



Lieven Boeve
KATHOLIEKE UNIVERSITEIT
LEUVEN, BELGIUM

The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion

By Richard Kearney

(Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion), Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001; 192 pp.; hb. \$ 19.95, pb. \$ 49.95;
ISBN:0-253-33998-7/0-253-21489-0.

[1] In this volume Richard Kearney takes up the challenge to reflect on God ‘after the God of metaphysics’. In the introduction he presents this volume as a kind of assemblage of thoughts on God, stemming from his doctoral studies on Ricoeur and the co-editing of *Heidegger et la question de Dieu* (with J. O’Leary, 1981), and more recently his contributions to the Villanova Conferences on ‘religion and postmodernism’ (1997, 1999). How is it possible to ‘overcome the old notion of God as disembodied cause, devoid of dynamism and desire, in favor of a more eschatological notion of God as possibility to come: the *posse* which calls us beyond the present toward a promised future?’ (3) How is it possible to think God post-onto-theologically? Kearney’s intuition, his ‘wager’, is to conceive of God in terms of a God ‘who may be’, ‘who is May-Be’, a ‘possible God’, a God ‘more than impossible’, with as first name, borrowed from Nicolaus Cusanus: *Possesit*. The God who may be is the God from the kingdom to come, an eschatological God, a God of promise and of powerlessness, of justice and peace, who persuades human beings to answer his call to realize the kingdom. Inspired by and in discussion with many contemporary thinkers from the so-called continental tradition, Levinas, Derrida, Ricoeur, Marion, Caputo, Breton, and Greisch among others, Kearney sketches ‘the outlines of a narrative [onto-]eschatology’ (8) that favors the possible over the actual, *posse* over *esse*. The methodological approach of this reflection on religion is of a phenomenological nature, supplemented with a hermeneutical retrieving of inspiring insights from the main texts of the Western Judeo-Christian philosophical and intellectual history. This exercise takes the form of an attempt to resist both classical onto-theology and postmodern negative theology.

[2] First of all, Kearney undertakes a phenomenology of the *persona*. The latter term, in a rather Levinasian way, invokes the otherness of the other, that of the other which can never be grasped, known, possessed; which irreducibly differentiates the other from myself, and obstructs every attempt of me to master it. It is indissolubly bound to a concrete person (under its biological, psychological, and social aspects), but never to be reduced to it. The *persona* is asymmetrically related to me, always already prior to me and later than me – it ‘transfigures me before I configure it’ (16), it has no place, but gives place, Kearney adds. It is

an ethical asymmetry, calling me to listen, to answer. Even more: the persona as the 'in-finite other in the finite person before me' is the sign of God. 'Not the other person as divine, mind you – that would be idolatry – but the divine in and through that person. The divine as trace, icon, visage, passage' (18). In this regard, Kearney posits a priority of ethics over ontology, of the Good over Being; of the 'eschatological relation of one-for-the-other' over the 'onto-theological relation of one-for-one or the one-for-itself-in-itself' (15).

[3] In chapters two to five, Kearney undertakes a phenomenological-hermeneutical retrieval of texts from Scripture combined with a discussion of contemporary continental philosophers' accounts of the religious, respectively entitled: 'I Am Who May be', 'Transfiguring God', 'Desiring God', and 'Possibilising God'. The first reflection deals with an interpretation of the 'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh of Exodus 3, the story of the self-revelation of God in the burning bush. Against an ontological reading which conflates Yahweh with the supreme Being (*ipsum esse*) of the philosophers (leading to ontotheology), Kearney mentions an alternative eschatological reading: 'I will be who I will be'. For God is not being nor non-being but a self-generating event. 'God is what he *will* be when he becomes his Kingdom and his Kingdom comes on earth. 'I am who may be': it is a performative rather than a constative expression, invoking 'mutual answerability and co-creation' (30). In a great deal of postmodern negative theology, as in e.g. Marion, God's transcendence becomes too transcendent; God is conceived of in such a way that we may legitimately ask how we still can know something of this God, and how we would be able to differentiate between God as excess or defect, *khora*. But also the 'teratology of the sublime', the mystical postmodernism, which reduces divine alterity to the level of human hermeneutics, does not suffice. There, God is so indeterminate that he can be anything, monstrous, trauma, stranger, horrific. Moreover, this position dispenses with ethical and historical judgement. Kearney defends an onto-eschatological reading: 'God putting being into question just as being gives flesh to God' (34).

[4] A second reflection starts with a reading of the transfiguration narrative on Mount Thabor. The transfiguration of Jesus into the *persona* of Christ 'signals a surplus or incommensurability between *persona* and person even as it inscribes the one in and through the other' (41); 'The infinite persona of Christ is not exhausted in the finite figure of Jesus of Nazareth' (42–43). The transfigured Christ interrupts the limits of intentional consciousness and reaches beyond perception, imagination and signification. Moreover, he is eschatologically profiled as the way, not the terminus; the narrative warns against a premature taking into possession. Therefore, we are left with the ethical choice between transfiguration or fixation: 'either to transform our world according to the Christic icon of the end-to-come; or to fix Christ as a fetish whose only end is itself' (44).

