

# A 'strange' theology: Engaging with Richard Kearney

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## ■ Introduction<sup>164</sup>

The year 2017 celebrates the 500-year anniversary of the Reformation. In its time and context, the Reformation aimed to redress a God-talk that tended to show favour to those who adhered to the theology of the then Roman Catholic Church. At times, the church's doctrine was characterised by exclusivism and was determined in distinguishing between those who belonged to the faith and those who did not. The church was not

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always a welcoming place to be, and Christianity was seldom a religion that allowed for a diversity of opinions. Then again, this may be a criticism levelled against the church and the Christian religion irrespective of time and space. Considering the modern context, it appears as if Christianity is once again faced with a very particular narrative of exclusion and self-isolation. This time it is not a self-isolation borne out of a need to protect the Christian religion or the church. Instead, it is a self-isolation that focuses on the perpetuation of particular social and political identities, worldviews and belief systems (not necessarily religious).

Let me illustrate: It can be safely assumed that the September 11 (2001) attacks in the USA changed the course of history (Du Toit & Lubbe 2002). These events impacted on the traditional West's notions of diversity, inclusivity and hospitality. For decades, the idea of 'the American dream' espoused images of the West being a haven for diversity – that everyone was welcome. Such hospitality hinged on the premise that everyone who took advantage of this invitation could make a contribution towards the well-being of American society (and its democracy).

Following the attacks of 2001, the USA (and other Western countries) questioned their own levels of 'hospitality'. What followed was an increase in security, growing caution and scrutiny of those who entered these countries and a cycle of retributive acts of violence. The persistent to-and-fro of this violence between the West and groups like Al-Qaeda and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) must have had a psychological impact on all sides; it escalated social suspicion of the 'other', expressed apprehension when the 'different' were encountered and increased a sense of having to create a safe space for their respective socio-ideological 'in-groups'.

If the recent political history of the West is anything to go by, the rise of the Trump administration and Brexit are indicative of societies that have become critical of the levels of hospitality once proclaimed by their liberal worldviews. Instead, these momentous events speak of social fear, anxiety, self-isolation and effectively a political redelineation of the conditions of their hospitality.

Fear, anxiety and self-isolation are ingredients for the building of walls, whether these walls are literal or metaphorical. The higher and stronger the 'walls', the more effectively society is able to differentiate between the self and the other, distinguishing between the in-group and the out-group, and the easier it is to fall into the trap of adhering to social generalisations.

It is then no wonder that events take place like the attacks on Muslim worshippers at Finsbury Park, clearly motivated by social generalisations and prejudice stemming from maladaptive schemas and fuelled by fear, anxiety, anger and isolation. Before Darren Osborne drove a van into a crowd of worshippers, he is quoted as having shouted 'I want to kill all Muslims' (Booth, Cobain & Morris 2017). This utterance carries all the traits of a self-isolating, maladaptive worldview. Of course, it would be unfair to typify Osborne's approach as the general view held by society. On the contrary, his acts are viewed as extremist and carried widespread condemnation. Nonetheless, his radical views must be noted, and subsequently, one should take heed that the rise of radical religious orientations is leading to increased incidences of violence and subsequently also isolating nationalisms, patriotisms and overall intolerance. The voices of integration, social cohesion of diverse population groups and multidimensional civil society are being challenged by voices that call for the reestablishment of primary identities of origin, culture, language and, perhaps subliminally, religion.

The world has changed; this is beyond dispute. Further, the world is changing, and hence, theologians have to ask what we are to make of God-talk in this changing global landscape. Is there a theological approach that can inform a Christian response to the overt polarisation of people, religions and worldviews?

It is my view that the contribution made by Richard Kearney, an Irish philosopher who has ventured into the discussion on religion and social cohesion, is a promising approach. Advocating non-violence, Kearney argues for a God-talk that takes the risk of making the self vulnerable to the other, with the hope of not only finding in the 'stranger' a friend but also finding God.

