

A view of God to consider: Critique of Richard Kearney's anatheism

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Abstract

The preface gives the background of the postmodern religious context within which a “view of God to consider” has become problematic. The preface also gives the methodology as well as the rationale for the study. The article examines the anatheistic concept of God of the well-known philosopher of religion, Richard Kearney, in order to answer the question whether Kearney’s concept of God is to be regarded in our post-metaphysical age and why. Two books of Kearney are selected to analyse, namely *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (2001) and *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (2011). The article indicates that the anatheistic God is not easy to identify and that it mostly involves a risk or wager of hospitality to recognize this God who is amongst other, “weak, functionalist, the other, the stranger and the incarnated kingdom of peace and love”. It is argued that although this non-metaphysical anatheistic God has some positive aspects (creativities, plurality, not militant or dogmatic), it remains difficult to mull over (and accept) this view of God for various reasons (weakness, functionality, unrecognizability). Kearney helps one however through his anatheistic concept of God to think new about the possibilities to “return to God after God” in our post-metaphysical age.

Preface

Background and problems identified

Richard Kearney's book *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (2011), posits that God¹ can be returned to in our postmodern and post-metaphysical age, but then God needs to be understood in a radically more metaphoric way. In other words, the concept God is not to be dismissed too hastily in our modern Western culture, but a radically new understanding of God is acquired.

Kearney's thesis is based on the assumption that trust and/or belief in God became something far-fetched in our modern secular age, but that within the openness of postmodernity, we might find trust in God again. A first question one can ask Kearney in this regard is: Why did the concept of God become such a far-fetched notion in our contemporary Western culture? Why can God not be mulled over positively (without complications) and simply like before? The next question is then: Is a "return" to God possible?

These questions are all addressed in Kearney's books, especially *Anatheism* (2011) and *The God Who May Be* (2001), and they form the background or context in which this study's research question is asked. In the context of these two books this study's problem statement can be formulated as follows: Does Kearney present a *view of God* in *Anatheism* which should be *considered* in our post-metaphysical² age? The title of this study already suggest that it is necessary or at least possible, but that this concept is not without critique (Critique of Richard Kearney's anatheism).

¹ God is spelled here (and in the title) with a capital letter because of the author's personal belief in the might of God. The author's own concept of God is that God can only exist as plural – "honest men and honest dames plus *logos*" (Pienaar 2014:1d). The term "God", with an uppercase "G", implies plural form, and is thus preferable for the author above the philosophical use of "god". The use of the words "God", "Gods", "gods", "goddesses", "a god", "a goddess" and "god" will be distinguished by putting the words as they appear in Kearney's work between inverted commas.

² The "post-metaphysical age" can be described as the contemporary Western context wherein any kind of transcendence is distrusted. Verhoef says for example: "The radicalization of immanence in our contemporary culture is typical of our post-metaphysical, post-transcendental and postmodern context" (2014:261), and the Dutch philosopher of culture, Willie van der Merwe, states: "the default position, so to speak, in present-day culture (philosophy, politics, art, and even theology) is not radical transcendence or even immanent transcendence but radical immanence" (2012:509).

In Kearney's philosophy, he has the assumption and/or conviction that we (as modern Westerners) have lost faith and trust in God for different reasons. He emphasises in *Anatheism* (2011) very strongly, the problems relating to evil and the holocaust and humanity's consequent loss of trust in God's love and might, and eventually in the whole concept of God. Other philosophical reasons for this loss of trust in God are posited in Kearney's earlier books, like *The God Who May Be* (2001).³ Kearney discusses several cultural, political and philosophical problems as contributing to our (modern Western) loss of trust in God. In his reaction to these problems, Kearney especially focuses on the problems of ontotheology, eschatology, theism and atheism in the context of postmodernism. For example, in our modern Western culture – with the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution – Kearney indicates that rationality became the criteria for everything – also for belief in God. Since then rational proofs for the existence of God were more and more required and consequently developed in philosophy and theology. These proofs all failed (or are unsatisfactory) in their own unique way, although the opposites – namely the proofs that God does not exist – could also not be proved convincingly. All these attempts to prove God's existence indicate how problematic a "view of God" has become and how difficult it is to "return" to God as Kearney shows in his project.

It is interesting that Kearney argues in his book *Anatheism* that God can be returned to without him positing an ontological or other traditional argument for the possibility and existence of God. The God of *Anatheism* is furthermore not defined directly or dogmatically in the book, although there are places where Kearney used the words "God is ..." These instances will be analysed in this study in order to investigate who the God is which Kearney says we can return to. This is necessary to answer the main question of the research article, namely: Does Kearney present a view of God in *Anatheism* which should be seriously regarded in our post-metaphysical age? This question can be divided in several sub-questions: Who is/are the "God" that Kearney describes in *Anatheism*? And consequently: Should we take this view of God seriously? In other words: Is/are this "God" to be "trusted"? Why should we in other words put our faith in this concept of "God"? Does our religious tradition (e.g. Christianity) point

³ Kearney stated in this book that "the advent of the *eschaton* of Creation is inseparable from human innovation" (2001:45). This quotation implies that the author's own previous research about "Accounting of ideas" (Pienaar 2014) can refer to anatheism's view of "God", because for Kearney and the author, *creativities* are regarded as important.

towards such a concept of “God”? And what appraisal can be raised for such a concept of God?

In an attempt to answer these questions Kearney’s concept of God in *Anatheism* will be analysed and appraised. For example: If Kearney’s anatheistic God is too “weak” (as opposed to the classical omnipotent concept of God), or too unrecognizable (visible mainly in the stranger or alien and not in revelations of holy scriptures), the question is whether this “God” can be “realistically” (in a faithful community) contemplated, accepted and trusted? Can we (heirs of a post-metaphysical age) really return to this “God”, or does this God remain only a philosophical concept, which provides no hope?

