation and questioning.
- An ever-recurring wager placed on God, that with the anatheistic writer of Hebrews declares:

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)

To Kearney the philosopher, the last word as implied summons to act accordingly:

We may say, consequently, that the [Exodus 3] act of disclosure signals an inextricable communion between God and humans, a radically new sense. . . of fraternity, responsibility, and commitment to a shared history of “becoming,” beginning with 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 [God].* God’s relation with mortals is, in other words, less one of *conceptuality* than of *covenant*. (*The God Who May Be*, p. 30; emphasis added.)

Amen.