## ■ The status quo in encountering the Other

As a student of Ricoeur, it is only fitting for Kearney to begin his wandering into a 'strange' God-talk by asking the question: 'Where do I speak from?' (Kearney 2010:i). He answers this question by describing his journey as one where his life was shaped by different forms of conflict, conflict that ultimately aimed to polarise people, whether American and Middle-Eastern, Catholic and Protestant in Ireland or black and white in South Africa. He speaks as a person who was raised in Western religion, politics and worldviews. This does not make him apologetic with regard to Western thoughts and actions. On the contrary, Kearney engages critically with his own world, his own beliefs and his own understanding of God.

Off the bat, Kearney offers his first critique of Western thinking, namely that in the West, notions of self-identity are measured as the good while the other is dealt with from the perspective of suspicion (Kearney 2002:7–8). I do not think that this hermeneutic of suspicion is necessarily a Western-specific notion. Our biological make-up informs us that the threat comes from the 'outside', and any perceived threat engages our primal defence-attack mechanisms (LeDoux 1998:138–178). Nonetheless, Western worldviews with their individual-centred approaches seem to emphasise suspicious and cautious engaging with the other. Describing this (almost) natural form of prejudice, Kearney falls back on Levinas's notion of 'ontology of sameness' and Derrida's 'logocentrism' (Kearney 2002:9) as philosophical foundations for dealing with this suspicious way of life.

In Levinas's 'ontology of sameness', the other is first encountered as an entity outside the self. The other is primarily perceived as a threat who enters into an unspoken dialogue with the self (Cohen 1986):

The unspoken message which appears in the face of the other is: do not kill me; or, since the message has no ontological force, but is the

very force of morality: you *ought* not kill me; or, since the alterity of the other's face is alterity itself: thou shalt not kill. (p. 7)

When self encounters the other, the self and the other's self are moved to ethical and moral reflections, determining what unfolds in the meeting event (Levinas & Kearney 1986). The 'ontology of sameness' then suggests that this move to personalised ethical responses, where the focus is on *my* response and on the other's *my* response – the identification of the self in the other and the other in self – creates the option to forego defence mechanisms and to 'become incarnate selves in the face of incarnate others' (Kearney 2010:160).

Derrida's 'logocentrism', according to Kearney, follows similar lines. The unspoken word of law, rights, justice, contracts, duties and pacts set the conditions for hospitality in any given context (Kearney 2002:11). It is up to the host to choose an approach of radical hospitality, as the host has no way to guarantee that the guest will naturally comply with the expectations set out by the unspoken word. In both Levinas's and Derrida's approaches, the hermeneutic of suspicion is acknowledged, but the move towards a positive encounter between the self and the other rests squarely on the decision of the self to risk hospitality.

Perhaps this hermeneutic of suspicion, the over-cautious response of considering the other as a threat (and acting on the premise that the other is a threat) lies at the heart of the perpetuating cycles of violence and self-isolation that we witness in the world today. Kearney then responds with a call to actively and deliberately take the risk of making oneself vulnerable to the other by offering the gift of hospitality. This requires a shift in thinking, a move that Kearney calls the transition from optocentrism (emphasis on sight) to carnal hermeneutics (emphasis on touch). As beings who are embodied in the context of a particular time and space, reality is mediated through the senses (Kearney & Treanor 2015:2). The reason we are able to perceive threat is as a result of information passing through the senses, informing the self that something or someone exists beyond the parameters of the self.

Our first encounter with the other is usually visual – we see the other. The optocentric response prefers to keep a distance between the self and the other, where the other is viewed as an object and distinct from the self (Kearney 2015:30). To see a person allows the subject (self) to operate with the knowledge that safety is found in the distance between the self and the other. Carnal hermeneutics, on the other hand, engages the other senses, of which touch is the most profound. Whether it be in the shaking of hands, the sharing of a meal or ultimately in intimate contact, the distance between the self and the other is removed, leaving the self in a place of vulnerability, taking a chance that hospitality shown will result in a life-giving experience and not unfold in the most negative imaginings that suspicion can conjure up (Kearney 2015:89–98, 199–215).