The hypothesis of this study is that Kearney’s concept of God(s) (as in *Anatheism*) is a worthwhile and even necessary “view of God to consider” in our post-metaphysical age, but that this concept is not without critique (as the title suggests). In Kearney’s description, God is often found in (or part of) aliens, downtrodden people of society and also in followers of other faiths (than Christianity). Whether these people as “God” (Others) can be trusted is not always so certain for Kearney and therefore judgements about them have to be made continuously. Each decision in this process of recognition is a “wager”, a risk to be taken by being hospitable towards the stranger. The risk in the wagers is however reduced according to Kearney because the anatheistic God remains throughout especially visible in the marginalised, the suffering, the weak – but this remains problematic as will be explained later.

Although anatheism refers to plural Others, Kearney usually uses singular metaphoric descriptions for “the Stranger”, “Stranger”, “the stranger”, “sacred stranger”, “radical Stranger” and “the other” (2011:xii, xv, xvii, xix, 3, 7, 16, 61, 152, 153, 166, 167, 172). Regarding the trust of the stranger, it is of importance that the anatheistic concept of “God in others” is based for Kearney on the kenotic emptying of God. This concept is adopted from Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the Christian God who emptied himself on the cross for humanity through Jesus Christ. “God” then became part of humanity and the world through his Holy Spirit – a further kenotic movement.⁴

⁴ Socrates said "every sort of motion" was reflected by the Greek word "'*kinēsis*'" and "an ancient name"; "'*hesis*' ('a going forth')", describes movement; and "'*stasis*' ('rest')" means the opposite of movement (Plato, 1997, 426c-d, Cratylus, I.4528). The words "religion" and "belief" have its origins in leaving or staying at a place. Cratylus opines that proper words

In sum: The anatheistic God of Kearney seems to be a very promising concept of God – a view of God to think about. In this study it will be argued that there are however some serious critiques to be raised against it.

Methodology

The methodology of this research project is to primarily focus on Kearney's book, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (2011). The text will be analysed in the context of Kearney's other book *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (2001). Preparation for the work included reading other secondary works about and of Kearney, but the study will be bracketed in the context of the two mentioned books. This is done to have the study not too wide and also to not portray the author as a specialist on Kearney's extended oeuvre.

Different sections in the article will focus on the main parts of the argument. The first part will discuss the problems regarding the possibility (existence) of a view of God to consider and the need for a "return to God" – an anatheistic God in Kearney's terminology. The second part will discuss Kearney's earlier more eschatological understanding of God which will help to put into perspective his concept of the anatheistic God. In the third part Kearney's anatheistic God will be examined in order to see if this view of God is realistically or seriously, to be reflected upon. Lastly the anatheistic concept of God will be critically discussed. The structure of the article will then be as follow:

- 1) The question of God's possibility and existence
- 2) The God who may be
- 3) The God of anatheism
- 4) A view of God to consider and conclusion

reflect movement, which "all" things are subject to (Plato, 1997, 426e-437a, Cratylus, I.4823). He also opines that more than human power determined the first words and therefore the first words were absolutely right and the two opposing forces: motion and rest, "aren't names at all" (Plato, 1997, 438c, Cratylus, I.4859). Jesus of Nazareth did not flee from his prosecutors in Jerusalem, therefore his kenotic emptying of the life giving force of movement, which, in Greek philosophy, was regarded good, may have partly caused his crucifixion.

After the presentation of the research article, some limitations of the study will be indicated as well as a final conclusion. Further possible research questions which became apparent through this study will also be discussed. These are not included in the research article itself because the article's unity and focus had to be maintained, and because of length limits of the article (5000-8000 words). The importance and relevance of this study will also be highlighted in this last section.

The academic peer-review journal, *Acta Academica*, was chosen as the preferred journal to publish this article because of this journal's inter-disciplinary focus within the humanities. Previous articles on the same themes and from the field of philosophy of religion have also been published in *Acta Academica*. The guidelines for authors for this journal are attached at the end, and the research article has been prepared accordingly. The short biography of the author (given at the beginning of the article) is for example a prerequisite of *Acta Academica*.

Article

1.1 Biography of author

The author was born, 1968, in Vereeniging Gauteng South Africa, and he was raised in Heidelberg, Gauteng. He studied accounting at Stellenbosch University and qualified as chartered accountant (SA) during 1994. During 2009 he decided to follow a career as academic. His research field, Accounting for ideas, motivates a distinction between networking aspects and creating aspects of entrepreneurship. Currently utilitarian developments diminish new creative ideas due to *untenable* remunerations, which prioritise networking. The effects of this are creative vagrants and aliens, which Kearney identifies in his anatheist theism and anatheist atheism. This makes Kearney's work of extreme importance for the author's own field of research.

1.2 Abstract

An abstract is given at the beginning.

1.3 Keywords

Anatheism, alterity, eschatology, theism, atheism.

1.4 Introduction

In Richard Kearney's *Anatheism: returning to God after God* (2011:166), Kearney⁵ stated very explicitly that he is not trying to form a new "religion" and therefore one should not understand his anatheistic concept of God as a dogmatic or static definition per se. His "faith" (cf. Kearney, 2011:74-75) is rather a continuous investigation and forming of new possible understandings of God as our circumstances and our philosophical milieu change. His concept of anatheism is a response "to recent atheist critiques" as well as an attempt to engage "the multiplicity of religious traditions in a meaningful way" (Clingerman 2011:116). This concept of anatheism will be analysed

⁵ Kearney is one of the most prominent and influential philosophers of religion in recent times. His books *Anatheism* (2011) and *The God Who May Be* (2001) are just some of his long list of his publications on philosophy of religion (see for example <http://richardmkearney.com/> for more of his various publications).

and criticised in this article and the question will be asked if this is a view of God to be considered in our post-metaphysical age.

