ANATHEISM

{ Returning to God After God }

RICHARD KEARNEY

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INTRODUCTION
GOD AFTER GOD

Profundum, physical thunder, dimension in which we believe, without belief, beyond belief.
—Wallace Stevens, “Flyers Fall”

What comes after God? What follows in the wake of our letting go of God? What emerges out of that night of not-knowing, that moment of abandoning and abandonment? Especially for those who—after ridding themselves of “God”—still seek God?

That is the question I wish to pursue in this volume. And, so doing, I propose the possibility of 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. This third option, this wager of faith beyond faith, I call anatheism. Ana-theos, God after God. Anathesism: another word for another way of seeking and sounding the things we consider sacred but can never fully fathom or prove. Another idiom for receiving back what we’ve given up as if we were encountering it for the first time. Just as Abraham received back Isaac as gift, having given him up as patriarchal project. In short, another way of returning to a God beyond or beneath the God we thought we possessed.

The book is divided into seven chapters. The first, “In the Moment,” asks what happens in the decisive instant when the sacred stranger appears: do we respond with hostility or hospitality? Fear or trust? Or both. The fact that inaugural moments of faith often begin with someone replying to an uninvited visitor—Abraham under the Mamre tree, Mary at the instant of annunciation, Muhammad in his cave—raises the question as to how reli-
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IN THE MOMENT

THE UNINVITED GUEST

Thus says the Lord: you shall not molest or oppress an alien, for you were once aliens yourselves.

—Exodus 22:20

She walks with him as a stranger, and at first she puts him to the test; fear and dread she brings upon him and tries him with her discipline . . . then she comes back to bring him happiness and reveal her secrets to him.

—“On Wisdom,” Sirach 4

Abrahamic religions testify to inaugural encounters with a divine stranger. In such primary scenes two responses are registered: hostility or hospitality. You decline the other or receive the other into your home. Let me give some examples drawn from the three Religions of the Book—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

THE JUDAIC WAGER

I begin with the story of Abraham. It is a dry hot day in the desert of Mamre. An old man is sitting at the door of his tent, pitched under the shade of an oak tree. His wife, Sarah, is inside the tent, sheltering from the midday sun. She is not happy; she is over a hundred years and she is barren. Her servant woman, Hagar, is younger, more attractive than she and more fertile: a rival. Abraham is brooding, about his unhappy wife, about the future of Israel. Suddenly a shadow flits across the sunlit ground in front of him. He looks
IN THE WAGER
THE FIVEFOLD MOTION

When a great moment knocks on the door of your life it is often no louder
than the beating of your heart and it is very easy to miss it.
—Pasternak, Letter to Olga

FIVE MOMENTS

The anatheist wager I am trying to describe has five main components: imagination, humor, commitment, discernment, and hospitality. I will say a
word about each in turn, though strictly speaking they do not constitute five
sequential moments, chronologically separate in time, but rather equiprimordial aspects of a single hermeneutic arc. Wagers occur in an instant, all
at once. But they are complex, shrouded in a halo of multilayered motions. And there is much, we shall see, that precedes and follows them.

Imagination

One cannot wager unless one has freedom to choose. Such choice pre-
supposes our ability to imagine different possibilities in the same person,
to see the Other before us as a stranger to be welcomed or rejected. This
sense of primordial openness to the Stranger means that our perception is already a hermeneutic “seeing as.” From the start, it is a primary inter-
pretation inscribed in our bodily response, emotion and affect, before any
theoretical reflection. To respond in fear or welcome—as dramatized in the
IN THE NAME
AFTER AUSCHWITZ WHO CAN SAY GOD?

One has to free one's self inwardly of everything, of all existing representations, of all slogans, of all comforts. One has to have the courage to let go of everything, of all standards and all conventional certainties. One has to dare taking the giant leap... then life will be endlessly overflowing, even amidst the deepest suffering.

—Etty Hillesum, notes from Westerbork Camp, July 7, 1942

What do we mean when we speak in the name of God? Do we mean an omnipotent God who will solve our problems, save and scold, condemn and control? Or something very different? When we pray In the Name of the Father do we regress to primitive rites of infantile dependency and projection (as Freud suggests)? Or is there more to it than that? Something beyond childish superstition and fetishism? Something that gestures toward a divinity that may be in flesh and blood, here and now, if we allow it, responding to the name that calls by creating a place where the one who comes can arrive in our midst? If dogmatic theism often fostered the idea of primal attachment to a paternalist fetish, anatheism, having traversed the purges of atheistic critique, endorses the counter idea of an adventing God—God as the advent who invites us to the feast of life in all its polyphony.

Strictly speaking then, anatheism is neither antitheism nor antiatheism but a form of post-theism that allows us to revisit the sacred in the midst of the secular. It appreciates the candor of enlightened critiques of religion and acknowledges Max Weber's diagnosis of the "disenchantment" (Entzauberung) of modernity. It says yes to all these no's and asks what, if anything, comes after.
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IN THE FLESH

SACRAMENTAL IMAGINATION

Only through singularities can we find the divine.