Kearney develops these ideas in his book *Anatheism: Returning to God after God*, emphasising the point that not only does hospitality facilitate community and reconciliation between people but also the mystery of God is encountered in the process.

## ■ A 'strange' response

Kearney's thesis in *Anatheism: Returning to God after God* is that God meets people (us) through the stranger (them). He deduces this point by citing all three Abrahamic religions, identifying the common theme of how the religious pundits miss the revelation of God, while those on the margins, who have nothing to lose by displaying hospitality, are able to meet God. Whether it be Abraham under the Mamre tree (Kearney 2010:3–20), Jesus feasting with sinners and tax collectors (Kearney 2010:136) or the Prophet meeting God in the cave (Kearney 2010:30–46), these God-encounters break the rigid framework of religious fundamentalisms, as if God refuses to be defined by them. It is in the God-talk of a well-defined god that theists build a wall between the self and the other, where the in-group hold fast to the basic fundamentals of the faith, while those who form part of the out-group are often marginalised and labelled. They are then

encouraged to relinquish these labels before they can be welcomed back into the 'community of faith'.

By the same token, atheism, which may serve as a disillusioned response to theism, builds a wall between those who seek freedom outside the strict fundamentals of religion and those who continue to subscribe to a theistic god. Both theism and atheism have very distinct forms of God-talk. It may seem to be a contradiction to describe atheism as having a God-talk, but without a God-talk, atheism has little or nothing to protest against. Richard Dawkins is a prime example of an atheist with a very particular kind of God-talk. The God-talk he employs in *The God Delusion*, for instance, is one that protests against the very God-talk propagated by the theists, who remain unmoved when it comes to critiquing their faith claims (Dawkins 2006). So, here we have two polarised groups, all because of God-talk, and the wall between them consists of the rigid adherence to their respective beliefs ... and in the end neither has much to show in terms of a providing a life-giving God-encounter.

It is here that Kearney introduces a third way, a way he calls 'anatheism'. The prefix 'ana-' does not mean 'another', as if another theism would solve the problem of polarisation, or as if another theism would be the *real* theism – the *real* encounter with God. If it were, then such a new form of theism would do nothing more but add another wall, one between the old theism and the new. No, 'ana-' is used as a process of stepping-back and returning to God after the god of theism became the irrelevant god of atheism. He (Kearney 2014) describes it as follows:

But in a-n-a we have two A's. And if the first 'a' is the 'a' of a-theism, the second 'a' is the 'not' of the 'not'. The negation of the negation. The double A-A of anatheism. A reopening to something new. After all. (p. 235)

The re-meeting with God, a fresh divine revelation in an authentic life experience, is what Kearney refers to when he notes that '[...] certain deep experiences can undergo disenchantment after which we may return again to them again in a new light, *over and over*' (Kearney 2014:234).

In anatheism, God is not encountered as *God*, or at first recognised as *God*, for the defined god is nothing but the domesticated image of our understanding – God created in our own image. God meets Abraham *through* the wandering strangers who seek food, drink and shelter; the shepherds meet God *through* the stranded strangers in the stable; Muhammad meets God *through* the strange presence in the cave; the theme repeats itself in the Abrahamic religions over and over again. The key to the encounter is not through God forcing a divine meeting with the self, but through and when the self ventures to show the gift of hospitality instead of the act of hostility towards the other (Kearney 2014:238). The repetitive nature of this form of God-encounter makes the Divine dynamic and, in a Levinasian manner, requires of us to recognise the dynamism of our own self in the Being of God. Anatheism therefore is not only a fresh way in which we encounter God but a dynamically refreshing way in which we encounter the other and discover new life in the self – returning in a fresh way in order to move forward (Kearney 2014:234).

To open oneself to this form of encounter entails risk. Kearney recognises this risk and proposes that with every act of meeting with the other, the self has to make a wager. The self needs to discern whether the other acts as a guest or as an enemy (Kearney 2015:17). Interestingly, the Latin word that forms the basis of English words like 'hospitality' and 'hostility' is the word *hostis*, which can be translated as either 'guest' or 'enemy' (Kearney 2010:38). Irrespective of whether the other acts as guest or enemy, the self in the gift of hospitality will also encounter God; whether it be God joining us in new life or God meeting us in our suffering in the event that our hospitality has been abused.