In the first section Kearney's view about "God's possibility and existence" will be discussed as background and motivation for his need and development of the concept of an anatheistic God. In the second section his earlier more eschatological view of God, in *The God Who May Be* (2001), will be discussed, because this book indicates the development in Kearney's own thoughts regarding the concept of God. In the third part this concept of "anatheism" will be discussed as a development of his thoughts on God. In the last section the question will be asked if this anatheistic God of Kearney should be seriously regarded or even trusted in our post-metaphysical age. Some appreciation and some critique for this creative contribution of Kearney – in his development of an "anatheistic God" – will be discussed in the conclusion of the article.

1.5 Four parts of a 'dialogue' with Kearney

1.5.1 Kearney's view about God's possibility and existence

Kearney often views philosophical themes by regarding and contrasting the extreme positions within a specific dilemma and try to find a sort of middle way without giving up on the tension between the poles. For example, in his *God Who May Be* (2001) he took the two extreme views on God, namely ontotheology and eschatology, and he created the term "onto-eschatology" as the preferred way of regarding these extremes and tensions between them together. Again, in *Anatheism* (2011), Kearney took the extremes of theism and atheism, contrasted them and then coins the term anatheism as an alternative, a "middle way".⁶ In their extremes, theism was seen as dogmatic, and atheism as militant. Both the dogmatic characteristics of theism and the militant characteristics of atheism were rejected by Kearney in his concept of anatheism. The result was not a synthesis in the Hegelian sense, but rather a continued recognition of

⁶ Anatheism is a combination of the Greek *ana*, which means "again" or "return", and *theos*, which means "God". Kearney wrote: "Anatheism, I have argued, is not an end but a way. It is a third way that precedes and exceeds the extremes of dogmatic theism and militant atheism. It is not some new religion, but attention to the divine in the stranger who stands before us in the midst of the world. It is a call for a new acoustic attuned to the presence of the sacred in flesh and blood. It is *amor mundi*, love of the life-world as embodiment of infinity in the finite, of transcendence in immanence, of eschatology in the now" (Kearney, 2011:166).

the tensions that exist. Kearney maintains the tensions in his “middle way”, because he rejects Hegel’s conception of the Absolute (as a Being which is exclusively metaphysical), and chooses a more modest new approach as “anatheistic” (as an adjective) (Kearney, 2011:150, 180). The two extremes of atheism and theism did therefore not become one conception for Kearney and he specifically wrote he prefers adjectives to nouns and this is important in the sense that: the noun anatheism, for example, explains not his faith, like “anatheist theism” and “anatheist atheism” as adjectives do (Kearney, 2011:184). By using anatheism as an adjective, the negativity of dogmatism and militarism is excluded (Kearney, 2011:184).

When it comes to the question about God’s possible existence, Kearney is not a “normal theist” (in the classical sense where God is a omnipotent timeless metaphysical being). When Kearney describes the possibility of God, it is a concept of God which seems to include the concrete other and especially the stranger. He wrote for example: “If the sacred stranger were identical with the self, she would be neither sacred nor strange. The stranger is sacred in that she always embodies something *else*, something *more*, something *other* than what the self can grasp or contain” (Kearney, 2011:152). The implication is, as Kearney explains, that when the other is met, a certain reaction is called for. We are called to responsibility and a judgement has to be made how to respond: Is the other to be ignored or is the other accepted as the “sacred stranger” – part of God? This a rational choice which has to be made. Kearney disagrees with Derrida and Kierkegaard that we do not know how to make this discernment and says: “Perhaps that [not knowing] is the prerogative of God? And we are not gods” (Kearney, 2011:45). Kearney agrees however with Levinas who “holds that the gift of Judaism to humanity is atheism – namely, separation from God so as to encounter the other as absolutely other” (Kearney, 2011:62). For Kearney anatheistic hospitality toward the stranger is:

“not just the recognition of the other *as the same as ourselves* (though this is crucial to any global ethic of peace). It also entails recognizing the other *as different to ourselves*, as radically strange and irreducible to our familiar horizons” (Kearney, 2011:150).

He wrote that “for if others are strangers to us we are equally strangers to others and to ourselves” (Kearney, 2011:153). In his Epilogue (2011), Kearney quoted Irenaeus: “The

glory of God is each and every one of us fully alive” (Kearney, 2011:182). The tension between the possible existence of God in others and in ourselves (as not identical) remains thus and it emphasises the ethical response, which Levinas also argued for. The recognition of God in the Other (the sacred stranger) might however remain problematic (because of the uncertainty to recognize the sacred stranger as God) and this will be some of the critique raised against Kearney.

Whether Kearney regards himself as part of "the stranger", is not clear. The overall view, after reading *The God Who May Be* (2001) and *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (2011) is that anatheism may lead to a functionalist practice similar to Christianity. The God of anatheism is described by Kearney with “may be” and “weak” in his two books. Kearney’s interpretation is that “God” (in the other) is not “above” us, but that God is “appointed”. Kearney does however not motivate an appointment of God, but motivates the sacredness of "the stranger". His *Anatheism* (2011) continues for example his perpetual hermeneutic investigation of this concept of God in his *The God Who May Be* (2001). For Kearney, the possibility is there that the other can therefore be rejected again and again, and the continuity of the Other is thus problematic.⁷ Kearney did acknowledge this problem when he wrote:

“So, far from collapsing horizons, ana-theism keeps them open and overlapping. Far from resolving conflicting interpretations, ana-theism preserves the hermeneutic circles in motion. It renounces the romantic nostalgia for some original oneness (of being, meaning, intention, authorship) declining to end the story, happy or unhappy. And it does this out of fidelity to an endless interplay between transcendence and immanence. As such, ana-theism holds that two is better than one — and that three (or four) is better still” (Kearney, 2011a:81).

