

**Kearney, Richard. *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. 272 pp, hb \$29.50, ISBN: 978-0-231-14788-0.**

**Taylor, Mark C. *After God*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007. 482 pp, pb \$35.00, ISBN: 978-0-226-79171-5.**

Ever since Nietzsche pronounced the death of God, philosophy has been searching for a second opinion. It can often seem as though western thought is marked by the five stages of grief: many thinkers are in denial about Nietzsche's diagnosis; many are angry and generous in casting their blame on those deemed responsible for the tragedy; and many more exist in a state of depression: numb and indifferent to the divine in a world disabused of its former fantasies. Yet there are also those who exhibit a peculiar blend of acceptance and bargaining. They grant that the traditional God has met his demise, but they reason that if only a few conditions are met, religion could carry on *post-mortem*; it could return to God after his death. Among Nietzsche's progeny are theorists of the well-known "religious turn," the rebellious teenagers of post-metaphysical thought. They prove resourceful in their attempts to modify theological concepts, developing new perspectives on religion capable of overcoming the life-negating parodies of ages past. But how are we to think posthumously in a culture so deprived of its taste for higher things? And more importantly, what kind of God can we expect to rise from this modern graveyard?

One answer to this question is provided by Richard Kearney in his latest work, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*. Having studied with two pioneers of the "religious turn," Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Levinas, it is unsurprising that Kearney has risen to prominence among religious thinkers in the continental tradition. From his earliest work, *Heidegger et la Question de Dieu* (1981) to his more recent, *The God Who May Be* (2001), Kearney has been haunted by the question of God's fate in a postmodern world.<sup>1</sup> In *Anatheism*, he specifically addresses the challenge of man's return to the sacred at the dawn of the third millennium. He offers readers a "philosophical story" (xvii), introducing "reasonable hermeneutic considerations into the theist-atheist debate" (171). According to this story, modern disenchantment is a symptom, not of atheism, but of a pervasive and dogmatic sense of security. Kearney's self-appointed task, then, is to unsettle believers and nonbelievers alike, to guide them into a *post*-theism and a *post*-atheism. Faith, either in God or his absence, can never be a possession or a finished product. It is rather a wager made again and again, constantly renewed to remain enduringly authentic. But to wager rightly, man must be a proficient interpreter of his own experience. Even the God-denier must accurately interpret the God he denies. Thus underlying the wager of faith should be a disposition of hospitality toward the Other who exceeds all of our self-certainties. Such a disposition fosters openness to the divine as the stranger always remaining beyond our comprehension: the third way along which a renewed quest for God can proceed. This, according to Kearney, is the path of *anatheism*: a "religion of agnostics," as Wilde called it, defined and inspired by a space of "holy insecurity" (5) and radical humility.

The argument of the book unfolds as Kearney explores the various dimensions of this disposition at the levels of lived experience, poetic expression, and ethical practice. He begins in chapter one (“In the Moment”) to develop a phenomenology of the stranger as a paradigm for all human-divine encounters. In his view, authentic religion makes possible the experience of God as a stranger irreducible in his strangeness; and thus preceding the judgment of faith is the response of either hospitality or hostility to this unexpected visitor. Kearney supports his interpretive framework by demonstrating a textual precedent in all three Abrahamic faiths for seeing God as the stranger *par excellence*. He then goes on in chapter two (“In the Wager”) to examine the five aspects of “a multilayered hermeneutic drama” (47); the conditions, as it were, for such an encounter on the side of the interpreting subject. Imagination, humor, commitment, discernment, and hospitality all have parts to play in structuring experience as a dynamic between host and guest. And this dynamic has a profound impact on the character of the God that appears. As Kearney argues in his third chapter (“In the Name”) – perhaps his most controversial and intriguing – the fate of traditional theism was sealed more definitively by the horrors of the concentration camps than by any Nietzschean proclamation. Consequently, drawing from major figures in post-Holocaust literature, Kearney argues that the only God still viable for atheism is a *powerless* God: one who renounces his sovereignty and his distance from humanity so as to suffer with us, even rely upon us, and imbed his transcendence within the very immanence of the world.