## ■ Some reflections

Now, what are we to make of anatheism? Of course, questions are posed of Kearney's approach. Sands, for instance, argues that Kearney merely reinterprets God alongside others who



already have had a God-experience but does so from the limitations of his own biases and suspicion which is in fact the writing of a new dogmatic line in theology (Sands 2016:10). A further question would be: What are we to do with religious tradition? Is it merely to be appreciated as the story of the development of our response to God through the means of religion? Or what about the more detailed aspects of religious traditions such as the sacraments – are we, by being suspicious of traditions in religion, to throw out the baby with the bathwater in order to reinvent a religion that is aesthetically more palatable for today's context? Are we creating God in our own image, our own hopes, our own projected eschatons, especially if we want these eschatons to build bridges and destroy the dividing walls? Is this truly a new kind of God-encounter, an anatheism, or is it a kind of theism that we want and are thus subsequently inventing?

As valid as these questions are, two points need to be noted. Firstly, the hermeneutic of anatheism is nothing new in the Abrahamic religions; Kearney merely identified the recurring theme and named it. Along with it, there are some truths to be learnt, one of which is that we should guard against religious Empire building, for even when we have an authentic God-experience and ask whether we should 'build huts' to commemorate this experience, God will surprise again by manifesting in a different stranger. Secondly, Kearney does not demonise religious tradition or describe it as a lesser-preferred option. No, anatheism recognises the dynamic movement of sacred encounters, which sometimes manifest significantly through religious traditions and rituals, while at other times meet the self in a religious spaces. The point is that the culmination of encounter, wager and hospitality is the creation of sacred spaces and sacred moments. Hostility achieves the exact opposite. The sacred is not confined to religion and neither does spirituality have a monopoly on the sacred. Kearney (2014) suggests:

The 'sacred' is somewhere between the 'spiritual' and the 'religious' [...]. The spiritual involves a seeking that does not necessarily involve religion; if by religion we understand a specific set of creedal truth claims, shared ritual traditions and institutional behavioural codes. (pp. 244-245)

The sacred is what unfolds when the unifying presence of God enables the self and the other to transcend the boundaries that keep them apart, the walls that are determined to convince them that the other is always an enemy.

## ■ A 'strange' communion

'Where do I speak from?' I speak as a white, male, South African Methodist. Like Kearney, my life too has been shaped by historically based wall-building. Using Kearney's understanding of anatheism as a backdrop, I can identify the bridge-building nature of sacred moments, especially in events such as the sacrament of Holy Communion. I have already in other papers reflected on Holy Communion as unifying sacrament (Bentley 2011, 2012, 2014, 2017), but I wish to return anew to the mystery of the sacrament and God's ability to use this space as a practical instrument of reconciliation.

Indulge me for a moment as I imagine the unfolding of events during Holy Communion: Here, in front of me is a congregation, a group of people from different backgrounds, different cultures, speaking a variety of languages. If we were to take the time to speak to each one of them, we would find that they hold divergent political beliefs, identify across the spectrum of sexuality and carry with them a myriad of complex histories, successes and problems. Each one is present as a self, standing in the midst of the other. The self is already vulnerable, for the self looks at the other and admires some, is intimidated by others, perhaps even feels either superior to them or inadequate compared to them. Optocentrism dictates this space. One thing is certain: the self can definitely identify those with whom they would rather not share this space. This is exacerbated when the presiding minister asks the congregants to look around and to take note of who is present in this moment. Now the congregation is asked to take note of who is absent from this space. Do those absent not feel welcome? Is there any reason why they would consider it better to be absent than to be part of this moment? Has the church neglected its gift of hospitality? Has it instead been hostile towards the stranger?

The minister shares the peace and asks the congregation to share the peace among each other. People turn towards each other, shaking hands or giving a hug, blessing each other with 'The peace of the Lord be with you', responding with 'And also with you' (Methodist Conference Office 1975:B10). Some engage heartily, while the apprehension is tangible in others. It is obvious that some handshakes and hugs are forced, reluctantly making the self vulnerable to transcend the space of optocentrism so as to dare to touch.