In line with the author’s own concept of God (see footnote 1), it can be argued here that Kearney allows the power of the plural form over the “weakness” of the singular form. In other words, the gods and goddesses, who are distinguished correctly amongst good and evil others, are part of the plural form of God. Kearney wrote: “Thus after the demise of the ‘God’ of power – rightly exposed by Nietzsche and his atheist peers – we find a reacknowledgement of God in all his weakness on the cross” (Kearney, 2011:67).

⁷ This is to an extent similar to Christianity’s returning god, because the power of one human (as “God”) is always dependent on the acceptance by more than one.

This notion about weakness and of a singular god on the cross is interrelated with the metaphysical God of “ontotheology”, which Kearney rejects in *The God Who May Be* (2001), because, the notion of an omnipotent human’s power is dependent on a notion about some or other metaphysical power (assisting only One).

According to the author’s concept of God, the singular human being on the cross is not the real metaphysical conception of Being. Being with an uppercase “B” relates to honest human beings and *logos*, who lead with creative and responsible power.⁸ Kearney, however, rejects only the metaphysical conception of Being outright, but he keeps singular metaphoric references for "God" intact. The existence of God is thus found for Kearney in the plural, but metaphorically also in the singular, the weak, and in the other, and not in the metaphysical, the ontotheological, Being and power. This post-metaphysical concept of God is initially developed by Kearney in his book, *The God Who May Be* (2001) and later on in *Anatheism* (2011). This will be discussed next.

1.5.2 The God who may be

In *The God Who May Be* (2001), the concept of a post-metaphysical, and especially an eschatological God, was very prominent in Kearney’s thought. He wrote for example:

“The God of the possible – which I call *posse* in a liberal borrowing from Nicholas of Cusa – is one who is passionately involved in human affairs and history. And my basic wager is that this God is much closer than the old deity of metaphysics and scholasticism to the God of desire and promise who, in diverse scriptural narratives, calls out from burning bushes, makes pledges and covenants, burns with longing in the song of songs, cries in the wilderness, whispers in caves, comforts those oppressed in darkness, and prefers orphans, widows and strangers to the mighty and the proud. This is a God who promises to bring life and to bring it more abundantly. A God who even promises to raise the dead on

⁸ The existence of God for the author is found in plural others-than-only-selves but instead of chosen weakness, the author’s God is powerful, due to partly, creativities. A result of Being is, group honesties (related to *chrēstotēs*), which cause creativities and powers. Thus, according to the author, there is a contradiction, relating to functionalist singularity of God of omnipotent human possibility, which is not possible, in Kearney’s anatheism. That contradiction is the functionality in anatheism and Christianity. It is a functionality, which preys on and praises ‘the Creator’.

the last day, emptying deity of its purported power-presence – understood metaphysically as *ousia*, *hyperousia*, *esse*, *substantia*, *causa sui* – so that God may be the promised kingdom” (Kearney, 2001:2).

Important for Kearney, is that the God of the possible, of the eschaton, is thus already at work in our world and time. Kearney says: “God is not a dead letter but a vibrant concern for our time” (2001: 3). This God is involved, concerned and worthwhile to think about.

Kearney’s eschatological God ordains however not everything and therefore his God is not recognized via “theodicy”, which justifies God in relation to the evil experienced in the world. Theodicies are for Kearney banal and unjust due to its implied trust in “esse” rather than “posse” (possibility). God remains too static and “unjust” in theodicies. An “esse” “fixes” “God”, limits “him/her”, while a “posse” opens up possibilities – like his future kingdom. Kearney describes God’s possible kingdom as “a kingdom of justice and love” (2001:38) in comparison with the “unjust or unloving” God of the theodicies. As part of these possibilities of God, Kearney refers to Hans Jonas’s conception of “self-forfeiture of divine integrity for the sake of unprejudiced becoming, no other foreknowledge can be admitted than that of *possibilities*.”⁹ (Kearney 2001:5). Kearney however qualifies Jonas’s conception of God, because he does not agree with the metaphysical consequentialist utilitarian properties thereof, which imply trust in “self-forfeiture of divine integrity” (Kearney 2001:113).

Kearney’s own concept of God is developed then in his discussion of Exodus 3:14. He says that God is in this verse not a “God” of “logocentric immanence” (Kearney 2001:31). The translation – “I am the Being who is eternal” – equates for Kearney with the Being of Greek philosophy and not with humanity (others). Kearney regards Greek ontology in opposition with the morals of his “God”, and sees idolatry in close relation to ontotheology in the phrase “God is One” (Kearney, 2001:31). In this understanding of God by Kearney – through the translation of a promissory nature, that states “God” will be what He will be – the infinite (always true) nature of God, which prohibits mortals from acting immorally (which require deceits), may be infringed upon. Postmodern philosophers describe this problem by identifying “Judaism” and “German idealist

⁹ “Jonas; H. 1996. The Concept of God after Auschwitz: A Jewish Voice. In: *Mortality and Morality: A Search for the Good after Auschwitz*, p.134, edited by Lawrence Vogel. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press.” (Kearney 2001:113,165)

mysticism” with the monstrous and sublime Leviathan postmodern “God” (Kearney, 2001:33). Kearney disagrees, however, and argues that the Jewish “God” need not be acknowledged either in a sense of “being nor non-being”, but rather in a sense of “eschatological *may be*” (Kearney, 2001:34). In this way Kearney manages to describe God as not apocalyptic threatening.