This modified notion of transcendence is what holds the promise of restoring a sacramental vision of the world. Chapters four and five (“In the Flesh” and “In the Text” respectively) are of particular interest for nonbelievers, as they invoke philosophical and literary authorities either agnostic or explicitly atheistic in their creeds. Nonetheless, according to Kearney, these authors appropriate sacramental language to describe the irreducible dimensions of everyday life, which are to be encountered and welcomed *as strange* (thus atheism has a viable alternative to reductive naturalism). Kearney draws out the implications of this immanent transcendence first by analyzing the idiom of sacrament that Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Julia Kristeva employ in their philosophies of embodiment, and second by describing an analogous idiom in the literary works of James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Virginia Woolf. These retrievals of sacramentality create a space of reverence and wonder in the midst of our mundane experience that can, *if* one so wagers, “clear a landing site for the divine stranger” (15). Finally, in chapters six (“In the World”) and seven (“In the Act”) Kearney turns to the practical consequences of his new understanding of transcendence. With a God no longer above but within the world, *imitatio dei* becomes an “ethics of kenosis” (133): the believer must turn *toward* the world rather than away from it, affirming the secular (i.e., the temporal) beyond its supposed opposition to the sacred. Atheism ultimately terminates, therefore, (though it is always renewed) with a faith that embraces and affirms life in the heart of secularity, intimating God in the complexities of action and suffering (as exemplified in the struggles of Dorothy Day, Jean Vanier, and Mahatma Gandhi). This is, in short, Kearney’s blueprint for building a world beyond the death of God.

An alternative blueprint is provided by Mark C. Taylor in his most recent work, *After God*. Taylor established his reputation as an authority on religion and postmodernism most definitively in his Derridean-flavored *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (1981). *After God* represents his most ambitious project to date, tying together all the dimensions of his scholarship into a single complex narrative. Not only does Taylor construct his own definition of religion using concepts born of contemporary information theory, he also proceeds to trace the contours of this definition as it manifests itself in a comprehensive genealogy of secularism. In his view, the relationship between religion (principally western Christianity) and the secular is in need of a conceptual overhaul: the typical dichotomy has continually caused people to misunderstand the nature of religion and its influence. For Taylor, as for Kearney, the nihilism of contemporary culture is rooted not in secularity but rather in absolutism (neofoundationalism). To overcome it, one must retrace the steps of history in order to see the secular as an intrinsically religious phenomenon, co-emergent with and codependent upon belief. Taylor therefore tells his story to demonstrate how and why religion remains deeply influential in the modern and postmodern world, while also constructing “a more adequate religious vision and ethical framework” after the death of God.<sup>2</sup>

In chapter one (“Theorizing Religion”), Taylor develops the concept of religion that shapes the structure of the entire book. As he succinctly defines it, “Religion is an emergent, complex, adaptive network of symbols, myths, and rituals that, on the one hand, figure schemata of feeling, thinking, and acting in ways that lend life meaning and purpose and, on the other, disrupt, dislocate, and disfigure every stabilizing structure” (12). Here, according to Taylor, the insights of contemporary information theory allow for a more comprehensive account of religion than has ever been possible. According to this view, religion is not a static and timeless set of truths but a living and evolving network of meanings that ultimately disrupts all of its determinate forms. It emerges and develops as part of a “relational web” in which it shapes and is reciprocally shaped by other natural, social, and cultural systems. As Taylor notes, ways of thinking about God influence ways of thinking about self and world (and vice-versa) (22). And in a world that is so deeply interconnected, conceptual patterns that favor oppositions will ultimately fail as reliable guides to reality. This judgment allows Taylor to delimit the inflexible alternatives that have haunted theology throughout the Christian tradition: history bears witness to a repeating oscillation between monism and dualism, two ways of failing to grasp the codependent relation of God to world. As Taylor reveals throughout the book, these false dichotomies of both/and and either/or reverberate beyond religion into the discourses of media, technology, and politics. His solution is to affirm (like Kearney) a third way: a schema of neither/nor that can think God and the world in their complex relation.

The bulk of Taylor’s narrative unfolds across chapters two through six, describing in detail how “what begins as a theological revolution becomes a political revolution, which in turn, inspires the philosophical and aesthetic revolution that eventually culminates in twentieth-century secularity” (84). The story begins with Luther, who represents, for Taylor, the true father of modernity. Luther functions as a “tipping point” (66), a moment of rupture for traditional

religious schemata, opening up radical new ways of figuring God, the self, and the world. Taylor then traces the history of Luther's paradigm shift as it gives shape first to the autonomous self of modern democracy and Kantian thought. He then traces it to the Romantic identification of God with creative imagination. This, in turn, leads to profound new theories in twentieth-century aesthetics and finally culminates in both the death of God and the neofoundationalist reactions we now face. At each stage of the development, the unresolved tension between immanence and transcendence is renewed and deepened. While one sees shades of Derrida and Altizer in his analysis, Taylor's argument relies mostly on a creative fusion of Hegel and Kierkegaard. Only with a new appropriation of Hegelian logic (modified to resist closure) can we overcome the nihilistic drama of absolutism, exemplified today by the American religious right. Taylor therefore calls us to adopt a religion without God and an ethics without absolutes (chapters seven and eight): a vision in which we embrace the relational nature of reality and open ourselves to an infinite now identified with the formless source of religion's adaptation. Transcendence then must be seen as the interplay of identity and difference, the "emergent self-organizing network of networks" (346). It is never itself figured, and yet it never stands apart from the networks of meaning that emerge within it.

