Introduction

JOHN PANTELEIMON MANOUSSAKIS

Moses desires to see the "glory" (Ex. 33:18) or the "face" (Ex. 33:22) of God, but he is refused and receives a vision of God "only from behind," after God, on going by, had pressed him with his hand into the crack in the rock.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, The Glory of God, VI, p. 38

So here we are, like Moses, after God.

All the texts in this volume share, in one way or another, the adverbial ambiguity of after. The God they seek—the God they are after—is a God who can be seen "only from behind," that is, without being seen, in the blindness of vision, at the limits of the phenomenological horizon. This is a God who, for several of our contributors, can be known only through the dark cloud of not-knowing. A God who can be named only through the paradox of a name that refers back to itself, without name. A God without God, without sovereignty, power, and presence.

Who or what comes, then, after God? Such was the question that befell philosophy following the proclamation of the "death of God." In the wake of God, as the last fifty years of philosophy have shown, God comes back again, otherwise: Heidegger’s last God, Levinas’s God of Infinity, Derrida’s and Caputo’s tout autre, Marion’s God without Being, Kearney’s God who may be.
The stakes in this debate could not, in my view, be higher or more topical; the questioning of God has taken on a new urgency and pertinence in this time of religious and cultural conflict. This return to religion became dramatically visible in all its complexity on September 11. The event itself assumed religious dimensions in its sublimity as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. It was immediately registered in terms of two religious idioms: Islamic fanaticism, which “provoked” and “justified” it, and Christian fundamentalism, which proclaimed that the West was under attack and vowed to protect it. As the name of God was invoked by politicians and common people alike, as “ground zero” became more and more a hallowed ground with interfaith services and memorials, gradually September 11 became less exclusively a political case, simply because such an impossible event could not be fully appropriated by political language. It called, in time, for a more philosophical discourse, as epitomized by Kearney’s essay “On Terror” in his *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*. The present volume on Kearney, I believe, elaborates and expands on such a discourse, by presenting us with a divinity at last free from the three-headed monster of metaphysics—the Omni-God of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence—and the “triumphalist teleologies and ideologies of power” that it has provoked.

In the Continental tradition, religion and the question of God have always been an integral part of philosophy. Whether theistic or atheistic, intellectual movements such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, existentialism, structuralism, and poststructuralism have all engaged in various ways with questions of ultimacy, transcendence, and alterity. Two of the foremost thinkers in this dialogue are Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger. Kierkegaard emphasized faith over reason, while Heidegger gave precedence to thought over faith. Both, however, draw from a common Pauline tradition, although they interpret it differently. With the advent of phenomenology, normative questions about theistic claims—for example, the debate about the existence of God—are often bracketed (a method known as the phenomenological *epoche*) for the sake of a different and arguably more meaningful set of questions: Could God be given to consciousness as a phenomenon? What kind of phenomena are religious experiences? What sort of phenomenological method is needed in order to describe them? In recent years, this questioning of God has assumed such acute and arresting proportions as to prompt some scholars to speak of a “theological turn” in philosophy. Kearney’s
work signals one of the most compelling and challenging engagements with this turn.

Following Kierkegaard and Levinas, the Continental philosophy of religion embraces Pascal’s distinction between the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, giving precedence to the latter over the former. Such a gesture indicates a move away from metaphysics and toward a God who surpasses the old categories of ontotheology. Contemporary French thinkers (Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Luis Chrétien) have offered exemplary cases of such thinking. Marion, in particular, has greatly contributed to the formation of a nonmetaphysical thinking of God. First, by following Heidegger’s critique of ontotheology, he un fettered God from His ontological burden; more recently, by recovering and reinterpreting the notion of givenness in Husserl; and finally, by developing his own insights on a phenomenology of saturation.

In its hermeneutical trajectory, following Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, Continental philosophy adds a movement both of suspicion and of affirmation to this debate. Richard Kearney’s diacritical hermeneutics and John D. Caputo’s radical hermeneutics are two special instances. Besides being the chief exponent of deconstruction’s implications for religion (The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida, 1997), Caputo’s thought has been of tremendous significance in explicating Jacques Derrida’s “turn to religion,” represented by a series of recent works.¹ Caputo’s Radical Hermeneutics (1987) led him to a novel, postmetaphysical understanding of religion “without religion” (On Religion, 2001), signaling with this paradox the undecidable mystery of God—“an infinite questionability” that is, at the same time, “endlessly questionable.” Kearney’s diacritical hermeneutics, on the other hand, attempts to steer a middle path between Romantic hermeneutics (Schleiermacher), which retrieves and reappropriates God as presence, and radical hermeneutics (Derrida, Caputo), which elevates alterity to the status of undecidable sublimity. This debate—exemplified by this volume’s concluding exchange among Kearney, Derrida, and Caputo—has already made its mark as one of the most challenging directions of Continental thought.

This volume attempts to represent some of the most considered responses to Richard Kearney’s recent writings on the philosophy of religion, in particular The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion (Indiana, 2001) and Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness (Routledge, 2003). Since the publication of these two volumes,
over a dozen international academic societies have devoted conferences, book panels, and seminars to major aspects of Kearney’s hermeneutics of religion. This volume brings together seventeen essays, seventeen different variations on the same theme: philosophy about God after God—that is to say, a way of thinking God otherwise than ontologically. Against the monotony—or, as Nietzsche has aptly put it, the monotonono-theism—of a single voice, this volume sings with a polyphony that brings into unison different times and different spaces. First, the thinkers included in this collection hail from different geographical coordinates: in particular, continental Europe and North America. But they also traverse different generations: an older one, comprising figures who have influenced Richard Kearney’s thought (Breton, Derrida, Caputo, Marion, Greisch, Janicaud, Hederman), and a younger one that includes several figures who have been inspired by Richard Kearney’s thought (Bloechl, Nichols, Ó Murchadha, Treanor, Manoussakis). In any case, it is Kearney’s recent attempts to rethink the religious that serve as the central thread that runs throughout this collection.