Kearney’s (2001:34) argument is that there is more to God than only Being and more than only becoming. He says that “to pass *beyond* being you have to pass *through* it. Without the flesh of the world, there is no birth” (Kearney, 2001:36). He argues with Nicholas of Cusa that God “is best considered neither as *esse*, nor as *nihil*, but as ... *possest* (absolute possibility which includes all that is actual)” (Kearney 2001:37). Kearney refers to Cusanus who wrote “existence (*esse*) presupposes possibility” and that therefore the “God as May-Be” is prior to the ontological Being of God –as also for Heidegger (Kearney 2001:37). This view can also be found with Derrida’s “messianic Perhaps” (Kearney 2001:37). Kearney’s view of God is thus one of “onto-eschatological hermeneutics” or in other words a “*poetics of the possible*” (Kearney, 2001:37). This notion leads to the question: Does it mean that the Word is a condition for God? The answer of Kearney is no, because “God’s” love is infinite. Kearney wrote that, “as a gift, God is *unconditional* giving. Divinity is constantly waiting” (2001:37). In other words, God’s existence is identified in the existence of possibility. In this context, God’s words in Exodus 3:14 seems to mean: “*I am who may be if you continue to keep my word and struggle for the coming of justice*” (Kearney, 2001:37-38). One can thus say that Kearney’s “God” might be a future “kingdom of justice and love” (Kearney, 2001:38), and therefore his “God” can thus be compared to a fair and just state.

Kearney further describes God to be the “other” as in a love relationship. He refers to Solomon’s Song of Songs (5:2): “my dove, my flawless [‘perfect’] one”. In this verse the Shulamite dark woman is referred to with “dove” (the symbol of peace) and the eschaton Kearney foresees, relates therefore to peace (Kearney, 2001:55.135). The other’s body is compared also to nature (Kearney, 2001:56). The whole biblical book, Song of Songs is acknowledged by Kearney as culturally subversive and in his view, “God’s” kingdom could therefore be radically new. Eros and desire are “glorified” and cultural uses like planned marriages are for example “derided” (Kearney, 2001:57).

Kearney furthermore identifies a progression from the ontological translation of "I am what I am" in Exodus to passionate love (not planned marriages) in Song of Songs, to a claim in 1 John that "God is love" (eros) (Kearney 2001: 58,138). Kearney's eschatological "God" has in line with this progression consequently a direct relation with erotic love. Solomon is king and is compared with "Yahweh", and the sexual desire portrayed in the Song of Songs is equated with the love of God (Kearney 2001:59). This view of Kearney is in agreement with Levinas. According to Kearney, Levinas distinguished between "totality" as "ontology" ("history, reason, representation, horizon, and power") and "eschatology" related to "desire" (Kearney 2001:62). Totality relates to objectivity, which was part of philosophies regarding

"(a) the *archeological* obsession with First Causes (a retrospective account of desire running from Neoplatonic metaphysics right through to Freudian psychoanalysis) and (b) the *teleological* drive toward a Final End (a prospective account of desire proffered by the Hegelian model of history). By contrast, Levinas defines eschatology as a relationship of desire, which breaches totality, opening up what he terms 'infinity'" (Kearney 2001:62).

Levinas pronounces that a "phenomenology of desire" holds the key to infinity, and according to Levinas, the bases (a trace) for extrapolations to the infinite is within totality (Kearney 2001:63). This trace should be followed due to "desire of the other" and "responsibility for the other" (Kearney 2001:63). Levinas opines that at the eschaton wars shall end, and the way to the eschaton is via desiring the other (meaning his God), which is outside of totality (Kearney 2001:63).

Derrida also had some influence on Kearney's eschatological God. Derrida's messianicity is a desire for "a God still to be invented" (Kearney, 2001:73). Derrida's faith was not Judeo-Christian, but a "leap into radical atheism" (Kearney, 2001:73). In his book, *On the Name* (1995), Derrida wrote: "The other, that is, God or no matter who, precisely, any singularity whatsoever, as soon as every other is wholly other".¹⁰ Caputo explained this view of Derrida by writing that the singularity of God is, according to Derrida extreme irrationality so that the idea is completely rejected as totally Other

¹⁰ "Derrida, Jacques. *On the Name*, p.74. Edited by Thomas Dutoit. Translated by David Wood, John P. Leavey, Jr., and Ian Mcleod. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995." (Kearney 2001:146,163)

(Kearney 2001:74). Kearney asks consequently if this view of Derrida does not imply that the anthropomorphic “God” of love gets rejected (Kearney, 2001:74). This is problematic for Kearney because there are “very definite names, shapes, and actions at specific points in time, [for] the God of *caritas* and *kenosis* who heals specific cripples and tells specific parables, who comes to life here and now and bring it more abundantly” (Kearney, 2001:74). In this light it is not so easy to just reject the “God of love” (Kearney, 2001:74).