A number of family resemblances unite Kearney and Taylor in their analytic and constructive endeavors. One can easily discern a similar narrative framework held between them: opposing absolutism, pursuing a third way beyond the sacred-secular divide, and ultimately affirming a transcendence reciprocally determined by immanence. Both Kearney and Taylor are storytellers and openly confess their philosophical biases. They share a common debt to deconstruction and post-structuralism and a common appreciation for the artistic dimension of religion. They also share the limitations of their common philosophical heritage. For instance, both Kearney and Taylor describe the nature of transcendence in terms that either explicitly mention (in Taylor's case,) or closely resemble (in Kearney's case), the postmodern sublime. Kearney's "God who may be" and Taylor's "altarity" exist as infinite creative principles to the degree that they lack any determinate form. Neither thinker considers how God might be thought of as infinite form or actuality, and how such an alternative might alter their stances toward the tradition and even open up a more radical path for God's return. Ironically, Kearney is a bit too hospitable toward Heidegger's history of metaphysics and Taylor is perhaps still too beholden to the terms set by Hegelian totality. But the real danger of their grammar of transcendence is the reductive logic that tempts it. Though Kearney's atheism includes an ethical imperative of reverence for the claims of diverse religious traditions, he stresses that there can be no absolute knowledge of the absolute – just a pluralism of interpretations always subject to revision or even dissolution. Such is the "surplus of meaning" and the "deep ground" that precede and exceed all religions. This gives the impression that the claims of particular traditions are little more than contingent metaphors lacking the power to reveal God in any final or definitive way. But the Abrahamic faiths claim precisely this kind of revelation for themselves, insofar as God has shown himself uniquely through particular forms in history. How well then can Kearney's hermeneutic integrate particular traditions without doing them violence? It would seem that the only absolute

knowledge about the absolute that Kearney allows is precisely the truth of this law governing different faiths.

Taylor's account also suffers from the same fundamental limitation. His "groundless ground" (or the sublime) acts as a Heraclitean flux, destabilizing every particular religious form that claims stability. The particular shapes that religions have therefore appear ephemeral and all but indifferent to the truth that Taylor wants to elaborate. Consequently, his language of complex adaptive systems seems to reduce the content of religions to a purely descriptive analysis of systems forming and disbanding (a danger he shares with overly reductive accounts of natural selection). This kind of meta-discourse alone supplies the *enduring* truths of religion, rising above the particularities of faith traditions and governing them. It alone attains the kind of truth that escapes the deconstructive rhythm of an adaptive network. Though this antinomy is present both in *Anatheism* and *After God*, theists will find a fellow traveler in Kearney far more so than in Taylor. Though he sees a future for religion, in the end Taylor does not hold out much hope for God. He declares near the end of his book that the creative infinite is older than God and outlives him; that all claims favoring an infinite God simply mask his finitude. Gods for Taylor ultimately fall among the set of finite forms subject to dissolution, and worse, only serve to "hide the originary abyss from which everything emerges and to which all returns" (345). One would be technically mistaken then to say that Taylor intends a return to God after his death. Kearney, however, is more hopeful. For him, God is indeed identified with the infinite whose truth we must constantly interpret and to whom, therefore, we can always in a sense return.

While at times Kearney's exegesis strains the texts from which he draws, overall his analyses are illuminating and his arguments compelling. He is clearly engaged in an enterprise of creative appropriation that, fittingly, shows great hospitality to the authors upon which he calls. Noting that anatheism is not something new but rather a phenomenon that recurs throughout religious history, Kearney appears more to conduct a symphony of voices than to impose his own novelties: he lets the thinkers and the artists speak for themselves, but in such a way as to lend credence to his own claims. Similarly, Taylor's work at times struggles under the weight of the author's ambition: each chapter of his genealogy could serve as a book length study and could benefit from the more detailed analysis that such an expansion would enable. Nonetheless, Taylor's ability to don the masks of philosopher, historian, cultural critic, art critic, economist, etc. with such ease and finesse is truly impressive. His arguments are clear and his style is eminently accessible.

Both *Anatheism* and *After God* are important contributions to the ongoing debate about God's place in a postmodern world. One may wager that their authors have stumbled upon the only paths forward, or on the contrary that they have sacrificed too much of what God once was. I myself often found them to be strangers to my own intellectual proclivities; but nonetheless, these are two strangers I gladly welcome as guests.

PATRICK X. GARDNER  
*University of Notre Dame*

## Notes

1. Kearney, *Anatheism*, xiii.
2. Taylor, *After God*, 42.