Richard Kearney is still in the midday of his life (he was born in December 1954); and his work, far from being concluded, is still in many exciting ways in progress. This volume does not aspire to offer a definitive statement on Kearney’s philosophy of religion, but only to put on record and make available for a larger readership the lively debates that his writings have already generated. By doing so, this work bears witness to two things: the relevance of Kearney’s philosophical writings for the current study of religion, and the relevance of theology and religion for the present study of philosophy as it has been confirmed by the work of major thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic.

All of the papers presented in this volume share the common problematic of the otherness of the Other—an eminent concern in post-Levinasian philosophy. This problematic can be expressed in the following dilemma: how can we think and speak of the Other on the Other’s terms, that is, without reducing otherness to a reflection of the Same—while, at the same time, being able to think and speak of the Other without falling into a sort of apophatic mysticism of the ineffable?

Kearney’s work, even when it comes to the question of the paradigmatic Other, that is, God—or, especially when it comes to questions of God—tries persistently to articulate a middle way (a via...
tertia) between the two extremes of our philosophical debate: (a) the unmediated, uncritical rapport with the Other epitomized by Levinas’s infinity, Derrida’s différence, and Caputo’s khora, and (b) certain rigid and outdated conceptions of ontotheology and metaphysics. Kearney would like to maintain the healthy criticism of a hermeneutics of suspicion without, however, letting go of a hermeneutics of suspension (that retrieves and even embraces forgotten or overlooked treasures in tradition’s storehouse, such as Aristotle’s dynamis, Gregory’s prospopon, and Cusanus’s possest). This position came to be known in Strangers, Gods, and Monsters as diacritical hermeneutics. The methodological equivalent of diacritical hermeneutics is the prosopic reduction proposed here.

It is this hermeneutical reduction of reductions—reversing the reversals and returning us to the simple eschatology of the everyday—that the essays of the present book seek to address. Almost all of the authors would agree on the necessity of a critical philosophy for providing us with the resources for discernment when it comes to distinguishing between a “good” alterity (the stranger, the widow, and the orphan) and a “bad” alterity (the monstrosity of evil). They would disagree, however, on the criteria to be chosen and the principles that would guide us in such a diacritical project.

The crucial moment in carrying out Kearney’s envisioned philosophy (hermeneutical and phenomenological) comes when the road we follow reaches a fork. At that moment one needs to decide which way to go, and it is precisely in the possibility of such a decision—if, indeed, one can decide—that a number of the papers find potential disagreement. For diacritical hermeneutics seems to want to have its pie and eat it: Isn’t the need for criteria canceled out by the neutrality of its position? And if such a neutrality is abandoned for the sake of criteria, wouldn’t we eventually have to side with one or the other extreme?

The thinkers writing for this volume take two distinct and somewhat antithetical positions. There are those who question Kearney’s seemingly equivocal language of the different signs and figures of God, asking how this “God who may be” does not end up to be not a God at all but rather a regulatory concept (Desmond) or a unifying idea (Nichols) around which Kearney is constructing some kind of “ethical monotheism” (Bloechl). Such criticism eventually leads to the arduous task of “defining” what or who God is supposed to be (Treanor)—a question taken up in a controversial way by Breton and O’Leary.
On the antipodes of this line of thinking, there are those who question Kearney’s reluctance to cut the umbilical cord of metaphysics, asking whether his religious hermeneutics offers us an alternative to ontotheology or just another version of it, namely, an onto-eschatology (Olthuis). After all, as Hart and Olthuis ask, isn’t the possible a category of metaphysics? Both Ó Murchadha and O’Leary interrogate the Judeo-Christian commitments that, in their view, inform Kearney’s hermeneutical and phenomenological reading. Kearney’s pledge to an understanding of God that would promote love and justice does not derive (as Janicaud argues in his essay—the last before his untimely death) from a purely phenomenological observation; and thus it seems to vitiate his claim to find God in phenomena such as posse or the “face” of the Other: phenomena which, if “allowed to unfold on their own terms and without theological interference, do not necessarily point to the God of Scripture” (O’Leary). As Ó Murchadha observes, “the things to come” (eschatology) are not quite the same as “the things themselves” (phenomenology).

This debate, like any debate that touches upon the fundamental questions of philosophy, cannot receive a definitive answer. It must instead be left open and ongoing. As a provisional and tentative response, however, to the arguments, questions, and objections raised by the essays collected in this volume, we have prefixed a double proposal for a phenomenological prosopical reduction that supplements the preceding three (Husserl, Heidegger, and Marion). This is an attempt to sketch out those premises according to which the conundrum of the Other’s alterity, as outlined above, is rethought through an integral phenomenology that allows us to encounter the Other in the relational infinity of our everyday experience. This renewed attention to epiphanies of the ordinary universe is what Kearney calls a microeschatology.

Wishing to leave the much-contested question of the relationship between philosophy and religion open, we have organized the seventeen contributions presented here into two major groups: “Philosophy Facing Theology” and “Theology Facing Philosophy.” We thought that such a dialogical “facing off” might best capture the relational character of prosopon as a being-toward-the-face-of-the-Other.

The final part of the present volume, titled “Recapitulations,” provides the reader with lively debates and exchanges among leading figures on the philosophy of religion (Derrida, Marion, Caputo) and theology (Tracy, McFague, Keller) while summarizing and reviewing the main themes of thinking God after God.