—Spinoza

There are three basic elements to anathesim: protest, prophecy, and sacrament. In chapter 3 we looked mainly at the first two, especially as they signal a challenge to the God of otherworldly omnipotence and invite retrievals of a God of service and natality. In this chapter I will focus on the third element—namely, a sacramental return to the holiness of the everyday. As the phenomenological analyses I explore in this and following chapters focus mainly on figures of eucharistand epiphany, I begin with some remarks on the Gospel tradition of embodiment. So doing, however, I by no means wish to confine the application of these analyses to Christianity.

From the beginning, and at its best, Christianity professed both a pilgrim and sacramental vocation. The first went out in search of aliens and strangers.¹ It was a quest of a kingdom still to come, which ran from early migrant missionaries to the bold thinkers of the Reform movements (including advocates of a “religionless faith” like Bonhoeffer and Ricoeur).² The second vocation—the sacramental—sought to welcome the stranger into the here and now: the kingdom already come. This hosting of the transcendent in the immanence of the present was epitomized by the great mystics of the monastic and mendicant orders (Carmelites, Beguines, Franciscans, Benedictines) as well as by numerous religious artists and saints.³ Anathesism draws from these two vocations, seeking to combine the pilgrim commitment to protest and prophecy with a sacramental return to epiphanies of the
In this chapter I look at how certain modern authors illustrate the anatheistic paradigm. I will focus on three pioneers of modernist fiction who bore witness to the return of the sacred—Joyce, Proust, and Woolf. No one of these was a believer in any orthodox confessional sense. Each was deeply marked, to be sure, by their religious education and upbringing: Joyce as a Catholic, Woolf as a Protestant, and Proust as someone with a mixed Christian-Jewish background. But none of them advanced an overtly theistic position. Conventional wisdom might even suggest the contrary: that Joyce was a rebel apostate, Proust a secular sensualist, and Woolf a humanist aesthete (how otherwise make sense of her response to the news that T. S. Eliot had converted in 1928: “there’s something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God”)?

At first blush, therefore, it would seem that these three writers, like many of their literary contemporaries, chose aesthetics over religion. There is a notion among modern intellectuals that matters of existential profundity and ultimacy, previously considered the preserve of churches, are now, in Western culture at least, being transferred to the sanctuaries of art. While there is clearly some truth to this view of secular modernity, it often misses the degree to which many authors remained deeply committed to a sacramental imagination that defied the either/or division between theism and
IN THE WORLD
BETWEEN SECULAR AND SACRED?

After our hermeneutic detour through sacramental poetics we return, finally, to the question of sacramental ethics. Here we revisit a central concern of the anatheist wager: namely, what does it mean to accept the sacred stranger into the secular universe? What is involved in translating epiphanies of transcendence into the immanence of everyday action? What are the practical implications of moving from sacred imagination to a sacred praxis of peace and justice? Or, to put it in another way, how do anatheists in a secular age respond to the question: what is to be done?

TOWARD AN ETHICS OF KENOSIS

As we saw in chapter 3, Bonhoeffer already hinted at an answer when he declared from his death cell in 1944 that “secular and sacred are not opposed but find their unity in Christ. . . . That which is Christian is to be found only in the natural, the holy only in the profane.” More recently, a number of postreligious Christian thinkers have pushed this even further, to the point where their work is sometimes accused of atheistic nihilism, when in fact it proposes to pass through the death of God to a renewal of sacred love for the world (amor mundi). Here I am thinking particularly of the anatheist interpretation of kenosis (divine self-emptying) offered by the French Passionist Stanislas Breton and the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo. Both have
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IN THE ACT
BETWEEN WORD AND FLESH

If you have an eye for it, the world itself is a sacrament.

—Augustine

The three arcs of anatheism—the iconoclastic, the prophetic, and the sacramental—attest to ways in which the sacred is in the world but not of the world. While the sacred inhabits the secular, it is not identical with it. They are not the same, though for anatheism they need each other as self needs stranger. 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. This point has been recognized, in Western culture, from the beginning: from Abraham’s welcome to the wanderers in the desert and Socrates’ dialogue with the Stranger in The Sophist about the relationship between Same and Other. From these biblical and Greek inaugurations, the stranger is recognized as one who can make the impossible possible, who brings sameness and alterity into fertile congress. And similar points may doubtless be made regarding non-Western cultures.

In the modern epoch iconoclastic voices have been heard in the indignant critiques of religion that go under the heading of a “hermeneutics of suspicion.” Such protests signal, I have conceded, a welcome deconstruction of the false idols that every religion has carried on its back at some time or other. Although salutary, such a move is not sufficient to account for the integral life of faith. It concentrates on the “negative” aspects (quite reasonably), but often ignores the “positive” surplus of meaning that exceeds
CONCLUSION
WELCOMING STRANGE GODS

The feeling remains that God is on the journey too.

—Teresa of Avila

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.

Anatheism is not an atheism that wishes to rid the world of God, rejecting the sacred in favor of the secular. Nor is it a theism that seeks to rid God of the world, rejecting the secular in favor of the sacred. Nor, finally, is it a pantheism (ancient or New Age) that collapses the secular and the sacred into one, denying any distinction between the transcendent and the immanent. Anatheism does not say the sacred is the secular; it says it is in the secular, through the secular, toward the secular. I would even go so far as to say the sacred is inseparable from the secular, while remaining distinct. Anatheism speaks of “interanimation” between the sacred and secular but not of fusion or confusion. They are inextricably interconnected but never the same thing.