It does not end there. Now everyone is invited to a common Table. It is not the church's Table, neither is it the minister's Table. It is the Lord's Table and everybody is invited. As the elements are consecrated, the congregation sings Charles Wesley's hymn (Wesley n.d.):

1. Come, sinners, to the gospel feast;  
let every soul be Jesus' guest.  
Ye need not one be left behind,  
for God hath bid all humankind.
2. Sent by my Lord, on you I call;  
the invitation is to all.  
Come, all the world! Come, sinner, thou!  
All things in Christ are ready now.
3. Come, all ye souls by sin oppressed,  
ye restless wanderers after rest;  
ye poor, and maimed, and halt, and blind,  
in Christ a hearty welcome find.
4. My message as from God receive;  
ye all may come to Christ and live.  
O let his love your hearts constrain,  
nor suffer him to die in vain.
5. This is the time, no more delay!  
This is the Lord's accepted day.  
Come thou, this moment, at his call,  
and live for him who died for all. (n.p.)

The congregation makes their way to the Communion rail. As they kneel, they gather as a diverse community, a people who

would not usually spend time around each other's tables. Here they are: black, white, rich, poor, the healthy, those who suffer ill-health, the disenfranchised, those who benefit from others' hard labour ... they are all here.

As they receive the Bread, they hear, '[t]his is the Body of Christ, take and eat'. The Body of the Divine touches my hand in the same way as it touches the hand of the other. The self becomes vulnerable to being touched (cf. Kearney 2015:27). I taste and eat. 'The Blood of Christ shed for you. Take and drink.' I taste and drink (cf. Kearney 2015:18). There is something sacred in this vulnerable moment where I am welcomed by the hospitality of the Table. Those who I considered as the other a moment ago become fellow sojourners as they too experience this sacred hospitality.

We leave the Table with the blessing (Methodist Conference Office 1975):

The blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, remain with you always. Amen. Go in peace in the power of the Spirit to live and work to God's praise and glory. Thanks be to God. (p. B17)

This means that I am now required to extend the hospitality shown to me in turn to those whom I may encounter during the course of the week.

And so, the sacred moment moves beyond the religious into the secular, an open invitation to take the risk of encountering 'the other'.

## ■ Conclusion

Not everyone will share my view or experience of the Lord's Table. Neither should they. This is where I experienced a sacred moment. It is not a moment to be prescribed or duplicated for others. To do so would be to 'build huts', to construct a theism through which we believe God should and must encounter all people. For me, this was one of Kearney's anatheistic moments,

a returning to God after God, experiencing the transforming potential held concentrated in the gift of hospitality. Here, God, who for all means and purposes should see me as the other, took the wager of showing hospitality. In turn, as I become the guest, one request was made: 'I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you' (Jn 13:15 NIV).

The Christian response to the increasing polarising of people in our communities is that the gospel was never intended to perpetuate the divisive action of building walls between people. There should therefore not be a Christian rationale for turning away the stranger, whether the stranger be a bearded Middle-Eastern man wishing to travel to the West or refugees fleeing the atrocities in their home countries in order to find refuge elsewhere. The building of walls to keep out 'the vulnerable' could perhaps just be the most inhumane response we could offer.

Instead, religion by its own rich history of learning that there is something sacred in opening the door for the other must act in both faith and hope. It should act in faith as it reflects on its past, knowing the value that emerges from the gift of hospitality. Furthermore, it should act in the hope that the world its hospitality is contributing to is one that experiences healing through the sharing of this gift. In the present, the gift of hospitality is manifest in the gift of love ... and perhaps right here the formulation of sacred hospitality is to be found in: 'Love the Lord your God with your entire being, and love your neighbour as you love yourself'.<sup>165</sup>

Kearney's anatheism calls for a re-encounter, a fresh God-experience that unfolds in the existential expression of hospitality.

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165. My own paraphrase of the twofold law of love.