It is interesting that although Kearney accepts a “God” of history in the plural (“names, shapes and actions”) form, he presents a functional “God” of the future in the singular form, with primarily singular metaphoric references, for example the stranger (Kearney 2001:74). Kearney’s philosophy can be interpreted to transpose this historical Christian view into the future, but with a better living of “God” intact: less vagrants, less aliens, and less sorrow. Kearney opines that Derrida’s eschatological “God” (the ‘possible impossible’) could deceive him (the future is uncertain) and therefore this God is not to be trusted; he therefore asks if deconstruction, which makes the other the totally Other, can distinguish between “messiahs and monsters”, because if something is totally Other, how can it be identified and even trusted (Kearney, 2001:75-76). Here Kearney refers in the plural to “messiahs”. The idea of singular “God” is totally Other for Derrida, and Kearney keeps the idea of a singular metaphoric incarnated messiah intact. He writes:

“The possibility opened up by the eschatological I-am-who-may-be promise a new natality in a new time: rebirth into an advent so infinite it is never final. That is why we are called by the posse not only to struggle for justice so that the kingdom may come, but also to give thanks that the kingdom has already come and continues to come. From where? From out of the future into every moment, from beyond time, against time, into time—the Word becoming flesh forever, *sans fin*, without end. That is why, as in Blanchot’s story, if ever we meet the Messiah we will ask him, ‘When will you come?’” (Kearney, 2001:82).

In his *The God Who May Be*, Kearney disputes thus the Western tradition that God is rather *esse* than *posse*. He argues that possibility precedes existence (*posse* should be regarded more important than *esse*), and therefore possibility should be regarded as “God” – the God that may be. His “God” implies thus a continuous renewal of the

'kingdom of God', which has already come and is coming continuously as justness increases (Kearney, 2001:84). The kingdom of God is however only a metaphor of the peace that will be there, once again (Kearney, 2001:110).

Two aspects of this "God who may be" become thus clear here and are of importance for this article's argument. The first is that this eschatological God's identity is and remains uncertain and the second is that this is not a God of power, but rather of weakness. It is however a God of justice and of love, and these two aspects are defended very strongly by Kearney in this book. The question is now how this concept of God is constructed in Kearney's book which was written ten years later, namely *Anatheism*.

1.5.3 The God of anatheism

In his book *Anatheism* (2011), Kearney continues his line of thought about God as possibility (*posse* rather than *esse*) and rejects for example the two presuppositions about God's perfection and oneness (2011:133-134). God, who is in the world, is for him not perfect in a static sense, but rather eschatological. We may ask who or what is this God in the world then?

Kearney wrote that "a kenotic moment of 'nothingness' and 'emptiness' resides at the core of a postmetaphysical faith" (Kearney, 2011:134). These are however not the last words, it is not despair, because "abandonment leads back to action" (Kearney, 2011:134) – an ethical moment or action follows. In other words, the surrender of the I's, to become i's, resurfaces as services. These "kenotic (emptying) believers" are thus emptying their selves of power, by not sacrificing others to survive, and by putting their Selves at the mercy of others to do the same (Kearney, 2011:134). For Kearney action (ethics) resurfaces when trust is put in the value of creativity for the sake of survival (Kearney, 2011:137). He says that "for what is God, as Irenaeus put it, if not us fully alive?" (Kearney, 2011:137). The emphasis on creativity implies that one specific (Kearney, 2011:137-138) religion is not to be all and the end of everything, but rather that the sharing of the universal values (which leads to creativity) is what is important. Kearney refers on this point to Raimon Panikkar, a contemporary philosopher, who proposes the option of a creative relationship between the secular and the sacred. This

does not imply for him that the secular and the sacred are identical. He wrote: "It is a matter of reciprocal interdependency rather than one-dimensional conflation. And this chiasmic coexistence may itself serve as model for the interanimation of democratic politics and mature faith" (Kearney, 2011:140-141).

Various different aspects and implications of Kearney's anatheistic God are found in his *Anatheism* and the chapters can be summarized as follow, to illustrate this point. In the second chapter of this book, called "In the Wager", Kearney indicates the importance of anatheism for interreligious dialogue and for a new hermeneutics of the "powerless power" of God. In the third chapter, "In the Name", Kearney continues this theme of the "weakness of God" and asks: Is God Master or Servant? Sovereign or Stranger? Emperor or Guest? He concludes that God is Servant, Stranger and Guest. His fourth chapter, "In the Flesh", uses agnostic arguments about "occluded" holy relations of human existence, in order to motivate the incarnate God, as "sacred word made flesh". It is again the powerlessness of God, his humanity, his "flesh" (in the other) that is emphasized (in contrast to the ontotheological and metaphysical God which he already rejected in *The God Who May Be*).

The fifth chapter, "In the Text", explains the anatheistic reading of "epiphanies" of everyday life, as described by the authors Joyce, Proust and Woolf. The chapter describes how sacramental rituals spread into the profane and became utilitarian practices. This is important for an anatheistic understanding of God, because it indicates that "God" is part of the other. The sixth chapter, "In the World", explains hermeneutically how atheism and theism influenced politics. God is in other words "in the world" (in human political structures) and should be recognized as such.

In his seventh chapter, "In the Act", Kearney identifies motions of caring and suffering as part of the incarnate God, with reference to Dorothy Day, Jean Vanier and Mahatma Gandhi. Kearney posits that only after realizing "one knows virtually nothing about God" can we recognize the incarnate God (Kearney, 2011:5). In this regard Kearney (2001) refers to the apophatic tradition (which he dislikes because of its metaphysical character), which explains God in the sense of what God is not. The anatheistic God is thus at the same time a much more human God than an unknown God. How can/must one then respond towards the stranger, the other, this God?