[5] In order to think God and desire, Kearney comments on the Song of Songs, in which he stresses that the desire of God does not stem out of deficiency but out of excess, and reveals a superabundant, impassioned God. Classical metaphysical readings, on the contrary, looked upon desire as lack, as something to be filled in. An eschatological reading, however, focuses on the active-passive

aspects of the desire of God: God's desire for us is answered by our desire for God. The phenomenological reading of desire by Levinas, in which ethics precedes hermeneutics, seems for Kearney already to be an interpretation of desire, and leads to a kind of 'impossible' prophetic postmodernism, an excessive ethics, risking to fall back into pathological passivity and paralysis (69). Derrida's and Caputo's deconstructive readings radicalize Levinas' account, which they evaluate still as metaphysical because Levinas identifies, names, God: What we need, they state, is an alterity without name, the 'renunciation of a specific God as condition of possibility of a God still to come, still to be named' (71). It concerns an 'impossible god', a messianic God: a 'non-lieu of absolute passion and passivity, of incessant waiting and welcome, preceding and exceeding every historical revelation of a specific messiah' (73); in other words: a leap into radical atheism. Kearney asks whether one does not lose too much with this radicalization, running the risk of indiscriminate: how to think alterity when 'tout autre est tout autre'? For one needs signs to recognize God. Derrida urges to be open for all others, and he calls this a matter of faith, absolute faith, blind, not knowing. But is such faith ultimately, asks Kearney, not only blind but also empty?

[6] 'For God everything is possible', Jesus responds to the disciples in discussing how someone can be saved (Mark 10). The kingdom is the impossible made possible; it consists of possibles beyond my impossibles and possibles, and evokes an eschatological timeframe, a 'messianic tempo'. It calls for a new understanding of God in our time because 'the possibles given to me by the *posse* would be impossible were they not a *gift* (82). In the metaphysics of the possible, the latter was seen as a dimension of being precontained within reality (latency, lack, to be realized); or as an intellectual representation (contrasted by reality); or in an evolutionistic fashion as something of the past recognized in the present because realized today. The possible thus is a kind of sub-category of the real and therefore does not qualify to speak of God. To remedy such reductive conception of the possible, Kearney presents four post-metaphysical readings of the possible: Husserl's teleological, Bloch's dialectical (utopian), Heidegger's ontological, and Derrida's deconstructive notion of the possible. By opening up the conventional metaphysical concepts of the possible, all four of these thinkers go in the direction of an eschatological understanding of God. They may suggest, according to Kearney, that the priority of actuality over possibility should be reversed. Summarizing, Kearney construes the possible God as May-Be as radically transcendent, as at the same time possible and impossible, possibilizing the impossible to happen, as calling upon us, engaging us in the realization of the kingdom, and finally not only as a 'can-be' but also a 'should-be', urging for our openness to the gracious coming of possible divinity.

[7] In his conclusion, Kearney briefly rehearses the poetics of the possible God. First he engages in three short hermeneutical retrievals: Aristotle's *nous poetikos*: 'the divine *nous* makes us *able-to-think* at the same time as it makes the world *think-able*' (103); Cusanus' God as *possest*: God's *esse* is his *posse*: absolute possibility and absolute actuality go along; Schelling's dictum that the essence of God is to become its existence. Secondly, as an analogue to Heidegger's

ontological play of the fourfold (the play of the world once transfigured by the poet or artist), Kearney imagines the play of the possible God (Godplay), as the play of the *homo ludens* playing God's play. As *posse* God is both promise of possibilities and powerlessness, and invites the help of human beings, because he is 'unable to actualise those possibilities without the help of other human beings' (107). As a player God empowers human beings playing, making them capable to share the dispossessive nature of the kingdom, the renunciation of the will-to-power, recalling the danger of all play, to forget that it is a play (and turning it into idolatry, ideology). Finally, Kearney repeats that there is no *opposition* of *posse* to *esse*, because 'the realization of *possest's* divine *esse*, if and when it occurs, if and when the kingdom comes, will no doubt be a new *esse*, refigured and transfigured in a mirror-play where it recognizes its other and not just the image of itself returning to itself'. And this 'is not impossible for God – if we help God to become God. How? By opening ourselves to the 'loving possible,' by acting each moment to make the impossible that bit more possible' (111).

[8] Reading Kearney's book on the God who may be is an imaginative exercise in its own right, stimulating and thought provoking. However, the reader is continually puzzled about where precisely Kearney stands both philosophically and theologically. Specifically intriguing is the way in which he often introduces the term 'wager' to account for his position in relation to other positions, and this both as regards its content (the God who may be) and its methodological approach (phenomenology over against hermeneutics). The discussion with Derrida's atheistic messianicity illustrates this point rather well. Kearney shows how Derrida's position also implies a wager, a choice, a particular dealing with desire, but the question remains how Kearney legitimates his own choice. Why would one read the texts Kearney wants to read, and use his hermeneutical key (a God of love and justice)? The difference with Derrida, he says, has to do with another language game, with another referent, a parting of ways. The reader, however, is left with the question as to what the relationship is between the two discourses: if it is not opposition but difference, what difference? Are both just discourses standing next to each other? For if it is a matter of choice and decision, is Derrida's discourse then not presupposed – because to choose is to 'lift the impossible'? Or is it that Kearney implicitly acknowledges that he has been chosen before choosing – choosing then in fact being answering the call of God who already addressed him? And how does he know? By reading texts. . . but what texts? And in the end, does it really matter – because all religions and great intellectual traditions would seem to speak of the same striving for justice and peace.