

Comments on “Return of Religion as Opportunity: ‘Anatheism’ and Post-Modern Philosophy and Theology,” a Colloquium event for Msgr. Dr. Tomas Halik at the Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Study, November 2015

Jeffrey K. McDonough
jkmcdon@fas.harvard.edu

I want to begin by thanking the organizers and Msgr. Halik for including me in this session. It is an honor to be here and I’m looking forward to learning from the discussion. Our topic is very broad and my time is short so I thought I might focus my remarks on anatheism and the possibility that it might “inspire a deeper and more mature faith, interreligious dialogue, and a more productive confronting of contemporary secular culture.” To give away my punchline: I think anatheism is a fascinating development that may well be of help for many struggling with their secularism or their faith, but that it is not necessary for promoting epistemic humility nor humanistic compassion, nor does it seem to me an especially promising theology for the Christian Church.

Before getting ahead of myself, however, perhaps it would be helpful to say first, very roughly, what anatheism is. That turns out to be more difficult than one might have suspected. The term is due to Richard Kearney. Near the beginning of his book of the same title,¹ Kearney asks, “So what is anatheism,” and offers the following answer:

The ana signals a movement of return to what I call a primordial wager, to an inaugural instant of reckoning at the root of belief. It marks a reopening of that space where we are free to choose between faith or nonfaith. As such, anatheism is about the option of retrieved belief. It operates before as well as after the division between theism and atheism, and it makes both possible. Anatheism, in short, is an invitation to revisit what might be termed a primary scene of religion: the encounter with a radical Stranger who we choose, or don't choose, to call God (Kearney, 6).

¹ Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009). Hereafter cited as “Kearney.”

Elsewhere Kearney describes anatheism as “a third way beyond the extremes of dogmatic theism and militant atheism: those polar opposites of certainty that have maimed so many minds and souls in our history” (Kearney 3). Although difficult to pin down exactly, the anatheist thus seems to inhabit a space between atheism and theism, constantly vacillating between the two, always seeing religion as a stranger and yet always welcoming it nonetheless.

It is clear that anatheism is intimately related to Kearney’s personal experiences growing up in Ireland. He tells a story about his education under the care of Benedictine monks at Glenstal Abbey in southern Ireland.² At the beginning of his instruction in religious doctrine, his teacher, Father Andrews, told the young Kearney you think you come here knowing what Christianity is. But the first thing I’m going to teach you is all the arguments against the existence of God. They read Marx, de Beauvoir, Feuerbach, and Nietzsche. At the end, Father Andrews said now if there is anybody left in this class who still has an interest in God, we can have a discussion. Without wishing to suggest a direct causal connection, it certainly isn’t hard to see how someone might walk away from this sort of educational experience thinking that the key impetus to religious belief is a confrontation with atheism and, perhaps, the key impetus to atheism is a confrontation with religious belief. That all things considered, the most promising approach to religion is a vacillation between theism and atheism, that is an embrace of anatheism.

Kearney also explains that what he calls “the God debate” took on a special significance for him as someone who grew up in Ireland during The Troubles. A young philosopher living in Europe in the last decades of the twentieth century and moving to America shortly before 9/11, Kearney reports that it all:

carried an added charge for someone growing up in Ireland during a thirty-year period of violence with daily news reports of Catholics and Protestants maiming each other in the northern part of our island. The sectarian strife in Belgrade and Beirut mattered too, of course, but Belfast was just up the road. (I lived in Dublin for twenty years.) I couldn't ignore it even if I wanted to. But, in addition to witnessing

² “Why Remain a Catholic? Episode 1: Richard Kearney,” Glass Darkly Films, Inc. posted on Youtube at: <https://youtu.be/s3SIjWz7Ud8>.

sectarian violence, I also experienced the arrogance of certain Protestant and Catholic leaders speaking as if God was on their side. Home Rule is Rome Rule!

What we have we hold! No Surrender! Not an Inch! (Kearney, Preface)

Again without wishing to suggest a direct causal connection, it is easy to see why someone with Kearney's background might arrive at a view like anatheism. There is surely plenty of blame to go around for the real world troubles that Kearney calls attention to. Dogmatism among both theists and secularists no doubt not only helped to fuel conflicts in Ireland, Eastern Europe and the Middle East, but also countless other smaller scale conflicts throughout Western Europe and America. [And now, of course, Beirut and Paris as well.] Insofar as anatheism precludes both religious and secular dogmatism, it is easy to see how Kearney, and other reasonable people, might find it attractive.