For Kearney, hospitality towards the other as the stranger, the suffering, the marginalized and weak, is the crucial action (ethics), which follows the discernment about "God". However, if the wrong person is hosted it could lead to death or damage of the self. Hospitality should be based on knowledge and that includes the awareness of not knowing all, and that above knowledge, is love (Kearney, 2011:47-48). The discernment includes thus a wager – to be hospitable towards others without knowing if they are good, without knowing if they are God (or “a monster”). In mind with regard to these wagers is, ‘the face’, which Derrida (2001), for example, posited. God is in other words not simply identifiable by religious dogma anymore. Bonhoeffer asked for example how a secular world can refer to “God” with a religion-less faith (Kearney 2011:66). The answer according to Bonhoeffer is that “a non-sovereign, non-metaphysical God is one whose very powerlessness gives us power, making us capable of life, resistance, and rebirth” – in a political sense, against fascism (Kearney, 2011:66). Bonhoeffer chose a faith against extreme individualism and against metaphysics as individualists’ salvation. A characteristic of Bonhoeffer (and atheism – because Kearney accepts this notion of Bonhoeffer) is the proposition that God is weak and suffering (Kearney, 2011:68, 70). For atheists this “involves a hope in spite of hopelessness that the estranged God may return in its empowering powerlessness” (Kearney, 2011:68). This means that the atheistic God is identified rather by powerlessness (by the stranger, the suffering and marginalized) than by power. It is in the weak, the suffering other where one can find the Other, and one’s response should then be one of hospitality and love.

Kearney continues this line of thought when he says that God is of cosmic nature and not "acosmic" – thus God is in this world (Kearney 2011:98). He refers to Francis of Assisi who broke with "previous metaphysical doctrines of Christianity as acosmic denial of the body" (Kearney, 2011:99). Francis of Assisi promoted a type of panentheism (whereby God is for example in animals as well) which was against the “acosmic tendencies of mainstream metaphysical Christianity” (Kearney, 2011:99) of the time. Kearney writes approvingly that,

“Francis's intrepid achievement was to combine love of God with a sense of union with the life and being of Nature. His greatness was to have expanded the specifically Christian emotion of love for God the Father to embrace ‘all the lower orders of nature’, while at the same time uplifting Nature into the glory of the

divine. ... For here, after all, was a 'mystic who dared conjoin transcendence and immanence, the sacred and the secular, by calling all creatures his brothers'" (Kearney, 2011:99).

It is however true that this mystical panentheism "was condemned as blasphemy by many orthodox Christians before and after Francis" (Kearney, 2011:100) and Kearney acknowledges that this God is unacceptable for many orthodox Christians. Kearney says thus that, "in sum, atheism is not about evacuating the sacred from the secular but retrieving the sacred in the secular" (Kearney, 2011:130).

One of the most important problems in regard to Kearney's conception of God is perhaps the "weakness of this God". He states clearly that the atheistic God who is found in the other, the stranger (who can be a fellow citizen or an alien), is not a metaphysical or ontotheological almighty God. This God is rather a weak and suffering other. Who this is, can/must be decided every time one meets the other – a process that "demands tireless interpretation and continual decision" (Rubenstein 2012:90). The atheistic God can thus be understood as a possible functionalist God of people who decide what their concept of a suffering "God" will be. It can be argued that atheism includes both stasis (fellow citizen vagrant(s)) and movement (emigrating alien vagrant(s)). The God of atheism is thus not an absolute conception relating to correspondences we can agree on, but rather a metaphorical and personal conception.

1.5.4 A view of God to consider & Conclusion

The main question this article tried to answer is: Does Kearney present a view of God in his *Anatheism* that can be seriously taken account of in our post-metaphysical age? In the above discussion Kearney's concept(s) of an atheistic God(s) is/(are) described as the other, the stranger, the downtrodden people, alienated people, those who are often rejected by their societies, the weak singulars and the suffering.¹¹ These people might for example be vagrants, aliens in foreign countries and struggling artists – it remains a difficulty to discern and seriously regard this "God".

¹¹ Amy Lamborn says "Kearney effectively demonstrates the transformative possibilities that emerge when we act hospitably to the divine stranger. That is his hermeneutic wager" (2012:355).

Kearney is furthermore not very clear about this plural form of the anatheistic God. The singular metaphoric notions of this God has similarities with the monotheistic Christian God of the last 1700 years, because Kearney promotes hermeneutics of an event in which the returning Christ is allowed to be “God” of anatheism through the kingdom of love and justice. The kingdom of love and justice can however also be understood more as a state of being and less than a “metaphysical God”. In this way the anatheistic God gets a more plural form again in opposition to the singular concept of God in (mainstream or orthodox) Christianity.

Although this view of God may seem unorthodox at first, there are various reasons why this notion of God should be seriously meditated over. According to Kearney one very important reason is, that this concept of God may help us to find our humanity (again) through hospitality and love towards the stranger/other. The ethical response towards the stranger remains however something of a wager, something that can only be eschatologically confirmed. The positive aspect of this is that the multiplicity of Kearney’s eschatology, in which God is not dogmatically defined, allows eventually for new spaces and opportunities to be creative and free, away from dogmatism and militarism. There is “an eschatological openness to anatheism that resists being ossified into a final or particular position” (Burkey 2010:165).

A critical question must be asked here, namely: Does our religious tradition (e.g. Christianity) point towards such an anatheistic concept of “God”? Although there are a lot of obvious reasons why one can answer no here, Kearney argues that Christianity with its functional parousia can be regarded a forebear of anatheism. In other words, Christianity can be interpreted to have caused a change of the good one (Christ) into many gods and goddesses (through God’s kenotic emptying) - similar to Whitehead’s interpretations in his process philosophy (and the consequent process theology). The anatheistic God remains however very far removed from mainstream and orthodox Christianity.

Despite of this criticism, the anatheistic concept of God has some important value. It is a worthwhile view of God to mull over because it identifies and presents an alternative to some problems with regard to “God” like “dogmatism”, “militancy”, “theodicy” and “theocracy”. The anatheistic concept furthermore acknowledges the downtrodden gods and goddesses who cannot be part of God unless they “create together” in order to form

a powerful group. Creativity as part of God is thus hereby positively acknowledged and regarded as important.¹² In this way Kearney presents in his concept of anatheism a worthwhile view of God to consider in our post-metaphysical age, but it is a concept not without its problems.

¹² See footnotes 1, 3 and 8 regarding the author's own concept of God and the importance of creativity in relation to God.

Conclusions, restrictions and recommendations

The research project asked important questions in the field of philosophy of religion about the concept of God self. This question was asked in regards to the highly influential philosopher, Richard Kearney's, books, *Anatheism* (2011) and *The God who may be* (2001).

Two shortcomings of this project can immediately be mentioned here: Firstly the awareness that the author is not a specialist on Richard Kearney's philosophy, and secondly that only two books of Kearney's work have been examined, in a "realist sense" in the context of prescribed reading, as well as reading of Plato's complete works and other non-prescribed philosophical works, not listed in a Bibliography. This paper is a mini-dissertation in partial fulfillment for an MPhil degree in Philosophy, which cannot be compared with a thesis, which is the only fulfillment for a Masters degree in a "specialist sense". These shortcomings set of course restrictions to this study, but for the purpose (and reach) of this research project a choice had to be made to limit the scope of the study to a demarcated question and focus. Further research about this theme and this study's problem statement can thus be done by examining and integrating other relevant works of Kearney and by collaborating with specialists on Kearney.

A further shortcoming (and potential point of further research) is the unexamined (and mainly implicit) criteria the author held in evaluating possible consideration and trust in Kearney's anatheistic concept of God. In this regard two points can be developed in further research: Firstly the author can present his own concept of God, and why this God could (should) be trusted or regarded in more detail (it is only referred to in the study in footnotes because it does not form the main focus of the research). Secondly more general and specific criteria for trust in (or at least contemplation of) God can be identified from main religions like Christianity and from other philosophical notions of God. The aspect of omnipotence of God will for example be an interesting criterion to analyse in relation to trust.¹³

¹³ The reason for this is because people normally trust people (or something) who are able (in other words powerful enough) and willing to help them. Furthermore, "honest humans"

To conclude: This study was an attempt to answer the author's question of how one should understand Kearney's atheistic view of God and if one can realistically debate this atheistic God. The article was presented in a way to introduce these findings to the uninformed but interested reader. Hopefully the article succeeded not only in answering these questions for the readers, but also in introducing and emphasizing the important work of Richard Kearney in the field of philosophy of religion. Kearney's continuous search for "God after God" and his sensitivity and urgency to discern between the possible "monsters and messiahs" in our post-Holocaust, postmodern and post-metaphysical times is of utmost importance.

To conclude: Although a lot of critique can be raised against Kearney's atheistic God – philosophically and theologically – he remains a creative thinker who presents "a view of God to consider" – as the title of this article suggests. In this process one may find some insights regarding the ontotheological, militant, dogmatic and metaphysical notions of God one may still entertain and at least rethink the consequences thereof in our mutual search for a "world of love, justice and peace". This makes this research and study of utmost importance and relevance for philosophy of religion and theology today.

Annexure - *Acta Academica* Guidelines for Authors

Acta Academica is an academic journal dedicated to scholarship in the humanities. The journal publishes scholarly articles that examine society, culture and politics past and present from a critical social theory perspective. The journal is also interested on scholarly work that examines how the humanities in the 21st century are responding to the double imperative of theorising the world and changing it. The journal appears four times a year and two of its issues are thematically focused.

General considerations for publication

Papers submitted to *Acta Academica* will only be considered for possible publication if the author(s) have certified in writing that the paper in question is not under consideration by another journal, and will not be submitted to such a journal until and unless a final, written rejection decision from the present journal has been received.

Papers submitted to the journal must ensure that the existing relevant literature is appropriately and fairly cited; in this respect, efforts should always be made to ensure that reference is made to the first report of a finding or conceptual insight rather than a later elaboration.

The journal indicates in all cases the date of reception of the manuscript and the date of acceptance by peer review.

Practical considerations

Word length of manuscripts should be 5000-8000 words including notes and references with an abstract of up to 150 words and five key words. Authors should supply a biography of 50-100 words.

A coversheet should accompany the manuscript providing full name, institutional address, email address, telephone and fax numbers - also the address where proofs and offprints should be sent if different from the above.

Authors should allow three months for consideration of their paper, but upon acceptance, they will be asked to make any necessary corrections and submit a final hard copy as well as an electronic copy.

Titles and section headings should be clear and brief. Lengthy quotations (exceeding 40 words) should be displayed, indented, in the text. Essential notes should be indicated by superscript numbers in the text and collected on a single page at the end of the text.

Reference style

Acta Academica adheres to an adapted Harvard reference style. Please note the following:

References cited in the text should read: Arendt (1958: 63-4); Brown and Smith (1984,1989). Use 'et al.' when citing a work by more than two authors. The letters a, b, c, etc. should be used to distinguish citations of different works by the same author in the same year. All references cited in the text should be listed alphabetically and presented in full after the notes, using the following style.

Books: Laclau E and Mouffe C (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Trans. W Moore and P Cammack. Verso: London.

Articles: Coetzee JM (1991) The mind of apartheid: Geoffrey Cronje (1907-). *Social Dynamics: A journal of African studies* 17(1): 1-35.

Articles in books: Dubow S (1987) Race, civilisation and culture: the elaboration of segregationist discourse in the inter-war years. In: Marks S and Stanley T (eds.) *The Politics of Race, Class and Nationalism in Twentieth Century South Africa*. London: Longman Inc, pp. 71-94.

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