Furthermore, it is clear from his writings and interviews that anatheism has led Kearney to a generous and humane outlook. Kearney offers as exemplars of an anatheistic attitude Dorothy Day, Jean Vanier, and Mahatma Gandhi. Kearney praises their openness to others, their generosity, their sacrifice. Writing of Dorothy Day, for example, he says:

Dorothy Day embodied the sacramental message of the Christian Gospel ... she devoted most of her life to an intellectual and political renewal of Christianity through a worker's publication—The Catholic Worker— and the establishment of dozens of Hospitality Houses throughout the country. ... Day made a point about using the term hospitality instead of what she considered to be the condescending term charity for performing “duties” to the poor. ... Her pioneering workers newspaper first took shape on her kitchen table as she labored to establish her first hospitality houses in Harlem and Little Italy. Day saw these radical activities as vehicles of compassion and her protest campaigns as “underminings through love.” Within years over a dozen U.S. cities had set up similar houses to shelter and feed the homeless. (Kearney, 154)

As in the case of Day, there is much to admire in Kearney's anatheistic heroes. They are people we can all revere and hope to imitate in many ways. Their examples of compassion, tolerance, generosity and bravery are good lessons for us all.

Anatheism is thus clearly consistent with a non-dogmatic, humane outlook such as Kearney himself obviously favors. But is it necessary for, or uniquely conducive to, such an outlook? It seems to me the answer to that question must be “no.” Many traditional theists have found it natural to embrace epistemic humility and to favor a compassionate attitude towards others. For the sake of one example, consider Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas, an empiricist and student of Aristotle, thought that we could have knowledge – *scientia* – of the natural world around us; we could have a good understanding of the sky and the stars, the land and the oceans, dogs and cats. But, he famously insisted that we can have no such knowledge of God. Given the kind of being God is, and the kind of being we are, we are precluded, in this life at least, from knowing God’s positive nature and we must content our selves with knowing what God is not. Likewise, Aquinas maintains that charity is the greatest of all virtues, higher even than faith and hope (ST 2a2ae,23,6). Through charity we come to love what God loves as God loves it; indeed, according to Aquinas, through charity we enter into friendship with one another and even with God himself. In finding motivation for the rejection of dogmatism and the promotion of compassion, theists have a rich tradition of their own on which they may fruitfully draw.

Similarly, secularists needn’t, as Kearney implies, constantly return to religion in order to motivate their own anti-dogmatism and humane convictions. To appeal to history once again, consider the example of David Hume. David Hume was raised in the strict fire and brimstone Calvinism of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. He once remarked that “when he heard a man was religious, he concluded he was a rascal,” although he grudgingly admitted that “he had known some instances of very good men being religious.” In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Hume presents a thoughtful, carefully crafted exchange between three points of view, allowing all sides to make points and take losses. Hume draws the dialogue to a close by awarding first place to Cleanthes, the reflective theist, last place to Demea, the dogmatic theist, and second place – second place! – to Philo – the allegedly “careless skeptic” that most closely represents Hume’s own philosophy. In his *Treatise on Human Nature*, and his *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Human Morals*, Hume places natural sympathy at the foundations of all human morality. It is our capacity to take on the hurts and joys of our fellow beings, Hume maintains, that serves as the spring from which all moral

behavior flows. Like theists, modern secularists have a rich tradition on which they may draw in motivating the rejection of dogmatism and the promotion of compassion.

It is hard to know if dogmatism and inhumanity have really been on the rise among theists and secularists over the past several decades or so. I suspect that really they haven't. I suspect that appearances to the contrary are due less to an upswing in radicalism, and more to an increase in the ability of radicals to make their voices heard and their actions felt. Nonetheless we do confront the question of what to do in the face of dogmatism and the inhumanity that it often breeds. Perhaps atheism offers a possible line of response that should be placed next to traditional theisms and humane secularism. As a theology for the Christian Church, however, atheism seems to me far less promising than its more traditional alternative. Academics may claim that "God is dead" and that we live in a "post-theological" age, but polls suggest that there are still upwards of 2 billion Christians in the world and over 1 billion Roman Catholics. As Christians and Catholics, those believers belong to a long and rich tradition that has, at its best, been a champion of a reflective humility and compassionate outreach. Rather than abandon that long and rich tradition for a post-modern toing and froing between religion and secularism, faith and disbelief, Christians and Catholics might find a more powerful inspiration in their own long and distinguished history.